LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES OF RURAL SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN
CULTURALLY-COHESIVE COMMUNITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Paige Ryan Raney

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Liberty University
2020
LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES OF RURAL SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN CULTURALLY-COHERENT COMMUNITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by Paige Ryan Raney

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2020

APPROVED BY:

Rebecca Lunde, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Melissa Lannom, Ed.D., Committee Member
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe leadership experiences of rural school principals in K-12 schools in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama. Three theories guiding the study were Blanchard’s situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) as it described different leadership styles and directing others to desired results, Dweck’s mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) by considering how fixed mindset was the inability to think beyond a situation and growth mindset focused on the process of learning and development, and Burns’ and Bass’s (1978) transformational leadership theory in how principals display leadership. Rural principals’ experiences were defined as ways they display leadership in culturally-cohesive communities. The central question was: How do rural principals describe their leadership experiences working in rural schools? The research questions were: (1) How does the culture in a rural, culturally-cohesive community affect the ways school principals make decisions and implement change?; (2) What specific ways do rural school principals display leadership?; (3) What leadership experiences create a fixed mindset for rural school principals?; and, (4) What leadership experiences create a growth mindset for rural school principals? A qualitative research method with a transcendental phenomenological research design was used, and 10 rural school principals were selected to participate. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and photo narratives. Data was transcribed, personal biases were bracketed, significant statements were grouped into themes, and textural descriptions included verbatim examples of participants’ experiences. Structural descriptions described how experiences happened. Composite descriptions combined textural and structural descriptions to give a rich explanation of experiences and how they occurred.

Keywords: rural, culturally-cohesive, situational leadership, growth and fixed mindset
Dedication

To Will and JR. You’re my forever favorites. Thank you for never letting me give up. I just could never stand the thought that you two might not reach your full potential. Oh, how you have and continue to do so! You’re my inspiration and great encouragement. Thank you for reminding me that “not everyone’s life is like ours” and that my job is to “help them, Mom.” May you soar with wings like eagles, jump into work head first, and always love a good show and a great baseball game. I love you for all eternity.

To Mudger and Night-Night. You held up! Thank you for being my biggest cheerleaders and encouragers for almost fifty years. You were the ultimate models of how to serve other people and allow them to bless our lives. Through teaching, leading, and coming alongside others, you showed me how to do the greatest work I know. I promise I’m finished with being a student! Let’s sit on the porch and rest.

To Rural School Principals. Never doubt the work you do each day makes a difference in the most challenging situations. You inspire me. Your work is near to God’s own heart as you support families who often experience extreme poverty and unthinkable family situations. You convince them that through education, their lives can be better. It’s a hard sell every single day yet you show up with great determination and servants’ hearts. May this study honor you, allow others to see you, and help the world hear you.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Rebecca Lunde, my Committee Chair, for her ongoing encouragement throughout my journey of writing a dissertation while sending two sons to college, accepting a new job, and navigating through life’s challenges. Her weekly emails encouraging me to “keep going” always helped me turn my attention back to the task. Thank you, Dr. Lunde, for believing that I could finish.
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. 3  
Dedication .................................................................................................................................................. 4  
Acknowledgments ..................................................................................................................................... 5  
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................... 11  
List of Abbreviations ............................................................................................................................... 12  
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 13  
  Overview .................................................................................................................................................. 13  
  Background ............................................................................................................................................ 14  
    Historical ............................................................................................................................................ 16  
    Social .................................................................................................................................................. 16  
    Theoretical .......................................................................................................................................... 18  
  Situation to Self ...................................................................................................................................... 19  
  Problem Statement ............................................................................................................................... 21  
  Purpose Statement ............................................................................................................................... 22  
  Significance of the Study ..................................................................................................................... 23  
  Research Questions ............................................................................................................................. 24  
    Central Research Question ............................................................................................................. 24  
  Definitions ............................................................................................................................................ 26  
  Summary ................................................................................................................................................ 27  
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................. 28  
  Overview ................................................................................................................................................. 28
List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographic Overview ................................................................. 90
List of Abbreviations

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Over the course of a principal’s tenure at a school, many opportunities for strong, guided leadership are required. Principals find it necessary to display different types of leadership. In rural communities, principals lead within small, yet culturally-cohesive environments. These circumstances often require principals to display various forms of leadership. This study will utilize a transcendental phenomenological research design to describe leadership experiences of rural principals in small yet culturally-cohesive communities. The study will strive to illuminate these principals’ voices in their attempt to display appropriate situational leadership.

The problem is research has identified challenges of rural school principals including hiring disadvantages, diverse responsibilities, gender discrimination, lack of professional development support, isolation from resources, budget constraints, and lack of collaboration with other principals (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham, Smith, & Wright, 2014; Miller-Vaz, 2015; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013). However, minimal qualitative research has been devoted to describing the leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. This transcendental phenomenological study attempts to give voice to rural principals as they display leadership in various situations in rural communities where the population may be small and rural but it is culturally-cohesive.

This chapter describes the background of the research and also the researcher’s position to the study. Many aspects of the study are described including the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the research questions, and defines all terms important in the study.
Background

Rural school principals are expected to display many forms of leadership. Not only are they responsible for student achievement and development, but they are also, as any school leader would be, responsible for ensuring teachers are effective and productive. When comparing rural principals to urban principals, rural principals wear many more hats in their schools. Often they are required to assume roles of classroom teacher, instructional coach, parental involvement specialist, social worker, assessment specialist, and community liaison (Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Taole, 2013). Research supports the struggle rural school principals have in giving adequate attention to their administrative duties (Taole, 2013). In urban schools, these administrative duties are often delegated to other support staff (Mette, 2014), and this is not an option for rural school principals since the school staff is considerably smaller and often less trained in how to handle such duties (Mette, 2014; Taole, 2013).

Recruiting and retaining quality rural school principals is a struggle for many districts (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012). There are a variety of reasons districts struggle with these issues, including being geographically isolated from other principals and the district office, thus creating a lack of professional collaboration, limited budgets, lack of access to high quality professional development and other resources, and high expectations from parents and stakeholders in small, yet culturally-cohesive communities which include communities where stakeholders possess common cultural, social, political, historical, and economical foundations (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Latham et al., 2014; Miller-Vaz, 2015; Preston, Jakubiec, & Koymans, 2013; Shu-Yuan, Isernhagen, Scherz, & Denner, 2014; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013). Other aspiring school leaders observe these heavy, diverse workloads of rural school principals and do
not feel equipped to handle these types of principal positions or do not desire to experience this type of extended workload.

Among rural school principals, the ratio of male rural school principals to female rural school principals is almost 2:1. In a large American review of rural education, Harmon (2003) found that when compared to urban schools, principals in rural schools were more likely to be male and less likely to represent minority groups. While females constitute a majority of teachers in rural schools, males dominate the rural school principalship. Females experience difficulty in obtaining rural school principalships as they may be perceived as being unsuitable for being an adequate leader in this role (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Miller, Graham, & Al-Awne, 2014; Netshitangani, 2016). This study will give voice to the lived experiences of female rural school principals as they will be included in this study. The hope is that current and future female rural school administrators will benefit from this study.

Rural school principals are struggling with the increased expectations regarding school accountability and change in education. While increasing accountability changes have increased the amount of administrative compliance, rural school principals often do not have adequate help in completing all required documentation. Data-driven decision-making and student assessment practices have required rural school principals to devote more time in these areas, often without the support of additional support staff (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). These new, emerging initiatives have required many changes in the field of education that require community support and buy-in. In small, rural communities that are culturally-cohesive, these necessary changes can create exceptionally challenging circumstances as rural community members are often positioned to maintain cultural values and are frequently apprehensive to any type of change (Blakesley, 2012).
It is well-documented in the research that rural school principals face many challenges (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham et al., 2014; Miller-Vaz, 2015; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013). To this point, however, there is minimal qualitative research that examines and gives voice to rural school principals and their leadership experiences serving in their unique capacities. This study will attempt to fill this gap in the literature and give voice to the leadership experiences of rural school principals and how they display this leadership in rural, culturally-cohesive communities. This study will attempt to support and inform the work of rural school administrators as well as district leaders who supervise rural school principals. This research will provide insight into the lived experiences of rural school principals and will inform their work. van Manen (1997) explained, “From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (p. 5).

Historical

Historically, in rural schools, the leadership requirements for principals were much different than it is in current day education. Generally, leadership in the schools was male dominated and rural schools were the primary way students were educated as the nation was a much more community-based, agricultural society. As populations began to migrate toward cities, rural schools were not as populated or common as families moved to more urban environments for educational opportunities. Historically, there was little diversity in a school and the instructional methods were traditional in nature. Over time, rural schools have evolved as school leadership to direct rural schools has also changed.

Social
Rural schools are often the focal point of rural communities. The school principal must effectively maintain a positive, working relationship with community members and develop an awareness of the importance of his or her standing in the community (Hands, 2012; Hartell, Dippenaar, Moen, & Dladla, 2016; Latham et al., 2014; Mette, 2014; Shu-Yuan et al., 2014). This effort works to align the mission and vision of the school with the community’s expectations (Latham et al., 2014). Rural principals are viewed as an important figure and role model in the community as parents and community members often place exceedingly high expectations on these leaders, scrutinize their actions, and expect them to frequently take personal time outside of school to work on school issues and respond to parents’ needs (Lock, Budgen, & Lunay, 2012). Rural principals must support the connection between the rural school and the surrounding community by forming strong school-community relations. Developing this connection requires the rural school principal to spend time and effort promoting a sense of mutuality, confidence, respect, and understanding between the two groups (Hands, 2012; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Seipert & Baghurst, 2014). Rural principals must establish open communication between community members and the school. Rural principals must communicate their commitment to the school and the community by voicing their plans for the school, sharing their vision with students and teachers, and establishing how these plans and vision align with community expectations (Freie & Eppley, 2014).

Principals who grow up in a rural community often establish overall stronger credibility within the community by establishing that a common set of values exists between themselves and the community (Latham et al., 2014). This display of common values strengthens the efforts of principals to show understanding and support for the cultural cohesion present in rural communities. Cohesion in communities is primarily the identification of common interests and
maintaining respect for differences (Holden, 2013). Rural principals develop stronger community relations when they identify with these common interests and respect community differences or, in essence, honor the cohesion of the community (Holden, 2013; Latham et al., 2014).

This study will attempt to examine the lived experiences of rural school principals as they relate to the small yet culturally-cohesive communities that are often present in rural locations. Lifting their voices of authentic leadership experiences will add to the literature for rural schools. Current and future rural school principals will benefit from this study as well as district-level administrators who supervise rural schools.

**Theoretical**

The theoretical principles that support this study include the situational leadership theory and mindset theory. While it is documented that rural school principals experience challenges in leading schools in rural yet culturally-cohesive communities, there is a lack of research which studies how rural school principals display leadership. This study will attempt to give voice to these rural school principals and lift their lived experiences of how they display leadership. Specifically, the study will examine the relationships between these lived experiences and displays of leadership and the situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) which suggests that leaders must be skilled in using various forms of leadership in order to be effective in different situations. Also, the study will examine the relationships between the lived experiences of rural school principals and their displays of leadership as they relate to the mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) which suggests that one can learn and develop over time by adopting a growth mindset versus concentrating on a fixed outcome by adopting a narrow, fixed
mindset. The study will examine the relationship of the mindset theory and rural school principals’ experiences in displaying leadership.

**Situation to Self**

As a lifelong resident of rural communities in northeast Alabama, the researcher is aware of the unique situations surrounding schooling children in rural communities where the school is often the focal point of the area. These communities are often sparsely populated but maintain a cohesive culture. The researcher’s parents were rural educators, and her father served as a coach and administrator of a rural school. The researcher has memories of her father’s daily routines, challenges, and enjoyment as a rural school administrator, and understanding the many styles of leadership needed to successfully lead a rural school is important to her. The researcher believes this study is needed and will shed light on the complexity of being a rural school principal. Another reason for the researcher’s research interest in this area is that her current job includes supervising rural school principals.

Through this study, the researcher will allow rural school principals to lift their voices concerning their lived, leadership experiences while serving in rural schools in culturally-cohesive communities. Their situational leadership experience themes will be analyzed and similar themes will be coded. This study will be based on an ontological philosophical assumption which includes the researcher embracing the idea of multiple realities present in the participants’ lived experiences. These multiple realities will be gathered through the use of multiple forms of evidence and by comparing and contrasting the descriptions and different perspectives provided by the participants as they view their lived experiences of being a rural school principal in a culturally-cohesive community. The rural school principals being studied will report multiple realities to the readers of this study and will provide different perspectives of
displaying leadership in rural schools. Creswell (2013) supports the ontological philosophical assumption in qualitative research as he wrote, “Evidence of multiple realities includes the use of multiple forms of evidence in themes using the actual words of different individuals and presenting different perspectives” (p. 20). Additionally, as a Christian, the researcher will support an axiological assumption by positioning myself in this transcendental phenomenological qualitative research study while acknowledging the lived experiences of all participants as well as my own personal biases (Creswell, 2013).

This study will also employ an epistemological philosophical assumption in “trying to get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20) as the researcher will attempt to gain a deep understanding of the subjective experiences of all participants by spending a significant amount of time in the field and devoting adequate time into understanding what the participants are saying. The researcher will minimize the distance of understanding between the voices of the participants and herself in order to gain meaning into their experiences (Creswell, 2013). The epistemological philosophical assumption will be satisfied as the researcher will include specific quotes and textural descriptions from the participants’ lived experiences as rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. This qualitative research study will bring forth more knowledge as it will gather the subjective experiences of people (Creswell, 2013).

This study was guided by the social constructivist paradigm. Social constructivist paradigms allow individuals to seek greater meaning to the world in which they live and work by considering a wide variety of participants’ views of a given situation (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the social constructivist paradigm was experienced by exploring the wide variety of leadership experiences rural school principals have in their culturally-cohesive rural
communities. This paradigm determined what questions were asked in the interview setting, what types of inquiry methods were used and valued, and which findings deserved attention and further exploration (Patton, 2015). Through this view, the researcher sought to understand and gain meaning about the participants’ world (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) posited participants develop subjective meanings of other experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. This variety of meanings encouraged the researcher to provide a variety of complex views rather than narrow the new understandings into only a few themes (Creswell, 2013).

**Problem Statement**

Research has identified challenges of rural school principals including hiring disadvantages, diverse responsibilities, gender discrimination, lack of professional development support, isolation from resources, budget constraints, and lack of collaboration with other principals (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham et al., 2014, Miller-Vaz, 2015; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston et al., 2013; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013). Rural, as defined by the United States Census Bureau (2013), encompasses all populations existing outside urban clusters (2,500-50,000 people) or urbanized areas (50,000 or more people). Additionally, rural principals are highly visible within small communities that are often culturally cohesive and maintain common values (Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Hargreaves, 2009; Preston et al., 2013). Frequently, the school is the center and heart of the community (Freie & Eppley, 2014). The principal is expected to ensure the values of the community are the same values of the school. Rural principals recognize the strong influence and opportunity they have in transferring values to students (Freie & Eppley, 2014; Hicks & Wallin, 2013). The problem is there is limited research giving a voice to rural
principals that specifically focuses on how they display leadership in small yet culturally-cohesive communities especially when these decisions may challenge the established expectations of the community (Hartell et al., 2016).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe leadership experiences of rural school principals in elementary, middle, and high schools in culturally-cohesive rural communities in the southeastern United States. At this stage in the research, the experiences of rural principals will generally be defined as ways they display leadership as a result of being the school’s leader in culturally-cohesive communities which include communities where stakeholders possess common cultural, social, political, historical, and economical foundations (Preston et al., 2013).

The theories guiding this study include situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) as it describes different styles of leadership coupled with several maturity levels and how leaders must direct, coach, and guide others to a desired result. Situational leadership theory describes leadership styles that should be applied in given situations (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013; Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982; Meirovich, 2012). Situational leadership theory gives a framework to the leadership shifts rural school principals are required to employ when making decisions and implementing changes related to students, teachers, parents, and community. Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006, 2012) will also guide this study. Mindset theory employs two bodies of thought: fixed mindset which is the inability to think beyond or outside of a situation and growth mindset which focuses on the effort and process of learning and development rather than a fixed outcome. This framework can assist rural school principals in leadership decision-making and implementing change.
Significance of the Study

Empirically, this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study will add to the literature of rural school education and challenges and benefits faced by rural school principals (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham et al., 2014; Miller-Vaz, 2015; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston et al., 2013; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013). This study will also add to the understanding that rural principals require respect and must accept responsibility within small, rural communities (Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Hargreaves, 2009; Hicks & Wallin, 2013). This study will add to the literature of rural female principals as these principals face unique challenges in leading schools in rural, culturally-cohesive communities (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Miller et al., 2014). The current literature demonstrates that rural principals must effectively engage in parental partnerships in rural communities and must appropriately manage parental involvement in their rural schools (Shu-Yuan et al., 2014). This study will add to the literature of parental involvement in rural schools. The current literature emphasizes that rural school principals must effectively serve as instructional leaders and create professional learning communities within their schools (Cherkowski, 2016; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Kristiansen, 2014; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Seipert & Baghurst, 2014). This study will add to the literature regarding the development of instructional leadership and professional learning communities in rural schools.

Theoretically, this study will merge the findings of the study and the situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) and the mindset theory (Dweck, 2006). The literature regarding situational leadership theory, as it relates to academics, supports a leader displaying a broad range of leadership characteristics in order to create productive learning environments (Meirovich, 2012). This study will add to the literature linking the situational
leadership theory to rural school principals and their role as an instructional leader in charge of professional learning communities. Also, the situational leadership theory, as outlined in current literature, strongly justifies the importance of a trusting relationship between supervisor and supervisee (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013). This study will add to the literature regarding rural school principals and how their experiences relate to the situational leadership theory. The mindset theory as it relates to this study will support ideas about human nature (Dweck, 2012). This study will add to the literature of rural school principals’ ability to adapt, change, and grow in culturally-cohesive communities. This study will increase confidence in these theories as experiences of rural school principals are compared, contrasted, and discussed in relation to these theories.

Practically, this study will fill a void in the research literature regarding the lived experiences of specifically how rural principals display leadership in their schools and communities (Preston et al., 2013). The study will explore the challenges and benefits of being a rural school administrator (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham et al., 2014). The study will attempt to provide additional insight into the ways rural school principals make decisions and implement change in their rural yet culturally-cohesive communities. Stakeholders such as district administrators will be able to use the study’s findings to better support rural school principals and the challenges they face. Rural school principals will be able to use the research findings to understand better ways to develop important relationships between school faculty, teachers, parents, and community members in culturally-cohesive communities.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be used for this study:

Central Research Question
How do rural principals describe their experiences working in rural schools? Current research in rural education reveals rural school administrators insist resiliency is necessary to maintain high quality schools (Hargreaves, 2009; Halsey & Drummond, 2014; McMahon, 2015). Rural school principals describe the need to change the school’s culture when student achievement is low (McMahon, 2015). Recent work in rural school education reveals the strong influence rural communities have in shaping the school’s values (Hicks & Wallin, 2013; Mette, 2014; Shu-Yuan et al., 2014).

**Sub-question One**

How does the culture in a rural community affect the ways school principals make decisions and implement change? In rural communities, values are strong and often instilled into the culture of the school. Also, rural school principals may struggle if they are not from the community or do not reside there while serving as principal. The rural school principals are often scrutinized in these communities and have very little privacy outside of school hours (Preston et al., 2013).

**Sub-question Two**

What are specific ways rural principals display leadership in their schools? The role of a rural school principal is diverse and requires different kinds of leadership. Rural principals serve as assessment leaders, instructional leaders, conveyors of community values, and as role models in their schools (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Hargreaves, 2009; Renihan & Noonan, 2012). They are required to deliver professional development due to lack of access to these resources (Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Rural principals must also serve as strong leaders in their communities (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Preston et al., 2013; Seipte & Baghurst, 2014).
Sub-question Three

What leadership experiences create a fixed mindset for rural school principals? Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) employs two bodies of thought: fixed mindset which is the inability to think beyond or outside of a situation and growth mindset which focuses on the effort and process of learning and development rather than a fixed outcome. This framework can assist rural school principals in leadership decision-making and implementing change.

Sub-question Four

What leadership experiences create a growth mindset for rural school principals? Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) employs two bodies of thought: fixed mindset which is the inability to think beyond or outside of a situation and growth mindset which focuses on the effort and process of learning and development rather than a fixed outcome. This framework can assist rural school principals in leadership decision-making and implementing change.

Definitions

1. **Fixed mindset** – “A fixed mindset is believing one’s qualities are carved in stone. Believing one only has a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character” (Dweck, 2006, p. 6).

2. **Growth mindset** – “A growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts and believing everyone can change and grow through application and practice” (Dweck, 2006, p.7).

3. **Rural** – Rural is a geographic area that encompasses all populations existing outside urban clusters (2,500-50,000 people) or urbanized areas (50,000 or more people) (United States Census Bureau, 2013).
Summary

Research has identified challenges of rural school principals including hiring disadvantages, diverse responsibilities, gender discrimination, lack of professional development support, isolation from resources, budget constraints, and lack of collaboration with other principals. Additionally, rural principals are highly visible within small communities that are often culturally cohesive and maintain common values. Rural principals recognize the strong influence and opportunity they have in transferring values to students.

There is no research giving a voice to rural principals in specifically how they display leadership in small yet culturally-cohesive communities especially when these decisions may challenge the established expectations of the community. This transcendental phenomenological study will describe leadership experiences of rural school principals in elementary, middle, and high schools in rural communities in the southeastern United States.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The current literature identifies challenges rural school principals face in leading schools in small yet culturally-cohesive communities. This chapter incorporates related literature of current research including qualitative descriptions of rural schools (Freie & Eppley, 2014; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Hands, 2012; Harmon, 2003; United States Census Bureau, 2013), the rural principalship (Hicks & Wallin, 2013; Lock et al., 2012; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Taole, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013, 2014), common challenges of rural school principals (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Preston et al., 2013; Seipt & Baghurst, 2014; Stewart & Matthews, 2015), and parental involvement in rural schools (Hartell et al., 2016).

This chapter discusses the findings in the current literature regarding the specific challenges of rural school principals which include hiring disadvantages, diverse responsibilities, gender discrimination, lack of professional development support, isolation from resources, budget constraints, and lack of collaboration with other principals (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham et al., 2014; Miller-Vaz, 205; Preston et al., 2013; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013). The literature does not reveal studies devoted entirely to the leadership experiences and types of leadership displayed in culturally-cohesive communities by elementary, middle, and high school rural principals in the southeastern United States. This chapter describes the theoretical framework which guides this study including situational leadership theory studied by Hersey and Blanchard (1977), mindset theory studied by Dweck (2006), and transformational leadership theory studied by Bass and Riggio (2006).
Situational leadership theorists (Hersey & Blanchard, 2013) supported the idea that managers, salespeople, teachers, or parents make moment-by-moment decisions to effectively influence people. Situational leadership claimed that there are primary factors that influence a leader’s effectiveness including the leader, the followers, the supervisor, the organization, the job demands, and the decision time. As a mindset theorist, Dweck (2006) offered that those who hold a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset have the capacity to adapt, change, and grow. According to Dweck (2012), growth mindset created a capacity in human nature to learn and change accordingly to the world in which one finds himself. Leaders who maintain a growth mindset, exhibit qualities that seek challenging learning opportunities, show resilience in the face of setbacks, and can help prevent negative stereotypes from undermining achievement (Dweck, 2012).

Transformational leadership theorists study how organizations are reformed under transformational leaders. They offered the idea that followers are motivated to do more than they thought possible because of the influence of transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Additionally, transformational leadership involved inspiring followers to a shared vision and goals for an organization, challenging them to be innovative problem solvers, and developing followers’ leadership capacity via coaching, mentoring, and provision of both challenge and support (Bass & Riggio, 2006). A comprehensive synthesis of the literature has been compiled to advance the literature among rural school principals as they display leadership in their schools which are situated in culturally-cohesive communities. In this chapter, a thorough analysis of the theoretical framework and a synthesis of the related literature provide a background for this research and establishes a need for the current study as well as identifies the gap in the current literature.
Theoretical Framework

The theories guiding this study include situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) as it describes different styles of leadership coupled with several maturity levels and how leaders must direct, coach, and guide others to a desired result. Situational leadership theory describes leadership styles that should be applied in given situations (Hambleton & Gumpert, 1982). Situational leadership theory gives a framework to the leadership shifts rural school principals are required to employ when making decisions and implementing changes related to students, teachers, parents, and community. Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) will also guide this study. Mindset theory employs two bodies of thought: fixed mindset which is the inability to think beyond or outside of a situation and growth mindset which focuses on the effort and process of learning and development rather than a fixed outcome. This framework can assist rural school principals in leadership decision-making and implementing change. Lastly, the study will be guided by the transformational leadership theory developed by James MacGregor Burns and Bernard Bass.

