

2016

# Impact of a Rural Public School District on Community Culture

Lynnwood Michael Baade  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Lynnwood Baade

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Review Committee

Dr. Linda Crawford, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Deanna Boddie, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Kurt Schoch, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2015

Abstract

Impact of a Rural Public School District on Community Culture

by

Lynnwood M. Baade

MA, University of the Southwest, 2005

BS, Texas State University, 1986

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

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## Abstract

Individuals and families often migrate to rural areas anticipating a utopian environment and a school system that supports their beliefs and values. Little qualitative research, however, has been conducted about the impact of rural public school districts on their local communities. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study, as reflected in the central research question, was to explore how a rural public school district contributed to community culture. Maslow's motivational theory related to a hierarchy of human needs formed the conceptual framework for this study. A single case study was executed as the method of inquiry. Participants included 6 residents purposely selected from a small rural community in a United States western state. Data were collected from multiple sources, including interviews with the participants who had children enrolled in the public school district, observations of school board meetings, and documents reflecting the relationship between school and community. Data were analyzed using line-by-line coding and the constant comparative method to construct categories and determine themes and discrepancies. The key finding indicated that the public school district positively impacted the conservative culture of this rural community by encouraging community involvement in the school and by reinforcing community expectations that the school will provide students with a quality education and reinforce common conservative values and beliefs. This study contributes to positive social change by providing a deeper understanding of how rural public school educators and residents build a relationship of mutual understanding and cooperation to create a strong, vibrant rural community.

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my loving and supportive wife of 34 years, RitaKay. Thank you for sticking by me, through thick and thin, through the years as I worked toward achieving this academic milestone.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study was about the impact that a rural public school district has on its community culture. Culture has been defined as the set of shared values, norms, traditions, symbols, language, and knowledge that characterize an institution or organization (Calhoun, Light, & Keller, 1993). Lichter and Brown (2011) examined changing special and social boundaries in relation to rural American society and found that researchers have struggled to provide a definitive understanding of issues related to rural schools, including perceptions about the performance of rural students in comparison to urban students, the negative attitudes that exist about rural communities, and even the definition of rural. In an annual report titled *Why Rural Matters*, the United States government defined rural as nonmetropolitan, which means an area devoid of high-rise buildings or interstate highways (Strange, Johnson, & Klein, 2012). Benson (2010) defined rural as an area where most residents live on farms, while Demi, Coleman-Jensen, and Snyder (2010) defined a rural area as one that has less than 10,000 residents. In a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), rural schools are separated into three categories: rural fringe, distant, and remote. Rural fringe is defined as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. Rural distant is defined as a rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. Rural remote is defined as a territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an

urban cluster. Winand and Ediefson (2009) examined rural community input into school district strategic planning and found that too few school districts foster meaningful dialogue with their communities. Recommending focus groups as a means to establish better communication, Winand and Ediefson concluded that “immersion of school leaders in the topic of better communication with the community will serve as a catalyst to drive the district forward in the future” (p. 34). They recommended a continual dialogue between school districts and the community in order to keep an open mind to new ideas and to value the input of both parties.

The role of schools in reinforcing and perpetuating community ideas and values lends not only perspective to the relationship between the rural school and the community, but solidifies the place of rural citizens in this world (Benson, 2010). However, researchers who have explored the place of the rural school in the fabric of the local community have emphasized the educational role of schools, and they have conducted limited research about the expectations that community members have for their schools (Deggs & Miller, 2011; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). In a discussion of the rural brain drain and what it means for the United States, Carr and Kafalas (2010) described a crisis related to the exodus of youth from rural America. In related research, Autti and Hyry-Beihammer (2014) examined school closures in rural Finnish communities and found that these closures were the result of an out-migration of students from these rural communities. Brown, Perry, and McIntire (2010) examined rural school principals’ perceptions of community and staff involvement in shared decision making and found that school staff involvement in community decision making is particularly

important. In a related discussion of the challenges that educators in rural schools face, Gibbs (2010) contended that school involvement is crucial to the development of the rural community. Harmon and Schafft (2009) explored how rural school leadership emerges from collaborative community development and found that effective collaboration between school personnel and community members results in better rapport and a more effective exchange of ideas between these groups.

Therefore, this study adds to the body of knowledge about the impact that rural public school districts have on their community culture, and it provides a deeper understanding about how educators and community members may work together to create a more vibrant rural community. This study contributes to positive social change because it provides educators and community members with a deeper understanding about how to make policy decisions suited to the unique needs of the rural school district and its community.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study. In this chapter, I present the background of rural migration, the problem statement in relation to a rural communities, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. In addition, I include the conceptual framework, the methodology, assumptions, limitations, and significance of this study.

