10-6-2025

School Leaders and Strategies to Address Teacher Shortages in a Rural School District

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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Phaniki Jenkins

MA, Walden University, 2021

BS, Voorhees University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Educational Administration & Leadership (Non-Licensure)

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

The problem addressed was that education administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in rural public school districts in the Southeastern United States. Grounded in transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most helpful. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 state-certified administrators with at least 3 years' experience in their role in one rural public school district in the Southeastern United States. Open and axial coding were used to support thematic analysis. Administrative experiences with teacher shortages developed their collective view of a multifaceted issue shaped by low pay, geographic isolation, housing scarcity, and certification barriers exacerbated by competition with nearby districts. Administrative practices used included fostering supportive relationships, providing a caring school culture and climate, avoiding teachers being overworked to burnout, and addressing limited provisions for adequate salaries and benefits. Administrators identified district-level teacher development programs with strong mentoring and appropriate professional development, signing bonuses, relocation incentives, licensure flexibility, and stronger support systems for teachers as most helpful. The implications for positive social change are that administrators can advocate for policy and practice changes that support their teachers' emotional well-being, create a supportive school culture, and advance fair compensation. Supported teachers and boosted morale can enhance student learning.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work first and foremost to my Lord Jesus Christ, who is the head of my life. To my family, friends, and coworkers who loved and prayed for me throughout this journey. Without their prayers, support, faith, and encouragement from my mother, there is no way I would have made it this far. I also humbly dedicate this work to my chair, Dr. Mary Hallums, and committee member, Dr. Tina Dawson, who encouraged me with their words. To one of my biggest cheerleaders, Dr. Brenda Hughes, who always reminded me of Philippians 4:13, which states, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," when I felt like giving up.

Last, but not least, I would like to dedicate this work to my angel in heaven, my Granny Alice Sanders, who always instilled hard work in me and the scripture Hebrews 13:5, "the Lord will never leave you nor forsake you," and always said for me to remember if God brought you to it He will bring you through it. To my Granny, you were right. It's done.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teachers are leaving the profession (Dadvand & Lampert, 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2022; Edwards & Anderson, 2023). Teacher shortages in rural areas are a national problem in the United States (Dlamini et al., 2023). Teacher shortages affect students and the community (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). School administrators are challenged with teacher shortages (McPherson et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2023). Williams et al. (2021) found that teachers in rural areas may leave a district entirely, making it more difficult for administrators to recruit and replace them.

More research is needed to reduce teacher shortages, which impact student academic performance in rural areas (Nguyen, 2022; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Tran et al. (2023) suggested future research to better understand teacher shortages in rural areas. Lampert et al. (2023) indicated that school administrators struggle with teacher shortages, and Tran et al. (2024) recommended further research on administrators' practices to address this issue. Scallon et al. (2023) found that teacher shortages are increasing in rural districts and emphasized the need for research on the role of school administrators. Teacher shortages have increased in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States.

The problem addressed was that education administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in rural public school districts in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most useful. The findings may

contribute to positive social change through providing new insights into how school administrators perceive and improve their practices to reduce teacher shortages.

In Chapter 1, the background, problem, and purpose statements are presented regarding teacher shortages in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States. This chapter includes the conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance, and summary.

Background

A literature review highlighted the ongoing issue of teacher shortages in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States. This problem extends nationwide (Dlamini et al., 2023; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2024). Additionally, teachers are leaving the profession at higher rates (Dadvand & Lampert, 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2022; Edwards & Anderson, 2023; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2024).

School administrators face significant challenges with teacher shortages (McPherson et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2021). As one district-level leader explained, “Retention is just as much about emotional sustainability as it is about compensation” (Robinson, 2025, para. 7). In rural areas, teachers may leave a district entirely, complicating efforts to recruit and replace them (Williams et al., 2021). Administrators also struggle with administrative practices to address teacher shortages in rural districts (Castro, 2023; Scallon et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021). Additionally, rural school administrators encounter substantial difficulties due to ongoing teacher shortages (Berman & DeFeo, 2024; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Educational policies concerning

teacher recruitment and retention add further complexity for school administrators in addressing teacher shortages. Welsh (2024) examined rural educational policies and their impact on outcomes, emphasizing the challenges of managing teacher shortages. Further research is essential to better understand teacher shortages in rural areas (Berman & DeFeo, 2024; Mette, 2022; Welsh, 2024).

Teacher recruitment and retention remain critical administrative challenges in rural schools (Berman & DeFeo, 2024). Retention pertains to maintaining teachers over time at a school or their continued involvement in the education field (Berman & DeFeo, 2024; Brenner et al., 2021). It is necessary to examine administrative practices in addressing teacher shortages in rural areas (Burke & Buchanan, 2022; Glover & Stewart, 2023; Han, 2021; Floyd et al., 2024).

Problem Statement

In rural districts in the Southeastern United States, administrators are challenged to reduce teacher shortages. Teacher shortages have been increasing in these districts, impacting the quality of education. Therefore, the problem addressed was that education administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in rural public school districts in the Southeastern United States. Researchers have recommended further exploration of teacher shortages in rural areas (Mette, 2022; Mills et al., 2024). It is essential to examine administrative practices in managing these shortages (Mette, 2022; Mills et al., 2024; Pendola & Fuller, 2022). Teacher shortages disproportionately affect lower socioeconomic communities, and administrators continue to struggle to address this phenomenon (Pendola & Fuller, 2022; Ruble et al., 2023; Stanton et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most useful. A literature review revealed that school administrators in rural areas struggle with teacher shortages (McPherson et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2021). Additionally, school administrators struggle with administrative practices in reducing teacher shortages in rural districts (Castro, 2023; Scallon et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021). Teacher recruitment and retention in rural districts are challenging the practices of school administration (Berman & DeFeo, 2024; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Welsh, 2024).

Research Questions

RQ 1: How do rural school administrators perceive their challenges with teacher shortages?

RQ 2: What practices have rural school administrators used to reduce teacher shortages?

RQ 3: What practices do rural school administrators find useful in reducing teacher shortages?

Conceptual Framework

The transformational leadership theory (Downton, 1973) provided the conceptual framework for this study. This theory explains how leaders inspire and motivate employees to achieve both a common vision and common goals centered on four key elements—influence, motivation, academic stimulation, and individual consideration.

Increased class sizes decrease instructional quality, and disparities in educational opportunities can result from teacher shortages (Antoniou et al., 2024). Although this has been observed nationwide, this study focused on rural communities, which have been more harshly affected by the teacher shortage. The National School Boards Association indicated that rural districts have struggled to find and retain teachers to the same or greater extent than anywhere else in the country (Rockhold, 2024).

Multiple contributing factors in teacher shortages were explored through the interviews in this research. These contextual factors provided a framework to understand the teacher shortage, particularly for rural teachers, as an issue rooted in a lack of support, particularly in the structure of education. With many education programs closing, it has become harder to achieve licensure through the typical route of a college degree, and, as a result, teachers are unprepared and struggle within the classroom. At this point, teachers experience higher rates of burnout, particularly because of lower teacher salaries since they are widely considered underpaid for their work. As stated before, all of this is rooted in a lack of support for teachers.

While teachers have many varied reasons for leaving the field—or never entering it at all—administrators can, in some ways, develop an understanding of a larger, more representative context of the teacher shortage. This context can also help them understand its effects on the school community, including other teachers, children, parents, and more. Administrators serve as a key for both assessment and causation, as some of the factors commonly named in causing the teacher shortage to relate to administrative actions. Because of this, developed research questions analyzed both administrators'

impressions of addressing the teacher shortage with the hope that, with these qualitative answers, innovative solutions addressing the needs of administrators and of the larger school community can be developed.

Nature of the Study

Researchers conduct basic qualitative studies when they are interested in how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and assign meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews are used to gather qualitative data when applying this basic qualitative research design. Qualitative research is "an exploratory investigation of a complex social phenomenon conducted in a natural setting through observation, description, and thematic analysis of participants' behaviors and perspectives to explain and/or understand the phenomenon" (Burkholder et al., 2019, p. 83). Qualitative research is utilized to better understand participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). It offers flexibility in research design, data collection, and analysis. In this study, a basic qualitative design was employed, incorporating semistructured interviews to explore participants' perceptions (Creswell, 2014).

The phenomenon examined in this basic qualitative study was that school administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in a rural public school district in the Southeastern United States. A basic qualitative design was chosen to gather in-depth data about school administrators' perceptions through semistructured interviews to explore how they perceived and addressed teacher shortages. Qualitative data were collected to explore their understanding of teacher shortages in order to answer the research questions.

Ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study designs were not selected because a basic qualitative approach was most appropriate for examining administrators' perceptions. Ethnography was excluded as the study did not focus on a specific cultural group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phenomenology was not selected because it did not explore individual life experiences (Yin, 2009). Grounded theory was not chosen because the study did not aim to develop a new theory from the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, a case study design was not appropriate because it emphasized group behaviors or cultural practices.

Definitions of Key Terms

Throughout the study, the following are definitions of key terms:

Administrators: School leaders such as principals, assistant principals, and other school or district officials responsible for the management and operation of schools, including setting the vision, goals, and overall direction of the school (Baker et al., 2022).

Improved practices: Innovative and effective strategies to recruit, prepare, and retain teachers (Shuls & Flores, 2020).

Perceptions: Attitudes and beliefs that educators, students, parents, and the community hold about the teaching profession and the shortage (Oyen & Schweinle, 2021).

Rural school districts: Generally defined by three categories for a school district: fringe, distant, and remote. Distance from urban centers can vary depending on the definition of small population size and remote location. For this study, the area had both a small population size and was remote (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Teacher shortages: Specific grade level, subject matter, or geographic area where there is an inadequate supply of teachers, as determined by the Secretary of Education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Assumptions

Research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation are all impacted by assumptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Assumptions were made about this research. One assumption was that each participant answered each interview question honestly and openly. Another assumption was that participants had experience with teacher shortages to answer the interview questions. These assumptions were important because the participants' perceptions were needed to answer the research question.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this basic qualitative study was one rural public school district in the Southeastern United States that served as the research site. The study population consisted of school administrators from the research site, while teachers, students, parents, and guardians were excluded from participation. The research aimed for transferability, working for applicability to other rural public schools. The rural public school district covered a large geographical area. The delimitation of this study included only school administrators from the research site who were state-certified and had been employed for a minimum of 3 years. This delimitation established the boundary of the group studied. These parameters align with the types of parameters described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure quality research design.

According to Burkholder et al. (2019) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the population to which a study may apply is defined by its scope and the precise amount of material that will be covered to address the examination question. Specific aspects of the research problem addressed in this study were issues faced by administrators of rural school districts and, by extension, teachers as described through administrators' eyes to better understand teacher shortages. At the same time, there were varied understandings of what it meant to live in a rural area or attend a rural school district, which was generally defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) into three categories—fringe, distant, and remote. The distance from urban centers varied by location based on the definition used in each specific location. This specific study focus was important because rural districts are often underrepresented in conversations about education. Instead, these conversations are often dominated by those working in urban settings, who face important but often dissimilar issues, even though many students attend rural school districts. Excessive teacher shortages have disproportionately affected rural districts in recent years, reflecting a larger trend of nationwide teacher loss, prompting the question of why and how it can be addressed.

This research study focused on rural school district administrators' perspectives on teacher shortages. Teachers themselves were not included in the research study, nor were other stakeholders in education represented, such as students and parents. While this design method provided a comprehensive view, it may have led to an incomplete view of the effects of teacher shortages on communities. While administrators are affected by teacher shortages, especially when hiring, they do not experience the direct consequences

that may result, including increased students in single classrooms, reduced learning, and others (Ingersoll, 2001). This, in some ways, limited conclusions as interviewees were not directly leaving the classroom themselves, but it expanded knowledge about the perceptions of administrators about and administrator approaches for dealing with teacher retention problems.

While this study focused on teacher shortages in rural school districts and areas, the understanding produced may transfer to other locations if they have similar socioeconomic conditions. Many rural communities experience poverty on a larger scale, which is also true of many cities. At the same time, poverty may not be represented in the entire city. Smaller neighborhoods often experience wider-scale poverty, which is even more reflective of rural conditions due to the smaller populations reflected in neighborhoods in comparison to the whole city. Therefore, the driving factors of teaching shortages, which include living conditions, pay, and other poverty-related factors, can also be reflected in urban environments, making the results potentially transferable to entirely different locations. While teacher shortages are particularly impactful within rural communities, they are a problem reflected nationwide. As a result, many of the conclusions that were drawn from the study may produce a better understanding of this problem in other locations, as well as what solutions may address it, especially for at-risk communities and demographics (Burns, 1978).

