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Instructional and Managerial Challenges of School Principals in Small Rural Schools

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Instructional and Managerial Challenges of School Principals in Small Rural Schools Districts

by

Brenita Burnett Jordan

MA, Lamar University, 2013

BS, University of Phoenix, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Principals in rural schools often must do more work with fewer resources and serve in many capacities performing both instructional and managerial duties. School principals in small rural school's experience challenges when performing instructional and managerial tasks. The purpose of this case study was to examine how school principals in small rural districts handle instructional and managerial tasks and the perception of their readiness to manage these instructional and managerial tasks. The conceptual framework was Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership, which defines main quadrants of leadership as (a) telling or directing, (b) selling or coaching, (c) participating or supporting, and (d) delegating. The research questions guiding this study were how school principals in small rural school districts handle instructional tasks, and how do school principals in small rural school districts handle managerial tasks. Data were gathered through interviews with 8 school principals from southeastern rural schools in the United States. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data for emergent themes. Findings revealed that successful rural school principals employ several leadership styles such as directing, coaching, delegating and supporting. Implications for positive social change occur when rural school principals were provided with peer mentor support groups, regional service center trainings pertaining to the rural principal's specific job roles, and when rural school principals were allotted time to develop manuals and a common set of standards for the rural school administrator.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this entire study to the three most important men in my life, my husband Quentin and our two sons, Keltin and Katron. Even when I wanted to give up and throw in the towel, I knew that you all were watching, and I did not want to let you down. On difficult days, and there were many, you guys always had words of affirmation for me. Quentin, you are my biggest cheerleader and the love of my life. I could not have made it without your support. Keltin, you are what I aspire to be when I grow up. You are wise beyond your years. You are the very best part of me. Katron, you are my heartbeat and the air that I breathe. You believed in me when I did not believe in myself. One day very soon, we will celebrate your victories as well. You three are truly the wind beneath my wings. Lastly, to my mother, I hold you in my heart and take you along with me on this new journey. We did it!

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First and foremost, all praises be unto God who has given me this victory. I know that without the Lord, this would not have been possible. I am who I am only by Your grace. I would like to thank my spiritual parents, Reginald and Juanita Watkins for teaching me how to dream big, work hard and walk in the favor of God. To my Praise and Glory Worship Center family, your love and support means more than words can express. I love you guys greater.

I would like to thank all of the Walden University professors and staff. A special thank you to my chairperson Dr. Mary Hallums and committee members Dr. Peter Kiriakidis and Dr. Rollen Fowler. This would not have been possible without your support and guidance.

To Dr. Bruce E. Hill. No matter where this journey takes me, I will never forget how hard you were on me. You never stopped pushing me and making me greater in the process. Thank you for every bump and bruise along the way. I am forever in your debt. You are one of the wisest men in education that I know. I have learned so much from you.

Lastly, to the “Walden Girls”- Dr. Melvinia, Dr. Jennifer, and Dr. Tiffany, meeting you ladies at the residency was a divine connection. Thanks for experiencing this journey with me. I will never forget you all. #WeGotNext! The best is yet to come!

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for all teaching and learning that occurs on a school campus (school district administrator, personal communication, June 1, 2019). The rural school setting brings with it numerous varied and unique challenges that principals encounter daily. The rural school campus principal is challenged with balancing instructional and managerial tasks (school district administrator, personal communication, June 1, 2019). Principals in rural school districts encounter the following key issues: (a) lack of time to adequately handle instructional tasks and (b) lack of time to sufficiently handle administrative tasks (du Plessis, 2017; Tuters, 2015).

Principals in rural schools play a key role as instructional and managerial leaders, and their leadership role has evolved and is complex (Hohner & Riveros, 2017). The role of the principal includes instructional leadership comprised of data analysis, facilitating professional learning for teachers, teacher evaluation and coaching, as well as more traditional skills related to the management of a school's day-to-day operations (Hoyer & Sparks, 2018). As the instructional leader, principals are responsible for hiring highly qualified teachers, supporting teacher use of best practice strategies, and demonstrating the school's vision of educating all students (Hoyer & Sparks, 2018). In terms of instructional responsibilities, principals are instrumental in fostering student learning and successful student achievement and outcomes (Hoyer & Sparks, 2018). Understanding how principals work in the context of small rural schools (SRSs) is critical in understanding how these principals enact and interpret instructional leadership to meet

the diverse needs of their rural community stakeholders (Bauch, 2001; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013; Tuters, 2015). For these reasons, I sought to gather input from current and former rural school system leaders who have experienced the instructional and managerial challenges of working in SRSs.

This chapter provides background literature on the topic of instructional and managerial challenges principals face while working in an SRS district. A qualitative case study was used as the methodological approach and information was gathered through face-to-face and Zoom interviews with eight principals who have worked in a rural school setting. The problem and purpose of this study were framed on beliefs of current and former principals' beliefs of how to overcome the instructional and managerial challenges of working in a rural school district. Two research questions that guided this study focused on gathering beliefs of current and former rural district leaders. Key terms are defined with accompanying descriptions of assumptions, scope, limitations, delimitations, and significance of the study prior to a chapter summary. In this study, I briefly summarize the research literature related to the scope of the study topic, describe a gap in practice in administration, and provide evidence that the problem is current, relevant, and significant to the discipline while making a connection between the problem and the purpose of this study.

Background

The rural school setting brings with it numerous and varied unique challenges that principals encounter, such as inadequate leadership preparation programs, limited resources, increased role demands, and isolation (Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley,

2016). Novice principals have reported many management and leadership challenges, such as time management, lack of policy knowledge, timely completion of paperwork, curriculum knowledge, and managing the budget (Lee, 2015; Nelson, Colina, & Boone, 200; White & Reid, 200). These challenges are especially taxing in the SRS setting, where an administrator does not have the opportunity to delegate tasks because of limited resources.

Principals know they must be in the classrooms observing instruction and student learning, and research has suggested a link between school leadership and overall student success and achievement (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). While attempting to monitor teachers as they deliver lessons to students, principals also have other responsibilities. These responsibilities include overseeing discipline, testing, maintenance, and fire and safety procedures as well as existing administrative, instructional, and managerial tasks (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). Rural school leaders are in a precarious position and must work well with both staff and key community stakeholders (Hohner & Riveros, 2017).

There are gaps in the research on leadership in rural schools. Researchers have suggested the mischaracterization that rural school communities are homogeneous, lack diversity and a common culture, and are viewed as a problem to overcome rather than a setting to understand (Tuters, 2015). Additional research is necessary to learn more about novice rural school principals and their instructional leadership experiences and challenges (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Brenner, Elder, Wimbish, & Walker, 2015; Budge, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Parson, Hunter, & Kellio, 2016; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Research findings have aided in helping to improve teacher and

principal job satisfaction and enhanced student achievement and student outcomes, along with principals' preparedness and willingness to work in SRSs (Lashley, 2014).

Increasing responsibilities and growing workloads have prevented principals from completing work routines and disrupted their ability to fulfill their duties (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). In SRSs, principals are often expected to do more with less support and dwindling funding than in urban school districts (Mette et al., 2017). A major challenge for principals in SRSs is balancing the dual role of administrator and manager (Mette et al., 2017). SRS principals acknowledge the conflict and tension between supervision and evaluation as they serve as both evaluators and instructional leaders for their staff (Mette et al., 2017). Recently, there has been a decline in the number of principal applicants due to increased responsibilities, legislative demands, heavy workloads, pressure of inadequate funding, stakeholder pressures due to high-stakes testing, and lack of administrative assistance (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Finally, principals in SRSs often attempt to determine, through trial and error, how to successfully perform the many instructional, managerial, and administrative jobs they are responsible for each day (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In this research, I sought to discover how principals successfully meet the challenges they face as instructional, managerial, and administrative leaders on SRS campuses.

This study was unique because I examined the unique challenges that principals face while working in rural schools as instructional and managerial leaders (Hansen, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Scholars have identified the complex nature of experience and novice principal leadership in SRS and community settings but not from

the perspective of novice and seasoned principals (Craig, 2017; Halton, Howard, & Teieczorek & Manard, 2018). In this research study, I conducted an examination of the experiences of current and former principals in SRSs.

Problem Statement

The problem is that SRS principals experience challenges when performing instructional and managerial jobs. It is not known how school principals in rural settings handle the lack of instructional and managerial task support and the lack of support to close achievement gaps and how they perceive their preparedness to handle administrative tasks (Craig, 2017; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Hattan et al., 2017; Mendiola, Bynum, & Westbrook, 2019). The principal role can be the most influential position in a school (Jutras, Wallin, Newton, & Adilman, 2020). Principals face challenges in SRSs when performing instructional and administrative jobs unique to that setting. How they face these challenges can depend on their preferred leadership style (Hersey & Blanchard, 2007).

In their role as school principals in SRSs, principals provide instructional leadership for teachers in the classroom where often there are no instructional coaches (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Furthermore, in an SRS setting, because of limited resources, the administrator is sometimes also the assistant principal, principal, instructional coach, teacher evaluator, custodian, testing coordinator, academic coach, disciplinarian for staff and students, and the maintenance supervisor (Mette et al., 2017). Often, in SRSs, a principal does not have an assistant principal to share the burden of leading the campus. Staffing is a result of the size of a campus, the number of students

on campus, and the amount of funding available in these rural areas (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). An SRS principal may be tasked with leading and equipping teachers with the necessary support they need and often tread into uncharted territory (Jutras et al., 2020). With the redistribution of governance and power, principals must meet the expectation of adaptability and problem solving outside the training they receive (Lashley, 2014). A principal must set the climate on campus to support teachers and students (Jutras et al., 2020). Little research has been conducted concerning the challenges and experiences of school principals as instructional, administrative, and managerial leaders in SRSs and how these challenges affect students, student achievement, staff, and other stakeholders (Preston, 2018). In addition to increasing accountability requirements placed on school principals, these SRS principals often have less decision latitude and autonomy when leading their schools (Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Mette et al., 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the instructional and managerial challenges experienced by school principals in SRS districts. To achieve this goal, I interviewed eight current or former rural school principals. The findings of this case study may help school principals to balance the instructional and managerial challenges and apply instructional and managerial skills in small rural districts. School principals may use the findings to better understand their instructional and managerial leadership practices.

Research Questions

Research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: How do school principals in small rural school districts handle instructional tasks?

RQ2: How do school principals in small rural school districts handle managerial tasks?

Conceptual Framework

Hersey and Blanchard's (1993) leadership theory guided this qualitative case study. The situational leadership framework was important to this study because it allowed the administrator to be flexible in their style of leadership. In SRS, principals often lead new and developing teachers as well as experienced teachers and staff. Hersey and Blanchard (1993) indicated that effective leaders must adapt their leadership style based on the strength of their team members. Leaders are encouraged to determine the capabilities of their team members and be flexible when choosing the leadership style that fits their circumstance and desired outcome (Hersey & Blanchard, 2007).

According to Hersey and Blanchard (2018), there were four main quadrants of leadership: (a) telling or directing, (b) selling or coaching, (c) participating or supporting, and (d) delegating. *Telling or directing* was described as micromanaging, with minimal emphasis on relationship building (Chapman, 2018). *Selling or coaching* offered or sold team members on an idea, and the leader praised them when the task or goal was accomplished. Selling or coaching is focused on relationships and task behaviors (Hersey & Blanchard, 2007). According to the situational leadership theory, school principals are flexible and versatile in their leadership, which depends on the situation and the maturity of their team members (Hersey & Blanchard, 2007). When *participating or supporting*,

administrative leader work with a team on an equal basis, sharing the decision-making responsibility (Hersey & Blanchard, 2007). Lastly, the *delegation* of authority involves a principal closely monitoring the progress of a task while placing responsibility for decisions and completion of the task on the team members (Chapman, 2018).

In this study, these framework elements informed the examination of beliefs of current and former principals concerning managerial and instructional challenges faced while working in a rural school district. The day-to-day job of a rural principal supports the need for authentic, high-quality, and meaningful field experiences of rural school principals regarding how to overcome the instructional challenges that arise while instructing and managing students and staff. This conceptual framework related to the research questions, which was how principals handle instructional and managerial challenges in SRSs, by asking open-ended questions. Interview queries were designed to address interactions and active learning of the field experience of the participants.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a qualitative case study design in which I questioned how principals perceive their leadership styles and roles as instructional leaders and school managers. This approach supported the understanding of the phenomena in everyday settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The primary goal of the qualitative case study design was to provide a mode of inquiry that centralized the complexity and subjectivity of lived experiences and did not claim that there were static or universal truths but rather that there were multiple perspectives and truths (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data were gathered from interviews conducted with eight current rural school principals or former

principals who had either retired or changed school districts from an SRS in Texas to a district not considered an SRS. Purposive convenience and snowball sampling were used.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit eight current or former principals in SRSs. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and were coded using a priori coding for thematic analysis. Data were organized using exact words or phrases of participants. Thematic analysis was used to determine emergent themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Participants of the study were required to have served in a rural school district as a principal for a minimum of 2 years.

Definitions

The following terms and phrases are defined as used in this study.

Instructional leader: Is knowledgeable concerning best practices and research based student-centered instruction and models strategies that promotes the learning and success of students in the classroom (Campbell, Chaseling, Boyd, & Shipway, 2019).

Novice principal: A principle with as little as 3 months' experience in the position up to 3 years on the job (NCES, 2016). School principals in SRSs perform various instructional and administrative jobs.

