

EXECUTIVE LEADER PERSPECTIVES OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE:  
A QUALITATIVE MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY INQUIRY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Organizational resilience theory provided the basis for the qualitative embedded multiple-case study. The multiple-case study design explored the perspectives of rural school district executive leaders at three levels of qualitative meaning: a) individual-level executive leader perspectives, b) organization function-level (program and department) perspectives, and c) district-wide organizational perspectives. Three small Utah rural school districts with higher-than-average student achievement trends, all of which have student populations experiencing low-income factors, were the sites for the study. The analysis included data from 11 executive leader participants, and evidence was collected through interviews, surveys, organizational documents, and artifactual evidence. Precoding, deductive, exploratory, and pattern coding techniques were used to analyze the data. Two broad thematic patterns emerged with professional learning communities (PLC) and human resource management (HR) constructs. Executive leaders were highly committed to three entrenched sub-thematic core values and beliefs: *1) a continual improvement and a goal mindset, 2) collaboration, and 3) effective teachers who place a high priority on student achievement outcomes.* Five essential sub-thematic strategies also emerged in the analysis: *1) instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks; 2) data-driven decisions; 3) training and professional development; 4) consistent and effective leadership meetings; and 5) employee compensation and hiring the right people.*

*Keywords:* Organizational Resilience, Organizational Grit, Grit, Rural Executive School District Leadership, Adversity, Student Achievement

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## **Dedication**

To my best friend Stephanie, our children, parents, and our entire family. To Dr. Meredith Park, my dissertation chair, and Dr. Jerry Woodbridge, my committee member. To those who love to learn, teach, share, and lead in public education. To those who protect, defend, serve, and sacrifice for liberty, freedom, and responsible citizenship. To those who believe. Godspeed. Thank you.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Computer-Assisted (or aided) Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)

Human Resources (HR)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Personalized Competency-Based Learning (PCBL)

Professional Learning Communities (PLC)



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Many public education school districts and their executive school district leaders negotiate significant organizational challenges that prevent student achievement. These challenges may include economic crisis (Freelon et al., 2012), teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), social complexities (McIntosh, 2019), pandemic uncertainties (Hamilton & Gross, 2021), and low-income student conditions (Jackson & Addison, 2018; McKenzie, 2019).

Rural settings, especially low-income rural settings, can magnify these organizational and leadership challenges (Dillon, 2019; Franzak et al., 2019). Persistent child poverty is a significant barrier to education in rural America (Mattingly & Schaefer, 2021). The low socio-economic conditions of many rural communities are conducive to limiting student access to rigorous academic opportunities, college preparation programs, and pathways to post-secondary education (Grant & Roberts, 2022; Series, 2023a; Series, 2023b). Gaps in student achievement among racial classes can be greater in low-income rural areas (Johnson et al., 2021).

Organizational resilience theorists contend that organizational success depends on a long-term collective capacity to overcome adversity, achieve organizational goals, and sustain high-achievement outcomes (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Shepherd & Williams, 2023; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). This qualitative embedded multiple-case study explored organizational resilience theory in three small Utah rural school districts known for sustaining high student achievement in challenging low-income settings. The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple-case study was to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-

income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. This chapter provides organizational resilience theory's historical, social, and theoretical foundations. Afterward, the study's problem, purpose, and significance are discussed. Finally, the study's research questions and critical definitions associated with the study are presented.

### **Background**

Organizations worldwide experience significant social, political, and economic adversity and uncertainty (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Adversity and uncertainty profoundly impact how organizations operate. Today's volatile organizational environments challenge leaders to create and sustain organizational pathways that overcome adversity and uncertainty to succeed with their organizational goals—including high-achievement outcomes. Organizational resilience, overcoming adversity and uncertainty, and maintaining high achievement are now both a theoretical conceptualization and a pragmatic reality. Organizational resilience is necessary for present-day organizational survival and success (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007).

### **Historical Context**

Organizational resilience has been theorized and conceptualized for over two decades (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Organizations through the 90s were commonly designed for long-term, rigid, unchanging organizational structures (Horne, 1997). In the late 90s, it became clear that rigid and inflexible organizations would not do well in a constantly changing and volatile environment of social, political, and economic uncertainty. Horne (1997) suggested that future organizational survival would depend on an organization's ability to adapt and develop new identities as the environment changes.

By 2007, the onset of global military war actions, growing economic instability, and natural disasters had profound negative impacts on organizations' long-term survival and success. This reality led to the Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007) proposition that an organizational resilience theory was needed to explain how organizations can overcome significant adversity, disruptions, and uncertainty. Contemporary theorists continue to explore organizational resilience theory to provide explanations and possible solutions to organizationally challenging situations (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Duckworth & Lee, 2018).

### **Social Context**

Conceptually, organizational resilience evolved from the cold, hard reality that the impact is considerable when organizations experience significant adversity and disruptions that impede organizational functionality (Duchek, 2020; Chen et al., 2021). Organizations restructure, go bankrupt, or dissolve based upon their ability or inability to adapt. People lose jobs. Wealth can decline. The quality of nonprofit and government services can deteriorate. Safety is compromised. Organizational adversity and disruptions threaten long-term social, political, economic, and organizational stability and progress (Duchek, 2020; Chen et al., 2021).

Today, organizations are much more prepared for and resilient to adversity and uncertainty. This kind of organizational preparation and resiliency is now considered an aspect of social responsibility (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Mehta et al., 2024). Social responsibility includes proactively evaluating how the quality of services (Annarelli et al., 2020), employee commitment (Choi et al., 2020; Kim, 2020), and future organizational survival (Bell, 2019) will be impacted by organizational adversity and uncertainty. Organizations continually develop strategies to predict, engage, and overcome

organizational adversity, leverage adversity for organizational change, and achieve their targeted achievement outcomes (Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Lopez et al., 2024; You, 2023).

Public education systems are no exception. Social, political, and economic adversity and uncertainty can significantly impact organizational functionality and achievement. Economic uncertainties pose a high risk to student learning and school system outcomes (Ayoub et al., 2021; Chandler, 2018). School systems that neglect technology in organizational and learning processes tend to neglect student learning (Drossel et al., 2020). On the other hand, school systems with resilient school leaders who know how to overcome organizational adversity and uncertainty can facilitate high student achievement outcomes (Gordon & Hart, 2022).

### **Theoretical Context**

For much of the industrial age and through the 90s, organizational paradigms commonly centered on principles derived from the division of labor, scientific management, and the internal aspects of organizational management and functionality (Horne, 1997). These paradigms focus on concepts of scientific productivity, efficiency, and management. Horne (1997) described these approaches as finely tuned, systematic, and mechanistic organizational approaches unsuitable for quick, flexible, and adaptive responses to dynamically changing organizational conditions—particularly conditions imposed on an organization from the external organizational environment. Some scholars predicted that rigid, inflexible organizational structures could cause their future demise (Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Consequently, organizational resilience perspectives emerged as external and contingent conditions became less stable, predictable, and volatile (Horne, 1997).

Two apparent theoretical contexts of organizational resilience exist in the extant literature. The most explored context is with organizations that conscientiously focus on

enduring and surviving significant organizational adversity and disruptions. This line of research emphasizes a defensive response in the form of organizational adaptation, adjustments, coping, and recovery actions (Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). The most recent context explored in the literature is with organizations that do more than merely endure and survive significant organizational adversity. In this more recent theoretical approach, these organizations leverage adversity and disruption experiences into an opportunistic process that improves and transforms their organization into a new, vitalized, and high-achieving organizational structure (Duchek, 2020; Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Lopez et al., 2024; Vakilzadeh & Haase, 2021; You, 2023).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that many rural school districts and their executive school district leaders experience significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) that prevents sustained high student achievement. Very little knowledge is available to explain how rural executive school district leaders incorporate organizational resilience theory constructs (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007) into their pragmatic school district practices. Many rural executive school district leaders lead in the midst of immense and intense organizational adversities and challenges in today's public education climate. These adversities and challenges can include economic crisis (Freelon et al., 2012), teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), social complexities (McIntosh, 2019), pandemic uncertainties (Hamilton & Gross, 2021), and low-income factors (Jackson & Addison, 2018; McKenzie, 2019).

Rural settings, especially low-income rural settings, can magnify organizational and leadership challenges (Dillon, 2019; Franzak et al., 2019). Persistent child poverty is a

significant barrier to education in rural America (Mattingly & Schaefer, 2021). The low socio-economic conditions of many rural communities are conducive to limiting student access to rigorous academic opportunities, college preparation programs, and pathways to post-secondary education (Grant & Roberts, 2022; Series, 2023a; Series, 2023b). Gaps in student achievement among racial classes can be more significant in low-income rural areas (Johnson et al., 2021).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple-case study was to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) three rural executive school districts and their executive leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement. At this stage in the research, organizational resilience was generally defined as an organization's ability to anticipate, respond to, adapt to, and effectively cope with organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007) and sustain high organizational achievement levels (Duckworth & Lee, 2018).

Two critical facets of organizational resilience theory are relevant to the study: a) overcoming organizational adversity and b) sustaining high levels of organizational achievement (student achievement). The study incorporated low-income conditions as the context-situational adversity factor because low-income factors are some of the most significant organizational challenges that impact student achievement (Jackson & Addison, 2018; McKenzie, 2019). Three Utah rural school districts with modest enrollments and populations experiencing low-income conditions were selected as sites for the study. These three school districts have a history of sustaining high student achievement levels before, during, and after the pandemic (Utah State Board of Education, 2024).

### **Significance of the Study**

The study included four suppositions of significance. First, a considerable amount of research is available to support the existence of an organizational resilience theory phenomenon (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Second, the existing literature appeared to overlook exploring organizational resilience theory within the context of rural school district executive leadership, rural low-income factors, and rural student achievement. Third, most existing empirical research used a quantitative approach, and qualitative perspectives were minimally available. Finally, the study's purposeful sample provided an opportunity to extract valuable qualitative evidence that could be analyzed and shared with the rural school district executive leadership community and the organizational resilience theory community.

### **Theoretical Significance**

The study's theoretical significance stems from claims offered by two separate organizational resilience theory streams of research. Some organizations have successfully negotiated significant organizational adversity (Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Additionally, some organizations have successfully leveraged significant organizational adversity experiences toward realizing high-achievement outcomes (Duckworth & Lee, 2018; You, 2023). Both streams of research are theoretically significant and aligned with the purpose and problem statements associated with the study. Due to organizational resilience theory's context-specific and emergent nature, theorists continue to define and redefine organizational resilience theoretical constructs (Sevilla et al., 2023). The findings of this study provided further evidence to support organizational resilience theory as a promising theoretical phenomenon,

particularly in a rural school district executive leadership, rural low-income, and rural student achievement context.

### **Empirical Significance**

The study was designed to extract qualitative organizational resilience theory-based evidence lacking in the current literature. Most of the existing organizational resilience studies occurred in business, nonprofit, and government settings. Very few studies used samples in public education settings. The existing literature had no qualitative exploration into the context of rural school district executive leadership, rural low-income factors, and rural student achievement. Additionally, the study was based on a theoretical framework developed through the Chapter Two literature review process. The study was designed to provide evidence and findings that would support or dismiss the validity of this theoretical framework in a rural school district setting.

### **Practical Significance**

The study's purposeful sample and multiple-case study qualitative approach (Yin, 2018) provided the basis for the study's practical significance. The primary purpose of this case study was to obtain qualitative empirical evidence that would describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders can facilitate high student achievement in a challenging rural, low-income student population setting. This inquiry was designed to provide insight for rural executive school district leaders and insight into organizational resilience theory applications for rural school districts. The study's purposeful sample provided an opportunity to extract qualitative evidence from rural executive school district leaders who function as members of the Board of Education, superintendent, and other top-level executive leaders.



The study's purposeful sample provided a means to explore and describe qualitative connections between rural organizational adversity (low-income student factors), rural executive school district leadership, and sustaining high student academic achievement. Student low-income factors are significant organizational challenges impacting student achievement (Jackson & Addison, 2018; McKenzie, 2019). The three small Utah rural school districts selected for the case study have a history of experiencing impactful low-income challenges associated with their student and general populations. Moreover, each rural school district has a history of high student achievement levels measured by state assessments compared to similar rural school districts in Utah.

### **Research Questions**

Two organizational resilience theory claims are relevant to the study's research questions. Organizational resilience theory postulates that organizations can overcome significant adversity and disruptions (Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Organizational resilience theory also postulates that organizations can leverage significant adversity and disruption experiences and sustain high organizational achievement outcomes (Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Lopez et al., 2024; You, 2023). The study's central research question and three sub-questions align with this conceptual philosophy.

The central research question addressed a general inquiry into organizational resilience theory constructs, strategies, and practices. Sub-question 1 considered the organizational resilience theory perspectives of individual rural executive school district leaders. Sub-question 2 was an inquiry into functional-level (program and department) organizational resilience theory constructs, leadership, and management practices. Sub-question 3 was a probe into how rural school district executive leaders collectively manage and lead their school district-wide

operations. All research questions were based on the qualitative connections between organizational resilience theory and the practical challenges of sustaining high student achievement amid challenging organizational adversity.

### **Central Research Question**

How do rural public education school districts and their executive school district leaders overcome immense and intense organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district?

### **Sub-Question 1**

At the individual level, how do rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district?

### **Sub-Question 2**

At a functional level (program and department level), how do rural executive school district leaders manage and lead their function-level units (departments and programs) to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district?

### **Sub-Question 3**

At a district-wide level, how do rural executive school district leaders manage and lead their school district to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement?

## Definitions

1. *Achievement* – Achievement is the product of talent and twice the effort (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2015). Grit theorists mathematically define achievement as (Duckworth et al., 2015):
 
$$\text{achievement} = \frac{1}{2} \text{talent} \times \text{effort}^2$$
2. *Data Triangulation* – Data triangulation uses multiple sources of evidence and perspectives to substantiate and validate concepts, themes, and principles within the context and purpose of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018).
3. *Effort* – The time, energy, sacrifice, resources, and mental focus needed to accomplish a specific goal to high levels of achievement. Grit theory considers effort as the primary determinant of achievement (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015; Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth & Lee, 2018).
4. *Embedded Multiple-Case Study* – An embedded multiple-case study design focuses on a specific phenomenon with contextual cases and multiple-meaning subunits (Yin, 2018).
5. *Grit-Resilience* – Grit-resilience (or grit) is an individual's or organization's capacity for passion and perseverance to overcome challenges and achieve long-term goals at high levels (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Lee, 2018).
6. *Noncognitive* – Noncognitive is a descriptor of traits and determinants that are anything but intellectual (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015; Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth & Lee, 2018).
7. *Organizational Resilience* – The study theoretically defines organizational resilience as an organization's ability to anticipate, respond to, adapt to, and cope effectively with

organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007) and sustain high organizational achievement levels (Duckworth & Lee, 2018).

8. *Qualitative Research* – Research that attempts to make sense of very challenging, complex, and contextual life and social situations through the interpretations of people living the contextual realities and the researchers trying to understand the contextual realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).
9. *Talent* – Talent is the rate at which an individual or organization learns and develops skill-based abilities (Duckworth et al., 2015; Duckworth, 2016).

### **Summary**

Organizational resilience theory asserts that organizations can overcome adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007) and sustain high achievement outcomes (Duckworth & Lee, 2018). Organizational resilience theory is a promising theoretical phenomenon with diverse perspectives and contexts. The problem is that very little empirically based knowledge is available to explain how a rural school district and its executive school district leaders can overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain long-term student achievement. Consequently, this qualitative embedded multiple-case study was designed to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders can overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high student achievement.

A qualitative embedded multiple-case study approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) conceptualized an extremely challenging organizational and leadership situation in many rural school district systems. This sensemaking qualitative research process occurred through the interpretations of executive school district leaders who have had previous success in the study's

context. Three small Utah rural school districts with challenging low-income student conditions and a history of sustained high student achievement levels were selected as the multiple-case study sites. The multiple-case study was designed to extract qualitative empirical evidence from the case study's purposeful sample, sites, and settings for future contributions to the educational leadership and organizational resilience theory communities.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple-case study is to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high levels of student achievement. Organizational resilience theory offers two relevant claims that align with the study's purpose: a) some organizations have successfully negotiated significant organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020), and b) some organizations have successfully leveraged significant organizational adversity to realize high achievement outcomes (Duckworth & Lee, 2018). This literature review provides a foundational basis for a theoretical definition of hybrid organizational resilience and a framework that aligns with the purpose of the study. The emerging nature of organizational resilience theory, the gaps in the existing literature, and the context of the study provide the basis for the study's originality, value, and justification.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple-case study was to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain student achievement at high levels. Two existing streams of organizational resilience research attempt to generalize and explain theoretical constructs associated with organizational achievement under the immense and intense pressures of organizational adversity. First, some organizations have successfully negotiated significant organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020). Second, some organizations have successfully leveraged significant organizational adversity experiences toward realizing high-achievement outcomes (Duckworth & Lee, 2018; You, 2023).

## **Organizational Resilience Theory**

Organizational resilience has been theorized and conceptualized for quite some time (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Luning et al., 2022). Nevertheless, organizational resilience theory is an emerging and constantly changing phenomenon. Moreover, organizational resilience theory has yet to be organized into a consistently agreed-upon theory or conceptual framework in the literature (Duchek, 2020). Instead, thematic organizational types, stages, and behaviors resonate in the literature (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Luning et al., 2022). The reason for theoretical inconsistency and the emerging nature of organizational resilience theory is likely related to the contextual-specific and risk-specific nature of this theoretical phenomenon with different organizational types (Burnard & Bhamra, 2019; Florez-Jimenez et al., 2024). Nevertheless, organizational resilience theory is emerging through generalizable themes and constructs (Duchek, 2020).

## **Diverse Contemporary Perspectives of Organizational Resilience Theory**

Organizational resilience theory has evolved from a responsive and defensive posture toward a more proactive, anticipative, and actionable organizational perspective. Duchek's (2020) literature review revealed that some theorists define organizational resilience as an organization's response and recovery to significant organizational disruptions (Duchek, 2020; Su & Junge, 2023). Some theorists define organizational resilience as an organization's ability to adapt to significantly changing circumstances and become more vital through organizational change (Duchek, 2020; Su & Junge, 2023; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Other theorists define organizational resilience as a proactive and anticipatory capacity to predict, overcome, and sustain organizational achievement before, during, and after significant challenges (Duchek, 2020; Rai et al., 2021). Other theorists focus their organizational resilience perspective on results

and outcomes (Chen et al., 2021). Duchek (2020) concluded that “organizational resilience is an organization’s ability to anticipate potential threats, to cope effectively with adverse events, and to adapt to changing conditions” (p. 220).

### **The Grit-Resilience Perspective of Organizational Resilience Theory**

The organizational grit-resilience perspective is a more focused attempt to explain how organizations sustain high achievement through significant organizational adversity (Duckworth & Lee, 2018). The grit-resilience perspective depends on the grit-resilience capacity of the individuals who endure organizational adversity and sustain high achievement outcomes. Grit resilience is a specialized type of individual-level resilience (Duckworth et al., 2007; Morell et al., 2021). Duckworth et al. (2007) tested their individual-level grit-resilience perspective in several samples as they developed the first Grit Scale measurement. They defined grit as the capacity of an individual to achieve long-term goals through perseverance (determination and hard work) and individual passion (focus and consistency of interests). Grit-resilience is both an achievement- and adversity-related framework (Lee, 2022).

Revolutionary to the individual-level grit-resilience perspective is the notion that individual perseverance and passion influence achievement much more than intellect. Grit-resilience emerged as a quantitative empirical research predictor of high individual achievement, particularly a predictor that emphasizes noncognitive individual traits (Duckworth et al., 2007; Morell et al., 2021). Original grit-resilience researchers have refined the definition of grit over time. Originally, grit was defined as having two primary facets: perseverance and consistency of interests (Duckworth et al., 2007; Morell et al., 2021). Today, grit entails passion and perseverance for achieving long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016). Typical character and personality traits associated with individual grit-resilience include overcoming adversity and



obstacles, deliberate practice, diligence, determination, meaning and purpose, long-term goals, hope, and an organizational grit-resilience culture (Duckworth, 2016). Individual grit-resilience is a capacity-based perspective. Individual grit-resilience capacity can include self-awareness, realizing goals, and enduring the rigorous and challenging achievement process (Duckworth, 2016).

### **Related Literature**

The available empirical research provided the basis and justification for developing a theoretical definition of hybrid organizational resilience and a framework aligned with the study. Organizational resilience theory is an emerging and constantly changing phenomenon in the literature. Most empirical studies validate a specific theoretical perspective, oppose a particular theoretical perspective, or explore alternatives not yet explained by an existing theoretical perspective. Theorists and researchers provide organizational resilience theory constructs in many strategic forms. Some constructs are described as strategic stages (Duchek, 2020). Some constructs are strategic categories or types (Chen et al., 2021). Some constructs are organizational behaviors (Annarelli et al., 2020; Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). Appendix A provides a synthesis rubric map of the emerging theoretical constructs. This synthesis of related literature includes a) resilient organizational leadership and organizational design constructs, b) grit-resilient human resource constructs, and c) theoretical research and literature gaps. This synthesis of the related literature concludes with a hybrid theoretical framework that guided the study.

### **Resilient Organizational Leadership & Organizational Design**

Organizational leaders who believe in organizational resiliency build and sustain their organizations to withstand adversity—before, during, and after adverse events threatening an

organization's ongoing concern (Duchek, 2020; Khan et al., 2024; Onsoni, 2023). Organizational leaders are architects in designing, building, and maintaining organizational functions that embrace or disregard organizational resilience (Buranapin et al., 2023). They do this by integrating organizational resilience practices into multiple levels of their organization (Tasic et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2021). The organization's work processes, its leaders (Shelton et al., 2022), and the interactions leaders have with participants (Kakkar, 2019) define the resilience of the collective organization and its people.

### ***The Strategic Perspective of Organizational Resilience***

The conceptual nature of organizational resilience includes an organization's capacity to meet its objectives and goal orientations during challenging situations (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Today's organizations need the capacity to change and change quickly. Strategic adaptation and flexibility are necessary for organizational survival (Duchek, 2020; Sakikawa, 2022). The existing literature provided at least three conceptual, strategic approaches to organizational resilience: organizational coping with adversities, adaptation to changing situations, and proactive anticipation and preparation for future challenges (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Gerschberger et al., 2023; Hamidavi Nasab et al., 2023; Khalif & Slim, 2024; Rai et al., 2021; Vakilzadeh & Haase, 2021).

Organizational coping mechanisms are reactionary responses to immediate crises and organizational threats. Organizational coping refers to the organization's capacity to minimize the damaging effects of an immediate crisis or challenge. Adaptation refers to flexible transitory strategies that cause the organization to evolve from past to present-day realities. Adaptation also refers to the organization's capacity to experience the dynamic effects of adversity and implement flexible responses to overcome and successfully change operations for the future (Sakikawa, 2022). Anticipation strategies are proactive and address potential organizational

risks, future response plans, and the organization's capacity to capitalize on future challenges. Anticipation requires the organization to predict future adversity and challenges and prevent their harmful effects (Duchek, 2020; Florez-Jimenez et al., 2024; Hamidavi Nasab et al., 2023; Vakilzadeh & Haase, 2021).

The extant literature treats organizational resilience in three respects: a) as an organizational outcome, b) as an organizational process, and c) as an organizational capability perspective (Duchek, 2020). From a contemporary perspective, organizational resilience as an outcome is an apparent reality. Organizational resilience is a matter of survival for most if not all organizations (Bell, 2019). Organizational resilience outcomes and processes depend on organizational resilience capabilities (Duchek, 2020). An organization's ability to problem-solve and execute resilience-based strategies at three stages of resilience is imperative.