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the limited number of school administrators who participated from the research location. Another limitation was the availability of

participants for interviews. This limited the number of participants and the diversity of their roles within school districts. The phenomenon of this basic qualitative study was that school administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in a rural public school district in the Southeastern United States. As a result, a basic qualitative design was chosen. This research design was utilized to gather in-depth data about school administrators' perceptions via interviews. Those interviews explored how they perceived teacher shortages. Qualitative data were collected via semistructured interviews to answer the research question, which created another limitation of this study.

According to Burkholder et al. (2019), limitations are weaknesses in a study's methodology or design, and researchers should consider developing a strategy to address these weaknesses. A need to maintain participant confidentiality, as well as moral considerations, directed the research design. The number of participants, the fidelity and morality of the participants' responses during the interview, and the use of participants from only one rural area were potential limitations. A potential problem was not expected to be scheduling conflicts. A research plan was created that included creating guidelines for interpreting data and structuring interview questions to minimize bias by avoiding leading questions.

Significance

School administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in a rural public school district in the Southeastern United States. The findings offered valuable insights to support administrators in improving teacher retention and recruitment at the research site. Additionally, the findings may lead to further research concerning ways to reduce teacher

shortages in rural public-school districts in the United States. The findings may contribute to positive social change by providing new methods school administrators can use to reduce and address teacher shortages.

This study was significant because it had the potential to fill a gap in the literature regarding teacher shortages in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States. In the field of education, addressing the teacher shortage is an important issue that can benefit greatly from a study on the subject. Recognizing the underlying causes of the teacher shortage is essential. My research offered an in-depth analysis of the reasons behind the decline in the number of teachers entering the field, as well as the departure of others. Research on teacher shortages can make a substantial contribution to the corpus of knowledge in education by offering useful insights and workable solutions to an urgent issue.

Summary

Teacher shortages have increased in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States. The problem addressed was that education administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in rural public school districts in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most useful.

Through this basic qualitative research, I sought to investigate administrators' perceptions of teacher shortages in the Southeastern United States. In the conceptual framework portion of the paper, ways to help better understand teacher shortages and

their influence on teachers and students in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States were discussed. The nature of the study was also discussed. Chapter 2 includes an introduction and a concise synopsis of the current literature, including sources utilized and key terms used. Additional clarification includes the conceptual framework scholars used and how it was used in the study. In addition, a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the most recent research on the main ideas and study factors is offered. A summary is provided at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Teacher shortages in rural areas have been a growing concern in the United States, with negative results for students and teachers. Rural schools experience a unique blend of long-term challenges that help to overwhelm teachers, including physical remoteness, low funding, and scarce professional resources (Edwards & Anderson, 2023). Shortages are also intensified by employing unqualified teachers to cover the shortage, a move that further degrades the quality of classroom instruction in already low-funded schools (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). The essay discusses the causes and effects of rural teacher shortages, highlighting how high workloads and the employment of unqualified teachers create a cycle of issues in education. It also explores the potential of student teachers in fixing the issues and providing a more sustainable solution to the teacher shortage problem.

An examination of research literature resulted in the identification of a gap in knowledge on teacher shortages in rural public-school districts. There has been less recognition of teacher shortages in rural communities (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Teachers are leaving the profession (Dadvand & Lampert, 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2022; Edwards & Anderson, 2023). Teacher shortages in rural areas are a national problem in the United States (Dlamini et al., 2023). Additionally, teacher shortages affect not only students, but also the broader community (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). School administrators face significant challenges managing teacher shortages (McPherson et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2024). Williams et al. (2021) found that teachers in rural areas may

leave a district entirely, making it increasingly difficult for administrators to recruit and replace them.

More research is necessary to address teacher shortages, which impact student academic success in rural areas (Nguyen, 2022; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Tran et al. (2024) highlighted the need for future studies to better understand teacher shortages in rural regions. Consistent with Lampert et al. (2023), who found that school administrators struggle with teacher shortages, Tran et al. (2024) recommended additional research on administrators' strategies to reduce these shortages. Scallon et al. (2023) observed that teacher shortages are growing in rural districts and suggested further investigation into the role of school administrators.

In Chapter 2, the literature search strategy is described. It included the use of various library databases using specific key search terms. The conceptual framework is presented with a description of how the research phenomenon was examined. This literature review identifies key search terms and concepts to locate peer-reviewed articles published over the past 5 years. A summary and conclusion are presented at the end of this chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

This literature review required several searches of databases accessible through the Walden University Library. Included are Sage Journals, Academic Search Complete, EBSCO, ERIC, Education Source, Academic Search, Google Scholar, and Directory of Open Access Journals. The focus of this research was on lessening teacher shortages. Key search terms used in the literature search strategy were *teacher bonuses, teacher*

rewards, teacher parental support, teacher administrative support, teacher certification shortage, teacher salaries, teacher overwork, teacher burnout, school culture, school organization, teacher resignation, teacher exit, teacher retention strategies, retention, teacher professional development, teacher engagement, teacher motivation, teacher retention, teacher shortages, administrators, and *rural public-school districts*. The reference sections of dissertations were searched using related topics of teacher shortages in the ProQuest database to find more research articles. Quantitative and qualitative studies were included in the search for findings on teacher shortages. Each article used was relevant to this research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that supported this study was the transformational leadership theory (Downton, 1973). This framework explains how leaders inspire and motivate employees to achieve a common vision and common goals. The theory focuses on four key elements: influence, motivation, academic stimulation, and individual consideration.

Shortages of qualified teachers can lead to increased class sizes, reduced instructional quality, and disparities in educational opportunities. The shortage of teachers has turned into a serious problem, especially in the Southeastern regions of the United States, which are categorized as rural (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). The research examined the nature of this shortage, its contributing factors, and potential solutions to this serious problem. The concept here was defined as a lack of completely qualified teachers to fill the position of an educator. These deficiencies have led to either unfilled

job placements or the school districts being forced to hire inadequately qualified employees, negatively impacting the quality of education, student academic performance, and overall student well-being (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

When one looks at this issue from the viewpoint of the Southeastern United States, the shortage of teachers is made worse by the challenges of the region, such as economic problems, geographic location, and demographics. In terms of economic problems, rural areas often have limited financial avenues to support their school districts. This results in a salary reduction for these individuals and limited funding for various school facilities. These various issues can make it difficult to hire because qualified teachers are not drawn to the area and will not settle there. The economic resources of rural areas differ significantly from those of more urban regions, making it challenging for them to progress in comparison to urban areas (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023).

In addition, the geographic locations of rural schools place them in areas far away from various amenities, which is not appealing to potential teachers. The limited infrastructure in the area, such as the housing market and public transportation, adds to this already difficult task of hiring. Moreover, the demographics of the Southeast are often older and spread out, which makes it difficult to hire locally. Individuals trying to hire are forced to seek help outside of the region, and the teachers who do come are faced with fewer chances for success and collaboration with colleagues. They are more at risk of not being satisfied with their job and leaving, which worsens the teacher shortage in the region (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023).

This concept has been explored through many forms of research and emphasizes the need for swift action to prevent the worsening of the issue. An example was shown when Ingersoll and Tran (2023a) attributed teacher shortages in rural areas to demographic issues. In their framework, the teacher shortage is a result of "increasing student enrollments and increasing teacher retirements due to an aging of the teaching force" (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023a, pp. 396-431). The study they conducted highlighted one of the challenges of providing adequate teachers to students in rural areas. With an increase in students and more teachers leaving, the school's institutions are unable to keep up with the demand for competent teachers.

Researchers Ingersoll and Tran (2023) explored the issue by examining why teachers whom school districts hire do not remain in the district. Although the issue is rooted in the demographic differences of the area, the teachers who do get hired have few reasons to stay and do not contribute to the educational well-being of students. The researchers also presented the concept of teacher turnover. This concept is defined as the rate at which teachers end up quitting their jobs after being hired. In rural areas, these turnover rates are high. The researchers attributed this to the conditions they are exposed to while working in rural school districts.

Ingersoll and Tran (2023) urged rural school districts like those in the Southeastern United States to provide incentives that will motivate teachers to stay in their regions. They specifically stated that "the solution to the shortages is not only set in employing new teachers but is attributed to making the current ones stay" (p. 1). Motivating teachers to stay can be difficult, especially in rural areas, but this strategy

offered a long-term solution to the problem. Incentivizing the teachers who do choose to stay could give them little reason to leave, even with the drawbacks of living in rural regions. Ingersoll's (2011) work highlighted the issues that are adding to teacher shortages, including a lack of administrative support and poor working conditions for teachers. His findings and strategies for tackling the issue highlighted the importance of improving teacher working conditions and providing support systems to prevent the turnover of teachers (Ingersoll, 2001).

Other researchers looking at the issue have encouraged more action from the government itself. Mitchell et al. (2022) conducted a policy analysis to examine how the government can encourage more teachers to stay in rural areas. Policy analysis can be defined as a method that an institution or government uses to identify a potential solution to an issue. They generated several solutions and then evaluated which ones would be the most useful methods to address the challenge.

In the case of teacher shortages, a key question arises: which methods are most effective for incentivizing teachers to stay in rural areas? Mitchell et al. (2022) applied the analysis to the framework of "justice as fairness," which was made by philosopher John Rawls. This concept ensures that the interventions set forth are fair in all aspects. This means that rural educators should receive the same support and care as those in other parts of the country. According to researchers, the government should take proactive steps to close this unfair gap.

In their research, Mitchell et al. (2022) found that there are very few policies supporting teachers in rural areas and that little action is being taken to address this issue.

The research highlighted the severity of this issue and how it only gets worse if action is not taken. The research completed in previous studies thoroughly examined the influence of funding inequalities on teacher shortages. These studies showed the necessity for incentives for rural teachers and adequate support sources. An example occurred when researchers connected theories to the problem. Jiang et al. (2023), for example, explored what is known as the motivation hygiene theory. In this theory, a person is either satisfied or dissatisfied with their job due to a motivator (satisfier) or hygiene factor, which makes the job dissatisfying.

Jiang et al. (2023) determined that those two categories can be further divided into factors ensuring satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Motivators may include growth in one's job or being recognized by the administration. On the other hand, dissatisfaction may arise from working conditions or salaries. When the dissatisfiers outweigh the satisfiers, the person will be more motivated to leave a job because the administration fails to purposely curate an environment where people do not want to leave. According to Jiang et al., “the ideal situation would be to hire someone who intrinsically enjoys teaching and is paid well enough not to worry about the salary” (p. 4).

Some examples reviewed illustrate a balance between the motivators and the hygiene factors, which allow for higher retention rates. This unique approach allows teachers to be proud and fulfilled by the work they do while also feeling supported and secure in their roles. Regarding current studies on teacher shortages in rural regions, researchers can benefit from analyzing past mistakes and learning how to improve outcomes by avoiding repetition. For example, the research indicates that constantly

hiring without regard for current teachers does not improve teacher retention and only contributes to more turnover. Future research should focus on developing viable interventions to tackle the problem. It should focus on action and how it can be taken to solve the issue at hand. This synthesis of researchers and theory has helped build a greater understanding of the issue at hand and the steps that can be taken to solve it. It also highlights the importance of analyzing what works to develop interventions that will work (Monk, 2007).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Introduction to Reasons for and Results of Teacher Shortages and Turnover

The deficit of teachers in rural districts over the past few years has assumed crisis levels, particularly in mathematics, science, and special education. Nguyen (2022) described how rural districts also suffer from issues that discourage the recruitment and retention of quality teachers. These include low pay, few professional development opportunities, and isolation, all of which combine to render teaching undesirable in rural districts (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023).

Rural school districts also lack substantial budgets for recruitment or retention incentives, making it challenging to attract qualified personnel to vacant positions. Teacher vacancy rates, according to a National Center for Education Statistics report, are greater for rural schools than for urban and suburban schools. This is particularly true in high-need areas such as STEM education, where the countrywide shortage of qualified teachers is greatest (Guy, 2024).

With fewer applicants, rural schools tend to have to either hire less experienced teachers or employ substitutes without proper certification, again creating a staffing shortage. With rural schools experiencing teacher shortages, they have increasingly hired the services of teachers without certification. This has gained more prominence as schools cannot obtain certified teachers to occupy vacant classrooms. In fact, laws in many states allow hiring individuals without credentials as emergency hires (Franco & Patrick, 2023). While some of these teachers know the subjects they are tutoring, they do not have the pedagogical skills to instruct and handle classrooms (Guy, 2024). Therefore, the deployment of uncertified teachers is normally carried out in critical shortage areas, including in math and science, which are subject areas in which strong knowledge is required.