### **Background**

Significant research has been conducted on topics related to rural education and rural communities. In a discussion about rural teachers, Campbell and Yates (2011) found that, regardless of gender, rural teachers, students, and residents expressed little desire to live in the city, and most planned to live and work in the country. Dew (2013) explored

rural communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in relation to their resilience and transformation and reported that the rural communities face challenges concerning national economic conditions, societal and migration pattern changes, and environmental changes. Gibbs (2010) examined the challenges ahead for rural schools and found that rural schools perform as well as, or better, than their urban counterparts, even though they face challenges associated with small size and less support from the government. Gibbs also found educators in rural schools orient their students toward jobs in the lower to midlevel ranges of skill distribution and that much talent is lost due to increasing numbers of young adults who migrate to urban areas to attend college or obtain higher paying jobs. Gibbs recommended education as a developmental strategy for rural areas, contending that “better schools promote higher achievement and earnings” (p. 23). In addition, some prior research has been conducted on the recruitment and retention of rural teachers. Burton and Johnson (2010) presented portraits of two teachers in the rural south, and Sherman and Sage (2011) examined rural schools, brain-drain, and community survival in the wake of economic collapses. They contended that, while a significant number of teachers are inclined to teach in a rural area, advances must be made in curriculum and technology, as well as increases in teacher salaries, to attract and retain qualified educators. Golden, Cameron, and Balarajan (2011) examined migration patterns across the globe and found that migration to rural areas has resulted in an increase of exceptional teachers, students, and administrators with more diverse experience, training, and ambition.



Researchers have also examined rural students in relation to their satisfaction with a rural environment and education. Howley, Chavis, and Kester (2013) explored student perspectives in a rural school and found that “only half of interviewed students viewed the community in which their school is located as rural” (p. 2). Most rural students, however, expressed satisfaction with the rural environment in which they lived. Martin (2012) investigated criteria for happiness and living the good life and reported that a majority of rural students expressed satisfaction with living in a rural community and believed that they enjoyed a good life.

Researchers have also conducted studies on social factors that influence rural communities such as migration to urban areas, the economy, and opportunities to attend institutions of higher learning. Glasgow and Brown (2012) examined the ageing of rural America, noting that the average age of rural Americans is increasing, which has contributed to the decreasing population of young students in rural areas. Johnson and Strange (2012) examined rural demographic change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and reported slower rural growth and more diversity in populations, but they also noted, as did Sherman and Sage (2011), a significant out-migration of young adults from rural to urban areas seeking higher education and increased job opportunities. The increasing average age of the rural population, the out-migration of promising students, and the challenges of teaching a diverse student population present challenges to the rural school district and the rural community.

In addition to these challenges, researchers have examined the rural school administrator as a change agent. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) examined

the leadership practices of effective rural superintendents and found that they commonly accept responsibility for the performance of their schools and understand the need for improved communication between the school district and the community and the need for new strategies to meet the needs of an ever diversifying student population. Forner et al. also found that superintendents believed that they create effective schools by (a) limiting their priorities to the academic success of students, (b) recruiting and retaining high quality teachers, and (c) creating or acquiring resources to support necessary academic reform. In a related study, Corbett (2013) examined rural schooling in relation to modern mobility and found that because of the public nature of their jobs, administrators emphasize the need for high expectations and the need to change and improvise at every opportunity, including improving efforts to create and maintain a dialogue with the community.

Researchers have also explored the unique challenges that rural communities and rural public school districts face in relation to population changes, the national economy, lack of federal funding, and job opportunities. Ferris, Oosterhoff, and Metzger (2013) examined organized activity involvement among rural youth, particularly in relation to gender differences in associations between activity type and developmental outcomes. Ferris et al. identified low population density, economic distress, school and community interdependence, an out-migration of young talent, and an attachment to place as challenges in the rural environment. Ferris et al. also found that a higher percentage of female students graduate from high schools in rural areas, but they are more inclined to leave a rural area to seek education and job opportunities than their male cohorts. In a

synthesis of international rural education issues and responses, Stelmach (2011) maintained that because the term “rural” remains conceptually evasive, a lack of consensus about the term exists, which leads to inaccurate portrayals of rural students that negatively impact educational policies and practices as well as communication between community and school. Thus, even though significant research has been conducted on rural schools and rural communities, a gap in knowledge still exists concerning the impact that rural public school districts have on their community culture.

This study was necessary, therefore, because it addressed the impact of a rural public school district on the community culture. While previous studies have often included findings about rural public schools and rural communities independent of each other, few researchers have focused on the impact of rural public school districts on their local communities. This impact is created through an interaction of institutions, such as the public school district, their environment, the local community, and historical and cultural norms that have become an integral part of their lives, supporting a social constructivism paradigm (Creswell, 2005). This paradigm emphasizes group behavior as it relates to community interactions. Paradigms also relate to theory, which determines a researcher’s choice of methodology.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed by this study is that the impact that rural public school districts have upon their rural communities is not known. Many factors contribute to this impact, including the state of the economy, the conservative values and beliefs that the people who live in these rural communities often share, the educational standards set by

society and the federal, state, and local governments, and the desire of individuals for a simpler life and for peace of mind (Miretzky & Stevens, 2012). Benson (2010) explored life in rural America and found that schools are crucial in the determination of the health of a rural environment because schools include young people who will shape the future. As Dew (2013) pointed out in an investigation of rural communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, educators need to take action to recruit and retain high caliber administrators, teachers, and students in rural communities in the face of economic challenges, shrinking federal support for schools, and dwindling student enrollment. Burton, Brown, and Johnson (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of the research literature in relation to rural teachers in the United States and found that researchers have largely ignored the interactions that occur between rural schools and their rural communities. It is these interactions that I explored.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the impact of a rural public school district on its community culture. To accomplish that purpose, I described how the values and beliefs of community residents and the interactions between rural educators and residents contribute to the community culture. In addition, I described how educational documents, such as rural public school district policies, school board agendas and minutes, and local media, contribute to the community culture.