The three stages of anticipation, coping, and adapting to organizational threats are not relationally linear, but rather, the three stages are functionally iterative. The three stages continuously occur and interact with each other in a highly complex reality. Organizational resilience is an organizational capacity for problem-solution dynamics (Duchek, 2020; Garcia-Valenzuela et al., 2023; Vakilzadeh & Haase, 2021). Within all three stages, problem-solution dynamics manifest with organizational behaviors involving organizational preparation (Darkow, 2019; Gerschberger et al., 2023), organizational reflection and learning (Evenseth et al., 2022), and organizational change (Duchek, 2020).

The context of each organization dictates the complexity and scope of organizational resilience (Duchek, 2020). The organizational context, according to Duchek (2020), is determined by each organization's learning and knowledge capacity (Evenseth et al., 2022), resource capacity (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007), and social capacity (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). An

organization's engaging resilience and problem-solving experiences can promote or discourage organizational resilience. There are at least five complex dimensions of organizational resilience: capital (financial) resilience, strategic (achievement outcomes) resilience, cultural (employee commitment) resilience, stakeholder relationships resilience, and learning (organizational knowledge and change) resilience (Chen et al., 2021; Monternel et al., 2023; Potrich et al., 2022).

### ***Leadership and Organizational Goals***

Organizational leadership that emphasizes organizational goals and outcomes profoundly and positively impacts organizational resilience (Suryaningtyas et al., 2019). Madi Odeh et al. (2021) found that transformational leadership practices that provide a supportive and structural approach to organizational change can positively influence organizational resilience. Intentional, positive transformational leadership interventions can improve an organization's psychological capital with human resources (Buranapin et al., 2023; Fan et al., 2020; Georgescu et al., 2024; Gerschberger et al., 2023; Herbane, 2019; Onsori, 2023; Pathak & Joshi, 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Female organizational leaders tend to exhibit these leadership behaviors in an organizational resilience context (Cosentino & Paoloni, 2021).

Transformational shared leadership allows the organization to evolve and change while maintaining focus and an awareness of organizational purpose and goals (Wang et al., 2023; Werner et al., 2021; Zahari et al., 2022). Organizational leaders who engage in daily operations learn to use innovative resources such as technology to adapt to changing circumstances (Lansonja & Austin, 2024; Werner et al., 2021; Zahari et al., 2022). Conversely, leadership approaches legitimizing power and distance in relationships, individualism, and indulgence negatively influence organizational resilience (Fietz et al., 2021; Onsori, 2023).

### ***Resilient Leadership and Ethics***

A distinctive factor of resilient organizations is the presence of a conscientious leadership cadre who feels, thinks, and behaves with a deep sense of social ethics and responsibility (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2021). An organizational culture of ethics and responsibility permeates employee operations—particularly during organizational uncertainty. Ethics and positive psychology are built into forward-thinking organizational leadership (Gerschberger et al., 2023; He et al., 2022; Lin & Liao, 2020; Wut et al., 2022). The more employees perceive and experience organizational ethics and responsibility, the more employees respond ethically and responsibly during organizational uncertainty and adaptive change (Monternel et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2021; Wut et al., 2022). The more resilient and ethical the organization becomes, the more resilient the workforce becomes (Liang & Cao, 2021).

Employees' psycho-social perceptions appear to be associated with job satisfaction and organizational resilience. As organizational resilience and ethics increase, so do the psycho-social perceptions of employees' job satisfaction (Beuren et al., 2021; He et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2024; Monternel et al., 2023). Moreover, it is clear from the extant literature that organizational resilience is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Resilient organizations and leaders not only prepare for the process of resilience, but resilient organizations have a multi-dimensional architecture in their organizational designs (Su & Junge, 2023; Tasic et al., 2020). Resilient organizations and their leaders build resiliency and redundancy into multi-dimensional organizational levels (Tasic et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, resilient leadership approaches can bring negative influences into an organizational environment. Caza and Posner (2019) discovered that gritty leaders are achievement- and growth-oriented, but gritty leaders struggle with inspirational leadership behaviors. Leadership manifestations with gritty leaders appear through leadership by example

and goal achievement. Organizations with a higher concentration of leadership grit should consider implementing internal controls that build encouragement and inspiration in the organizational culture (Caza & Posner, 2019). A leader's resiliency filter can obscure a leader's inspirational capacity (Samborowski et al., 2021). Resilient leadership can hinder a leader's self-awareness and capacity when taken to extreme levels (Caza & Posner, 2019; Samborowski et al., 2021).

### ***Goal-Driven and Purpose-Driven Orientations***

Some organizations have goals to merely survive the challenges at hand (Duchek, 2020), and other organizations are performance-driven (Beuren et al., 2021) toward overcoming significant organizational adversity (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Khan et al., 2024). Highly resilient organizations are incredibly goal-driven, performance-oriented, and achievement-motivated entities (Werner et al., 2021). Organizational resilience theory includes individual participant and organizational-level goal attainment (Cotta & Salvador, 2020).

What distinguishes a resilient organization is its ability to achieve clearly defined goals amidst changing trends and organizational challenges (Granig & Hilgarter, 2020). Ferociousness, organizational consciousness, perseverance, and passion are unmistakable in highly resilient organizations. These organizations treat adversity and uncertainty as opportunities for organizational improvement, change, growth, and achievement (Annareli et al., 2020; Duckworth & Lee, 2018; Granig & Hilgarter, 2020). If anything, highly resilient organizations interpret adversity and uncertainty as a necessary feedback mechanism that motivates continual improvement for goal attainment (Duckworth, 2016).

### ***Anticipating Organizational Challenges, Responses, & Opportunities***

Effective anticipation strategies can mitigate the organizational stages of coping and adapting (Annareli et al., 2020; Duchek, 2020; Shepherd & Williams, 2023). Proactively

anticipating potential organizational challenges, risks, and strategic responses can determine the future resiliency of an organization (Annareli et al., 2020; Duchek, 2020; Florez-Jimenez et al., 2024; Khalif & Slim, 2024). Organizations can do this in many ways. Leaders can conduct valuable and strategic research for planning purposes. They can go as far as conducting “what-if” scenarios to learn how to cope and adapt. These “what-if” scenarios can also provide a means for determining what works and does not work under simulated conditions (Annareli et al., 2020).

Preparing for future challenges is a proactive and opportunistic approach. Many resilient organizations have found that being prepared for future adversity also means being prepared for organizational opportunities to exploit changing conditions for goal attainment (Cruickshank, 2020; Miceli et al., 2021). The anticipation process aids in developing situational awareness (Rahi, 2019). The anticipation, response, and opportunity process encourages shared and democratic leadership (Gichuhi, 2021; Vito et al., 2023). Governmental regulatory changes and organizational financial pressures appear to influence organizational uncertainty. Organizations that are well-prepared for regulatory and economic uncertainties seem to fare better during organizational adversity (Țiclău et al., 2021).

### ***Non-Human Resource Availability and Resilience***

Organizations require the necessary resources to anticipate, cope, and adapt to challenging conditions (Duchek, 2020; Park et al., 2022). Organizational resilience is a resource-dependent construct (Park et al., 2022). No matter how prepared organizational participants are to negotiate adversity and changing conditions, they can only overcome organizational challenges if they have the necessary resources (Do et al., 2022; Duchek, 2020; Park et al., 2022). Therefore, overcoming organizational uncertainty is a resource-dependent reality (Do et al., 2022).

Resource-based resilience is a financial and asset reality (Chen et al., 2021). An organization's financial performance indicates how well it can manage its resources in connection to organizational achievement through adversity and adaptive organizational change. Financial flexibility provides for organizational resource adaptive capacity (Chen et al., 2021; Hamidavi Nasab et al., 2023; Țiclău et al., 2021). Resource availability depends on the inventory slack held for uncertain times (Baghersad & Zobel, 2022; Hamidavi Nasab et al., 2023).

### *Adaptive Capacity and Open-Systems Dynamics*

The need for organizational resilience stems from the dynamic open-system context with which an organization interacts (Akpan et al., 2022; Garcia-Valenzuela et al., 2023; Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021; Shepherd & Williams, 2023). What is clear from the extant literature is that organizational resilience depends upon an organization's capacity to monitor its situational context and adapt to dynamically changing open-systems circumstances (Annarelli et al., 2020; Duchek, 2020; Granig & Hilgarter, 2020). The capacity to adapt and evolve may be the most critical aspect of organizational resilience.

Resilient organizations and their participants must have an organizational change psychology (Morales et al., 2019). This capacity requires the organization to have well-skilled people, flexible resources, and fluid, proactive and responsive paradigms. As the external environment evolves and pressures the organization to grow, the organization internally must adapt to these changing conditions (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). The dynamic capacity of an organization includes highly adaptive functions for monitoring environmental changes, management of internal communications, responding effectively to changing conditions, and the capacity to recover from the harmful effects of challenging conditions (Annarelli et al., 2020; Garcia-Valenzuela et al., 2023; Granig & Hilgarter, 2020).



One of the most cited aspects of open-system dynamism is an organization's capacity to participate in a more extensive systemic network (Kim et al., 2021; Waerder et al., 2021). Partnerships with other public and private open-system participants expand an organization's resources and information, particularly during extreme organizational disruptions (Kim et al., 2021; Waerder et al., 2021). The organization's adaptive organizational and operational capacity dictates how well relational resilience in critical dynamic environments can occur (Yılmaz Börekçi et al., 2021). Organizational resilience is a relational communitive dynamic (Yuan & Huang, 2021).

### ***Communications and Technology***

Several theorists posited that communications and technology can determine the capacity to detect changing conditions and respond effectively (Annarelli et al., 2020; Kantabutra & Ketprapakom, 2021; Lansonja & Austin, 2024). Highly resilient organizations provide critical decision-makers and plan implementors with information-rich pathways for crucial decisions. Technology is a primary tool for adaptive organizational resilience and communications (Heredia et al., 2022; Zahari et al., 2022). In 2020, Drossel et al. (2020) determined that only about 5% of schools in 14 countries were equipped with the capacity to help students overcome digital literacy challenges in an organizational resilience context. Digital literacy may be a societal challenge that impedes organizational resilience more than organizations appreciate (Drossel et al., 2020).

Resilient organizations constantly develop their communications resources, channels, and methods for immediate and adaptive responses to changing conditions (Shela et al., 2024). Actual communication methods impact stakeholders' psychological and social needs (Gerschberger et al., 2023). These needs include addressing the socio-emotional experiences stakeholders face as they endure challenges. Resilient communications also address the

development and affirming nature of a new identity the organization and its stakeholders are evolving towards. Shared and two-way communication between the organization and employees emphasizes communication (Kim, 2021; Vito et al., 2023).

### ***Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management***

Rigid institutionalized operations do not fare well in conditions that require organizational change (Duchek, 2020). On the other hand, an institutionalized culture of routine organizational learning that acts as a catalyst for organizational change can significantly influence organizational resilience (Butkus et al., 2023; Douglas & Haley, 2024; Hollands et al., 2023; Kumbalı & İrmış, 2023; Morales et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2023). Collective organizational learning and a fluid knowledge-generating and action-oriented process are essential to the organization's adaptive capacity (Evenseth et al., 2022; Hollands et al., 2023; Orth & Schuldis, 2021; Tang et al., 2023; Mehta et al., 2024). Knowledge and information catalyze adaptation and organizational response (Werner et al., 2021; Douglas & Haley, 2024; Hollands et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2023). Organizational adaptation and organizational learning go hand in hand (Butkus et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2023; Orth & Schuldis, 2021; Tang et al., 2023).

Resilient organizations tend actually to learn from unsuccessful endeavors in challenging situations (Annarelli et al., 2020). Organizational capacity depends on the participants' learning and knowledge-generating capacity (Douglas & Haley, 2024; Mehta et al., 2024). Thus, organizational resilience is dependent on the capacity of the organization's participants. The more an organization's participants can learn new skills, strategies, and knowledge, the more the organization can adapt to complex and changing circumstances (Evenseth et al., 2022; Potrich et al., 2022). Resilient organizations intentionally develop their human resources cognitively, behaviorally, and organizationally for adaptation, change, and organizational resilience (Buranapin et al., 2023; Georgescu et al., 2024; Putra & Istiyani, 2022).

Resilient organizations emphasize a continual and developmental approach to sustaining their people's resilience, intelligence, and competence (Annarelli et al., 2020). Resilience intelligence includes the capacity to function in teams and relational learning experiences, including mentoring and coaching partnerships. In essence, organizational learning and organizational resilience are correlated by some researchers as organizational innovation (Do et al., 2022; Garrido-Morena et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2023). Among the more critical aspects of knowledge management is the organization's ability to define and communicate roles and responsibilities during dynamic organizational uncertainty (Cotta & Salvador, 2020; Kumbalı & İrmış, 2023).

### ***Security***

Organizational adversity and challenges threaten the safety and security of the organization's capacity to function. Fraud, technology threats, physical asset deterioration, the safety and well-being of vital human resources, economic fluctuations, and other challenges can negatively impact operational security (Annarelli et al., 2020; Panevski, 2023). Werner et al. (2021) found that the security of resource and supply-chain processes is imperative. Security is a defensive approach that protects the organization's capacity to flexibly adapt to changing circumstances (Annarelli et al., 2020; Panevski, 2023; Werner et al., 2021).

### ***Summary—Organizational-Level Resilience Theory Constructs***

Appendix A summarizes the breadth and depth of constructs supported by the literature and provides a compare and contrast presentation structured around three perspectives: a) typologies offered by Chen et al. (2021), b) stages of organizational resilience offered by Duchek (2020), and c) other construct themes offered in the available literature. The Chen et al. (2021) typology classified organizational resilience constructs into capital resilience, strategic resilience, cultural resilience, stakeholder-relational resilience, and learning resilience types. Duchek (2020)

provided an organizational stages classification that included organizational anticipation and preparation, coping, and adaptation. Other organizational resilience theory constructs include strategic leadership and organizational design, goal and purpose orientations, organizational anticipation, human and non-human resources, adaptive organizational capacity, communications and technology, organizational learning and knowledge management, and security.

### **Grit-Resilient Human Resources**

Researchers recognize that resilient human resources are essential to organizational resilience for apparent reasons. Organizational resilience strategies focus on improving human resources' productive availability and capacity (Bouaziz & Smaoui Hachicha, 2018; Georgescu et al., 2024;). Human resource availability and capacity are a function of employee attitudes (Kim, 2020). Duckworth et al. (2007) found that individual grit-resilience predicts retention in the military and business environments. Grit-resilience has also been used to predict new teacher retention in at least two studies (Nazari & Alizadeh Ognyanous, 2021). Individual grit-resilience predicts how well an individual manages and leverages social-emotional factors such as stress and well-being concerning employee workplace retention (Nazari & Alizadeh Ognyanous, 2021).

Employees depend on the organization to provide psychologically and emotionally safe facilitators for resilience (Dhoopar et al., 2022; Pathak & Joshi, 2021; van den Berg et al., 2021). For example, resilience-based human resource strategies involving staffing, training, compensation, and evaluation can improve organizational resilience (Bouaziz & Smaoui Hachicha, 2018). Communication and technology practices with human resources are critical for

organizational resilience (Kim, 2021). Organizational learning and knowledge management strategies increase the capacity for organizational resilience (Evenseth et al., 2022).

Singh and Chopra (2018) drew correlations between resilience, work meaningfulness, and engagement. They recommended that employers implement practices to employ high-grit individuals and provide them with meaningful work. The combination of grit and meaningful work equates to higher employee performance (Lee, 2022). Both perseverance and consistency of interests (grit) were associated with work engagement and overcoming adversities experienced in the workplace (Singh & Chopra, 2018). Grit, combined with transformational leadership and job involvement, becomes a powerful impetus for task performance (Chandrawaty & Widodo, 2020).

### ***The Impact of Organizational Ethics and Human Resources***

An organization's purpose and sense of meaning impact productivity and create a culture committed to ethics and social responsibility (Choi et al., 2020). Individual grit-resilience appears to have a motive-awareness-action-achievement relationship (Choi et al., 2020; Chandrawaty & Widodo, 2020; Singh & Chopra, 2018). The organizational culture affects individual participant responses as it affects their goals and conscience. An action-oriented and resilient organizational culture facilitates the achievement of long-term organizational goals. Participants identify their meaning, purpose, and grit-resilience with the organization's meaning, purpose, and organizational grit-resilience. Organizational grit-resilience mediates relational well-being through a shared mission, vision, values, and goals identity (Choi et al., 2020). Individuals interpret their relationship with the organization based on their shared relational outlook (Choi et al., 2020).

### ***High-Resilient High-Achieving Individuals***

Duckworth and Lee (2018) suggested that organizational resilience depends on the grit-resilience of individuals participating in the organization. There is a grit-specific psychology to high-achieving individuals (Duckworth, 2016). By understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional traits of highly resilient and high-achieving individuals, an organization can collectively gather, organize, and leverage such individuals to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain organizational achievement. Most research on individual grit-resilience originates from Duckworth et al. (2007). Resilience-grit perspectives explicitly link individual achievement and adversity constructs. Thus, individual grit resilience is a specialized form of individual resilience (Duckworth et al., 2007).

### ***Mathematical Explanation of Individual-level Grit-Resilience***

The product of talent and effort mathematically explains the specialized nature of individual grit-resilience (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007). The variable of effort includes the time, energy, sacrifice, and resources one is willing to put forth and invest into a long-term goal (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015). Duckworth et al. (2015) believed talent is commonly interpreted as an innate, unchangeable intellectual and cognitive capacity. Regarding grit-resilience, however, talent is defined as the rate at which an individual learns and develops their skill-based abilities (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015). Talent is a constantly changing attribute that can be learned through the effort one puts forth in the learning process. The amount of effort considerably multiplies or reduces the talent effect (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015).

The mathematical explanation for grit-resilience asserts that noncognitive effort is the most significant contributing factor to individual achievement (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et

al., 2015). Duckworth et al. (2015) provided an alternative scientific and mathematical representation using a Newtonian calculus-derived perspective. This alternative perspective sheds light on the theoretical, scientific, and mathematical nature of grit and resilience:

$$\text{achievement} = \frac{1}{2} \text{talent} \times \text{effort}^2$$

This mathematical representation emphasizes effort's impact on individual achievement (Duckworth et al., 2015).

### ***Learning and Grit-Resilience***

Grit-resilience encompasses learning to persevere, maintain consistency of interests (passion), focus on goal orientations, and overcome obstacles and adversity (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2019). Individual resilience and capacity fluctuate over time (Samborowski et al., 2021). Grit-resilience is a covariate with experience, self-awareness, motivation, effort, and personal capacity (Samborowski et al., 2021). Perseverance and passion contribute to the learning and skill-development process to realize high-achievement outcomes (Duckworth et al., 2007; Jachimowicz et al., 2018).

### ***Associations of Noncognitive Factors with Achievement Outcomes***

The argument for a grit-resilience predictive framework evolved from studies linking noncognitive factors to high individual achievement (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit-resilience-related studies for student academic achievement center on public school and post-high school settings. Other grit-resilience-related achievement study contexts include the military academy, individual wealth, and business settings. Grit-resilience theorists contend that the construct of grit is generalizable across multiple contexts (Duckworth et al., 2007).

**Academic Student Achievement Outcomes.** The non-cognitive nature of grit-resilience associated with individual academic achievement is apparent in the research. For example, higher grit-resilience levels are related to simple demographics, such as being the first college

student in a family (Hodge et al., 2018). Students high in interpersonal character are more likely to be recognized by their peers for relational achievements (Park et al., 2017). Students with high intellectual character demonstrated much higher academic achievements during the year. Students high in intrapersonal character also demonstrated higher academic achievement, as reflected by higher grades (Park et al., 2017). Grit-resilience predictive measures are reliably associated with academic outcomes in multiple academic contexts ranging from elementary school to university levels (Duckworth et al., 2019; Hodge et al., 2018; Samborowski et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2019). Perseverance acts as a potential mediator for goal commitment and engagement. Grit is associated with improved engagement and academic achievement (Tang et al., 2019). Hodge et al. (2018) were able to associate engagement with grit and academic achievement. In some studies, cognitive ability seems to function independently of noncognitive skills, and mental and noncognitive abilities predict student grade-related achievement (Duckworth et al., 2019).

**Real-World Achievement Outcomes.** In real-world pragmatic and resilient contexts, noncognitive grit-resilience constructs predict high achievement much more than cognitive constructs. For example, Duckworth et al. (2019) studied West Point cadet achievement and progress. Cognitive constructs were much more closely aligned with cadet grades; however, noncognitive grit constructs predicted real-world practical training and overall graduation rates significantly more than mental constructs (Duckworth et al., 2019).

Noncognitive constructs also emerged in three of four studies by Eskreis-Winkler et al. (2014) in West Point, business sales, public high school, and marriage. Grit-resilience constructs predicted individual retention much more than other factors (e.g., intelligence, physical aptitude, Big Five personality traits, and demographic variables) in the military, business sales, and public



high school settings. Marriage was the only context where grit was not the primary predictor of retention (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Grit resilience and new teacher retention were also linked in another study involving two school districts serving low-income children (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). In this study, teachers with higher grit levels had significantly higher retention rates, student achievement, and job performance rates. Highly resilient teachers also had resumes that reflected their resilience (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014.)

**Social-Emotional Implications for Achievement Outcomes.** Grit-resilience constructs derive most of their predictive power from noncognitive traits (Duckworth et al., 2007). These noncognitive traits include social and emotional characteristics that block, facilitate, protect, or propel high achievers to reach long-term goals. The social-emotional implications are related to an individual's experience with adversity and need for psychological fulfillment. People driven by grit-resilience motivators have goal orientations and values for achievement. Social-emotional despair succumbs to social-emotional hope, optimism, and faith in the future for gritty individuals (Duckworth et al., 2007).

***Social, Emotional, and Developmental Grit-Resilience Facilitators.*** Grit-resilience is a psychological needs facilitator, particularly the grit facet of perseverance (Disabato et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2019). When people demonstrate grit under adversity, particularly the ability to overcome adversity, psychological needs fulfillment occurs at greater levels. Jiang et al. (2019) investigated the mediation capacity of grit with needs satisfaction and psychological well-being. They concluded that grit provides a pathway toward happiness in times of adversity. Being proactive, asserting self-initiative, and achieving through perseverance as well as having a growth mindset can be psychologically rewarding and fulfilling (Houston et al., 2020).

An inverse relationship exists between individual grit-resilience capacity and psychological despair (Datu et al., 2018). As the grit-resilience capacity of an individual increases, psychological distress decreases (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Relevant personal and professional lived experience can motivate grit-resilience. Individuals assigned to work in the same contexts and situations where they have experienced past traumatic events are much more likely to be engaged in their work. Police detectives and mental health professionals are much more likely to be involved in their work when the work reflects their past traumatic experiences. Persevering through experiential adversity appears to be a developmental grit-resilience factor, particularly when individuals relate their past ability to overcome traumatic experiences to present-day professional assignments (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014).

The grit-resilience facet of perseverance has a moderate to strong association with individual well-being (Disabato et al., 2019). Grit-resilience characteristics resonate when happiness emerges through action-oriented life engagement and purposeful meaning. Consistency of interests resonates with action-oriented efforts associated with engagement and meaning compared to pleasure (Datu et al., 2018).