Rural school district: An area more than five miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urban area (Spillane & Lee, 2014) and has a population of less than 2,500 people. Rural schools are defined as a district in open countryside, rural towns, or urban areas with populations of fewer than 49,999 people (Rasmussen, De Jong, & Aderhold, 2018); in addition, they can be clustered in the vicinity of urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Urban: Having a population of 50,000 or more people. Urban clusters have a population of at least 2,500, but less than 50,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Assumptions

Assumptions are things taken to be true. For this study, assumptions were inductive based on the experiences in the collection and analyzation of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Assumptions were necessary for this study because there were explicit things used to describe a phenomenon, like principals are managers and instructional leaders in schools.

Assumptions are used to test theories. In this study, it was assumed that the sample was large enough to reach data saturation and the principals would provide honest answers. Second, because this case study focused on interviewing participants who had worked in or were currently working in SRSs, it was assumed that the participants knew the inner workings of being a principal on a rural campus. There was also an assumption that the interview questions would elicit reliable responses and the participants would understand the questions they were being asked. The assumptions were based on Hersey and Blanchard's leadership theory. It was assumed that one of the quadrants of their theory was that principals were generally only one type of leader style. Another assumption was that the principals had a sincere interest in participating in the study and were participating of their own volition and were self-selected. The assumptions were necessary for the study because each participant was assumed to be an expert, having worked in an SRS for 2–20 years or more.

Scope and Delimitations

This case study was conducted in several districts in the Southern region of the United States. There were three schools with three principals and two assistant principals. The instructional and managerial role challenges of the administrator in an SRS were examined in this case study. I did not personally know many of the participants of this study. The study participants were chosen at random and included principals and former principals working in an SRS district at least 2 years. I also invited current and former principals working in my current school district. The results and findings of this study were based largely on the instructional and managerial experiences of these individuals. Because this case study was conducted in several districts in the southern region of the United States, outcomes may not apply to all populations.

Principals in SRSs must assume numerous roles that principals in urban districts do not have to contend with because of shared role responsibilities (Renihan & Noonan, 2007). Rural districts often do not have the funding that urban districts have. In rural areas, principals face the challenge of locating highly qualified teachers. These rural areas often face significant challenges with human capital implications in attracting and retaining talented teachers in the classroom (Chuong & Schiess, 2016), making this a delimitation. Historically, rural areas also have a larger number of migrant and minority students, families in poverty, more special needs students, and a smaller hiring pool from which to select qualified individuals (The Rural Educator, 2007).

Limitations

Limitations are based on the setting, sampling, and recruitment method of a study. Limitations are based on the nature of the analysis of the subject rather than analytical data. The limitations are characteristics of the methodology that influence the interpretation of the findings. Limitations are restrictions on generalizing the findings to other populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In the school districts in this study, teachers and parents were not interviewed for this research.

A potential limitation of this case study was its credibility and its subjective findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which are based on interviews conducted with present and former principals in SRSs. Researcher bias was also a limitation. Researcher bias was addressed through the process of triangulation. In this case, triangulation consisted of interview transcriptions, member checking, and journaling. Finally, the sample size was small with just eight present and/or former principals in SRS participating.

Delimitations

Delimitations are those aspects of the research that cannot be controlled by the researcher and that place restrictions on the results of the study. Delimitations are choices or boundaries a researcher makes. In this research, some of the delimitations were the number and kinds of participants, the location and environmental setting, the questions used, and the qualifications of the participants. In this research, participants were individuals who are or have been principals or assistant principals in SRSs in the southern region of the United States. School principals contributed their perspectives during

semistructured Zoom meeting interviews. Participants must have worked as a principal for a minimum of 2 years and could be any gender, ethnicity, or any economic SRS school. An effort was made to ensure that data analysis occurred without personal opinions and preconceptions. Also, I sought to ensure an objective evaluation and interpretation of the collected data without factoring in personal opinions and preconceptions. The results of this research are nontransferable to other SRSs because the number of participants was small and from a rural school district only.

Significance

The significance of this study is to provide school district administrators, school board members, and local community members with an analysis of SRSs principals' instructional and managerial tasks. The principal is the most influential position on the school campus (Jutras et al., 2020). The findings of this case study may help rural school administrators apply instructional and managerial skills better when working in SRS. School principals may use the findings of this study to understand their instructional, managerial, and administrative leadership roles and practices. The findings of this study include the changes within the local school district, such as recommendations for school principals regarding the application of instructional, administrative, and managerial leadership. Rural principals need to understand the challenges of working in SRSs, as this will make it possible to develop the support mechanisms and resources needed as the instructional leaders on their campuses.

Summary

The background of the study was a lack of research relating to the challenges principals encounter while working in SRS districts. The problem statement and purpose of the study drove the research questions. In this chapter, a theoretical framework was provided along with the nature of the study. Finally, definitions, assumptions, scope, and delimitations were discussed along with the significance of the study. This qualitative case study was designed to examine the challenges that principals in SRSs encounter.

Principals face many challenges while working in rural areas and have a plethora of duties that must be performed. The principal administrator, as the campus leader, manager, evaluator, disciplinarian, curriculum expert, and many other tasks, titles, and duties, is highlighted. Also noted were the differences that principals in SRSs are subjected to that urban principals may not encounter. This study was significant as it contributes to current practices that principals employ when managing and leading their campuses as the instructional leaders. The problem stated is that school principals in rural settings must handle a lack of instructional and managerial tasks and lack of support to close achievement gaps and be prepared to handle administrative tasks. The purpose statement was determined by the problem statement, which focused on examining and understanding the challenges SRSs principals experience when performing instructional and managerial jobs. The research questions are aligned with both the problem statement and purpose statement. In Chapter 2, I will provide an overview of the literature search strategies with an in-depth explanation of the conceptual framework and literature review

of the related research of field experiences of current and former principal principals of SRSs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The word *rural* was important to this research for many reasons. School leadership is influenced by the characteristics of a school community and its geographical setting. However, research about effective school leadership in SRSs is rare (Clark & Stevens, 2009; Starr & White, 200). The amount of research on SRS leadership and the demands on differentiated attention has been scarce. When looking at the research, I found a limited amount of studies focused on how SRS principals successfully meet their staff and student needs (Lacey, 2019).

Little research had been conducted concerning how principals in SRSs overcome the challenges they face while working in SRSs. The problem in this study is that school principals in SRSs have challenges when performing instructional and managerial jobs. The problems SRS principals have and the challenges they face when performing instructional and managerial jobs were examined in this research.

In the first section of Chapter 2, I present the literature search strategy, followed by the conceptual framework, and the benefits of using a situational framework for this study. A literature review related to key concepts includes the study's fundamental constructs of instructional and managerial challenges faced by principals working in SRSs. Finally, I discuss strategies for leadership preparation and capacity building.

Literature Search Strategy

An initial literature search was done using the Internet on the challenges of principals in SRSs. Initial searches for journal articles, books, and texts broadened to electronic databases from Walden University. Specific databases were searched,

including Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, and Education Source. A combination of keywords and phrases were used in the search, including *rural principal*, *rural school challenges*, *managerial jobs*, *managerial tasks*, *instructional challenges*, *principal preparedness*, and *rural school preparedness*. Finding literature related to the challenges of working in an SRS was the goal of a broad use of related search terms that supported the problem, purpose, and research questions in this study. I used databases such as Google Search, ERIC database, and SAGE Journals. Case studies and dissertations via the Walden Library were used, and peer-reviewed articles were given priority in researching the SRS. Literature from 2015–2020 was given priority for this case study. The literature review was focused on rural schools, leadership challenges, duties of principals in rural schools, and reasons principals choose to leave or stay. The searches provided the needed information to plan, implement, and report recent findings for this case study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was based on Hersey and Blanchard's (1993) situational leadership. The situational leadership framework was important to this study because it allows a principal to be flexible in their leadership style. In SRSs, principals often lead new teachers and developing novice teachers and staff. Hersey and Blanchard's situational research (2018) suggested that developmental levels of individuals influenced leadership style. The concept of leadership styles began to appear in research as early as the 1930s, according to Ramage and Skip (2020). Their ideas have brought many variations. Leadership styles were generally defined as situational,

transformational, democratic, and autocratic (Hersey & Blanchard, 2007). Recently, the servant leadership style has also been defined. When principles are aware their leadership style it can help them shape their approach and be a more effective principal. If the leadership style matches the kind of management a teacher prefers, the workplace relationship will benefit.

Hersey and Blanchard's (1993) leadership styles were examined to determine the leadership style of the school. SRS is constantly changing in many ways. There is a concept among SRSs of "one and done," which means that once teachers have 1 year of experience, they leave the rural school district for various reasons, such a higher pay and location (Willis & Templeton, 2017). In addition, the makeup of a school board could change, bringing changes in policies and procedures. School board members and policies change frequently in SRSs. Many school board members are elected by voting in the community (Baojuan & Qing, 2017). An example of this was when a large corporation opens a new branch in an area within the school district boundaries. The types of employees who were hired might influence the demographics of the school district as well as elected school board members. For example, when a corporation was in the technology community, more personnel they employ had a higher education. Once teachers had one year of experience, they left the district for various reasons such a higher pay and or relocating closer to home or more populated areas (Pourrajab & Ghani, 2016). Many school boards changes were based on the voting of the community (Baojuan & Qing, 2017).

The attributes of situational leadership theory guided this qualitative case study as this was the perceived leadership style of the school. Hersey and Blanchard (1993) indicated that effective leaders must adapt their leadership style based on the strengths of their team members (Blanchard, 2018). Leaders are encouraged to determine the capabilities of their team members and be flexible and choose a leadership style that fits their circumstances and desired outcomes (Blanchard, 2018).

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1993), (see figure 1) there are four main quadrants of leadership: (a) telling or directing, (b) selling or coaching, (c) participating or supporting, and (d) delegating.

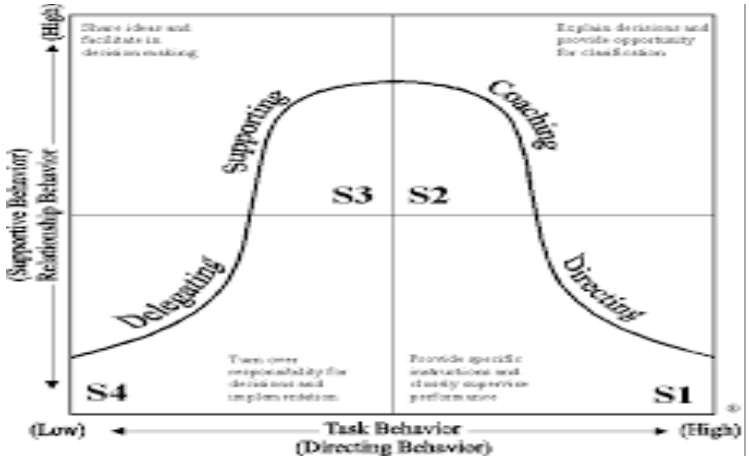

Figure 1. Hersey and Blanchard's (1993) leadership styles.

Telling or directing is described as micromanaging with minimal emphasis on relationship building (Blanchard, 2018). Selling or coaching offers or sells team members on an idea, and then the leader praises them when the task or goal is accomplished. Selling or coaching focuses on relationships and task behaviors (Blanchard, 2018). According to situational leadership theory, school principals are flexible and versatile in their leadership, which depends on the situation and the maturity of their team members

(Blanchard, 2018). When participating or supporting, the administrative leader works with the team equally, sharing the decision-making responsibility (Blanchard, 2018). Lastly, the delegation of authority by the principal closely monitors the progress of a task while placing responsibility for decisions and competition of the task on the team members (Chapman, 2018). Administrative leadership practices have been positioned as situational, meaning leadership is defined by "the organizational structures that shape their interactions, and the cultural context in which they are embedded" (Diamond & Spillane, 2016, p. 14).

Literature Review

School leadership is influenced by the characteristics of the school community and its geographical setting. However, research about effective school leadership in SRSs is lacking (White & Reid, 2008). Research on SRS leadership and its demands on differentiated attention has been scarce. Attention to leadership in SRSs is important because about one third of all schools in the United States are rural, and 24% of students identify as rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Studying SRS leadership could be beneficial because there has been a noticeable difference in educational outcomes at these schools (Wallin, Newton, Jutras, & Adilman, 2019). SRS principals need to see the successes of other SRS principals and use that information to emulate their leadership behaviors and actions.

Often rural school conjures thoughts of one-room schoolhouses with one teacher educating, taking care of, and supervising students of all ages. SRSs have changed since the time of one-room schoolhouses, but some of the barriers, challenges, and

opportunities for students have not changed (Echazzara & Radinger, 2019). No two SRSs are alike because of geographical distances, population sizes and density, socioeconomic statuses, ethnic makeup, and socially cohesive communities. Rural communities are generally a significant distance from other populated areas (Temple Newhook, 2010). This geographical distance can make SRSs' ability to hire and retain staff and provide them professional development difficult. Small population size and sparse population among SRSs leads to schools that are smaller than urban schools (Van Vooren, 2018). A dwindling population has been brought about by lower fertility rates, gains in land usage for agriculture, and lowered economies (OECD, 2015). Rural communities tend to have a higher aging population, which draws on social needs and public services (Van Vooren, 2018), which can take away from funding for schools (OECD, 2015). In addition, rural areas tend to be less economically sufficient (Lichter & Schafft, 2016). Rye and Scott (2018) and Wieczorek and Manard (2018) stated that rural students often work to pay for their basic needs and necessities, reducing the time they spend in school or studying after school. While rural communities are assumed to be stable, close, and ethnically homogenous, financial stability was a primary factor for a strong community and overlapping values and ethics (Rye & Scott, 2018). Agricultural migration has led to more diverse ethnicity and social implications; the dynamics of the rural community has changed (Rye & Scott, 2018). All these changes in these communities and populations have affected rural schools and their leaders as well.