Dweck’s Mindset Theory

Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory presented a comparison between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset relative to personal growth, opportunity for change, and motivation. Her research revealed that believing that one’s qualities cannot change indicated a fixed mindset. On the other hand, growth mindset is based on the belief that growth can occur by developing perseverance, a positive attitude, and by investing in hard work (Dweck, 2006). Dweck (2006) asserted that “the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life” (p. 6). According to Dweck (2006), mindsets are ways that leaders view themselves and others. The fixed mindset creates a need to evaluate one’s leadership style in every situation which will
call for a confirmation of intelligence, personality, or character (Dweck, 2006). Those holding a fixed mindset believe human attributes are simply fixed traits such as a fixed amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a specific moral character. Those who maintain the fixed mindset believe one cannot do anything to alter intelligence, personality, character, or motivation. Growth mindset is based on the belief that basic qualities are things one can cultivate through efforts of figuring things out for oneself, trying hard, and problem-solving when necessary (Dweck, 2006). Those who maintain the growth mindset may believe “all people, no matter who they are, can become substantially more intelligent, say, through their effort and education, or that all people can take steps to develop their personality or moral character over time” (Dweck, 2012, p. 616).

With respect to leadership, the fixed and growth mindset theories offer insight as to the characteristics of successful leaders. In her research, mindset theorist Carol Dweck (2006) supported that “fixed mindset leaders, like fixed mindset people in general, live in a world where some people are superior and some are inferior” (p. 112). Fixed mindset leaders consider themselves and their legacies greater than everything else (Dweck, 2006). For the most part, leaders who hold a fixed mindset will make decisions according to what makes them feel empowered in the moment rather than focusing on corporate goals (Dweck, 2006). Often, the organization where fixed mindset leaders are in charge eventually become to them worlds of personal greatness, entitlement, and a “magic realm in which the brilliance and perfection of the king were constantly validated” (Dweck, 2006, p. 122).

According to Dweck (2006), leaders who exhibit growth mindset behaviors are not the “larger-than-life, charismatic types who oozed ego and self-proclaimed talent. They were self-effacing people who constantly asked questions and had the ability to confront the most brutal
answers” (p. 110). The hallmarks of leaders with a growth mindset include not constantly trying to prove one is better than another, always trying to improve, surrounding oneself with the most able people they can find, focus on personal and organizational mistakes and deficiencies, and use continual feedback to alter strategies accordingly (Dweck, 2006). Dweck (2006) asserted that growth mindset leaders consistently become better at understanding how to deploy and motivate workers which leads to a higher productivity within the organization. Growth mindset leaders create a culture of growth and teamwork while brightening, expanding and filling the organization with possibility (Dweck, 2006). In growth mindset leaders, there is an emphasis and belief in human potential and development and are often physically found visiting employees in order to gain respect, learn from them, and nurture them when necessary (Dweck, 2006). Forcing out elitism and the idea that leaders are royalty is another trait of growth mindset leaders as they establish that hierarchy means very little to them and that genius is not enough to get the job done (Dweck, 2006). Mindset theorists advocate leaders who are growth mindset in nature believe that “leaders are made, not born, and made more by themselves than by any external means” (Dweck, 2006, p. 141). Growth mindset leaders think in terms of learning and because of this, they are clued in to all the different ways to create learning (Dweck, 2006).

**Hershey and Blanchard’s Situational Leadership Theory**

Hershey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory is one of the best-known theories in the field of managerial leadership (Meier, 2016). There are three main components of this leadership process including the leader, the follower, and the situation (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2013). Additionally, the model is based on the amount of direction (task behavior) that is provided by the leader, the amount of support (relationship behavior) that is provided by the leader, and the confidence and competence (readiness level) that is present in the follower
The emphasis in situational leadership is on the behavior of a leader in relation to followers (Hersey et al., 2013). All situational leadership approaches require the leader to behave in a “flexible manner, to be able to diagnose the leadership style appropriate to the situation and to be able to apply the appropriate style” (Hersey et al., 2013, p. 87). Three highly important skills in situational leadership include “diagnosis, inquiry, and flexibility” (Hersey et al., 2013, p. 113). Diagnosis requires the leader to effectively assess the situation and motives of the follower. Possessing a spirit of inquiry allows the leader to ask questions about followers’ motives and determine all aspects of a situation. Leaders must show flexibility in being able to adapt their leadership style to different situations (Hersey et al., 2013). Situational leadership “cannot supplant the importance of establishing a strong working alliance that allows the supervisee to be comfortable being transparent during supervision” (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013, p. 66). The leader, when applying situational leadership ideas, must be able to value and appreciate the differences in abilities and motives of his followers and must exhibit personal flexibility with a wide range of skills in order to adapt his own behavior to what is necessary in the given situation (Hersey et al., 2013).

The focus in situational approaches to leadership is on the observed behavior of leaders and their group members (followers) in various situations (Hersey et al., 2013). Under this idea, a leader applies different leadership styles according to the follower’s performance readiness level (Hersey et al., 2013; Meier, 2016). As the follower becomes more mature and ready for a higher level of performance, the leader is able to adjust the type of leadership employed with the follower (Meirovich, 2012). When followers are at the lowest level of readiness, they are not willing and are not capable of performing a task which requires the leader to provide a high amount of direction on tasks, procedures, and enforcement of rules (Meirovich, 2012). At this
stage, the leader is playing the role of teacher as the new follower may have high anxiety and uncertainty as a result of inexperience (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013). As followers become more mature with regards to productivity, they become more motivated and are willing to do more yet may still require support in accomplishing the tasks related to their job. In these experiences, leaders who apply situational leadership focus more on consideration and motivation which allows followers to build self-confidence over time (Meirovich, 2012). During this situation, leaders may take on more of a consultant role as followers are still learning (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013). Increasingly, followers will become more skilled with tasks and will develop relationships throughout the organization. Leaders who are mindful of situational leadership will begin to include followers in decision-making, seek their valuable input in solving problems, and engage them in teamwork activities (Meirovich, 2012). During this aspect of situational leadership, the leader acts more as a counselor in order to continue to maintain commitment and competence in followers (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013). At the highest level of maturity and readiness, followers become experts in their field and are often highly involved and productive in the organization (Meirovich, 2012). Throughout the development of followers, leaders must be “emotionally flexible and resilient and needs to manage affective responses accordingly in order to adapt to continuously developing new situations” (Meirovich, 2012, p. 174).

The emphasis in situational leadership is how the leader reacts and works with the followers. “According to situational leadership, there is no best way to influence people” (Hersey et al., 2013, p. 115). These situational leadership researchers assert that most people can increase their effectiveness in leadership roles through education, training, and development (Hersey et al., 2013). Situational leadership serves to support leaders in fostering the growth and self-efficacy among followers (Bedford & Gehlert, 2013).
Burns’ and Bass’s Theory of Transformational Leadership

Burns’ theory of transformational leadership supports the potential understanding of how rural school principals effectively display leadership in culturally-cohesive communities. Researchers agree that principals pursuing successful schools need leadership which requires principals to choose the direction of school activities, cultivating school community for corporate activities, and create positive relationships among all members of the school community (Navickaite, 2013). Transformational leadership is a process in which leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Burns, 1978). According to Burns (1978), “the result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 4).

Transformational leadership encompasses behaviors and actions of leaders who stimulate and inspire followers to work toward and achieve extraordinary results in challenging circumstances while, at the same time, cultivate leadership capacity within themselves (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Practicing transformational leadership requires leaders to empower followers to grow into leaders within the organization and align goals of followers, leaders, groups, and the greater organization in order to create cohesive outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006). At the heart of the transformational leadership theory is the understanding that “leadership is not just the province of people at the top…leadership can occur at all levels and by any individual, and it is important for leaders to develop leadership in those below them” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 2).

There are four elements of transformational leadership including individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Individualized consideration occurs when transformational leaders attend to followers’ needs for achievement and growth by serving as a coach or mentor while, at the same
time, listening to followers’ ideas and encouraging a two-way exchange in communication (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Intellectual stimulation includes transformational leaders encouraging creativity, innovation, and nurturing independent thinking among followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In intellectual stimulation, leaders expect followers to fail but does not criticize during these times but instead, leads followers to ask questions, think deeply, and solicit new approaches for solving problems (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Inspirational motivation is the degree to which the leader is visionary and articulates a vision that is both appealing and inspiring to followers. The creation of the school vision (the direction of the school’s activities) is the essential characteristic for school principals acting as transformational leaders (Navickaite, 2013). Transformational leaders motivate and inspire those around them and create conditions where “team spirit is aroused, and enthusiasm and optimism are displayed” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 6). By serving as role models to followers through admiration, respect, and trust, transformational leaders practice idealized influence which also encourages high ethical behavior, instills pride, and causes followers to want to emulate the leader who can be “counted on to do the right thing” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 6).

An important element in Burns’ idea of transformational leadership was his “firm belief that to be transforming, leaders had to be morally uplifting” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 12). True transformational leadership must be displayed for one of two reasons: utilitarian or moral (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Under the assumption transformational leadership is utilitarian in nature, the leader’s objective must clearly be to benefit the overall organization by benefitting individual members to meet the challenges of the task or mission (Bass & Riggio, 2006). When a school principal is a transformational leader, he must temporarily upset the school balance and be able to inspire the school community for the activity and later pursue the consolidation of the school
community in implementing the desired results (Navickaite, 2013). Under the assumption transformation leadership is a matter of moral principles in nature, the objective of the leader is to “do the right thing, do what fits principles of morality, responsibility, sense of discipline, and respect for authority, customs, rules, and traditions of a society” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 14). Additionally, an authentic transformational leader will show that he is truly concerned with the needs, desires, and development of followers and treats them as “ends not just means” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 14).

As school principals display transformational leadership, the principal must give significant attention to the professional development and formation of the entire school community and develop new leaders while distributing leadership to these new leaders (Navickaite, 2013). The best schools invest in leaders’ development, and the leader of the school cares for the state of the community (Navickaite, 2013). The culture of schools where leadership is distributed by a transformational leader maintains professional trust, positive employee relations, and has shared decision-making by teachers, students, administration, parents, and the local community (Navickaite, 2013).

**Related Literature**

The literature reviewed for this study is inclusive of research and current studies concerning characteristics of rural schools in culturally-cohesive communities, the rural school principalship, common challenges of rural school principals, and parental and community involvement in rural schools. This related literature highlighted the needs of rural school principals as they grapple with hiring disadvantages, diverse responsibilities, gender discrimination, lack of professional development support, isolation from resources, budget constraints, and lack of collaboration with other principals.
The Rural School Principalship

Educational researchers (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Freie & Eppley, 2014; Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Hargreaves, 2009; Harmon, 2003; Hicks & Wallin, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Miller-Vaz, 2015; McMahon, 2015; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Seipt & Baghurst, 2014; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Taole, 2013; Versland, 2013) continuously study the rural school principalship and how it is a unique leadership position in public education. These researchers agree that the unique context of a rural school community affects the ability to lead a school. In recent years of education, the most sought-out type of principal is one who is an instructional leader as he/she can create an atmosphere focused on teaching and learning which will lead to improved student achievement (Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013). Additionally, rural principals who focus on educating the whole child and holding high expectations of all stakeholders often experience increased student achievement (Woods & Martin, 2016). Leaders who focus on designing strong instructional practices will increase the school’s overall collective efficacy which will lead to increases in student achievement (Versland & Erickson, 2017). With increased accountability measures in place in all schools today, it is “crucial principals lead schools in directions that positively impact student achievement” (Wood et al., 2013, p. 12).

Student achievement can be better achieved when there is strong principal leadership without constant turnover. Keeping principal turnover low also creates a better learning culture for both students and staff (Wood et al., 2013). In rural schools, however, recruiting and retaining effective leadership has become especially challenging as the literature explained, “nowhere is this a more urgent situation than in rural areas” (Wood et al., 2013, p.13). Rural areas draw fewer applicants for the rural principalship, may not be as attractive due to shrinking
tax bases, and rural students often leave the area to move to more urban areas after graduation (Wood et al., 2013). Reasons for lack of recruitment to rural areas for principals can include geographic isolation, salary limitations, and distance to opportunities for professional growth (Wood et al., 2013). To overcome the challenge of recruiting and retaining rural school principals, some districts have partnered with education training programs to require students who may be interested in working in a rural school to do a practicum in a rural area in order to develop a deeper understanding of the rural setting and its community (Wood et al., 2013). Through these opportunities, future principal candidates are able to create a network of colleagues who can be consulted in times of stress during the rural principalship (Wood et al., 2013). Another strategy for recruitment and retention of rural school principals involves the “grow your own” approach whereby rural school districts are able to anticipate leadership vacancies several years in advance and work to provide teachers leadership and administrative opportunities during this time in order for them to engage in authentic leadership experiences (Wood et al., 2013).

Rural school principals are often required to serve in multiple capacities within the school including administrator, teacher, professional development provider, and community liaison (Cherkowski, 2016; Preston et al., 2013; Versland, 2013). As rural school principals often maintain dual roles as administrator and teacher, the administrative duties of the job, at times, has to be prioritized over teaching. Rural school principals who also teach, however, can lift the quality of their instructional leadership capacity as well as establish positive relationships with students (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013). Additionally, Newton and Wallin’s (2013) Western Canadian study involving rural administrators who served also as teachers found that not only did the dual role of administrator and teacher support close relationships with
students, but it was a source of job satisfaction for these rural school principals. Rural school principals are role models in the community and may serve as the community representative or a vehicle of governmentality by engaging the community in specific ways in order to make choices that are congruent with his idea of the rural school principalship (Freie & Eppley, 2014; Hicks & Wallin, 2013).

One study, however, found that rural principals who often wear multiple hats in the school believe this is their greatest struggle as there are too many roles assigned to them, and they often lack administrative or secretarial support (Parson, Hunter, & Kallio, 2016). Rural principals in this study describe their major job responsibilities to be that of bus driver, teaching classes, directing athletics, filling vending machines, facilities management, activities management, attendance (officer), helping on the playground, managing the Title I program, working with special needs students and their families, helping lead curriculum revision efforts, cutting the lawn, and assisting with banquets and graduations (Parson et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2013). Additionally, this lack of administrative support or having a single counselor who may serve multiple grade levels and many students often leads rural school principals into situations where he/she is the lone decision-maker. Unlike urban schools where leadership can be participatory and shared, rural school principals face challenges with being the only decision-maker (Parson et al., 2016). Due to low enrollments, small schools do not qualify for administrative support which is allocated often by funding mechanisms driven by student enrollment. The principal is, however, required to maintain compliance with all centrally-mandated policies (Wildy, Sigueroardottir, & Faulkner, 2014). Rural leadership demands more time from principals since many rural districts have no middle management and depend on their administrators to carry additional duties (Wood et al., 2013). Rural principals also experience
time constraints regarding the completion of necessary tasks at the school. The literature revealed that rural school principals report the importance of time and the overall lack thereof when performing principalship responsibilities. Overall, rural school principals in one study reported that “70% of their day was spent with student management items” (Parson et al., 2016, p. 76). Interruptions occur in greater frequency in situations where the rural school principal has many roles. These interruptions may come from parents, teachers, students, and community members and result in very early hours and very late hours for rural principals (Parson et al., 2016).

Successful rural school principals understand how necessary strong relationships are in the rural community (Preston & Barnes, 2017). By focusing on people through the establishment of working relationships with students, teachers, families, and community members, rural school principals establish a leadership platform (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

According to research, rural school principals often seek administrative positions in rural communities because there is less competition in obtaining the job, they live in the rural community, they have a deep commitment to improve opportunities in rural communities, and they believe, while rural schools are exceptionally challenging, the environment has a lasting impact on students by providing them a powerful place to learn and develop (Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Hicks & Wallin, 2013; Surface & Theobald; 2014). Also, certain studies emphasized that rural school principals often enjoy a slower-paced lifestyle and a love for the rural landscape that is physically present alongside a rural school setting (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Lock et al., 2012). This connection between the land and its people often strongly connects the rural school principal to the students, school, and community (Preston & Barnes, 2017).
Effective rural school principals can successfully manage change including promoting higher teaching standards that, in turn, lead to increased student achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2017). This requires rural school principals to embrace and promote the vision of the school, define clear action steps that closely align to the school’s vision, and as a result, serves as a catalyst for change (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Msila, 2012).

**Common Challenges of Rural School Principals**

According to research, rural school principals face challenges including heavy, diverse workloads, lack of professional development and resources, gender discrimination, implementation of continuous school improvement efforts, and difficulties recruiting and maintaining teachers across specialized content areas (Cherkowski, 2016; Kristiansen, 2014; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Lock et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2014; Netshitangani, 2016; Wildy et al., 2014; Preston et al., 2013; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2013). Rural school principals wear many hats as they may be required to assume roles such as teacher, instructional specialist, curriculum developer, grant writer, change agent, and community volunteer (Preston et al., 2013). While most of their urban school counterparts have additional administrative staff, rural school principals are unable to adequately distribute the operational duties of the school to others.

Maintaining the role of teaching principal impacts a rural school principal’s ability to enact instructional leadership practices, develop people, and manage instructional programs (Wallin & Newton, 2013). Faced with this challenge, rural school principals experience a “blurring of boundaries…in professional roles as teacher/principal and in many ways does double the trouble that exists for these individuals to provide instructional leadership” (Wallin & Newton, 2013, p. 29). Additionally, the instructional needs of rural school students are unique
and often provide challenges for rural school principals. If rural school students are to be future residents of their communities, students must be trained to contribute to the sustainability of their communities by learning how to lead, communicate effectively, and find innovative solutions to the challenges that are present within their rural communities (Bartholomaeus, 2013). Rural school principals must consider these needs when planning appropriate curriculum for the school. Consistently and purposefully developing rural students’ content and soft skills must be considered by rural school principals as these students will especially need to develop strong literacy skills, become critical thinkers, be creative, and even entrepreneurial in order for the local community to remain independent of people from metropolitan locations who would otherwise take leadership roles within these rural communities (Bartholomaeus, 2013). Place leadership is necessary as a close connection between a rural school and its community (Preston & Barnes, 2017). In this way, rural school principals must consider “place-based education which provides an opportunity for students to build an understanding of the local place where they live, and opportunities for students to participate in working for change” (Bartholomaeus, 2013, p. 103). Rural principals are expected to realize the complexity of living sustainably in rural communities and how this challenge will impact students in the future. In order to effectively implement place-based programs, rural school principals must be geographically, culturally, and contextually literate about his/her community (Lock et al., 2012; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Additionally, a rural school principal must ensure rural school classroom learning will contribute to rural school students learning critical thinking skills, effective communication techniques, how to use initiative, and how to solve problems present in the rural community in order to build sustainable capacity for the future (Bartholomaeus, 2013).
With regards to place, rural school principals must also learn to balance local school and district needs (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Often rural school principals work in districts that also include larger, more urban schools. Rural school principals may be called on to endorse district policies, vision statements, or action plans that are predominantly designed for urban schools. Being an effective rural school principal requires finding middle ground by addressing the rural school’s needs while respecting the larger district school policies. Rural school principals must strike a balance, through leadership, of local expectations and the educational expectations and vision of the centralized school district (Latham et al., 2014; Preston & Barnes, 2017). With this understanding, “these principals understand how local, district, and nationwide contexts influence the rural school and respond in ways that are both place-conscious and mandate-responsive” (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 10).

The current literature establishes that rural school principals experience a lack of professional development resources (Cherkowski, 2016). Research concludes that rural school principals are more isolated from resources, other principals, and have limited access to leadership programs than urban school principals (Stewart & Matthews, 2015). One study analyzed principal leadership in rural schools in Iceland and Australia. This study concluded rural school principals often lack the terminology regarding leadership and capacity development in schools since there is an absence of professional preparation for the principalship as programs are not offered in these jurisdictions (Wildy et al., 2014). Another study provided a pilot program for coaching rural instructional leaders and focused on the issues of rurality and the ideas of coaching versus mentoring with experienced professionals (Lindle et al., 2015). The study found that coaching became a more effective approach in this professional development of experienced rural principals since coaching influences refinement of professional judgment.
which demands ongoing reflection on practice with data use (Lindle et al., 2015). The literature suggests that analyzing data and taking action based on data are two different tasks. Taking action required a level of creativity that experienced principals often did not practice since largely this is a challenge for them. Also, a plethora of new initiatives, business fads, and professional learning trends may, at times, distract a practicing principal from thinking creatively or taking necessary actions or risks for continuous school improvement (Lindle et al., 2015).

Overall, rural school principals who are coached in high quality leadership practices rather than simply mentored or offered periodic professional development build a greater capacity to lead rural schools which positively impact student achievement and student development (Lindle et al., 2015).

The literature supports that leadership training courses provided to rural school principals before they begin their positions will lead to small long-term increases in job satisfaction (Drummond & Halsey, 2014). By virtue of their position, rural school principals are a source of intellectual capital and contribute toward sustainability in rural communities (Drummond & Halsey, 2014). In order to maximize this leadership opportunity and maintain self-efficacy, rural school principals benefit from leadership preparation courses as these increase job satisfaction for rural school principals who may otherwise desire to leave the rural community for a more urban school setting. Maintaining consistent principal leadership is necessary in rural communities in order to maximize capacity growth in the community, and leadership development may help to minimize such frequent changes among rural school principal leadership (Drummond & Halsey, 2016).

This study also revealed, for experienced rural school principals, that emotions related to leadership is an area largely ignored. In the current state of political turmoil and public distrust
of the teaching profession, rural school principals repeatedly voiced the need to effectively
manage emotionally charged climates in rural schools (Lindle et al., 2015). The study confirmed
the need to treat principal emotions more as tensions over instructional leadership rather than
perceiving them in a gingerly manner (Lindle et al., 2015). Professional development for rural
school principals should not only focus on knowing, beliefs, and tasks but should also include
studies and understandings of how emotions and trust are an integral part of continuous school
improvement in rural schools.

Additionally, the current literature revealed inadequate funding for professional
development, long travel distances to professional development opportunities, and inaccessibility
to colleges and universities for professional help as additional challenges (Stewart & Matthews,
2015). Rural school principals work through these obstacles by creating a shared vision for
learning which sets the foundation for school improvement, establishes a more personal
approach to learning which builds hope and trust among teachers, and becomes a true
professional learner in order to serve as a model for teachers (Cherkowski, 2016; Klar & Brewer,
2013; Mette, 2014; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Additionally, one study found the
implementation of professional learning communities in rural schools may help to support
professional development among teachers (Willis & Templeton, 2017). Professional learning
communities (PLCs) work to improve learning for all students and include job-embedded
learning opportunities for teachers (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). While rural
school environments do not always allow for teachers to have time in the day to meet, share
ideas, develop as leaders, or meet with school leadership, rural school principals understand
teachers need this time to be effective in their roles. Teachers in this study were offered more
time to meet, including common planning times, to improve PLCs (Willis & Templeton, 2017).
Rural school principals in this study conveyed the importance of growing teacher leaders in rural schools as the principal, because of the many hats he/she is required to wear, may not be able to make all decisions regarding student achievement and student management that may arise. Principals felt that empowering teachers as strong leaders within the rural school provided opportunities for teachers to be involved in the decision-making process both in their classrooms as well as the entire school (Willis & Templeton, 2017). Rural school principals who are able to maintain and sustain PLCs believe it leads to a positive culture change in the rural school as “empowering teachers to be leaders and creating the sense of community among teachers influenced the positive outcomes of the PLCs not only for school goals but also for student learning” (Willis & Templeton, 2017, p. 35). Rural school principals who are active participants in PLCs better understand what is necessary to implement teaching practices (Ringler, O’Neal, Rawls, & Cumiskey, 2013). When rural principals attend PLC sessions, understand the content of the professional conversations, and understand the time requirements to implement PLC agreements, teachers come away from PLC experiences with the understanding that the principal values PLC work, knows it is important, and is willing to help (Ringler et al., 2013).