### **Research Question**

The following research questions were based on the conceptual framework for this study and a review of the literature.

### **Central Research Question**

How does a rural public school district contribute to the community culture?

### **Related Research Questions**

1. How do the values and beliefs of rural community residents about education and public schools contribute to the community culture?
2. How do documents that are related to school district policies, school board meetings, and local educational news contribute to the community culture?
3. How do interactions between public school district educators and community residents contribute to the community culture?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Maslow's (1968) motivational theory, which includes a hierarchy of human needs, served as the conceptual framework for this study. Maslow developed this hierarchy of needs to explain human motivation. Maslow maintained that humans first address their physiological needs of hunger and thirst, followed by safety needs for security and long-term survival. Once these immediate needs for survival are met, humans address their needs for belonging and love, including affiliation with a group, and for self-esteem needs, which includes a positive self-image and recognition by others. Maslow also contended that humans have cognitive needs related to knowledge and understanding and aesthetic needs related to order and beauty. At the top of the pyramid, Maslow maintained, is the need for self-actualization or the desire to attain one's full potential.

As a motivation theory, Maslow's theory applies to collectivist cultures because it emphasizes the idea that individuals are motivated in part by affiliation or a sense of belonging that gives priority to group goals and values. I used Maslow's hierarchy of needs to explain why individuals are motivated to live in rural areas, and, more specifically, what they expect from their schools. In Chapter 2, I describe this theory in more detail, including how this theory is articulated in current research about rural education and rural communities.

### **Nature of the Study**

For this qualitative study, I selected a single case study design. I chose this design because it allows a focus on "how" and "what" questions, it is difficult to manipulate the behavior of the participants, and it is desirable to consider contextual conditions that are relevant to the study (Yin, 2014). Case study design also has established boundaries, which means that the scope of the study is clearly defined (Yin, 2014). In addition, the researcher can collect data from multiple sources of evidence to present a rich picture of the phenomenon (Yin, 2014).

For this study, the phenomenon or case is the interactions between a public school district and a small rural community located in a western state. The public school district that I selected for this study was one of two school districts located in this county and included one elementary school, two charter elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. For 2014-2015, school populations ranged from 22 to 245 with a total K to 12 population of 590 students. The school district employed 50 teachers, five principals, and two district superintendents. The rural community was located in a

specific county in a western state and included 2,849 people, according to the 2010 United States Census. The district had few population concentrations, with most of the population dispersed throughout remote areas. Because of the mountainous topography of this area, residents were significantly separated from each other and had limited opportunities for interaction besides convenience stores, gas stations, the library, and the post office.

In relation to the methodology of this case study, I collected data from multiple sources of evidence, including interviews with community members, observations of school board meetings, documents such as school district policies, agendas, and minutes from school board meetings, and local media reports about school activities. Participants included six local residents who had children enrolled in the public schools in this school district so that I could describe their beliefs about the impact the public school district had on their community culture. I also observed local school board meetings because these observations provided insight into the interactions between school district educators and community residents. I conducted data analysis at two levels. At the first level, I coded and categorized data from each source. At the second level, I examined the categorized data from all sources to determine commonalities in relation to emergent themes and discrepant data, which formed the key findings for this study. I analyzed these key findings or results in relation to the central and related research questions and interpreted the findings in relation to the conceptual framework and the literature review.

### **Definitions**

*Culture:* The set of shared values, norms, traditions, symbols, language and knowledge that characterize an institution or organization (Calhoun et al., 1993).

*Rural communities:* In a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), rural schools are separated into three categories: rural fringe, distant, and remote. Rural fringe is defined as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. Rural distant is defined as a rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. Rural remote is defined as a territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

*Rural schools:* Those schools that are not urban or suburban and are separated into three categories: rural fringe, distant, and remote. The school district in this study was classified remote because it was more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and was also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

### **Assumptions**

This qualitative case study was based on several assumptions. The first assumption was that participants had beliefs and values regarding how the public school district contributes to their community culture and that they presented these opinions openly and honestly. This assumption was necessary because participant responses



determine the credibility of this study. The second assumption was that educators and community residents interacted with one another during my observations of three school board meetings. This assumption was important because these observations were critical to the findings of this study. The third assumption was that the documents that I collected and analyzed for this study were accurate. This assumption was important because the accuracy of these documents impacted the credibility of this study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this case study was a rural public school district located in a rural community in the western region of the United States. This case study was also delimited or narrowed by the participants, time, location, and resources. Participants were parents who had children enrolled in the high school in this study public school district. This study was also narrowed by time and location because I conducted this study during 2015, over a 2-month period, in a small rural mountain community located in a western state. In addition, as a single researcher, I had limited resources.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of a study are often related to the design of the study. The first limitation of this study was the single case. Yin (2014) argued that multiple cases offer better opportunities for transferability of the findings, and therefore, a single case study may be limited in the transferability of its findings to other similar school districts located in small rural communities. The second limitation was that I conducted only three observations of school board meetings, due to the limited timeframe of this study, which may have limited the richness of the data. The third limitation was that I interviewed

participants once, which may also have limited the richness of the data. I used specific strategies to address these limitations, which I address in more detail in Chapter 3.