Leadership Styles

Leadership was a way to persuade an individual or group to do what the leader/principal desires (Prezyna, Garrison, Lockte, & Gold, 2017). Simply put, leadership was a way of achieving a goal or task with the help of others (Shepherd-Jones & Salisbury-Glennon, 2018). Leadership has an impact on people and organizations (Callier, 2018). It is accepted that for leadership to be effective, how a group of people works with the leader is important. Understanding the importance of different leadership styles can be applied in any given situation (Lacey, 2019). This study will employ situational leadership. It is necessary to look at different types of leadership to understand better why situational leadership is appropriate for this study (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

The concept of a situational leadership (SL) approach of leadership is the belief that employees are at different levels of development and competence. A principal who practiced SL used a different type of leadership to meet the immediate needs of the situations and groups (Chapman, 2018). This allowed the events to shape the leadership style (Francisco, 2020). Situational leaders also made sure that the commitment and competence of their employees were considered (Northouse, 2018). SLs took on the role of adult educators to build commitment and competence to do what needed to be done to accomplish a goal (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Another way that SL was defined was that other leaders should be replaced for a specific situation with one who had a better skill set for that particular task (Chapman, 2018). However, this diminishes the role and empowered responsibilities of human resource development (Basham, 2018). SL required

that personnel were available to help in all areas of an organization, such as financial costs. The aspect of financial costs is irrelevant in education (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

There were many strengths in SL. SL trained their employees to become effective and shared in decision-making. In a school, it took the form of shared governance. There was a unit leader who had attended a meeting with the principal and told her colleagues what needed to be accomplished. The teachers, as a whole, decided how this would occur. SL was applied in various settings, such as how a classroom could be physically arranged (Northouse, 2018). The only involvement from the SL was to tell the teachers what was expected and supported the teachers' ways of how to do so. SLs were flexible; they changed the way they led based on what was required and how the teacher could meet those requirements (Northouse, 2018). This type of leadership was not typically founded in the schools because of the pressure from high-stakes testing.

There were opponents to SL. For example, Northouse (2018) identified a lack of research on SL and thus questioned its validity in this approach. SL did not consider the individual and demographic characteristics of the employee. SL did not completely address the issue of the needs of one person as opposed to the needs of the group (Northouse, 2018). However, Northouse discharged the idea that SL studies had been done and that SL had been used in public school for years.

An example was when a teacher introduced a new unit directly and laid the foundation for learning it differently. The teacher empowered the student by granting more decision-making to the student, gradual release of responsibility. This occurred

when the teacher delegated, supports, and coached the students. This gradual release of responsibility was often seen in the classroom with learning center activities (Wallin et al., 2019). This followed Bloom's cognitive domain by moving the students from a rote approach and also follows Bloom's taxonomy through comprehension to analysis, synthesis, and evaluative levels of learning. For this to happen, there had to be a degree of delegating decision-making. If this was given to the teacher by the principal, then it occurred with the teacher to the students. When it occurred from central administration to the principals, this only enhanced the fact that it would occur in an individual school.

Principal as Instructional Leader in Small Rural School Districts

Principals agreed that the number one priority of a school was instructional leadership (Wallin et al., 2019). Good principals engaged their schools in the core processes of establishing academic achievement (Jeffries, 2019). A competent principal, as an instructional leader (PI), evaluated, maintained, and improved their school structures and climates. Schools needed a PI to keep the running of the schools effectively and continually making improvements (Wallin et al., 2019). An SRS school needed to have PIs with a vast knowledge of how to be an effective instructional leader without creating stress on the teachers. Principals agreed with the notion that SRS schools had greater autonomy making it easier for them to be strong PI. The four main themes for a principal as a PI were (a) academic focus, (b) high expectations, (c) staffing, and (d) decision making (Wallin et al., 2019).

There was little research pertaining to successful rural school leadership. One study of successful rural schools in South Carolina determined that successful rural

school principals were noted to be (a) promoted people-focused leadership with all stakeholders, whether students, staff, or communities and (b) were notable change-agents through enacting strong instructional leadership practices while balancing local and district policies (Jefferies, 2019). Preston and Barnes (2017) determined that these successful rural school leaders were proponents of social change and had strong instructional leadership that led to student achievement in low socioeconomic areas where success rural school leadership was equated to strong interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and collaboration among parents, students, and staff members. However, on the other hand, these successful rural leaders were known to stimulate change in educational organizations and were strong instructional leaders advocating and promoting a positive school culture that affected student achievement (Jefferies, 2019).

Academic Achievement

Lakomski, Eacott, and Evers (2016) said that the most critical factor for student success in high poverty schools was the quality of the teacher. They also suggested that principals were most responsible for setting the climate of the school to support best practices (Lakomski et al., 2016). A positive school climate supported academic achievement (Pourrajab & Ghani, 2016). Quality teaching depended on three things: the materials available to the teacher, the schools where they work, and the professional communities they encountered (Geher, Wilson, Gallup, & Head, 2019). This then made the principal, as an instructional leader of the school, a critical factor in the improvement and the effectiveness of academic achievement. (Pourrajab & Ghani, 2016).

The functions of a school were to ensure that teaching and learning were taking place. Cosentino (2019) posited that principals could not be effective PIs if they were not aware of what was happening in the classrooms. However, principals reported that the amount of time spent in the classrooms was minimal compared to the time that they should have been in classes (Cosentino, 2019). Some of this time spent outside the classroom was in giving constructive feedback to teachers and having conversations about data to make the best data-driving decisions for student academic achievement (Van Vooren, 2018).

Cravens, Goldring, and Penaloza (2008) found that SRS principals acknowledged spending only a limited amount of time on being a PI because of all the other administrative tasks that were part of the job descriptions. Ideally, all other responsibilities were delegated to another campus leader. These were considered secondary goals of instruction (McCormick, 2019). The PI was about being a mentor and coach and providing teachers with what was needed to support academic achievement. Day to day activities were given to others if an assistant principal was not present. These included student and teacher daily attendance, discipline, student attrition, overseeing assessments, data on special populations, and teacher progress. When an assistant principal gave feedback, the PI was strengthened (Nidus & Sadder, 2016). Promoting the delivery of curriculum and instruction increased student academic achievement quickly and efficiently (Marchetti, Wilson, & Dunham, 2016). Principals were able to identify best practices for teaching from pedagogy to instruction materials, in addition to establishing a positive school climate (Ginsberg, Bahena, Kertz, & Jones, 2018). When

able to do so, effectiveness was seen in the general operation of a school and student academic success (Wallin et al., 2019).

Ball (2017) reported that in a school, commitments to change on the part of the teacher were most often affection by a principal who provided leadership, gave directions, and purposed to educate all students at high levels. This was also known as a 'no excuses' school culture for expectations and accountability. These applied to students and staff (Olsen, 2019). Many times, SRS principals had less than desirable guidance and support from their districts. This meant that many times, they must show business acumen and knowledge of curriculum and instruction. (Carpenter & Peak, 2013). This meant principals led with the district's policies and procedures, making academic achievement a non-negotiable (Basham, 2018).

High Expectations

Garcia, Salinas, and Edinburg (2018) described that a PI was one who had high expectations and clear goals for the staff and students. Garcia et al. suggested that the PI must also be clear in their communications to both students and staff. Competent PIs set high expectations and clear goals for students and staff. The primary feature in an SRS was that PIs set higher student expectations (Willis & Templeton, 2018). Teachers and students were reminded daily that they were expected to graduate from high school and enter an institution of higher education. High expectations helped to ensure this (Wallin et al., 2019).

The accountability of student expectations and staff accountability played a PI role. Teachers needed to accept the responsibility for the failure or success of their

school, not as individual teachers providing excellent teaching in their buildings but becoming a part of a team (Heflebower, Hoegh, & Warrick, 2017). If teachers would do this, then principals would be given some flexibility to make regular classroom visitations and monitor student learning through common and accepted priorities (Ginsberg et al., 2018).

Staffing

School improvement equated to school personnel improvement (Wallin et al., 2019). The challenge in schools, especially SRS, was more than finding qualified teachers (Willis & Templeton, 2018). It was also in finding teachers with experience and the ability to improve academic achievement. Nixon, Packard, and Dam (2016) put forth that mechanisms had to be in place to not only recruit, reward, and retain good teachers, but also have policies in place to remove ineffective teachers. Principals believed that circumstances should be easier in the nonrenewal of a teacher.

A capable PI needed the autonomy to hire excellent staff and set accountability and expectations when hiring their staff (Jefferies, 2019). In an SRS, the autonomy was given to a principal to lead a campus was one of the highest differences between rural and urban schools (Martin, 2020). Rural school principals often served as the human resources officers in the hiring process (Martin, 2020). If PIs were given the autonomy to do so, student success would increase. PIs focused on coaching teachers and providing interventions for teaching staff in a timely manner (Mette et al., 2017).

Data-Driven Decision Making

SRS principals had to deal with many specific challenges. State and national standards had to be met; facilities had to be maintained, budgets developed and met, staff needs had to be recruited, and the community needs had to be involved (Mendiola et al., 2019). This was done to make sound decisions with the help of all stakeholders. Principals must be adequately trained in how to properly manage in these crucial areas (Klocko, Jankens, & Evans, 2018). There was less specialized training for principal candidates who wanted to work in SRS. Many options needed to be available for SRS principals to gain experience and training (Parson et al., 2016). There was little content being taught relative to running an SRS (Mendiola et al., 2019). SRS school principals needed to have available to them professional development to improve not only their leadership skills but as an instructional leader. One way to do this was that an SRS principal needed to guide and develop any school curriculum. After the principal had received the basic knowledge of skills-based training, the schools provided students with high-quality academic learning (Martin, 2020). Once principals had a strong foundation in the theories and concepts of instruction, they had the skills to build for student academic achievement, whether in a rural or urban school district (Mette et al., 2017).

Principal as Manager in Small Rural School Districts

The management aspects of a principal had become important in the academic achievement of students. In fact, the term *principal management* (PM) was widely used extensively in education and is one of the two major responsibilities of a principal. The competent and essential PM focus was vital for the academic achievement of students

(Parson et al., 2016). The concept of PM was all-inclusive in that it had to do with all aspects of education. PM was the act of using available resources most efficiently and cost-effectively to achieve well-defined objectives.

A school must be efficiently managed. PM was essential for learning to occur. It was a crucial part of all parts of education (Jefferies, 2019). The definition of a PM could be explained in different ways. Besides the responsibilities of planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling, the PM process was a continuous one with them functioning at different levels with different stakeholders (Mendiola et al., 2019). They helped to control teacher efforts to achieve student success. The process involved a series of operations undertaken for achieving school goals. The process was systematic.

According to Kimmel, Benson, and Terry (2017), there were three parts to PM, (a) authority, (b) responsibility, and (c) accountability. Management was a specific process that was made up of the abilities to plan, organize, made to happen by controlling, performance, and accomplishing stated objectives. Fayol (as cited in Edwards, 2018) posited that management was to make a prediction and then plan, direct, coordinate, and control actions. PM was multi-faceted in that it brought together and managed principals and teachers.

PM was a process. Those who oversaw this process were principals. Principals assumed leadership collaborating with their stakeholders, teachers, staff, parents, and community. Having good relationships with the community was crucial and was especially important when working in a rural community (Martin, 2020). Good stakeholder relationships were especially important in a small school setting, where, for

more successful leaders, these relationships were a major means by which they led and managed their schools (Mendiola et al., 2019). PM must have had good stakeholder relationships. The importance of including all stakeholders could not be ignored (Jefferies, 2019). The job of a principal was to get things done, primarily with the support and cooperation of the teachers.

PM was an action-based method for achieving the academic success of its students. It was based on results and not just a philosophy or mission statement. PM puts forth the importance of academic achievement in suitable ways, such as choices in pedagogy, curriculum, and discipline (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Academic achievement was through the direct efforts of teachers through the use of PM evaluated using concrete results such as test scores. PM was complex and covered all grade levels, curriculum, and staff, not just teachers (McCormick, 2019). Principals worked at different levels, but their functions were the same. PM consisted of particular skills that were necessary for dealing with each teacher. PM was not an art but a science because it comprised organized knowledge (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). PM were professional because its basis came through cultivated and advanced knowledge (Parson et al., 2016). Excellent coordination gave a clear direction to the well-working of school by providing unity (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Effective communication was essential not only with teachers but with all stakeholders. Principals needed to be innovative in adjusting their communication styles to a situation (McCormick, 2019). Because each school was unique, one principal could not repeat the decisions of another (Jefferies, 2019).

Functions

Principals were the managers in schools who organized educational activities from clubs, sports games, and extra-curriculum activities. Every principal supervised non-curricular activities making the responsibilities quite extensive (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Changes in the budget, social, political, technology, and staff needed to fall under the management responsibilities of the principal (McCormick, 2019). All these changes had either a direct or indirect influence on academic achievement (Jefferies, 2019). The PM had to adjust to all these changing forcing and addressing them in the everyday running of a school. All of this was done to maintain specific learning objectives. In education, teachers worked with each other. They needed guidance and direction for efficiency (McCormick, 2019). In the absence of a PM, teachers would work as they wished, making the efficient operating of the school less than desirable (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). A PM was needed to guide teachers but not take away their sense of self. If they did, then academic achievement would be hindered.