Attempting to change the extent the rural school principal is participatory in professional development sessions increases the capacity of teacher learning (Ringler et al., 2013). With regards to professional development, when the rural school principal’s role shifts from one who manages the building, the schedule, and the professional development to one who facilitates, leads, and participates in professional development for his/her school, teachers are better developed (Ringler et al., 2013). Steering away from booking the professional development session, setting it up, then walking out of the training and moving more toward a model where there are ongoing instructional conversations between the teachers and the rural
school principal leads to better student learning. In order to build strong learning communities, “principals must see themselves as learners alongside their teachers. Learners read, apply, reflect, collaborate with peers, seek feedback, and give feedback” (Ringler et al., 2013, p. 41).

One case study examining the challenges of implementing digital technology into the curriculum at a rural school emphasized “the geographic isolation of some rural schools makes it more difficult to form long-lasting professional development partnerships or to find qualified personnel to maintain the digital infrastructure” (Kotok & Kryst, 2017, p. 4).

The literature reveals that as rural school principals become a true professional learner and model these behaviors for teachers, the challenge of lack of access to high-quality professional development is diminished. Often for rural school principals, true instructional leadership is developed through role modeling, and the principal sometimes personally conducts professional development sessions for teachers (Klar & Brewer, 2014; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013). One case study focusing on a high poverty rural middle school with very high levels of achievement found that the principal leading by example was an attribute that led to strong progress made by the school (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Regarding the implementation of new initiatives and the professional development associated with it, this principal participated in all training sessions, learned everything possible about the initiative in order to best evaluate its effectiveness, sat side-by-side with her teachers during sessions asking questions, offering support, and listening to concerns. This positioned the principal to serve as a resource for teachers and effectively model new learning (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Rural school principals who participate in professional development alongside teachers in this way are better positioned to guard the school from outside threats such as district policies that are inappropriate for the rural school or that threaten to derail the school’s progress or are
incongruent with the school’s mission (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Rural school principals who demonstrate a commitment to their own professional learning help encourage effective school improvement activities (Versland & Erickson, 2017). In one case study, a principal who worked on an advanced degree shared research regarding how high poverty, rural schools found success in working with students, and as a result, teachers began replicating the ideas from the research articles shared into their own practice (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Rural school principals also model leadership attributes by sharing with teachers specific situations regarding students, their families, and obstacles they are working to overcome in the rural community. In this way, teachers view the principal as a leader who is well-connected to both the rural school and rural community and understand the “collective sense of mission and obligation to students and community” (Versland & Erickson, 2017, p. 13).

According to research, women represent the majority of rural teachers, but they represent the minority of rural school principals (Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Miller et al., 2014; Netshitangani, 2016). As indicated in a study (Miller et al., 2014) highlighting four female rural school principals and the slow track it took them to achieve a principalship, the researchers concluded that rural female principals often experience careers that are not marked with rapid transitions into leadership, but characterized more by a significant time spent teachers prior to achieving a leadership position. Furthermore, these female rural school principals used the slow transition into leadership roles to build collaborative leadership skills. In this study, half of the participants interviewed reported they believe there was a difference in leadership opportunities for men and women. One female interviewee responded that she had known of many cases “where men became principals quickly…on the other hand, many hard-working women stayed in assistant principal positions” (Miller et al., 2014, p. 98). Another study analyzed the barriers
rural female principals faced while transitioning from the classroom to administration (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). This study concluded that “although women complete educational leadership programs at higher rates than do their male counterparts, moving from the classroom to the high school principalship is difficult” (Kruse & Krumm, 2016, p. 36). Participants cited barriers to administration including family responsibilities, lack of confidence in formal education, and lack of mobility (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). Female rural principals also face communication barriers when working as a school principal in a rural setting. According to Netshitangani (2016), rural female principals must display both feminine communication styles and traditional male characteristics of independence in school settings to gain respect as a leader.

The current literature supports the idea that rural school principals face challenges when working to recruit and maintain high-quality teachers (Preston, Jakubiec, & Koymans, 2013). Research supports the idea that achievement gaps exist in rural schools due, in part, to human resource gaps when comparing urban and rural schools (Piyaman, Hallinger, & Viseshsiri, 2017). The research has analyzed the effects of learning-centered leadership of rural school principals and how this impacted teachers’ professional learning which is one way through which human resource gaps are diminished. Furthermore, the literature posits the connection between the direct and indirect effects principal leadership has on teachers’ collective efficacy and teacher trust which are both pathways that lead to greater teacher engagement in professional learning (Piyaman et al., 2017). According to Hattie (2012), if educators’ realities are filtered through the belief that they can do very little to influence student achievement, then it is very likely these beliefs will be manifested in their practice. If, however, teachers share a sense of collective efficacy, research demonstrates it is the greatest factor that impacts student achievement. Transformational leadership practices of rural school principals seek to build a school culture
that supports the collective efficacy and capacity of both teachers and students (Piyaman et al., 2017). These practices build both agency and trust among teachers which increases teacher motivation and builds a desire to maximize student learning. First, however, teachers, especially those who do not practice high-quality teaching, must engage with colleagues in collaborative activities which encourage collaborative conversations around data and shared learning regarding high-quality teaching practices. (Hattie, 2012; Piyaman et al., 2017). Gaps in initial qualifications in rural school teachers can be closed by providing learning-centered leadership and professional learning which serve to combat lower levels of engagement in workplace learning among rural school teachers (Piyaman et al., 2017).

Rural school principals face challenges when trying to implement continuous improvement practices in rural schools (Kotok & Kryst, 2017). In regards to technology implementation into the curriculum, rural school principals often view digital technology as a means to increase student engagement which leads to fewer dropouts, preparation for 21st century careers, and opportunities to connect students to their local communities (Kotok & Kryst, 2017). Rural high schools face challenges in maintaining the enrollment of high achieving students, and as a result of technology implementation, they are able to take advantage of online platforms and offer advanced courses (Kotok & Kryst, 2017). Rural school principals who desire to be or already view themselves as technology leaders do not have to be an expert themselves on the technology itself, but it is vital to understand how the technology can be used by teachers to maximize learning opportunities for students (Kotok & Kryst, 2017). In rural communities, rural school principals understand that effectively using technology within the school encourages all students to remain in the school rather than choosing a virtual school or urban school option. Socialization around the technology is important for students and teachers
in rural schools as this bridges a strong connection to community needs (Schafft, 2016). The connection between rural students, their schools, and communities has the potential to promote the long-term growth and development of rural communities (Schafft, 2016).

**Community Support and Parental Involvement in Rural Schools**

The current literature supports the idea that a rural school principal must effectively navigate his relationship and standing in the community (Hands, 2012; Hartell et al., 2016; Latham et al., 2014; Mette, 2014; Shu-Yuan et al., 2014). In culturally-cohesive rural communities, rural principals must consistently work to combine his leadership style and vision for the school with rural community expectations. Having ties to the community increased the rural principal’s ability to generate community support for new ideas or changes in the school (Latham, Smith, & Wright, 2014). Also, growing up in a rural school district established credibility between the principal and the community and showed that the principal shared a common set of values that were generally consistent with those of most community members (Latham et al., 2014). Latham et al.’s (2014) study included surveying and interviewing 63 rural principals and revealed the importance of the rural principal’s role in community affairs and “how having an understanding of the dynamics of living in a rural community was both a positive and enabling attribute” of the rural principalship (p. 7). Additionally, this understanding of rural communities led to a principal remaining in the rural community for longer than someone without this background knowledge (Wood et al., 2013). The literature emphasizes that rural school principals and educators are able to predict patterns of positive parental involvement in rural schools.

Overall, the principal is a role model in the community. In one study, rural districts were implementing school turnaround strategies using State Turnaround Schools Project trainers.
The researcher found that one key component in implementing school turnaround strategies was community involvement and addressing the concerns of the students, parents, and community members (Mette, 2014). The relationship the principal already had established with the community was vital to successful implementation. The study also found the successful rural principals “reflected on the specific work that was required to listen to the stakeholders to create greater buy-in within the community” (Mette, 2014, p. 16). Additionally, the researcher discovered there exists a real need for rural school principals to engage the community in order for a successful school turnaround to take place in a rural area (Mette, 2014). While most studies emphasized principals as key agents in establishing community support for rural schools, in some cases, community support may be organically generated, and rural school principals must understand how to develop their role in this community structure in order to increase student performance in the school (Ngalawa, Simmt, & Glanfield, 2015).

For the most part, rural school principals are responsible for generating PLCs within their schools leading to better teaching practices which often benefit students. One case study revealed highly effective and cooperative rural school principal leadership as a vital ingredient in partnering with a community who had made a deep commitment over many years to support their school (Ngalawa et al., 2015). Between rural school principals and the communities they serve, “this deep commitment made teachers teach as teachers, students study as students and community members participate in school issues as community members” (Ngalawa et al., 2015, pp. 118-119). In this study, the community valued strong school leadership and voiced concerns to district leadership when the school principal was not a strong leader who held the community and students in the highest regard. The community held visionary leadership for the future of the community and understood that well-educated students were necessary for its future. This
community described several key characteristics in a strong rural school principal: “had a good language (communication), he loved education, and had a good way of guiding students” (Ngalawa et al., 2015, p. 112). When strong community support and parental involvement exists, rural school principals can build on these assets with good leadership qualities in order to promote continuous school improvement.

In another case study, a rural principal voiced that he must communicate his commitment to the school and the community (Freie & Eppley, 2014). Additionally, this rural principal discussed the need to combine his leadership style and plans for the school with community expectations by “engaging the community in specific ways in order to make choices that coincide with his vision of what constitutes the ideal school leader, both in his own eyes and from the perspective of others” (Freie & Eppley, 2014, p. 658). Rural principals work to increase their social capital with community members (Preston & Barnes, 2017). According to the literature, social capital is any type of personal or professional bond or network a person has with other people or organizations (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Successful rural school principals effectively employ social capital to support school needs, school resources, encourage community involvement in the school, and to boost student achievement (Lester, 2011; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Community support and generating community involvement in rural school areas can lead to a solution to certain challenges experienced by rural school principals. Successful rural school principals understand that calling on the knowledge, skills, and experience present in a local rural community can lead to problems being solved, a more informed community, a better aligned vision for the school, and ultimately, school improvement (Ingman, Lohmiller, Cutforth, Borley, & Belansky, 2017; Preston & Barnes, 2017). As there are ongoing demographic changes
in rural communities, it becomes increasingly necessary for rural educators to be culturally
sensitive to the needs of their changing communities (Lin, Isernhage, Scherz, & Denner, 2014).
As a result, “moreover, a collaborative educational culture cultivates problem-solvers, uncovers,
and takes advantage of opportunities, and fosters additional collaboration, committees,
coalitions, networks, and partnerships” (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 11). Savvy rural principals
are aware that collaborative leadership structures will bring out the best in people and “uses the
constructive power of the school community to promote, produce, and publicize student success
and wellbeing” (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 11).

The literature indicates that rural school principals primarily engage parents in parent-
teacher conferences, school-wide activities, volunteering at school, and discussing their personal
goals and expectations for academic achievement (Lin et al., 2014). Overwhelmingly, when
parents hold high expectations for their child’s academic achievement, when parents have a
strong educational background, and when the teachers and school have a positive attitude toward
parents, there is more positive parental involvement in rural schools. Based on the research,
when parents hold high expectations for their child’s academic achievement,

it can be assumed that rural educators believe parents already know the potential impact
their involvement has on the academic success of their children and that they have
knowledge of how to get involved. Rural educators need to carefully avoid this
assumption. (Lin et al., 2014, p. 52)

Explicitly explaining to rural school parents what to expect for their child at each grade level,
how to effectively engage in their child’s school and educational experiences throughout their
time in school, and understanding the resources available to them are ways the rural school
principal can increase parental involvement (Lin et al., 2014, p. 52). Rural principals and
educators should expand their considerations of what parental involvement includes since the literature supports activities such as helping children in reading, encouraging them to do their homework independently, monitoring their activity inside and outside the four walls of their house, and providing support for their learning in different areas as true indicators of parental involvement (Rafiq, Fatima, Sohail, Saleem, & Khan, 2013). The literature supports that a family’s length of residence in the United States and parents’ ethnic backgrounds do not provide strong indicators of how involved parents will be in the rural school (Lin et al., 2014). Research supports actions that rural school principals can do to become more culturally responsive to parents. By creating a welcoming and open climate for parents to visit the school, translating or interpreting key information using parents’ home languages, and coordinating social services to support families in need, rural school principals are able to increase parental involvement in rural schools and be more responsive to the needs of diverse families (Lin et al., 2014). Additionally, the literature states that rural school principals can partner with families who are culturally diverse by “inviting parents to schools as guest speakers to share their experiences and not only connect to the existing curriculum, but enrich it and add value to it” (Lin et al., 2014, p. 53). One study found that providing transportation for school events for parents living in outlying areas and adjust the school calendar to meet varying needs of the rural community did not have significant impacts on parental involvement in the rural school (Lin et al., 2014).

Rural school principals can face challenges when working to increase parental involvement in a rural school (Hartell et al., 2016). As one study found, communication in rural areas can be problematic. The low level of education, lack of knowledge concerning technology, and poor cooperation from parents contributes to low parental involvement in rural schools (Hartell et al., 2016). Additionally, the researchers in this study found that rural principals
struggled with rural parents’ low level of education, their lack of understanding regarding how school works, and their lack of trust in school personnel (Hartell et al., 2016). Also, the research supports that parents’ socioeconomic status, parents’ work schedules, and recruitment of all parents to get involved in children’s education serve as challenges for parental involvement in rural schools (Lin et al., 2014).

In one study, the reality was presented that parents in struggling rural communities “cannot monitor their children’s behavior at home, provide support for their children’s educational needs and expenses, attend different school activities when they are invited by the school, or communicate with teachers regarding their children’s educational issues” (Hasnat, 2016). Oftentimes, parents in rural communities are mostly busy working for their family’s livelihood and cannot take time off work to attend school events (Hasnat, 2016). Research has found that parents from rural communities, at times, do not consider it their responsibility to be involved in their child’s education since educators are being paid a salary to educate students (Hasnat, 2016). Additionally, parents with this belief do not recognize a role they could play in the rural school that would contribute to their child’s learning (Hasnat, 2016). The literature supports that some rural parents believe “communication with the school is that it is something that occurs when the school authority demands the communication to convey their children’s wrongdoing or misbehavior (Hasnat, 2016, p. 146). One case study suggested that if parents were shown how to do so, they may be more involved in their child’s education, and if there is a lack of parental involvement, it should not be assumed that parents are “negligent or do not care about their children’s education” (Hasnat, 2016, p. 146). When serving on advisory committees, one study found that parents leaked important information about the school to the local community so principals could not trust parents with important and confidential information.
The study provided recommendations from rural school principals on improving parental involvement in rural schools such as introducing literacy classes for parents who may serve on advisory committees, training sessions should be introduced for parents who struggle with becoming involved in school activities, and new patterns of collaboration and empowerment between parents and principals should be formed (Hartell et al., 2016).

Summary

The existing literature reveals there is research surrounding the common challenges of rural school principals and specific characteristics that are present in rural yet culturally-cohesive communities. There is research to support the theoretical framework of this study. The research is weak, however, in giving voices to the leadership experiences of rural school principals in rural elementary, middle, and high schools. The research does not give voice to these rural school principals’ situational leadership experiences.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the leadership experiences of rural elementary, middle, and high school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. The literature indicates there is a gap in giving voice to the various leadership experiences displayed by rural school principals. This study worked to fill this gap in the research.

In this chapter the methods for study are described encompassing the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, and my role in the study. The process for data collection is detailed and includes semi-structured interviews, an online focus group, and a photo narrative. Data analysis is described in this chapter including open coding, axial coding, and memoing (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach was implemented in this study which was supported by epoche or bracketing, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the inclusion of both composite textural and composite structural descriptions. To strengthen the study, trustworthiness is described including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. These elements confirmed the consistency of the research findings, the integrity of the data, and ensured there was no bias in the study. This chapter also identifies ethical considerations such as Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, obtaining site access and permission, obtaining participant permission and informed consent, and communicating to participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Additionally, data security procedures and confidentiality are explained in this chapter.
**Design**

The research method of this study was qualitative, and the design of the study followed a transcendental phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of rural school principals in displaying leadership in rural schools in culturally-cohesive communities. Creswell (2013), Moustakas (1994), and Patton (2015) suggested qualitative research gives voices to the human experience. This design attempted to understand lived experiences and bring new voices to the research literature (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) supported the transcendental phenomenological approach as it involves “a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). The transcendental phenomenological approach of this study gave voice to the leadership experiences of rural principals who serve in rural, yet culturally-cohesive communities. These principals had the shared experiences in leading rural schools where communities are small, yet tight-knit. A phenomenological study was appropriate since principals gave descriptions of everyday things as they experienced them from their points of view (Schwandt, 2015).

Patton (2015) believed a transcendental phenomenological study “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 115). In turn, readers can better understand the phenomenon with this in-depth, descriptive information. This study employed the transcendental phenomenological approach. Transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to identify a phenomenon to study, bracket out of the experience, and collect data from several persons who have intimate experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the researcher, under this approach, collected and analyzed all qualitative data and looked for themes from participant statements in order to develop textural and structural
descriptions that led to an overall essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). The transcendentald phenomenological approach also allows readers to interpret the participants’ lived experiences through the historical and societal contexts of the participants’ lived experiences which creates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

A transcendental phenomenological design approach was appropriate as this study was both intentional and involved intuition on the part of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Through intentionality, the study did not focus on the principals being interviewed but instead, the phenomenon of their leadership experiences. Through intentionality, the researcher hoped to reveal multiple meanings of the leadership experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, the transcendental phenomenological design approach was appropriate as the study included intuition. According to Moustakas (1994), intuition “is the beginning place of deriving knowledge of the human experience” (p. 32) and expected the researcher to avoid using preconceived ideas and natural attitudes about leadership experiences of rural school principals. The study required the researcher to “engage in systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the epoche process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). This study focused on the leadership experiences of rural school principals “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34), so epoche, or to set aside or bracket, became important to the study as it was necessary to set aside my preconceived understandings about leading a school in a rural community. Practicing epoche required the researcher to be completely transparent to her own thinking and to allow anything new to come into her cognition as new knowledge in a completely open manner (Moustakas, 1994). In order to ensure epoche is achieved, the researcher maintained a journal to
document her decisions made during the study and also created reflective times for pure thinking about the phenomenon and created opportunities for complete concentration so that everything in consciousness could be considered for the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

Central Research Question: How do rural principals describe their leadership experiences working in rural schools?

Guiding Research Question 1: How does the culture in a rural, culturally-cohesive community affect the ways school principals make decisions and implement change?

Guiding Research Question 2: What are specific ways rural principals display leadership in their schools?

Guiding Research Question 3: What leadership experiences create a fixed mindset for rural school principals?

Guiding Research Question 4: What leadership experiences create a growth mindset for rural school principals?

Setting

The setting of the study took place in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in Alabama. Male and female school principals within communities that qualified as rural were eligible for participation. Rural, as defined by the United States Census Bureau (2013), encompasses all populations existing outside urban clusters (2,500-50,000 people) or urbanized areas (50,000 or more people). Semi-structured interviews took place at each school which created for participants a comfortable, familiar environment. Photo narratives were collected after the interviews from each participant. This collective evidence allowed the participants to choose a photograph representing their relationship with the community. The participants wrote
a narrative explaining the photograph and how it described this relationship between the principal and the rural community (Snyder, 2012). Focus groups were conducted through an online medium.

**Participants**

Participants for the study were selected using a purposeful sample. In a purposeful sample, decisions must be made “as to whom to select as participants for the study, the specific type of sampling strategy, and the size of the sample to be studied” (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). The participants in the study must have experienced the phenomenon in order to be selected for the study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants in this were male and female rural school principals from elementary, middle, and high schools in Alabama. They were asked to volunteer for participation in the study. Principals who did not lead rural schools were not selected, and superintendents and central office supervisors from districts serving rural schools were not be selected. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that researchers using a phenomenology approach interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. The researcher interviewed 10 participants at which point data saturation was obtained (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Data saturation is achieved when new data no longer yields any new information or unique contexts or perceptions from the participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

The rural school principals were selected to ensure maximum variation among the participants. Participants were male and female who had a variety of experiences as building principals and served in rural communities that are culturally-cohesive. In order to ensure diversity was achieved, age, years of experience, and cultural factors were considered in the selection process (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).
Potential participants were chosen by reviewing sizes of schools via the website of the Alabama State Department of Education to ensure the schools where they served were in communities meeting the rural definition, which according to the United States Census Bureau (2013), encompasses all populations existing outside urban clusters (2,500-50,000 people) or urbanized areas (50,000 or more people). Questionnaires were sent to potential participants who were principals in rural schools. The participants were chosen by these explicit considerations in order to ensure a wide range of rural school principals who were currently serving as principals in the southeastern United States. The principals had experienced the phenomenon of displaying leadership at a rural school in a culturally-cohesive community which was indicated on a questionnaire (see Appendix A). The selected principals were approved by the district-level supervisor.

The research study and participant criteria were identified and explained to the district-level supervisor and the school district superintendent. The district-level supervisor and school district superintendent were asked to review the participant criteria and upon review, gave permission to conduct research in the school district. After the completion of a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) and upon selection, an email and a consent form (see Appendix B) were sent to the rural school principals who served as participants. Appointments were created to begin interviewing participants and collecting photo narratives. Focus group sessions were scheduled after interviews had been completed.

**Procedures**

Following the specific protocols and procedures as required by the dissertation process at Liberty University, the researcher ensured the research was approved by the dissertation committee and the IRB (see Appendix X for approval). Ten participants for the study were
selected using a purposeful sampling approach which is appropriate for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). According to Moustakas (2013), there is no “in-advance criteria for locating and selecting the research participants” (p. 107). In order to ensure a sample of principals of different ages, different types of schools such as elementary, middle, or high, and different genders were considered. Participants in the sample included individuals who had experienced the phenomenon, had provided written agreement to be interviewed, had interest in being part of the research study, were willing to participate in an interview which was tape-recorded, and allowed the data to be published in a dissertation and other publications (Moustakas, 1994).

Upon selection of the rural principals to interview, the appropriate consent forms (see Appendix B) were obtained via email. Interview procedures were explained to all participants (Creswell, 2013).

Afterwards, the data collection efforts began through the semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and photo narratives. Focus groups were conducted during an agreed-upon time. Two different focus groups were conducted with three to seven principals in each group. The researcher facilitated the focus group conversation and participants were given the opportunity to interact with one another throughout the focus group session. The focus group session was recorded in order to transcribe all interactions. A photo narrative is a collage of photographs with a brief description of the relationship the principal experiences with the community as evidenced by the collage. The purpose of using the photo narrative was to provide another layer of understanding to the study through the explanations the participants provided about their relationship with the community. Participants were provided a Photo Narrative Documentation form (see Appendix C) and they emailed or scanned the final, completed product to the researcher for inclusion in the study. The semi-structured interview data was captured in person
at the school site of each participant principal using audio recording devices and was professionally transcribed for review. Recording procedures included using descriptive and reflective notes during the individual interviews and focus group interviews in order to capture exact happenings during the interviews as well as the researcher’s thinking and inferences made during the sessions (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were digitally recorded for future transcription by a professional transcriptionist. Throughout the interviews, the researcher practiced reflexivity as she purposefully directed her mind during the interviews to a neutral stance and practiced self-awareness to ensure that she was effectively having a conversation about the experience but also living in the moment of the interview (Patton, 2015). To collect effective interview data, the researcher practiced triangulated inquiry through reflexive questioning by remaining mindful of the participants, herself as interviewer, and those who used the research and asked questions that probed each perspective (Patton, 2015). A reflective journal was maintained to record and consider decisions made related to interview data and the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher requested member checks from the participants to review for accuracy regarding the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013).