### **Significance**

The significance of a study is in relation to potential contributions of the study that (a) advance knowledge in the discipline, (b) advance practice or policy in the field, and (c) advance positive social change within the scope of the study. In relation to advancing knowledge in the discipline, this study provides researchers and educators with a better understanding of the interactions that exist between public school district educators and residents in small rural communities and enables them to conduct further investigations into the educational factors that contribute to building a vibrant rural community culture that supports the educational opportunities of students. Concerning practice in the field, this study provides educators, school board members, and community residents with a deeper understanding about how to develop policies and practices that support the creation of a strong rural community culture that promotes educational opportunities for their youth. This study also contributes to positive social change by providing researchers, educational stakeholders, and community members with the insights into how to build and maintain a stable student population base, while retaining the funding and support necessary to educate students in rural areas and to prepare them for the increasing demands of modern society.

### **Summary**

This chapter was an introduction to this study. The problem addressed by this study was that the impact of rural public school districts on their rural community culture

is not known. The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how rural public school districts contribute to the community culture. The conceptual framework of this study was based on Maslow's (1968) motivation theory, which includes a hierarchy of human needs. Concerning the methodology of this qualitative study, I used a single case study design to provide the in-depth understanding of how a rural public school district impacts their community culture. I collected data from multiple sources, including interviews with community residents, observations of the interactions of public school educators and community residents at school board meetings, and documents that reflected the relationship between the school and community, such as school district policies, agendas and minutes of school board meetings, and local media reports about school activities. I transcribed, coded, and categorized the data and determined themes and discrepant data in order to develop key findings. This chapter also included a description of the assumptions, limitations, and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the research literature related to the problem and purpose of this study. This literature review also includes a discussion of how the conceptual framework for this study has been applied in current research and a review of current research related to rural school districts and rural communities. In addition, this chapter includes a discussion of the major themes and gaps that emerged from this review.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed by this study was that the impact that rural public school districts have on the community culture is not known. Rural school districts face challenges including frequent out-migration of students, which impacts budgeting and planning, teacher and student recruitment and retention, and student mindsets, who often believe that education is not necessary to prepare them for what they believe are inevitable, local, low paying jobs (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Campbell & Yates, 2011). The community, in turn, faces challenges related to the loss of talented educators, the brightest students, and the resultant mediocre labor pool. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore how a rural public school district impacts its community culture by describing the beliefs and values of community residents about the public school district's role in meeting the community's needs and expectations, by observing local school board meetings and by reviewing school policies related to community interaction and other documents and media related to local educational activities.

A review of current research established the relevance of this problem and the purpose of this study. Several researchers have conducted significant studies about the experiences of teachers in rural communities. Burton and Johnson (2010) studied two teachers in the rural south, finding that the choice to teach in a rural area is based predominantly on the rural background of teachers and the commonalities they share with the rural community. Burton et al. (2013) presented a narrative analysis of the literature related to rural teachers and found that the rural backgrounds and shared values are a significant part in their decision to teach in a rural setting. Campbell and Yates (2011)

studied a cross section of rural teachers and identified quality schools, exceptional students, financial support, and personal and professional opportunities as reasons teachers choose to teach in urban areas. In addition, researchers have examined issues related to rural teacher recruitment and retention. Golden et al. (2011) investigated the role that foreign students have played in infusing new talent, ideas, and motivation into rural schools. In contrast, Sherman and Sage (2011) described the negative impact of the out-migration of rural students on rural schools. However, Winchester (2009) reported a positive impact of foreign students on rural schools in Minnesota.

Researchers have also explored student perceptions of rural environments and student recruitment and retention in rural schools. Howley et al. (2013) investigated responsive relationships and institutional flexibility at a rural community college and found that only half of the students viewed the community in which their school is located as rural. In a discussion about enhancing achievement in rural schools, Stockard (2011) contended that students in rural schools often do not develop strong identities and are apologetic for living in the country. In addition, Burton and Johnson (2010), in their portrait of two teachers in the rural south, found that financial inequality, high rates of poverty, and low levels of educational attainment remain troubling challenges for rural school systems. The ingenuity of the rural community has also emerged from several studies. In an examination of rural life in America, Benson (2010) found that one of the keys to success in reforming education is providing professional development for the school staff, and yet educators in higher education institutions have done little to provide specialized training to teachers who work in rural areas. In an earlier study, Theobald

(2005) compared urban and rural schools in relation to the obstacles that they face and found that Americans expect improved performance from all public school students, but they often do not provide adequate resources to fund such improvement, particularly in rural communities. As rural populations decline, communities find themselves unable to support established public facilities, including schools. Theobald (2005) compared urban and rural schools in relation to the obstacles that they face and found that Americans expect improved performance from all public school students, but they often do not provide adequate resources to fund such improvement, particularly in rural communities. Even though comparisons of rural and urban schools have been a staple of research, Strange and Johnson (2010) examined the realities of rural education growth and found that the contributions that rural schools make to their local communities have been neglected.

Researchers have also explored various social factors that influence rural communities. Martin and Hewstone (2003) described societal problems of control related to conformity, obedience, and the minority influence. Even though a single individual can influence the choices and behavior of another individual, Martin and Hewstone noted that the more common dynamic involves the influence of group members on each other through an ever-evolving set of group values and norms. Benson reported that the dominant value system in rural areas is individualism. Rural residents also adopt specific values, such as belonging, emotional support, security, and predictability in order to survive in the larger social and economic environment. People relate to one another in rural areas, Benson contended, in ways that are more personal and socially supportive. In

another study about social influences, Farmer (2009) noted that rural residents are, by nature, suspicious of outside intervention, and their political attitudes favor independence, small government, and the liberty to exist in a more personal and traditional environment that operates at a slower pace.