The essential functions of a principal were many (Preston, 2018). These included organization, coordination communication in and outside the school, and controlling the basic running of a school. The principal as a manager was also needed for motivating teachers and coordinating their efforts to attain academic achievement of the part of students in a certain amount of time (McCormick, 2019). With the advent of high-stakes testing, education today is highly competitive (Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Fundamentals

The responsibility of principals as managers was broken down into 17 fundamentals.

1. Planning was the primary function. It involved determining what course of action was to be taken to achieve student success. Planning was the beginning point of all the other management processes, and all other fundamentals were related to and dependent upon planning. Planning was crucial to the success, stability, morale, and effectiveness in student success. Planning helped visualize the future and helped provide solutions for any contingency (Niswatyet al., 2019).

2. Organization was second to planning. Good organization brought together all the educational resources that stakeholder had to achieve student success. Organization meant finding and arranging ways to execute the educational plan. It provided structure and facilities to execute the school goals and objectives. There were different parts of organization (Niswatyet et al., 2019).

3. Staffing referred to how teachers were hired and how they were retained. Staffing involved recruitment, selection, placement, and development of teachers. The need for staffing occurred yearly, along with the diversity found in teaching and extracurricular activities. Every school needed an efficient, constant, and cooperative staff for the PM. Staffing at all levels from the classroom to the cafeteria was entrusted to the principal. The right teacher needed to be placed in the right grade level (Niswaty et al., 2019).

4. Directing/leading was imperative with guiding teachers to ensure academic achievement correctly. PMs needed to work as leaders of teachers without seeming to be autocratic. Strong plans and sound curriculum objectives at the baseline but required a principal as a manager to direct and lead the school staff. This included raising and/ or maintaining teacher morale, communicating, leading, and motivating. These were all essential on the part of the principal in a management capacity to achieve school objectives (Niswaty et al., 2019).

5. Successful coordination and the integration of activities of different grade levels were essential for the working of a school. The PM was responsible and must account for the work that was assigned. These tasks may be singular or independent from other functions making coordination essential—a singular independent function or as a part of the function of a school.

6. Controlling was also a significant function of PM (Niswaty et al., 2019). The PM assured that the wrong activities were avoided, and grade-level activities were used. There were three parts to controlling (a) establishing standards of performance, (b) measurement of the achievement in the process and interpretation of test results, and (c) taking the proper corrective actions, if need be. Education plans did not necessarily produce positive student success automatically. PM had to have an educational plan in order to do so. Control was closely aligned with other functions of the instructional principal. When there was no planning, there was nothing to be evaluated (McCormick, 2019). Controlling was continuous.

7. Motivation provided teachers with the morale to have teachers give their best to their students. This was accomplished by encouraging teachers take more interest and initiative within the proper bounds of teaching. Schools thrived when teachers were motivated. Motivation was either intrinsic or extrinsic, but no matter what way, motivation was inspirational and encouraged teachers to work (Niswaty et al., 2019). This psychological process was important.

8. Communication, whether it was written or oral, was crucial for the exchange of opinions, facts, information, and ideas among all stakeholders in the school. Communication gave information, guidance, and instructions. Principals, whether managers or instructional leaders, used the majority of their time in communicating to direct, motivate, and coordinate (McCormick, 2019). Communication occurred through people thinking and collaborating.

9. The PM used the availability of teachers and school resources, leading to student success. The principal managed both teachers and resources to ensure that teachers were adequately compensated for tutoring students before and after school. The PM managed the budget to ensure these things were properly taken care of (Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

10. Principals motivated teachers to self-select to become more involved in teaching to contribute to academic achievement (Usman, Murniati, & Tabrini, 2018). The PM served as the teacher-coach and encouraged leads, and guided teachers using best practice strategies (Niswaty et al., 2019).

12. Success and stability happened when the PM was effective in garnering cooperation and support not only from the teachers but from all stakeholders such as parents, students, and community members (Usman et al., 2018).

13. PMs develop a united, positive team spirit, which raised the overall academic achievement of the students (Usman et al., 2018). The PM was able to create a positive school culture.

14. PMs guaranteed the best use of teachers so that the benefits of their teaching skills, innovative ideas, and maturity were valued (Usman et al., 2018).

15. A PM made sure the functioning of teachers was orderly, smooth, and continuous over the entire school year. This also raised academic success (Usman et al., 2018).

16. Efficient PMs reduced teacher turnover and absenteeism to ensure continuity in the education of students (Usman et al., 2018).

17. A principal, as a manager, ensured that the school can face any situation - fortunate or unfortunate with effortlessness and confidence (Usman et al., 2018).

The very survival of a school depended on its principal in the capacity of a manager. Ineffective principal leadership led to disastrous results (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). PMs were in a unique position in the functioning of schools. The importance of a positive PM in education was not a given with limited access to professional development, access to colleagues, and limited collaboration opportunities. Forner et al. (2012) believed that the ability of a rural school principal to lead the 21st century successfully were very slim.

Students in Small Rural Schools

In the United States, students in SRS outperformed those in city schools (Lackey & Thompsett, 2018). Rural schools were often overlooked in research (Jefferies, 2019). As some studies indicated, rural students frequently faced several challenges in their transition to and completion of secondary education. Lackey and Thompsett (2018) showed that rural student displayed negative and positive affective and behavioral outcomes. Rural students were less likely to have role models, self-esteem, and school resources (McCormick, 2019). Schools fostered the development of social and emotional growth. SRS faced this lack because of a lack of support from the parents, community, school, and peers. Students in SRS were somewhat more likely to be bullied than those of their urban counterparts (Lackey & Tompsett, 2018). Fifteen percent of students in SRS reported that they were pushed around, verbally abused, and hit compared to 100% in urban schools. Twenty-seven percent of SRS reported that 27% of the students were left out of activities on purpose (Lackey & Tompsett, 2018).

Irvin, Byun, Meece, Reed, and Farmer (2016) indicated that rural students were behind in academic achievement. Socioeconomics decreased by about 70% in rural areas (Irvin et al., 2016). The gap was also seen in the lack of career choice from role models and highly skilled jobs in the community. Diverse settings provided different types of motivation and choices. The level of educations was lower among rural parents (Jefferies, 2019). This proved to be a challenge to the principal because of lower home-school involvement and created barriers for the children to have career aspirations (Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Learning Experiences in SRS

SRS were often seen in a negative light. They were small, isolated, and had lower socio-economic conditions (Martin, 2020). This produced a lack of quality teachers and limited advanced courses. Classroom populations were smaller than urban ones, with fewer students per teacher (McCormick, 2019). However, limited enrollments caused a student not to take advanced courses such as physics or advanced placement English/Language Arts (Irvin et al., 2017). This was because of a financial perspective and teachers who were qualified to teach such. SRSs faced the challenges of meeting the needs of special needs children. Teachers had to work with students from a wide range of abilities and interests beyond their capabilities (Schafer & Khan, 2016). So, the potential of smaller classes proved to be a disadvantage in SRS (Lacey, 2019).

Forty-two percent of students in SRS arrived late for school at least once every two weeks, compared to 4% of urban students (OECD, 2016). In skipping school, the percentages were almost identical. (OECD, 2016). The smaller population in rural communities made the per capita expenditure higher than urban schools because of the high fixed costs, such as building and furnishing a school (Lacey, 2019). School funding also put SRS schools at a disadvantage. In some states, school financing was dependent on the local tax base, which puts SRS at a greater disadvantage. The small size of the SRS made budgets less stable and predictable (Martin, 2020).

Quality Teachers

Providing students with the most highly qualified teachers and school leaders was challenging in SRS (OECD, 2016). In recent years, there had been a teacher shortage

throughout the United States, but especially in rural southern states (Tran, Smith & Fox, 2018). In rural areas, almost 40 percent of remote rural schools were challenged with retaining highly qualified teaching staff (Tran et al., 2018). Research suggested that barriers to hiring rural schoolteachers were lowered salary offerings, eroding community tax bases, higher percentages of students who struggled academically, remote areas, small communities, and distances from major areas (Tran et al., 2018). In recent years, there had been a trend of teachers in the Southern region of the United States, either retiring or quitting the teaching profession altogether (Tran et al., 2018).

The reputation of a school influenced the kinds of teachers and principals that chose to work in rural communities. It was also harder to retain competent staff and principals (Lacey, 2019). Another factor was the location of the school itself. In sparsely populated areas, it could take students and staff over an hour to get to school (Papay & Kraft., 2017).

Teacher Preparation

Years of research reported that teachers often felt inadequately prepared in teacher preparation programs to teach in hard to staff, high needs areas such as rural areas (Tran et al., 2018). Teachers were not be prepared to teach in SRS because teacher preparation programs most often focused on teaching and teaching practices in urban school districts (Ares Abalde, 2014). Many novice teachers reported student teaching in urban or suburban areas before accepting teaching positions in a rural area (Tran & Dou, 2019).

Teachers in rural areas were responsible for teaching outside their accredited areas. They had no training either in the subject matter or grade level. This required them to take additional preparation time (Tran & Dou, 2019). These teachers reported feeling inadequate when performing teaching duties (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). In recent years, many rural school districts had gone to a "grow your own" rural teacher preparation program to overcome the challenges of recruitment and retention (Moffa et al., 2018).

Moreover, new state and local standards brought about changes in curriculum and placed another burden on the teacher. SRS had limited or no access to assistant principals, curriculum specialists, and instructional coaches. For professional development, they were often required to drive long distances for training. This included staying overnight and finding substitute teachers, which placed an additional economic burden on the districts (Barrett-Tatum & Smith, 2017; Timar & Carter, 2017).

School Leadership

School principals were crucial for building positives school cultures, making learning a collective responsibility, and established shared decision-making practices (Bellei et al., 2016; Spillane et al., 2017). It was important for school principals to be skilled in instructional leadership (Mette et al., 2017). School principals had to be aware of the contexts in which they were leading and adjust to changes by using appropriate actions and practices (Lacey, 2019). This brought challenges such as leadership isolation and limited access to professional administrative learning (Hardwick-Franco, 2019).

Principals, in general, had a wide range of responsibilities and tasks, including those in rural areas. SRS principals were responsible for many roles, from classroom teaching, leading instruction, and assessment, managing school budgets, adhering to central office accountability, test scores, reporting requirements, and developing good relationships with the community (Lacey, 2019). Sometimes SRS principals managed several schools (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Reconciling local school demands with central ones created more challenges (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

In rural communities, there were underlying accountability issues (Preston & Barnes, 2017). These included scrutiny and public visibility. When change occurred, principals needed to create a culture of critical inquiry rather than keeping the status quo (Sunderman, Cohlan, & Mintrop, 2017). The threat of school closures because of falling enrollments made it more difficult to bring school improvement (Sunderman et al., 2017).

Preparing and Developing School Principals

A significant challenge for SRS was the lack of preparedness among school principals for living and working in rural areas (Jefferies, 2019). If a principal had a high level of preparedness for rural education, the ability to attract and retain teachers was easier (Ball, 2017). A supportive learning environment was one in which there were quality relationships among teachers, staff, parents, community, and the students. They needed shared expectations, and when doing so, teacher retention was high, making student achievement possible (Papay & Kraft, 2017). There had to be a supportive principals and professional opportunities for the teachers to do this (Jefferies, 2019).

Successful, effective SRS principals were people-focused with all stakeholders (Preston & Barnes, 2017). The principal had the opportunity to be a change agent in balancing local, district and state policies. Collaboration with all stakeholders was critical (Basham, 2019). Research had been well documented in that successful leadership was the substance for academic achievement and wellbeing. Studies had documented that successful leadership was a catalyst for improved student achievement and wellbeing (Basham, 2019).

People-Centered Leadership

The research showed that successful SRS leadership had strong maintenance of relationships and establishment (Caillier, 2017). Strong leadership was about nurturing relationships with all stakeholders (Jefferies, 2019). Research revealed that successful SRS principals had a leadership style that was based on teamwork. This helped with morale, motivation, and job performance of all staff members (Preston & Barnes, 2017). SRS principals were in a good position to promote collaborations, build trust, and bring about student academic achievement (Irvin et al., 2016). Preston and Barnes (2017) suggested that successful principals in rural school districts were one that encouraged teachers to work together to share pedagogical knowledge and experiences during faculty meetings. Effective rural principals promoted collaboration and capacity-building (Caillier, 2017). This generated self-pride, teacher job satisfaction, and personal wellbeing (Preston & Barnes, 2017). A strong rural principal encouraged professional connections with all staff members. Preston and Barnes (2017) reported that it was not unusual for SRS principals to informally meet with the teachers to discuss specific

student academic progress. Teachers found that these face-to-face meetings were supportive. Preston and Barnes posited that principals in SRS were more accessible than those in urban districts. The principal in an SRS was an ideal position to get to know every parent and student. This created a learning environment that was responsive to the individual needs of each student (Ozdemir, 2019). Effective leadership in SRS was one that encouraged listening, welcoming, and responded to parents (Irvine et al., 2016).

Principals as Change Agents and Instructional Leaders

A person who either unintentionally or intentionally supports or accelerates behavior, social, and/or cultural change was a change agent (Tran & Dou, 2019). A principal in SRS was in an excellent position to be a change agent, not only in the schools but also in the community. SRS principals were asked to endorse policy changes that were originally meant for urban districts (Schafft, 2016). If rural school principals were to be effective, then they had to balance community expectations and visions with those at the district and/or state level. These principals understood how this influenced the SRS. They were effective when they could balance both (Tran & Dou, 2019).