**The Researcher’s Role**

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. As a result, she took on the perspective of epoche in order to, as Patton (2015) explained, “look inside to become aware of personal bias, eliminate personal involvement with the subject material – that is, eliminate or at least gain clarity about, preconceptions” (p. 575). Throughout the study, she avoided any tendencies to develop positivistic schema or reflections in an effort to provide an optimistic viewpoint surrounding the research. Conversely, she worked to point questions or knowledge gathered back to the lived experiences of the participants in order to
support the phenomenological research design (van Manen, 1997). Also, she was cognizant of any attempts she had to interpret narrative data through the lens of common sense, assumptions, pre-existing understandings, or her own lived experience and worked to eliminate these from the research process (van Manen, 1997). By practicing bracketing as proposed by Husserl (1970), she took hold of the phenomenon and placed it outside of her understanding and personal interpretation of the phenomenon.

The researcher’s educational experience as a former fifth- and sixth-grade classroom teacher and as an elementary instructional coach serving reading and math classrooms for four years helped her identify with how rural schools operate. Currently, she serves as the Chief Academic Officer of a rural school district in northeast Alabama. When this study was conducted, she was continuing in this role. Under her duties as Chief Academic Officer, the researcher manages one million dollars of federal funds for three Title I schools. The programs and personnel funded from federal dollars are carefully selected and maintained to increase access for disadvantaged students to a quality educational experience. She is familiar with the challenges and benefits of serving rural school students, teachers, and administrators and has an interest in learning more about their experiences to better inform her work.

Additionally, the researcher earned her master’s degrees in Elementary Education and Instructional Leadership. She holds teaching certificates in both of these areas in the state of Alabama. She also holds an Educational Specialist degree in Educational Leadership. While she has experiences as a general education teacher as well as an instructional coach, she has never been a building principal and will not assume there are any similarities between the work she does now as a central office leader and those of the principals in this study. Since the researcher
conducted interviews in school systems where she has not worked and was unfamiliar, she further bracketed herself from the process as epoche requires.

The researcher served as the interviewer to bring out the lived experiences of the participants and served as the facilitator of the online focus group. She bracketed out of the research process to ensure no bias existed. As Patton (2015) explained, “in this analytical process, the researcher brackets out the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions” (p. 575). Additionally, prior to the study, she had no direct communication with the rural school principals selected for this research study and did not personally know them. This eliminated any bias or appearance of having friendships or relationships established with the participants prior to the research study.

**Data Collection**

This qualitative study, through a transcendental phenomenological research design, gives voice to the rural school principal’s leadership experiences when those experiences occur within a culturally-cohesive rural community. Once approval from IRB was obtained from the research institution and the study sites, the researcher began the data collection process.

In order to reveal more fully the leadership experiences of rural principals, she employed several data collection methods. The researcher used semi-structured interviews and online focus groups for data collection (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; & Patton, 2015). Documentation was also collected in the form of a photo narrative (Snyder, 2012). The photo narrative asked participants to write a narrative piece related to a picture they chose that they believed describes the relationship they have to their rural school community. Triangulation of data will be achieved using these three data collection methods and will, according to Patton (2015), “illuminate the inquiry question” (p. 316). Through the use of interviewing, observing,
and document analysis, errors in the research study were reduced (Patton, 2015). Triangulation of data was a primary goal of the study since it was both “possible and necessary” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 308) to merge data from various sources in order to reveal a more genuine meaning of the truth by representing it as a collection of different viewpoints.

Individual interviews were incorporated with the selected participants. Qualitative interviewing was chosen as a data collection method in order to more clearly understand what the researcher was not able to observe. Patton (2015) suggested researchers cannot, without questioning, truly understand how people have experienced phenomenon or organized the world through their thoughts, feelings, and intentions. The interviews she conducted included open-ended questions, opportunities to listen extensively, observations, and clarifying probes when necessary (Patton, 2015).

Next, a photo narrative representing collective documentation was requested of participants. Participants were asked to generate a photo or use a previously taken one via an electronic device (cellular phone, iPad, laptop computer, or tablet) that describes the relationship they, as rural school principals, believed they had with their culturally-cohesive community. Participants were asked to write a brief description of the relationship and how it related to the photograph. This documentation demonstrated a personal connection to their lived experiences (Snyder, 2012). Visual data is becoming increasingly important in qualitative data (Patton, 2015). This collected documentation provided another viewpoint of the rural school principals’ leadership experiences in a rural, culturally-cohesive community. The purpose of using the photo narrative was to provide another layer of understanding to the study through the explanations the participants provided about their relationship with the community.
Lastly, an online focus group was used at the end of the interviewing process once data saturation had occurred. This online focus group occurred via Google app tools. The online focus groups were conducted after the initial interviews were completed. The researcher served as the facilitator for the focus group interview. The researcher asked one question at a time and allowed all participants to provide input to each question if desired. This data collection method served to support the rural school principals’ documentation of their lived experiences and enhanced by providing them a social context with other principals. The online focus group served as an interview where participant descriptions were enriched by hearing each other’s responses and making additional comments based on what others contributed (Patton, 2015).

**Interviews**

In this study, interviews were used to capture the experiences, activities, opinions, feelings, and understandings of rural school principals. The goal of the interview was to obtain high-quality information from rural school principals regarding their leadership experiences (Patton, 2015). All interviews were conducted in face-to-face sessions and elicited the stories of leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. Interviews as a means of data collection in this study were reasonable since principals established their identities as leaders and offered meaningful data to the research study through this process (Schwandt, 2015). In this phenomenological study, the researcher relied on the interview process to gather, according to van Manen (1997), “experiential narrative material” (p. 66) which aided the researcher in developing a clearer understanding of the experienced phenomenon. The interview was the primary source of data in this study since through talking rather than writing, a participant is often more inclined to tell personal stories anecdotes, and experiences that brought the researcher closer to the lived experience (van Manen, 1997). The researcher listened closely
to participant responses and through reflection, asked probing questions when necessary in order to remain close to the lived experience. Throughout the interview, the researcher pressed to remain true to the phenomenological point of view of understanding how it is to lead as a principal in a rural community (van Manen, 1997). While the subjective and unique experiences were gathered, analyzed, and valued, the researcher prioritized the phenomenological research expectation which is the nature of the human experience in the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). The researcher established rapport in an authentic and trustworthy manner (Patton, 2015).

Interview questions were open-ended and clear so the rural school principal was able to elaborate on leadership experiences. In this way, the research study was strengthened since “qualitative inquiry – strategically, philosophically, and methodologically – aims to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses. Rather, questions should be asked in a truly open-ended fashion so people can respond in their own words” (Patton, 2015, p. 446).

All participants were asked 15 interview questions. For consistency, all interview questions were asked in the same format and in the same order. Questions 1 through 4 captured background experience information about the rural school principalship. Questions 5 through 7 were questions related to leadership experiences of rural school principals in their schools. In question 8, rural school principals were asked to describe their situational leadership methods which supports the theoretical framework theory of situational leadership (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2013). Questions 9 through 12 related to leadership experiences of rural school principals in their communities. Questions 13 and 14 asked rural principals about their perceptions regarding fixed and growth mindset in relation to their leadership experiences. These questions support the mindset theory which is part of the study’s theoretical framework. The last question was used to create an open invitation for information that might not have been
communicated during the interview. The interview questions were developed to obtain an understanding of the lived experiences of rural school principals as they display leadership in culturally-cohesive communities. After IRB approval (see Appendix F), interviews were conducted and transcribed using a professional transcriptionist. Additionally, the interviews were annotated by the researcher in order to capture any verbal or physical gestures that helped the researcher understand more about the principal’s human experience in relation to the phenomenon. After interviews were completed, the researcher communicated with the participants via email in the event there were further interviews or additional information that was needed.

The interview questions were drafted in order to allow rural school principals to describe their leadership experiences. The interview questions relevant to this study include:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How do you, as a rural school principal, describe your work experience?
3. What challenges do you face as a rural school principal?
4. As a rural school principal, what benefits do you experience?
5. In what ways do you display leadership within your school?
6. What is the purpose of your leadership within your school?
7. How does your leadership affect those within the school?
8. When has it been necessary to modify your leadership style based on a given situation in the school or in the community?
9. In what ways do you display leadership within the rural community?
10. How does your relationship with the rural community affect your leadership experiences as a rural school principal?
11. How does the culture of your rural community affect your ability to make decisions as a rural school principal?

12. How does the culture of your rural community affect your ability to implement change in your school?

13. How do you think your leadership experiences might be fixed or lacking the opportunity to improve?

14. How do you think your leadership experiences might have the potential to grow or develop over time?

15. If I have questions, may I contact you?

The interview questions were developed from an analysis of the literature review, the central research question, and guiding research questions. The interview and focus group questions were guided by the theories supporting the theoretical framework including situation leadership theory (Hersey et al., 2013), mindset theory (Dweck, 2006), and transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Interview questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 were designed to capture participants’ background knowledge of the participants and their experiences in the rural school principalship (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Preston et al., 2013; Seipt & Baghurst, 2014; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). These questions helped establish a communicative discourse between the participant and the researcher and were intended to provide the participant with questions that were straightforward and relevant to their everyday experiences.

Interview questions 5 through 7 asked the participant to respond to questions related to leadership experiences in their school. While these may be varied, rural school principals had the opportunity to describe these with these questions and also reflect and respond to the purpose
of their leadership capacity within the school. The literature confirms that rural school principals often serve their schools as administrator, teacher, counselor, assessment specialist, and professional development provider (Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Taole, 2013).

Interview question 8 probed participants’ experiences in shifting leadership styles in changing situations in order to direct others to a desired result (Hersey et al., 2013). Participants were asked to give examples of their leadership displays that required reflecting on a situation and evaluating what the desired results were in order to shift their leadership style to achieve these results.

Interview questions 9 through 12 were designed to ask participants about their leadership experiences in their rural community. The literature confirms the need for rural school principals to establish strong relationships in their culturally-cohesive communities (Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Hargreaves, 2009; Hicks & Wallin, 2013). Additionally, the literature emphasizes that current rural school principals must engage in building strong parental involvement in their rural schools (Shu-Yuan et al., 2014). These interview questions were designed to give participants the opportunity to explore these ideas related to their lived experiences.

Interview questions 13 and 14 were guided by mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) and transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This theory recognizes that resilience and sustainability can be created as a way of being. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect on leadership experiences that may have created a fixed mindset and those that may have created a growth mindset. Additionally, these questions required participants to examine displays of leadership and evaluate them according to fixed outcomes or ability to grow or transform their school.

**Online Focus Groups**
In this study, online focus groups were used to allow rural school principals to be interviewed in a social context. Focus groups were organized into groups of five or fewer once individual interviews were completed and the transcripts were analyzed to ensure any follow-up questions were appropriately addressed. Patton (2015) supported collecting data in this way, as he asserted, “participants get to hear each other’s responses and make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (p. 475). In these interviews conducted via online focus groups, the overall goal was to obtain high-quality data and additional observations in a social context where participants considered their own views in the context of the views of others thus adding to the narrative of the lived experience (Patton, 2015).

Online focus groups were conducted via Google app tools with five or fewer principals at a time once the interviews were completed and transcribed. This opportunity in a social context gave the rural school principals the ability to offer information that might not have been captured in their individual interviews. Interactions among participants provided a way to secure checks and balances on each person’s ideas and exposed ideas that were outliers (Patton, 2015). Usually, focus groups are enjoyable to participants as they often engage in new knowledge, beliefs, and even changed behavior when the session takes on a problem-solving approach (Patton, 2015). Exploring the idea of a lived experience in a group setting supported the goal of triangulation of data. This opportunity encouraged participants to assign additional meanings to the phenomena of practicing leadership by being a rural school principal (van Manen, 1997). Since language and conversation brings reflections and lived experiences to life, participants had the opportunity in the focus group setting to provide additional meanings to their lived experiences through this socially-constructed experience (van Manen, 1997). Providing a
different venue for expressing ideas and leadership experiences added to the credibility of the study as some research participants may have found one-on-one interviews intimidating (Patton, 2015). The focus group questions relevant to this study include:

1. What were the primary motivational factors that led you to becoming a rural school principal?
2. What do you consider to be the most rewarding aspects of being a rural school principal?
3. What do you consider to be the most challenging aspects of being a rural school principal?
4. Describe what you believe it takes to be a successful rural school principal?
5. How does the rural community and its culture influence your decision-making as a principal?
6. Where are opportunities for growth in your school?
7. Are there situations in your school that seem fixed, without opportunity for growth, and must be accepted as they are? Describe those.

Focus group questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 attempted to provide rural school principals the opportunity to describe motivational factors that could be attributed to the rural school principalship. Additionally, these questions attempted to surface descriptions of leadership experiences unique to being a rural school principal (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham et al., 2014; Miller-Vaz, 2015; Preston et al., 2013; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013).

Focus group question 5 asked participants to describe their relationship with the rural community and guided the participants to conversations toward the effects of decision making
and implementing change as a result of serving at a rural school (Hands, 2012; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Seipt & Baghurst, 2014).

Focus group questions 6 and 7 utilized the mindset theory which supports the theoretical framework to probe participants further about their leadership experiences in their rural school and create opportunities for them to reflect on them in order to apply a fixed or growth mindset identification to these experiences (Dweck, 2006). Mindset theory requires participants to explore the fixed mindset in relation to the growth mindset and how one can develop or transform their thinking or leadership experiences over time (Dweck, 2006).

During the focus group interviews, discussions were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. This ensured that all conversation is captured and themes could be coded from the transcript. Field notes and journals were utilized to note ideas that were common among the participants and those that were different. Focus group interview transcripts were shared via email with all participants in order to ensure accuracy and member checking (Creswell, 2013).

**Photo Narrative**

The photo narrative asked participants to write a narrative piece related to a picture they choose that they believed describes the relationship they have with their rural school community. Patton (2015) supported this type of data collection as he wrote, “Incorporating photography into data collection can also be a highly participatory process” (p. 489). Through this data collection, rural school principals were given a different platform through which to explain their leadership experiences in connection to a culturally-cohesive community. This self-reflection illuminated the voice of the rural school principal by creating a way to use a photograph or picture as a metaphor for his or her leadership experiences in the rural school community. Employing a photo narrative opportunity in this study gave participants additional opportunities to construct a
possible interpretation of the lived human experience rather than only recalling situations whereby leadership was displayed (van Manen, 1997). The photo narrative data collection also supported triangulation of data by considering the relationship the participant believed was present between themselves and the rural community. The evaluation of this relationship made it possible for the participant to consider, in an alternate way, what it was like to be a rural school principal in a culturally-cohesive community. Due to the concrete nature of a photograph, this data collection supported the research effort to probe the participants’ reality of the lived experience rather than only thinking abstractly about it (van Manen, 1997). By structuring this data collection technique in a completely open-ended way, rural school principals were not limited to the leadership experiences shared in their responses.

Participants were asked to use no more than three photos or pictures to describe the way they viewed their relationship with their rural community. The locations or objects were not specifically designated in an attempt to use the experience as a reflective tool in capturing part of the lived experience of a rural school principal in relation to their rural community. At the end of each interview, the researcher shared with each participant a template of the photo narrative documentation (see Appendix C) in order to eliminate confusion and allow for maximization of a quality data collection. Participants were encouraged to share their photo narratives through email. Only the emerging themes from the photo narratives were used in the research study, and no actual photographs were displayed in order to protect confidentiality. The photo narrative documentation was used to encourage rural school principals to reflect on their relationships within the rural community (Snyder, 2012). A primary purpose of the photo narrative was to create another text regarding the human, lived experience of leadership in a rural school and to provide opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue about this phenomenon (van Manen,
1997). Data analysis of the photo narrative documentation was searched for themes in the rural principals’ experiences as rural school principals provided reflections of their community relationships and provided a personal connection with their leadership experiences. The collective photo narrative documentation was piloted with three non-participants who served as rural school principals in various school districts to ensure accuracy and appropriate feedback.

**Data Analysis**

A specific, structured method of analysis was used to support this phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The personal experiences of the principals were described by transcribing the interview and focus group data. This research used a transcendental phenomenological research approach including epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. More explicitly using a data analysis approach offered by Moustakas (1994), the researcher obtained a full description of the lived experiences of the phenomenon from each participant. Then, from the verbatim transcripts for each participant, the researcher analyzed each experience looking for significant statements that described the experience and recorded all relevant statements as these became “invariant horizons or meaning units” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). These statements were grouped into themes, and the themes were given descriptions of the textures of the experiences which included verbatim examples from the participants’ descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). At this point, using imaginative variation, descriptions of the structures of the experiences were constructed by addressing the underlying dynamics of the experience such as “how” these feelings and experiences emerged (Moustakas, 1994). The structural qualities were then combined with textural qualities into structural-textural descriptions of the meanings and essences of each of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The process concluded with composite textural-
structural descriptions of meanings and essences of the experience being written which combined all individual textural-structural descriptions into an overall description of the rural principal leadership experience representing the entire group of participants (Moustakas, 1994).

**Epoche**

According to Moustakas (1994), epoche is a difficult task that “requires that we allow a phenomenon or experience to be just what it is and to come to know it as it presents itself” (p. 86). In order to separate from the research study and set aside all references to others, the researcher’s personal experiences were set aside or bracketed out during the entire study (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher had no direct experiences or relationships with the participants prior to the beginning of the research study. During the study, the researcher committed to being fully immersed in the epoche process as this allowed all prejudices and predispositions to exist in a separate realm from the research study and allowed the lived experiences from the participants to be heard as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) asserted that engaging in epoche satisfies the necessary requirement that the researcher approaches the research study as an “opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning, not being hampered by voices of the past that tell us the way things are or voices of the present that direct our thinking” (p. 85). The researcher maintained a reflective journal which served to maintain epoche and bracketing throughout the research study. The journal contained notations about the setting of the interviews, observations made during the participant interviews as well as the focus group interview sessions, personal reactions during the process, how participants seemed to perceive and respond to the interview questions, and the rapport established between the participants and the researcher.

**Phenomenological Reduction**
Moustakas (1994) described the act of phenomenological reduction as being the task of looking repeatedly at the experience or phenomenon in order to provide and elaborate on the absolute qualities of the experience. Including varying degrees of intensity is a natural result of this process. Phenomenological reduction includes looking again and again at the textural language allowing different reflections and considerations each time. This ability to attend repeatedly to the textural language describing the phenomenon will assist the researcher in reducing the experiences to only those that provide textural meanings (Moustakas, 1994). A list of significant statements was developed, and participants’ lived experiences were brought out in these statements, which achieved horizontalization of the data. Each one of the significant statements was treated as having equal worth. Significant statements were then grouped into larger units of information or themes. “Classifying and coding qualitative data produces a framework for organizing and describing what has been collected during fieldwork” (Patton, 2015, p. 554). Ideas and themes became more clear as the data is analyzed. During this phase of analysis, the researcher will “build a foundation for the interpretive phase, when meanings are extracted from the data, comparisons made, creative frameworks for interpretation are constructed, conclusions are drawn, significance is determined, and in some cases, theory is generated” (Patton, 2015, p. 554).

**Imaginative Variation**

In order to build upon phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation was employed to explore the meaning of emerging themes. This assisted the researcher in describing what is being experienced and how these aspects of the lived experience benefited and supported the research study. Primarily, engaging in imaginative variation during the research process allows the researcher to arrive at the underlying factors of why experiences come to be (Moustakas,
After phenomenological reduction has been achieved by analyzing textural descriptions, imaginative variation allows the researcher, through reflection, to arrive at structural descriptions such as time, place, materiality, and relationship to self and others (Moustakas, 1997). Considering the lived experiences on a wider view by engaging in imaginative variation allows the researcher to understand there is “not a single inroad to truth, but that countless possibilities emerge that are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of that experience” (Moustakas, 1997, p. 99).

**Textural, Structural, and Composite Textural-Structural Descriptions Synthesis**

The researcher developed a textural description by writing a description of what participants experienced with the phenomenon and included verbatim examples. A description of “how” the experience happened represented the structural description. The researcher reflected on the setting and context where phenomenon was experienced. The researcher wrote a composite description combining both the textural and structural descriptions which will inform the reader of what the participants experienced and how. Additionally, the descriptions were viewed from a fresh lens giving the research study a new perspective once the descriptions and lived experiences had been synthesized. This synthesis helped achieve a series of individual manifestations taken as a whole instead of being individually considered (Moustakas, 1997).

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was important to this study and was established by focusing on the details of the study. Spending adequate and quality time at the research site, building sound relationships with the participants, and spending adequate and quality time reviewing and analyzing data increased trustworthiness in the study. By spending considerable time with participants, they were more likely to be open and honest in their responses. To strengthen the
study, “when a large amount of time is spent with your research participants, they less readily feign behavior or feel the need to do so; moreover, they are more likely to be frank and comprehensive about what they tell you” (Patton, 2015, p. 685). Trustworthiness was also maintained by establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

**Credibility**

In order to establish credibility in the study, member checking was used so the participants could judge the accuracy and credibility of the account given to the researcher (Creswell, 2013). All participants were asked to review interview data and focus group data to promote validity in the study. Participants were encouraged to ask specific questions regarding the interview transcripts they were provided. Additionally, triangulation improved credibility of the study. By using multiple data collection methods, sources, and various theoretical frameworks, credibility of the study is increased. Using collected data from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and photo narratives, triangulation of data was achieved and credibility in the study was strengthened. In order to establish strong credibility with participants, the researcher spent an adequate amount of time in the interview setting taking specific care in the interaction style and comfort level exhibited during the interview process with each participant (Patton, 2015).

**Dependability**

Dependability was achieved by using peer review or debriefing in order to provide an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2013). According to Schwandt (2015), “dependability focused on the process of the inquiry and the inquirer’s responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented” (p. 309). The researcher also used member checks to increase the dependability of the study. By using member checks, the
researcher sought feedback from the participants on the researcher’s findings (Schwandt, 2015). This act of verifying the participants’ intentions in the interview process and how this data was analyzed and developed into textural and structural descriptions allowed the researcher to increase the integrity of the research findings by seeking feedback from the participants.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability was present in the research process as the researcher ensured that data collection and data analysis supported qualitative research methods and did not create findings that were simply creations of the researcher’s imagination (Schwandt, 2015). In order to provide corroborating evidence from different sources, triangulation of data was used in order to document themes from multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2013). Confirmability was achieved as the researcher was able to link “assertions, findings, interpretations, and so on to the data themselves in readily discernible ways” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 309).

**Transferability**

Transferability was achieved in the research study by ensuring to provide readers with sufficient information regarding findings and the ability to take those findings and transfer them to another case under study. To ensure transferability in the study, the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions which required providing details when describing a case or when writing about a theme in order for readers and other researchers to understand the complexities of the research (Creswell, 2013). In order to maintain a separate stance toward the research study and consistently remain mindful of biases or prejudices in educational leadership, the researcher bracketed out any associations and provided a journal of reflective thinking to eliminate any personal experiences that could influence the qualitative study and thus disrupt transferability (Creswell, 2013).
Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were incorporated throughout the study. Research data was locked and secured, IRB approval (see Appendix F) was obtained, the research study obtained committee approval, and appropriate consent forms (see Appendix B) were obtained.

The qualitative research data in this study was stored on a secure laptop with backup copies uploaded to a secure site. High-quality devices were used to audio-record each interview. All information from the participants was protected in order to safeguard their anonymity by masking their names in the data. Any printed data was maintained in a filing cabinet that was locked and secured. Safeguarding and protecting data was established by securing interview data and photo narrative documentation (see Appendix C) in a secure, locked file cabinet. Email correspondence was protected via passwords.

Along with obtaining IRB approval and committee approval, the researcher gained approval from the school districts where participants were interviewed via the district’s superintendent (see Appendix D). Participants were supplied with informed consent documentation (see Appendix B) which explained the nature of the study, potential selection of participation, and their right to withdraw at any point during the study. Additionally, to increase ethical considerations, the researcher conducted the study with caution with regards to sharing personal experiences in educational leadership in the interview setting (Creswell, 2013).

Further ethical considerations included copies of the research being provided to all participants, cultural, religious, and gender considerations were respected, composite stories were used so participants cannot be identified, and pseudonyms were used (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, confidentiality was enforced and practiced throughout the research study. This was applied by using pseudonyms in the study so that confidentiality was noted.
Summary

The transcendental phenomenological approach for research design is appropriate as it allowed the lived experiences of rural school principals to be captured. This approach provides an open-ended invitation for rural school principals to share their leadership experiences in leading rural elementary, middle, and high schools in the southeastern United States.