To improve teacher retention, several factors need to be considered, with a goal of identifying how to keep valued teachers engaged, as well as several factors that help push teachers out of the profession. These are critical concerns for schools hoping to retain experienced educators with the reduced funds available and increased financial strains caused by significant teacher turnovers (Hagedorn, 2005). Teachers often leave the profession due to a lack of support from school and district leadership, including insufficient classroom resources that hinder their success. This can contribute to them becoming emotionally drained and reconsidering whether they should continue as teachers (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Kececi & Kara, 2023).

Rural schoolteacher shortages lead to higher teacher loads, the assignment of uncertified teachers, and the risk of degraded quality of instruction. All of these are interrelated and create a cycle with negative consequences for both students and teachers. To address the issues posed by teacher shortages, policymakers need to place top priority on strategies for enabling the recruitment, retention, and professional development of teachers, particularly in rural areas. Although assigning uncertified personnel may seem like an easy solution, it is essential to prioritize longer-term strategies, such as investing in student teacher placements and providing enhanced mentorship opportunities for both student teachers and uncertified teachers. Addressing issues holistically will place rural schools in a stronger position to support students and teachers, which in turn will lead to better learning outcomes for everyone.

Hiring noncertified teachers is more concerning in rural schools because in rural schools, they are likely to have fewer professional development opportunities or resources than their certified counterparts. Nguyen (2022) contended that non-certified teachers working in rural schools are less likely to be enrolled in mentorship schemes or professional development workshops because such schools may not have sufficient resources and encounter logistical challenges. Without proper training and mentoring, noncertified teachers are likely to struggle with classroom management, lesson planning, and student motivation, ultimately impacting student performance.

Edwards and Anderson (2023) also showed that students in schools without certified teachers perform poorly academically and on traditional tests. For rural students, this is particularly concerning because they already have limited access to learning

resources and opportunities. The use of noncertified teachers leads to a vast difference between rural and urban students and continues to widen inequity in academic achievement.

One of the most significant consequences of the shortage of teachers in rural schools is the increased workload imposed on the available teachers. Teachers in rural areas are often asked to handle more than one subject or grade simultaneously, thereby extending their already overwhelmed time and energy. According to Edwards and Anderson (2023), rural teachers, in some cases, are asked to deal with diverse teaching assignments, teaching outside their field, and therefore, they become overwhelmed and burned out. Such heavy loads not only impair the physical and mental health of teachers but also compromise teachers' ability to provide the individualized attention that students need to succeed academically.

The issue of having to instruct more students with fewer resources is particularly critical for rural schools (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Rural schools lack ancillary personnel, such as teaching assistants, school counselors, and special education instructors, which adds to the burden on teaching staff. In addition, the burnout of teachers in rural communities is also a growing issue (Guy, 2024). Ongoing stress caused by work overload and diminishing resources leads to higher turnover rates as educators seek alternatives in less stressful environments. Rural teacher turnover is extremely high, and losing veteran teachers only worsens the shortage. Moreover, teachers belong to a professional learning community (Guy, 2024). Isolation can be detrimental to their development as teachers and their ability to provide students with an effective education.

The lack of certified teachers and the employment of noncertified staff create a circle that undermines the total effectiveness of rural education systems (Edwards & Anderson, 2\023).

Teachers are leaving the profession before retirement, known as teacher turnover (Edwards et al., 2024). Dadvand and Lampert (2024) conducted a review of the literature to explore the issue of teacher shortages. They examined specific teacher professional development programs that focus on reducing teacher shortages by providing teachers with opportunities to improve their teaching strategies while also getting paid. DeMatthews et al. (2022) investigated the role of administrators regarding the turnover of teachers. They found high rates of teacher turnover and suggested that improving retention rates can reduce teacher turnover. They found that there is a lack of qualitative research to examine the relationship between administrators and teacher turnover.

Teacher shortages in rural areas have been a longstanding concern. Urbanization has affected teacher shortages as people continue to migrate towards more suburban and urban areas to pursue their careers (Dlamini et al., 2023). To better understand this, Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) conducted a detailed analysis of teacher supply and demand in the United States. They found long-term workforce planning proved valuable for districts and policymakers to implement practices to attract and keep high-quality teachers.

Exploring the phenomenon further, Diamond et al. (2020) surveyed rural administrators regarding the turnover of teachers. They found that rural administrators prefer teachers who have teaching experience and have completed bachelor’s degree

programs. This preference helps explain why rural administrators have difficulties in retaining teachers. They suggested one solution would be for rural administrators, maybe to hire teachers with lower qualifications and support them to develop teaching skills.

Dlamini et al. (2023) also discussed the issues of teacher retention in rural areas. They conducted a literature review of studies focused on the challenges administrators face and issues with teacher shortages in rural areas. They found that teacher shortages in rural areas are due to the limited options for accommodation, the infrastructure of school buildings, a lack of engagement from rural students, bad working conditions, and limited resources. They concluded that additional incentives are needed for teachers in the form of monetary gains, accommodation, and the maintenance of a good teaching environment.

Another research team, McHenry-Sorber et al. (2023), examined administrators' perceptions of teacher shortages. Data were collected using interviews with administrators across school districts, and it was found that administrators' understanding of staffing teachers related to their connection with the community. Administrators' connection with the community may influence teacher shortages. McPherson et al. (2024) agreed with the findings of McHenry-Sorber et al. (2023) that it is difficult for staff teachers in rural regions. This research all indicates there are multiple reasons for teacher shortages in rural areas.

Rural communities have historically had difficulty luring and retaining professionals, including teachers (Lock, 2008; Miller, 2012). Due to persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified educators, teaching in rural schools continues to

decline (Heeralal, 2014; Owusu-Acheampong & Williams, 2015). Significant barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in these areas include geographic remoteness and difficult socioeconomic circumstances (Elfers & Plecki, 2006). The World Bank claims that the inability to retain qualified teachers is a major factor in the poor academic performance of students in rural schools (Aziz, 2011). Strong student outcomes are the hallmark of a high-quality teacher (Mitra, Dangwal & Thadani, 2008). In addition, they suffer from a lack of qualified and experienced teachers, which results in subpar instruction. According to research, only qualified, experienced teachers can provide effective instruction (Aziz, 2011; Hammer et al., 2005; Jimerson, 2003).

The presence of excellent teachers is the foundation of quality instruction, a status that cannot be attained by any individual working in the field. Concern over the quality of education in rural areas, where about 70% of the continent's population resides, has grown over the past 20 years throughout Africa (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). Among the main problems affecting the quality of instruction in these areas are a shortage of trained teachers and unfavorable teaching environments (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). This is a matter to consider in research.

Tran et al. (2024) investigated how administrators in areas like South Carolina are having difficulties with teacher shortages. Based on the Rural Recruitment Initiative aimed at reducing the rates of teacher turnover, research suggested the need for strategies to improve teacher shortages. They demonstrated the importance of adequate teacher support in reducing teacher turnover. In line with the findings of Tran et al. (2024), Craig et al. (2023) examined teacher shortages and found that teacher shortage is a deep-rooted

issue. Future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of teacher shortages in rural areas and provide evidence-based strategies to retain teachers. Such future research could include what adequate teacher support looks like.

High Teacher Loads and Student Outcomes

High teacher loads lead to lower student performance. Sorensen and Ladd (2020) found that schools with high turnover rates often have low student performance. Nguyen (2022) noted that rural students generally perform worse academically compared to their urban and suburban peers. Since specific factors, both internal and external to a school or district, can contribute to teacher retention in the first 5 years (Sabina et al., 2023), understanding these factors is important.

High teacher turnover, prevalent in many reviewed articles, negatively affects student performance (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Nguyen (2022) suggested more research on understanding the challenges in maintaining student achievement in rural schools. Since literature previously discussed established that rural teacher shortages occur for multiple reasons, understanding that those shortages influence student success due to enlarged class sizes is important.

The problem of teacher shortage has impacted both the schools and the communities in which they are located. Because of unskilled labor and the possibility of an increase in poverty and crime, high teacher turnover has an impact on the workforce in the community Garcia, E., &Weiss, E. (2019). However, it has been discovered that teacher retention is aided by the development of pertinent, applicable policies and practices to draw in and keep top-notch educators and leaders in the field. It is crucial to

evaluate the policies and procedures that the government and educational institutions should develop and implement in order to retain teachers. Institutions' appropriate staffing levels also influence the same. Research has shown that seasoned educators outperform new ones in terms of student performance.

There are severe repercussions for both students and teachers due to the severe problem afflicting American schools nationwide. Poor student performance, an increased financial strain on the school's administration, and forcing "hard-to-staff" schools into a cycle of hiring teachers who are not a good fit for their students are just a few of the problems caused by high teacher attrition (DeMatthews et al., 2022). Teacher shortage has many different causes, which makes it a challenging problem that calls for interdisciplinary solutions.

The literature on high teacher shortages emphasizes the complexity of the problem. While Cailen O'Shea (2021) emphasized that teacher-student relationships are a positive and significant factor in teacher job satisfaction, DeMatthews et al. (2022) and his coauthors observe that there is a correlation between high teacher attrition and leadership turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2022). The issue is further complicated by the fact that burnout can surpass high job satisfaction, even though teacher job satisfaction also plays a significant role in lowering teacher shortage (Madigan & Kim, 2021). There is a significant gap in the research, as while some studies offer specific solutions to specific problems, none look at a comprehensive strategy that can effectively and significantly address high teacher attrition.

Since teacher shortages have a direct impact on student outcomes and the general

standard of education, it is a crucial issue for district schools. Teachers quitting their jobs because of poor pay or unfavorable working conditions is known as teacher attrition. Due to disruptions in classroom instruction and a lack of experienced teachers, the teacher shortage may have detrimental effects on students. Student performance and accomplishment are strongly correlated with teachers' attrition. A higher teacher attrition rate causes poor student outcomes and higher absenteeism (Nguyen et al., 2019). Additionally, teachers who stay in their classrooms for a long time show greater dedication to their students and job satisfaction, which improves the school climate. Additionally, school resources and teacher retention are closely related teachers are more likely to stay in schools with more resources (Geiger & Pivovarova,2018).

Staffing shortages negatively influence both teacher satisfaction and student achievement. Prioritizing teachers as individuals and stressing trust and respect in professional relationships is a crucial special education recommendation (Ansley et al., 2019). Both employees and students can gain from positive work environments that increase teacher commitment and satisfaction. To establish a stable and encouraging teaching profession, districts need to implement a range of federal, state, and local strategies due to the complexity of teacher shortages (Sutcher et al., 2019). By synthesizing these relevant studies, the literature review provided a comprehensive understanding of problems. These problems influence teacher shortages and the results of those shortages in rural areas.

Role of the Administrator

Researchers have highlighted the significant role of administrative strategies in

mitigating teacher shortages. Administrators are often the first line of defense, meaning that they are responsible for developing and implementing solutions to issues such as teacher shortages (Lampert et al., 2023). Administrative strategies significantly affect teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools. These teacher shortages challenge administrators. How teachers perceive the behaviors and attitudes of administrators has a large impact on how motivated those teachers are (Martinez & McAbee, 2020).

When teachers believe their administrators are supportive of their autonomy and believe in their competence and ability to make educational choices, it can be transformational in helping retain teachers. To gain more insight into the teacher perspective, Scallon et al. (2023) examined the phenomenon from the standpoint of teachers. They found that when teachers experience limited resources, it contributes to teacher dissatisfaction due to their perceiving a lack of support from administrators. This goes against teachers' ideals of effective leadership.

Due to teacher shortages and a lack of candidates for administrative promotions, teachers perceive administration as a source of stress and instability. This difference in perception can cause problems for administrators trying to bridge the gap between rural district challenges and teacher retention. Scallon et al. summarized the problems they found teachers experienced in rural districts. First, rural districts often have fewer support resources to implement teacher ideas or needs, leading to higher dissatisfaction with administrators. Additionally, teachers have described that leaders demonstrate three practices, such as: (a) recognizing teachers as knowledgeable contributors, (b) communicating the school’s vision around high-quality teaching, and (c) centering student learning. To help solve the teacher shortage problem, it appears necessary to

reconcile these two perspectives.

Several other factors related to the role of administrators in addressing the teacher shortage were examined. One study (Capp et al., 2022) found that often the school environment focuses solely on the climate created for the student without considering the impact of that environment on faculty wellbeing and support. Further, schools that focus on both student and teacher support can create a more welcoming environment that fosters resilience in both students and teachers. Still another study (Yeol, 2020) indicated that schools are in the process of evolving into innovative cultures that increase positive growth. As that occurs, teacher retention increases.

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO23, 2022) highlighted the results of a survey of rural superintendents who indicated that their inability to offer competitive salaries was a significant inhibitory factor in terms of securing qualified teachers. Another factor affecting rural teacher shortages administrators struggle with is the lack of ability for teachers to do inter-district transfers, meaning teachers who feel uncomfortable or unhappy within their school cannot transfer to other schools within the district (Williams et al., 2021). As a result, teachers may leave the district entirely, minimizing the local potential-educator pool making it more challenging to recruit and replace them when they leave. The lack of these options for administrators also exacerbates the issue.