Although the grit-resilience facet of passion is associated with meaning and purpose, the grit-resilience aspect of perseverance is most associated with well-being in terms of individual achievement (Disabato et al., 2019); therefore, it is unsurprising that grit-resilience appears to be a reciprocated relational and motivational mediator and outcome (Bartel & Rockmann, 2024). As individuals develop their capability to persevere and consistency of interests (passion), their capacity to achieve improves. As individuals interact with relational support systems built on grit-resilience constructs, their grit-resilience capacity improves (Datu et al., 2018). Direct interventions targeting expectancies and values can motivate deliberate practice and improve

achievement among non-expert students (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2016). Direct interventions include teaching study skills and teaching students to focus on their interests and goals. The interventions were not a means for immediate revolutionary progress to high performance; however, direct interventions significantly improved the performance of lower-performing students. The same interventions marginally improved performance for already high-performing students (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2016).

***Social-Emotional Protective Factors.*** Grit-resilience (perseverance and passion) is a mediator that insulates gritty individuals from negative social-emotional experiences (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Feedback in pressure situations can be interpreted from a positive or a negative perspective. For some, negative feedback can instill negative feelings, negatively impacting performance. On the other hand, gritty individuals value performance feedback as an impetus for higher levels of achievement (Motro et al., 2020). Gritty individuals tend to react differently to negative feedback. Motro et al. (2020) found that individuals high in feedback self-efficacy and grit were more immune to the negative implications of poor feedback and negative social-emotional responses to negative feedback (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). One possible explanation for the protective factor of grit-resilience is related to nonattachment with achievement outcomes. Perseverance aids in nonattachment, so individual identity is not defined by the success or failure associated with goal achievement (Siah et al., 2020).

***Social-Emotional Risks of Grit-Resilience.*** Grit-resilience can manifest itself in varying degrees. Some gritty individuals are more inclined to persevere with controlled diligence than others who recklessly persevere with uncontrolled tenacity (Alaoui & Fons-Rosen, 2021). While diligence produces controlled perseverance, tenacious orientations can produce unethical and uncontrolled behaviors. Some individuals exhibit extreme characteristics of grit resilience, and

these extreme characteristics can come with high-impact consequences (Houston et al., 2020). Grit-resilience can manifest in extreme hyper-competitiveness, unethical behaviors, and possibly narcissism (Houston et al., 2020).

For example, the capacity to overcome obstacles through adverse conditions may work against high-resilient individuals in high-stakes situations. People who exhibit extreme grit-resilience levels may find it difficult to accept failure, and they may fail to let go of an unreachable high-stakes goal and experience significant negative consequences (Alaoui & Fons-Rosen, 2021). Arli et al. (2020) provided evidence to support this claim. People with extremely high grit-resilience levels can display significantly more unethical behaviors. An obsessive focus on grit-resilience may produce individuals who devalue ethics. High grit-resilience individuals may react to pressure situations, compromising integrity, ethics, and their inner moral compass (Arli et al., 2020).

### ***Grit-Resilience Measurements***

One measurement debate among grit-resilience researchers is the need to predict achievement beyond intellect-centered diagnostics (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Grit-resilience constructs hinge on the notion that high achievers rely on many other skills beyond the cognitive and intellectual domains. Their achievements directly result from deliberate practice, hard work, the capacity to endure significant challenges, and other noncognitive capabilities that propel their learning and skill development. Today's contemporary grit-resilience measures are designed to fill the achievement gap that needs to be addressed in traditional cognitive and intellect-based measures (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015).

**The Grit-O Scale.** The original grit scale (Grit-O) included 12 items that reflect the two main facets of grit-resilience: perseverance and passion (Duckworth et al., 2007). The Grit-O scale was tested with six different studies and four different sample contexts of various ages: two

samples of adults, Ivy League undergraduates, two classes of military West Point cadets, and National Spelling Bee participants. The results were staggering, and the results validated what has intuitively been known for centuries, that is to say, hard work, a commitment to learning and goals, laser-like focus, and goal orientation matter when it comes to high achievement. These noncognitive traits not only matter, but these noncognitive character and personality traits produce goal-oriented results much more than intellect alone (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Using the Grit-O scale, Duckworth et al. (2007) revealed that educated adults have much greater grit levels than non-educated adults, given their grit to complete long-term goals. Grittier people change jobs much less often. Grittier students earn higher grades. Grit-resilience reliably predicts retention and completion rates of West Point cadets much more than other military academy measures. The study also revealed that grit constructs had little correlation with intellect (Duckworth et al., 2007). The original grit scale has been associated with other studies that cite a reasonably good internal consistency alpha of .74 (Arli et al., 2020; Duckworth et al., 2007; Jiang et al., 2019).

**The Grit-S Scale.** In 2009, Duckworth and Quinn refined the original grit scale to a shorter, more efficient, and more effective measure of grit. The new Grit-S (short) scale includes only eight items compared to 12 items in the longer previous scale. The Grit-S scale was tested using the same data used in 2007 by Duckworth et al. The Grit-S scale reliably predicted academic achievement, retention, and grit at greater levels. Several studies cite the Grit-S as having internal consistency alpha measurements ranging from .73 to .83 (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2016; Siah et al., 2020). The Grit-S scale also reveals a strong correlation between the two facets of grit: perseverance and consistency of interests (passion) (r

= .59,  $p < .001$ ). The extant research of Jachimowicz et al. (2018) also supported the notion that both facets function as critical determinants of high achievement.

**Grit-Resilience Measurement Trends.** Researchers have used Grit scales extensively to measure grit resilience with many other traits, contexts, and social characteristics. The depth and breadth of grit scales used in the quantitative research literature substantiate the validity of grit resilience in contemporary scholarship. Grit scales have been combined with other established, valid, and reliable scales to produce valuable research and knowledge. Appendix B provides a detailed list of quantitative scales used in empirical studies. Table 1 summarizes the depth and breadth of quantitative scales in Appendix B.

**Table 1**

*Scale Measures Used in Grit Studies*

Topic	Count of Measurement Scales
Grit & personality trait scales	6
Academic achievement scales	2
Psychological well-being scales	16
Organizational environment scales	8

**Alternative Measurement Scales.** Some researchers have moved in a different direction by creating alternative grit scales. Essentially, the change to an alternative scale is a change in philosophy, definition, and constructs with grit resilience. For example, Singh and Chukkali (2021) developed a new scale with four dimensions rather than two dimensions: adaptability, perseverance, spirited initiative, and steadfastness. The Singh and Chukkali (2021) instrument reflected an interpretation in the literature that consistency of interests is no longer a valid

construct with grit resilience. The Sing and Chukkali (2021) instrument is also an adjustment from Western- to Eastern-world culture.

On the other hand, the Triarchic Model of Grit Scale (TMGS) developed by Datu et al. (2017) embraced the original grit-resilience facets of perseverance and consistency of interests, adding a third dimension of adaptability to the theoretical measurement framework. The original grit scales were mainly designed to measure noncognitive grit traits (Duckworth et al., 2007), but the TMGS scale is designed to measure cognitive, behavioral, and emotional grit traits (Datu et al., 2018).

### ***Summary—Individual Grit-Resilience Constructs***

Three primary sources provided foundational individual-level grit-resilience constructs. Duckworth (2016) provided a basis for grit-resilience constructs' historical and applicational evolution. Duckworth et al. (2015) offered scientific and mathematical explanations for grit-resilience constructs. Duckworth et al. (2007) provided the initial empirical support for individual grit-resilience constructs. Table 2 summarizes the grit-resilience constructs offered by these sources.

**Table 2***Summary—Individual Grit-Resilience Constructs*

Construct Theme	Duckworth (2016)	Duckworth et al. (2015)	Duckworth et al. (2007)
Passion (consistency of Interests)	✓	✓	✓
Perseverance & determination	✓	✓	✓
Effort (time, energy, sacrifice, and resources)	✓	✓	✓
Talent (deliberate practice, skill development, continual improvement, growth mindset)	✓	✓	✓
Meaning, purpose & goal orientations	✓	✓	✓
Self-awareness & reflection (aligned with goal achievement)	✓	✓	✓
Capacity to overcome adversity	✓	✓	✓
Focus on achievement outcomes	✓	✓	✓

**Organizational Resilience—Theoretical Research & Literature Gaps**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders embed organizational resilience theory constructs in their district-wide operations to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain student achievement at high levels. The study was designed to examine this purpose through the lens of organizational resilience theory combined with individual-level grit-resilience constructs. The originality and value of the dissertation project are derived from current gaps in the extant research literature regarding rural executive school district leadership, organizational adversity, rural poverty, and rural student achievement. These gaps in the literature had not yet been addressed.



### **Organizational Resilience Research Gaps**

This literature review identified 41 organizational resilience-related empirical research studies relevant to this research project. The majority of studies focused on quantitative methods and private business settings. The research studies were somewhat evenly distributed among cultures throughout the world. All but one study was conducted with organizational leaders or employees. No studies have focused on organizational resilience among rural school district executive leaders in the United States. Table 3 summarizes the 41 empirical studies reviewed concerning organizational resilience.

**Table 3***Organizational Resilience Studies—Empirical Study Criteria & Counts*

Research Study Criteria	Count
Research Method	
Qualitative	12
Quantitative	28
Mixed methods	1
Culture	
Central and South America	5
Europe	10
North America	9
Southwest/Southeast Asia	14
Other	7
Setting	
General population	1
K-12 or university education	3
Military	1
Private businesses and workplace	28
Governments, nonprofits, higher/public education	12
Participants	
Professional experts	2
Workplace employees	2
Military	1
Higher education students	2
Employees (multiple levels)	16
Organizational leaders	22

***Individual-level Grit-Resilience Research Gaps***

This literature review included 29 individual grit-related empirical research studies and seven organizational grit-related empirical research studies relevant to the purpose of this dissertation project. All 29 studies used quantitative methods. Most studies occurred in North American settings. Studies were heavily concentrated on K-12 students, university students, and adults from the workplace, military, and general population samples and settings. No studies focused on individual and organizational grit with rural school district executive leaders in the

United States. Table 4 summarizes the 29 individual grit-resilience studies included in this literature review.

**Table 4**

*Individual-level Grit-Resilience—Empirical Study Criteria & Counts*

Research Study Criteria	Count
Research Method	
Quantitative	29
Culture	
Europe	4
North America	15
Southwest/Southeast Asia	6
Other	4
Setting	
General population	6
K-12 or university education	15
Military	5
Workplace settings	3
Participants	
Professional experts	1
Military	5
Employees	2
Students	15
General population adults	6

**Organizational Resilience—Theoretical Definition for the Study**

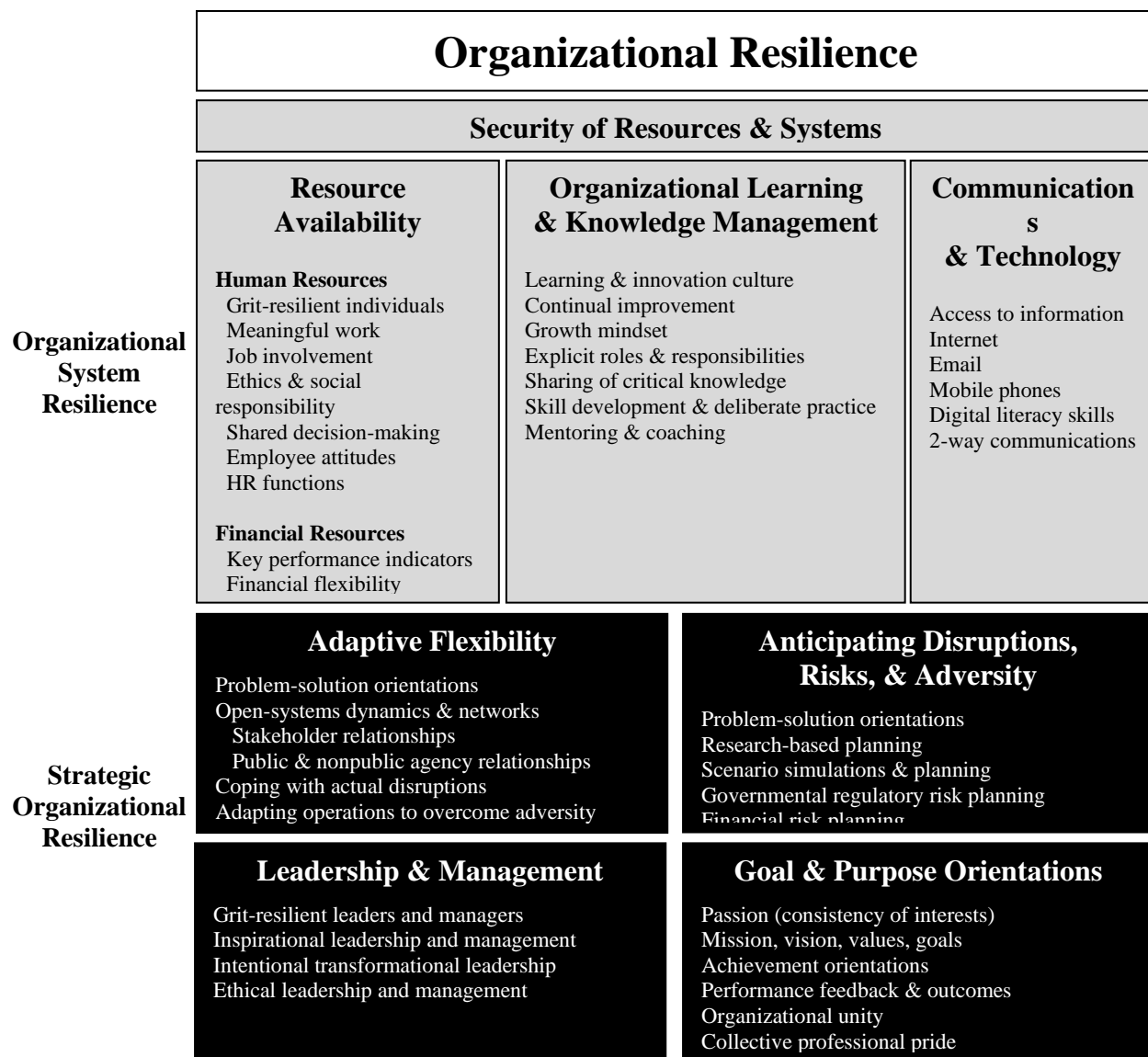
The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple-case study was to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain student achievement at high levels. Due to the emerging and inconsistent nature of organizational resilience theory in the literature, a hybrid theoretical definition of organizational resilience was needed for appropriate alignment with the purpose of the study. The hybrid definition must address the adversity and high-achievement aspects of the study's purpose. Consequently, organizational resilience was theoretically defined for the study as an organization's ability to

anticipate, respond to, adapt to, and cope effectively with adversity (Duchek, 2020) while sustaining high organizational achievement (Duckworth & Lee, 2018).

### **Organizational Resilience Theoretical Framework**

Based on the literature review synthesis, a hybrid organizational resilience theory and a grit-resilience framework were developed to guide the study. Figure 1 depicts the framework which combines the organizational grit-resilience theory perspective (Duckworth & Lee, 2018), the stages of organizational resilience perspective (Duchek, 2020), the organizational resilience typology perspective (Chen et al., 2021), and the individual grit-resilience perspective (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015) into a single combined theoretical framework.

Essentially, a typology of two different classifications was developed from the literature review. *Strategic organizational resilience* provides a directional guide for an organization and its collective capacity to anticipate and respond to adversity. *Organizational system resilience* provides for the systemic production functionality needed to overcome adversity. The model conceptually portrays an integrated multiple-construct design and architecture for organizational resilience (Tasic et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2021). The strength of organizational resilience depends on an organization's foundation (strategic organizational resilience) and systemic structure (organizational system resilience). Individual grit-resilience (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015) constructs are integrated with both *strategic organizational resilience* and *organizational system resilience* classifications to provide the organizational human resource basis for high-resilient high-achieving individuals that participate in the organization.

**Figure 1***Hybrid Theoretical Organizational Resilience Framework***Theoretical Framework and Study Alignment**

This qualitative embedded multiple-case study explored and described how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain student achievement at high levels. This literature review synthesis provided a scholarly basis for developing a hybrid theoretical framework to address the

purpose of the study. The purpose and scope of the study were constrained to an organizational leadership perspective. Consequently, the study focused on the hybrid theoretical framework's foundational *strategic organizational resilience classification*.

### **The Organizational Challenge of Rural Poverty and Low-Income Conditions**

A significant organizational adversity factor was needed to substantiate the validity of the qualitative embedded multiple-case study. To ensure the theory, sample, and setting aligned with the purpose statement, problem statement, and research questions associated with the study, the adversity-context of low-income student conditions related to student achievement was selected for the project. This adversity-context was chosen because low-income student conditions are generally known to have a significant and negative influence on student achievement (Jackson & Addison, 2018; McKenzie, 2019).

The rural context provided a natural setting of adversity. Rural settings, especially low-income rural settings, can magnify organizational and leadership challenges (Ackerman & Ackerman, 2024; Dillon, 2019; Franzak et al., 2019). Persistent child poverty is a significant educational barrier in rural America (Coady, 2020; Mattingly & Schaefer, 2021). The low socioeconomic conditions of many rural communities are conducive to limiting student access to rigorous academic opportunities, college preparation programs, and pathways to post-secondary education (Ackerman & Ackerman, 2024; Grant & Roberts, 2022; Series, 2023a; Series 2023b). Gaps in student achievement among racial classes can be more significant in low-income rural areas (Johnson et al., 2021).

### ***Organizational Leadership and Student Socioeconomic Conditions***

The multiple-case study design emphasizes the impact that rural executive school leaders can have in their organizational capacity with student achievement. Educational leaders and their organizational approaches can positively influence student achievement in a high-poverty and

low-income educational context. Organizational learning approaches align with a positive student achievement school climate (Gordon & Hart, 2022). Williams et al. (2019) determined that a school organizational culture of hope and open-system relational networks makes a noticeable difference. Klar & Brewer (2014) reached similar conclusions in a rural leadership high-poverty school context. Student achievement levels can improve as rural school leaders develop the capacity to lead proactively through flexible and dynamic relationships (Klar & Brewer, 2014).

### ***Poverty, Low-Income, and Student Achievement Gaps in the Literature***

Poverty and low-income conditions are empirically associated with student achievement gaps in public school systems (McKenzie, 2019; Jackson & Addison, 2018). Rural settings, especially low-income rural settings, can magnify these organizational and leadership challenges (Franzak et al., 2019; Dillon, 2019). Rural teachers' stereotypical beliefs about student socioeconomic conditions can negatively impact student achievement in a rural school setting (Chandler, 2018). Poverty and low-income conditions accompany language and special education student needs (Jackson & Addison, 2018). School systems often neglect low-income gifted students because of their socioeconomic status (Ayoub et al., 2021). Rural schoolteachers are more likely to have less-developed skill sets to address the learning needs of low-income students (Lavalley, 2018). Rural school leadership settings attract a specific type of school leader. These school system leaders are cognitively and emotionally intelligent leaders who appreciate developmental and organizational processes (Roberts & Downes, 2019). At the time of the study, no existing research was available regarding the context of rural school district executive leadership, rural poverty and low-income conditions, and rural student achievement.

## Summary

The purpose of the qualitative embedded multiple-case study was to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain student achievement at high levels. I intended to examine this leadership and organizational challenge through organizational resilience theory. At the time of the study, the existing literature and research did not address this challenge and context through an organizational resilience theoretical perspective. The existing literature also appeared to neglect the organizational challenge of rural low-income conditions and rural student achievement, particularly in a rural school district executive leadership context. Due to the emerging nature and diverse perspectives of organizational resilience theory, a hybrid theoretical definition and framework were developed through the literature review process to guide the study. The study's originality, value, and justification are based on this literature review, synthesis, and these gaps in the extant literature.



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of the qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain student achievement at high levels. Organizational resilience was generally defined for the study as an organization's ability to anticipate, respond to, adapt to, and cope effectively with organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007) and sustain high organizational achievement levels (Duckworth & Lee, 2018). A qualitative embedded multiple-case study approach has historically been used for in-depth qualitative inquiry, exploration, and descriptive interpretation of human perspectives and settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Three small Utah rural school districts, each serving a low-income student population, are the sites for the study. Low-income student population factors function as the significant adversity situational context for the study. Chapter 3 clarifies the multiple-case study's research design, the role of the researcher, and the methodological approach for the multiple-case study. This chapter explains the multiple-case study's site selection, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. Justifications for the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the multiple-case study are also provided in this chapter.

### **Research Design**

The three small Utah rural school districts selected for the qualitative embedded multiple-case study are unusual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) in that each has a history of sustaining higher than normal levels of student achievement despite their low-income student and general populations. This case study inquiry seeks revelatory and qualitative insights

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) that currently do not exist in the contemporary research literature. A qualitative research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) was used to conceptualize an extremely challenging organizational and leadership situation in some rural school district systems. This sensemaking qualitative research process occurred through the interpretations of executive school district leaders who have had success in the study's multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018), allowed for inquiry and analysis of multiple units and subunits of meaning in multiple rural school district sites. The multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) offered the opportunity for an exploration into the perspectives of rural executive school district leaders at three different levels: a) their individual-level leadership perspectives, b) their organizational function-level perspectives (program and department level perspectives), and c) their district-wide organizational perspectives.

### **Research Questions**

Two organizational resilience theory claims are relevant to the study's research questions. Organizational resilience theory postulates that organizations can overcome significant adversity and disruptions (Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Additionally, organizations can leverage significant organizational adversity and disruption experiences and sustain high achievement levels (Duckworth & Lee, 2018). The study's central research question and three sub-questions align with this conceptual philosophy. The central research question addressed a general inquiry into organizational resilience theory constructs, strategies, and practices. Sub-question 1 considered the organizational resilience theory perspectives of individual executive school district leaders. Sub-question 2 was an inquiry into functional-level (program and department level) organizational resilience theory constructs, leadership, and

management practices. Sub-question 3 was an inquiry into how school district executive leaders collectively manage and lead their school district-wide operations. All research questions were about the qualitative connections between organizational resilience theory constructs and practical applications with high student achievement outcomes sustained over prolonged periods.

### **Central Research Question**

How do rural public education school districts and their executive school district leaders overcome immense and intense organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district?

### **Sub-Question 1**

At the individual level, how do rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district?

### **Sub-Question 2**

At a functional level (program and department-level perspectives), how do rural executive school district leaders manage and lead their function-level units (departments and programs) to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district?

### **Sub-Question 3**

At a district-wide level, how do rural executive school district leaders manage and lead their school district to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement?

## **Setting and Participants**

The qualitative embedded multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) was systematically structured to obtain qualitative empirical evidence that describes rural executive school district leader organizational perspectives through an organizational resilience theory lens. The study may a) provide insight for other rural executive school district leaders, b) provide insight into best practices for embedding organizational resilience theory constructs into rural school district organizational processes, and c) provide insight into organizationally sustaining long-term student achievement despite challenging low-income conditions.

The study's purposeful sample and investigation of multiple sites provided a means to explore and describe qualitative connections between organizational adversity, rural school district executive leader perspectives, and higher-than-normal academic achievement with a student population experiencing low-income conditions. The study's purposeful sample and multiple sites provided a means to extract qualitative evidence from rural executive school district leaders who function as members of the Board of Education, as the superintendent, and as other top-level executive leaders in their respective districts.

### **Sites**

Rural School District 1, Rural School District 2, and Rural School District 3 (pseudonyms for the school district study sites) are small rural school districts located in Utah. Each rural school district was functionally organized by a top-level publicly elected Board of Education comprised of five board members. Top-level executive leadership positions included in the study are the superintendent, who is responsible for all operations in the district; the business administrator (chief financial officer); and other executive leaders, who oversee functional units such as secondary school programs, special education, and technology.