The data collection and data analysis procedures were appropriate for this qualitative study as they supported the need in the research to give voice to rural school principals and their leadership experiences through semi-structured open-ended interviews, online focus groups which provided a social context for principals to share their leadership experiences, and a photo narrative which captured the reflections of rural school principals as they described, metaphorically, their relationship to their culturally-cohesive school communities. Creating strong trustworthiness and ethical considerations gave validity to the study and built research credibility between the participants, the researcher, and the study’s readers.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe leadership experiences of rural school principals in elementary, middle, and high schools in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994, van Manen, 1997). This study served to provide rich descriptions of the experiences of rural principals as well as ways they display leadership in culturally-cohesive communities (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Chapters One through Three described the methods employed and literature used to conduct and support this phenomenological study. The purpose of this chapter is to present the synthesized findings and data analysis of the semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and the photo narrative documentation (see Appendix C) in the context of themes that emerged and how these themes relate to each research question.

Research Questions

In order to study the leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities, a central research question and four research sub-questions were considered:

Central Research Question: How do rural school principals describe their experiences working in rural schools?

Guiding Research Question 1: How does the culture in a rural community affect the ways school principals make decisions and implement change?

Guiding Research Question 2: What are specific ways rural school principals display leadership in their schools?
Guiding Research Question 3: What leadership experiences create a fixed mindset for rural school principals?

Guiding Research Question 4: What leadership experiences create a growth mindset for rural school principals?

Participants

The participants of this qualitative research study were chosen from a rural school district in northern Alabama. Because each community within this school district met the federal definition of a rural area and all schools within this school district were centered in a culturally-cohesive community, rural school principals from this district were chosen for the study. The schools comprised of nine public schools identified as Title I and one vocational center. There was one PreK through fourth-grade school, two fifth-grade through eighth-grade schools, three PreK through eighth-grade schools, three PreK through 12th grade schools, and one 10th grade through 12th grade vocational center. All schools were assigned pseudonyms. After obtaining permission from the IRB at Liberty University on January 30, 2019, an email was sent to each principal in the school district explaining the study and gave all principals the opportunity to participate in the study and schedule a time for an introductory meeting (see Appendix E). Prior approval to conduct the study in this district was granted from the district superintendent (see Appendix D).

Each principal desired to combine the introductory meeting (see Appendix E) and the individual interview because of time constraints with their schedules. Ten participants volunteered and participated in the study. These principals’ administrative experiences ranged from 2 years to 22 years. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.
Table 1

*Participant Demographic Overview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>School Configuration</th>
<th>Years of Experience as a Rural School Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>K-4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>PreK-12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtis</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>PreK-8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>PreK-12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lane</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turner</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>PreK-8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>PreK-8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Description of Participants*

In order to provide a composite description of each participant’s lived experience, an individual description of each participant is described. This context describes the participant’s age, years of experience as a rural school principal, how each arrived at the rural school principalship, and their experiences in leading a rural school in a culturally-cohesive community in a rural, north Alabama school district. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

**John.** John is a 44-year-old Caucasian male. When asked to tell about himself, the discussion led to his journey in becoming a rural school principal. John began his college education majoring in Engineering and then Marketing. He changed his major to secondary
education because he “always wanted to coach.” After obtaining his degree, John obtained a job at the high school where he graduated and taught history and drivers’ education. His next move was to an area school in a neighboring district to serve as head basketball coach. John was there eight years spanning from 2007 until August 2015. During this time, John explained how he was “an outsider when they brought me in, and they loved me and took care of me. I never thought I could love a place as much as I love that place. They just made me one of their own.” Also, during his tenure as head basketball coach, John developed medical issues that necessitated a hospital visit which revealed he was diabetic. He took a semester off school, and during this semester, his beloved son passed away. John described this difficult time by saying he learned “it was God’s plan; it wasn’t my plan. I learned a lot about my faith, my family, and my friends. I did a lot of soul searching.” During this challenging time, John received a phone call from a principal in his current school district who suggested he come and do some administrative work for them. He eventually became an assistant principal in the district but only spent 14 months in that role before he was promoted to principal of a PreK-12 school in the district. John has been in his current role as principal of Wilson High School, a PreK-12 school, for two years and two months and has just completed his 21st year in public education.

**Linda.** When asked to tell about herself, the discussion led to her journey in becoming a rural school principal. Linda is a 58-year-old Caucasian female who grew up in south Tennessee. Her father was the town doctor in the community where she now serves as a rural school principal. She married when she was 19 years old and has been a part of the same community for over 40 years. Linda began her college education by majoring in nursing because her father wanted one of his daughters to be a nurse. As Linda described, however, “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want to teach school. I had really good teachers growing up.
But, of course, the principals were always men.” Linda graduated in December and the principal saved her a spot at the school because the special education teacher left, and Linda held this certification. Later she transferred to kindergarten at the same school where she entered her classroom with four mismatched tables and some mismatched chairs, and it was the second day of school. Additionally, she had 28 kindergartners including nine girls and the rest were boys. Afterwards, Linda taught third grade for several years while continuing to attend graduate school where she obtained her Educational Specialist degree and after 20 years in education, she obtained her administrative certification. She added, “I never even thought about being a principal. Principals were men.” Several years later, Linda explained the superintendent at the time asked her to transfer to a different school and spend time as an assistant principal and work alongside a veteran principal in order to gain administrative experience. Linda explained how this was a time of growth for her professionally. Eventually, Linda was offered a principal’s position at a small K-12 school in the district. The school was an hour drive away due to the large geographical size of the district. She decided to take the job and begin an administrative career.

Jeff. Jeff is a 45-year-old Caucasian male with 15 years of experience in education and 4 years of experience as an administrator. When asked to tell about himself, the discussion led to his journey in becoming a rural school principal. Jeff has lived in the school district his entire life and graduated from one of its high schools. Jeff obtained a business degree and worked as an insurance auditor at the same hospital where his future wife was working as a nurse in the labor and delivery area. Upon setting a wedding date, they began to ask, “are we going to continue these jobs that have been really good for us or do we want to stop and go back and get a masters degree?” Jeff described, “We both loved kids. We both loved our jobs. What about
let’s go back and get a Master’s degree in education?” He explained how both he and his wife obtained education degrees along with teaching certificates using the alternative certification pathways available in the state of Alabama. Jeff explained how he comes from a family of educators, citing cousins, aunts, and uncles who were teachers. He stated, “Education was a big family factor.” Jeff began his teaching career at a high school in the district teaching social science since he had an economics background and spent ten years in the classroom. Additionally, Jeff coached for three years, became the club sponsor for Beta Club, and obtained a license to drive a bus. As Jeff extended his time at the school, he expanded his leadership roles by becoming the senior class advisor, the Continuous Improvement Plan chair, and the textbook coordinator. Jeff described how he had a principal and an assistant principal who encouraged him to take on more leadership roles and trusted him to be in the school office more working in this capacity as his teaching schedule allowed. Jeff described how he felt these role models trusted him and how he, in turn, believed they influenced and mentored him. Jeff stated, “I’m not afraid to ask them anything. They gave me a good foundation.” In the fall of 2015, Jeff moved to a different school in the district and became an assistant principal with primary responsibility for the K-6 function of the school. As he described, “I didn’t understand a lot of the curriculum aspects of that. The motivation was different for me in high school versus elementary.” In February of 2017, he became the principal of the school when the principal at the time moved to the central office as superintendent. Jeff described how he sees his school as a tree branch of the original tree which represents the school district. He indicated that his mentors helped him create this idea as he always feels they want him to be successful, and he knows he is never cut off from them.
**Curtis.** Curtis is a 52-year-old Caucasian male. When asked to tell about himself, the discussion led to his journey in becoming a rural school principal. Curtis described how he was a lifelong resident of the area and is entering year 31 of his educational career. He has been a rural school administrator for 22 years. He began his teaching career at one of the area high schools as a science teacher and basketball coach. After eight years of teaching and coaching, he applied for an administrative job. He was hired as a principal of one of the district’s middle schools with no prior experience as an assistant principal. Curtis explained,

> I had zero administrative experience, but I somehow interviewed extremely well – probably because I knew nothing about being a principal which probably served me well in terms of the interview. I got the job and spent six years at Breckinridge Middle School. The middle school experience was interesting.

Following this administrative assignment, Curtis transferred to one of the district’s K-8 schools, Flintville School, and spent nine years as the school’s principal. Curtis explained,

> There were some needs at the school. Enrollment was declining, and it was a situation that needed some help. I got to expand my administrative experience into K-4, which I did not have experience with. We turned the enrollment around.

Curtis has been the principal at his current school, Denmark School, a K-8 school for seven years.

**David.** David is a 36-year-old Caucasian male. When asked to tell about himself, the discussion led to his journey in becoming a rural school principal. David graduated from a high school within the district in 2001. He resides in a small community 15 minutes away from the high school where he currently serves as principal. After graduation, David enrolled at a local community college where he played baseball. After completing two years there, he enrolled at a
four-year university to complete his undergraduate degree. David contemplated majoring in engineering since his sister is a mechanical engineer. He decided to major in education because “I really like coaching and I enjoy living here.” David decided the best path for him was secondary mathematics so he obtained his undergraduate degree in this area, and according to him, “got hired just like that” at a high school in the district where he stayed for 11 years as a teacher and the head baseball coach. David emphasized that he was not trying to change jobs because he consistently had good baseball teams and his players were young but “out of the blue” one of the district principals called him and indicated that he had administrative opportunities that would soon be open at his school. David decided to move to the school and soon became the assistant principal in October of the school year. In January of the same school year, the principal was transferred to the central office and David applied to be the principal of the high school and was selected for the job. David noted he applied for the job so that everyone would know he was interested but stated, “I wasn’t planning on getting it. So, and then, it happened where I got it.” David has been the principal at his current assigned school for three years. In searching for an assistant principal, David indicated he chose someone he knew and with whom he had taught and coached for 10 years at his previous high school. David expressed the importance that “it was a great opportunity” for them since they were both learning how to be administrators and could act and reflect on issues together.

**Kevin.** Kevin is a 48-year-old Caucasian male. When asked to describe himself, the discussion led to his journey in becoming a rural school principal. Kevin stated he was born and reared in the local area and “was fortunate to have parents that instilled work ethic” in him. He described how “that was the big thing because like everybody else at that time, we were all poor, but nobody knew it, because we were all just alike.” Kevin explained how his dad valued
education and encouraged him to go to college and get a degree. Kevin described how school was challenging for him. He said, “School was never my strong suit. It wasn’t. In comparison to my peers, you know for a lot of them, it was easy. It was a piece of cake. I had to work for it.” Kevin explained how he worked through college and obtained a degree in agribusiness and wanted to become a county agent. Additionally, he tried to find a job in his field in Georgia but was turned down twice because “they thought I was too far away from home, and I wouldn’t stay. I was told that twice.” Kevin described how these rejections “kind of crushed the dream,” and he came back home and pursued collision repair as a job since his dad owned a small body shop. Kevin explained that he spent 10 years in collision repair work with his dad since he had learned this trade throughout his high school experience. Eventually, he married an elementary school teacher from the area. She urged him to pursue becoming an agriculture teacher since she had a job posting for one at an area high school. Kevin described how he spoke with the principal who had already recommended another person for the job. At that point, Kevin began the path to graduate school pursing alternative certification, which provided him a master’s degree and a teaching certificate. A year later, he was hired at the local high school as an agriculture teacher. He explained, “I went from working on a 1996 Jeep on a Thursday with the dash out and every part of it spread out in a million pieces to becoming a teacher on Friday morning.” Kevin served as an agriculture teacher for eight years and during that time obtained his administrative certification. After eight years at this high school as a teacher, Kevin became as assistant principal at the school. He also spent eight years as an assistant principal and was then promoted to principal of the area Career Technical School.

Lane. Lane is a 54-year-old Caucasian male. Lane has served as a principal for 15 years. Before becoming a principal, he was an assistant principal for 5 years for a total of 20 years in
school administration. Prior to this, Lane was a science teacher for 10 years at the same local area high school where he served as assistant principal. When given the opportunity, Lane transferred to an elementary school in the district where he stayed for the majority of his time as a rural school principal. Lane explained, “I think the Lord put me in this position (as a principal) because I’m able to do so much more than I did as a teacher. Some people are born teachers. I think I was a born administrator.” Within the last six months, Lane moved to one of the district’s middle schools where the culture is very different. Lane explained, “It is different here. There’s a mentality here of, like, if you don’t like something somebody says, let’s fight about it. I probably had, the first month I was here, four fights.” This type of school environment was described to Lane upon his arrival like “an inner city school in a rural area.” Lane added that students in his new middle school either live in housing projects across the street from the school or may live as far as an hour and a half away from the school. He explained that his school has one of the longest bus routes in the district with students actually being picked up in the southernmost point of an adjacent state. This new experience at this middle school requires Lane to “be at the school as early as possible in order to go through emails and things like that.” Lane explains how it is necessary for him to “spend a lot of time in the halls because I’ve found, if I’m visible, I have far less trouble.”

**Turner.** Turner is a 49-year-old Caucasian male. He has 26 years of experience in education and has 7 years of experience as a rural school administrator. When asked to tell about himself, the discussion led to his journey in becoming a rural school principal. Turner stated, I started out at a high school. I taught math and Driver’s Education for thirteen years. Then, I went back to the area where I live and taught five more. After seventh and eighth grade all day, I was ready to leave.
During that time, Turner obtained National Board Certification in mathematics. Afterwards, Turner was selected to be the assistant principal at a high school in the district for a year, and then moved to be the principal of a K-8 school in the district. Turner explained the enrollment fluctuations his school has experienced since he has been at the school. He said, “We’re about 130 now. First year I was here, we were 115. Two years later, we were at 175. It was crazy. Sitting here one summer, and the fax machine went off requesting records. It was like Bam, Bam.”

Andrew. Andrew is a 46-year-old Caucasian male with 23 years of experience in education and 14 years of experience as a rural school administrator. He grew up in the school district directly across the road from the school where he attended. He explained that his dad was a mechanic and drove a tractor-trailer for years. Andrew explained that there were times, due to his dad’s job, that his family would move around some in the summer but they “couldn’t survive without going to our school. It would have been the end of the world.” With his family’s periodic moves, there were parts of the country he was able to see such as Utah and Virginia. He explained that “basketball was the thing” at this school, and he “played a lot of basketball growing up.” Eventually, due to his skill in the sport, after graduating in 1991, he went to college in Brevard, North Carolina. Andrew explained, “Basketball took me there.” He then transferred back to the state and completed his college education in 1996. Andrew stated his first job was teaching history for four years at a high school in the district where his former basketball coach had become the principal. Andrew explained that he began to coach basketball while teaching. Through the encouragement of his former coach, Andrew began working on his administrative degree. Andrew valued his coach’s advice as he said, “you would have options.” As he was working on his master’s degree in administration, he was contacted about applying for
an assistant principal’s position at a high school in the district. Andrew explained, “The Lord works things out, and I was an assistant principal for five years.” In 2005, Andrew explained he went to a K-8 school to become the principal and has been at this school since that time. He just completed his 23rd year in education. When asked if he ever sees himself moving to another school, Andrew explained, “Unless the Lord has different plans, I really love it here. I think, part of that was my experience going into a high school and being in a situation, as an administrator, you have so many irons in the fire.” Additionally, Andrew, in speaking about his current school said, “When I came here, I was like, pinch me.”

**Carter.** Carter is a 34-year-old Caucasian male. He has been in education for 13 years and has been a rural school administrator for 3 years. When asked to tell about himself, the discussion led to his journey in becoming a rural school principal. Carter grew up in the area, has lived in the area his entire life, and attended the school where he is now principal. He recently became a father to an adopted son. Carter taught math before becoming an administrator. He explained that he obtained a degree in math because it was the quickest path to obtain a job due to the need for math teachers in the state of Alabama. In 2006, he became an assistant principal at a high school in the district. He was only there for 11 months before being named principal of his current school. Describing this quick transition, Carter explained, “It was a very quick turnaround. The system was changing. People were moving up.” Carter explained that he moved to the assistant principal position at a high school in the district because a long-time teaching colleague of his had just been named as principal and asked Carter to come to help him. Carter explained, “A lot of us were assistant principals for what felt like two minutes. Then we got thrown into the fire.” Carter explained how he is the person with the least number
of years of educational experience at the school where he is principal since teachers often stay in the same place in this school district for their entire educational career.

Results

The results of the study were derived by a thorough analysis of all individual interview data, focus group interview data, and photo narrative documentation data. Throughout the study, participants echoed similar experiences when participating in individual interviews and a focus group interview. The photo narrative documentation served to support themes derived from the interview data collection.

Using the qualitative research methods from Moustakas (1994), the researcher bracketed personal beliefs, experiences, expectations, and ideas regarding the phenomenon and analyzed each data set including individual interview transcripts, focus group interview transcripts, and photo narrative documentation. Initially, codes were developed by analyzing individual principal experiences and the context of those experiences. After initial coding, the researcher reviewed all codes in order to determine importance in relation to leadership experiences of rural school principals. A synthesis of codes was conducted with non-essential codes removed and remaining codes reorganized into meaningful connections allowing the researcher to identify themes related to the central research question and the research sub-questions.

Research participants participated in member checking by reviewing individual transcripts and themes that were generated through an analysis of individual interviews, focus group interviews, and photo narrative documentation and offered the researcher feedback to ensure all data was valid, accurate, and credible (Moustakas, 1994).

A thorough analysis and reflection of the data revealed five descriptive themes across the collection of participant individual interviews, focus group questions, and photo narrative
documentation. The major themes from the research study that contributed to rural school principals’ leadership experiences in culturally-cohesive communities included (a) Familiarity with Rural Communities and School Families; (b) New Initiatives and New Learning; (c) Instructional Support Outside of Rural Community; (d) Leadership Mentoring; and, (e) Challenges in Rural Communities. Textural themes were then developed from each type of data collected including the participants’ interviews, the focus group interview, and the photo narrative documentation. The goal in collecting the data and formulating these was to capture the lived experiences of these rural school administrators and lift their voices in how they display leadership. These themes helped provide answers to the study’s research questions regarding how rural school principals display leadership in rural school communities that are culturally-cohesive in northern Alabama. Appendix G provides a summary of the themes and the related codes that contributed to the themes.

**Theme Development**

**Theme 1: Familiarity with rural communities and school families.** Consistently throughout each of the data collection methods of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and photo narrative documentation, the importance of being extremely familiar with rural communities in order to most effectively lead a rural school became a common theme. During the interviews, the principals expressed the unique, close relationships they are able to build with students and their families by being in a smaller, more intimate rural setting where generations of families have lived for a long time. They consistently expressed the necessity of these relationships in order to most effectively display leadership when necessary. Carter explained, “I know every kid in my building. If something’s going on, it’s pretty easy to figure
out really quickly.” Turner supported that thinking with, “The people here are like family. Everybody’s easy to get along with. I know most of the families.”

John explained the benefits of having students for their entire Pre-K-12th grade experience in this way:

Just being in a small town, you get to know your kids. You get to know the parents a little bit better. You’re going to run into them at the gas station, the restaurants, and you’re going to see them out and about, and you just have a way of meeting. Plus, you get to see these kids grow up. If I’m at a 9-12 school, I get them when they’re freshmen. I don’t get to see them overcome something, maybe, that they struggled with in third grade. The way you make those relationships is by just going up and sitting with them in the stands at ball games. At PTO or parent meetings or any kind of back to school night, you make yourself available. You go down here to the Dairy Bar and you sit and have lunch and just talk to people. I know five or six people if I needed something right now, I could pick up the phone and call them, and they’d be here to help me.

David expressed the benefits of understanding families and students in a rural school and drawing upon his experiences in growing up in a rural community and attending a rural school. He stated:

You get to know the kids and build a relationship. I like that part. I grew up the same way they do. They like to hunt and fish, and that’s what I like to do. They’re hardworking people, and we have common interests. I think what has helped me more than anything is my background and the way I was brought up. It’s the same way they’ve been brought up. I understand them, and I build relationships as soon as they get here.
Andrew supported the idea of building relationships as a key factor in being an effective leader in his rural school. He explained:

You get to know these kids and as you get to know their families, you build that relationship. I’ve been challenged to grow in that way. Going from a larger high school to a smaller, K-8 school, I’m getting to know the teachers and the faculty and staff. I’m getting to know the families and the kids and building that relationship so when we do meet challenges and need to address obstacles, the relationship building helps.

Lane explained that becoming familiar with each student and family builds trust, which is vital in displaying leadership. He said:

I’m not the smartest principal I ever see, but I promise you, I’m going to be there, and I’m going to care about them. I try to tell the parents every year, I’m going to take care of them just like they’re mine.

Linda expressed a similar sentiment that building a family’s trust in her leadership abilities is vital, and she has been able to do this due to her many years as a member of the rural community and a long-time teacher at the school she now leads. She stated, “Another benefit of my being here is that I taught a lot of these parents. I taught them in kindergarten and third grade. They know I have that kid’s best interest at heart.” Curtis added to the idea that building trust among families helps him display leadership as a school leader and also added that teachers are able to provide instruction at a higher level and consistently use new, best practices with students due to the large amount of trust built between school personnel and families. He believed:

I think there’s a lot of trust in what we’re doing. Part of that is the reputation of the school. The reputation has been solid for years. That builds the trust, the quality of teachers that we have, the preparation of our students entering high school. They’re (the
students) very successful for the most part. So, yes, I would say the trust factor there is key. The staff is really focused on delivering quality educational experiences for the kids that come through. We don’t face resistance in the community. I’ve been very fortunate, not even little pockets of resistance. I think it’s the trust. I think they trust these folks.

Seven of the ten participants who submitted photo narrative documentation suggested that they believed part of their leadership obligation is to treat their teachers and staff as a team and a family. As the leader, rural school principals mentioned in their documentation that they know the way they want their schools to proceed knowing there will be obstacles to overcome. One participant mentioned that the journey of running a school with so many other people should be fun as well and can be if they all work together as a team. Additionally, one participant included in the photo narrative documentation, “I can empathize with my teachers, students, parents, and community. I know where they are coming from.” The photo narrative documentation overall emphasized the need for rural school principals to develop strong relationships within the school and within the community in order to best display effective leadership.

During the focus group interview, participants viewed building strong relationships in the rural school community as a benefit to the work they do. They agreed that “knowing the people” made their jobs worthwhile and fulfilling. Additionally, this familiarity and understanding of community members developed a sense of identification with students who may have struggled when they were younger but later had success in the workforce. Rural school principals also suggested that these relationships built with students and seeing them later succeed encourages them in the work they do.
Two principals alluded to the fact that they believed it was necessary for rural community members to view them as plain and hardworking in order to build necessary leadership capital. John explained:

I’ll never forget the first week I was here; it was a Saturday morning. I came up and needed to do some yard work. So I loaded up my weed eater and brought it out here. A guy that I didn’t know from Adam’s house cat comes up and said, ‘Are you the new principal?’ I said, ‘Yes, sir.’ He goes, ‘Need some help?’ I said, ‘I’m all for it.’ He said, ‘Give me a few minutes.’ He went home, got his stuff, and then came and worked out here for about seven or eight hours. I learned that a long time ago from another administrator I had. There are days when they community doesn’t need to see you dressed up. They need to see you out working, and I agree wholeheartedly. But, now, at the same time, I’m not going to go out here and do all this work and toot my own horn. I’m not going to flaunt it and everything. If I’m doing a good job, somebody else wins.

Supporting that same idea, Turner expressed, “I don’t get any strange looks if I show up in work clothes. Nobody looks at me. Nobody cares. I don’t have to put on a tie and a jacket every day and say, ‘Hey, I’m the principal.’”

Additionally, the principals expressed the need to develop relationships with leaders in the community such as the mayor, town council, and community organizations. Carter described from his experience, “I think trying to reach out to people in the community that are interested in helping us out. Our mayor and our council are awesome to work with. They’ve never told me no.” Curtis has many years of experience in leading his high-performing rural school. He expressed his belief in the necessity to form relationships with community leaders in order to gain support and effectively display leadership at his school. He explained:
It’s a small town but these folks are very supportive of the school. We work cooperatively with the town government. We have a library next door. They run a summer reading program, and we tie that together with our summer feeding program. They have a nice sign over there and anytime we have anything going on, right now they had our summer feeding program up on their sign. It’s just right across the street, and it’s a very visual point here in the community. So they’re great to work with.