Rural school administrators are also viewed as change agents, as some studies indicate. Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) contended that rural school superintendents should have listening skills, open minds, and a support and recognition system in place for their staff. In a supporting study, Forner et al. (2012) described the leadership practices of effective rural superintendents using Waters and Marzano's (2006) six correlates of effective school district leadership practices. Forner et al. identified seven core leadership practices among the superintendents, consistent with previous research on leadership.

Researchers have also found that rural communities face many unique challenges. Fry and Anderson (2011) examined reasons first-year teachers choose to remain in rural schools. They found that these teachers choose to remain in rural areas because of the support they received from administrators and the community, and the rapport they enjoyed with their colleagues. If this support is not apparent, rural communities stand to lose talented teachers and students. It is the survivalist spirit of rural people, Corbett (2013) maintained, that helps them to adapt and overcome challenges related to education and the economy.

Chapter 2 is a review of the research literature for this study. It includes a discussion of the literature search strategies that I used and a discussion of Maslow's

motivation theory as the conceptual framework for this study. In addition, I include a review of current research in relation to (a) experiences of teacher in rural communities, (b) rural teacher recruitment and retention, (c) student perceptions of their rural environment, (d) rural student recruitment and retention, (e) the ingenuity of the rural community, (f) social factors that influence rural communities, (g) rural school administrators as change agents, and (h) challenges that rural communities face. I also include a summary and conclusions, in which I describe the major themes and gaps in the literature and how this study addresses those gaps.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To conduct this literature review, I used several search strategies. In addition to the Internet, I used traditional indexing and abstracting services such as ERIC, Psychological Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, and the Social Science Index to identify peer-reviewed journal articles relevant to this study that were published within the last 5 years. I also used citation indexing because I considered references from citations in relevant journal articles. During this search process, I used the following key words: *rural education, rural communities, rural migration, rural schools, rural life, and rural teachers*, which resulted in the identification of articles pertaining to rural migration patterns, the quality of education and faculty in rural schools, and the motivation of teachers and administrators in choosing to live and work in rural areas.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Maslow's (1968) general theory of motivation forms the conceptual framework for this study. Maslow, a humanistic psychologist who developed a motivation theory



about the hierarchy of human needs, maintained that after humans meet their physiological and safety needs, they are motivated by affiliation or the need to belong, followed by self-esteem needs, cognitive needs, and aesthetic needs, and culminating in the need for self-actualization. Maslow (1954) contended, “What a man can be, he must be” (p.16), which is the basis of the human need for self-actualization. According to Maslow (1968), self-actualization pertains to a person’s realization of his or her full potential, whether it be expressed through academia, sports, or inventiveness. In progressing through the hierarchy, Maslow postulated that a person does not experience a need until the one below it has been fulfilled. Maslow believed that these needs are similar to instincts in animals, and they play a major role in determining choices and behavior.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs has also been articulated in previous research. Benson (2010) explored the motivation for beginning a new life in rural America and found that teachers who choose to work in a rural school do so for many reasons, all relating to fulfilling personal needs. Benson found that teachers were motivated to teach in rural schools due to their desire to help students with academic challenges similar to their own. In addition, Benson found that teachers are drawn to rural communities because of their positive experiences of acceptance and support in growing up and attending school and college in rural areas. Burton and Johnson (2010) conducted a narrative analysis of the literature related to rural teachers in the United States and found that teachers motivated to teach in rural areas make that choice based on their need to be valued and appreciated in an environment in which they are comfortable. Campbell and

Yates (2011) examined the traits and qualities that define rural educators and found that they most often embrace conservative values, tradition, and individualism ingrained during earlier life experiences. Griffin and Galassi (2010) explored parental perceptions of barriers to academic success in a rural middle school and found that parents often believe that their children do not reach their potential because of (a) a lack of communication between parents and teachers, (b) challenges within the family, (c) instructional problems, (d) a lack of school resources, and (e) a lack of strong teacher student interactions. These studies suggest that without rapport between rural public school educators and community residents that is born out of satisfaction and mutual respect, educators will have a difficult time meeting the expectations of the community, and community residents will be reluctant to give educators in these rural schools their full support. These studies support Maslow's motivational theory because researchers found that residents chose to remain in rural communities in order to fulfill their need to be valued, appreciated, and supported. The need for improved rapport and communication among teachers, administrators, and community also supports Maslow's contention that people seek safety, security, love, and belonging in their quest toward self-actualization.

Other research studies also support Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Brown, Carr, Perry, and McIntire (2010) examined principals' perceptions of community and staff involvement in shared decision making and found that principals believe community and staff members have a profound impact on the community because they engage in a mutually beneficial collaborative process. Farmer (2009) explored rural district politics

affecting the local school and found that school representatives have a powerful voice in the community. Farmer concluded that school personnel could enhance their influence through clear communication of goals, forming coalitions with influential members of the community, demonstrating empathy with conflicting views, and practicing collaboration. Forner et al. (2012) supported Farmer's findings in their exploration of leadership practices of effective rural school superintendents. Forner et al. found that effective administrators seize every opportunity to make a difference, are receptive to new ideas, and exercise effective communication with staff, faculty, and community. Forner et al. concluded that effective communication of ideas and goals, collaboration with community leaders, and empathy with those individuals who may disagree with new ideas are key strategies in building a vital rural community.