Challenges Faced by Administrators

Administrators face challenges when focusing on teacher recruitment and retention, as identified by Castro (2023). Challenges administrators face include high teacher turnover, lack of support resources, and professional development opportunities,

particularly in rural districts. Additionally, administrators face challenges with the influx of new teachers, including those who have not attended a teacher preparation program. Administrators also face challenges regarding the professional development of teachers to ensure that it will not affect student learning. Administrators in rural school districts face specific challenges related to teacher shortages, such as supporting underprepared teachers effectively while balancing leadership and organizational duties. Yang et al. (2021) researched these situations and determined that administrators have fewer interactions with external stakeholders, such as parents and the community, and engagement with external stakeholders affects community relations. At the same time, Affuso et al. (2023) found that a lack of such support from teachers and parents can erode teacher motivation and self-efficacy over time. This inability to meet the needs of either teachers or the community they serve can significantly strain rural administrators' success.

Administrators in rural schools face significant challenges due to teacher shortages, including increased workload, difficulty in maintaining educational standards, and limited resources. Teachers indicated in a study by Ingersoll and Tran (2023) that school administration is often a point of dissatisfaction. They found that rural teachers are more likely to cite school administration dissatisfaction and a reason to leave the teaching profession than teachers in urban areas. This is borne out in a study by Redding and Henry (2019) that examined the rates of teacher turnover among newer teachers and found that a large portion of novice teachers decide to stop teaching within their first year, which has negative implications on the education of the students due to abrupt

interruptions in their teachers, a further complication experienced by administrators. This aligns with other research indicating that teacher dissatisfaction with the administration is a particular problem in rural areas.

Several studies identified problematic administrator practices, as well. Myende and Maifala (2020) reviewed the results of a qualitative study highlighting the voice of administrators in rural schools. They found that administrators tend to lead their schools without regard for issues affecting their schools socially. Administrators mostly focus on tasks that need to be addressed from the top instead of the issues affecting their staff. This type of leadership not only reveals the issues in leading rural schools but also shows where more focus should be placed by the administrative leaders heading these schools.

At the same time, Naslund and Ponomariov (2019) analyzed data on charter schools located in Texas and their practices regarding teacher turnover. They revealed that administrators often dismiss inadequate teachers instead of providing them with proper support. This results in a lack of attention to the effects of teacher turnover on the development of students. Pendola and Fuller (2022) explored the characteristics of rural principals and their rates of retention and turnover. They demonstrated that rural administrators have fewer resources to succeed because they have less support from coworkers and support staff and have many more responsibilities. These are issues that also need to be considered when addressing administrators' roles in teacher retention and turnover.

Teacher Professional Development

Rural teachers, who may be underqualified or hold emergency certifications,

often lack opportunities for professional development through their district. Berman and DeFeo (2024) found that teachers need to be more skilled or take more time to train to be prepared to work with students from diverse backgrounds that can occur in rural areas. Further, a lack of professional development may cause teachers to leave early in their careers.

Considering this further, Nawab and Sharar (2022) examined the difficulties in preparing programs targeted at the professional development of teachers in rural areas. In interviews, they found a lack of communication both between and about different programs designed to develop teachers. An example is the program known as New Teachers Anonymous, discussed in research by Lamboy (2023). Through this program, new teachers are allowed to share their opinions and struggles in their new careers while in the presence of their peers. However, its participation is smaller than possible because it competes with other programs occurring at the same time. One such competing program was examined by Rivera et al. (2023). They examined the Teach for All programs because, through this program, overseas teachers can teach abroad and fill vacancies as well. However, because this program incurs additional costs and requires teachers to be absent when teacher shortages already exist, few teachers have an opportunity to participate. These conflicts in existing programs need to be examined more closely.

Teacher motivation and engagement are integral to teachers' decisions to stay or leave rural teaching (Lazarides & Schiefele, 2021). Teacher motivation is a core skill that enables teachers to overcome the challenges they face in teaching by influencing

their decision-making and self-regulated learning. At the same time, measuring teacher engagement allows people to understand whether those programs change how teachers practice instruction in the classrooms. That engagement includes teachers using the learning opportunities to change how they approach and conduct their teaching activities (Kelly et al., 2022).

Some research indicated that training, coaching, and continuous collaborative professional development can help teachers increase student learning skills over a long period (Ventista & Brown, 2023). There were actions found to work in helping retain some teachers during the first few years of service. Components like strong guidance and mentoring by experienced teachers and induction programs, both of which increased teacher job satisfaction, showed to be successful (Sabina et al., 2023).

The teacher shortage can begin as early as preservice teacher development. Ai et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the experiences of educators who practice in rural environments. The participants were a group of volunteers who collected data on how teaching in these environments can be challenging and how the experiences contribute to the overall understanding that the teachers have individually. The participants were preservice teachers with previous experience teaching in rural communities, who were studying in a Bachelor's degree program. At the study's data collection stage, the pre-service teachers reported that their experiences teaching in rural settings were very different, and they had to adapt to the needs of the student population. Their approach toward teaching changed, and they formed bonds with the students. The study highlighted the importance of tailoring practices to the specific

needs of rural students, as their needs differ significantly from those of students in other areas.

This supports research results found by Stanton et al. (2022), who conducted a case study to examine how community-focused initiatives help preservice teachers properly overcome the difficulties affecting rural educational systems. They investigated how elementary school teachers can properly address the needs of their students through community-centered planning strategies. The research results showed how this approach resulted in teachers having a greater understanding of the needs of rural communities. The introduction and training of preservice teachers for teaching in rural communities require further examination to understand how to improve their retention.

Educational Policy Implications

Policy implications refer to the possible impacts of educational policies on teacher recruitment and retention and school administration. Policies that can significantly affect rural schools include funding allocations, incentives for rural schools and teaching, and certification requirements, all of which play a role in shaping the experience of rural education. This topic is explored only minimally in research literature. However, Welsh (2024) found that they are a factor affecting teachers in their work and desire to remain in teaching. To some extent, this effect is offset by the fact that many teachers are not familiar with or do not concern themselves with policy. When teachers are aware, this can lead to teacher shortages that negatively affect student outcomes by leading to larger class sizes, reduced course offerings, and lower academic achievement in rural schools.

Finally, Hatch et al. (2020) explored how district-wide improvements in instruction and equity positively impact teaching quality. They found that district-wide improvements affect policy implications. All of this paints a complex picture of the role of policy in teacher retention and teacher shortages.

Along with these issues are other policy decisions that must be considered. Mette (2022) examined such concern when he explored the effect of race on the rural educational sector. They highlighted the issue concerning how policies prevent innovative and progressive policies from being implemented at these schools. Removing this concentration on whiteness could allow for more progressive school districts that will invite educators from all types of backgrounds.

Further, Mills et al. (2024) used what is known as a Bacchian-inspired approach to understand the problem of teacher retention. They explained how the issue most greatly affects lower socioeconomic communities. They examined how teacher shortages are shown in policies including the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy and the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and found these plans were not effective in combatting the retention problem in rural areas. In contrast, Peterson et al. (2020) explored education in a rural area where many students are from low-income families and minority backgrounds. They examined a program known as *Grow Your Own*, which provides teachers with opportunities to obtain teaching certifications and advance in their practice. They found that making teachers more culturally aware to address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, like those residing in rural environments, assisted in retention. Although some insights into best approaches to recruiting and retaining quality

teachers in rural districts have been gained, the area of best practices remains unclear. In addition, according to Brooks and Perryman (2024), social justice must be given top priority in teacher education policies by addressing spatial inequality. Their research demonstrates how England's current policies frequently take resources away from rural areas while ignoring the difficulties these areas face. The authors criticize the emphasis on centralization and standardization, cautioning that these strategies may have detrimental effects on isolated and rural communities. To guarantee equity in teacher education, they urge more study and policy oversight. Furthermore, the enduring problem of teacher shortages is recognized as a long-term obstacle that calls for continuous, flexible policy solutions.

While teacher shortages are a common problem, they are particularly acute in schools that serve underprivileged communities. Because of the complicated needs of their students and families, these schools frequently lack resources and put more pressure on their teachers (Dadvand & Lampert, 2024). As a result, part of the teacher's job is to address historical and social injustices. Strong preparation, evidence-based induction, and continuous support are crucial for keeping teachers in these demanding settings. Further research is needed in this area, as recommended by different researchers. Comparative studies across diverse rural settings can provide insights into context-specific challenges and solutions (Welsh et al., 2024). Continued evaluation of policy interventions is essential to assess their long-term effect on teacher shortages and educational outcomes, as well as on the challenges faced by administrators in rural districts and the policy implications of teacher shortages (Berman & DeFeo, 2024).

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Teacher recruitment describes the process of hiring qualified individuals as teachers and the strategies utilized to enroll students in teaching or educational preparation programs during college. Studies like Horn et al. (2024) have investigated the teacher situation within rural areas. They examined the thoughts of special education teachers in rural communities concerning the need for interventions targeted at improving recruitment and retention. They surveyed special education teachers who reported a need for more adequate teachers in rural areas and more strategies aimed at providing teacher comfort. They are not alone in identifying a need for strong recruitment and retention efforts in rural districts. Researchers like Berman and DeFeo (2024) have shown that teacher recruitment and retention are key issues in rural schools, influenced by such problems as salary disparities, professional development opportunities, and community support. In rural areas, they found that recruitment and retention are particularly challenging due to factors such as geographic isolation, lower salaries, limited professional development opportunities, and fewer resources. Other sources noted teacher salaries have not increased notably for decades, making retention difficult (Granger et al., 2022). In fact, teachers worldwide are experiencing stress and burnout that is leading to anxiety and depression, resulting in teachers leaving the profession in large numbers and anywhere between 25-74% of teachers experiencing moderate to severe burnout (Agyapong et al., 2022). Teachers are also experiencing overworking in record numbers, becoming unable to balance between their professional, social, and family lives, so they feel they fail at all roles (Mahmood, 2022).

One way administrators have successfully offset other issues in rural districts is by offering higher compensation, which attracts more qualified and motivated teachers who are also more likely to stay, even in areas with greater needs. This can help prevent increased rates of teacher turnover. Castro and Esposito (2022) summed it up with the response from one participant in their study. “We find the bonus produces positive direct effects on teacher retention but also a negative spillover on the probability of filling teacher vacancies in neighboring schools” (p. 697). At the same time, Brenner et al. (2021) explored the difficulty of keeping current teachers, thereby reducing the large rates of turnover. One suggestion was a place-based education model where educators connect their curriculum to the community, which allows them to understand their students and be more rooted in the community. Brenner et al. believed this model would work in rural settings to provide teachers with a reason to stay because they would feel more rooted to their communities. Aligned with this, Floyd et al. (2024) explored the mental health aspect of why educators decide to leave the teaching profession. They used a survey to collect data from special educators and educators in higher education and found that educators need to find meaning in their work to find the purpose of teaching.

Further, students with disabilities (SWDs) are increasingly being taught in general education classrooms, which puts more pressure on general education teachers to accommodate their varied learning requirements (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). The possibility that working with SWDs influences the likelihood that general education or special education certified teachers will leave their positions was explored by these researchers. They examined whether the percentage of SWDs a teacher serves is

associated with teacher turnover, is related to the type of disability, and is affected by certification by using multilevel logistic regression models. They found that special education certification reduced this risk, and higher percentages of students in classrooms were linked to an increased risk of turnover. Stress levels for teachers were positively related to whether classes included students with autism or emotional or behavioral disorders. However, for special education certified teachers, these students' presence did not increase risk and resulted in lower teacher turnover. At the same time, Ruble et al. (2023) explored the rates of special education teachers maintaining their positions in education and how these rates have reduced in recent years. The researchers administered a survey with a topic based on teacher burnout and collected data at different points in the school year and found that burnout levels were stable and could be predicted in teachers. They recommended that strategies aim at either preventing or reducing burnout from the beginning. Based on these studies, teacher retention is influenced by both monetary rewards and gaining a sense of fulfillment and must be addressed from the moment the teacher enters the school.