The student enrollment for each rural school district ranged from 3,120 to 4,563 (Utah State Board of Education, 2024). All three rural Utah school districts experience challenging low-income and educational at-risk factors compared to state averages. Student-free/reduced lunch participation rates, population income levels, and college education rates reflect socio-economic at-risk factors associated with each school district. A comparison of these factors in the three districts to the state average is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Rural School District Low-Income & Education At-Risk Factors*

	2021–22 School Year			
	RSD1	RSD2	RSD3	Utah
Student enrollment	3,120	4,563	3,189	674,650
Student free/reduced lunch	43.5%	36.2%	40.3%	26.5%
Annual median household income	\$63,221	\$55,361	\$55,820	\$74,197
County per capita income	\$25,479	\$24,041	\$21,254	\$30,986
County poverty rate	10.7%	10.0%	14.1%	8.6%
County high school diploma rate	89.60%	91.00%	92.00%	93.00%
County college bachelor’s degree rate	22.40%	20.90%	20.70%	34.70%

Despite challenging low-income and education factors, each Rural School District has performed well with English and language arts state student assessments since 2017, particularly when comparing other Utah school districts with similar low-income and education factors. (Utah State Board of Education, 2024). Each rural school district selected for the study performed equal to or higher than the state average in at least three of the past five tested years with English and language arts state assessments. In the 2021-22 school year, only one other small rural school with higher-than-normal state assessment results and challenging low-income at-risk factors performed better than the rural districts selected for the study. This district is the researcher’s, and it was eliminated from the study due to the researcher’s conflict of interest and

potential bias. At least nine other small Utah rural school districts had similar low at-risk factors but performed below the state average with English and language arts state assessment results.

Table 6 presents the comparison of language arts proficiency, and Appendix C summarizes multi-year Utah school district assessment trends.

**Table 6**

*Rural School District Student Proficiencies with Literacy State Assessments*

	Student Proficiencies			
	English and Language Arts State Assessments			
	RSD1	RSD2	RSD3	Utah
2022-23	49%	47%	46%	44%
2021-22	48%	46%	45%	44%
2020-21	44%	43%	42%	43%
2019-20	<i>Not tested due to pandemic</i>			
2018-19	50%	46%	48%	47%
2017-18	45%	45%	49%	45%
2016-17	43%	43%	44%	44%

**Participants**

The study included 12 school district executive leader participants. Because one participant did not complete the survey, this participant's responses were not included in the analysis. The study analysis included two board members elected by the general population every four years to oversee the macro-perspective of district operations. The study included three board members, three superintendents, and six directors. A breakdown of the participants is presented in Table 7.

**Table 7***Study Participants Included in the Data Analysis*

	Board Members	Superintendents	Executive Leaders	Total
RSD1	1	1	2	4
RSD2	1	1	2	4
RSD3		1	2	4
Total	2	3	6	11

**Recruitment Plan**

The qualitative multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) required a purposeful sample (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) that aligned with the subunits of meaning the study was designed to measure (Yin, 2018). Three rural Utah school districts with a low-income student and a general population associated with a history of high academic performance trends on state assessments were selected as the sites for the study. There were 12 participants in the study. Because one participant did not complete the survey, this participant's information and responses were removed from the analysis. Participants included board members, Superintendents, and other executive directors. The study was designed to measure subunits of meaning at three levels. These three levels of meaning included: a) an individual-level perspective, b) an organizational function-level (program and department level) perspective, and c) a district-wide organizational-level perspective. The same executive leaders participated in individual and function-level data collection methods (individual interviews and surveys). The participant communication process was initiated after obtaining IRB approval (Appendix D) and district superintendent approval (Appendix E). All participants were recruited via email (Appendix F).

### **Researcher Positionality**

I have 28 years of public education experience and 17 years of rural school district executive leadership experience. From my view and experience, school district executive-level decisions are consistently driven by organizational adversities that a school district experiences with the district's respective student population. Consequently, I used a pragmatism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020) positionality for the study. The study's design centered on extracting, analyzing, and synthesizing qualitative evidence to describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders manage and lead their school district to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Appendix G summarizes my professional background, which may affect my hermeneutic interpretations.

### **Interpretive Framework**

This qualitative embedded multiple-case study was an in-depth inquiry into how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school leaders do what they do. The qualitative embedded multiple-case study used a pragmatism interpretive framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Dixon et al., 2023; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020) to address the problem of how rural school district executive leaders lead their school district through significant organizational challenges and sustain high levels of student achievement. The study focused on a pragmatic best practices philosophical perspective. In addition, the study focused on organizational resilience theory constructs and rural executive leader practices that may produce higher levels of sustained student achievement amid significant organizational adversity factors (low-income student factors). A pragmatic interpretive framework allowed me the



flexibility to adapt the study to the site's conditions and purposeful sample (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Philosophically, my interest in a pragmatic approach is based on my extensive experience as a rural public school district educator and leader. Rural school district leaders are tasked with complex student learning challenges in unique rural situations. The unusual nature of the purposeful sample, site, and setting provided the basis for the significance of this qualitative inquiry (Yin, 2018). The pragmatic interpretations and inquiry involved with the study were designed to reflect human experience, actions, and habits in the study's unique context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Dixon et al., 2023; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Pragmatism-based inquiry considers a specific problem, specific practices that address the situation, and consequential outcomes. Therefore, pragmatic interpretations depend on context and experiential interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Dixon et al., 2023; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

The study's research design was explicitly structured to explore and describe best practices and solutions associated with the study's problem(s) and research questions. No specific qualitative philosophy or reality underlies the pragmatic orientation of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Instead, the study's research design was structured to explore and describe the subjective qualitative relationships, perspectives, and interpretations with the research questions, within the context of the study, and with the study's site, participants, and setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Dixon et al., 2023; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Yin, 2018).

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Three philosophical assumptions were associated with the study's research design, positionality, and interpretive framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The ontological assumptions refer to my views of reality. The epistemological assumptions refer to my views of

knowledge and truth. Finally, my axiological assumptions refer to the personal values and biases integrated into my research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). These assumptions guided the study's data collection, analysis, interpretations, and findings.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

Ontological assumptions represent how I identify and define reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My own principles and values center on Christian beliefs. These beliefs originate from doctrine, principles, and values derived from a relationship with God and Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, my reality is God's reality and truth. My existence, purpose, and reality are interpreted through and aligned with the word of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. When secular philosophies contradict divine truths and principles, my reality is constructed by placing a higher priority on divine truths and principles that supersede secular philosophies.

Within this reality framework, everyone's divine capacity to choose their own beliefs, principles, values, and actions is fundamental. Consequently, the study design gathers empirical evidence regarding participant perspectives, interpretations, and decisions—including the choices participants make in their context and the values that underlie their choices. I have reported the evidence and findings objectively without regard to whether that evidence is consistent with my belief system.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Epistemological assumptions represent how I conceptually construct and interpret knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Above all else, faith in and through Jesus Christ represents the most holistic view of knowledge that I have. Evidence is not required to anchor a coherent and reasonable belief in knowledge of something that cannot be seen or observed but which can still be true from a knowledge perspective. I believe that divine knowledge is often obtained through deep spiritual experiences with God that may not be observable to others.

Nevertheless, I recognize for the purposes of this study, an evidential epistemological perspective is required. The study's knowledge or truth claims are justified using multiple data and evidence sources. The study's validity and reliability stem from data corroboration strategies such as data triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). The study design gathers evidence from at least three different types of evidentiary sources—individual interviews, surveys, and district organizational documents and artifacts. When multiple lines of evidence substantiate a knowledge or truth claim, greater credibility is given to the evidence and the interpretation of the evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018).

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Axiological assumptions represent the values that may affect the results of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am a husband, and father of five children, and a grandfather of six grandchildren. Family values greatly influence how I interpret information. Three of my children are public education teachers. My daughter-in-law is also a public education teacher. One of my children is completing graduate training for a school counselor career. My family values are highly commingled with public education values.

I have 28 years of experience in public education. My experience includes over 20 years of experience in district administration assignments. In addition, I have 17 years of experience as a rural executive-level administrator overseeing accounting, finance, and human resource organizational activities. My experience includes seven years of high school teaching assignments involving curriculum, instruction, English Language Learners, concurrent enrollment college courses, instructional coaching for other teachers, and athletic coaching.

Before my public education experience, I served nearly four years of active duty in the United States Air Force in security-related and combat arms assignments. My military service

includes one deployment in the Middle East with Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Patriotism is a significant part of my own value system, as I also have two great-grandfathers who served in WWI, a grandfather who served at Pearl Harbor (WWII), and his brother who served in Hiroshima and Okinawa (WWII), an uncle who served in Vietnam, and a father-in-law who served as a Green Beret. I have several other members of our extended family who served in all military service branches during peacetime.

### **Researcher's Role**

My role as a researcher is to act as a human instrument, gather data and evidence, interpret the data, synthesize the data and evidence, and objectively report my findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). I have no conflicts of interest, prior relationship, or employment history with any of the three rural Utah school districts included in the study. I am unaware of the internal organizational operations of these sites or participants, nor do I have any decision-making authority or responsibility with any of the sites. I also did not know about leadership strategies, organizational strategies, or other organizational frameworks associated with the case study sites or participants prior to the study. Given my experience, values, and biases, my role as a researcher for this study was to gather data and evidence, interpret, synthesize, and objectively report my findings.

### **Procedures**

Two critical procedures were necessary before the study was undertaken. First, permissions were obtained from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the participating sites. Second, participants were recruited for the study, and their written consent was obtained. This section explains how these procedures were aligned with the study's qualitative multiple-case design.

The study's first procedural phase included obtaining the appropriate permissions and written informed consent. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix D) was obtained at Liberty University before proceeding with any other study procedure. After IRB approval, written approval was obtained from each school district's superintendent (Appendix E). Each superintendent was provided copies of the IRB approval and data collection questions before authorizing the study. Subsequently, written informed voluntary consent was obtained from all study participants (Appendix H).

### **Data Collection Plan**

The study used three different data collection methods: a) individual interviews, b) a survey/questionnaire, and c) district organizational documents and artifacts (see Appendices I & J). Individual interviews were used to assess individual leader-level perspectives. Survey-questionnaires were used to determine function-level (program and department) operational perspectives. District organizational artifacts (documents, physical artifacts, and media) were used to assess district-wide organizational-level perspectives. The same participants completed an individual interview and survey as part of the embedded multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Data triangulation techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) were used to substantiate the trustworthiness of evidence, analysis, interpretations, and findings.

Data collection occurred through individual interviews, surveys, and organizational documents and artifacts available for review. Each participant received a copy of the interview and survey questions 48 hours before initial data collection (see Appendices I & J). Audio recordings were made of each interview. A transcription record was made of all audio

recordings, after which the transcription record was given to participants to review for accuracy and possible revisions before data analysis occurred.

Case study questions were an inquiry into the pragmatic perceptions of the participants and the organizational operations of the sites (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The organizational resilience theory constructs selected for the study were based on the hybrid theoretical organizational resilience framework developed from the Chapter Two literature review (Figure 1). The scope of the study was restricted to an organizational leadership perspective. Consequently, the study narrowly focused on the hybrid theoretical framework's *strategic organizational resilience classification*, as depicted in Figure 1. The multiple-case study was an inquiry into the leadership, management, goals, adaptability, and anticipatory capacity and perspectives of rural executive school district leaders and their school district. In other words, the study narrowly focused on the organizational and leadership processes (Kakkar, 2019; Shelton et al., 2022) and the organizational and leadership efforts (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Lee, 2018) that define the resilience of the collective organization and its people.

The study's design aligned with the central research question, research sub-questions, the three data collection methods, and the organizational resilience theoretical constructs used. Table 8 portrays the study's data collection strategic plan.

**Table 8***Data Collection Strategic Plan*

Qualitative Research Data Collection Methods			
	Individual Level Experiences	Organizational Function Experiences	District-Wide Experiences
	CRQ & SQ1	CRQ & SQ2	CRQ & SQ3
Organizational resilience Theory constructs	Individual Interviews	Survey-Questionnaire	Documents & Artifacts
Leadership and management			
Developing leader resilience	✓	✓	✓
Inspirational leadership	✓	✓	✓
Transformational leadership	✓	✓	✓
Goal and purpose orientations			
Goal and purpose orientations	✓	✓	✓
Achievement & performance	✓	✓	✓
Organizational unity	✓	✓	✓
Anticipating risks and adversity			
Risk planning and preparation for organizational adversity, uncertainty and disruptions	✓	✓	✓
Adaptive flexibility			
Problem-solution orientations	✓	✓	✓
Open-systems dynamics	✓	✓	✓
Coping with adversity uncertainty and disruptions	✓	✓	✓
Adapting operations to overcome adversity	✓	✓	✓

**Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach**

A semi-structured interview format was used for individual interviews. The purpose of the semi-structured qualitative individual interview was to elicit from participants their qualitative perspectives associated with the study's research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017;

Merriam, 2019; Yin, 2018). The interview process does pose the risk of the interviewer filtering information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). To improve the relevance and trustworthiness of qualitative data collection, participants were provided a list of the interview questions at least 48 hours before the scheduled interview (see Appendix I). This allowed the participants time to cognitively process each question and provide the most prepared, relevant, and essential information in their responses.

Interviews were facilitated through an in-person semi-structured format. Although written and informed consent (Appendix H) were obtained before each interview, verbal consent was obtained again at the beginning of the interview before the recording occurred. A confidential audio recording was made of each interview to protect the identity of each participant. Once the interview was completed, the audio recording was transcribed using transcription software. The researcher then reviewed the audio recording and transcript for necessary revisions and corrections. Interviewees were provided a copy of the transcript for review and revisions before data analysis occurred. No interviewees provided any additional changes to their interview transcript and responses.

Interview questions followed an open-ended structure, allowing for considerable participant latitude and unbounded responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Questions reflected the study's design to gather evidence regarding participant perceptions at the individual leader level as part of the embedded multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Each question was designed to elicit a pragmatic response from participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Before interviews were conducted, questions were pilot-tested and refined with qualified professionals in similar settings and leadership positions who were not participants in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questions reflected the



organizational resilience theory constructs presented in Table 5. Several questions combine organizational resilience theory constructs into the same question. I did not disclose to study participants the organizational resilience theory constructs each question was based on to ensure participant responses were free from perceived restrictions and undue bias (Yin, 2018).

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please describe your formal education and professional experience, including your current position with the school district. CRQ, SQ1
2. For several years, your school district has performed consistently well with state assessments and student proficiencies. Describe a few of the most critical professional challenges you have personally experienced in relation to your job assignments and how you overcame those professional challenges to help your students succeed with state student academic assessments and proficiencies. CRQ, SQ1
3. Describe the most important goals you have in relation to student achievement and how you measure your success with those goals. CRQ, SQ1
4. From a leadership and management perspective, how do you lead and manage others in your job and assignments to support high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1
5. How do you intentionally plan for possible organizational adversity, uncertainty, and risks that may prevent students from attaining high academic achievement levels? CRQ, SQ1
6. How do you intentionally interact with other top-level leaders in your school district to improve and sustain high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1

7. From a leadership and management standpoint, how do you facilitate skill development and organizational learning processes (including professional development) that support and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
8. How do others in your school district support and help you deal with complex leadership and organizational challenges affecting student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
9. As unexpected organizational challenges occur, particularly challenges that affect student achievement, how do you adapt your practices to overcome those challenges and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
10. Describe your continual improvement professional growth plan. CRQ, SQ1
11. This study requires an analysis of district-wide organizational artifacts such as organizational documents, strategic plans, policies, procedures, processes, archival records, and other evidence that reflects how the school district functions. What multiple lines of evidence and artifacts are available that I can review that explain how your school district is able to: a) overcome significant organizational challenges and b) sustain high levels of student achievement? How can I get access to these artifacts and evidence?

The individual interviews used as a data collection approach for the study had several underlying purposes. First and foremost, the semi-structured interview method was used to generate perspective-based knowledge through the communication capacity of study participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). All questions were designed to gather evidence as part of the individual leader level embedded in the multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) and to solicit individual personal perceptions regarding experience with organizational theory constructs. All questions included in the individual interview data

collection method were designed to address the central research question and sub-question 1. Question 1 in the interview was intended to be a conversational starter and an inquiry into individual qualifications and experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All other interview questions assess individual experiential perceptions regarding the theoretical constructs selected for the study.

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

Audio recordings were transcribed using transcription software for further data analysis. The coding data analysis design incorporated a two-cycle coding approach with five independent coding reviews (Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle functioned as an initial coding of participant responses at the detail level (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The first cycle included a pre-coding independent review where keywords, phrases, and themes were identified (Saldaña, 2021). The second independent review of the first cycle incorporated deductive coding strategies. Deductive coding used thematic codes developed from the Chapter 2 literature review (Figure 1) and the study's research questions (Saldaña, 2021).

Once first-cycle reviews were completed, a second cycle of reviews was initiated. The second cycle of coding was designed to conceptualize initial first-cycle codes into broader constructs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The third independent review (second cycle) used exploratory provisional coding strategies (Saldaña, 2021). Exploratory provisional coding strategies were intended to revise, change, and add new codes to the initial first-cycle codes. Essentially, pattern coding provided a means to address the study's research questions and offer broad thematic insights with the coding data (Saldaña, 2021). Second-cycle pattern coding strategies were meant to help group first-cycle codes into thematic summaries and meta-analytic inferences (Saldaña, 2021).

Data analysis of individual interview transcripts used manual coding methods. The complexity of using complex CAQDAS software programs was not appropriate for this particular qualitative study, especially given the study's small qualitative data set design (Saldaña, 2021). Consequently, data analysis for this study used Microsoft Excel to accomplish the study's manual coding and data analysis. Participant responses and data gathered from organizational documents and artifacts were separated into small analyzable data fragments (Saldaña, 2021) in a Microsoft Excel database table. Each fragment of data was coded separately through first-cycle and second-cycle coding reviews. Microsoft Excel was then used to produce pivotable data reports that associated frequency code counts with themes and sub-themes from the coding process (Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018). Member-checking strategies were used to allow each participant the opportunity to review the findings and make suggestions to improve data validity and reliability. No participants provided additional information through member-checking processes.

### ***Survey Data Collection Approach***

A survey/questionnaire approach was used as part of the embedded multiple case-study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) to assess participant perceptions about the organizational function unit with which they worked (department and program level). For example, board members received a survey/questionnaire designed to assess their perceptions of theoretical constructs related to their board-level position. Superintendents received a survey/questionnaire designed to assess their perceptions of theoretical constructs affecting their superintendent function. Other directors received a survey/questionnaire to assess their perceptions of theoretical constructs within their functional unit assignments—such as finance, special education, technology, and secondary programs. The survey questions were adapted to their positional functions.

The same individuals who participated in individual interviews also participated in the survey/questionnaire data collection process. The survey/questionnaires were used: a) to assess participants' theoretical beliefs and experiential perceptions about organizational function assignments and b) to identify differences between individual interview responses and the information obtained from organizational documents and artifacts. Participants were allowed to review and revise their survey responses, so they had the time necessary to assess and reassess the validity and reliability of their responses.

### *Survey/Questionnaire Questions*

1. Email:
2. Thank you for participating in the study. As a reminder, all names and personally identifiable information will be kept confidential. For several years, your school district has performed consistently well with state assessments and student proficiencies. Describe a few of the most critical challenges (name of organizational function) experienced with student achievement. CRQ, SQ1
3. Describe the most important goals (name of the organizational function) in relation to student achievement and how (name of the organizational function) measures success with those goals. CRQ, SQ1
4. Describe how (name of the organizational function) consistently maintains optimism and hope for student achievement—particularly during challenging academic circumstances with students. CRQ, SQ1
5. From a leadership and management perspective, how does (name of organizational function) lead and manage others to support high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1

6. How does (name of the organizational function) intentionally plan for possible organizational adversity, uncertainty, and risks that may prevent students from attaining high academic achievement levels? CRQ, SQ1
7. How do (name of the organizational function) intentionally interact with other programs, schools, and departments to improve and sustain high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1
8. From a leadership and management standpoint, how does (name of organizational function) facilitate skill development and organizational learning processes (including professional development) that support and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
9. How do other programs, departments, and schools in your school district support and help (name of the organizational function) deal with very difficult leadership and organizational challenges that affect student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
10. As unexpected organizational challenges occur, particularly challenges that affect student achievement, how does (name of organizational function) adapt practices to overcome those challenges and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
11. Describe the continual improvement professional growth plan for (name of the organizational function). CRQ, SQ1

### ***Survey/Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan***

Computer-generated survey/questionnaire results were analyzed using a two-cycle coding approach with five independent coding reviews (Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle included a pre-coding independent review where keywords, phrases, and themes were identified with survey responses (Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle functioned as an initial coding of participant responses at the detail level (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The second independent review of the first cycle

incorporated deductive coding strategies. Deductive coding used thematic and sub-thematic codes developed from the Chapter 2 literature review (Figure 1) and the study's research questions (Saldaña, 2021). The third independent review (second cycle) was structured for exploratory provisional coding strategies (Saldaña, 2021). Exploratory provisional coding strategies were used to revise, change, and add new codes to the initial first-cycle codes. The second cycle included two independent reviews using pattern coding strategies (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding strategies were used to group first-cycle codes into thematic summaries and meta-analytic inferences. Essentially, pattern coding provided a means to address the study's research questions and offer broad thematic insights with the coding data (Saldaña, 2021). The second cycle functioned as a method for conceptualizing initial codes into broader constructs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Data analysis of survey responses used manual coding methods. The complexity of using complex CAQDAS software programs was not appropriate for this particular qualitative study, especially given the study's small qualitative data set design (Saldaña, 2021). Consequently, data analysis for this study used Microsoft Excel to accomplish the study's manual coding and data analysis. Participant responses and data gathered from organizational documents and artifacts were separated into small analyzable data fragments (Saldaña, 2021) in a Microsoft Excel database table. Each fragment of data was coded separately through first-cycle and second-cycle coding reviews. Microsoft Excel was then used to produce pivotable data reports that associated frequency code counts with themes and sub-themes from the coding process (Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018). Member-checking strategies were used to allow each participant the opportunity to review the findings and make suggestions to improve data validity and reliability. No participants provided additional information through member-checking processes.

### **Document Analysis, Physical Artifacts, and Media Data Collection Approach**

Organizational documents and artifacts were collected and analyzed for data and evidence to assess the district-wide organizational operations as part of the embedded multiple-case study design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). These documents and artifacts included organizational documents, policies, procedures, board meeting minutes, internal administrative meeting agendas, professional development program plans and documents, organizational and leadership frameworks, performance evaluation frameworks, archival records, district website resources, and strategic plan artifacts. This data collection approach was designed to identify vital aspects of the inner workings of the district-wide organization. Participants were asked in the interview and survey to provide the researcher access to publicly available documents, artifacts, and media relevant to the study's purpose: a) overcoming significant organizational adversity and b) sustaining student achievement at high levels. I searched only for publicly available documents and artifacts from the district's websites. No confidential or personally identifiable information was collected for the study.