These studies relate to Maslow's motivation theory in that they support the contention that all people seek acceptance, recognition, and support in their quest for self-actualized lives. Rural school administrators, as well as rural community members, have recognized that maintaining open lines of communication, entertaining new ideas, and demonstrating empathy for others with conflicting views leads to acceptance, recognition, and support that in turn builds stronger schools and stronger communities (Cejda, 2010; Forner et al., 2012; Gibbs, 2010).

This study also benefited from Maslow's (1968) motivation theory in several ways. In the hierarchy of human needs, Maslow emphasizes the need for affiliation or belonging, which often involves giving priority to group goals and values. Maslow contended that people are motivated to satisfy their needs for belonging by developing

relationships with those individuals who share their values and beliefs. In addition to this need to belong, Maslow also contended that all human beings express a need for self-esteem, for knowledge and understanding, and for aesthetics. Studies indicate that rural educators have recognized the value of reaching out, collaborating, and demonstrating genuine interest in their students, the students' families, and the community in order to help students improve their self-esteem and their knowledge and understanding of concepts and skills related to their course work (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006). In addition, some researchers have found that rural educators support student involvement in the arts, which addresses the human need for aesthetics (Corbett, 2013). Thus, Maslow's hierarchy of needs was important to consider in exploring how a rural public school district impacts the the community culture.

### **Experiences of Teachers in Rural Communities**

Qualitative research has been conducted about the experiences of teachers in rural schools. In describing teachers' interests in and preparation for teaching in rural communities, Campbell and Yates (2011) addressed the realities of geographic isolation and rural values and found these realities to be both positive and negative. They found that for some educators, metro-centricity had to be overcome in order to persuade high quality teachers to work in a rural area. In an examination of charter schools, Buckley and Schneider (2009) found that teachers who worked in rural schools established stronger rapport with their students than teachers in charter schools. While this issue is not particularly important to teachers whose background and preferences innately lead them back to the country, it is a challenge when recruiting educators from urban areas to

rural areas without the resources to which they have become accustomed. Campbell and Yates recommended overcoming these challenges by recruiting new teachers who have experienced some level of education themselves in a rural area.

In their description of the experiences of two teachers in the rural South, Burton and Johnson (2010) found that these two teachers were drawn to teach in a rural environment due to their rural roots. The teachers reported that they were most comfortable in this setting because they were familiar with community values and culture and because they had friends and a support network. Both teachers explained that being from a rural community was a significant part of their identity, both personally and professionally. In order to attract a more diverse cross section of teachers to rural communities, Burton and Johnson recommended that educators must first be willing to form relationships with teachers and schools in rural communities. They also contended that educators must maintain an open mind and be receptive to examining their own perceptions or misconceptions regarding rural life. Teachers also reported that the peculiarities and specific challenges of teaching in a rural setting were not addressed during their teacher training. Burton and Johnson concluded that the challenges and rewards of teaching in a rural setting must be addressed in order to avoid sending a message to students and educators that their community is not important.

In a related study, Fry and Anderson (2011) examined experiences that encouraged first-year teachers to remain in rural schools. Fry and Anderson found that these teachers choose to remain in rural areas because of the support they received from administrators and the community and the rapport they enjoyed with their colleagues. Fry

and Anderson recommended that school administrators understand the importance of being approachable to these first-year teachers as well as being encouraging and empathetic to their needs so that that their experiences are positive and they choose to remain in their positions.

In supporting research, Woodrum (2009) examined cultural identity, place, and community in rural New Mexico. In relation to cultural identity and community in rural New Mexico, Woodrum found that most proposals regarding a national curriculum fails to recognize the special needs of many rural students, as well as the desire of rural areas to maintain their cultural identity. Woodrum noted that as Americans move toward a national curriculum for public schools, rural students from cultural and linguistic minorities are at increased risk of being “disembedded” from their roots (p. 21).

Woodrum (2009) added,

Since the coming of common schools in the era immediately following the Civil War, the trajectory of public education, both philosophically and organizationally, has been toward a more normative institution reflecting the values of white, middle-class America, forcing a choice between cultural identities and economic survival. (p. 26)

Woodrum concluded that in order to improve student achievement, teachers must embrace an increasingly diverse student population by accommodating their languages, cultural traditions, and values, while offering quality education facilitated by quality teachers. These experiences with diversity require insight, empathy, and improvisation on the part of the teaching staff.

In another study about teacher experiences in rural communities, Gibbs (2010) examined the challenges ahead for teachers in rural schools because rural students have continued to post major but uneven gains in retention, enrollment, and standardized testing. As technology and the resultant job skills requirements increase, Gibbs found that rural residents have paid closer attention to factors contributing to teacher and student retention and career preparation in their economic development plans. Gibbs also found that workforce education impacts economic growth in rural communities and that better schools contribute to the community by promoting higher academic achievement, which leads to increased earnings. By improving academic achievement, Gibbs concluded, teachers contribute to the prosperity of rural communities. In order to help students improve their academic progress in the future, teachers will be required to address increasing student diversity in classrooms, which will include specific learning needs and learning styles of their students, and their cultural background.