The effective SRS principal was one that was a strong instructional leader. They encouraged a school culture where teachers were empowered to try new ideas and take well-calculated risks (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Many times, rural principals taught, in addition to handling administrative and managerial duties. Their teaching put them in a position to provide curriculum and guidance to teachers (Tran & Dou, 2019). SRS principals led through role modeling as the instructional leaders (Cosentino, 2019). They advocated quality professional development that was accessible to their staff (Preston &

Barnes, 2017). Because of the internet, distance was longer a barrier for teachers to get quality professional development. A strong principal was one who recognized their staff achievements with formal and informal awards and positive communications (Preston & Barnes, 2017). The successful instructional SRS principal had an emphasis on the instructional style that brought about high academic achievement for all students (Cosentino, 2019). They had high expectations for their teachers by striving for all students to be on-grade level reading and by encouraging academic achievement on standardized tests (Cosentino, 2019).

Summary and Conclusions

Though the literature was rich concerning the rural school, there was not a varied selection of research concerning how principals in rural schools could successfully overcome the many challenges that they faced. The literature was substantial, providing that the principal was essential in the success of the school. Words and concepts that addressed this problem include supportive, community-focused, cooperative, visionary, accommodating, and decisiveness. These all brought about collaboration. Regardless of the school's location, the dynamics of the staff, or the number, type, or grade level of students, a rural principal who fostered rich, collaborative relationships with teachers, students, parents, community members, and senior educational leader was positioned to succeed. Prior research provided insight into the variety of roles that principals undertook, but many studies had been limited to single school districts and thus presented a limited picture of how rural school districts principals spent their time.

Chapter 2 included information on the literature search strategies. A conceptual framework was introduced. Principals as instructional leaders in SRS and urban school districts was present. Chapter 2 also included sections on principal as managers in both SRS and urban schools. Quality teachers, teacher preparation and school leadership were discussed. Preparation and development of principals as the change agents were given. Hersey and Blanchard's (1993) leadership theory was discussed and examined for this study. The principal as the situational leader was examined in chapter two. Attention to leadership styles in SRS was evident through the literature.

The principal as the instructional leaders on their campus was key in the research. Many rural school principals reported having numerous duties and jobs, in addition to being the instructional leaders on their campuses (Jeffries, 2019). Barnes (2017) determined that successful principals were not only prominent instructional leaders but also known to stimulation social change in the educational field. Lakomski, Eacott, and Evers (2016) reported that the principals most important role is school climate had a direct correlation to student achievement. One of the main roles of the principal was to ensure that teaching and learning were occurring (Cosentino, 2019).

Chapter 3 includes information on the research design and rationale for this case study. The role of the researcher was written. Chapter 3 includes the data analysis plan for data collection, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and shared with the participants for review to ensure accuracy of the data prior to coding and analysis. In addition, participant selection, instrumentation, and the procedures for recruitment of principals were elucidated.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The research problem in this study was that principals in SRS districts face many instructional and managerial challenges. The purpose of this study was to examine the instructional and managerial challenges of past and present principals who had worked in small rural districts. I chose a case study approach to identify managerial and instructional leadership practices of rural school principals. When seeking to understand a contemporary phenomenon deeply and in a real-world context, a case study is the best model (Yin, 2014). In this chapter, I describe the research design, methodology, instruments, and data collection.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions that guided this study was: How do school principals in SRS districts handle instructional tasks? How do school principals in SRS districts handle managerial tasks? Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted that qualitative research makes meaning of the experiences of the participants. I chose a qualitative design for this study because it focused on the instructional and managerial challenges of principals currently and formally working in rural school districts using the experiences of current principals and past rural school principals. According to Yin (2017), case studies are the preferred method when researchers are asking why and how questions. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), a qualitative approach is a mode of inquiry that centralized the complexity and subjectivity of lived experiences and does not claim static or universal truths but rather asserts that there are multiple perspectives and truths. In this method, “the

researcher collected open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data" (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, para 2).

This qualitative case study addressed a gap in knowledge and understanding of how principals in rural areas complete the many duties before them and still are effective instructional leaders managing campuses. I chose a case study design to investigate this phenomenon. Data were collected through in-depth interviews about real-life situations. Case studies are used to examine the causes of underlying principles.

The use of the qualitative design for this case study was supported by Crawford, Burkholder, and Cox (2016). Qualitative design was appropriate for this study because information was needed from participants through the interpretive lens of a researcher. Due to the small participant population of this study, the qualitative design allowed me to draw meaningful data from each interview participant, which is key in a qualitative approach (Crawford et al., 2016). A qualitative design allows for the construction of meaning from data and participant interviews (Crawford et al., 2016). A quantitative approach would not provide the participants beliefs needed to obtain the use of field experiences.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was that of an interviewer, and as such, I prepared a list of questions and probing questions. I am currently an assistant principal administrator at one of the rural school district schools where this case study took place. I have worked in this position for 4 years and did not supervise any of the participants of the study. As a current assistant principal and current colleague of the participants and interviewees in

this study, bias was a continual factor to manage as data were collected, analyzed, and reported. As the researcher, I had to set aside any formal training and preparation and remain open to new ideas discovered in the case study, participant interviews, and review of common themes discovered in the data. I had no power relationship with any of the participants of this study. The study participants were current or former principals from SRSs. Assurance was given that all participants understood their role in this study was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Participants were not compensated in any way. Data were collected, analyzed, transcribed, and reported. Documentation was recorded and stored in a secure place for access only by me.

I gathered data from participants using individual face-to-face interviews. Interviews were held online using the program Zoom. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Alpha-numeric pseudonyms were given to participants to protect their privacy and their rights. The thoughts and feelings of the participants were gathered concerning their areas of expertise, having worked in a rural school district.

As a current assistant principal, current colleague of the participants, and interviewer in the study, bias was a continual factor to manage as data were collected, analyzed, and reported in this study. I needed to set aside my formal training and remain open to new ideas and strategies and thoughts discussed within the case study, participant interviews, and review of the archival data. Bias from personal feelings, values, or assumptions on the part of a researcher should not influence the results of a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To manage bias throughout the case study, interview

questions were open-ended and were recorded and reviewed by a peer reviewer not involved with the study to ensure that the interview questions were aligned to the research questions, participants were allowed to respond with little limitations, and researcher bias was identified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Conducting the study in my own work environment, particularly because of issues of confidentiality and informed consent, and with individuals I work closely with were ethical considerations I needed to address (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I ensured that each participant understood that participation was voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participants of this case study were required to have formerly served or currently serve in an administrative position in a rural school district for at least 2 years. This case study consisted of eight current or former principals from SRS districts. Purposeful sampling was used. Participants were not under my supervision and participated on a voluntary basis; they could elect to quit the study at any time and for any reason. These individuals were sent information regarding the study and a consent form to participate.

The eight participants for this study were chosen based on their experience as a current or former administrator in an SRS. Several of the participants had worked in both urban and rural school districts. Participants were identified as meeting the criteria based on their job title and position within the districts of the case study. Only eight participants were selected for this study because of the limited number of principals working in a

rural area. Each of the participant's job experience provided a unique belief and understanding of the instructional and managerial challenges often associated with working in a rural school district.

Instrumentation

The interview questions served as the primary research instrument for this case study. A researcher-produced interview guide containing opening comments, interview questions, and closing comments for each interview was the primary instrument used for this case study. The guide also included space for field notes during each interview. The interview instrumentation for the study was created from a series of interview guides developed by Walden University (2016, 2016a; 2016b) and used in various courses of study by Walden University.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for later coding and reference. Each participant received an email inviting him or her to participate in the study. Approximately one week later, individuals who agreed to participate in the study received a digital invitation to set up a date and time for the interview. Once scheduled, a meeting place was determined for the convenience of the participant.

The meeting took place after school hours in the participant's office via Zoom meetings throughout the day, with participants being in the privacy of his or her own office or home. A 'Do Not Disturb' poster was placed on the closed door of the selected interview place. Once the interviews had been audio recorded for transcription and coding purposes, a copy of the transcribed interview was sent to each participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A backup recorder was used in case something went wrong with the first

Zoom recorder. Through membership checking, participants had an opportunity to read and discuss anything that he or she felt needed to be amended. No participant felt as if anything needed to be amended or changed. Participants received a thank you email for their participation in the study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

I focused on the beliefs of principals gathered through Zoom interviews and analysis of archival data in the form of descriptive survey data, on the usefulness of overcoming instructional and managerial tasks experience component within a rural school principals' duties and tasks. The participants participated in a qualitative case study that allowed them to share their beliefs and ideas on the usefulness of a field experience component to provide recommendations to the novice and seasoned rural school principal administrator.

An initial letter of support was obtained from the school superintendent (see Appendix A). An email was sent to current and former principals of rural school districts describing the study and inviting each of them to participate. Informed consent was obtained from each principal (see Appendix B). The study procedures were thoroughly explained to each potential participant, including how each principal remained anonymous and would receive no monetary benefits if they chose to participate. Every willing participant was contacted via email to set up a time that was convenient for him or her to take part in the interview.

The interview process took approximately 30 minutes but was scheduled for an hour. The same interview questions were asked in the same order for each participant (see Appendix C). Interviews were conducted in a quiet place such as an office or a place of the interviewee's choosing. The interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken as well. Questions were shared in an email format so that the participant had sufficient time for reflection upon the questions to be asked during the interview. After the one hour Zoom meeting interview had been completed, a transcription of the interview was given to the participant before the submission of data for the study. A follow-up interview was also be offered if the participate requests it.

Data Collection

I sent an email to identified participants who met the selection criteria to request their participation in the study. Those who did not respond to the email, I sent another email as well as to additional potential participants until I had a larger sample. Principals who replied with "I consent" were provided the details for the interviews.

I conducted interviews for this study via Zoom. I scheduled each interview for 1 hour. I informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. I used no identifying information to protect participants' confidentiality and to elicit open and honest responses. In addition to recording each interview with the permission of each participant, I took notes.

I transcribed the recordings from each interview. The notes contained the date, time, and information from the interview. I sent a summary of the participants' codes, definition of each code, and a quote from the transcript for the participant to do member

checking. The participants emailed back if they had any changes to the codes. There were no changes to the codes. Participants were sent a thank-you letter via email for their participation in this research study.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis process was focused on the research question and aligned to the conceptual framework (Yin, 2014). I analyzed all of the data by firstly reading all of the transcribed interviews. I took notes from the first reading. Interview transcripts were organized to manage the data. Emergent themes required thematic analysis. Initial coding aimed to uncover common themes and categories that arose from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Initial coding was ideal for interview transcripts to acclimate the participant language (Saldana, 2015). The first cycle of initial coding consisted of specific words or phrases. While coding, I kept notes to document the meaning of the codes. The second cycle of line-by-line coding was to enhance the details of the data. Next, I sorted the codes into categories and subcategories while exploring the relationship between the categories and subcategories. The categories revealed the broader themes, and the subcategories support the themes. No discrepant data was found in the first cycle of coding. The open coding process, of the data, directly added to the work's validity. Validity of the work was to strengthen credibility. Qualitative research used member checking to strengthen credibility (Merriam, 2009). Member checking was also called response validation, feedback given about the data collected, and conclusions from the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was a characteristic to endorse and validate the research. Moskal and Leydens (2002) defined validity as the appropriateness of interpretations, the degree to which the evidence the results, and the correctness of the data. Joppe (2000) argued that validity occurred if the obtained results were believable and truthful. In addition, Joppe stated that to determine validity, a series of questions were posed. The researcher would find the answers of others to know if the measurement was accurate or not.

Credibility

Trustworthiness begins with establishing credibility within the methodology of the project; especially the data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The researcher's role was to include all the complexities that presented themselves within the study and draw meaningful inferences from the data presented by each of the study participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The research participant's role was to answer each of the questions without bias based upon his or her experiences as an administrator of a rural district. Coding, looking for similar trends, themes, and patterns in the data were used. Credibility and transferability were paramount to the success of the study.

Transferability

A thorough description of the data collected through Zoom interviews was provided. In addition to finding eight case study participants, a spectrum of beliefs on the phenomena being studied were given. Participants were chosen based upon their having worked in a rural district a principal in a rural school district. As noted by Carl and Ravitch (2016), transferability allowed the audiences of the research to transfer aspects of

the study design outcomes by the consideration of contextual factors without attempting to replicate the design and findings of the case study.

Dependability

Interview data, member checks, conceptual framework and literature review were a requirement for dependability of this study. During this process, common themes, and trends to establish categories were examined. While engaged in data collection and analysis, I was mindful of my role as a researcher and any personal thoughts and kept an open mind to allow myself the ability to change beliefs and adapt to what the data revealed. The analysis of interview data was utilized to ensure accurate coding of interview data. Transcripts were used to determine an accurate collection of interview data as copies of transcripts were provided to each of the study participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Peer-debriefing occurred with the participants to allow me to confirm interpretations and coding of the data as well as ensure that the development of categories was accurate. Saturation was reached when no new data or categories were introduced (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Confirmability

Confirmability was established through memo and reflective journal writing, and the researcher's biases and assumptions related to the topic of instructional and administrative challenges principals faced in SRS was recognized (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). During the research stages of this case study, the researcher was mindful of the role of the researcher while engaging in data collection and analysis. Peer-review and debriefing of the data occurred to confirm correct coding of data, themes, and categories.