Burke and Buchanan (2022) explored current initiatives aimed at attracting teachers to rural environments. They conducted a literature review and highlighted a variety of strategies across literature that are effective, such as the use of marketing aimed at teachers, offering higher financial incentives, lower living costs, and the ability to make an impact in the lives of their students. They also suggested that older teachers, nearing retirement, may be more motivated to complete their careers by making a difference in disadvantaged areas. Similarly, Glover and Stewart (2023) explored a new

program aimed at intervening on the issue of teacher recruitment. The program occurs after the teacher graduates from school and provides districts with the opportunity to add diversity and participate in distance learning. They identified teaching programs that not only helped teachers develop their skills but also offered a more flexible system for instruction, thereby creating a much-needed connection to their environment and students, which in turn helped combat teacher attrition. Engels et al. (2021) examined a similar program aimed at understanding the influence of peer-to-peer teaching and support. They found that in situations where administrators made attempts to actively structure such support programs teacher retention was higher. Teachers need to understand the schools and communities in which they teach and connect to the needs of their students and fellow teachers. Programs that assist with this understanding can positively affect retention.

The role of principals in retention was equally important. Grissom and Bartanen (2019) explored the link between the teachers' perceptions of the principal's leadership qualities and the rates of teacher turnover. They found that in schools with more effective school principals, the rates of teacher turnover were lower. In this study, they evaluated the effectiveness of a principal by their ability to sustain their better-performing employees by providing efficient incentives. They also found that when high-performing teachers are incentivized, they are more motivated to stay, which creates a better learning environment. One of these areas of effectiveness was explored by Goldhaber et al. (2020) who examined the correlation between the shortages of teachers and placements of student teachers. They found that areas with fewer student teacher hires are more likely to

hire teachers on an emergency basis the following year. They indicated emergency hires are most likely not thoroughly vetted and may not do the best job for students. They suggested hiring student teachers in regions where administrators struggle with staffing to combat the issue. This is important to consider when examining the hiring choices administrators may face. Administrators' roles in planning, recruiting, supporting, and welcoming teachers cannot be understated, especially given that Among many solutions to the rural teacher shortages is a greater use of student teachers. Student teachers are typically in the final stage of their teacher preparation programs and are actively seeking school experience. Oyen & Schweinle (2021) noted that offering student teacher placements in rural schools and districts can help alleviate teacher shortages while offering quality field experience for future teachers.

Rural student teaching can be a win-win, as student teachers gain experience with the specific issues of rural education, while schools get extra help in classrooms. In addition, rural school student teacher placements would also likely have the effect of attracting new teachers into rural communities. Teacher preparation programs typically require student teachers to have placements in a range of situations, including rural schools (Oyen & Schweinle, 2021). Placements familiarize prospective teachers with instructional strategies, such as differentiated instruction and classroom management, as well as rural school issues, including limited resources and small-sized classes. Student teachers can be a valuable asset to administrators in meeting the teacher numbers required.

In contrast, when Han (2021) explored the correlation between teacher

compensation and the quality of their performance, they found two important results. First, teachers who graduated from secondary institutions tend to earn less. Second, higher-paid teachers also tend to migrate out of teaching, while lower-paid teachers retain their positions as teachers. All of this indicates a need to recruit high-quality teachers, but an equal concern is that high-quality teachers may be motivated to leave teaching for other kinds of positions.

Goldhaber et al. (2020), Williams et al. (2021), and Berman and DeFeo (2024) highlighted key issues impacting teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas. They identified noncompetitive salaries, limited inter-district transfer options, and inadequate professional development as primary challenges. These factors contribute significantly to the difficulties rural districts face in attracting and keeping qualified teachers. These results align with the previous findings. This was supported by the results of a study conducted by Toropova et al. (2020). They explored the correlation between teacher satisfaction and retention. They examined the working conditions of the teachers, their compensation, and their attitudes towards teaching. To evaluate satisfaction, researchers used the work teachers had to do, their degree of cooperation with administrators, and their attitudes toward disciplining students. The benefits rural administrators can offer teachers appear key to teacher recruitment and retention, but providing those benefits appears to require administrator innovation and examination to determine best practices.

Summary and Conclusions

Teachers are leaving the profession (Edwards et al., 2024). High rates of teacher turnover highlight the need for more qualitative research on teacher shortages (Dadvand

& Lampert, 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2022; Dlamini et al., 2023). Numerous researchers have noted the difficulty of staffing teachers in rural regions (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023; McPherson et al., 2024). Still others have found that teacher shortages contribute to lower student performance (Craig et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2024). Numerous other researchers have also emphasized how teacher shortages challenge administrators and that teacher recruitment and retention as critical issues in rural schools (Berman & Defoe, 2024; Lampert et al, 2023).

In Chapter 2, the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, and literature review related to key factors and concepts were discussed. Teacher shortages pose a significant challenge for administrators in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States, and there have been several studies to tackle this issue. To better understand this issue, educators must understand the context in which it exists. Compared to other school districts, rural districts have a greater turnover rate, which has a more significant impact on student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). There are multiple contributing factors to teacher shortages, which were explored in this study. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology design, role of the researcher, instrumentation, and trustworthiness issues.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Teacher shortages have increased in rural school districts in the Southeastern United States. The problem addressed was that education administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in rural public school districts in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most useful. In Chapter 3, I present the research design and rationale, including participant selection criteria. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are used as lenses to discuss the study's trustworthiness. To address the ways in which I protected participant safety and confidentiality, ethical considerations and protocols are also provided.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions that guided this basic qualitative study were the following:

RQ 1: How do rural school administrators perceive their challenges with teacher shortages?

RQ 2: What practices do rural school administrators use to reduce teacher shortages?

RQ 3: What practices do rural school administrators find useful in reducing teacher shortages?

The phenomenon examined in this basic qualitative study was school administrators' struggle to reduce teacher shortages in a rural public-school district in the Southeastern United States. A basic qualitative design was chosen to gather in-depth data

about school administrators' perceptions of and practices to reduce shortages. Semistructured interviews were used to explore and answer these questions. Quantitative research was not appropriate because teacher perceptions are not statistically analyzable in an exploratory study like this one. Other qualitative methods would also not have allowed me to answer the questions posed in this study.

Role of the Researcher

My professional role did not include supervision of participants at the research site. Following Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, I ensured the protection of human participants. I did not collect data before obtaining IRB approval from both Walden University and the research site. All IRB protocols were adhered to during participant recruitment and interviews. Qualitative data were gathered through interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. I maintained professionalism to ensure that participants felt comfortable responding to the interview questions. Participants were asked open-ended "how" or "why" questions regarding the research phenomenon. An interview protocol and a reflexivity journal were used to ensure unbiased questioning, document my predispositions around my topic, and minimize researcher bias. Professional relationships were established with all participants, and all interview data will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years.

A researcher's main responsibility is to carry out research that adds to knowledge and draws conclusions that are supported by data. According to Burkholder et al. (2019), the researcher is the main tool used to collect data for a qualitative study, so they must

account for potential influences on the data. I had no personal or professional connection to the study participants. This means that there were probably fewer biased responses from the interviewees than there might have been otherwise, allowing for more authentic qualitative answers to analyze. Power relationships, such as the interviewees having more seniority than I did in terms of experience and education, were not a concern. However, I was aware of possible researcher bias as I conducted the study.

Methodology

The phenomenon of this basic qualitative study was that school administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in a rural public school district in the Southeastern United States. A basic qualitative design was selected to gather in-depth data from school administrators to explore their perceptions regarding teacher shortages. Additionally, a basic qualitative design was used to understand participants' perceptions. Qualitative data were collected through semistructured interviews to address the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Several qualitative designs were ruled out because they would not have answered the research questions. Phenomenology was not selected because the study did not focus on individual life experiences (Yin, 2009). Ethnography was not selected as the study did not focus on a cultural group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A case study design was not chosen because that type of study focuses on group behaviors or cultural practices (Yin, 2009). Grounded theory was not selected as the study was not used to develop a theory from its findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Participant Selection

The research site was a rural public school district serving over 3,000 students in elementary, middle, and high schools. The district employed over 30 elementary teachers, more than 20 middle school teachers, and over 50 high school teachers. Six elementary, three middle, and four high school administrators managed the schools. Of the 15 administrators, 11 were female, and four were male. The participant population consisted of 15 administrators, with a sample size ranging from 10 participants. A small sample is appropriate for qualitative studies, as qualitative research allows for in-depth exploration and understanding of participants' experiences. Qualitative researchers may continue interviewing participants until no new data emerge from the interviews, a concept known as saturation in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Purposive sampling was used to recruit 10 school administrators from one rural public school district who were state-certified and had been employed for a minimum of 3 years. The exclusion criteria were teachers, students, parents, and guardians.

Instrumentation

Data were collected for this study through individual semistructured interviews using a platform for virtual meeting conferencing. Each of the participants involved was familiar with the platform. They answered questions related to the leadership styles of administrators and how they perceived and addressed teacher shortages. Interviews were used to collect qualitative data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

A qualitative researcher develops and uses an interview protocol guided by the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview questions were developed based

on the literature review and the conceptual framework, a technique described by multiple researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, a reflexivity journal was maintained to minimize researcher bias, and member checks were employed to ensure accuracy of participants' responses, also techniques suggested by researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Yin, 2009).

This study's participants were selected to provide an understanding of the challenges faced by administrators in rural school districts. The focus on administrators was intentional because these participants are involved in teacher staffing and retention. By selecting a sample of 10 administrators, the research aimed to capture how school administrators perceive and address teacher shortages, as well as which methods that they have used to address the shortages have proven useful and which have not. Focusing on a small group of administrators allowed for an in-depth exploration of their perspectives regarding teacher shortages in rural districts.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) indicated that in qualitative research, the researchers are the main instrument because they are aware of how their positionality affects the data and conclusions. The instrument I used for my research was a semistructured interview protocol. School administrators from one rural public school district were interviewed using Zoom for virtual meeting conferencing. All participants were asked the same interview questions with follow-up questions to gain a better understanding of their perceptions. According to Ravitch and Carl, the same questions should be used with each participant, and follow-up questions should be used to collect extensive, more detailed data. According to Creswell (2014), the feedback provided by participants contributes to

the development of practical instruction in responses to the research questions to collect reliable data. As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Burkholder et al. (2019), interview questions and protocols are used to establish content validity.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

IRB approval was obtained from both Walden University and the rural public school district, which served as the research site. The school district's website provided information about administrators, including their credentials and email addresses. A list of email addresses was compiled for school administrators who were state-certified and had been employed for a minimum of 3 years from one rural public school district. This list was used to send an email invitation to participate in interviews. The email invitation included a copy of the consent form and details about the study, such as its purpose and significance. School administrators who agreed to participate were contacted via email to schedule the interviews. The date and time of the interviews were agreed upon with each participant. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were recorded with each participant's consent. During the interviews, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

In conclusion, to start the data collection procedures for participant recruitment, names and emails of administrators were gathered. Emails were sent to all participants requesting their participation. They were provided with a copy of the consent form that details the study's nature, background, and purpose. The email contained my contact information so they could contact me to ask questions that needed clarification. Next, scheduled interviews were up to 1 hour long. The interviews were conducted using

Zoom, and each participant received the Zoom link along with their interview questions via email at least 24 hours before their scheduled interview. To ensure accuracy, the interviews were recorded using a digital recorder with the consent of the participants. During each of my interviews, notes were taken to help me with follow-up questions or to add to an answer if needed. Before ending the interview, participants were informed that their interview would be transcribed and that they would receive a copy of the transcript to review. All my participants were informed of the purpose of this process, which was for them to clarify and edit anything that was captured by them during the interview.

Data Analysis Plan

Interview transcripts were organized and coded for analysis as per guidelines laid out by Creswell (2014). Data analysis was conducted to understand the participants' responses as described by Ravitch and Carl (2021). Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emergent themes as described by multiple researchers (Burkholder et al., 2019; Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, open and axial coding were employed to examine keywords and phrases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). After determining all the codes, I created a new Excel spreadsheet that combined all the codes from each of the administrators' interviews. I reviewed the codes to check for repeating patterns.

Additionally, inductive analysis was used to review the interview transcripts to identify categories and themes, again as described by multiple researchers (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Yin, 2009). The process of grouping keywords, categories, and subcategories was repeated until no new data

emerged. Member checks were utilized to ensure the accuracy of participants' responses. Discrepant cases were examined within categories and subcategories and are reported in the findings. This systematic process guided the analysis of interview transcripts to generate emergent themes that address the research question.

Trustworthiness

According to Shenton (2004), credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability are the four criteria that determine trustworthiness. Burkholder et al. (2019) stated that the studies conducted by qualitative researchers are validated, or considered trustworthy, by ensuring dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The validity of qualitative research relies on the experiences, perspectives, and insights of both the researcher and the research participants (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Credibility

To ensure credibility, retired administrators from the same research site reviewed the findings to assess confidence in the interview transcripts and their interpretation. Member checking was used to enhance the credibility of this qualitative research. Additionally, a reflexivity journal was maintained during interviews to minimize research biases, all as described by Ravitch and Carl (2021). These are appropriate credibility measures used by researchers to adhere to ethical research standards and maintain professionalism to minimize researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this case, the reflexivity journal was used to minimize researcher biases and reactivity. In addition, interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings. Member checks were

conducted with participants to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcripts. The findings included excerpts from participants' responses. Qualitative data, including interview recordings, communication with participants, consent forms, and the reflexivity journal, will be stored securely on my home office computer, which is password-protected. All information from this study will be retained for 5 years, as required by IRB guidelines.