In summary, these studies indicate that the experiences of teachers in rural communities are complex. Teachers in rural communities are challenged to bring new ideas to the classroom that will enhance student performance, while overcoming community resistance to these ideas. They must bridge the gap between parents and school administrators, while demonstrating their allegiance to both. Rural teachers must use their preference for the rural setting to motivate students to realize their potential, even though they often face negative student and parental attitudes about education and limited instructional resources.

### **Rural Educator Recruitment and Retention**

Several research studies addressed the question of how the culture of the rural community influences their recruitment and retention of rural teachers and administrators. In a study about learning to be rural, Theobald and Wood (2010) examined rural education experiences and the special challenges associated with supporting nontraditional students. Interviews were the primary source of information, with the goal of discovering how students and staff believed the rural nature of their school affected teacher recruitment and retention. This task was made more difficult by the fact that only half of the rural students who were interviewed considered the community in which their school was located as rural. Teachers and students who categorized their environment as rural reported disadvantages such as lack of financial support, poor facilities, inexperienced staff, and staff who did not conform to the local socio-cultural ethos. Students and teachers who were interviewed suggested recruiting teachers early on in their training, with a concentration on those teachers who received at least a portion of their early education in a rural area. Concerning retention, Theobald and Wood reported that teachers who remained in a rural setting were those teachers who were satisfied with their career choice of teaching, were committed to their profession, and appreciated the leadership they received. Respondents stated that they did not wish to leave their rural assignment because they valued their community's support for their efforts in the classroom.

Other studies also include interesting findings about the recruitment and retention of rural school administrators. Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) examined the perspectives of



rural and small school principal candidates about their motivations for seeking a principal position, dividing them into categories of incentives and disincentives, and their satisfaction once selected. Principals cited such disincentives as the growing complexity and demands of the position, high stress, long hours, inadequate salaries, and a perceived lack of support from other members of the education community for superior performance. Incentives included being able to make a difference for the students, the ability to influence the direction of the school, the opportunity to implement new ideas, and financial advantages. Principals also identified some common misconceptions regarding rural school teachers, including their desire to use the rural appointment as a stepping stone to better assignments, and their acceptance of rural positions because no other positions were available to them. Cruzeiro and Boone recommended that administrators maintain an open mind to new ideas presented by teaching staff and the community, exercise innovation to meet the needs of a diverse student population, and recognize superior student and staff achievement.

In another study about recruitment and retention, Fry and Anderson (2011) reported that first year teachers identified three factors that influenced them in choosing to stay in their teaching positions in rural schools, which included (a) evidence of their effectiveness as teachers, (b) mentoring programs, and (c) the ability to make adjustments to life in rural areas. Fry and Anderson concluded that rural school educators should establish internal support networks and mentoring programs for new school staff in order to create maximum job satisfaction, and they recommended that school administrators

and school boards recognize the needs of first-year teachers, listen to their ideas, and recognize superior performance.

In summary, recruitment and retention of teachers and school administrators in rural communities is challenging. Researchers have found that many of the most talented educators are drawn to urban areas with more resources and what they consider a higher quality of life. Even though it may be easier to recruit and retain teachers with a rural background, greater emphasis should be placed on preparing teachers for teaching in rural areas during their teacher training. Rural school administrators should provide more encouragement for first-year teachers in rural communities by recognizing and rewarding exemplary performance and implementing a mentoring program.

### **Student Perceptions of Rural Environments**

Students' perceptions of their rural environment are important to consider because they are a key element in examining the impact of rural public school districts on community culture. Howley, Chavis, and Kester (2013) explored responsive relationships and institutional flexibility at a rural college and found that only half of the interviewed students viewed the community in which their school is located as rural. For those participants who considered their community as rural, they reported that loss of economic opportunity was most often the deciding factor in considering the community rural, rather than attributes such as access to nature, close local relationships, or conservative values. Howley et al. also found that educators at local community colleges contribute significantly to local economic development, assisting students in accessing postsecondary opportunities, and maintaining a close and productive relationship with

local schools. Because rural schools address a wide range of educational and economic development needs, Howley et al. noted that they often serve several generations of community members, creating a unique, family-like environment. Even though several respondents believed that rural was synonymous with lost opportunities, others did not define their community as rural. Howley et al. added, “Whether or not they considered the area rural, all respondents reported that the responsiveness of faculty and staff, and the relationships facilitated by a small community, made staying in school easier for them and had a positive impact on their retention” (p. 10). Students’ comments about the rural quality of their school were found to be relative, because their views were based on their particular social construct. Even though many students did not consider their community to be rural due to a thriving local economy and strong employment, those students who did consider their environment rural were more inclined to remain in their rural schools. Howley et al. also found that their “embeddedness” in the local rural community correlated with the strength of their relationships with faculty and staff, enabling them to connect even more fully with their school and needed support services.

In a related study about student perceptions of their rural environment, Sparks and Nunez (2014) examined the role of postsecondary institutional urbanicity in college persistence. Sparks and Nunez found that students considered rural schools with opportunity, support, and talented teaching staff as necessary to their success. Students also referenced technological advances and the resultant increasing demands on those entering the workforce as challenges that educators need to consider in preparing students for educational and employment opportunities. Sparks and Nunez recommended that

rural administrators and community leaders realize these advances in technology and their impact on teaching methods and the demands of the current job market and incorporate steps to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their planning processes.