Ethical Procedures

Through Walden University's IRB process, all research guidelines and ethical considerations were abided by and adhered to. Four ethical considerations needed to be addressed when designing research that includes human subjects. These considerations included protection from harm, informed consent, confidentiality, and honesty with professionals. To ensure that these standards were met in this study, no data were collected, and no contacts were made with the participants until approval was attained. One ethical concern was to prevent all psychological harm to the participants. Participants were informed that they could stop participating at any time; that participation was voluntary.

Participants received information related to the study and purpose to decide whether to participate. The participant were aware of their right to stop or withdraw from the study without any consequences. Therefore, this information was made fully known via written instructions and verbal instructions before study participation. In addition, participants may have had concerns or questions and may not know whom to contact if they have completed the introduction to the study. This information was provided in the informed consent form.

To reduce the potential for harm and to increase the ethical integrity of this study, a properly constructed informed consent form was provided to all participants. Having a properly constructed informed consent form, including possible benefits and risks to study participants, the process of the study, the ability to stop participating in the study without consequences, the limits of confidentiality, and the researcher's contact

information, increased the researcher's adherence to ethical standards as well as decreased the risk of harm to participants. Without this information, the participants were able to make a fully informed decision on whether to be part of the study or continue in the study or not. Having the informed consent form provided some protection for participants and reduced the risk of harm.

Participant confidentiality were also protected in this study. Any information collected were not included in the participant's identifying information. Once a participant signed the informed consent, all identifying information was no longer used. The participants were assigned a number that served as that participant's identification throughout the remainder of the study. The following were the systematic procedures that were followed to ensure that participant confidentiality and potential risks were reduced to a minimum. If the patient stated a willingness to participate in the study, the researcher explained the letter of introduction. Principals that were willing to participate in the study were provided with a date and time to meet to begin the interview process. The researcher explained the informed consent and provided participants time to read both forms and formulate questions about the study before deciding whether to participate.

At the time of the study, the researcher reiterated that participation in this study was voluntary and that he or she could withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were informed that the selection of the subjects for this study was solely based on study criteria. Selection of the participants did not overburden, over-utilize, unfairly favor, or discriminate against any participant. The researcher explained that for confidentiality, the participant's information was entered into a database and assigned a number. The

participant's name and information were no longer used once the number was assigned, and the participant will no longer be identifiable. All data will be securely stored for a minimum of five years. All study findings were presented in aggregate form, and no personal identifiers were attached. There was no participant under the age of 30 in this study.

Summary

The problem addressed in this study was the managerial and instructional challenges faced by principals working in SRS. This chapter included details related to the design and rationale for this qualitative case study, my role as the researcher, the trustworthiness of the study, and the ethical procedures adhered to within this qualitative case study. A qualitative case study design was chosen for this study because of the broad explanation for the behaviors of current and former principals working in rural school areas. Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated that a qualitative case study begins from pure observation and that prior conceptual structure composed of theory and method that served as the starting point for all observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Chapter 4 includes the analysis of the data, the results of the study along with the evidence of trustworthiness conclusions, and recommendations.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the instructional and managerial challenges principals face while working in SRS districts. In Chapter 4, I provide a critical analysis of interview and archival survey data collected during my research. The research questions addressed in this study were focused on how school principals in SRS districts handle instructional and managerial tasks. This chapter includes the setting of the study, data collection and analysis methods, and results. A description of evidence of trustworthiness is also included in this chapter.

Setting

Participants for this study were principals of rural schools in the southern region of the United States. Participants (P1–P8) had been administrators for periods ranging from 8 to 37 years (Table 1). Purposeful sampling was used to select rural school principals with the following selection criteria: (a) been a school principal for at least 2 years, (b) were state-certified, (c) and worked for the rural school district for at least 2 years. I used purposeful sampling for particular characteristics to identify and select information-rich participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Years as an administrator
P1	Male	10 years
P2	Male	32 years
P3	Female	19 years
P4	Female	25 years
P5	Female	9 years
P6	Female	8 years
P7	Male	12 years
P8	Male	28 years

Data Collection

I used a case study research design. Walden University's IRB granted approval (#0-05-20-097721) to conduct this research. Emails to potential participants were sent, and participants responded. I sent consent forms via email, and participants replied with the words "I consent." Data were collected from eight rural school principals through semistructured face-to-face interviews via Zoom using an interview protocol.

Interviews took place within a 2-week timeframe. I conducted the interviews via Zoom in an enclosed space to maintain privacy and confidentiality. I used two methods to record the interviews: the voice memo app on my cellphone and the audio recording through Zoom. In addition to recording the interviews, I took notes, and after each interview, these notes were used as a portion of the first cycle coding (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I listened to and transcribed each interview. I listened to the audio recordings and made corrections to the transcripts after each interview. To keep the participants' identities and names confidential, I used an alphanumeric naming system, P1–P8. I

reached data saturation when no new information came about during the interviews (Creswell, 2013). Each of the transcribed interviews was sent via email to each participant for review. Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes (see Table 2). No participants requested to change their transcripts. I sent a thank-you note to each participant via email shortly after each interview. There were no variations in the data collection or unusual circumstances.

Table 2

Location, Frequency, and Duration of Each Participant Interview

Participant	Location	Frequency	Duration
P1	Zoom meeting	One interview	30 minutes
P2	Zoom meeting	One interview	40 minutes
P3	Zoom meeting	One interview	35 minutes
P4	Zoom meeting	One interview	33 minutes
P5	Zoom meeting	One interview	36 minutes
P6	Zoom meeting	One interview	31 minutes
P7	Zoom meeting	One interview	31 minutes
P8	Zoom meeting	One interview	35 minutes

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data first by reading all the interview transcripts; this provided a general sense of the data (Creswell, 2013). I took notes after the first reading, and to analyze the data, I used thematic analysis. Codes were derived using single words or phrases from analyzing the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Miles and Huberman (2019) indicated this step in the analysis of data entails the differentiation and combination of data along with reflections on the data. Codes were attached to chunks of varying words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting

(Miles & Huberman, 2019). The exact words and phrases were used for categories and then I used exact words and phrases to create themes and categories (Saldana, 2015). After reading all the interviews and performing the first initial codes, I grouped similar codes from each interview and reduced the list to a smaller, more manageable list of codes (Creswell, 2013). Every effort was made to make sure the codes fit into and were related to each other. Marginal notes were consistently made that served as a reminder to stay focused on the ideas and to add meaning and clarity to the notes (Miles & Huberman, 2019). Information related to the coding cycle is presented in Table 3. Based on the group similarities, I generated the categories and themes for the next cycle of coding (see Table 4).

Table 3

First Coding Cycle

Interview question	Codes
1	High quality teachers. Systems and processes. Inexperienced teachers. Quality staff development. Implementing instructional plans. Rural schools perceived as steppingstones. Quality staff. Relationships with community members. Time management factor. Clear expectations. Build relationships.
2	Make connections. Provide students with quality instruction. Accountability system. Giving students an opportunity to compete. Dealing with small numbers. Perception of rural schools being failing schools. Finding time for planning. Supporting teachers. Having needed resources available. Building connection with teachers. Relationships. Having content knowledge.
3	Accountability necessary evil. Preparing students for testing. Distraction from instructional tasks. Lesson plans. Test taking strategies. Issuing supplies. Reports. Emails.
4	Lead people. Effective systems and processes. Continuous improvement. Build capacity. Less delegation power. Wear many hats. Numerous job responsibilities. Not enough time in the day. Budget. Large number of things that you have to do. 75%. 60%.
5	Systems and processes. Presence of leadership. Managing the climate of the campus. My presence throughout the day. Communication. Answering student, staff and parent concerns. Support team. Financial component. Set the tone. Delegate managerial tasks. People reluctant to change.
6	Responding to emails and phone calls. Maintenance. Bogged down in procedures. Procedures draw you away. Micromanage. Change.
7	Resistant to change. Teachers unapathetic. 25% of time. 50% of time. Half of your day. Actually, get to spend or should spend. 30 or 40% approach. 20% or less of your day.

Table 4

Second Coding Cycle

Codes	Categories	Themes
Best practices Cycle of improvement Effective systems Clear communication	Instruction	Systems and processes
Highly qualified staff High mobility staff Climate Quality instruction Inexperienced, novice teachers	Staff	Attracting highly qualified staff
Data Lesson plans Accountability Testing	Testing	Planning
Access to resources Available resources Supplies Accountability testing	Resources	Professional development opportunities
Making connections Building relationships Parental support Climate Environment Connections	Relationship	Building relationships
Communication Time management Roles Responsibilities Wear many hats Clear expectations	Roles	Clearly defined roles and responsibilities

Results

Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership model (1993) served as the conceptual framework for this study. I analyzed the dimensions of the conceptual framework and the categories from the data to identify the themes. Six themes are discussed in the results. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: How do school principals in SRS districts handle instructional tasks?

RQ2: How do school principals in SRS districts handle managerial tasks?

Theme 1: Attracting Highly Qualified Staff

Eight principals were asked what challenges with instruction they encountered while working in a rural school setting. All eight participants mentioned time as a factor affecting instruction in one form or another. Each participant also stated that there never seemed to be enough time in the day to complete the various tasks principals must attend to.

In addition to time, P1 stated that his biggest challenge was in maintaining and obtaining highly qualified staff. P2 also stated that obtaining quality staff who wanted to remain in the district for longer than 1 to 2 years was an instructional challenge. P3 stated, "So many times, rural schools are perceived as steppingstones for individuals to move from one level to the next level." P5, P6, and P8 identified instructional challenges with staffing and the teacher force being able to meet the instructional needs of the curriculum being taught, the availability of quality professional development for the teaching staff and having the needed resources readily available.

P4 and P7 also listed time as a factor but went further to state that an instructional challenge for them was in having a lack of parental support for the importance of education from the homes. P7 stated that when parents do not believe that education is important, this same feeling flows to the children and it affects the student's receptiveness to classroom instruction. P4 talked about her students coming to school with very limited backgrounds and limited life experiences that also created an instructional barrier on her campus. Many of the student's in P4's district often did not live with biological parents, but either live in a shelter or with grandparents. These student's also transition from one place to another very frequently.

Because each of the eight principals mentioned time as a major instructional challenge, participants were asked the probing question how much time principals should spend doing those instructional tasks. P1 one believed that he should spend more than 50% of each day in the classroom observing instruction and offering feedback to teacher's, but in reality, less than 25% of his day is spent on instructional tasks. P2 believed in being visible on campus and states that it is all about balance and balancing your time for quick observations even as he passes the classrooms and looks in from the hallway. P3 said that instruction is the number one priority and therefore, the principal should be in classroom all day. P3 stated the many meetings that must be attended, in addition to the other varied task that must be completed make doing so an impossibility. P4 and P8 believed that they should spend 75% of their day completing instructional tasks, whereas P5 and P7 determined that they should spend 80-95% of their time completing instructional tasks, but went on to say that if they are being honest, they are

lucky if they have the opportunity to walk through the building once before it is off to whatever task is pulling them at that very moment.

The instructional tasks determined to be the most important differed for each of the participants. P1 felt that providing students with good, quality instruction was most important to him. P2 thought that instruction that would prepare students to be able to compete with other students, whether in high school or beyond was the most important instructional task. P3 thought that supporting and having the necessary resources for them was her most important instructional task. P4 and P7 determined that supporting teachers and building relationships was a major instructional challenge but making a connection between the teachers and the student's families was equally important. P5 expressed planning as the most important instructional task because adequate planning allows for better predictability of what is occurring in the classroom. P6 and P8 stated that having a good content knowledge of the curriculum was most important to them.

Theme 2: Clearly Defined Roles and Responsibilities

For Theme 2, all participants (100%) indicated that they did not know what their roles and responsibilities were. Many (25%) indicated that some of their roles and responsibilities had not been explicitly stated in their job descriptions. Each of the eight participants stated that working in a rural district allows you to learn in every area for often there are not sufficient staff to cover the many positions and duties, which means it often falls on the shoulders of the principal. P4 said,

> I think some of the instructional challenges that I experienced were with the time management part. Because of our role as principal, we could have been pulled in

> different directions … You fixed your schedule for the day, but then things pop up that you have no control over, and it takes away from some of the tasks that you've established to accomplish during that day. … So that's one of the things, the time management is also a factor. I think the other thing is trying to make sure I clearly go over what my roles and responsibilities are. … Time management is a factor, but if I know clearly what my roles and responsibilities are, then I could be more effective as a principal and the leader of my campus. I know that we have to wear different hats because we are a small school district, but if we could know upfront what those expectations are, then that would help to ease some of the stress.

Theme 3: Making Connections and Developing Relationships

For Theme 3 seven out of eight principal participants mentioned that building a trust factor with their staff was important. Two mentioned that communicating with parents and the community was also important. P1 said, "You have got to be very intentional about the things about letting students know that you genuinely care about them. If students perceive that you don't care, they will not learn with and from you." P1 concluded, "Handling positive relationships right away is key."

P2 and P3 stated that building relationships is priority. When teachers have a positive relationship with you, they become additional support to assist in getting things done the right way on your campus. So, you would hope that you have teacher leaders on your campus that will help with students and other key stakeholders. P4, P6, and P8 stressed the importance of communicating with parents early and often. Each principal

mentioned that a well-informed parent or guardian helps the campus with instruction in the classroom as well as potential discipline issues.