### ***Document Analysis, Physical Artifacts, and Media Data Analysis Plan***

All documents and artifacts collected for the study were examined using a two-cycle coding approach with five total independent coding reviews (Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle functioned as an initial coding of the document and artifactual evidence at the detail level (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The first cycle included a pre-coding independent review where keywords, phrases, and themes were identified (Saldaña, 2021). The second independent review of the first cycle used deductive coding strategies. Deductive coding used thematic and sub-thematic codes developed from the Chapter 2 literature review (Figure 1) and the study's research questions (Saldaña, 2021). The second-cycle third independent review was structured for exploratory provisional coding strategies (Saldaña, 2021). Exploratory provisional coding



strategies were used to revise, change, and add new codes to the initial first cycle. The second cycle included two independent reviews using pattern coding strategies (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding strategies grouped first-cycle codes into thematic summaries and meta-analytic inferences. Essentially, pattern coding provided a means to address the study's research questions (Saldaña, 2021). The second cycle conceptualized initial codes into broader thematic and sub-thematic constructs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Data analysis of evidence obtained from organizational documents and artifacts used manual coding methods. The complexity of using complex CAQDAS software programs was not appropriate for this particular qualitative study, especially given the study's small qualitative data set design (Saldaña, 2021). Consequently, data analysis for this study used Microsoft Excel to accomplish the study's manual coding and data analysis. Participant responses and data gathered from organizational documents and artifacts were separated into small analyzable data fragments (Saldaña, 2021) in a Microsoft Excel database table. Each fragment of data was coded separately through first-cycle and second-cycle coding reviews. Microsoft Excel was then used to produce pivotable data reports that associated frequency code counts with themes and sub-themes from the coding process (Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018). Member-checking strategies were used to allow each participant the opportunity to review the findings and make suggestions to improve data validity and reliability. No participants provided additional information through member-checking processes.

### **Data Synthesis**

A two-cycle coding approach with five independent coding reviews facilitated the coding data analysis and data synthesis design (Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle functioned as an initial coding of data evidence at the detail level (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The first cycle included a

pre-coding independent review where keywords, phrases, and themes were identified (Saldaña, 2021). The second independent review of the first cycle incorporated deductive coding strategies. Deductive coding used thematic codes developed from the Chapter 2 literature review (Figure 1) (Saldaña, 2021). The second-cycle third coding review used exploratory provisional coding strategies (Saldaña, 2021). Exploratory provisional coding strategies were used to revise, change, and add new codes to first-cycle initial codes. The second cycle included two independent reviews using pattern coding strategies (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding strategies grouped first-cycle codes into thematic summaries and meta-analytic inferences. Pattern coding was a data synthesis method (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding translated detailed experiential data into summary categorical code groupings. Saldaña (2021) refers to pattern coding as a “meta” (p. 322) coding process where the summary codes refer back to the detailed codes. Pattern codes describe and summarize the underlying codes and themes (Saldaña, 2021). The second cycle conceptualized initial codes into broader thematic constructs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Data analysis and synthesis of the evidence used manual coding methods. The complexity of using complex CAQDAS software programs was not appropriate for this particular qualitative study, especially given the study’s small qualitative data set design (Saldaña, 2021). Consequently, data analysis used Microsoft Excel to accomplish the study’s manual coding and data analysis. Participant responses and data gathered from organizational documents and artifacts were separated into small analyzable data fragments (Saldaña, 2021) in a Microsoft Excel database table. Each fragment of data was coded separately through first-cycle and second-cycle coding reviews. Microsoft Excel was then used to produce pivot table data reports that associated frequency code counts with themes and sub-themes from the coding process (Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018). This process allowed for analysis and synthesis at the first

cycle and second-cycle levels within each type of coding strategy and at a holistic level that could combine various levels and strategies.

All data analysis codes, units of meaning, themes, and sub-themes were primarily derived from theoretical constructs associated with the data collection methods and Chapter 2 literature review (Figure 1). Each data collection method targeted specific functional levels to obtain data and evidence. These evidentiary functional levels included: a) participant perceptions about their individual-level experiences (interviews), b) participant perceptions about their assigned positional organization function (surveys), and c) district-wide function (organizational documents and artifacts). Consequently, the categories and subcategories (codes) representing data and evidence from all three levels and data collection methods were compiled into compare and contrast analysis, tables, and reports.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research is subject to several limitations and interpretative weaknesses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Participant and researcher bias can cloud qualitative analysis and interpretations. The small sample size may not reflect a generalizable reality. Replication of the study can be complex. The time needed to conduct and make sense of the research and data can be immense (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Consequently, the study's trustworthiness depended on the quality of the study's design, research methods, processes, and evidence (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Several internal controls were embedded in the study to strengthen credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Credibility trustworthiness refers to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis integrity. Transferability trustworthiness refers to the generalizability of the study to other contexts. Dependability trustworthiness refers

to the study's capacity for replication. Finally, confirmability trustworthiness refers to researcher neutrality.

Internal control strategies incorporated into the study's procedures included member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018), two-cycle coding with five reviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Saldaña, 2021), data triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018), audio recordings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), transcription software (Saldaña, 2021), thick descriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Saldaña, 2021), and pilot testing of data collection questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Table 9 summarizes the internal controls used in the study.

**Table 9***Trustworthiness Internal Controls*

Trustworthiness	Purpose	Internal Controls	References
Credibility	Quality of data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and data synthesis integrity	Member checking	Creswell & Creswell, 2018 Denzin & Lincoln, 2017 Saldaña, 2021 Yin, 2018
		Two-cycle coding with five reviews	Saldaña, 2021 Denzin & Lincoln, 2017
		Data triangulation of multiple data sources of evidence	Creswell & Creswell, 2018 Denzin & Lincoln, 2017 Yin, 2018
		Transcription software	Saldaña, 2021
Transferability	Generalizability to other contexts	Thick descriptions	Denzin & Lincoln, 2017 Saldaña, 2021
Dependability	Capacity to replicate the study	Pilot testing of data collection questions	Creswell & Creswell, 2018 Yin, 2018
		Member checking	Creswell & Creswell, 2018 Denzin & Lincoln, 2017 Saldaña, 2021 Yin, 2018
Confirmability	Researcher neutrality	Audio recordings	Creswell & Creswell, 2018 Denzin & Lincoln, 2017
		Member checking	Creswell & Creswell, 2018 Denzin & Lincoln, 2017 Saldaña, 2021 Yin, 2018
		Data triangulation of multiple data sources of evidence	Yin, 2018
		Transcription software	Saldaña, 2021

Data triangulation was critical to the trustworthiness of the study. Data triangulation uses multiple sources of evidence and perspectives to substantiate and validate concepts, themes, and principles within the context and purpose of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). The study was designed to incorporate data triangulation at two

levels. The first level of data triangulation occurred between the three sources of data collection—the individual interview, district organizational artifacts, and individual surveys/questionnaires. The second level of data triangulation occurred within the embedded multiple-case study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018), wherein interpretations of individual leadership, program/department functionality, and district-wide functionality perspectives were assessed.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the quality of evidence, data analysis, data interpretation, and data synthesis in the study. Credibility also focuses on the integrity of the research and findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Four specific credibility-related internal controls were embedded throughout the study. Member-checking strategies were used for participant verification of data accuracy and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018). Participants provided no additional information through member-checking activities. Two-cycle coding with five reviews was used to minimize errors with interpretations, data validity, and reliability (Saldaña, 2021). Data triangulation of multiple data sources of evidence strengthened data reliability and validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Transcription software improved the translation of interviews into narrative written transcripts for coding and analysis purposes (Saldaña, 2021).

### **Transferability**

In qualitative research conditions, transferability is always highly questionable, given the purpose of qualitative research. Qualitative research aims to understand contextually specific experiential human perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017); therefore, researchers and readers of this report should exercise caution when attempting to transfer the methodology and conclusions

to other contexts. Nevertheless, extensive descriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) of the research design, data collection, data analysis, and conclusions are provided throughout the report. The in-depth descriptive nature of the information in the report may help readers determine the extent of transferability for their purposes.

### **Dependability**

Dependability requires transparency and evidence that shows the study's design and findings are consistent and appropriately aligned (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Dependability can be demonstrated through an adequate description of the procedures undertaken for the study. Dependability is accomplished through an inquiry audit, which at Liberty University occurs with a thorough review of the research process and the products by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director.

Dependability also refers to the ability of other researchers to understand and replicate the study. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Two internal controls are embedded in the study to improve its replication capacity. The data collection methods and questions were test-piloted first with individuals who worked in similar positions to the participants or who had perspectives that could add value to developing research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Member-checking strategies were also used for participant verification of data accuracy and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018); however, none of the participants provided additional information through member-checking activities.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to minimizing researcher bias in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The study employs four strategies to strengthen confirmability. Audio recordings and

online survey data logs were used for audit trail purposes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Member checking was used as a confirmability audit strategy where participants validated the data and interpretations of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018); however, none of the participants provided additional information through member-checking activities. Data triangulation of multiple data sources of evidence was used to validate researcher interpretations and findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Transcription software translated audio recordings into high-quality text translations (Saldaña, 2021).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Several procedures were incorporated into the study's design to strengthen confidence in the ethical aspects of the study. Participants were provided with study materials and explanations. IRB approval, school district authorizations to participate in the study, and prior consent from each participant was obtained (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. Participants were given the interview questions well before the interviews occurred, which allowed them time to prepare adequately for their interview and to provide responses that included significant data and evidence. Very few notes were taken during interviews; all field notes were then secured in a locked filing cabinet. All confidential information and responses were secured in a Google OneDrive folder. All data, records, and non-public reports were secured through password-protected or locked systems and devices. Pseudonyms and codes were used to protect the identity of participants and school district sites. The study did not include sensitive personal information regarding specific students, a student group, or the participants.



## Summary

The qualitative multiple-case study explored organizational resilience theory to describe how (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018) rural executive school district leaders overcome organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement. The qualitative multiple-case study incorporated a pragmatic researcher positionality and interpretive framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Three rural Utah school districts with a history of sustaining high student achievement in a low-income setting were selected as sites for the study. Twelve rural executive school district leaders from three small Utah rural school districts participated in the study. The study was designed to gather data and evidence from three levels of meaning: a) the individual-level leader perspective, b) each leader's position, organizational function-level perspective (department and program level), and c) a district-wide organizational perspective. The qualitative multiple-case study design included three data collection methods: a) individual interviews, b) a survey/questionnaire, and c) district organizational documents and artifacts. A two-coding cycle approach with pre-coding, deductive coding, exploratory provisional coding, and pattern coding methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Saldaña, 2021) was used to analyze, interpret, and synthesize the qualitative data for a future findings report in Chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. This chapter examines the data and evidence collected through semi-structured interviews, surveys, and organizational artifacts and documents. Included in the analysis are descriptions of the participants and their responses. This chapter also consists of the qualitative themes and sub-themes that materialized through the analysis and a thematic tabular alignment with the research question and sub-questions. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the major results from the study and data analysis.

### **Participants**

This qualitative multiple-case study included 12 executive-level participants from three small Utah rural school districts. Participants in the study were identified through recommendations made by the three superintendents included in the study. Participants included three rural school board members, three rural school district superintendents, and six rural school district director-level school district leaders. All three board members who participated in the study have served as board presidents or are currently serving as board presidents in their school districts. Eleven of the twelve participants were male, and one participant was female. All 12 participants have earned graduate degrees, with one holding a doctorate. All 12 participants completed the semi-structured interview part of the study. Eleven of the twelve participants completed the survey. Because one participant did not participate in the survey, this participant's interview responses were removed from the data analysis. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and

that the study was voluntary. A summary of participants' professional experience is presented in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*Rural School District Executive Leader Study Participants*

Executive Leader Participant Pseudonym	Years of Public Education Experience	Executive Leadership Position	Highest Degree Earned	Professional Background
Matthew	10	Board member	Masters	Electrical engineering
Kurt	38	Superintendent	Masters	Social science educator
Jason	10	Technology director	Masters	Technology
Zachrey	3	Business administrator	Masters	Accounting
Jerry	24	Superintendent	Doctorate	Spanish & literacy educator
Stephanie	22	Special services director	Masters	Literacy, technology, mathematics, special education
Bryan	30	Assistant superintendent	Masters	Elementary & technology educator
Leroy	30	Board member	Masters	English & language arts educator
Joshua	12	Board member	Masters	Business, entrepreneur
Dustin	28	Superintendent	Masters	Technology educator
Landon	30	Assistant superintendent	Masters	Business & marketing educator
Spencer	9	Business administrator	Masters	Accounting

**Matthew**

Matthew is a professional electrical engineer who has been a board member for ten years. He has three children who have attended public schools in his school district. He has several family members who work in public education, and he feels very closely connected to the community. Matthew stated he'd "always kind of been involved with the school districts,"

adding, "I've got three children who all went through [my district]." His mother was an administrative assistant at a middle school. He also has a brother-in-law who is a high school football and wrestling coach. Matthew has also served as the board president in his school district. Matthew's higher-education professional background includes a degree in engineering, and he works as a professional engineer for his local power plant company.

### **Kurt**

Kurt has served as superintendent of his school district and has 40 years of public education experience as an educator, school administrator, and district administrator. Kurt indicated that his professional education experience includes:

[H]istory and then whatever else they gave me. It's a little P.E., a little math, a little of this and that. So, I was there for seven years, and then I was a teacher and vice principal there for five years. And then I moved to the high school as a vice principal for four years, back to the middle school as the principal for ten years. And now I'm just starting my 40th year.

### **Jason**

Jason holds a bachelor's degree in computer science and a master's degree in information technology. Jordan began working as a computer technician in his school district and now serves as the Director of Technology. His interest in public education stems from his positive personal life experiences with his district as a former district student. Because he and his wife are from the area, he became interested in working for the local school district. Jason has ten years of experience working in public education. He stated, "I worked as a computer technician till the IT director retired in 2020. So, then I was able to be the director after he retired, and in the meantime, I got a master's degree in IT management."

**Zachrey**

Zachrey's professional background includes experience in the banking and accounting industries. He has a bachelor's degree in finance and a master's degree in accounting. He is currently licensed as a Certified Public Accountant. He has worked in both rural and urban environments. His interest in his school district stems from his spouse's connection to the community and the local school system. Zachrey has three years of experience working in public education. Before his employment with his district, Zachrey indicated, "I worked at State Bank of Southern Utah for about six years in several different positions, starting as a bookkeeper, then into the Mortgage Department, and then finally into the audit department for a couple of years."

**Jerry**

Jerry has a long-standing familial history with public education. He was born and raised in the area and attended the same school district where he served as superintendent. Jerry stated, "Yeah, so my parents are both teachers. I grew up in a family of five, and I'm the only one that's in education of the siblings. But my dad is like a 40-year. He taught high school for a long time, probably 15 years or so. And then he was a principal at (elementary) and then he finished his career as a high school principal. My mom was a first-grade teacher forever. So, between the two of them pushing 100 years of experience." Jerry's background includes Spanish and literacy education. He has 24 years of experience in public education.

**Stephanie**

Stephanie began her career as a classroom assistant and is now a director in her school district. She has an extensive professional background and is licensed and endorsed in literacy, technology, mathematics, and special education. Stephanie has 22 years of experience as a public education teacher and administrator and oversees intervention programs for at-risk students in

her school district. When she became a teacher, she believed, “I really want to be an elementary teacher.” She then became a half-time teacher and half-time literacy coach. Her career then evolved into district-level administration in the areas of special education and special populations.

### **Bryan**

Bryan currently serves as an assistant superintendent in his district. He has over 30 years of experience, including elementary education, technology education, and athletic coaching at the high school level. He has primarily coached the high school wrestling and track teams. He hails from a family of mechanics and family businesses. His interest in public education stems from his positive classroom experiences as a former student in his school district, which motivated him to pursue education as a career. His career in education began very early in his life. Bryan stated, “So I got my elementary degree and I got hired. And I was a young coach. I’ll bet I was a head wrestling coach at maybe 23 years old, 22, 23 years old, somewhere over there.”

### **Leroy**

Leroy has over 30 years of public education experience. He is a retired English teacher and athletic coach. He indicated, “I taught English for well, I taught 9th grade English forever, and then I taught college prep English for the last five years of my career. I was an adjunct professor at Snow College.” He attended college with an athletic scholarship and played baseball and football. He is currently serving as a board member and has served three separate two-year terms as board president during his tenure as an elected board member for his community.

### **Joshua**

Joshua has 12 years of experience as a board member for his school district. He is also a successful small business owner with expertise in agriculture, hardware, and auto repair. He was

raised on a farm, and much of his interest in his rural community stems from his childhood experiences there. His formal education includes graduating from high school in his current school district and having post-secondary education in agriculture and business. Joshua summarized his background:

I worked for a brokerage firm up in Provo, and then I came back here. I was raised on our farm. We have a family farm. And then we bought this business here back in 1988. And this business includes...auto parts and hardware and farm parts. And then behind us we have our repair shop, and then we have the gas station and car wash over there.

### **Dustin**

Dustin's professional training as an educator primarily includes training in high school vocational courses such as electronics, woodworking, and shopping. He has worked in large urban and small school districts. He credits much of his success to the prior superintendent, who was a principal and mentor to him when he became a teacher. He said, "I remember [former superintendent], and [former superintendent] was my high school teacher. So, he was a superintendent, I was his assistant. So, we've been connected pretty closely for quite some time." Dustin has 28 years of experience as a middle-school and high school teacher, high school administrator, and superintendent.

### **Landon**

Landon has 30 years of experience in public education, including assignments as a classroom teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent. He has worked at the high school and district levels. His formal education includes business, marketing, and school leadership. Landon stated, "I taught for eight years. I was an assistant principal (high school)...for eleven years,

principal at (another high school) for seven years, and this will be my fourth year here at the district.”

### **Spencer**

Spencer is currently the chief finance officer for his school district. He has experience in tax and auditing, a master’s degree in accounting, and is a Certified Public Accountant. Before his employment with his district, Spencer worked for the Utah Tax Commission. Spencer was initially hired to be the Director of Accounting in his school district but was recently promoted to the chief finance officer position. The district’s former business administrator provided a vital mentor role for Spencer. Spencer said, “I was just like a sponge. He [his former district supervisor] took me everywhere. Yeah. He mentored me, basically, for seven years. That way, he felt, you can hit the ground running, and I can walk out the door.” He has nine years of experience working in his school district.

### **Results**

Using a qualitative multiple-case study design, this study explored how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Data and evidence were collected through semi-structured interviews, surveys, and organizational documents and artifacts. The data and evidence include in-depth participant responses and descriptions. The study was designed to incorporate data triangulation at two levels.

The first level of data triangulation occurred between the three sources of data collection—the individual interview, district organizational artifacts, and individual surveys/questionnaires. The second level of data triangulation occurred within the embedded multiple-case study design that included three separate rural school districts (Denzin & Lincoln,



2017; Yin, 2018). Interpretations of individual leadership, program/department functionality, and district-wide functionality perspectives were assessed through this data triangulation approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). ).

Two cycles of coding were used to analyze the data. The first coding cycle included precoding and deductive techniques (Saldaña, 2021). The first review of the first cycle identified keywords or phrases as part of the precoding procedures. At least three separate reviews were completed using precoding procedures. Once first-cycle precoding procedures were completed, first-cycle deductive coding procedures were implemented. Deductive codes (themes) derived from the Chapter 2 literature review were assigned to specific narratives or small sections of evidential data. At least three deductive coding reviews occurred. The second coding cycle included exploratory provisional and pattern coding techniques. Exploratory provisional coding strategies revised, changed, and added new codes to the initial first-cycle codes. Pattern coding provided a means to address the study's research questions and offer broad thematic insights with the coding data (Saldaña, 2021).

Frequency code counts (Saldaña, 2021) were used to determine which themes and sub-themes resonated most with participants and study sites. Themes and sub-themes with the highest frequency code counts were considered the most influential factors in answering the central research question and sub-questions. The first coding cycle was used to develop the second coding cycle. The second coding cycle was designed to answer the central research question and sub-questions, and the second coding cycle included exploratory and pattern coding techniques (Saldaña, 2021) that were used to identify new themes and sub-themes. Table 11 summarizes the results of the data analysis (See also Appendices K, L & M).

**Table 11***Themes, Sub-Themes & Frequency Code Counts*

Coding	Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency Code Counts	% of Total Codes	
1 <sup>st</sup> Cycle Deductive Coding	Adaptive flexibility	Problem-solution orientation	68	62.39%	
		Coping with actual disruptions	15	13.76%	
		Stakeholder relationships	13	11.93%	
					88.07%
	Anticipating disruptions, risks, and adversity	Problem-solution orientations	69	63.30%	
		Financial risk planning	16	14.68%	
					77.98%
	Leadership and management	Transformational leadership	46	45.10%	
		Grit-resilient leadership	32	31.37%	
		Ethical leadership	14	13.73%	
				90.20%	
Goal and purpose	Targeted student achievement outcomes	39	45.88%		
	Mission, vision, values, goals	27	31.76%		
				77.65%	
2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle Exploratory Coding	Core values and beliefs	Continual improvement & goal mindset	87	31.29%	
		Collaboration	71	25.54%	
		Effective teachers & student achievement	70	25.18%	
					81.65%
	Strategies	Instructional coaches, mentors, and support network	72	28.2%	
		Data-driven decisions	38	14.90%	
		Training & professional development	37	14.51%	
		Consistent & effective leadership meetings	21	8.24%	
		Employee compensation & hiring the right people	16	6.27%	
					72.16%
2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle Pattern Coding	Professional learning communities	Instructional coaches, mentors, and support network	72	38.50%	
		Data-driven decisions	38	20.32%	
		Training & professional development	37	19.79%	
					78.61%
	Human resource strategic orientation	Training & professional development	37	59.68%	
Employee compensation & hiring the right people	16	25.81%			
				85.48%	

Because the second coding cycle was designed to answer the central research question and sub-questions, second-cycle themes and sub-themes are the most relevant for answering the research questions and sub-questions of the study. Themes in the form of core values and beliefs and organizational and leadership strategies materialized in the data analysis through second-cycle exploratory coding techniques. Two additional archetype themes also emerged in the data analysis. Both professional learning community and human resource thematic categories were strongly associated with the strategies identified through second-cycle exploratory coding. As depicted in Table 11, these new themes and sub-themes are highly interconnected.

### **Core Values and Beliefs**

A clear predominant theme associated with the organizational culture of these school districts was that which related to the underlying core values and beliefs to which leaders adhere. The coding analysis revealed three primary sub-themes associated with core values and beliefs: a) continual improvement and a goal mindset, b) collaboration, and c) effective teachers and student achievement. These three sub-themes accounted for approximately 82% of sub-theme codes associated with the core values and beliefs theme. Other core values and belief sub-themes were present in the analysis, such as accountability, mental health, and a safe school environment; however, these sub-themes did not occur with high-frequency code counts.

### ***Continual Improvement and Goal Mindset***

Executive leaders signified in their responses that there is a strong desire to ensure continual improvement throughout school district operations. Continual improvement was linked to organizational goal-driven processes in many participant responses, and continual improvement accounted for approximately 31% of frequency code counts in the core values and beliefs theme. For example, Stephanie referred to her professional improvement plan concerning school district goals. Bryan described how he thinks continual improvement works best in his

district by stating, “If I can really focus on professional development, and I can focus on what formative assessments we could incorporate that are beneficial to a district or the program, I feel like there’s a trickle-down effect.”

Critical to this perspective is a long-term grittiness toward overcoming challenges and improving outcomes. Perspectives related to leadership perseverance were prevalent in the data. Jerry referred to a long-term challenge he continually faces when he stated, “But one of our biggest struggles is still so for eleven years I have worked on this...ensuring that students learn versus teaching students.” Dustin pointed out how his district intentionally decelerates organizational processes and challenges to improve goal achievement. He stated:

So, when something big, a real big challenge lands, you create a vision, kind of a begin with the end in mind, and then you work backward on how we’re going to deal with it...We can take some time, yeah. And slow it down and make decisions and not rush into things.

### ***Collaboration***

Collaborative dynamics were also ubiquitous in participant responses. Participants often referred to collaboration as a core value and belief. This construct accounted for approximately 26% of core value and belief constructs. Jerry shared, “I think we’re pretty collaborative. We have an excellent team, the districts, the directors, the principals, the teachers, and the support staff.” Dustin emphasized, “We try to have a culture of family and culture of helping each other out, and it’s not just one person. I don’t think there’s any one person that can do it alone, do it alone, or know all of the answers.”