As a high school principal, Kevin emphasized the importance of working closely with industries in the nearby area that depend on recent high school graduates to supply their workforce needs. He explained building relationships with personnel from these industries is an important way he displays leadership as a rural high school principal in supporting his students who are career ready and need jobs. He stated:

We have close relationships with our industry people around here. They can call up and ask just a very simple question, ‘Is student X going to do what I need him to do?’ That’s their workforce. Getting some of that involvement is a little easier, too, when you got those personal relationships. They trust you. Our mission with Career Tech is to meet industry needs. I cannot turn a blind eye to them. That relationship is what has got our apprenticeship program going.

**Theme 2: New initiatives and new learning.** During the semi-structured interviews and focus group interview, the rural school principals interviewed consistently mentioned how beneficial it is for rural schools to experience new learning and new initiatives that cause thinking and reflection about established teaching and learning practices. This idea emerged as a theme describing how teachers in rural schools approach new teaching practices and how essential it is for rural school principals to display leadership in maximizing the benefits of these
new opportunities. Explaining how he was able to bring a new state initiative to his schools, Curtis described how he led his schools to adopt the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative (AMSTI) which is well-known in the state to provide high quality professional development regarding STEM instruction. He explained,

The previous two schools where I was principal, I lead both of those into AMSTI. The first school I was at, we were actually one of the first middle grades schools when AMSTI expanded into the middle grades. I got them on board with it.

In describing a new character education program, Carter explained,

The teachers are open to it because they see a need for it. So the thing I figured out is that it’s like doing a garden. You’ve got to get everything plowed up, and you get everything laid out there for everybody to see that there’s a need for it. Once they see there’s a need for it, provide a solution. This, by far, has been a more effective way to do it. Not by coming in and hitting them over the head with something. If it’s done that way, everybody knows at the end of the year it’s probably going away if it doesn’t go away by October.

In describing how the implementation of a new character education program emerged, Andrew described how vital it was to have the community and families support the initiative as everyone benefits from a new, positive initiative. He described how he worked to ensure it was well explained and easy to understand which created a more sustained implementation plan. Andrew stated:

We came up with ‘Be A Warrior TODAY.’ T stands for: tell the truth, O stands for: obey the rules, D stands for: do your best, A stands for: attitude – everybody’s got one, have a good one, and Y stands for: yes, ma’am and yes, sir. The message is that we don’t have
the power to go back in the past, and I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. We’ve been blessed with only TODAY. I can make good choices today, and it’s going to impact today. If the change is connected to the livelihood of the school and the continuing presence of the school, it’s going to be well-received. The school is the hub. It’s the identity of the community.

Several rural school principals described how they have displayed leadership in their own lived experiences by creating a significant change for the school by implementing a new schedule, a new resource, or a different approach to teachers’ established routines. Overall, these efforts to change were needed as described by the rural school principals and were in the process of leading to positive changes and increased learning opportunities for students. The process, however, was repeatedly described as hard, requiring perseverance, and was implemented over time. Linda explained:

We were using one math resource that to me was repetitive, but it wasn’t rigorous enough. So we got another resource, and I had some teachers who were very resistant to it. They didn’t want to do it. Parents couldn’t understand it. One parent wanted to get the teachers edition so she could help her child at home. It has been hard for the parents to embrace the new math resources. We did begin to see increased test scores and data. Additionally, Linda described how looping classrooms were being implemented at her school for the following year. Following a period of research and planning, she made the decision for all teachers to maintain the same class rolls for two years and essentially, the teachers would loop from one grade to the next in order to develop deeper learning relationships between students and teachers. This was a significant display of leadership as Linda had to work to develop
teacher buy-in. She explained, “This is an experiment. The rest of the county is going to be watching us. I feel like they can do it. I have good teachers. They just need something new.”

The implementation of some changes was repeatedly noted to be challenging and slow in having a positive effect in student achievement. Kevin described the shift from a block schedule to a seven-period schedule to be a significant one for high school personnel since many of them had only taught or worked as a counselor under the block schedule. Making this change, however, benefitted the skill development of students at the Technical School, by grouping students in a better way and allowing instructors to more adequately teach at students’ skill levels. Kevin explained, “There will be more alignment in kids’ skill levels as first year students are becoming acclimated to these craft areas. We don’t want to leave them behind. Changing the schedule gives kids more accessibility.” In describing this significant display of leadership in working with personnel from each of the system’s high schools, Kevin explained,

We made a change last year that I am a 100% believer that we needed to do. We went from a 2 session to a 3-session day. We looked around and tried to see how it worked before we did it. This was new and counselors in the system had never developed a schedule (with 7 periods) because the block had been around longer than they had. This was new, and they were having to come up with it. I think most folks are seeing that there is a benefit to it. Next year, we are doing a straight seven period day. Our schedule is going to be the same here every day. We are going to be more consistent. We drew up what three sessions here were going to look like, and we tied it into the high school schedule. It worked.

Rural school principals who were interviewed also mentioned that another challenge in implementing new learning was the limited accessibility and exposure rural school teachers
experience. Rural school principals work to provide opportunities for rural school teachers to be able to engage in professional development. At times, rural school principals must encourage rural school teachers to seek new learning experiences outside of their immediate school or engage in new practices in order to increase student achievement. Two principals discussed how teaching and leading in remote areas limit the development rural school teachers and administrators can experience. As a result, it is a challenge to learn new instructional strategies or to observe different techniques in teaching. Carter explained:

> They haven’t seen other places. All they know is what they see here everyday. This is the only place they’ve taught. They haven’t been in anybody else’s classroom. So as a leader, you have to make sure they’re not fighting complacency and the comfort zone factor. You still try to convince people to grow.

Supporting this idea, Andrew explained this challenge when he stated:

> The trend has been to provide professional development within the walls of your building more and more as well as to connect teachers in different buildings, in different locations. That’s been a trend and a positive thing. Teachers are not on that island. In my setting, when I’ve just got one grade level teacher, they need another teacher to connect with.

Across all interviews, principals explained that even though it is extremely limited, instructional coaching support is extremely helpful to the teachers and students in their rural schools. Carter asserted:

> But the thing our coach did, she’s really gifted and been able to do this. She’s able to go into a teacher’s classroom, help them identify a problem, help them seek a solution without them feeling like she’s telling them what to do. That’s a hard balance to strike, and she was able to do it.
One aspect of new learning and new initiatives that emerged was the challenge rural school principals face in strengthening the academic culture of their schools. This shift is usually accompanied by encouraging yet difficult conversations the rural school principal begins to have with the school staff. Carter explained:

It makes uncomfortable situations more uncomfortable sometimes. But I think that I’ve got a lot better grip on it now that I’ve been doing it. Look I respect you, and I’ve always respected you, but we’ve got to do this. Those are hard conversations to have, but the more you have them, I guess you get used to it.

In supporting that same idea, Lane described:

Sometimes teachers tell me here, ‘We’re never going to do super on that test because we’ve got so many hits compared to everybody else.’ I told them that’s not the answer we’re going to have. We’ve got to have more data meetings and know how to read those reports. We’ve got to know who’s getting better scores and who’s still struggling. You’ve got to be able to dive into that a little further. This is what we’ve got to focus on. Everybody needs to refresh.

Theme 3: Instructional support outside of rural community. During principal interviews, leaders referenced their need to provide high-quality professional development to their teachers in order to increase student achievement and development. At times, this display of leadership is challenging and not easily attainable in the local, rural community. Two principals described how their teachers had benefitted from instructional support outside of the rural community. Carter, explaining the recent decision by a large, global company to build an operations center within the county, provided his school staff with out-of-state professional
learning opportunities geared toward better coaching of teachers and developing a growth mindset for learning and leading. He explained:

This deal opened up. We flew out there. They trained us for one week in San Jose at company headquarters which was some of the best PD I ever got, not even close. We thought it was going to be how to use all their stuff. It was about creating a mindset of adaptability and being coachable. Grow from where you’re at. They trained our digital coaches on dealing with resistant teachers. There was consistent follow-up. There was consistent feedback.

Additionally, some principals referenced a large, growing city within the state and their close proximity to it as a source of instructional support for their teachers. They described how they consistently take advantage of the many professional learning opportunities this urban area provides teachers and school leaders. Several principals referenced a learning community that meets in this city called Principally Speaking Network. They explained how they are able, free of charge, to participate in these three times per year meetings to meet and network with other school administrators. They described the connections and school visits that had emerged from this network that had been learning experiences for them and had served to increase their leadership capacity by gaining new ideas from other school administrators as well as having access to nationally-known educational speakers and experts. John explained:

We may be better off than some of the other schools in the county. We have been able to develop some partnerships there, which are only 30-40 minutes away. They offer a lot of professional development over there that my teachers take advantage of.

During the focus group interview, participants collectively agreed that without these opportunities to grow and learn, a fixed mindset forms in their rural schools. With it, they
explained, a growth mindset develops among teachers and staff members in the rural school as new ideas are infused into the rural school. Additionally, having more connection to industry and more work opportunities creates a growth mindset among community members. One principal explained how there is always a hope for new companies and increasing work in the rural community surrounding his school.

Lane explained about professional development teachers would experience over the summer, which would emphasize college-readiness skills. He stated, “We are going to be involved with A+ College Ready Program. We get trained this summer. We want strategies and best practices. I’m hoping it pays off. When our educators get trained, they come back and get results.”

In the interviews, rural school principals discussed the reliance they have on the district office to provide them with instructional support outside the immediate rural area when implementing curriculum or professional development that required change related to a new initiative or new state standards. Curtis explained:

I’ve never really been good in the area of professional development. That’s one thing as an administrator that I don’t think I’m strong in. I’ve never been able to, in my opinion, effectively plan and execute professional development for the people at my school. But from the district level, we’ve always had good professional development. There has always been a vision for the district, where we were headed and planned professional development and kept us moving in that direction which is difficult for a district this size. I’ve always leaned on the district level for things we’re doing. Then we do things at our school, kind of piggy-backed off of that to support the district initiative or the district’s direction.
Theme 4: Leadership mentoring. Throughout the semi-structured interviews and in the photo narrative documentation, rural school principals who were interviewed consistently mentioned how they were mentored regarding leadership practices, and this mentoring relationship served to strengthen their leadership abilities. Additionally, in leadership situations where they needed to seek guidance and experience, these mentors served as valuable resources for rural school principals. During the focus group interview, rural school principals explained how mentors and others in leadership positions were part of the primary motivational factors leading them to become rural school principals.

When Carter was asked about leadership experiences that supported his development of a growth mindset, he referenced learning to reflect about having hard conversations with employees. He explained how his mentor, through trust, helped him develop the important skill of reflection and thinking things through. Carter stated, “I’ve learned to just be overly reflective on anything. That’s just the way I approach everything. Jackson is a good resource for me. I trust him, first of all, he’s a smart guy, and he sat in this seat for eight years.” Carter also explained how having a critical friend relationship in leadership is vital to getting better at the work he does and growing as a leader. Thinking about his move into the principalship, he recalled:

I walked in getting ready for my interview here, and I was like, ‘I need to know what you think my weaknesses are. I know what I think they are, but I know you are going to tell me about it.’ I know what’s going to tell me the truth. When I was a teacher I didn’t do that at all. I look back and I cringe a little bit because I think I would be exponentially better now than I was then.
When deciding to be a principal for the first time after being a teacher for 25 years, Linda stated, “I thought I’m going to go for it. And I really learned a lot. It was good for me. I’m sure I made a lot of mistakes, but I learned and developed tougher skin.” Linda stated the superintendent was a support to her during this transition into being a principal as she could call him for advice with any situation. She discussed how necessary this mentoring was since this was a completely new role for her after so many years as a classroom teacher.

Kevin discussed the significant scheduling change that he worked to create at his school in order to provide more instructional time for students. Since his school serves students throughout the region, he knew it would also affect other schools in the area. In order to maintain a growth mindset in this display of leadership, Kevin stated how frequently he spoke to district staff and gathered ideas and advice from them in working through this change. He explained, “I had several conversations with district personnel about what it was going to look like here. They were integral.”

John explained, in his interview, how he has been mentored through reading texts written by leadership experts. He explained how frequently reading or listening to podcasts increases his ability to maintain a growth mindset in the work of being a rural school principal. He described, “I get most of my leadership information from actually reading. I read business stuff. I read a lot of business fiction. I read Jon Gordon and Andy Andrews. I listen to a lot of podcasts.”

In the photo narrative documentation, one participant described, “great individuals who helped establish my roots. The roots are supplied with truth from those essential elements that have been placed around them from the beginning.” Participants also described leadership relationships as necessary to sustain the work as a rural school principal.
Theme 5: Challenges in rural communities/challenges being a rural school principal.

Throughout the collection of data, rural school principals described the challenges of maintaining a growth mindset in rural communities. Repeatedly, principals further described these challenges as creating difficult environments in which to display leadership. Principals in the study discussed how their role as principal of the rural school often requires them to display leadership that is outside the boundaries of teaching and learning. Frequently, their displays of leadership involve being a role model for students, supporting families who are struggling to survive financially and emotionally, and raising funds for their school so students and teachers have basic materials and supplies. The photo narrative documentation specifically referenced challenges of rural school principals and was described with, “there are going to be some dangerous areas we must navigate through, and we are all in it together.”

The lack of parental involvement and overall parental support for education in rural communities became a common theme among principals in the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, they spoke about the challenges in rural communities of an older generation of grandparents now increasingly being the primary caregivers for school-aged children. Lane explained:

Parents in some of these rural areas don’t really respect education because they come from a poor background. They say, ‘Hey, if I can get out and get a job, they can, too.’

So the value of education is not what I would expect it to be.

In Carter’s small school he noted, “What’s going to help is dad getting in the picture. Several of the students live with grandparents who have health issues. The grandparents are trying to handle all of that, and they can’t.” For several students in the small school, their dads are serving prison time, are deceased, or are completely absent from the student’s life. In one grade, Carter
has 19 students. He stated, “I just went through mentally and made note of who I considered to have a stable home life. Not normal like Leave It to Beaver, just stable. I counted five.” Turner supported this idea when he explained, “I’ll say at least 30% or more of our kids are raised by a grandparent. You can’t take a 75-year-old that can’t operate a cell phone and expect them to help a kid with their education.”

John added that the perceptions of residents of rural communities in north Alabama are not always favorable toward education. Since these perceptions are communicated to their children who attend his school, John noted this as a challenge:

The expectations of people in rural Alabama are a challenge. Parents or grandparents may not have graduated from high school or they struggled. Sometimes breaking that cycle is one of the toughest things I’ve seen. And drug issues in rural Alabama. You just have to look up the police report. The big one is the mindset of, ‘My daddy didn’t graduate from high school, and he just wants me to go work at the factory job.’ One of our biggest challenges is letting kids see some possibilities.

Andrew explained how this challenge is growing and has had a negative impact on the overall school environment during his 14 years in school administration. Additionally, he reflected on how important it is to address this challenge directly with families and parents in order to attempt to overcome its negative effects. Andrew noted, “Maybe their experience in school wasn’t the best experience. You don’t know that until you go. You don’t know until you ask. You don’t learn until you get to a place where you’re willing to bring that up.”

Along with perceptions, several principals noted the challenge of working with families who experience generational poverty, which is increasingly common in rural communities. David stated, “We have low-income families here. We’re a Title I school, and parental
involvement is hard. And we don’t have any businesses here.” Linda further explained this challenge in providing students what they need for every day school events. She stated:

The challenge is that we are very poor. To get anything, I have to write grants and call people and beg. I have parents who try to help and will give, but a majority of my parents just don’t have it. Sometimes on fieldtrips, our kids can’t go unless we get money for them.

Curtis explained:

Having worked in different communities, I do see as a commonality, in our district, is the socioeconomic factor. With that comes a lot of different things like split families, grandparents raising children, students on medication they can’t get or can’t afford or don’t stay on top of. There’s an increased prevalence of mental illness type issues. That’s real. That’s not imagined. So with that combination of things, at times it’s amazing to me that we’re able to be as successful with children as we are. This is one of the top academic performing schools in our district. In the socioeconomic level that we deal with, I think it’s a great tribute to great staff of people and teachers that work here.

Andrew spent time reflecting on how important it is to understand first the challenges extreme poverty presents to students and families in their homes, and in being more aware of it, he believes creates a better understanding of each student’s needs. This leadership display, as he discussed, is a way he models for both his students’ families but also his teachers and staff that being empathetic and supportive of each student’s needs strengthens their ability to learn in an encouraging environment filled with high expectations. He offered:

After almost twenty years in administration, was has changed for me, is the expectation to maintain the facility but also to try and understand individual needs of students and
what do we need to do to meet those needs. This is going to demand that you get to know those families, and what in those settings, in their homes, are the challenges on the home-front that they are going to bring to us here.

Research Question Responses

One central research question and four sub-questions that emerged from the literature guided this study. As a result, the central research question and each of the four sub-questions are discussed.

Central research question. The central research question asked, “How do rural school principals describe their experiences working in rural schools?” From the data acquired through interviews, a focus group, and photo narrative documentation, rural school principals’ descriptions of their experiences working in rural schools provide conclusions that these leaders must be familiar with the culture of rural communities and seek to understand and work to solve challenges that prevent students’ needs from being met. Additionally, rural school principals find it necessary to develop relationships with rural community residents in order to positively affect change in their rural schools. Rural school principals described how working together as a team and as a family with teachers and staff at the school ensures greater achievement at the school and provides a better learning environment for students. Rural school principals described how new initiatives and new learning are fueled by district initiatives and give schools instructional direction. Additionally, principals emphasized the high-quality instructional support they receive and seek out from outside the rural community. They described this work as vital to propelling the instructional quality and student achievement efforts in their schools. Rural school principals also gave descriptions of how they receive and need leadership mentoring as instructional leaders. This aspect of their own professional development emerged
as a theme in the work and experiences of rural school leadership. Facing the daily challenges of poverty, family dynamics, low expectations, and minimal regard for education as barriers to the work they do each day. Several described how their leadership must often extend beyond that of instructional leader to a form of parental leadership for many students as this is absent in many homes in rural communities yet desperately needed to meet students’ basic needs.

Guiding research question one. Guiding research question one asked, “How does the culture in a rural community affect the ways school principals make decisions and implement change?” From the data acquired through semi-structured interviews, focus group interview, and photo narrative documentation, rural school principals described how knowing the rural community and making decisions in their best interest is vital as a rural school leader. Often, the data collection revealed how rural school principals work to develop relationships with community members and families in order to provide a basis of support when instructional decisions or school changes need to occur. During the focus group interview, principals voiced how they make decisions with the community in mind since, in their view, it is a community school and the school does not belong to the principal. This relationship often helped make the changes successful as trusting relationships were the basis for implementing the change and seeing positive growth in these rural schools. In understanding the value of relationships, Carter explained, “I think it’s just understanding how to work with people. Understand the value of relationships and of making sure that I’m not a bridge burner. A lot of people are bridge burners.” Additionally, Carter referenced his understanding of how to work with people through the implementation of change and at times, finding it necessary to adjust his thinking to ensure the needs of his rural school community are met. He stated:
I think just understanding how relationships work and understand that sometimes you got to give on stuff. You can’t be so bullheaded that it’s always your way. I think those things matter. I think the ability to navigate obstacles is something that’s really important. Understanding when to choose your battles. There’s some stuff that’s just absolutely not worth fighting over, and there’s some stuff that’s fundamental to what we do. Yes, I will fight for it.

When implementing change, John referenced his belief that his rural school community needs to be informed and included in the necessary changes. He described:

I think the number one thing you’ve got to do is inform them. A couple of years ago, we changed to a new math textbook (to align with common core standards). I had a couple of teachers in elementary, all these parents have a question, and I said, ‘Hey, let’s have math night.’ One teacher got scared it was just going to be a bash. After it was over, she reported that several parents mentioned they felt like they were cheated when going through elementary school because they didn’t have this.

David and Turner described how they believed in the importance of instilling a strong work ethic in students since the businesses in their rural community regularly communicate to them the importance of this vital trait. David concluded:

Several years ago, I went out and asked a business here what they are looking for when students are coming in. They told me they need them knowing how to work hard. So we are trying to instill this through athletics. They push, they grind, and they get after it. The business told me recently, they could tell, and they give them the job. That’s what it is: work ethic. I’m a firm believer in teaching work ethic. It doesn’t matter what you know.
Turner added to this thinking when he asserted, “My major focus is putting kids to work. You know, we’re not all going to college, and most of the ones that go, aren’t going to finish. So I want them to leave here with a work ethic.”

In thinking about academic changes that needed to be made at the school, Linda began to study looping classrooms. She believed this would increase the teachers’ understanding of the standards and give them new experiences. She took this idea to the teachers and began to develop a system of support and commitment to the changes. Each teacher in the building would be teaching a different grade level. Linda explained, “They’re fired up about it. They’re on board with it.” Linda explained that before she made the final decision, “I sent an email and said this is what I’m thinking about, and I’d like some input.”

**Guiding research question two.** Guiding research question two asked, “What are specific ways rural school principals display leadership in their schools?” Rural school principals who were interviewed for this study spoke, overall, of how they display leadership with teachers, students, and parents. Many focused on how they use leadership to obtain the best outcome in each situation for their rural school and their rural community. Lane described how he interacts with students in order to display the type of leadership he wants to convey in his rural school. He described:

I’m not their buddy. I’m going to treat them like I care about them, which I do. And I think the Lord put me in this position because I’m able to do so much more than I did as a teacher. Some people are born teachers. I think I was a born administrator. I try to be as fair as possible. I know what these kids are coming from, and you can’t always just scream and holler at them because they get that at home, when they’re not here. So I try
to find many ways to try and affect them. But I’ve never forgotten what it’s like to be a teacher.

During the focus group interview, participants discussed how the rural school is often a living organism within the rural community and how they fit into that structure. Principals expressed how they are able to convey community values in the rural school since they are very aware of the community’s values and beliefs. They explained how frequently their goal of building values in students aligns with the community goals of instilling values in students. Andrew explained, “That’s the kind of people we have in our communities.”

Rural school principals throughout the study noted how important it is to work effectively with teachers and to use their leadership capacity to create environments and situations where teachers can do their best work. Curtis explained:

The core people, the real strength of our school – they just get it done. They get it done. They are very consistent. My best people – there are some things I’ve observed. They’re very consistent with what they do. They consistently come in. They plan for instruction. They deliver quality instruction. They think about what they’re doing. They analyze it. This is not something I’ve beat these people over the head with through a lot of meetings, a lot of data, or a lot of analyzing. I don’t do that. My idea there is, we’ve got people performing at a high level, and we’re getting it done. I try to stay out of their way in a sense. I’m there to support what they’re doing and reinforce it, but I have learned to let them operate. You’ve got to let your best people do their thing.

Andrew described how he believed teaching and leading were God-given gifts. He explained how he uses his leadership capacity to communicate these beliefs to teachers. He said:
I want teachers to be who they are. I believe they are a hope. You come into this, because of some intrinsic motivation to make a difference in a child’s life. Whatever mere talent you’ve been blessed with, that is the heart of what you do. Don’t lose that. It’s only by God’s grace that has flooded my heart. I want to honor Him in what I do. It is not by chance or circumstance that’s brought us here. I want to encourage and lead in a way that points us to His plan.

David described how he had to learn that once he became a rural school principal that there would be times that he would experience confrontational situations with teachers in order to make the best decision for his rural school. He stated:

I have to make the best decisions for the school not individual teachers. I’m not going to shout and holler. It’s not about me. I’m a simple man with a simple plan. And that’s the way I live by. Don’t make it hard. Just let it come. Everybody talks about stress as a principal and stuff. I’ll be honest with you. There are some stressful things, but it’s just what you can handle, and how you can deal with it. People don’t like confrontation, which, I don’t think anybody likes confrontation. But it’s part of it. It’s necessary.