P5 said, “One big thing is a lot of our students come to school with very limited backgrounds. They don’t have a lot of life experiences.” P5 also stated, “Their experience has been from the television and the life experience that they have has not always been great within their homes. A lot of them don’t live with their biological parents.” P5 also mentioned, “They live with extended family members or are in foster care. Our school is the school where all of the homeless children or children living in the shelter come, and they’re in and out constantly.” P5 concluded,

> So, we have a lot of transition but basically a lot of our students come in and school is their very first experience being around a larger group of children their age with very, very limited experiences even holding books or looking at books or anything like that. Students with limited experiences is one of the main instructional challenges that I face working in a rural district.

P7 said, “Building the relationship is the most important instructional task because if you build a relationship then any instructional tasks are going to fall suit, they’ll do whatever you want them to do.” P7 mentioned, “The most important instructional challenge for her was support from parents from the aspect of education is important. That is definitely a barrier.” P7 went on to state that, “Because with no support from the parents, that kind of flows over into the way the children think which then runs over into the classroom and kind of guides their participation in classroom instruction.”

Theme 4: Resources and Professional Development

In Theme 4, all the participants (100%) stated that professional development was necessary. P2, P3, P4 and P5 expressed that it was difficult for teachers to get exceptional or job-relevant training because of the distance in which teachers would have to travel. Finances were also a factor in getting staff high quality professional development and training. Small districts often do not have access to the same caliber of training as larger districts.

According to P6, “Normally, it’s the issue of availability of resources. The biggest one we have is professional development. We don’t have the access to professional development that is affordable like the bigger districts.” P6 also mentioned, “That’s one of the main things that we run into. It’s an issue of them being trained properly in order to implement those things.”

P8 reported, “I think one of the challenges was having available resources. The lack of resources in some areas, from curriculum materials to, at that time, technology access and some challenges there as well.” P8 said, “When you deal with staffing issues were some of the challenges. Being able to find staff that were willing to work in these rural school districts.” Participants were asked, what instructional tasks they perceived as most important.” P8 also said, “Each principal noted the difficulty in determining which task was the most important because each task effects so many other things pertaining to effectively leading a campus.”

P1 implied, “I really feel beyond anything, the greatest challenge in providing students with quality instruction is being able to connect, make connections and make

connections with students first." P1 said, "I'm just a firm believer that it really doesn't matter what you know in regard to students, our students don't really care what you know until they know you care." P8 said, "If the student doesn't like you, I think there are going to be challenges to convince that student why education should matter to them." P8 also said, "I think being able to connect and get teachers to understand the importance of making that connection first before you can begin instruction." P8 implemented, "I think after that is being able to create an environment, and connecting with the students, being able to create an environment that is conducive for learning." P8 mentioned, "You make that connection, and you have got to be able to create an environment that will lead to students being successful. Once you've done all that then you got to be able to teach." P8 also mentioned, "Once you establish all those, you know made a connection, create an environment that you wanted to, now you actually have to have something to say in front of kids." P8 conclusion, "I think that's where those instructional strategies and best practices come in to play to ensure that learning is taking place in the classroom."

P2 mentioned, "In a rural school, you want to give these children a chance to compete. You want to make sure that teachers are giving the level instruction that helps those students to compete." P2 also mentioned, "Because you have two or three types of students coming through your system. Those that are looking to move and go on to college, and you don't want them to be a failure in college." P2 mentioned, "You have those that are looking to pursue careers, and you want them to have the academic skills to be able to be successful there as well. And of course, the other challenge I faced was the accountability system." P2 said, "With groups of students such, it's more challenging to

show progress and improvement with testing when you have different cohorts of students coming through your system and you're dealing with small numbers." P2 mentioned, "So, you're battling that issue as well because you don't want to lose the perception of your school of being a struggling school or failing school just because you have small numbers of students." P2 stated, "In rural schools small numbers make it a little more challenging for you as well. So, I think those are the main areas, helping students to be successful in the next pathway." P2 concluded, "Then helping the campus be successful in its ability to handle the state accountability system." P3 mentioned, "I would say planning because if you don't take the time to plan and find time for planning in the school day schedule, then you can't really predict what's going on in the classrooms." P4 mentioned,

> The most important task would be supporting the teachers, being there to support them and having the resources that they need. So, walking in and if you see something that the teachers need to work on, making sure they know, because I like to be in classrooms during the day, and making sure that I have relationships with those teachers.

P5 mentioned, "I feel that supporting the teachers is major as they continue to work with the children directly, building that connection between the families that the children do have." P5 mentioned, "Trying to get them into the schools to learn the value of education and to see how we can support them to extend their learning at home." P5 said,

> For many of them, their school has changed over the years and schools very different now than even when I went to school. So a lot of the grandparents that have the children or the great grandparents that have the children, they have been under the mindset that that's the school and you come home and you play but a lot of that is just basic teaching them that it's okay, when you sit down with a book or they come home with their decodable reader.

P6 mentioned, "First of all, the teachers have to have a good knowledge of the TEKS and their delivery system whether you use the TEKS resource system or whatever curriculum you're tied to." P6 said, "Teachers need to know how to break down each lesson in order to do that. So, the planning process to deliver the instruction is probably the most crucial piece, just so they understand exactly what's going to be put together." P7 mentioned, "The most important instructional task is in having content knowledge for instructional purposes. Having the content knowledge of the subject that you are going to teach, and once staff have the knowledge is making it relevant to the learning." P7 said,

> A lot of times when you have a small school district, you don't always get the experienced people with content knowledge and then they come from different settings and how to make learning relevant to them to realize the importance of it and relevance goes to making it connect to that student or students in those communities that they are living in. You can be talking about something dealing with math and you applying it to here in a small community that's dealing with farming communities, but you are apply that to farmers or relating to building gas

> wells and things like that and that may not be relevant to them. So, you have to make the learning relevant to the community which you are serving in.

Theme 5: Planning

Instruction versus preparing for a state-mandated test was the most frequent comment. Participants, as a whole, believed that the concept of teaching to the test took away from effective pedagogy and the ability to motivate students. The participants agreed that accountability was important, but the amount of stress put on it outweighed the benefits of student learning. P1 responded that the least important instructional task was testing and instruction leading to testing. P1 said that the instructional task he liked the least would be actually preparing students for testing. P1 stated, "It is a necessary evil to be able to assess that students have the essential knowledge and skills that they need in order to be successful to graduate or go to the next grade level." P1 concluded, "But in the same sense, it creates and takes away from the joy of learning because of that. So, I would just say accountability." P1 would not say accountability is not important and he believes in it. P1 mentioned,

> But the fact of the matter is that our focus as educators is so test-driven that it's hard to be able to determine if students are really enjoying learning and really are appreciating learning. So again, I wouldn't say that it's not important, but it is something that he's not a huge fan of having to put the focus on that. But at the same time, he knows that it's a necessary evil in order to ensure that students are successful.

P2 mentioned, “I guess the one area that I see as the least important instructional task has to do with accountability.” P2 also mentioned, “It seems like we spend a lot of time on testing and not enough time on teaching and I think that becomes a distraction from the instructional tasks that we need to do.” P2 said, “We basically stop teaching and start getting ready for testing and that’s lost instructional time. Then you’re working on the test, and how well do you do on the test and you start implementing test taking strategies.” P2 also said, “I would like to see more time spent on just teaching and then let the teachers naturally show the way the students performed. So that would be my area, accountability.”

P3 mentioned, “I think writing down lesson plans. I think that the planning process is important in that each teacher can figure out what needs to happen in their class and a plan A and plan B and a plan C.” P3 also mentioned, “Writing out lesson plans is not as important as what the teacher actually does in the classroom, that they have a plan and that we know they have a plan. I don’t know if that makes sense.” P2 said, “We need to plan and that we need to have PLC’s and we need to have what is the learning target of the day, and what are the strategies we’re going to use in all of that.” P2 implied, “I think also sometimes we get hung up, as principals, in turning in the piece of paper or you know submitting a lesson plan rather than what the plan actually says that the teacher is going to do.”

P4 said, “I would probably say issuing out paper, supplies, documents because everything is so important. I would say that issuing supplies is the least important instructional task, because everything is so important.” P5 mentioned, “I guess sometimes

it's very easy to get caught up in all the reports and the emails and things that we have to do as administrators and of course get that stuff done because it's required." P5 mentioned, "But while I'm here at school, to be present and visible and available to the teachers for whatever need that they have." P6 also mentioned,

> The delivery method can go on in numerous ways if you plan properly. So, you don't necessarily have to worry about how you going to get across whether it's through direct instruction, group instruction or whatever the situation might be. If you plan it, you understand how the students can get it. The delivery is usually the easiest part once everything is put together.

P7 mentioned, ""Homework was the least important instructional task because our kids don't have help at home." P8 mentioned, "Dress code was the least important instructional task. All tasks are important when it has anything to do with instruction. Dealing with dress code issues takes away from instructional time." Participants were asked how much time principals should spend doing these instructional tasks and all principals stated that they should be in classrooms observing instruction. All principals, with the exception of P1 and P stated that principals should spend 75 percent of their day doing instructional tasks. P1 and P said that they believed the principal should spend 60 percent of their day doing instructional tasks.

Theme 6: Systems and Processes

Systems and processes were defined in different ways from the participants. All concurred that there was not enough time to oversee the processes adequately in a rural district, especially if there had been frequent administrator turnover according to P1, P2

and P8. In many cases, when principals inquired what the process was for doing certain tasks, there was not a clearly defined system or process for successfully accomplishing the aforementioned task. They all mentioned that having systems in place was important, but that situations occur when there have been no established system or procedure for handling it.

P1 stated that the greatest challenge, when you talk about managerial tasks, is having systems and processes in place which allows you lead people. The greatest challenge being in a situation where you are in a rural setting is really ensuring that you do have effective systems in place. Number one, you have to have effective systems, protocols, and things that you can effectively monitor in order to successfully run any campus. P1 and P8 believed that you are only as good as what you can continue to monitor. And then after you have monitored and make some adjustments to what is going on, that becomes a continuous cycle for improvement. P5, P6, and P7 stated that everyone must understand what those systems are, especially those individuals that have to be responsible for monitoring, ensuring those systems are running effectively.

P2 noted that you do not have as many people in a rural setting to delegate different tasks to, so you end up carrying and wearing a lot of hats. Having effective systems already in place would ease the burden and weight that rural school principals often carry. P5 said that he obtained a license to drive the bus just in case he ever needed to do so.

In managing the campus when you don't have the classified staff in all of the areas that you might have in a larger system, you end up carrying a big key ring around

on my waistband because I had to have a key to every door and a way to access things and you know from the issues that might be occurring with technology or something that's breaking down. I guess I probably could qualify as a copier repair person now too because that's one of the big tasks that you have to do. And then managing the campus, managing discipline, managing counseling with kids, managing parents all were a big part of it and that's why I said I think you know one of the advantages of the rural setting and small setting is it teaches you so many schools skills from managerial to instruction."

P3 mentioned, "There is never enough time, and there's not enough of me. So, you can never get it done what you have planned to do because just as soon as you think maybe that you're through with discipline or you're through with answering parent." P3 mentioned, "Then there are the phone calls and emails, and then you wonder where the day went. And so, I think it's never ending. You're just not going to ever have enough time to get it all done." P3 mentioned, "And so, you have to figure out how much time you're going to give those tasks every day."

P4 mentioned, "If something happens, then you are pulling yourself between two or three tasks. I might have to go and talk with a parent or have students who are involved in something." P4 mentioned, "I have a teacher who I need to support and then I have my other staff that I need to support. It's just trying to put all of that into prospective and prioritizing is key." P4 concluded, "These are my main managerial challenges."

P5 said that one of the bigger challenges I have faced has to do with budget because over the past years we have lost personnel and in meeting the state mandated requirements for all different kinds of things when we lose personnel, and we have to pull

from one section to cover another just because we don't have that personnel anymore. It's very difficult. So, in the past few years, I've lost custodians, assistants, assistant teacher assistants and additional PE teachers. So just a scheduling component because of funding. Our district has been undergoing some change over the last few years in the district office. And so, the requirements have changed and when we have a new person, everybody has new ideas. And so that's when things started changing and we started losing people."

P6 mentioned, in a small school setting you have such a large number of things that you have to do. Normally in a big district, where things are broken up you've got somebody who will take care of maintenance for you and supervise the custodians and clean up. You've got somebody to take care of organizing your games and things of that nature. You've got somebody who can kind of take the ball over and organize your extracurriculars. In a small school district that drops directly on the shoulders of the principal. And so, all those things have got to be taken care of and let's say for instance, I have my custodian, and something happens to him. I don't have anybody to replace him. So now who do I have to make sure that the restrooms are clean, taking out the trash things of that nature? Something like that can turn into a situation that can take you all day long and then you don't have an opportunity to get into the classroom."

P7 said the biggest thing that I have to do is I have to trust the people that work for me. I don't micromanage by any means, so I just make sure that the daily routine is set. I make sure that they have all the information they need to be able to do their jobs as teachers or as the person that I put in charge of doing something that I don't necessarily

have to do myself. It's a team effort and I truly look for my strong leaders and start giving them things to do.

The challenges are many, no matter if it is an urban or rural school district. Principal participants were asked, what managerial challenges, if any, did they face while working in a rural school district. All 8 principals mentioned the plethora of duties that are required of the principal, as the leader of a campus, and the fact that in a rural district, oftentimes you do not have people to delegate different tasks to get completed. And when this is the case, the task often lands on the desk of the principal.