The value of constant and consistent collaboration appears to be a value-based foundation for district operations. Collaboration is not an overly complex leadership approach for these leaders. Collaboration seems to function primarily as a source of information flow. Joshua just

wants “access to information, and if something comes up, let us know.” Jason stated, “Communication is key. Also, by getting out to the schools and working together as much as possible to solve challenges.” Stephanie said, “When faced with difficult challenges, we have met as a district admin team (and school admin team if a particular school is directly involved) to discuss our action plan and what supports are needed to work through the challenge.”

### ***Effective Teachers and Student Achievement***

While effective teachers and student achievement may be considered a strategy or resource, this theme was often referred to as a core value underlying the district’s organizational framework. This construct accounted for approximately 25% of core value and belief constructs. Matthew referred to how he values high-performing teachers by indicating:

We’ve had areas in which the students want to learn or grow or excel or know more, want a class, or we’ve identified something from a test, from the testing area where we need to improve. It seems like there’s always at least one or two people that are pretty passionate about it.

Spencer offered his perspective by stating, “With me, I think my overarching goal is to manage a healthy budget, so we can pay teachers, we can provide good benefits, we can get quality educators to teach the students to help with achievement.”

Leaders were sometimes able to communicate their awareness of performance deficiencies. This sub-thematic core value was sometimes embedded in narratives with ineffective teachers, instruction, leadership, and student achievement. Dustin perceived, “The gaps are, I think administrators who are supposed to be instructional leaders. I think our principals and our administrators are emergency managers.” Leroy said, “Our challenge has been getting our students to take the assessments seriously. There have also been a few teachers who have done the same.”

## Strategies

Conceptually, organizational resilience includes critical tactical approaches to meet organizational objectives during challenging situations (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Strategies represent executive leaders' tactical priorities and actions to achieve organizational outcomes. Five primary strategies materialized from the second-cycle exploratory provisional coding analysis, comprising approximately 72% of all strategic frequency code counts. These five strategies are: a) instructional mentors, coaches, and support networks, b) data-driven decisions, c) training and professional development, d) consistent and effective leadership meetings, and e) employee compensation and hiring the right people.

### *Instructional Coaches, Mentors, and Support Network*

Instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks accounted for approximately 28% of strategic frequency code counts. This strategy was strongly associated with collaborative and transformational leadership approaches. Jerry maintained, "We follow a coaching model. It's not an evaluation. It's a peer coaching. You shouldn't be afraid of it. It begins with self-evaluation, and let's identify sincerely where you want to improve." Stephanie had a similar perspective and stated, "I think probably our most important one is really making sure that we're harnessing our instructional coaches that are in the building to improve teacher performance, help teachers utilize best practice, kind of weed out the fluff, and get to the meat."

Instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks are more than skill-building strategies. There is a well-understood psychology and sociology entrenched in this strategy. For example, when discussing support networks in his district, Jerry stated, "Number one, the number one influence that gets student achievement further than anything is collective teacher efficacy." Zachrey stated, "So I would say my goal is to support everybody else in achieving that goal." Psychology and sociology center on a student-centered mentality and culture.

### ***Data-Driven Decisions***

Participants often referred to the need for objective data resources to guide strategic decisions. Data-driven decisions accounted for approximately 15% of strategic frequency code counts. Data-driven decisions seem to function as a directional compass that steers leadership and collective behaviors. Stephanie said, “I think it’s just looking at the data and having conversations around the data, shining a light on our bright spots in schools that are doing really well with subgroups and then kind of getting their input, what’s working for you?” Jerry offered a more holistic perspective when he said, “We partner with parents and the community to ensure a safe and caring learning environment. These are all measured using student achievement data, success/failure rates, pathway and college completion rates, and climate survey data.”

### ***Training and Professional Development***

Participants did not include very many specific professional development topics in their narratives. Instead, they often referred to how they organize training and professional development opportunities. If anything, there was an intentionality towards professional development and how it fits within their school district’s organizational structure. For instance, Landon stated, “I organize our PD day each September and focus on areas that teachers want assistance with.” Kurt’s district takes a different approach to leadership training. He stated, “Professional development in principal administrative meetings focuses on areas that we believe will move the needle of academic achievement.” Training and professional development as a strategic sub-theme accounted for approximately 15% of strategic frequency code counts.

### ***Consistent and Effective Leadership Meetings***

Participants sometimes mentioned leadership meetings as an effective strategy for overcoming challenges and improving achievement outcomes; however, the consistent and effective leadership meetings sub-theme only accounted for approximately 8% of strategic sub-

theme frequency code counts. When this strategy was mentioned, it was often referred to as a collaborative necessity for leaders. Dustin believed his leadership team relied heavily on leadership meetings. He stated, “We work together as a whole rather than one person thinking they can solve all the issues. We hold a monthly leadership-administrative meeting and a monthly district office staff meeting.” Jerry had a similar perspective about his district and stated, “Those administrative team meetings are a huge piece because that’s where we talk about it. We ask that very hard questions, and they open up and they say, this is what I’m struggling with, or you’re wrong, superintendent. You think this is happening like this? It’s not.”

### ***Employee Compensation and Hiring the Right People***

While participants sometimes cited their compensation and hiring practices, this sub-theme did not resonate with high-frequency code counts in the analysis. Only 6% of strategic frequency code counts were associated with this sub-theme. Participants described compensation as a cause-and-effect relationship with hiring and retaining the right people. For example, Zachrey emphasized “focusing on an attractive professional salary and benefits package to promote retention and attract high-quality candidates for employment.” Spencer remarked, “With me, I think my overarching goal is to manage a healthy budget, so we can pay teachers, we can provide good benefits, we can get quality educators to teach the students to help with achievement.”

### **Professional Learning Community Strategies**

After second-cycle exploratory provisional coding was completed, pattern coding techniques were used to identify broader holistic patterns in the data associated with exploratory code themes and sub-themes. The first holistic pattern from the exploratory code analysis involved professional learning communities (PLCs) (Eaker & Marzano, 2020). Professional learning communities (PLCs) are generally known as a community-based and support network



approach to effective instruction and learning. PLC organizational frameworks commonly include shared vision and values, team-based work, continual improvement toward intentional achievement outcomes, and reflective analysis (Eaker & Marzano, 2020).

Participants often referred to the importance of PLCs in their district. Second-cycle pattern coding revealed a significant code-count frequency. There were 187 total code counts associated with professional learning community constructs. All 11 participants had PLC-related code counts. Bryan stated, “We realized the power of the PLC and what it can do for our district.” After removing all non-PLC constructs from the qualitative sample, three exploratory provisional code strategies accounted for approximately 79% of PLC frequency code counts: a) instructional coaches, mentors, and support network, b) data-driven decisions, and c) training and professional development.

### ***Instructional Coaches, Mentors, and Support Network***

Instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks accounted for approximately 38% of PLC pattern frequency code counts. This strategy was strongly associated with collaborative and transformational leadership approaches. Jerry maintained, “We follow a coaching model. It’s not an evaluation. It’s a peer coaching. You shouldn’t be afraid of it. It begins with self-evaluation, and let’s identify sincerely where you want to improve.” Stephanie had a similar perspective and stated, “I think probably our most important one is really making sure that we’re harnessing our instructional coaches that are in the building to improve teacher performance, help teachers utilize best practice, kind of weed out the fluff, and get to the meat.”

Instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks are more than skill-building strategies. There is a well-understood psychology and sociology entrenched in this strategy. For example, when discussing support networks in his district, Jerry stated, “Number one, the number one influence that gets student achievement further than anything is collective teacher

efficacy.” Zachrey stated, “So I would say my goal is to support everybody else in achieving that goal.” Psychology and sociology center on a student-centered mentality and culture.

### ***Data-Driven Decisions***

Participants often referred to the need for having objective data resources to guide strategic decisions. Data-driven decisions accounted for approximately 20% of PLC pattern frequency code counts. Data-driven decisions seem to function as a directional compass that steers leadership and collective behaviors. Stephanie said, “I think it’s just looking at the data and having conversations around the data, shining a light on our bright spots in schools that are doing really well with subgroups and then kind of getting their input, what’s working for you?” Jerry offered a more holistic perspective when he said, “We partner with parents and the community to ensure a safe and caring learning environment. These are all measured using student achievement data, success/failure rates, pathway and college completion rates, and climate survey data.”

### ***Training and Professional Development***

Participants did not include many specific professional development topics in their narratives. Instead, they often referred to how they organize training and professional development opportunities. If anything, there was an intentionality towards professional development and how professional development fits within the organizational structure of their school district. For instance, Landon stated, “I organize our PD day each September and focus on areas that teachers want assistance with.” Kurt’s district takes a different approach to leadership training. He stated, “Professional development in principal administrative meetings focuses on areas that we believe will move the needle of academic achievement.” Training and professional development as a strategic sub-theme accounted for approximately 20% of pattern frequency code counts.

## **Human Resource Strategies (HR)**

The second holistic pattern that emerged from the pattern code analysis was a strategic human resources focus. Human resource (HR) strategies involving staffing, training, and compensation are currently associated with organizational resilience (Bouaziz & Smaoui Hachicha, 2018). Human resource thematic constructs were much less prevalent in the data compared to the professional learning communities theme. Only 62 total frequency code counts were related to human resource thematic constructs. Though leaders referred to PLC constructs much more than HR constructs, HR constructs were still present in pattern codes. Zachrey indicated, “I think probably our biggest challenge is just making sure that we have our staffing levels up, that we’re setting our salaries and benefits, compensation packages at a point where we can keep our people retention so they’re not all leaving.” Some participants also mentioned compensation, training, hiring, and other human resource management practices. After removing all non-HR management constructs from the qualitative sample, training and professional development emerged as the most prevalent sub-theme, with approximately 60% of the HR sub-theme frequency code counts. Employee compensation and hiring the right people accounted for 26% of the HR sub-theme frequency code counts.

### ***Training and Professional Development***

Participants did not include very many specific professional development topics in their narratives. Instead, they often referred to how they organize training and professional development opportunities. If anything, there was an intentionality towards professional development and how professional development fits within the organizational structure of their school district. For instance, Landon stated, “I organize our PD day each September and focus on areas that teachers want assistance with.” Kurt’s district takes a different approach to leadership training. He stated, “Professional development in principal administrative meetings focuses on

areas that we believe will move the needle of academic achievement.” Training and professional development as a strategic sub-theme accounted for approximately 60% of HR pattern frequency code counts.

### ***Employee Compensation and Hiring the Right People***

While participants sometimes cited their compensation and hiring practices, this sub-theme did not resonate with high-frequency code counts in the analysis. Only 26% of HR pattern frequency code counts were associated with this sub-theme. Participants described compensation as a cause-and-effect relationship with hiring and retaining the right people. For example, Zachrey emphasized “focusing on an attractive professional salary and benefits package to promote retention and attract high-quality candidates for employment.” Spencer remarked, “With me, I think my overarching goal is to manage a healthy budget, so we can pay teachers, we can provide good benefits, we can get quality educators to teach the students to help with achievement.”

### **Research Question Responses**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. The answers to the central research question and sub-questions are derived from a synthesis of data and evidence gathered from interviews, surveys, and organizational documents and artifacts. Answers reflect conclusions from synthesizing the themes and sub-themes that materialized through the first and second coding cycles. The coding analysis included precoding, deductive, exploratory, and pattern coding techniques (Saldaña, 2021). Table 12 portrays how the data analysis themes and sub-themes are associated with the study’s central research question and sub-questions (See also Appendices K, L & M).

**Table 12***Research Questions, Themes & Sub-Themes*

Themes	Sub-Themes	Frequency Code Counts	% of Total Codes	Research Questions & Data Collection Methods
Core Values & Beliefs	Continual improvement and goal mindset	87	31.29%	CQ SQ3
	Collaboration	71	25.54%	
	Effective teachers and student achievement	70	25.18%	
			81.65%	
Strategies	Instructional coaches, mentors, and support network	72	28.2%	CQ SQ1
	Data-driven decisions	38	14.90%	
	Training and professional development	37	14.51%	
	Consistent and effective leadership meetings	21	8.24%	
	Employee compensation and hiring the right people	16	6.27%	
			72.16%	
Professional Learning Communities	Instructional coaches, mentors, and support network	72	38.50%	CQ SQ2
	Data-driven decisions	38	20.32%	
	Training and professional development	37	19.79%	
			78.61%	
Human Resource Strategic Orientation	Training and professional development	37	59.68%	CQ SQ2
	Employee compensation & hiring the right people	16	25.81%	
			85.48%	

### Central Research Question (CRQ)

How do rural public education school districts and their executive school district leaders overcome immense and intense organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018)?

Rural school district executive leaders overcome organizational adversity and sustain student achievement through four critical organizational resilience themes. These four thematic categories are *core values and beliefs*, *strategies*, *professional learning communities*, and *human resource strategic orientations*. Executive leaders act as directional guides for their districts and prominently lead at the forefront with these thematical approaches. Dustin provided an excellent example when he stated, “The thing is, teachers are professionals. They want to do well. So, I don’t know, it’s as much getting or forcing them to do it as seeing the importance of the vision.”

All three school districts have a pervasive professional learning community (PLC) and human resource (HR) culture. PLC and HR approaches incorporate continual improvement and goal mindsets, collaboration, effective teaching practices, instructional coaches, mentors, support networks, data-driven decisions, training and professional development, and employee compensation practices. These values, beliefs, and strategies were strong emergents in the data analysis. Thematic topics such as performance feedback, technology, policy governance, literacy, specific curriculum and pedagogies, character education, vocational programs, athletics, a safe school environment, and specific at-risk student interventions existed in the study, but these thematic topics *did not* emerge with high-frequency code counts in the data analysis. Executive leaders did not perceive these later constructs as major contributing factors to the organizational resilience of their school districts.

**Sub-Question 1 (SQ1)**

At the individual level, how do rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018)?

Within their capacity, executive leaders have relied heavily on five main strategies to overcome adversity and sustain student achievement: a) instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks; b) data-driven decisions; c) training and professional development; d) consistent and effective leadership meetings; and e) employee compensation and hiring the right people. Interestingly, leaders perceive employee compensation and hiring the right people as a less impactful strategy. Executive leaders strongly prefer interdependent, interpersonal, and relational strategic approaches.

Using instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks was the most widely used strategy with leaders. During his interview Bryan mentioned this when he stated, “I’ll come back to it all day long, the relationship. Because I have principals that I’ve seen, the ugly cry in a few situations. And as long as I’m there beside them saying, hey, we got this, and I can boost them up and get them going, that’s part of my job is to be the district cheerleader.” Leroy indicated that “every school has an opportunity for their teachers to get together and talk with one another, collaborate to collaborate, plan, see what does work, what doesn’t work.” Without question, the individual-level perspectives of leaders are tied to the interdependency of their role in their district organization. Matthew said, “It’s all about collaboration. We work on a board. You’re just one of five folks. So, it’s important.”

Leaders often use data-driven decisions as a problem-solution strategic tactic. For obvious reasons, the data is a feedback mechanism that validates performance successes or

deficits. Reliable data also provides a benchmark for developing solutions to improve performance. Dustin mentioned his school district is working towards improving learning outcomes for English language learners. Assessment data offered his district the basis for identifying areas of improvement, and the teachers were then able to develop value-added solutions with corresponding results. Landon indicated that assessment data has provided insights into specific teacher practices. By finding common data trends among teachers with student assessments, Landon's district can identify specific teacher practices that produce higher student achievement outcomes.

Training and professional development strategies appear most in the form of collaborative networks. There is no question that leaders believe collaboration is a highly effective training and professional development method. For example, Kurt stated, "So we are a PLC district, and we do a lot with that. We do a lot of our formal trainings with PLCs. We've encouraged and facilitated, really, every teacher in the school district to go to at least one PLC." Participants described collaborative training and professional development as an informal and routine process. Jason said, "With my techs, if we're ever implementing a new product or switching from a different brand of networking gear or something, I'm always involving them in the discussions with the vendors and the trainers so that we can all have the skills we need."

### **Sub-Question 2 (SQ2)**

At a functional level (program and department level), how do rural executive school district leaders manage and lead their function-level units (departments and programs) to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement in their school district (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018)?



Two strategic holistic integrations were prevalent in functional-level operations. The first and most widely used approach is with PLCs. Participants often referred to the importance of PLCs in their narratives. There were 187 total frequency code counts associated with PLC constructs. Three main strategies were associated with PLCs: a) instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks, b) data-driven decisions, and c) training and professional development. Strategically, executive leaders believe PLC dynamics account for most functional-level capacity to overcome challenges and sustain student achievement.

Stephanie explained how PLCs improved leadership in her district when she stated, “Our most recent approach, I want to say, over the last two years, has just been that last hour of our administrator meeting where they own the agenda and they’re bringing things to the table, and it’s more of kind of that PLC.” Landon had a similar view. He indicated, “I think we meet with our principals meetings, but what we’ve done is we’ve made a leadership section and a PLC section that we have breakouts between elementary, middle school and high school principals with their coaches.”

The second most common functional-level approach was using a human resources strategic approach. However, HR strategies were much less prevalent in code counts than PLC strategies. Additionally, only two HR strategies emerged in the data: a) training and professional development and b) employee compensation and hiring the right people. These strategies seem to resonate most with superintendents or financial leaders.

### **Sub-Question Three (SQ3)**

At a district-wide level, how do rural executive school district leaders manage and lead their school district to overcome significant organizational adversity and sustain high levels of student achievement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018)?

The data from all three school districts had a strong core values and beliefs element. Three core values and beliefs resonated with similar frequency code counts: a) continual improvement and a goal mindset, b) collaboration, and c) effective teachers and student achievement. The purpose of core values and beliefs functions as a collective identity for executive leaders. Core values and beliefs drive and motivate to overcome challenges and improve student achievement. Landon said, “And to have that vision improvement mindset. Before we were making relationships and supporting the principals. Now we’re being more purposeful of, okay, what is that the coaching cycle should look like? How does that improve instruction, which (strategy) improves assessments? Jerry may have provided the best synopsis of why core values and beliefs are so crucial to executive leaders in his district when he stated:

But a lot of it is this. Are you a champion for students? Do you expect excellence...and how careful you have to be with carrying the banner, which is probably the biggest struggle we have in our district, is every single person carrying the banner. When I first got made superintendent, I used to tell people that 50% of my problems or the problems of the district come from our own people. Now I would tell you that 97% of the problems in my district (come from our own people). When I have a group of parents that are in Board (meeting) being upset, it’s generally directly tied to my own employees. They’re helping fire those bullets. So, it’s (about) carrying the banner. Are you proud to be a part of this district?

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. This chapter provided a

summary of study participants, data analysis, and results from the study. Data and evidence obtained from participant interviews, participant surveys, and organization-wide documents and artifacts provided the basis for the analysis.

Twelve executive leaders from three small Utah rural school districts that have student populations with substantial low-income student factors participated in the study; however, because one participant did not participate in the survey, this participant's interview responses were removed from the analysis. All three school districts and their executive leaders have predominantly incorporated *professional learning community (PLC)* and *human resource (HR)* themes and sub-themes in their operations to produce and sustain high levels of student achievement. Data and evidence triangulated well with three core values and beliefs: *a) continual improvement and a goal mindset, b) collaboration, and c) effective teachers and student achievement.*

The data analysis also revealed a perceived executive leadership reliance on five strategies: *a) instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks; b) data-driven decisions; c) training and professional development; d) consistent and effective leadership meetings; and e) employee compensation and hiring the right people.* Performance feedback, technology, policy governance, literacy, specific curriculum and instruction pedagogies, character education, vocational programs, athletics, a safe school environment, and specific at-risk student interventions did not emerge with high-frequency code counts or triangulate well in the data analysis. Executive leaders did not perceive these later constructs as major contributing factors to the strategic organizational resilience of their school districts.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Chapter 5 provides the interpretation of the findings, policy and practice implications, and the study's empirical and theoretical implications. A discussion of the study's potential weaknesses (limitations) and constraints (delimitations) follows. Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations for future research and a final, conclusive summary.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. The study is based on known theoretical organizational resilience and grit-resilience constructs identified in the Chapter 2 literature review. Organizational resilience is an organization's ability to anticipate, respond to, adapt to, and cope effectively with organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Grit-resilience (or grit) is an individual's or organization's capacity for passion and perseverance (talent and effort) to overcome challenges and achieve long-term goals at high levels (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Lee, 2018).

This discussion offers my interpretations of themes and sub-themes from the study's data analysis, as presented in Chapter 4. These interpretations extend into implications for policy and practice. Empirical and theoretical implications are discussed in connection to these interpretations. Recommendations for future research are then provided.

## **Summary of Thematic Findings**

Thematic findings were developed by analyzing data collected from interviews, surveys, organizational documents, and artifacts. Data analysis included two coding cycles using deductive, exploratory, and pattern coding techniques (Saldaña, 2021). Exploratory and pattern coding techniques and analysis generated new themes and sub-themes not identified in the Chapter 2 literature review. These themes and sub-themes emerged as intersectional constructs with study sites and participants. The new themes resonated in the form of: a) core values and beliefs, b) strategies, c) professional learning communities, and d) human resource strategic orientations.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

This discussion offers my interpretations of themes and sub-themes from the study's data analysis, as presented in Chapter 4. My interpretations are based on the concepts identified in the Chapter 2 literature review, the conditions in which data and evidence were obtained, and connections observed and made in the data analysis. My interpretations were used to identify constructs that were present in the study's data and evidence from the extant literature, as well as new constructs that emerged in the data analysis. This section also provides empirical, theoretical, and practical implications related to my interpretation of the findings.

### ***Core Values and Beliefs***

Second-cycle exploratory provisional coding identified three core values and beliefs (Saldaña, 2021). First, leaders consistently described their district as having *a continual improvement and goal mindset*. This sub-theme accounted for approximately 31% of core value and belief exploratory provisional codes. Most participants described this core value and belief as part of an ongoing iterative process beyond defining and implementing strategies to achieve defined organizational outcomes. They often connected this value and belief to collaboration and

other PLC constructs (Eaker & Marzano, 2020). The presence of a solid value-based system may be an indicator of the relational well-being shared in the district organization (Bartel & Rockmann, 2024; Choi et al., 2020). Individuals tend to interpret their relationship with the organization based on shared relational values (Choi et al., 2020).

Second, *collaboration* accounted for approximately 26% of core value and belief exploratory provisional codes. Responses frequently referred to collaboration, continual improvement, and a goal mindset as interdependent concepts. One superintendent described PLC collaboration processes in his district as an essential continual improvement pathway toward achieving district goals. A board member described collaborative board meetings as crucial to improving his district's performance. Collaborative leadership approaches are consistent with transformational leadership styles and resilient organizations (Madi Odeh et al., 2021). Intentional, positive transformational leadership interventions can improve an organization's psychological capital with human resources (Fan et al., 2020; Herbane, 2019; Pathak & Joshi, 2021).

Third, *effective teachers and student achievement* accounted for approximately 25% of core value and belief exploratory provisional codes. Participants very rarely described effective teachers and student achievement as mutually exclusive concepts. Instead, participants repeatedly described these concepts as interdependent and interrelated concepts. With student achievement as their highest priority, teachers are esteemed at the highest levels in these districts. Participants consistently linked effective teachers and student achievement with collaboration, continual improvement, and a goal mindset. For example, one superintendent referred to his district's Friday teacher collaboration meetings associated with specific student achievement

goals. A technology director depicted how he uses collaborative meetings with principals and teachers to solve instructional technology problems that were obstacles to student learning.