Additionally, Curtis added that there are situations in which he must display leadership by redirecting teachers who many not be performing in a way that provides the best opportunities for the school and the students to develop and grow. He explained:

Sometimes our staff or certain grade levels of our staff lose focus on what we need to be doing or what we need to be about which is teaching and learning. Sometimes we get off into left field about planning a lot of fluffy activities. Sometimes I have to just say, ‘No, we’re not going to do that.’
In displaying leadership when working with parents, rural school principals emphasized how each situation must be handled in a particular way in order to arrive at the best outcome for everyone. Curtis described:

- Sometimes it is going to be with parents. With some of our behavior issues that we have with students, 90% of our referrals are going to come from five students. So sometimes those situations can be so difficult. Sometimes there are things only the principal can do.

**Guiding research question three.** Guiding research question three asked, “What leadership experiences create a fixed mindset for rural school principals?” Rural school principals face challenges that create a fixed mindset for themselves, teachers, and their rural school community. The challenges that emerged from the data included generational poverty, grandparents replacing parents as the primary caregivers for students, low expectations, negative views of the educational process, and lack of access to opportunities that meet the educational needs of students. With these challenges, it was evident from the data that rural school principals struggle to overcome these situations in order to focus more intently on instructional leadership opportunities.

- During the focus group interview, rural school principals discussed how community perceptions of education sometimes create fixed mindsets among students. As rural school principals described, students often grow up in an environment where the mentality is that earning a diploma will require you to work and sustain a different lifestyle than they have been taught. Rural school principals agreed this is extremely difficult to overcome and help students understand the value of pursuing an education.

**Guiding research question four.** Guiding research question four asked, “What leadership experiences create a growth mindset for rural school principals?” From the data
acquired from semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, and collection of photo narrative documentation, rural school principals revealed leadership experiences that create a growth mindset for themselves as well as their rural school communities. Specifically, rural school principals spoke about the opportunity to hire new teachers as a way to create a growth mindset within their rural school. Curtis explained:

The biggest key for a principal to change a school is the ability to hire. The people you bring in, they’re yours. It gives you a chance to bring in people that will jive with your philosophy, your vision, the way you like to do things. So the principal’s key component is the ability to hire staff, which is probably the single biggest way the principal can positively affect the school.

Turner also supported the idea of hiring great staff as a way to create a growth mindset within his rural school. He concluded, “I think hiring high-quality folks is one of my best qualities. I interviewed 26 people for my school secretary’s job. I hired a great one.”

During the focus group interview, principals engaged in a conversation about the importance of hiring teachers who are lifelong learners and who bring to the rural school a sense of continuous improvement. Additionally, the focus group interview led to a conversation among principals about how important it is to grow areas in their rural schools which will benefit students such as developing a fine arts program so students can experience music and art. This curriculum expansion leads to a growth mindset as more students are given opportunities to engage in courses that interest them.

Creating a growth mindset in a rural school was also supported through the data collection process by creating opportunities for personal development for the rural school
principals themselves and for their teachers through strong professional learning opportunities. Kevin supported this idea as he explained:

My first year here, I was very energetic and open with everybody in and around the area. I told them I want you to be a part of what we are doing. During the first year here, I had somebody come through here every day. I wanted them to see. We brought the entire teaching staff of the county school system here. They came here for a professional development session. They came and toured. I wanted to create that culture. Since then, I tried to get them back as much as I can.

Curtis expressed the importance of personally improving each year as an administrator and how this effort leads to and maintains a growth mindset for himself and his school community. He explained:

If you ever stop analyzing your own practice as a professional, you’re dying as a professional. It’s over at that point. I work to get a little better every year. There are things I already have in mind going forward into this year. There’s some new things at the district, things we started implementing last year. But there’s things that I know going into the next school year, there are a couple of things that I really want to work on, and I want to do a better job. Now you can go down a rabbit hole if you’re not careful. You can get too much going. You can only improve so much on one or two things. I think you’re better off, and I’ve found this works for me, narrow your focus. Let’s get one or two things, hey, this is really my professional development, this one I need to do better at. It may just be one thing. Hey, this is the one thing this year I want to do better. Because if you’re an administrator, your time demands are off the charts. Finding time to
work on things, work on yourself, is hard. All these other things are going to suck your time away. But you have to invest in yourself. You have to invest in improving yourself.

**Composite, Textural, Structural, and Essence Description**

**Textual description.** In order to create a composite textural description, each individual participants’ textural descriptions were combined. This allowed the researcher to create a general description, which offered insight to the collective lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of the composite textural description was to capture the leadership experiences of rural school principals in a culturally-cohesive rural community. Primarily the themes which emerged from the lived experiences and voices of the participants in the study yielded the data, which revealed lived leadership experiences of rural school principals in north Alabama. Collectively, the participants’ experiences can be identified via the specific leadership experiences, which lead to a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. Additionally, these leadership experiences describe ways that the rural community affects the way rural school principals approach implementing change. The textural descriptions revealed five themes related to leadership experiences of rural school principals in a culturally-cohesive rural community.

In phenomenological research, the final stage is the identification of the composite textural and structural descriptions obtained from the study. The particular phenomena that emerged from the study occurred at a specific time with specific people in a specific location. The researcher collected the phenomena and viewed the context through an objective lens, with a fresh perspective applied to each situation. Afterwards, each participant’s experiences were synthesized to derive meaning for the study. Through bracketing and maintaining notes regarding each individual interview and the focus group interview, the researcher was able to
glean specific textural and structural characteristics of each participant in order to most accurately capture the essence of their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and the photo narrative documentation provided a way for participants to describe their leadership experiences as a rural school principal in a culturally-cohesive rural community. The overall results and themes that emerged indicated that the participants described their leadership experiences as becoming familiar with rural communities and developing relationships with school families, creating and being supportive of new initiatives and new learning, seeking instructional support outside of rural communities, seeking leadership mentors, and working through challenges and barriers that exist in rural communities.

**Structural description.** According to Moustakas (1994), the individual structural descriptions help to provide a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of each participant’s experiences. In this study, the structural descriptions provided a detailed understanding of how leadership experiences were experienced by rural school principals in culturally-cohesive rural communities. All the leadership experiences the participants shared helped to create the structural description for each person. According to Creswell (2013), the structural descriptions are combined with textural descriptions in order to convey the essence of the participants’ collective experiences. This synthesis emphasized that rural school principals identified factors that affect their ability to create and maintain a growth mindset regarding displays of leadership while working in their rural school and the surrounding community. The study participants shared examples of leadership experiences that contributed both positively and negatively toward creating a growth mindset in their rural school.
Through the process of participants sharing their experiences, the researcher was able to describe the essence of these experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The essence statements are derived as the researcher formed a synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions into a combined statement (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of this study was to identify leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. As a result of this integration of data between the textural and structural descriptions, a thorough analysis of this data revealed five themes that emerged from the study’s participants regarding their leadership experiences as rural school principals as they created the photo narrative documentation, participated in the focus group, and answered questions in a semi-structured interview.

**Essence description.** The ultimate goal of a phenomenological study is to capture the essence of the participants’ lived experiences. The essence of this study captured the specific experiences of each rural school principal and captured their individual attempts to create a growth mindset in their rural schools and rural communities. The specific goal of this study was to understand, describe, and lift the voices of rural school principals and their leadership experiences in leading rural schools in culturally-cohesive communities in north Alabama. The transcendental phenomenological study was utilized to answer the central research question along with the four sub-questions that supported the central research question.

**Summary**

In this study, semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and the collection of photo narrative documentation were used to collect data from participants regarding their leadership experiences as rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. Five themes emerged related to the central phenomenon of having leadership experiences as a rural school principal. The themes that emerged from the data included: (a) Familiarity with Rural
Communities and School Families, (b) New Initiatives and New Learning, (c) Instructional Support Outside of Rural Communities, (d) Leadership Mentoring, and (e) Challenges in Rural Communities. As a part of this transcendental phenomenological study, the central research question as well as the four sub-questions, were specifically answered from the data. The themes that emerged addressed the research questions, which were grounded in both the literature and the theoretical framework. At the same time, the themes further described the leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities in north Alabama.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe leadership experiences of rural school principals in elementary, middle, and high schools in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). The experiences of rural principals were defined as ways they display leadership in culturally-cohesive communities. The central question was: How do rural principals describe their leadership experiences working in rural schools? The 10 participants chosen to participate in the study were from a variety of backgrounds, were varying ages, had different amounts of administrative experience, and had a variety of educational experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to further explain and provide additional analysis from the data collected. The chapter begins with summarizing the findings by briefly answering each research question, the five relevant themes that emerged from the study, relevant literature, and Hersey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory, Dweck’s mindset theory, and Bass and Riggio’s transformational leadership theory which all guided this study. Additionally, this chapter provides a summary of findings, discussion, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

One central research question and four guiding research questions that emerged from the researched literature guided this study. The central research question as well as the four guiding research questions are discussed.

Central Research Question

The central research question asked, “How do rural school principals describe their experiences working in rural schools?” From the data acquired through interviews, a focus
group, and photo narrative documentation, it was concluded that participants’ descriptions of their experiences working in rural schools provide conclusions that these leaders must be familiar with the culture of rural communities and seek to understand and work to solve challenges that prevent students’ needs from being met. Participants emphasized the need to display leadership by developing relationships with teachers, students, parents, and community members. Through these relationships, participants expressed how they are able to organize collaboration among teachers and school staff. Participants asserted how necessary strong relationships are with school families as many of them experience extreme poverty in rural areas. Blanchard and Hersey’s theory of situational leadership asserts that effective leaders build relationships. Rural school principals display leadership by supporting these families while teaching them to avoid holding low expectations for student achievement and overcoming unfavorable beliefs regarding educational experiences.

**Guiding Research Question One**

Guiding research question one asked, “How does the culture in a rural community affect the ways school principals make decisions and implement change?” From the data acquired through semi-structured interviews, focus group interview, and photo narrative documentation, rural school principals described how knowing the rural community and making decisions in their best interest is vital as a rural school leader. The participants described how this familiarity with the rural school community and all members within it is the best way to implement change. Additionally, participants expressed how informing the community of the components of the change along the way increases the effectiveness of the change implementation. During the data collection, participants also emphasized how it is important to research the change, study its effects, and work to instill a work ethic in teachers, students, and rural school families. They
believe this vital skill of understanding that a strong work ethic is necessary helps navigate change in the most positive way.

**Guiding Research Question Two**

Guiding research question two asked, “What are specific ways rural school principals display leadership in their schools?” Participants described how they display leadership with teachers, students, and parents. Many focused on how they use leadership to obtain the best outcome in each situation for their rural school and their rural community. The study concluded that rural school principals who participated in the study believe they must consistently interact and collaborate with teachers, parents, students, and rural community members. Additionally, participants believed they must be extremely visible while leading the rural school. Being a rural school principal, the study concluded, is not an office job. Participants also described the nature of their leadership and how they believed building a leadership relationship with teachers, students, parents, and rural community leaders should not be confused as a friendship. Maintaining this leadership posture, they believed, increased their capacity to effectively lead their rural school. Rural school principals asserted how they, as leaders, have opportunities within their schools to convey values that align with community beliefs. In regards to their work with teachers, rural school principals offered they best lead when they are able to create effective teaching and learning environments and coach teachers to commit to high levels of instruction. With all stakeholders, participants believed it was necessary to learn to effectively lead through confrontation since it is an inevitable consequence of being a school leader.

**Guiding Research Question Three**

Guiding research question three asked, “What leadership experiences create a fixed mindset for rural school principals?” Rural school principals face challenges that create a fixed
mindset for themselves, teachers, and their rural school community. Primarily, the study concluded that generational poverty created extreme challenges for rural school principals including fixed mindsets among school families regarding their economic outlook, their perceptions of educational experiences, and their low expectations of student achievement. Rural school principals described how working with these families to learn the value of an education is difficult. Overall, many participants described how families living in extreme poverty present overwhelming challenges on a daily basis. This adversely affects the teaching and learning environment at times as rural school principals and teachers work with students and their specific experiences.

**Guiding Research Question Four**

Guiding research question four asked, “What leadership experiences create a growth mindset for rural school principals?” From the data acquired from semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, and collection of photo narrative documentation, rural school principals revealed leadership experiences that create a growth mindset for themselves as well as their rural school communities. The study concluded that rural school principal participants believe the opportunity to hire new teachers and school staff who are focused on being lifelong learners and maintain a continuous improvement mindset help support a growth mindset within their schools. New teachers and staff who best align with the rural school’s culture and bring new, fresh, and updated educational practices into the school help drive a growth mindset in rural schools. Participants described how hiring the best people they can find serves to build a positive school culture and promotes a growth mindset. Additionally, the study concluded that providing rural school principals and rural school teachers with strong personal and professional development
opportunities creates a consistent growth mindset in rural schools as continuous improvement ideas are offered and practiced.

Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe leadership experiences of rural school principals in elementary, middle, and high schools in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). In order to connect between current literature and this study, this discussion will represent the literature that emerged in Chapter Two and will analyze comparisons to the data discovered in this study. Hersey and Blanchard’s (1977) situational leadership theory, Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory, and Burns’ and Bass’s (1978) transformational leadership theory which all guided this study

Theoretical

Hersey and Blanchard’s (1977) situational leadership theory centers on the idea that leaders adapt to various situations and adjust their displays of leadership according to the needs and circumstances present. The participants in this study repeatedly emphasized this idea as they described ways in their rural school communities in which they build relationships with students, school faculty and staff, and families in order to achieve continuous school improvement. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of having a familiarity with rural school communities in order to appropriately respond to needs in the various situations they experience as rural school leaders. This data led to the emergence of one of the study’s themes, Familiarity with Rural Communities and School Families.

Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory supported the study as well as it describes how a comparison between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset relative to personal growth,
opportunity for change, and motivation. Her research revealed that believing that one’s qualities cannot change indicated a fixed mindset. On the other hand, growth mindset is based on the belief that your growth can occur by developing perseverance, a positive attitude, and by investing in hard work (Dweck, 2006). In applying this to rural school principals’ leadership experiences, participants described how necessary it is to enact a growth mindset throughout their schools and school communities in order to achieve continuous school improvement. Through on-going professional learning, partnerships, and instructional coaching, this growth mindset is amplified in rural schools. Two themes, New Initiatives and New Learning and Instructional Support Outside of Rural Community emerged from the data related to Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory.

Burns’ and Bass’s (1978) transformational leadership theory also guided this study. This theory asserts a process by which leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership encompasses behaviors and actions of leaders who stimulate and inspire followers to work toward and achieve extraordinary results in challenging circumstances while, at the same time, cultivate leadership capacity within themselves (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Participants in this study often relied on leadership mentors to guide and motivate them through the work of being a rural school principal. These necessary relationships that helped sustain principals in their work led to one of the study’s themes, Leadership Mentoring. Additionally, practicing transformational leadership requires leaders to empower followers to grow into leaders within the organization and align goals of followers, leaders, groups, and the greater organization in order to create cohesive outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Rural school principal participants frequently described the challenges in rural school communities that create difficulties for their work as school leaders.
Participants described generational poverty, lack of parental involvement, and changing family dynamics as challenges to effective displays of leadership. As a result of this data related to transformational leadership theory, a theme, Challenges in Rural Communities and Challenges of Being a Rural School Principal, emerged as significant to the study.

Empirical

Rural school principals experience a variety of leadership experiences in culturally-cohesive communities. According to research, rural school principals often seek administrative positions in rural communities because there is less competition in obtaining the job, they live in the rural community, they have deep commitment to improve opportunities in rural communities, and they believe, while rural schools are exceptionally challenging, the environment has a lasting impact on students by providing them a powerful place to learn and develop (Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Hicks & Wallin, 2013; Surface & Theobald; 2014). In order to understand the leadership required of rural school principals and what types of decisions they must make to implement change in their rural schools and create a growth mindset among teachers, students, families, and community members, leadership experiences of rural school principals must be described. The research concludes that successful rural school principals understand how necessary it is to form strong relationships in the rural community in order to establish a leadership platform (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Preston and Barnes (2017) found that in order to promote student achievement and wellbeing of students in rural schools, the constructive leadership actions and behaviors of rural school principals must be examined in order to effectively capitalize on those leadership experiences. The study concluded that rural school principals are more successful when they are active citizens in the rural community and effective collaborate and interact with community
stakeholders. This finding aligns and agrees with a significant theme that emerged from the interview data in this current study. Rural school principal participants overwhelmingly offered that collaborative relationships built with rural school community stakeholders is a crucial element of their leadership effectiveness.

This current study attempts to describe leadership experiences of rural school principals in an attempt to extend the research on this topic. The current study participants established this same premise as a necessary component of the rural school principalship and provided examples of how they develop strong relationships with teachers, students, school families, and members of the rural school community. Through the explicit descriptions of building these relationships, the body of research in this area is strengthened. Additionally, the findings from the current study related to establishing strong community relationships align with the study’s theoretical framework as building relationships supports the theory of transformational leadership. When rural school principals work to establish strong relationships with rural community stakeholders, they are able to lay the foundation to garner support and collaboration around implementing necessary changes in the rural school in order to experience strong continuous school improvement (Ingman et al., 2017; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Lin et al., 2014).

The research studied revealed that effective rural school principals can successfully manage change including promoting higher teaching standards that, in turn, lead to increased student achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2017). In the semi-structured interviews, participants confirmed this idea in ways they described effectively managing changing by displaying effective leadership through the process. Rural school principals described how they found it helpful to include teachers and staff at all points along the way during a change implementation. Additionally, more veteran principals explained how crucial it is to provide information to school
families and rural community members during the transition and change implementation. They have found in implementing change that it is more successful when all parties involved have the information they need and are invited to ask questions in order to develop a partnership through the change. Rural school principals’ descriptions of these leadership experiences strengthens the research surrounding the rural school principalship.

According to research, rural school principals who focus on educating the whole child and holding high expectations of all stakeholders often experience increased student achievement (Woods & Martin, 2016). In this study, rural school principals provide specific examples of how they displayed leadership by focusing on student achievement and by seeking high-quality professional development opportunities for teachers in order to bring new learning and better opportunities to their rural schools for students. The research also emphasizes that leaders who focus on designing strong instructional practices will increase the school’s overall collective efficacy, which will lead to increases in student achievement (Versland & Erikson, 2017).

Throughout this study, participants referenced the work they do in exposing teachers to high-quality learning experiences in order to provide higher levels of instruction so students learn at higher levels. In a study conducted by Ringler et al. (2013), similar results were found as the impact of principals’ feedback about teachers’ practice was evaluated. The study found that “teachers valued their principal’s suggestions and feedback on instruction.” (Ringler et al., 2013, p. 40). Another study conducted by Piyaman et al. (2017) evaluated the relationship between learning-centered leadership and teacher learning in rural schools. The study found that “learning-centered leadership evidenced a strongly positive, statistically significant total effect on the professional learning of teachers in rural schools” (Piyaman et al., 2017, p. 728). These findings are congruent with the findings of the current study. Curtis, in particular, linked his
thinking that his specific displays of leadership are situational and centered on lifting the quality of instruction in his building in order to maintain high student achievement. He offered:

My thinking is, which every situation is different, every school is different, so to be a good leader everything is situational. So, what I’ve found works best for me, first you’ve got to come in and get a feel for what’s going on. What are the strengths of the school? What are the weaknesses? There’s going to be both no matter how good a school is. We’re a high performing school, but we have areas that we are not as strong in. Okay, so learn the situation, support your strongest areas, nurture those teachers, and be there for them.

Additionally, the findings from the literature as well as this current study are supported by the ideas of the theoretical framework, which supports this study. In particular, transformational leadership practices regarding teacher development and increased student achievement “seek to build a school environment that supports the capacity development of both teachers and students” (Piyaman et al., 2017, p. 717). These descriptions by rural school principals of their leadership experiences strengthen the body of research regarding the rural school principalship.

The literature provides examples of how rural school principals face challenges including heavy, diverse workloads, lack of professional development and resources, gender discrimination, implementation of continuous school improvement efforts, and difficulties recruiting and maintaining teachers across specialized content areas (Cherkowski, 2016; Kristiansen, 2014; Kruse & Krum, 2016; Lock et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2014; Netshitangani, 2016; Preston et al., 2013; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2013; Wildy et al., 2014). The present study added to the current literature by several participants’ descriptions of how they display leadership in working through the challenges of generational poverty, low
expectations, and rural school family members who hold unfavorable views education and schooling. Each of these challenges, as described by the participants during the focus group interview, are instilled in students in rural schools since they know these situations as ways of life. Changing students’ mindsets related to the opportunities that education can offer them can be a challenge at times as evidenced by the participants descriptions of leadership experiences in this area. Participants described experiences and specific examples of how families experience difficulties that even when unintended, are brought to the school with their students. Displaying leadership in these situations is increasingly challenging as evidenced by the semi-structured interview data in this study. Rural school principals describe leadership experiences that are outside the parameters of instructional and administrative leadership which is what they are primarily trained to do as school leaders. The descriptions of these lived experiences of rural school principals add to the research in this area.

The current literature establishes that rural school principals experience a lack of professional development resources (Cherkowski, 2016). Additionally, the literature contains studies that provide for coaching and mentoring rural instructional leaders with experienced professionals (Lindle et al., 2015). In this present study, rural school principal participants discussed how necessary it is to engage in new learning experiences and leadership coaching. Participants believed participating and learning outside of their school buildings helped to sustain their ability to maintain a growth mindset about continuous improvements in both instruction and student achievement. Rural school principal participants are often isolated geographically and do not have access to colleagues in order to share ideas, new learning, or form study groups. Participants referenced ongoing professional development opportunities that both they and their teachers utilize in a nearby urban area, and the participants referenced how these groups have
strengthened the instructional processes in their schools. Central office administrators serving as leadership mentors and coaches have a positive impact on rural school principals according to the present study. These findings agree with findings from a study conducted by Drummond and Halsey (2014). In that study, researchers studied the effect of improving the job satisfaction of rural school principals through formal job preparation (Drummond & Halsey, 2014). The study found that a “lack of formal preparation of rural school leaders for their roles is associated with lower job satisfaction ratings” (Drummond & Halsey, 2014, p. 45). Additionally, the study found that “formal preparation of rural school leaders may ameliorate the learning curve of their roles” (Drummond & Halsey, 2014, p.45). These results and those from the current study connect to the theoretical framework in the current study by aligning with the idea of establishing a growth mindset in leadership. Participants explained how they depend on these relationships to gain advice, encouragement, and new understandings regarding continuous improvement efforts from central office administrators. This new learning, in turn, is passed on to teachers in the participants’ schools and further supports the idea of growth mindset. These teachers often put into practice ideas and new instructional methods rural school principals bring back to the school.

The current literature supports the idea that a rural school principal must effectively navigate his relationship in the community (Hands, 2012; Hartell et al., 2016; Latham et al., 2014; Mette, 2014; Shu-Yuan et al., 2014). The present study reveals data from rural school principals that parental involvement is challenging and diminishing in their schools as students matriculate through the grades. As students become older, situations often become more complex, and parents have fewer skills with which to support students both educationally and emotionally. According to rural school principals in this study, this creates a lack of parent
involvement in rural schools. Participants also supported this idea with additional data, which explained how these parents often hold low expectations for their child’s academic achievement because, at times, the parents did not have a favorable experience with education. This idea is supported in the literature. In a study conducted by Lin et al. (2014), the results found that “parents need up-to-date information and guidance to best understand how to support their children in schools” (p. 52). According to research, overwhelmingly, when parents hold high expectations for their child’s academic achievement, when parents have strong educational backgrounds, and when the teachers and school have a positive attitude toward parents, there is more parental involvement in rural schools (Lin et al., 2014).

In a study by Hasnat (2016), parents and teachers have a different understanding of what good communication between the school and the home should be. In the present study, the same results emerged as participants described a lack of communication between the school and families. The study by Hasnat (2016) suggests that active steps need to be taken so that the school authority communicates so to encourage parents to become involved. This idea supports the theoretical framework of this study by emphasizing the need for situational leadership. Each rural community and each rural school is different. The study by Lin et al. (2014) emphasizes how traditional communication efforts between families and rural schools are largely ineffective and should be reconsidered. Because of this, “educators may need to re-conceptualize their strategies for parent involvement and align them with the goals of engaging parents in their children’s education” (Lin et al., 2014, p. 53). Focusing on the idea of situational leadership as presented in the theoretical framework of this study would support rural school principals as they attempt to increase the effectiveness of communication and parental involvement in their rural schools by considering each family’s needs. The present study could benefit from this data as
participants only voiced their concern that communication between families and the school is not strong, but solutions and new ways of communicating were not offered as part of the interview data.