P1 expressed again, the need for having systems in place so that everyone knows what he or she should be doing, and this was before the pandemic. P1 went on to say that once you throw the pandemic into the equation, you are learning to build the plane in the air. Managing people in a remote situation is difficult at best. P1 stated, "People are your best resource." P8 also mentioned the communication factor, in addition to the lasting effects of a global pandemic.

P2 stated, "These managerial tasks are an important part of your job, especially in the rural area. You don't have as many people to delegate different tasks to, so you end up carrying and wearing a lot of hats." P2 mentioned, "If something breaks down, the principal is the go-to person. I guess I could qualify as the copy repairman now after having worked in the rural school area." P5, P6, and P8 expressed the idea that there is never enough time within the day to accomplish all that needs to occur on a rural school campus. All participants mentioned that there was never enough of them to go around.

P7 has eight different programs on one campus, so it is very important that she delegates some of the tasks that would normally fall to the principal in a rural school district. P7 oversees a high school campus of approximately 80 kids, but also is in charge of the running of 3 alternative schools, an emotionally disturbed classroom, and a transitional classroom for students with special needs that have already graduated high school and the daycare for young mothers and fathers. In addition, P7 also has an early intervention system for 18 months old to 3 years old. P7 also noted that a lot of the managerial things that she has to get accomplished, she must do at night and after hours. P8 mentioned, “If something happens, then you are pulling yourself between two, three or four different tasks. So, it’s just trying to put all of that into prospective and prioritizing is key.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In this qualitative research, trustworthiness occurred through four aspects credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. The establishment of credibility relied on sound methodology within the overall study with specific detail to data collection (Shenton, 2004). Credibility was established for this study through member checking. Dependability was achieved through the comparison of gathered data from participant interviews. Transferability was achieved by providing a rich description of data through interviews and data analysis (Ravich & Carl, 2016). Confirmability was established through consistent reflexive practice, memo writing, and recognition of my personal biases, beliefs, and assumptions related to the instructional and managerial tasks of principals working in small rural school districts. All eight participants were given a

copy of the data, interpretations, and tables to check for errors, clarify statements, or include additional information. Participants were given a week to respond. No participant desired to make any changes to their interviews. Member checking was often used in qualitative research to validate findings (Roberts, 2010).

Summary

The purpose of this case study was to understand the instructional and managerial challenges that principals faced while working in an SRS district. Using thematic data analysis, I identified six themes that emerged and aligned to the functions and dimensions of situational leadership conceptual framework and provided the answers to the research questions. The themes were: (a) attracting highly qualified staff, (b) clearly defined roles and responsibilities, (c) making connections and developing relationships, (d) time/planning, (e) systems and processes, and (f) professional development opportunities. In Chapter 5, I conclude the study with a discussion on the interpretation of the findings, limitations to the study, and recommendations. In addition, the implications for positive impact on social change as an outcome of this study was included.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the instructional and managerial challenges of principals working in SRS districts. I gathered data through interviews with eight rural school principals to examine their instructional leadership in this qualitative case study. I used a qualitative case study research design to develop a comprehensive understanding of how rural school principals apply situational leadership in managerial and instructional task achievement. Qualitative research is used to make meaning of the experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I bounded this study to this group of participants with administrative leadership content knowledge in four school districts in the southern region of the United States.

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Attracting Highly Qualified Staff

Many participants discussed experiencing difficulty attracting and maintaining highly qualified staff not only because the districts are in a rural area, but also because the staff retention rates were low. One participant mentioned that new teachers start their careers in small districts, knowing they can move to larger districts and earn more money. The participants spoke of the high amount of turnover among staff members.

Theme 2: Clearly Defined Roles and Responsibilities

There was little discussion in the interviews about the common roles of principals as managers and instructional leaders. The participants' managerial roles were the least defined and often depended on the amount of office staff available to them in their district. The participants' roles as instructional leaders were more clearly defined as being

in charge of curriculum and instruction, and participants also mentioned accountability. Based on the data, the participants believe in accountability but indicated there was too much emphasis placed on accountability due to high-stakes testing. One participant said that lesson plans were necessary, while another participant disagreed.

Theme 3: Making Connections and Developing Relationships

Participants indicated that building trust with the staff and the community was important. Participants emphasized the value of developing trust and making connections with parents and students—not just their staff members. In rural settings with smaller populations, communities seem to know one another more, which can make it easier to connect and build relationships.

Theme 4: Resources and Professional Development

Participants discussed the importance of having resources and access to professional development but indicated that these were difficult to achieve in SRSs. Participants indicated that small districts lack access to professional development opportunities. One participant said that it was his responsibility to make sure teachers had the proper supplies they needed, including technology.

Theme 5: Planning

Participants spoke about time spent divided between instructional duties and managerial duties. Participants overall would have liked to have at least 75% of their time allocated to instruction, but they could not. Reasons participants gave regarding the lack of instruction time included answering emails, building maintenance, distributing classroom supplies and resources, and other day-to-day operational tasks.

Theme 6: Systems and Processes

The participants stated that there were systems and processes in place, but, at many times, were difficult to follow. These systems did not necessarily have any relationship to student behavior, but more to managerial duties. One principal mentioned that making a duty roster was time-consuming.

The principals mentioned many other things, such as how challenging their jobs were. The backgrounds of the students in that some come from foster care homes, and others are living with family but not biological parents. Nothing was mentioned about their responsibilities for the quality of instruction, just that it was their responsibility to oversee instruction. Several principals mentioned that coming into the rural setting was difficult because of a lack of clearly defined processes and procedures. This made the day to day operations of the campus laborious and difficult.

Limitations of the Study

There were some limitations to the study. It was anticipated that it would be difficult to find enough participants, but this was not the case. One limitation was finding an agreed-upon time to meet. The times for the interviews varied because of the nature of the principal. Some participants did not directly answer the questions, so implications had to be made from their answers. I had to reschedule with one principal three times. Only one was prompt for the interview, so the time I had allocated on my part had to be adjusted. This provided difficulty because I had duties I had to perform for my school. This provided a limitation in that I did not want to appear to rush them in giving them their answers. Another limitation was that I did not anticipate an emergency interruption.

This could have flowed with the relationship between the participant and me when answering the questions, but it did not. A final limitation to the study was that no assistant principals participated in the study, as they too are leaders on these rural school campuses.

Recommendations

Many recommendations come to mind. From the overall answers from the participants, it was evident that they felt they did not have enough time during the day to feel that they had done a good job. One recommendation would be for a way for them to get a better understanding of all their duties. Another recommendation is that because of COVID-19, we are all learning how to communicate in other ways. Principals no longer have to travel any distance to receive quality professional development. The regional services centers can provide this and even help individualize professional development trainings based upon rural setting needs. Texas consists of two-thirds rural areas. Additional federal money is given to rural schools. Some Texas Regional Service Centers allow districts to co-op their federal money for training. Perhaps some of this can be given for professional training that is more applicable to subject area teachers in their teaching areas.

For example, coaches are required to attend professional development that has little to no bearing on what they are doing. In Texas, a coach only has to teach one academic subject a day to coach. The areas in which they teach vary from driver's education to social studies. Most of the professional development they attend have no bearing on their coaching duties.

Another area would be to provide mentors or peer support groups for rural principals to support each other. Many have the same problems, like poverty and poor attendance. A support group would help regardless of the grade levels of which the principals are a part. These support groups could be scheduled using Zoom. Social media websites could be set up for a place for principals to pose problems and get suggestions.

The roles, responsibilities, procedures, and duties are not standard from school district to school district. It would be helpful if there could be a common set of standards for rural principals from the Texas Education Agency. Principals could collaborate. As mentioned earlier, situations may occur that have not happened before, such as an absent bus driver. In rural areas, some students travel on a bus for an hour a day if the geographical region has a sparse population.

Principals should be given paid school time to develop their manuals and guidelines for when an emergency comes up. With COVID-19, problems have arisen from getting students free and reduced breakfasts and lunches to the lack of viable technology. This was an unanticipated problem that had to be solved quickly. If principals could meet with each other to talk about their problems during a Zoom with a moderator, these problems may be addressed before they happen. Each rural principal has had an experience that has happened in their district. These can be written down on a form and shared through email monthly.

Implications

Because this study took place in school districts with a low student population, most principals do not get the peer support they need. All school districts are one high

school district only. While they could get support from other principals, most of those not at the high school did not understand the magnitude of the responsibilities of the principals, like football game attendance.

All principals implied that working in small rural districts present their problems that others do not understand. While their problems may not be different from urban districts, they are magnified by the size. For example, SRS have students from single-parent homes, homes where a parent is incarcerated, foster care, students raised by others than their biological parent(s), and even homeless.

The implications are many. There are as many as there are individual small rural high schools. The underlying implication from the principals is that they need to have greater communication with other principals. Many principals do not have the "one and done" mind-set because of their personal feelings and reasons for working in an SRS.

Conclusion

When I started this research, I assumed that principals in SRSs would have the attitude of "one and done," meaning that they only were going to work in small school districts so they could have the experience to have a job in a larger district. Sometimes, in a larger district, being an assistant principal has a higher salary than a principal at a rural one. I found out that principals leave for this reason, but many chose to stay because they are either part of the community already, become part of it, or just prefer the advantages of a smaller district. This means that there is less bureaucracy for them to go through to get what they need. But the downside of being in a smaller district is that they are more

visible to the community. This could be a positive or a negative, depending on how active the community is in the education of their children.

Principals in SRSs have the same problems as those in large urban areas. Principals in SRSs do not have the staff or support to help alleviate these problems. As the principals mentioned time and again, communication is the factor. If there were more of it, they might feel less isolated and more apt to stay in rural districts. A person must be committed to the concept of working in rural schools. A peer support system, no matter the delivery, could make a difference in whether they stay or leave the district, creating less of an unrest in the changing on principals and teachers.

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Appendix A: Initial Support Option

Dear Walden University Education Leadership program staff,

I understand that, as per the student's doctoral program requirements, the student will conduct research and then publish a dissertation in ProQuest following ethical standards:

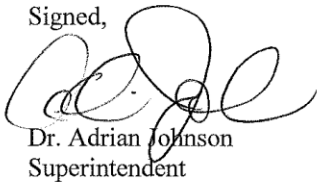
a. The student will be responsible for complying with policies and requirements regarding data collection (including the need for the organization's internal ethics/regulatory approval).

b. The student is required to maintain confidentiality by removing names and key pieces of evidence/data that might disclose an organization's or an individual's identity.

c. Via an Interview Consent Form, the student will describe to interviewees how the data will be used in the dissertation study and how all interviewees' privacy will be protected.

I confirm that I am authorized to support/approve research activities in this setting.

Signed,



Dr. Adrian Johnson
Superintendent
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979-279-3200
June 21, 2018.

Appendix B: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about Instructional and Managerial Challenges of School Principals in Small Rural School Districts. The researcher is inviting you to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Brenita Jordan, who is a doctoral student Walden University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to understand the instructional and managerial challenges of school principals in small rural school districts.

Procedures:
This study involves the following steps:

- Take part in a confidential, audio recorded interview (Zoom or phone option available) (1 hour)
- Review a typed transcript of your interview to make corrections if needed (email option available) (10 minutes)
- Speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher's interpretations and share your feedback. (This is called member checking and it takes 20-30 minutes, written, phone option and Zoom are available.)

Here are some sample questions:

RQ1. How do school principals in a small rural school districts handle instructional tasks?

RQ2. How do school principals in small rural school districts handle managerial tasks?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. You will be treated the same at Walden University whether or not you join the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. The researcher seeks 8 volunteers for this study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as answering questions that you feel might be detrimental to your employment. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by providing school district administrators, school board members, and local community members with an analysis of the SRS principal's instructional and managerial tasks.

Payment:
There will be no payment for participation.

Privacy:
The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the researcher is required to remove all names and identifying details before sharing; this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by password protection, use of alphanumeric codes in place of names, storing in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home and transcriptions (when necessary) separately from the data, discarding names once an alphanumeric is assigned. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You can ask questions of the researcher by email at bjordan@hearne.k12.tx.us. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is IRB #0-05-20-09772 and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.**

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by signing below.

I consent to take part in the research and be audio recorded.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of consent _____

Participant's Signature _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Interviewee Code #:

Location of Interview:

Hi, my name is Brenita Jordan. Thank you very much for participating in this interview today. As you know, the purpose of this interview is to gather beliefs on the instructional and managerial challenges principals face while working in SRS districts. This should last about 30-40 minutes. After the interview, I was examining your answers for data analysis purposes. However, I will not identify you in my documents, and no one was able to identify you with your answers. You can choose to stop this interview at any time. Also, I need to let you know that this interview was recorded for transcription purposes. Do you have any questions?
Are you ready to begin?

Research Question 1

What challenges did you encounter with instruction while working in a rural school district?

Research Probing Questions 1

a. What instructional tasks do you perceive as most important and why?
b. What instructional tasks do you perceive as least important and why?
c. How much time should principals spend doing instructional tasks?
d. How would you describe the importance of instructional tasks?

Research Question 2

What challenges, if any did you encounter with managerial tasks while working in a rural school setting?

Research Probing Questions 2

1. What managerial tasks do you perceive as most important and why based upon Hersey and Blanchard's theory?

a. What managerial tasks do you perceive as least important and why?
b. How much time should principals spend doing managerial tasks?
c. How would you describe the importance of managerial tasks?

Close

Thank you for your answers. Do you have anything else you'd like to share? Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time, goodbye.