### ***Five Intersectional PLC and HR Strategies***

Five critical strategies emerged from the data analysis. Four strategies converged with functional themes of the professional learning community (Eaker & Marzano, 2020) and human resources (Bouaziz & Smaoui Hachicha, 2018). First, all three school districts relied heavily on *instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks* as a critical pathway for overcoming adversity and sustaining student achievement. This strategy accounted for approximately 28% of all strategic exploratory provisional codes and 39% of all PLC strategic pattern codes. Nearly all participants described a strong dependency on well-trained instructional coaches and mentors. Leaders drew connections about solid support networks in their districts and could explain how they each functioned as a vital element to the support network. Moreover, nearly all participants perceived that the strength of their district support network depended on a shared responsibility toward student achievement.

Second, leaders commonly refer to data-driven decision-making processes related to student achievement. Data-driven decisions accounted for approximately 15% of all strategic exploratory provisional codes and 20% of all PLC strategic pattern codes. State assessments were often referred to as the primary source of data and goal measurement. One board member was able to articulate his district's strengths and weaknesses regarding student achievement with state assessments. Superintendents and directors seemed more aware of their district's data-driven decisions. This rural school district approach aligns with data-driven strategies prevalent in many other resilient organizations (Annarelli et al., 2020; Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2021). Highly resilient organizations provide critical decision-makers and plan implementors with information-rich pathways for crucial decisions. Data generated by technology sources is a

primary tool for adaptive organizational resilience and communications (Heredia et al., 2022; Zahari et al., 2022).

Third, *training and professional development* accounted for approximately 15% of all strategic exploratory provisional codes, approximately 20% of PLC strategic pattern codes, and approximately 60% of HR strategic pattern codes. While training and professional development are standard practices in public education, participants did not perceive this strategy as being of the same importance as instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks. Instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks had nearly double the frequency code counts compared to training and professional development. Some participants referred to professional development days. Other participants referred to training meetings.

Fourth, some executive leaders referred to *consistent and effective leadership meetings* as a critical strategy to address organizational challenges and sustain student achievement. This strategy accounted for approximately 8% of all strategic exploratory provisional codes. Those leaders who mentioned this strategy referred to board meetings and administrator-principal leadership meetings as their core leadership meeting structure. Some leaders identified this strategy as a critical contributor to their success; however, some leaders did not mention this strategy at all. This strategy's collaborative and PLC nature may mean that it should be classified with other strategies and concepts. The data analysis identified this separate strategy because some participants mentioned it as a critical aspect of organizational resilience.

Finally, *employee compensation and hiring the right people* accounted for approximately 6% of all strategic exploratory provisional codes and 26% of HR strategic pattern codes. Participants seemed to treat this strategy as a support and complementary contributor to student achievement rather than a primary contributor. While some board members, superintendents, and



directors included this strategy in their responses, many still needed to. While some board members, superintendents, and directors included this strategy in their responses, many did not. The two financial leaders and a few others included in the study mentioned this strategy. Many leaders, however, did not include this sub-theme in their responses or perceive this strategy as a critical pathway for student achievement. This is inconsistent with other organizations where compensation is crucial to organizational resilience (Bouaziz & Smaoui Hachicha, 2018).

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Organizational resilience is an organization's ability to anticipate, respond to, adapt to, and cope effectively with organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Grit-resilience (or grit) is an individual's or organization's capacity for passion and perseverance (talent and effort) to overcome challenges and achieve long-term goals at high levels (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Lee, 2018). Given the purpose and context of this study, recommendations are pragmatic suggestions for small rural school district executive leaders who engage in similar challenges.

### ***Implications for Policy***

Policymakers may consider the findings applicable for two purposes. First, small rural school districts may need more resources to implement the study's findings and recommendations. State and regional authorities may find it beneficial to provide funding or additional resources to help rural school districts implement critical practices and strategies. Second, rural school district boards may consider policies and budget decisions that embed critical organizational resilience constructs in school and program operations.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Findings from this study suggest that rural school district executive leaders can strengthen their district's capacity to overcome organizational adversity and sustain student achievement. Study findings indicate that certain literature-supported factors, as well as specific core values, beliefs, and strategies, can be used to maintain student achievement outcomes under conditions of adversity. Executive leaders should embed three core values and beliefs in their school district operations and organizational culture: *a) a continual improvement and goal mindset, b) collaboration, and c) effective teachers who place a high priority on student achievement.*

Executive leaders should also focus on implementing five critical strategies: *a) instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks; b) data-driven decisions; c) training and professional development; d) consistent and effective leadership meetings; and e) employee compensation and hiring the right people.* Most importantly, executive leaders should focus on integrating these core values and beliefs, as well as these five critical strategies, into the broader professional learning community (Eaker & Marzano, 2020) and human resources perspectives (Fan et al., 2020; Herbane, 2019; Pathak & Joshi, 2021). Integrating specific strategies into broader PLC and HR perspectives is consistent with how other types of organizations develop strong, resilient organizations (Bouaziz & Smaoui Hachicha, 2018).

### **Empirical & Theoretical Implications**

Based on the Chapter 2 literature review, a hybrid organizational resilience theory and grit-resilience framework were developed as a foundational basis for the study. Figure 1 depicts the framework that combined the organizational grit-resilience theory perspective (Duckworth & Lee, 2018), the stages of organizational resilience perspective (Duchek, 2020), the organizational resilience typology perspective (Chen et al., 2021), and the individual grit-resilience perspective

(Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth et al., 2015). The framework provided a tiered typology that includes strategic and system-resilient factors. Given the nature and design of this study, only the *strategic organizational resilience* classification tier was used.

Some of the study's findings agreed with the theoretical framework developed from the Chapter 2 literature review; however, some concepts identified in the literature review and Figure 1 were absent in the study's findings. Table 13 summarizes the study's conclusions about the theoretical framework depicted in Figure 1.

**Table 13***Results Alignment with Literature Review Theoretical Framework (Fig. 1)*

Strategic Organizational Resilience Category Theme	Sub-Theme	Prevalent Major Study Finding	Minimal or Absent in Study Findings
Adaptive flexibility	Problem-solution orientations	✓	
	Open-systems dynamics and networks		✓
	Stakeholder relationships	✓	
	Public and nonpublic agency relationships		✓
	Coping with actual disruptions	✓	
	Adapting operations to overcome adversity	✓	
Anticipating disruptions, risks, and adversity	Problem-solution orientations	✓	
	Research-based planning		✓
	Scenario simulations and planning		✓
	Governmental regulatory risk planning		✓
	Financial risk planning	✓	
Leadership and management	Grit-resilient leaders and managers	✓	
	Inspirational leadership and management		✓
	Intentional transformational leadership	✓	
	Ethical leadership and management		✓
	Passion (consistency of interests)	✓	
Goal and Purpose Orientations	Mission, vision, values, goals	✓	
	Achievement orientations	✓	
	Performance feedback and outcomes		✓
	Organizational unity		✓
	Collective professional pride		✓

### *Empirical Implications*

The study design was intended to obtain and analyze qualitative organizational resilience theory-based evidence from a context that appears to be nonexistent in the current literature. Very few organizational resilience studies used samples in public education settings. The existing literature overlooks a qualitative exploration into the context of rural school district executive leadership, rural low-income factors, and rural student achievement. The framework depicted in Figure 1 was developed from the Chapter 2 literature review. Extant literature on organizational resilience and grit theory mainly focuses on individuals, private sector organizations, non-profit organizations, government, and higher education institutions. Organizational achievement for these entities is typically measured by profit, non-education service measures, or other measures not necessarily associated with public education school districts. The literature review did not reveal any existing research related to public education school districts and organizational resilience studies.

Many of the concepts portrayed in Figure 1 and Table 13 may need to be revised, given the narrow focus of the study and case study context; nevertheless, several concepts in the literature review resonated with the findings. These concepts are specific to leadership, problem-solution paradigms, and organizational achievement. The nature of the study's conclusions compared to the framework depicted in Figure 1 and Table 13 suggests that some organizational resilience constructs are universal, and some are context-specific (Sevilla et al., 2023). This perspective agrees with Burnard & Bhamra's (2019) perspective as they concluded that theoretical inconsistencies are mainly due to the emerging nature of organizational resilience theory and the contextual-specific nature of this theoretical phenomenon.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The study's theoretical significance stems from claims offered by two separate organizational resilience theory streams of research. Some organizations have successfully negotiated significant organizational adversity (Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Additionally, some organizations have successfully leveraged significant organizational adversity experiences to realize high-achievement outcomes (Duckworth & Lee, 2018). Both streams of research are theoretically significant and aligned with the purpose and problem statements associated with the study. Due to organizational resilience theory's context-specific and emergent nature, theorists continue to define and redefine organizational resilience theoretical constructs (Sevilla et al., 2023). This study's evidence and data analysis support organizational resilience theory as a promising theoretical phenomenon, particularly in a rural school district executive leadership, rural low-income, and rural student achievement context. Consistent with the literature presented in Chapter 2, organizational learning and knowledge management theory and concepts (Annareli et al., 2020; Evenseth et al., 2022; Morales et al., 2019; Werner et al., 2021) appear to be strongly connected to organizational resilience in a small rural school district context.

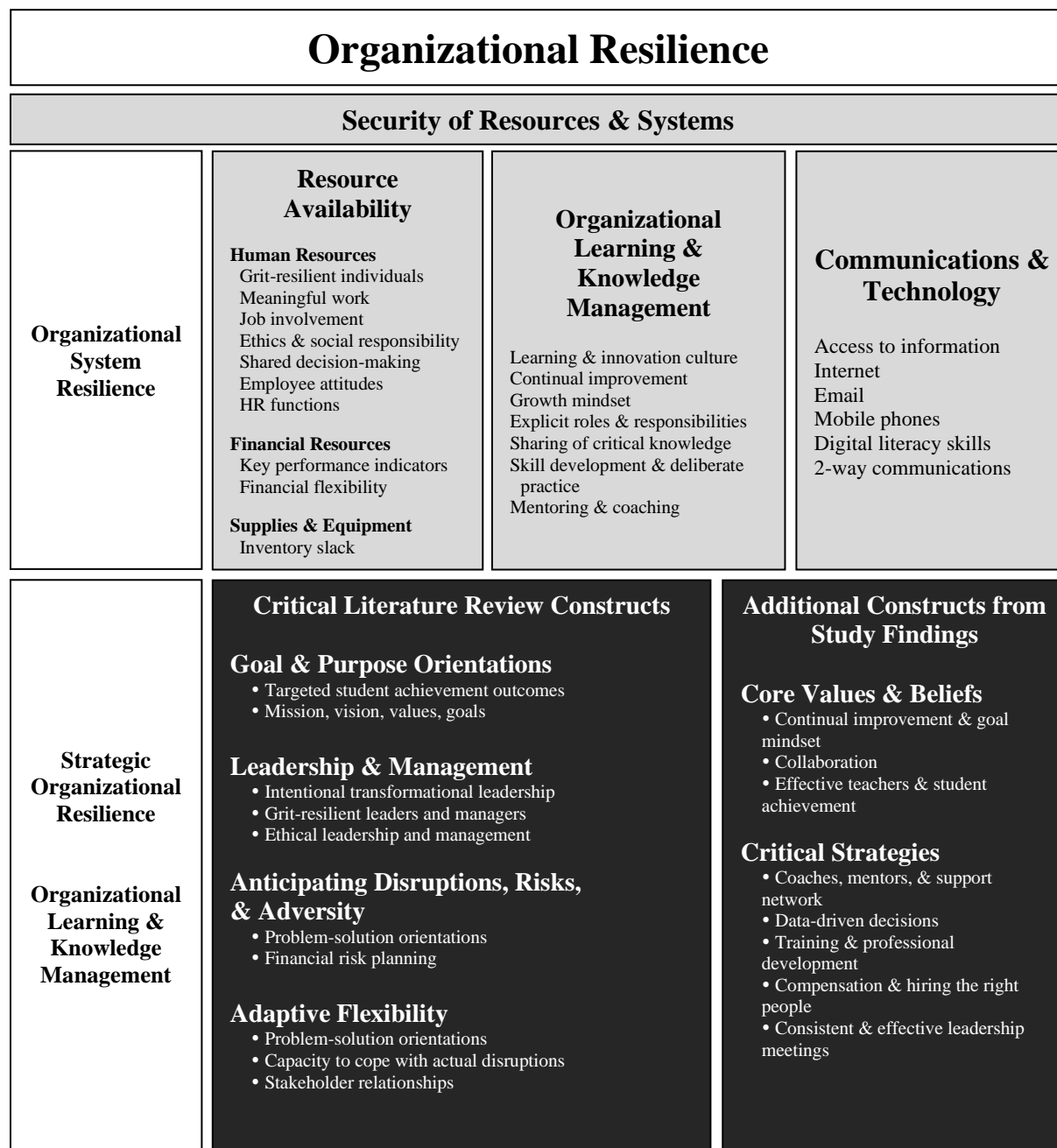
The framework depicted in Figure 1 classifies organizational resilience concepts into two categories: a) strategic organizational resilience factors and b) organizational system resilience factors. The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Consequently, the study's design included only the strategic organizational resilience themes and sub-themes depicted in Figure 1. First-cycle deductive coding was based on the strategic organizational resilience themes and sub-themes shown in Figure 1.

Second-cycle exploratory and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021) revealed new insights not portrayed in the Figure 1 theoretical model developed from the Chapter 2 literature review.

Second-cycle exploratory and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021) exposed new strategic resilience constructs associated with a small rural school district context. These new themes and sub-themes materialized in the data analysis as core values, beliefs, and strategies. Some sub-themes were initially classified in Figure 1 as organizational system resilience factors resonated as critical strategies. The study revealed that continual improvement, collaboration, instructional coaching, and mentoring were critical strategic factors, not just systemic operational factors.

Several other organizational resilience constructs were present in different organizational contexts that did not emerge as major contributing factors in the study. Performance feedback, technology, policy governance, literacy, specific curriculum and pedagogies, character education, vocational programs, athletics, a safe school environment, and specific at-risk student interventions with high-frequency code counts did not triangulate well in the data analysis. With these findings in mind, Figure 2 revises Figure 1 and incorporates the study's strategic organizational resilience findings and interpretations. Strategic organizational resilience factors were depicted initially in Figure 1 but did not emerge in the study's analysis and were removed from the Figure 2 framework.

Figure 2

*Revised Theoretical Organizational Resilience Framework*



## **Limitations and Delimitations**

Several limitations and delimitations accompany this study and corresponding analysis. Limitations represent potential weaknesses that can influence findings and recommendations, including limitations outside of the researcher's control (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Delimitations reflect specific decisions I made to restrict the scope of the study. Delimitations can also influence findings and recommendations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018).

### ***Limitations***

The study design, data collection methods, and data analysis largely depend on the participants and the researcher's interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). Participants and the researcher were required to interpret organizational conditions, information, and experiences to articulate their perspectives through their knowledge, skills, abilities, and biases. To minimize bias in the analysis and interpretation of findings, I employed strategies such as data triangulation, memo notetaking, coding that only allowed one code count per response or data item, and several code cycle reviews to identify coding inaccuracies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). The trustworthiness of findings and recommendations is subjective regarding researcher and participant interpretations. Findings may not be generalizable to other contexts and settings. Given these realities, qualitative research is complex to replicate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018).

### ***Delimitations***

The study and findings are specific to the conditions and setting of the three small Utah rural school districts and their executive leaders that were selected for the study. These school districts reside in Utah and the United States (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Yin, 2018). The study is constrained by factors such as geography, participant demographics, uncontrollable variables, the time of the study, and student population demographics. For example, only one female executive

leader participated in the study. All other participants were male. Only school district board members, superintendents, and other district executive-level leaders were included in the study. All participants were well-educated and had extensive post-secondary university-level education. Moreover, the small Utah rural school districts included in the study were selected based on student achievement as measured by state assessments and their respective local low-income factors. These conditions highly influence findings and recommendations.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Consequently, the study's design focused only on *strategic organizational resilience* factors. The study did not include or examine other organizational resilience factors, such as systemic operational and security factors. Additionally, the revised strategic organizational resilience factors presented in Figure 2 are context-specific to the sites and conditions of the study. It should not be assumed that Figure 2 is relevant to other public education school district settings and situations.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how rural executive school district leaders overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes. Few, if any, studies related to organizational resilience theory have been done in a public education setting, let alone a small rural school district setting with low-income student factors. Thus, all recommendations stem from this reality. Recommendations for future research include the following:

1. The study could be replicated in other school districts with similar conditions to support or refute the findings of this study.

2. The study could be enlarged to examine other adversity conditions, such as challenges with student behavior, diversity, and teacher performance.
3. Future studies could be structured to include other participants who can provide greater insight at other levels within the school district organizational structure. Other participants may include a more diverse group of leaders, teachers, parents, and students. Such a study may confirm or refute the perspectives of executive leaders found in this study.
4. The study could have been expanded to explore the organizational system resilience factors identified in the literature review, but these factors did not emerge as study findings (Figures 1 and 2).
5. The study may be extended to quantitative or mixed-method approaches to validate and test the reliability, strength, and impact of specific strategies and practices.
6. The study could be expanded to explore specific pedagogies that did not emerge with the study findings (e.g., literacy, at-risk student interventions, technology, etc.).
7. The study could be magnified to investigate connections between organizational learning, knowledge management constructs, and organizational resilience in small rural school districts.
8. Future studies can further explore concepts generalized by study participants that need to be more well-defined and explained. For instance, participants in this study identified compensation and hiring the right people as an essential part of organizational resilience; however, participants did not clearly define the compensation structure needed or traits of the “right people” who contribute to organizational resilience.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore and describe how three small rural Utah school districts and their executive leaders have overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustained high student achievement outcomes. Organizational resilience theory was used for the study's design, analysis, and interpretations. Organizational resilience refers to an organization's capacity to anticipate, respond to, adapt to, and cope effectively with organizational adversity (Chen et al., 2021; Duchek, 2020; Horne, 1997; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007) and sustain high organizational achievement levels (Duckworth & Lee, 2018). Data and evidence for the analysis were obtained from eleven executive leaders from three rural Utah school districts. Data and evidence were derived from interviews, surveys, organizational documents, and artifacts. The analysis included two coding cycles and diverse coding techniques: precoding, deductive coding, exploratory provisional coding, and pattern coding techniques. The themes and sub-themes with the highest frequency code counts were considered to be highly impactful strategic organizational resilience constructs.

The study's analysis, findings, and interpretations suggest that small rural school district executive leaders can strengthen their district's capacity to overcome organizational adversity and sustain high student achievement. The broader thematic patterns in the study's analysis were professional learning community (PLC) and human resource management (HR) approaches. The analysis also revealed that executive leaders are highly committed to three entrenched core values and beliefs in their school district decisions and operations: *a) a continual improvement and a goal mindset, b) collaboration, and c) effective teachers who place a high priority on student achievement outcomes.*

Five essential strategies also emerged in the analysis: *a) instructional coaches, mentors, and support networks; b) data-driven decisions; c) training and professional development; d) consistent and effective leadership meetings; and e) employee compensation and hiring the right people.* Several other organizational resilience constructs were present in the analysis but did not emerge as major contributing factors in the study. Performance feedback, technology, policy governance, literacy, specific curriculum and pedagogies, character education, vocational programs, athletics, a safe school environment, and specific at-risk student interventions did not resonate with high-frequency code counts and did not triangulate well in the data analysis. The bottom line is that these rural executive school district leaders rely heavily on PLC-specific and HR-specific core values, beliefs, and strategies to overcome significant organizational adversity (low-income student factors) and sustain high student achievement outcomes.

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## Appendix A

## Organizational Resilience Theory Constructs

Types of Organizational Resilience (Chen et al., 2021)	Stages of Organizational Resilience (Duchek, 2020)	Strategic Organizational Behaviors & Constructs Associated with Organizational Resilience	
<p><b>Capital Resilience</b> (Financial Resilience)</p> <p><b>Strategic Resilience</b> (achievement outcomes)</p> <p><b>Cultural Resilience</b> (employee commitment)</p> <p><b>Stakeholder-Relational Resilience</b></p> <p><b>Learning Resilience</b> (learning, knowledge &amp; organizational change)</p>	<p><b>Anticipation &amp; Preparation</b> for Organizational Adversity, Risks, &amp; Challenges</p> <p><b>Coping</b> with Actual Organizational Adversity, Risks, &amp; Challenges</p> <p><b>Adapting</b> to Actual Organizational Adversity, Risks, &amp; Challenges</p>	<p><b>Strategic Organizational Leadership &amp; Organizational Design</b></p> <p><b>Goal &amp; Purpose Orientations</b></p> <p><b>Anticipating Organizational Challenges, Potential Responses, &amp; Opportunities</b></p> <p><b>Human, Capital, &amp; Financial Resource Availability</b></p>	<p>Beuren et al. (2021) Cosentino &amp; Paoloni, (2021) Fietz et al. (2021) Herbane, (2019) Liang &amp; Cao (2021) Madi Odeh et al. (2021) Pathak &amp; Joshi, (2021) Rodríguez-Sánchez et al. (2021) Suryaningtyas et al. (2019) Tasic et al. (2020) Werner et al. (2021) Zahari et al., (2022)</p> <p>Cotta &amp; Salvador (2020) Granig &amp; Hilgarter, (2020) Werner et al. (2021)</p> <p>Annareli et al. (2020) Duchek (2020) Cruickshank (2020) Gichuhi (2021) Miceli et al. (2021) Rahi (2019) Țiclău et al. (2021)</p> <p>Baghersad &amp; Zobel(2022) Bouaziz &amp; Smaoui Chen et al. (2021) Dhoopar et al. (2022)</p>

			<p>Do et al. (2022)  Duchek (2020)  Evenseth et al. (2022)  Hachicha (2018)  Kim (2021)  Kim (2020)  Park et al. (2022)  Pathak &amp; Joshi (2021)  Țiclău et al. (2021)  van den Berg et al. (2021)</p>
		<p><b>Adaptive  Capacity &amp;  Open-Systems  Dynamics</b></p>	<p>Akpan et al. (2022)  Annarelli et al. (2020)  Duchek (2020)  Granig &amp; Hilgarter (2020)  Kanabutra &amp; Ketprapakom (2021)  Kim et al. (2021)  Morales et al. (2019)  Waerder et al. (2021)  Yılmaz Börekçi et al. (2021)  Yuan &amp; Huang (2021)</p>
		<p><b>Communications  &amp; Technology</b></p>	<p>Annarelli et al. (2020)  Drossel et al. (2020)  Heredia et al. (2022)  Kantabutra &amp; Ketprapakom (2021)  Kim (2021)  Lee et al. (2013)  Zahari et al. (2022)</p>
		<p><b>Organizational  Learning &amp;  Knowledge  Management</b></p>	<p>Annarelli et al. (2020)  Cotta &amp; Salvador (2020)  Do et al. (2022)  Evenseth et al. (2022)  Morales et al. (2019)  Teo et al. (2017)  Werner et al. (2021)</p>

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**Security**

Annarelli et al. (2020)  
Werner et al. (2021)

## Appendix B

### Scale Measures Used in Grit Studies

The following summarizes scale measures used in grit quantitative and mixed methods studies.