Shenton (2004) asserted that demonstrating credibility is one way to guarantee dependability. According to Burkholder et al. (2019), credibility is the assurance that the conclusions are reasonable considering the information provided. Triangulation and member checking are two strategies implemented to increase credibility. Triangulation is the process of using several data sources, investigators, or data collection methods. As stated by Burkholder et al., triangulation is the process of utilizing several sources to verify the veracity of a claim. My initial action was to transcribe every piece of data. NVivo was used for the first coding cycle. To identify emergent themes, a thematic analysis was used for pattern coding. Member checks were conducted.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) defined member checks as the procedure through which a researcher confirms with study participants that the reconstruction of their realities fairly. It represents what they shared and provides them with an opportunity to comment on the reconstruction. Member checks were conducted by providing participants with copies of the interview transcript and soliciting their feedback on my preliminary interpretations of their data, ensuring an accurate portrayal of their intended statements.

Transferability

I provided a detailed description of the location and participants to enable readers to compare similarities with their own settings, facilitating potential transferability. The findings of this study may be transferable to similar contexts. To ensure that readers can determine whether results are transferable to other locations, I presented a comprehensive description of the study context and included excerpts from the findings. Additionally, retired administrators, who reviewed my interview questions, were asked to conduct an external audit of the findings.

Transferability, as defined by Burkholder et al. (2019), Ravitch and Carl (2021), and Shenton (2004), is the degree to which the results of a study can be used in different contexts. The reader determines whether the outcomes of one scenario can be applied to their current field of interest. Through my study, an explanation was given of all the steps involved in the research, including the setting, participant selection, informed consent procedure, interview data collection method, and data analysis.

Dependability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), dependability is established through triangulation, which includes detailed information on research design, implementation, data collection, and analysis. In terms of dependability, this study can be replicated in a similar context to achieve consistent results. Readers can evaluate my methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In Chapter 4, the interpretation of the findings is presented and discussed.

According to Burkholder et al. (2019), Ravitch and Carl (2021), and Shenton (2004), a study is considered dependable if it yields consistent results and can be theoretically replicated by other researchers. To guarantee the dependability of the procedure and the accuracy of the study's conclusions, a well-rounded design was adhered to at every stage. To demonstrate the dependability of the research study, triangulation and methodological sequence were used.

Confirmability

Confirmability is established by documenting data validation procedures and assessing the research study's quality (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I documented an audit trail detailing how my research was conducted. Additionally, I kept a reflexive research journal throughout to minimize researcher bias.

Researchers go above and beyond to demonstrate that their findings are the result of the information they have gathered, not biased or the product of their personal preferences. Reliable research yields results that other researchers can replicate, accurately represent data obtained from participants, and essentially yield the same outcomes (Burkholder et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). Reflexivity means carefully self-monitoring and taking responsibility for one's beliefs, judgment, and practices during the research process to ensure that the findings attain credibility. Researchers acknowledge their biases (Burkholder et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Procedures

In conducting this qualitative study, ethical procedures were followed. I ensured the protection of all participants. Before the study, approval 05-09-25-0428487 was obtained from Walden University (IRB) and the rural public school district serving as the research site. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood their rights, the purpose of the study, and their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, with all data stored securely and access limited to authorized personnel only. Additionally, a reflexive journal was maintained to minimize researcher bias, and member checks were used to ensure the accuracy of participants' responses. By adhering to these ethical standards, the research aimed to uphold the highest level of integrity and respect for all participants involved.

Researchers adhere to ethical research standards and maintain professionalism to minimize researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this case, a reflexivity journal was used to minimize researcher biases and reactivity. Interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings. Member checks were conducted with participants to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcripts. The findings included excerpts from participants' responses. Qualitative data, including interview recordings, communication with participants, consent forms, and the reflexivity journal, will be stored securely on my home office computer, which is password-protected. All information from this study will be retained for 5 years, as required by IRB guidelines.

Summary

The study focused on exploring how school administrators perceive and address teacher shortages, as well as which methods they believe are useful and which are not. The methodology involved a basic qualitative design, utilizing semistructured interviews to gather in-depth data. Ethical procedures were clearly outlined, ensuring that participants provided informed consent, confidentiality was maintained, and their rights were protected throughout the research process. Additionally, steps were taken to minimize research bias that included the use of a reflexivity journal and member checks. The research design demonstrated a comprehensive approach to conducting rigorous, ethical research while maintaining transparency and participant engagement.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings of a basic qualitative study that explored challenges and improved practices related to teacher shortages in rural school districts across the Southeastern United States. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most useful. Three primary research questions guided the study:

RQ 1: How do rural school administrators perceive their challenges with teacher shortages?

RQ 2: What practices have rural school administrators used to reduce teacher shortages?

RQ 3: What practices do rural school administrators find useful in reducing teacher shortages?

The insights gathered through semistructured interviews have informed the analysis and interpretation of administrators' experiences, beliefs, and recommendations. This chapter includes a description of the study's setting, participant demographics, data collection and analysis processes, as well as the presentation of results aligned with the research questions. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, each component of this chapter adheres to rigorous qualitative research standards.

Setting

This study was conducted in a rural district located in the Southeastern United States, encompassing three primary school campuses: one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. Collectively, these three academic units serve an estimated student population of approximately 940 students, with 451 in elementary school, 198 in middle school, and 280 in high school. The district employs roughly 119 certified teachers across its schools. Seven administrators serve the district, and six agreed to participate in the study. These individuals represented both school-based and district-level leadership roles. The rural context of the district provided a unique lens through which to examine teacher recruitment and retention challenges, especially in communities where access to certified staff remains a persistent obstacle.

The participants in this study were 10 certified administrators employed in rural Southeastern school districts. Each individual held a valid certification from the state and had direct administrative experience in either a school-based or district-level leadership role. All participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the phenomenon under investigation, namely the experience of managing teacher shortages in a rural educational context.

Data were collected through one-on-one, semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom. The use of Zoom facilitated both audio and video recording for transcription purposes. As a secondary measure, a mobile recording application was utilized to ensure data preservation. Importantly, interviews were conducted in private, off-campus

locations selected by the participants, preserving confidentiality and minimizing potential workplace interruptions.

Of the 10 participants, five held master's degrees while five had earned doctorates. Their administrative experience varied, with representation from early-career, midcareer, and veteran administrators. Specifically, participants reported administrative tenure ranging from 5 years to over 20 years. The group included three male and seven female participants. Three administrators held district-level positions, while seven served in school-based roles, primarily at the elementary level.

Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics, including gender, highest degree earned, years of administrative experience, and level of administrative placement within the district.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participants		Years admin experience	Gender	Education level	Administration level
1	SA	9	Female	Master's	School
2	SA	20	Male	Doctorate	School
3	SA	6	Female	Doctorate	School
4	SA	9	Male	Master's	School
5	SA	11	Female	Master's	School
6	SA	5	Female	Master's	School
7	SA	30	Female	Doctorate	School
8	SA	22	Female	Master's	School
1	DA	6	Female	Master's	District
2	DA	10	Male	Doctorate	District

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semistructured interviews, designed to elicit rich, narrative responses from participants about their experiences with teacher

shortages. The interview protocol consisted of nine open-ended questions, accompanied by two follow-up prompts per question to deepen understanding and clarify participant perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). These interviews were structured to align closely with the study's two guiding research questions, ensuring relevance and coherence throughout the data collection process.

Interview Structure

Each of the 10 interviews was conducted via Zoom over a 3-week period. This platform was selected for its accessibility and secure recording features, which enabled both video and audio capture. To ensure data integrity, a secondary recording application was used concurrently as a backup. Interviews ranged in duration from approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All participants responded to the initial recruitment email within 3 days, signaling their willingness to engage in the study. Scheduling challenges were minimal, with participants selecting times that allowed them to conduct interviews off-campus and outside of regular working hours.

Participation was voluntary and confidential. Each administrator chose a neutral or private location to participate. This ensured that the data collection process upheld the ethical principles of privacy and comfort. All participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically targeting certified administrators with firsthand knowledge of the district's teacher shortage challenges. Each individual held a valid administrative certification within the Southeastern state and served in either a school-based or district-level leadership capacity.

Zoom's transcription feature enabled immediate access to written interview data,

which were downloaded and reviewed for accuracy. After transcription, I performed an initial verification by replaying each interview and manually correcting any inaccuracies or gaps in the text. Participants were then emailed their individual transcripts for member checking. They were invited to review and, if necessary, clarify or amend any part of their recorded responses. All participants submitted confirmations or minor revisions within 2 weeks.

To ensure data security, all interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored on an encrypted universal serial bus (USB) device, which remains locked in a cabinet in my personal office. As indicated in the data management plan presented in Chapter 3, these records will be securely maintained for a period of 5 years before permanent deletion. The data collection process proceeded without deviation from the approved research protocol. There were no adverse events or irregularities during this phase. Each step of the process adhered to the standards of ethical qualitative inquiry, prioritizing transparency, participant dignity, and fidelity to the phenomenon under study.

Interview Process

The interview process adhered to the data collection procedures outlined in Chapter 3 and was implemented only after receiving formal approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and written permission from the district superintendent. Following this approval, I contacted 10 certified administrators via email, inviting them to participate in the study. Each administrator responded affirmatively with a written consent statement, typically replying with “I consent” within 3 days of receiving the invitation.

Once consent was obtained, a follow-up scheduling email was sent to each participant. This email included a scheduling tool that allowed each administrator to select a convenient interview time and date. Scheduling proved efficient, as all participants confirmed their appointments within a few days. The email correspondence also included a detailed description of the interview format, the purpose of the study, the participants' rights, and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

At the beginning of each interview, I restated the purpose of the study, explained the interview format, and reminded participants of their right to decline to answer any question or to terminate the interview at any time without penalty. This briefing was crucial in building rapport, establishing trust, and ensuring that informed consent remained ongoing throughout the process. All interviews were conducted virtually, with no participants opting for in-person sessions. Each administrator selected a location that offered privacy and minimal distractions. This decision further protected participant confidentiality and supported their comfort in sharing candid responses.

Participant Review

Following each interview, I reviewed the audio recordings in conjunction with the auto-generated transcripts provided by Zoom. Manual corrections were made to ensure transcription accuracy, particularly in sections where automated text misrepresented participants' phrasing or professional terminology. Once revised, transcripts were emailed back to each respective participant for review, in line with member-checking protocols (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants returned their feedback within 2 weeks, offering either confirmations or minor clarifications. These revisions were incorporated into the final transcripts to ensure that each participant's voice was represented accurately and authentically.

Throughout the interview process, there were no deviations from the original methodology. All steps were executed in alignment with qualitative research standards, centering participants' voices, ethical rigor, and procedural transparency.

Data Protections

All data—including digital recordings, verified transcripts, and researcher notes—were saved to an encrypted USB drive. They are stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. By ethical research practices, and as stated in the original data management plan, these materials will be destroyed after 5 years.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was guided by an inductive approach, moving systematically from initial coding to the identification of broader categories and emergent themes. This process proceeded as described in Chapter 3, in the discussion of open and axial coding and the development of categories and themes. This approach was well-suited for exploring how administrators experience and respond to teacher shortages in rural settings, as it allowed patterns to emerge organically from the participants' own words rather than being forced into predetermined categories.

Upon completion of each interview, transcripts were first reviewed for understandability by replaying the audio recordings alongside the automatically generated text. This verification process ensured that transcription errors were identified

and corrected, and all answers were clearly understood, preserving the integrity of participant responses. Following transcript verification, each document was sent to the corresponding participant for member checking and to clarify any responses that were unclear. During that time, participants were given the opportunity to revise, clarify, or elaborate on their responses to enhance authenticity and reliability. All participants returned their transcripts either with no revisions or with minor adjustments within 2 weeks.

First-Cycle Coding

Once verified transcripts were finalized, I engaged in a line-by-line analysis of the data. Using qualitative coding methods described by Ravitch and Carl (2021) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I assigned descriptive codes to specific text segments that directly related to the study's two research questions. This initial round of coding, known as first-cycle coding, focused on identifying specific challenges administrators associated with teacher shortages and their methods of addressing them. It also highlighted patterns in language, tone, and recurring expressions used to describe professional frustrations, coping strategies, and systemic obstacles.