In this present study, rural school principals described how they displayed leadership by forming strong relationships with community stakeholders. They asserted these relationships are necessary partnerships to create the best teaching and learning environment within their schools. The research supports this idea of building strong bonds between the rural school community and the school as everyone is focused on the school. A collaborative educational culture fosters committees, coalitions, networks and partnerships between rural community members and school personnel. These actions promote, produce, and publicize student success and wellbeing (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Rural school principal participants in this present study provided explicit examples of how they intentionally cultivate relationships within the rural community and offered that this is a significant display of rural school principal leadership.

**Implications**

The results of this study are important to the educational community because they provide a voice to rural school principals who have described their leadership experiences in culturally-cohesive communities in north Alabama. Overall, the researcher’s goal was to lift the voices of rural school principals in an attempt to discover and present a synthesis of the meanings, themes, and essences of these principals’ lived leadership experiences. This study provided additional understandings of the lived experiences of rural school principals and is important since it explored the lived experiences of rural school principals and how they display leadership in culturally-cohesive communities in north Alabama.
The implications of this study were important to the research regarding school leadership of rural school principals in the following ways:

1. This study lifted the voices of rural school principals in describing their leadership experiences in leading rural schools in culturally-cohesive communities.
2. This study highlighted the essence of leadership experiences of rural school principals who lead elementary, middle, and high schools in culturally-cohesive communities in north Alabama.
3. This study highlighted the essence of how rural school principals display leadership in culturally-cohesive communities in north Alabama.
4. This study provided data regarding leadership experiences of rural school principals that create both a fixed and a growth mindset in rural school communities.
5. This study explored existing gaps in the literature related to rural school principals’ leadership experiences in culturally-cohesive communities.
6. This study provided data sources and evidences to support the need for future studies regarding leadership experiences of rural school principals.

**Theoretical**

The theories guiding this study include Blanchard and Hersey’s situational leadership theory, Dweck’s mindset theory, and Burns’s transformational leadership theory. Blanchard and Hersey’s situational leadership theory encompasses three main components of the leadership process including the leader, the follower, and the situation. This theory emphasizes the behavior of a leader in relation to his followers (Hersey et al., 2013). Important in this theory is the ability of the leader to appreciate the differences and motives of his followers and the ability to remain flexible and adaptive in his own behavior in any given situation (Hersey et al., 2013).
Equally important in this study is Dweck’s mindset theory (2006), which presents a comparison between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset relative to personal growth, opportunity for change, and motivation. In her research, Dweck (2006) described individuals with a fixed mindset as those who believe their qualities or situations cannot change. According to Dweck, leaders who exhibit a fixed mindset believe some people are superior and some are inferior. These leaders must repeatedly affirm they are superior and the organization is simply a platform in which to display this superiority. Conversely, a growth mindset is based on the belief that one’s growth can occur by developing perseverance, a positive attitude, and by investing in hard work (Dweck, 2006). Leaders who exhibit a growth mindset display self-efficacy, ask questions, and have the ability to confront failure with the mentality that they would grow, learn, and succeed in the end. They are constantly trying to improve. (Dweck, 2006).

Finally, Burns’ theory of transformational leadership helps to ground this study. According to Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leadership cultivates behaviors and actions of leaders who stimulate and inspire followers to work toward and achieve extraordinary results in challenging circumstances, while, at the same time, cultivate leadership capacity within themselves. Transformational leaders operate out of deeply held personal value systems that include such values as justice and integrity and these traits cannot be negotiated or exchanged between individuals as they represent personal standards (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Demonstrating confidence, increasing motivation, articulating goals, and building an image are distinguishing behaviors of successful transformational leaders (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987).

This study discovered that leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities are shaped and influenced by developing a familiarity with rural communities and school families, new initiatives and new learning, instructional support outside
of the rural community, leadership mentoring, and challenges in rural communities. Building relationships within a rural community and developing trust among community members is necessary in growing one’s leadership capacity in a rural school according to rural school principal participants. This example of situational leadership supports the effectiveness of rural school principals’ displays of leadership. Building this social and political capital with stakeholders, according to the participants, creates situations where leadership can be displayed effectively even when confrontation may be necessary. Living, working, and building relationships in a rural community are vital to a rural school principal’s ability to display leadership.

Rural school principals, through new initiatives, new learning, instructional support outside of the rural community, and leadership mentoring are able to create and maintain a growth mindset for both themselves as well as teachers and school staff. Additionally, rural school principals are better able to engage in transformational leadership when engaging in these experiences as they help encourage the achievement of extraordinary results amidst challenging circumstances. New initiatives and new learning opportunities give rural school principals the opportunity to personally develop and provide ways for their teachers and students to continuously improve. Providing these new learning environments and ways to improve their craft empowers both rural school principals and those they lead to increase their capacity in teaching and learning which, in turn, increases their self-efficacy as well as their collective efficacy regarding students. Opportunities for professional development remind rural school principals of their love of learning which supports a growth mindset. As rural school principals are mentored by other leaders, they naturally develop a growth mindset in displaying leadership.
Mentoring relationships offer rural school principals a sounding board for ideas, a mechanism for seeking advice, and create a coaching situation where leadership capacity is increased.

In the present study, participants discussed challenges of being a rural school principal. Often embedded in the rural community, principals are required to display leadership when facing obstacles that impede student development as a result of generational poverty, low expectations, and negative views regarding educational experiences. The study concluded these situations empower a fixed mindset among rural school families as well as teachers and school staff, and at times, become overwhelming. Rural school principals claim that displaying leadership through strong relationships help to diminish the effects of these realities in rural communities. Developing a union of trust among rural school principals, teachers, and school families is integral in keeping these factors that lead to a fixed mindset in students to a minimum.

**Empirical**

As grounded in this study and noted in the related literature, continuous challenges exist in rural communities that impede the work of rural school principals. Families in rural communities often experience extreme, generational poverty. At times, this results in longstanding low expectations of students, diminished views of education, and a distrust of principals and teachers. Compounded with the need to instill a strong work ethic in students so they may succeed in a career or in college and to increase their motivation to learn, rural school principals face challenges. Rural school principals in this study asserted the need to increase parental involvement among low-income families in rural schools. The related literature shows a discrepancy between the perceptions regarding parental involvement between rural school families and rural school principals. According to Hasnat (2016), rural parents “do not seem to believe that it is possible for them to have a role that would contribute to their children’s
learning” (p. 145). Additionally, rural school parents think “they are completely outside their children’s learning process” (Hasnat, 2016, p. 145). Conversely, rural school principals and teachers believe there are positive results of increased parental involvement by rural school families, and this involvement would serve to decrease the challenges presented to rural school principals in displaying leadership (Lin et al., 2014). Rural school principals and teachers identified the most positive outcomes of increased parental involvement to be “increased collaboration between parents and teachers that positively impacts students learning and increased student motivation to learn” (Lin et al., 2014, p. 45). The results of this study support the idea of decreasing the challenges present when rural school principals display leadership while, at the same time, the study concludes the importance of rural school principals developing strong relationships in the rural community in order to effectively display leadership. Continuing to build relationships with rural school families and explicitly explaining the positive effects of parental involvement will support rural school principals in minimizing challenges presented when attempting to display leadership in their rural schools.

**Practical**

When reviewing research related to this study, the fact that rural school principals are often required to serve in multiple capacities within the school including administrator, teacher, professional development provider, and community liaison is often a challenge to rural school principals being able to effectively display leadership in culturally-cohesive rural communities (Cherkowski, 2016; Preston et al., 2013; Versland, 2013). However, in the present study, this requirement of “wearing many hats” was not seen as being a challenge to the work rural school principals do. During the focus group interview, this issue was discussed and instead of being a barrier to the work, it was discussed as a phenomenon that is readily accepted. Participants did
support the idea of helping new rural school principals become more aware of this as it would support them in establishing good time management routines and maintain their productivity. In this current study, the overwhelming theme of developing relationships within a rural community is a primary and necessary way rural school principals believe they are effectively able to display leadership within their rural communities. With the many aspects of a rural school principal’s job, there are many opportunities to develop relationships with teachers, students, parents, and community members. It is common in rural areas for principals to be the only administrative decision-maker as there is often no additional administrative support (Parson et al., 2016). As a result, rural school principals lead in every necessary situation and are provided the opportunity to develop and maintain relationships which is necessary, according to study participants, in displaying effective leadership in rural schools.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

The researcher made decisions to apply delimitations to the study. First, participants must be serving as rural school principals and not assistant principals or central office administrators. This delimitation was made to preserve the essence of the study by lifting the voices of rural school principals and their leadership experience in serving rural schools in culturally-cohesive communities. The researcher made the decision to delimit the study to include descriptions of leadership experiences of rural school principals. While they perform many tasks during the day, the study only focused on their displays of leadership while serving rural school communities.

The present study was designed with careful research methods and a deliberate design. The study is limited, however, by the following factors. First, participants’ ethnicities were only Caucasian. Second, only public school, rural school principals were interviewed. Third, the
limited diversity among the participants is acknowledged because of participants being located in the northern region of Alabama where there is not broad diversity among rural school principals. Fourth, this study did not encompass multiple school districts across the entire state of Alabama. Therefore, this study concedes that the leadership experiences described by rural school principals here may not reflect the diverse perspectives of rural school principals of other ethnicities and geographical locations.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research study sought to describe the lived, leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities in north Alabama. The emerging themes from the study included familiarity with rural communities and school families, new initiatives and new learning, instructional support outside of the rural community, leadership mentoring, and challenges in rural communities, and challenges being a rural school principal. These themes provide direction and multiple recommendations for future research. The educational community could benefit from future research, which may include interviewing rural school principals in surrounding states and throughout the Appalachian region. Specifically, what are leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities in the Appalachian region?

Replicating the study in geographic areas outside the south would be interesting. The rural population may have different backgrounds and may not face the same challenges as rural communities in north Alabama. The population may be more diverse and the socioeconomic status may be different in different regions of the United States. Additionally, the size of the rural schools may change if the study is expanded to reach beyond the state of Alabama. If the
size of the school is much larger, the relationships and challenges may look differently in these schools.

An interesting study would be to perform a quantitative study that could explore the effectiveness of rural school principal leadership on student achievement. Through data collection, a researcher could perform a study to observe specific leadership experiences that occurred and the students’ achievement gains. Afterwards, the researcher could measure the effectiveness of leadership experiences of rural school principals and the direct correlation with student achievement.

**Recommendations for Rural School Principals**

As evidenced in this study, rural school principals feel a calling to the work they do. Through a variety of leadership experiences, especially those involving developing relationships within the rural school and within the rural community, principals develop a growth mindset concerning the work they do for students and alongside adults in rural schools. The acquisition of this growth mindset comes as a result of seeing the opportunities students can experience when a solid educational experience is obtained. As Kevin explained in his semi-structured interview:

> My staff and I understand this: for a lot of the kids, we – our school – might be their last shot at a way out. Doing the things that you need to do as an administrator that’s going to help better facilitate that child being able to thrive is what we do. Our system creed is helping all students achieve. I put that up on the front office glass.

**Recommendations for Central Office Administrators**

This study revealed the importance of providing mentoring and leadership coaching to rural school principals who are often isolated while leading their schools. Central Office
administrators could support this in their districts by organizing frequent mentoring sessions and provide rural school principals with leadership coaches who could offer advice, support rural school principals in working through school issues, and serving as a sounding board for the decisions rural school principals must make for their schools including significant curriculum or personnel changes. When Central Office administrators are visible in rural schools, principals have the opportunity to share leadership experiences with them and learn from their experience.

Central Office administrators should work to provide professional development opportunities to rural school teachers and principals as new learning often increases the growth mindset for these groups. New learning and district initiatives, according to this study’s participants, support rural schools and improves the teaching and learning environment for students as teachers begin to try new things and work to improve instruction.

**Recommendations for Industries and Workforce Development**

Throughout this study, participants voiced the need to supply students to the workforce who are ready and skilled to work. Industries and workforce developers who can create partnerships for work-based learning, apprenticeships, and on-the-job learning opportunities with rural schools will only benefit by strengthening the workforce of the local, rural community. Often industries have the resources to renovate a space within a school to create a job laboratory where students are offered career technical educational experiences and job skills are directly taught. These efforts would create a growth mindset for rural school students to be able to understand the connection between learning and obtaining an education and becoming a skilled worker. Through these partnerships, rural school principals would eliminate a significant challenge in their schools by lifting the expectations for all students regarding developing a strong work ethic and being skilled for a future career.
Summary

This study was comprised of 10 participants who shared their experiences of being a rural school principal in a culturally-cohesive community in northern Alabama. They shared experiences via individual, semi-structured interviews, photo narrative documentation, and participation in a focus group. Rural school principals shared how they displayed leadership and described leadership experiences in their rural schools. They discussed leadership experiences that led to both fixed and growth mindsets in their rural school and in their rural communities. Interestingly, rural school principals who participated in this study did not complain about the many hats they are required to wear while often being the sole leader in their school. Instead, they voiced concern over the deficiencies in opportunities for their students and teachers which are present in rural communities. Their work and passion seemed to be driven by the intent to close the gap on this lack of opportunities in their schools. By lifting the voices and lived experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities, this study discovered that a familiarity with rural communities and school families, access to new initiatives and new learning, obtaining instructional support outside of rural communities, access to leadership mentoring, and certain challenges in rural communities were significant aspects of leadership experiences of rural school principal participants.
REFERENCES


https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2015.1037927


Dear Principal,

As a doctoral student at Liberty University, I am conducting research regarding leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. The purpose of this questionnaire is to establish a pool of potential participants for this study. If you are willing to participate in this study and further our understanding of the important work rural school principals do, please email your responses to the following questions:

1. How large is your school?
2. What is the size of the community where your school is located?
3. How many years of experience do you have serving as a rural school principal?
4. Would you consider the community where the school is located to be tight-knit?
5. Have you faced challenges and benefits as a rural school principal?
6. Are you able to describe leadership experiences related to your job as a rural school principal?
7. Are you able to describe how you have made growth or change in your rural school?
8. If I have other questions, may I contact you again?
Dear Participant: You are invited to participate in a research study of rural school principals who lead rural schools in culturally-cohesive communities located in the state of Alabama. You were selected as a potential participant because 1) you are identified as an experienced rural school principal, 2) you lead a school in a rural community, and 3) the community in which the school exists is culturally-cohesive. Please read this form and ask specific questions prior to your agreement to participate in the research study.

This study is being conducted by: A doctoral student in the School of Education, Liberty University.

**Background Information**

Over the course of a principal’s tenure at a school, many opportunities for strong, guided leadership are required. Principals find it necessary to display different types of leadership. In rural communities, principals lead within small, yet culturally-cohesive environments. These circumstances often require principals to display various forms of leadership. This study will utilize a transcendental phenomenological research design to describe leadership experiences of rural principals in small yet culturally-cohesive communities. The study will strive to illuminate these principals’ voices in their attempt to display appropriate situational leadership. The problem is research has identified challenges of rural school principals including hiring disadvantages, diverse responsibilities, gender discrimination, lack of professional development support, isolation from resources, budget constraints, and lack of collaboration with other principals (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Latham, Smith, & Wright, 2014; Miller-Vaz, 2015; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Versland, 2013). However, minimal qualitative research has been devoted to describing the leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities. This transcendental phenomenological study attempts to give voice to rural principals as they display leadership in various situations in rural communities where the population may be small and rural but it is culturally-cohesive.

**Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, I would ask you to answer the following questions honestly based on your personal and professional leadership experiences serving as a rural principal in a culturally-cohesive community.

1) Meet with the researcher for an initial brief introduction and description of the study in your school (15 minutes)
2) Participate in a semi-structured interview that will be audio-recorded for approximately one hour where I will ask 15 questions related to: a) your work experiences as a rural school principal, b) the challenges and benefits of being a rural school principal, c) ways you display leadership in your school and the purpose of that leadership, d) ways you have had to modify your leadership approach due to community influences, e) how your relationships within the rural community affect your leadership experiences and ability to make decisions, and f) how the rural community affects your ability to implement change and grow over time. (1 hour)

3) Participate in an online Focus Group via Google Hangout where the same topics will be discussed (1 hour)

4) Participate in Photo Narrative documentation (Snyder, 2012) which will highlight your leadership relationship within the rural school community and will require that you write a brief description of the photo(s) submitted per a narrative format (15-30 minutes).

5) Participate in member checking which includes a review of interview data to ensure the researcher’s accuracy in the display and interpretation of collected data (30 minutes)

Risks and Benefits of Being in this Study

Risks: This research requires minimal risk and is no greater than everyday activities.

Benefits: The results of this study will provide a deeper understanding of the leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama. There are potential benefits to current and future rural school principals for better leadership practices for continuous school improvement in rural communities.

Compensation

There will be no compensation for participants in this study.

Confidentiality

All data and records related to this study will remain private and secure. In the event the study is published or information is used from the study, the researcher will not include any information that would disclose the participant’s identity. Furthermore, the data collections, records, and audio-recordings will be securely maintained. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants. All information listed in the participant documentation questionnaire regarding years of experience, the size of the rural community, the challenges you have faced as a rural school principal, and the descriptions of the leadership experiences you have faced as a rural school principal will be included and reported in this study, but all information will be associated with the pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality. Audio recordings will only be accessed by the researcher and the contracted transcriptionist. All electronic data will be password-protected, and all paper copies of the findings of the research will be maintained in a fireproof locked cabinet. At the end of three years, these findings will be destroyed after the dissertation study has been completed. While the researcher will maintain confidentiality, the researcher cannot guarantee that members of the research group will maintain confidentiality and privacy during this process.
Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not you participate will in no way affect any present or future associations with Liberty University. Additionally, at any time during the study, you are free to leave the study or abandon any question during the semi-structured interview without affecting any relationships.

How to Withdraw from this Study

If at any time you choose to withdraw from this research study, please contact the researcher immediately at the email provided. If you choose to withdraw, any data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will not be included as a part of this research study and will be destroyed in order to accommodate your request of withdrawal. Focus group data, however, will not be destroyed, but your explanations and comments during the focus group sessions will not be included in the research study.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher is conducting this qualitative study. You may ask any specific questions directly to the researcher at any time during the research study. These questions may occur before, during, or after the study. You are encouraged to contact the researcher if needed. You may also contact the researcher’s dissertation chair.

If you have questions or concerns regarding this particular study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Carter 134, 1971 University Blvd., Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. I consent to participate in this qualitative study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant: __________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of Researcher: __________________________ Date: ______________
APPENDIX C: PHOTO NARRATIVE DOCUMENTATION

Objective: To capture additional layers of meaning in a rural school principal’s relationship within a culturally-cohesive community. Reflexive photography is useful to determine human interpretation of interaction within the environment and serve as symbols of meanings for experiences (Schulze, 2007).

Directions: Please take 2-3 photographs that symbolize your leadership experience or relationship within the rural community where you serve as principal. These photographs may also be symbols of your professional growth as a rural school principal in a rural community. Afterward, upload your photographs into the box below as a collage. In the lines provided below the box, please write a brief description of “leadership experiences and relationships within a rural community.” Thank you for your participation in this study.

References

Dear Superintendent:

I am a doctoral student at Liberty University pursuing a degree in Educational Leadership. Mr. / Ms. Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator referred me to you as the person to contact in requesting approval to conduct research in your school district. My study is a qualitative research study regarding leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama. I am requesting permission to conduct my research with principals at rural schools in your school district. I am interested in conducting my research in your school district because of my personal professional goals of increasing the capacity of principal leadership and better understanding how to support principals who lead in rural communities where community influences are strong and values are cohesive. From my research, literature emphasizes there are challenges and benefits to serving as a rural school principal. The literature, however, does not include studies where principals describe their leadership experiences in a culturally-cohesive community where values are strong. Additionally, there are no studies where rural school principals describe how they work within their community considering their specific leadership style to enact a growth mindset within their rural school. I am interested in helping your school district understand more about leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities.

The purpose of this study is to explore leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama. Data will be collected through individual interviews with principals, online focus groups with several principals being interviewed at the same time, and photo-generated documentation which will ask principals to use symbols to describe their leadership experiences and relationships within the rural community. I will
conduct the interviews outside of school hours. In addition, I will request participants to take no more than three photos of symbols that describe their leadership experiences or relationships within the rural community. These photographs may be taken in their schools, homes, or other community environments to capture their leadership experiences and relationships. No children will be included in the photographs or in the research in any capacity. My data collection will not interfere with the school day and will not disrupt the learning environment. All information that could be identifiable will be omitted and pseudonyms will be used throughout the research process to ensure confidentiality for the principal, the school, and the school district. There are no known risks with this research and all subjects will be kept safe and will be treated with the greatest respect. This study will be beneficial to the study of leadership and lived experiences of rural school principals and will serve to support them in their challenging capacities.

Thank you for taking time to consider my request. If there is someone other than you I should work with to accomplish gaining permission to conduct research in your school district, please share or forward this information. Please email or call me if you have questions, concerns, or need additional clarification of the study. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

With respect,
APPENDIX E: VERBAL SCRIPT TO PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

I am conducting research in your school district. I have received permission from your superintendent and other central office personnel to discuss with you the possibility of your participation in this study. Central Office personnel shared your name as a possible candidate in the study. As a result, I would like to invite you to participate in my research study which will explore leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities in Alabama. You have been identified as a potential participant since you 1) are a rural school principal and 2) you serve as a rural school principal in a community that is culturally-cohesive.

My research intends to lift the voices of rural school principals through their shared, lived experiences. Additionally, my study intends to display leadership experiences of rural school principals in communities that have strong values and beliefs and how these principals have, through these leadership experiences, experienced growth in their rural school. The current research literature does not focus on leadership experiences of rural school principals in culturally-cohesive communities and how they have initiated growth or change in their rural schools. I am interested in hearing what you may be able to share about your leadership experiences as a rural school principal.

I have a participant questionnaire and an informed consent form that will be necessary for you to read and sign if you are interested in participating in the study. All necessary information is explained in the consent form document such as background information, purpose, procedures, risks and benefits, voluntary nature of the study, confidentiality, and how to withdraw from the study. If you would like to participate in the study, I would like to schedule an interview time with you via email message. To summarize, by agreeing to participate in this study, you would be involved in the following aspects of the study:

1) Meet with me (the researcher) for an initial brief introduction and description of the study (15 minutes)
2) Complete the Participant Questionnaire (15 minutes)
3) Participate in a semi-structured interview which will be audio-recorded (1 hour)
4) Participate in an online Focus Group via Google Hangout (1 hour)
5) Participate in a photo narrative documentation collection which will use symbols to describe leadership experiences and community relationships you have as a rural school principal (you will be provided detailed information) (15-30 minutes)
6) Participate in member checking which involves your review of the transcript of your individual interview to ensure the researcher has captured and interpreted the data accurately (15-30 minutes).

Thank you for your time and willingness to share your lived experience of being a rural school principal for this research study.
APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 30, 2019

Paige Raney
IRB Approval 3605.013019: Leadership Experiences of Rural School Principals in Culturally-Cohesive Communities: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Paige Raney,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
## APPENDIX G: THEME DEVELOPMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>RELATED CODES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Theme 1: Familiarity with rural communities and school families | • Community member  
 • Connect  
 • Empathy  
 • Familiar  
 • Family  
 • Hardworking  
 • Influence  
 • Know  
 • Relationships  
 • Team  
 • Trust  
 • Understanding  
 • Welcoming |
| Theme 2: New initiatives and new learning    | • Challenges  
 • Change  
 • Coaching  
 • Implementation  
 • Improvement  
 • Incentives  
 • Initiatives  
 • Partnerships  
 • Professional learning  
 • Reflection  
 • Thinking  
 • Time  
 • Support |
| Theme 3: Instructional support outside of rural community | • Accessibility  
 • Connections  
 • Growth mindset  
 • Model  
 • New ideas  
 • Opportunities  
 • Optimism  
 • Planning  
 • Proximity  
 • Training  
 • Vision |
| Theme 4: Leadership mentoring               | • Accountable  
 • Advice  
 • Development  
 • Experience |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 5: Challenges in rural communities / challenges being a rural school principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Family dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Perseverance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Role model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>