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Scale</u>	<u>Originator</u>
<b>Grit &amp; Personality Traits</b>	12-Item Long Grit Scale (Grit-O)	Duckworth et al., 2007
	8-Item Short Grit Scale (Grit-S)	
	The Triarchic Model of Grit (TMG)	Datu et al., 2017
<b>Academic Achievement</b>	13-Item Brief Self-Control Scale	Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004
	Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)	Singh & Chukkali, 2021
	Orientations to Happiness Scale	Peterson et al., 2005

## Appendix C

## Utah School District Language Arts Assessments &amp; Student Proficiencies

	2022-23			2021-22			2020-21		
	% Student		F/R	% Student		F/R	% Student		F/R
	Rank	Proficiency	Lunch %	Rank	Proficiency	Lunch %	Rank	Proficiency	Lunch %
Rural Utah School District	1	57%	21.17%	6	53%	16.85%	1	55%	20.84%
Rural Utah School District	2	57%	23.62%	7	53%	17.39%	8	50%	22.50%
Utah School District	3	56%	16.95%	3	55%	13.43%	2	54%	18.26%
Utah School District	4	55%	21.99%	5	53%	16.99%	4	52%	22.50%
Utah School District	5	53%	26.75%	4	54%	26.89%	3	53%	25.86%
Rural Utah School District	6	52%	9.06%	2	55%	6.31%	7	50%	9.85%
Rural Utah School District	7	52%	37.40%	1	58%	29.07%	5	52%	29.21%
Utah School District	8	51%	20.59%	8	51%	18.86%	6	50%	17.69%
Rural Utah School District	9	49%	47.10%	9	51%	38.51%	10	48%	37.50%
Utah School District	10	49%	38.73%	11	48%	33.23%	15	45%	40.24%
<b>Study Rural District 1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>45.27%</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>43.45%</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>46.17%</b>
Utah School District	12	49%	33.79%	16	46%	26.85%	14	46%	36.83%
Utah School District	13	48%	21.43%	10	48%	16.38%	11	48%	18.52%
Rural Utah School District	14	48%	35.92%	12	48%	24.11%	12	48%	32.50%
<b>Study Rural District 2</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>41.34%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>36.18%</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>37.50%</b>
<b>Study Rural District 3</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>43.62%</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>40.31%</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>40.83%</b>
Rural Utah School District	17	45%	45.42%	24	42%	41.94%	23	42%	42.20%
Rural Utah School District	18	45%	33.33%	33	36%	56.66%	30	41%	58.73%
Utah School District	19	45%	39.88%	14	48%	31.40%	13	48%	38.12%
Rural Utah School District	20	45%	19.29%	20	44%	13.72%	27	42%	15.77%
Utah School District	21	44%	18.72%	22	43%	15.99%	17	44%	17.37
Utah School District	22	44%	34.52%	18	45%	29.21%	19	43%	28.04%
Rural Utah School District	23	44%	52.15%	23	43%	46.04%	24	42%	51.02%
<b>Utah</b>		<b>44%</b>	<b>30.56%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>26.45%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>28.80%</b>
Rural Utah School District	24	44%	46.30%	17	46%	34.16%	21	43%	42.82%
Rural Utah School District	25	43%	39.82%	25	42%	31.38%	31	39%	37.50%
Rural Utah School District	26	42%	29.39%	21	43%	23.08%	22	42%	28.28%
Rural Utah School District	27	42%	18.66%	30	38%	12.14%	9	49%	18.31%
Utah School District	28	42%	54.36%	29	39%	43.38%	28	41%	48.59%
Utah School District	29	42%	25.48%	26	41%	19.63%	29	41%	22.50%
Utah School District	30	41%	49.85%	27	41%	45.05%	33	38%	46.77%
Rural Utah School District	31	40%	48.92%	28	39%	49.91%	34	36%	50.80%
Rural Utah School District	32	40%	42.83%	31	38%	35.53%	37	34%	37.50%
Utah School District	33	37%	25.98%	35	35%	23.22%	35	36%	23.76%
Rural Utah School District	34	36%	30.67%	32	36%	28.24%	32	38%	31.07%
Rural Utah School District	35	36%	32.48%	36	33%	22.85%	16	45%	33.66%
Utah School District	36	34%	26.68%	34	35%	21.69%	36	34%	27.12%
Utah School District	37	33%	47.41%	37	32%	43.81%	40	32%	44.36%
Rural Utah School District	38	31%	42.11%	38	30%	34.49%	38	32%	40.17%
Utah School District	39	29%	64.73%	39	30%	63.57%	41	31%	67.75%
Rural Utah School District	40	28%	72.06%	40	28%	73.12%	25	42%	73.35%
Rural Utah School District	41	27%	41.58%	41	27%	40.09%	39	32%	37.50%



	2018-19			2017-18			2016-17		
	% Student		F/R	% Student		F/R	% Student		F/R
	Rank	Proficiency	Lunch %	Rank	Proficiency	Lunch %	Rank	Proficiency	Lunch %
Rural Utah School District	2	57%	23.11%	3	56%	33.27%	2	54%	29.06%
Rural Utah School District	14	52%	27.00%	14	48%	30.27%	29	42%	32.00%
Utah School District	8	54%	17.35%	6	52%	19.49%	6	51%	23.00%
Utah School District	1	60%	24.81%	1	56%	27.00%	1	55%	27.00%
Utah School District	3	56%	27.22%	5	53%	28.10%	3	53%	25.77%
Rural Utah School District	7	54%	15.00%	19	47%	13.59%	10	50%	13.24%
Rural Utah School District	9	54%	37.71%	13	48%	36.62%	11	49%	42.86%
Utah School District	12	52%	21.54%	9	50%	22.45%	8	50%	27.09%
Rural Utah School District	5	55%	44.27%	4	53%	45.20%	9	50%	49.17%
Utah School District	15	50%	41.33%	22	46%	43.15%	23	43%	45.51%
<b>Study Rural District 1</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>49.98%</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>52.97%</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>51.88%</b>
Utah School District	20	49%	38.62%	15	48%	39.87%	13	48%	41.36%
Utah School District	11	53%	20.65%	7	51%	20.72%	5	51%	22.15%
Rural Utah School District	6	54%	38.55%	10	50%	37.00%	14	47%	43.00%
<b>Study Rural District 2</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>43.00%</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>43.52%</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>45.21%</b>
<b>Study Rural District 3</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>48.25%</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>49.81%</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>48.51%</b>
Rural Utah School District	22	48%	43.01%	17	47%	43.00%	15	46%	44.55%
Rural Utah School District	38	37%	62.00%	34	38%	63.00%	40	30%	67.00%
Utah School District	13	52%	41.95%	11	50%	42.68%	7	51%	45.24%
Rural Utah School District	10	54%	17.88%	20	47%	18.17%	4	53%	18.89%
Utah School District	23	48%	19.48%	18	47%	20.52%	24	43%	23.00%
Utah School District	17	49%	33.16%	8	51%	32.90%	17	46%	34.70%
Rural Utah School District	18	49%	55.22%	28	43%	54.81%	33	39%	54.53%
<b>Utah</b>		<b>47%</b>	<b>32.21%</b>		<b>45%</b>	<b>32.92%</b>		<b>44%</b>	<b>34.71%</b>
Rural Utah School District	25	47%	37.32%	16	48%	43.00%	12	49%	43.00%
Rural Utah School District	30	44%	44.63%	32	40%	47.00%	28	42%	47.00%
Rural Utah School District	21	48%	32.58%	21	46%	33.81%	22	43%	35.97%
Rural Utah School District	4	56%	22.50%	2	56%	23.66%	16	46%	23.00%
Utah School District	26	46%	54.63%	26	43%	53.60%	25	43%	56.52%
Utah School District	29	45%	27.00%	27	43%	27.00%	20	44%	33.00%
Utah School District	31	43%	55.67%	31	42%	54.81%	30	41%	55.84%
Rural Utah School District	32	42%	48.02%	37	37%	49.27%	31	40%	47.00%
Rural Utah School District	37	38%	43.00%	36	38%	45.23%	34	39%	48.22%
Utah School District	35	40%	28.29%	38	37%	33.00%	35	38%	31.06%
Rural Utah School District	28	45%	36.37%	25	43%	36.93%	32	39%	34.28%
Rural Utah School District	19	49%	33.66%	29	43%	39.11%	18	46%	37.39%
Utah School District	34	40%	33.38%	35	38%	34.05%	37	35%	37.00%
Utah School District	40	35%	47.04%	40	33%	47.73%	39	31%	48.40%
Rural Utah School District	33	41%	39.42%	33	39%	36.47%	36	35%	39.56%
Utah School District	39	36%	72.50%	39	35%	73.83%	38	34%	76.01%
Rural Utah School District	41	31%	72.82%	41	28%	72.91%	41	26%	69.62%
Rural Utah School District	36	38%	35.44%	30	42%	38.18%	19	44%	46.14%

## Appendix D

### Institutional Review Board Approval

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 3, 2023

Todd Burke  
Meredith Park

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-399 Executive Leader Perspectives of Rural School District Organizational Resilience: A Qualitative Case Study Inquiry

Dear Todd Burke, Meredith Park,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
Research Ethics Office

**Appendix E**  
**Site Approvals**

Rural School District 1

November 14, 2022

Todd Burke  
PhD Student, Liberty University  
P.O. Box 2239  
Beaver, Utah 84713

Dear Mr. Burke:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Executive Leader Perspectives of Rural School District Organizational Resilience: A Qualitative Case Study Inquiry, we have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [REDACTED] School District.

Check the following boxes (as applicable):

- We grant permission for Todd Burke to contact school district executive leaders to invite them to participate in his research study.
- We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.
- We are requesting one or more in-person presentations about the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

## Rural School District 2

December 14, 2022

Todd Burke  
PhD Student, Liberty University  
P.O. Box 2239  
Beaver, Utah 84713

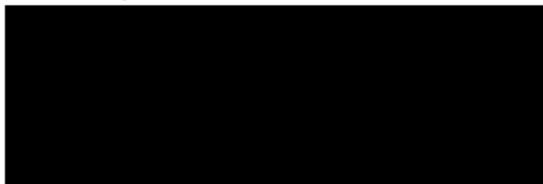
Dear Mr. Burke:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Executive Leader Perspectives of Rural School District Organizational Resilience: A Qualitative Case Study Inquiry, we have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [REDACTED] School District.

Check the following boxes (as applicable):

- We grant permission for Todd Burke to contact school district executive leaders to invite them to participate in his research study.
- We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.
- We are requesting one or more in-person presentations about the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

## Rural School District 3

December 2, 2022

Todd Burke  
PhD Student, Liberty University  
P.O. Box 2239  
Beaver, Utah 84713

Dear Mr. Burke:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Executive Leader Perspectives of Rural School District Organizational Resilience: A Qualitative Multiple-Case Study Inquiry, we have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [REDACTED] School District.

Check the following boxes (as applicable):

- We grant permission for Todd Burke to contact school district executive leaders to invite them to participate in his research study.
- We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.
- We are requesting one or more in-person presentations about the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

## Appendix F

### Participant Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Education and Organizational Leadership degree. The purpose of my research is to study executive leadership perspectives and how rural school districts are able to organizationally overcome challenges associated with low-income student factors and simultaneously sustain student achievement at exceptionally high levels, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study. Your school district was selected for the study because your district and your students consistently perform exceptionally well with state academic assessments compared to other similar Utah rural school districts. Your district superintendent recommended that I contact you as a possible participant for the study.

Participants must be a rural school district executive leader such as a board member, superintendent, or other rural school district executive leader. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an individual interview (11 questions; 30-45 minutes) and an online survey (10 questions). During the interview and survey activities, you will be asked to provide easily accessible and publicly available organizational artifacts such as district documents, plans, policies, procedures, or other records that reflect how your school district functions. Names and other identifying information may be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

If you would like to participate, I am planning to be on site at your school district on (insert date), and would like to meet with you at (insert time). To participate, please reply to this email and confirm the above-requested interview time or provide an alternate date and time that is convenient for you.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions about the study, please reply to this email with your questions.

Todd Burke, PhD Student, Liberty University

## Appendix G

### Researcher Background Affecting Hermeneutic Interpretations & Findings

The study's design relied heavily on researcher hermeneutic interpretations and findings, which were influenced by my background and experience. Consequently, this appendix provides a full disclosure of my background.

#### EDUCATION

**PhD Education & Organizational Leadership**, *Liberty University*, 3.95 GPA (in progress)

**Masters of Accountancy (Governmental Emphasis)**, *Rutgers University*, 3.73 GPA

**Masters of Human Resource Management**, *Utah State University*, 3.71 GPA

**Graduate Studies Education Leadership & Administration State Licensure**, *University of Utah*, 4.0 GPA

**Bachelors of Science in Business & Marketing Education**, *Weber State University*, 3.81 GPA, Magna Cum Laude, Utah Career Teaching Scholarship

**Undergraduate Accounting Studies**, *Utah Valley University*, 3.91 GPA

**Taylorsville High School**, *Utah*

#### CREDENTIALS & ASSOCIATIONS

**Licensed Educator & Administrator**, *Utah State Board of Education*

Secondary Education, Business/Marketing, School Leadership

**Certified Public Finance Officer (CPFO)**, *Government Finance Officers Association*

**Certified Government Financial Manager (CGFM)**, *Association of Government Accountants*

**Certified Fraud Examiner (CFE)**, *Association of Certified Fraud Examiners*

#### EXPERIENCE

**Business Administrator & HR Director**, *Beaver County School District, Utah* (current)

**Assistant Business Administrator & Director of Accounting**, *Provo City School District, Utah*

**High School Business & Marketing Educator**, *Emery County School District, Utah*

Sterling Scholar Advisor, Advanced Placement Macroeconomics, Concurrent Enrollment Courses, Assistant Volleyball & Softball Coach, FBLA Advisor, Yearbook, School Community Council, Teacher Coach/Mentor, School Accreditation Team, School Improvement Committee, Technology Improvement Committee, Textbook Adoption, Teacher Negotiations, Insurance Committee

**Security Police, United States Air Force**, *Hill Air Force Base, Utah*

Air Force Achievement Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Southwest Asia Service Medal, Kuwait Liberation Medal, Air Force Good Conduct Medal, E-4 Early Promotion, Honorable Discharge

## Appendix H

### IRB Stamped Participant Consent Form

#### Participant Consent Form

<b>Title of the Project:</b>	Executive Leader Perspectives of Rural School District Organizational Resilience: A Qualitative Case Study Inquiry
<b>Principal Researcher:</b>	Todd S. Burke, PhD Student, Education & Organizational Leadership, School of Education, Liberty University

#### Invitation to Participate in the Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be an executive leader in one of the three identified rural school districts. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about & why is it being done?

This study is about your executive leadership perspectives and how your school district is able to organizationally overcome challenges associated with low-income student factors and simultaneously sustain student achievement at exceptionally high levels. Your district was selected for the study because your district and your students consistently perform exceptionally well with state academic assessments compared to other similar Utah rural school districts.

This study is NOT about state assessments and student performance. Rather, this study is about how your school district executive leaders organizationally lead through challenging rural conditions.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in three (3) evidence data collection activities:

**Individual Interview:** 11 questions (30-45 minutes)

**Online Survey:** 10 questions (30-45 minutes)

**Provide Documents & Physical Artifacts:** During the interview and survey activities, you will be asked to provide easily accessible and publicly available organizational artifacts such as district documents, plans, policies, procedures, or other records that reflect how your school district functions.

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---------------------------------------------------------------



For individual interviews, participants will be given the questions at least 48 hours before the interview occurs through email notification. This will give you time to think about the questions and prepare for the interview. Your school district Superintendent or the researcher will send you the questions, date, and time of each activity to the email address you use for your school district position.

Your school district Superintendent or the researcher will send you the online survey to the email address you use for your school district position. You will have at least 48 hours to complete the survey. If you forget to complete the survey, you will receive a follow up phone call or email reminder.

**Check for Understanding Procedures** – After you provide your responses for each activity, the researcher will transcribe your responses for analysis. The analysis includes assigning parts of your responses to specific themes, patterns, or topics. Once the analysis is initially completed, the researcher will contact you by email and provide you with a copy of the analysis. You will have an opportunity at that time to 1) modify or change your response to each question, and 2) provide feedback to the researcher as to whether or not you agree with the analysis and why. It is your choice as to whether or not you want to provide additional information to the researcher.

#### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a better understanding of the perspectives and experiences of top-level executive leaders in your school district. This information may help other rural school district executive leaders support and sustain long-term student achievement.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved with the study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes.

Electronic records will be stored with password protection. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

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Data, records, and audio recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer and on a private Google account. The information obtained through the study will only be used to report the findings of the study. Only the researcher will have access to data files. Electronic records will be destroyed after three years.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is **voluntary**. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher right at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Todd Burke. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [tburke7@liberty.edu](mailto:tburke7@liberty.edu) or 435-590-0254. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Meredith Park, at [mjpark@liberty.edu](mailto:mjpark@liberty.edu).

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

#### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what this study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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Approved on 4-3-2023

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

*The researcher has my permission to audio-record my participation in an interview.*

Participant's Full-Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Approved on 4-3-2023

## Appendix I

### Individual Interview Script, Guidelines, & Questions

Thank you for participating in the study. As a reminder, all names and personally identifiable information will be kept confidential. Only an audio recording will be made of this interview.

This is a semi-structured interview and dialogue. I will read each question, and you can respond any way that you would like. I may follow up with other questions depending on your response to each question below.

1. Please describe your formal education and professional experience, including your current position with the school district. CRQ, SQ1
2. For several years, your school district has performed consistently well with state assessments and student proficiencies. Describe a few of the most critical professional challenges you have personally experienced in relation to your job assignments and how you overcame those professional challenges to help your students succeed with state student academic assessments and proficiencies. CRQ, SQ1
3. Describe the most important goals you have in relation to student achievement, and how you measure your success with those goals. CRQ, SQ1
4. From a leadership and management perspective, how do you lead and manage others in your job and assignments to support high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1
5. How do you intentionally plan for possible organizational adversity, uncertainty, and risks that may prevent students from attaining high academic achievement levels? CRQ, SQ1
6. How do you intentionally interact with other top-level leaders in your school district to improve and sustain high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1

7. From a leadership and management standpoint, how do you facilitate skill development and organizational learning processes (including professional development) that support and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
8. How do others in your school district support and help you deal with very difficult leadership and organizational challenges that affect student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
9. As unexpected organizational challenges occur, particularly challenges that affect student achievement, how do you adapt your practices to overcome those challenges and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
10. Describe your continual improvement professional growth plan. CRQ, SQ1
11. This study requires an analysis of district-wide organizational artifacts such as organizational documents, strategic plans, policies, procedures, processes, archival records and other evidence that reflects how the school district functions. What multiple lines of evidence and artifacts are available that I can review that explains how your school district is able to a) overcome significant organizational challenges, and b) sustain high levels of student achievement? How can I get access to these artifacts and evidence?

## Appendix J

### Survey/Questionnaire Questions

This open-ended survey focuses on your assignment and organizational function in the district (Board, Superintendent, finance, special education, secondary programs, technology, etc.). You will have at least 48 hours to review and respond to the survey. You may also make any changes to your responses within the 48-hour response period.

1. Email:
2. Thank you for participating in the study. As a reminder, all names and personally identifiable information will be kept confidential. For several years, your school district has performed consistently well with state assessments and student proficiencies. Describe a few of the most critical challenges (name of organizational function) experiences in relation to student achievement. CRQ, SQ1
3. Describe the most important goals (name of organizational function) has in relation to student achievement, and how (name of organizational function) measures success with those goals. CRQ, SQ1
4. Describe how (name of organizational function) consistently maintains optimism and hope for student achievement--particularly during challenging academic circumstances with students? CRQ, SQ1
5. From a leadership and management perspective, how does (name of organizational function) lead and manage others to support high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1

6. How does (name of organizational function) intentionally plan for possible organizational adversity, uncertainty, and risks that may prevent students from attaining high academic achievement levels? CRQ, SQ1
7. How do (name of organizational function) intentionally interact with other programs, schools, and departments to improve and sustain high student academic achievement? CRQ, SQ1
8. From a leadership and management standpoint, how does (name of organizational function) facilitate skill development and organizational learning processes (including professional development) that support and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
9. How do other programs, departments, and schools in your school district support and help (name of organizational function) deal with very difficult leadership and organizational challenges that affect student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
10. As unexpected organizational challenges occur, particularly challenges that affect student achievement, how does (name of organizational function) adapt practices to overcome those challenges and sustain high levels of student achievement? CRQ, SQ1
11. Describe the continual improvement professional growth plan for (name of organizational function). CRQ, SQ1

## Appendix K

## Deductive Code Frequency Code Counts

<b>Adaptive Flexibility Orientations</b>		
<b>Deductive Code</b>	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Problem-solution orientations	68	62.39%
Coping with actual disruptions	15	13.76%
Stakeholder relationships	13	11.93%
Adapting operations to overcome adversity	6	5.50%
Public & nonpublic agency relationships	4	3.67%
Open-systems dynamics & networks	3	2.75%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Anticipating Disruptions, Risks &amp; Adversity Orientations</b>		
<b>Deductive Code</b>	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Problem-solution orientations	69	63.30%
Financial risk planning	16	14.68%
Research-based planning	8	7.34%
Targeted student achievement outcomes	7	6.42%
Scenario simulations & planning	5	4.59%
Governmental regulatory risk planning	4	3.67%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Leadership &amp; Management Orientations</b>		
<b>Deductive Code</b>	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Transformational leadership	46	45.10%
Grit-resilient leadership	32	31.37%
Ethical leadership	14	13.73%
Inspirational leadership & management	10	9.80%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Goal &amp; Purpose Orientations</b>		
<b>Deductive Code</b>	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Targeted student achievement outcomes	39	45.88%
Mission, vision, values, & goals	27	31.76%
Organizational unity	8	9.41%
Performance feedback & outcomes	8	9.41%
Collective price	2	2.35%
Passion (consistency in interests)	1	1.18%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100.00%</b>



## Appendix L

## Exploratory Provisional Code Frequency Code Counts

<b>Core Values &amp; Beliefs</b>		
<b>Exploratory Code</b>	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Continual improvement & goal mindset	87	31.29%
Collaboration	71	25.54%
Effective teachers & student achievement	70	25.18%
Accountability	19	6.83%
Student mental health	9	3.24%
Relational trust	9	3.24%
Team philosophy	8	2.88%
Proactive planning	3	1.08%
Safe school environment	2	.72%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>100.00%</b>
<b>Strategies</b>		
<b>Exploratory Code</b>	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Instructional coaches, mentors, & support network	72	28.24%
Data-driven decisions	38	14.90%
Training & professional development	37	14.51%
Consistent & effective leadership meetings	21	8.24%
Employee compensation & hiring the right people	16	6.27%
Technology	11	4.31%
Character education	10	3.92%
Policies	9	3.53%
Evaluation & feedback	7	2.75%
Stakeholder input	5	1.96%
At-risk student population strategies	4	1.57%
Literacy	4	1.57%
Independent consultant or research-based resource	4	1.57%
CTE vocational classes	3	1.18%
High expectations	3	1.18%
Chain of command accountability	2	.78%
Personalized-competency based learning (PCBL)	2	.78%
Consequential planning	2	.78%
District report card	1	.39%
Calendaring	1	.39%
Registered behavior technicians	1	.39%
Counting F's	1	.39%
Athletics & academics	1	.39%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

## Appendix M

### Pattern Code Frequency Code Counts

<b>Professional Learning Community Strategies</b>		
	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Instructional coaches, mentors, & support network	72	38.50%
Data-driven decisions	38	20.32%
Training & professional development	37	19.79%
Evaluation & feedback	7	3.74%
Consistent leadership meetings	5	2.67%
Stakeholder input	5	2.67%
Literacy	4	2.14%
Independent consultant or research-based resource	4	2.14%
At-risk student population strategies	4	2.14%
CTE vocational classes	3	1.60%
High expectations	3	1.60%
Consequential planning	2	1.07%
Personalized competency based learning (PCBL)	2	1.07%
District report card	1	.53%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Human Resources Strategies</b>		
	<b>Frequency Code Count</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Training & professional development	37	59.68%
Employee compensation & hiring the right people	16	25.81%
Consistent leadership meetings	5	8.06%
Independent consultant or research-based resource	4	6.45%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100.00%</b>