The initial coding process started with the deidentified transcripts of the administrators. I reviewed each transcript thoroughly, analyzing words and phrases to develop relevant categories. Key terms were then highlighted within each transcript, enabling the emergence of meaningful concepts and insights aligned with Research Question 1. From Research Question 1, the following words were highlighted: *travel*, *workload*, *pay*, *location*, and *culture*.

Codes identified included the following 24 codes across all interview questions:

Table 2

First-Cycle Codes

Rural location barriers	Climate and culture	Professional learning	Incentive programs
Career advancement	Resource allocation	Workload and burnout	Employee appreciation
Leadership development	Transparent communication	Performance bonus	Mentorship programs
Career pipeline	Employee surveys	Emotional support	Housing challenges
Relationship building	Competitive compensation	Mentorship programs	Professional development
Recognition and celebration	Collaborative planning	Sign-on bonuses	Pay for performance

These codes were sorted to answer each question, with the recognition that some participant responses answered not just one question but several. These were further refined during sorting in second-cycle coding.

Second-Cycle Coding

Following first-cycle coding, a second-cycle coding process was employed to refine and sort codes into categories. In this phase, codes were grouped to uncover repeated ideas, trends, and shared experiences across participants. A spreadsheet was used to organize, categorize, and color-code responses by frequency and relevance. This approach facilitated the comparison of responses across school-based and district-level administrators and helped ensure transparency in how themes were derived. The second-

cycle coding helped to reveal patterns within the data. During this phase, participants' responses were transferred into a spreadsheet to organize and color-code recurring patterns. The data came from both school-level and district-level elementary administrators, all of whom responded to the same set of questions but offered varying perspectives. As I continued analyzing the data, words were highlighted that appeared more than twice across responses, which facilitated the identification of patterns and the formation of categories. The categories that emerged were aligned with the research questions.

In this stage, the 24 codes listed previously were sorted into 13 separate categories to answer the questions and form the themes identified. Those categories included the following:

Table 3

Second-Cycle Codes

Retention strategies	Motivation and engagement	Professional support	District initiatives
Teacher retention challenges	Motivation strategies	District limitations	Teacher exit factors
Teacher retention strategies	Challenges in rural education	Motivation and engagement	Professional development
Organizational culture			

Again, these 13 categories fit one or several questions, as RQ 2 and RQ 3 contained many of the same themes. As these categories were sorted during third-cycle

coding, the different applications of these categories to themes depending on the RQ being answered were considered.

Third-Cycle Coding

In the final cycle of coding, known as third-cycle coding, categories were grouped to identify common themes that answered the research questions. The 11 themes identified to answer all questions. Included are the following that were sorted finally to answer the specific questions they addressed before being presented in the results section.

Table 4

Third-Cycle Codes

Problems attracting and retaining certified staff	Inability to provide benefits and adequate salaries	Teachers overworked and teacher burnout	Impact of teacher shortages
Geographic location	Poor administrative and parental support	Policy reform	Strong mentoring
Strong interpersonal relationships	Innovative rewards	Bonuses	

The coding structure used aligned responses to both research questions and allowed for nuanced distinctions between individual experiences and shared institutional realities. Patterns in language, tone, and recurring concepts were meticulously tracked, and memos were written throughout the coding process to capture analytical insights and interpretive reflections. This three-tiered analysis—first through open coding and then through categorizing and identification of thematic clusters—enabled a deep understanding of the underlying factors contributing to teacher shortages and highlighted

innovative practices used by administrators to address them. The coding process not only distilled the data into key themes but also preserved the complexity of each participant's perspective, aligning with best practices in qualitative research as described by Ravitch and Carl (2021).

Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most useful. Findings were derived from ten semistructured interviews, each offering insight into both the personal and professional realities of school leadership in chronically understaffed environments. I organized the results using the three research questions.

RQ 1: How Do Rural School Administrators Perceive Their Challenges with Teacher Shortages?

Themes associated with RQ1 are described below.

Problems Attracting and Retaining Certified Staff

Participants consistently described teacher shortages as a multifaceted issue influenced by structural, cultural, and geographic factors. A dominant theme across responses was the difficulty of attracting and retaining certified staff in rural areas. The most persistent challenge in the rural district is teacher retention, which is often influenced by geographic isolation and limited access to urban amenities. As summarized by SA1, "…teachers come, they do not stay, they move and they go to larger districts where they are going to have less students in the classroom, possibly." Many teachers

leave for jobs in corporate training, curriculum development, education technology, counseling, or nonprofit work, where they can use their skills with less stress and higher pay.

Inability to Provide Benefits and Adequate Salaries

Administrators reported that low salaries, inadequate housing, and geographic isolation made it difficult to compete with neighboring urban or suburban districts. As shared by SA1:

> … an issue with teacher pay, because it is a rural district, we cannot match salaries, like many of the larger districts, such as Greenville or Charleston, can, so that therefore teachers come, they do not stay, they move and they go to larger districts where they are going to have less students in the classroom, possibly. Still, they are also going to have more money.

SA 7 also shared, “Many teachers feel that their salaries do not reflect the workload and responsibility of the job, especially when compared to other professions requiring similar levels of education and certification.” Low salaries, relative to education level, workload, and other professions, drive many out, especially early-career or mid-career educators.

Teachers Overworked and Teacher Burnout

One administrator noted, “We are asking teachers to do more with less, and we’re still not able to keep them beyond a couple of years” (SA7). That participant stated further, “Teachers often face excessive workloads, long hours, and emotional stress, which can lead to burnout and eventual departure from the profession.” At the same time,

several school leaders described an "exhaustion culture," where existing staff are stretched thin, absorbing responsibilities left unfilled by vacant positions. The inability to maintain consistent staffing was also said to impact student learning and contribute to administrator burnout. This was summed up best by SA5:

Teachers are increasingly being asked to do more and more, and the conspiracy surrounding testing is causing a lot of problems for them. It has taken away from teachers actually doing the main job that they have been hired to do; to teach students, some of the demands is increasingly more time consuming. Constant emotional, mental, and physical strain from managing classrooms, meeting standards, and balancing workloads leads to long-term exhaustion. Many teachers report feeling overworked and underappreciated.

Impact of Teacher Shortages

Participants emphasized the cumulative toll that vacancies have on school climate and student behavior. Increased class sizes, rotating substitutes, and limited planning periods contributed to declining morale. SA4 stated, "…teacher shortages cause burnout from academic expectations and challenges of addressing student behavior as student discipline evolves." Administrators also highlighted certification barriers and teacher preparation gaps as systemic challenges, particularly for rural schools with limited recruitment pipelines. Teacher shortages can contribute to creating even greater teacher shortages.

Geographic Location

Geographic location is one of the challenges that deters teachers from working in rural school districts. Limited housing options and restricted access to external social

networks in rural districts make it challenging for teachers to form connections, which can discourage them from remaining in the district. This was highlighted by DA1, who said:

> Many people were turned off by the distance and the location it was in, which is pretty much in the middle of nowhere, about an hour away from Charleston and an hour and a half away from Columbia; there isn't a lot of industry here. So, people did not really like that about our district. Another issue is that the housing situation is not great here.

SA5 further described it as:

> We are in the low country, specifically in the very rural part of it. So, the geographic region is probably one of the main reasons that I think we have problems retaining teachers in our area. Because of social activities and cultural events for our teachers to attend, there is probably about an hour before they can get to any extracurricular activity or cultural even. Proximity to home, family, or a preferred community environment (rural, urban, suburban) plays an important role in teachers' interest in the district they chose to work in or reside. Unfortunately, geographic location is impossible to change.

Poor Administrative and Parental Support

Administrators described teachers as feeling they lacked administrative and parental support when faced with student challenges that resulted in their deciding to leave the district. This is best illustrated in the following quotation.

> Our school district faces numerous challenges, including behavioral issues, low attendance, inadequate student academic achievement, and insufficient parent participation and support. This causes problems for teachers, as they struggle to meet all the students' needs. When we have issues with attendance or parent support, and academic problems arise, teachers are limited in their ability to address them outside of the classroom. You cannot get with the parents, or you cannot work with them to make sure that they are working to help their students achieve what needs to be achieved. (SA5)

Teachers stay when they feel respected, supported, and valued by school leaders and have parent support.

RQ 2: What Practices Have Rural School Administrators Used to Reduce Teacher Shortages?

In response to the second research question, participants provided a range of suggestions. The questions were grounded in both their current practices and aspirational goals. A description of the themes developed in response to this question follows.

Policy Reforms

Administrators also called for policy reforms to offer licensure flexibility, relocation incentives, and increased support for early-career teachers. Examples provided by participants included such activities as excessive testing mandated by state policy, as well as the red curriculum mandates. Said SA7, “Overemphasis on standardized testing, red curricula, and excessive paperwork can make teachers feel like they have lost professional autonomy,” indicating this is one reason teachers choose to leave. Since

these decisions are made at the state level, only state policy reforms can help address the issue.

Strong Mentoring

In addition, many emphasized the importance of strong mentoring and leadership visibility. Several participants stated that when teachers feel heard, supported, and seen by their administration, they are more likely to stay. “People leave buildings, not districts,” DA2 explained, emphasizing that school climate is often shaped by leadership consistency and relational trust. As shared by SA7:

> Providing strong mentoring is essential for supporting new teachers. Schools should pair new teachers with experienced mentors who can offer guidance and support. A structured induction program should be provided during the first one to three years to help new educators acclimate and grow professionally. Additionally, regular check-ins and classroom observations followed by constructive feedback should be implemented to ensure continuous improvement and development.

According to the participants, providing regular check-ins and classroom observations with feedback is a great way to support new teachers.

Strong Interpersonal Relationships

Fostering strong interpersonal relationships and a collaborative professional culture is critical for retention. One administrator stated fostering strong interpersonal relationships and a collaborative professional culture is critical for retention. When teachers feel valued, supported, and empowered through open communication and shared

decision-making, their commitment to the school and its mission increases. DA1 said:

> Retention happens, in my opinion, and based on my experience, on relationships, building relationships is important in any organization, and especially in education, when people work for you, when they know you care, and that's not just children, as adults, too. So making sure that the culture and the climate in the school building is positive, making sure that there's an open door policy where they feel comfortable to come to you with things that they're dealing with, whether it's personal issues that may pour into their professional world and that not be used against them, but more so to kind of support them in making decisions of how to handle it and combat it.

A collaborative school culture where staff are treated as professionals builds loyalty.

Innovative Rewards

Helping teachers feel appreciated, motivated, and more likely to stay in the field by praising their work, providing opportunities for professional development, acknowledging their excellence, and supporting their well-being. DA1stated:

> The fact that we allow them to do so, we have faculty and staff days where, even though it is a teacher workday, it's not always about work. Like, one thing we did was a big Wellness Day celebration. This day was built into our schedule as a professional development day where teachers and staff could sign up for various activities, including massages, pedicures, line dancing, haircuts, and facials.

Fair pay, incentives, and consistent salary schedules can reduce the desire to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Bonuses

Encourage teachers to remain in the field by providing monetary compensation for their work, boosting morale, acknowledging their efforts, and demonstrating the value of their contributions, particularly when they are linked to longevity, growth, or achievement.

> So, we've done several things. sign-on bonuses to retention bonuses, attendance bonuses, and attendance incentives. We also have a new program called the pay-for-performance incentive, which is based on student growth. Teachers are incentivized, with significant financial rewards, if they demonstrate a certain amount of growth. Last year, we had teachers leaving with $20,000 added to their regular paychecks due to the growth we saw. (DA2)

Since bonuses were mentioned specifically, they are listed separately. However, the same observations about innovative rewards apply to this theme, as well.

RQ 3: What Practices Do Rural School Administrators Find Useful in Reducing Teacher Shortages?

In response to the third research question, participants indicated which of the methods they had tried had proven useful. A description of the themes developed in response to this question follows.

Strong Mentoring

In addition, many emphasized the importance of strong mentoring and leadership visibility. Several participants stated that when teachers feel heard, supported, and seen by their administration, they are more likely to stay. “People leave buildings, not

districts," one administrator explained, emphasizing that school climate is often shaped by leadership consistency and relational trust. As shared by SA7:

> Providing strong mentoring is essential for supporting new teachers. Schools should pair new teachers with experienced mentors who can offer guidance and support. A structured induction program should be provided during the first one to three years to help new educators acclimate and grow professionally. Additionally, regular check-ins and classroom observations followed by constructive feedback should be implemented to ensure continuous improvement and development.

Discussed previously under RQ2, this theme proves important here, too, since it is one of the techniques administrators indicated was successful.

Strong Interpersonal Relationships

Multiple participants have successfully used strong interpersonal relationships. DA1 summed it up best.

> So, relationships play a huge part in retention. In addition to that, just feeling supported if a teacher or an employee is struggling in an area within their role, providing that professional development, or maybe assigning them a mentor to kind of help them through whatever challenges that they're facing. So, we've noticed that we've been able to retain those who feel supported.

A strong interpersonal relationship is another technique administrators indicated proved highly successful in creating connections that held teachers in the schools.

Innovative Rewards

When monetary rewards are less possible, innovative rewards can be successful, according to DA1 who shared several innovative methods outlined in response to RQ2. DA1 stated:

> A survey was done, and employees said they enjoyed this day. Feedback was off the charts. People indicated, we need to do more of that. It wasn't about coming in and doing PD; it was about self-love, empowerment, and knowing we're not alone. We're in this together, but sometimes you've got to take care of yourself, and so just providing is not meaningless.

Further consideration of how this can be applied in other schools appears useful and worth further research and examination.

Bonuses

Bonuses, when possible, can prove highly motivating, according to DA2. After sharing details about how the bonuses were provided in response to RQ 2, DA2 shared a final comment about their usefulness. “So, something, of course, and if you can, you can be a part of a district that is a pay-for-performance district like that that helps to retain teachers.” Bonuses are another useful method for teacher retention. Acquiring those funds appears to be tricky, but overall, the method itself is useful.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Through all interviews, participants expressed a deep commitment to finding solutions, even in the face of longstanding systemic barriers. Their responses reflected a balance of realism and resilience—an acknowledgment of the challenges and an

unwavering belief in the power of school leadership to make a difference.

Evidence of Trustworthiness - To ensure the rigor and credibility of this qualitative research. I employed multiple strategies aligned with the criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Burkholder et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These strategies were integrated throughout the research design and data collection process to affirm the authenticity of the findings and uphold the ethical standards of qualitative inquiry.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree of confidence in the truth of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To enhance credibility, I utilized several validation strategies. First, I conducted in-depth semistructured interviews with ten administrators who were purposefully selected based on their experience and relevance to the phenomenon of teacher shortages. Member checking was also employed to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and interpretations; each participant was provided with a copy of their transcript and invited to clarify or amend any content. All participants confirmed the accuracy of their responses, with a few offering minor clarifications, which were incorporated into the final analysis.

Consistent engagement with the data and prolonged interaction with participants' narratives further contributed to credibility. I also engaged in reflexivity—maintaining a journal of personal reflections and analytic memos—to monitor biases and ensure that participants' voices were represented with fidelity.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In qualitative research, this is not achieved through statistical generalization but rather through the provision of rich, detailed descriptions. To support transferability, I included comprehensive context about the setting, demographics, and administrative roles of participants. By offering this depth of detail, readers and future researchers can assess whether the study's findings apply to other rural or under-resourced educational environments.

Participants were selected from varying administrative levels and years of experience. This variation introduced diversity in perspective while maintaining a shared context of working in rural districts. This strategic inclusion increases the relevance of the findings to similarly structured educational settings.

Dependability

Dependability emphasizes the consistency and reliability of the research process. To ensure dependability, I followed a documented methodology as outlined in Chapter 3. The steps taken—from participant recruitment, interview scheduling, and data collection to coding and thematic analysis—were applied consistently and tracked through detailed memos and procedural logs.

The study design remained stable throughout the research period, and all participants engaged in the same interview process using the same guiding questions. By maintaining a structured and transparent approach, I created an audit trail that allows others to examine the process and confirm the reliability of the findings (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are shaped by participants' input rather than researcher bias. To promote confirmability, I maintained a neutral stance during interviews. Participants were allowed to elaborate freely, and I used open-ended questions that encouraged authentic expression.

All transcripts, recordings, and analytical notes were stored on a secure USB drive and locked in a private office, ensuring data integrity and privacy. Furthermore, my positionality as both a practitioner and scholar was bracketed through reflective journaling and triangulation of data sources, reinforcing the objective interpretation of participant responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Summary

An inductive data analysis approach was employed, allowing themes to naturally emerge from participants' perspectives on teacher shortages in rural districts. After each interview, transcripts were verified for accuracy and sent to participants for member checking, ensuring the authenticity of the data. Using Saldana's (2016) qualitative coding methods, first-cycle coding assigned descriptive codes to responses related to the study's research questions, focusing on challenges and experiences. Second-cycle coding then grouped these codes into broader themes, with responses organized in a spreadsheet to track frequency and relevance across roles and settings. Throughout the process, memos captured analytical insights, and the coding structure maintained both individual nuances and shared patterns. This two-tiered method enabled a comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues and innovative strategies administrators use to address teacher

shortages, while preserving the depth and complexity of their experiences.

In this basic qualitative study, I examined how school administrators in rural Southeastern districts perceive and respond to teacher shortages. Through 10 semistructured interviews, I learned that administrators view the shortage as a complex issue shaped by low pay, geographic isolation, housing scarcity, and certification barriers. These challenges contribute to high turnover, staff burnout, and declining morale, negatively affecting school climate and student outcomes. To address these issues, administrators recommended “grow-your-own” teacher development programs, licensure flexibility, relocation incentives, and stronger support systems for early-career teachers. They also stressed the importance of mental health resources, mentoring, and visible, supportive leadership, highlighting that teacher retention depends as much on emotional well-being and school culture as it does on compensation.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter contains a summary of the study, the results, and the importance of those results in relation to practice and future research. The problem addressed was that education administrators struggle to reduce teacher shortages in rural public school districts in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was three-fold: to understand what experiences education administrators had concerning teacher shortages, what practices they used to address shortages, and what strategies they deemed most useful.. The participants in this study were administrators who had been employed in their position for a minimum of 3 years.

In Chapter 5, the results are reviewed and compared with current literature. In this chapter I present recommendations for future research and implications for applications of the insights that were collected.

The research questions were as follows:

RQ 1: How do rural school administrators perceive their challenges with teacher shortages?

RQ 2: What practices have rural school administrators used to reduce teacher shortages?

RQ 3: What practices do rural school administrators find useful in reducing teacher shortages?

Interpretation of the Findings

The results of this study supported the findings of previous studies in several areas. Several participants indicated that they had ongoing problems attracting and

retaining certified staff. As solutions, they indicated that they sometimes used noncertified staff to attempt to fill in staffing gaps. This aligns with concerns brought up in prior research by Nguyen (2022) and Edwards et al. (2024), who shared that noncertified teachers chosen to fill staffing holes proved detrimental to students' overall learning. Another result indicated that administrators have problems providing benefits and adequate salaries. This aligns with results found by Castro and Esposito (2022) when they determined that administrators in rural districts cannot meet the salaries and benefits offered in larger districts. Several participants indicated that providing compensation or alternative housing for commuting teachers can be a great innovative reward, which also aligns with the results of studies conducted by Ingersoll and Tran (2023) on incentives, rewards, and bonuses.

Participants made several statements that expanded on knowledge in previous literature. Participants emphasized strong interpersonal relationships. This expands on the idea proposed by Sabina et al. (2023), indicating that mentoring was a key factor in teacher retention. Participants also emphasized strong interpersonal relationships. This study indicates that all kinds of relationships can be important for retention, including those with the community. This expands on Sabina et al.'s findings on the importance of strong mentoring. Further, previous research (Guy, 2024) indicated that teacher overwork was part of the reason for teacher resignations. This study's results also indicated that teacher burnout comes into play when teachers have to deal with other external factors in the community while trying to achieve academic expectations. This study, therefore, expands on Guy's results by indicating that prior to resignation, many such teachers can

experience burnout. This provides another milestone in understanding the teacher resignation process.

Participants mentioned several other factors as well. They indicated that policy reform is necessary to improve their ability to provide rewards and bonuses for teachers, as well as to increase the salaries of teachers. This aligns with much research regarding the problem of bonuses, good salaries, and rewards related to teacher retention (Jiang et al., 2023). However, this also expands previous literature to suggest policy reform as a potential method to improve this situation. This idea was barely touched on in previous literature, except for a shallow examination by Mitchell et al. (2022). The new data provided in this study suggest a new direction for deeper exploration into how changes could occur to help address the incentive challenges rural schools and districts can face.

Limitations of the Study

This basic qualitative research study had several limitations, including a lack of broad participant representation and the fact that participants were volunteers. Both can introduce the potential for bias. A lack of broad participant representation limited the number of perspectives gained, while participants who only volunteer could have resulted in participation by participants with a particular perspective they wanted to promote. While 10 administrators took part in the study, only four were from the district level, and the remaining six were school-level administrators. This lack of diversity could also have resulted in skewed results because few participants from either group meant limited depth on the topic could be gained. Further, participants had limited time for interviewing and

probing for clarification due to their roles as administrators. This might have prevented the depth of understanding that might have been possible if participants had more time.

Recommendations

This basic qualitative study explored what school administrators have experienced in relation to teacher shortages in a rural public school district in the Southeastern United States. One recommendation is to examine gender differences. A second is to explore differences based on educational attainment, such as bachelor's versus master's degrees. A third recommendation involves examining the role of human resources and organizational management in teacher shortages. Finally, a fourth suggests exploring the positive aspects of rural environments about teacher turnover.

Implications

This basic qualitative study has the potential to foster positive social change by improving teacher shortages in rural southeastern school districts. It would be beneficial for districts to support administrators in addressing teacher shortages by enhancing teacher capacity, providing personalized professional development, increasing human resources support, improving organizational management, and fostering a school culture built on trust and inclusion. This could be done through a training program or mentoring administrators or other similar methods. When students receive consistent, high-quality instruction from dedicated educators, their academic performance tends to improve. As a result, students taught by qualified teachers are more likely to graduate high school equipped with the skills needed for college, careers, or the workforce. The study’s findings support efforts toward meaningful social progress.

It is recommended that the district develop training for administrators using Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory section on the development of strong relationships between leaders and their employees to assist with teacher retention. This would be useful, in that administrators emphasized that strong relationships play a key role in keeping teachers. When school leaders are skilled at fostering supportive connections with their staff, they can help reduce turnover. Administrators who create positive environments, motivate teachers, and acknowledge their contributions are more likely to retain high-quality educators (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Rural teacher shortages can improve when leaders invest in teacher development, foster meaningful relationships, build trust, offer necessary resources, cultivate a supportive school climate and culture, and actively address the unique challenges of rural settings.

Conclusion

This study examined how school administrators describe effective strategies and the obstacles they face in retaining teachers in rural southeastern school districts. DeFeo and Tran (2019) noted that rural school districts face considerably greater staffing difficulties compared to urban, suburban, and town districts. They also highlighted that the United States is experiencing a widespread teacher shortage, often described as a national crisis, particularly impacting efforts to hire and retain rural educators. This research study was grounded in Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) situational leadership theory, which shaped its conceptual framework. Interviews with administrators revealed key themes, including human resources, school culture and climate, professional development, and the unique challenges of rural settings. Administrators consistently

emphasized that building strong relationships was crucial to addressing teacher turnover in rural areas. The study suggests that fostering supportive relationships can positively influence school culture and climate, while targeted professional development and effective organizational and human resource strategies can further support teacher retention. These efforts may ultimately reduce turnover and enhance student achievement.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol and Questions

Introduction

Hello, my name is Phaniki Jenkins. Thank you for being willing to participate in the study interview today. The purpose of this interview is to explore K–12 school administrators and their perceptions about best practices to retain teachers in rural southeastern United States districts. The interview will last approximately 1 hour. I will start the interview by asking you about your experience as an administrator. Then, I will begin asking your questions about teacher shortages and teacher turnover. Please feel free to express how you truly feel as there are no correct or incorrect responses. After the interview, I will examine your answers for data analysis purposes. To ensure confidentiality throughout this process, I will not identify you in any of my documents nor will anyone else be able to identify you in connection with your answers. At any time during this interview, you may opt to end this interview. Also, as a reminder, this interview will be recorded and revisited by me in preparation for the study's completion.

Do you have any questions before starting the interview?

Are you ready to begin the interview?

1. How many years of experience do you have as an administrator?
2. How long have you served as an administrator within this district?
3. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in retaining teachers within your school or district?
4. Based on your professional experience, what strategies or best practices have you found to be most effective in retaining teachers?
5. What initiatives or programs has your district implemented to support teacher retention?
    - In your opinion, what factors contribute to teachers choosing to remain in this district?
    - What do you perceive as the primary reasons teachers leave this district?
    - What factors do you believe contribute to teachers leaving the profession?
6. In your view, what strategies could be implemented to mitigate teacher shortages in rural public-school districts?
7. How do you, in your role as an administrator, foster motivation and engagement among educators to align with a shared vision and collective goals?
8. What approaches have you found most effective in encouraging teachers to continue their careers within your district?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding teacher retention, challenges, or strategies that could provide further insight?