In another study about student perceptions of rural environments, Campbell (2012) reflected on her early school days in a rural community. Caring teachers and faculty, encouragement, and challenges in relation to American schools, Campbell maintained, resulted in a positive learning environment for her. Campbell contrasted these memories with her experiences in the present, teaching young children in the challenging conditions of Honduras. Campbell moved to Honduras immediately after graduation from college, where she was engaged in teaching English to the Honduran children. Campbell was disheartened to learn that regardless of their desire, effort, and scholastic aptitude, the schooling of children ended at age 11, at which time they would, without exception, join their parents harvesting crops in the field. Campbell added, “Every family member is inextricably embedded in the larger family system, and can never be fully understood independent of the context of that system” (p. 245). Campbell began her teaching career by testing Honduran students who had been judged ready for their final examinations before leaving school for a life in the field. The results were abysmal, because students failed to demonstrate even rudimentary skills such as knowing their age or writing their name. When Campbell asked other teachers why student learning was so limited, they replied that Honduran schools were “awful”. The teachers explained that Honduran teachers were paid by the government, were very poorly

compensated, and were constantly striking to protest low wages, working conditions, and a lack of labor rights. These constant interruptions, they believed, made it difficult to provide a consistent curriculum for students. In the best of circumstances, with a motivated teacher and students, Honduran students still left school at age 11 to work in the fields.

In a discussion of rural migration patterns in the United States, Lively and Taeuber (2012) addressed the challenges of migration to rural areas and the accompanying student loss of identity. They noted that, especially when moving from urban to rural areas, students reported that they lost a sense of who they are and where they are going. Factors that contribute to this lost feeling were a sudden reduction in leisure activity, limited resources in the rural school, less talented educators, and fewer friends. Lively and Taeuber contended that these students understood the rurality of their environment, and they had a negative reaction to their relocation.

In summary, these studies about student perceptions of their rural environment indicate that students perceive this environment as beneficial to their education and success. In reflections on her early school days in a rural community, Campbell (2012) identified caring teachers and faculty, encouragement, and challenges as key factors resulting in a positive learning environment for her as a student. To attain the goals of recruiting and retaining a teaching staff sensitive to the learning needs of their students, educators must realize the need to foster a family-like atmosphere, responsive to student needs. Researchers have also suggested that rural planners should capitalize on the unique opportunity that rural educators have in serving generations and therefore creating

a family-like atmosphere conducive to learning and to meeting student and staff needs for belonging, safety, and self-esteem, all of which contribute to reaching self-actualization.

### **Student Recruitment and Retention in Rural Schools**

Significant studies were found in this literature review about student recruitment and retention in rural schools. Strange (2011) investigated educational needs and funding for rural schools and found that educators in many rural school districts face the challenge of declining student enrollment due to better employment and educational opportunities in urban areas. Strange recommended that school administrators and community planners take into account the benefits offered to students in urban areas and counter this attraction by emphasizing the advantages of a rural school, including a family-like atmosphere, low teacher to student ratios, and a supportive bond that often exists among teachers, students, and community.

In related research, Helge (2010) discussed the need to encourage the establishment of a national rural education agenda in order to pursue solutions to the out-migration of students from rural areas. Helge contended, as did Strange (2011), that rural school educators must address the perception that urban schools have more to offer. They can accomplish this goal by establishing a long-term plan based on faculty and student needs, realizing that as the student population becomes more diverse, demands for relevant curriculum taught by qualified and motivated teachers become more crucial.

In a discussion of rural school districts and international programs, Casto, Steinhauer and Pollack (2012) examined a rural community using the recruitment of international students as a prism, with the goal of determining how the recruiting methods

affect financial, academic, and social situations for the school and community, as well as for the local and international students. The recruiting process included two stated goals: to increase enrollment and to increase diversity in the school. Casto et al. discussed the benefits and challenges of the recruitment of international students in relation to the social and academic school experience. School faculty reported fears of school closure and consolidation as a motivating factor in their recruiting efforts, as well as local resistance to students with different customs, cultures, and values. In addition, Casto et al. discussed professional concerns such as the ability of rural school educators to meet the needs of a diverse student population with limited education resources. Using a modification of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological theory, which combines systems theory and social systems theory, Casto et al. addressed challenges faced by foreign students in their native countries, such as gender inequality, poverty, and the resultant lack of resources, technology, and adequately prepared teachers, and they recommended that educators in rural schools can attract and retain international students by providing an educational environment with ample resources and relevant curriculum.

Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, and Lawson (2014) conducted a multiple case study of rural high school completion and found that teachers who challenge students by using various instructional strategies to reach students' different learning styles are able to retain the largest percentage of students. Wilcox et al. recommended consolidation of local government entities, including rural school districts, to overcome the tendency of policymakers to base educational decisions largely on rural problems, thereby improving student learning while still maintaining their rural school identity.

In a discussion about rural demographic change that involves slower growth and increased student diversity, Johnson and Strange (2012) noted, “In rural areas, people are said to be attached to a place and to kinship and tradition in a way that inhibits the kind of freethinking and openness that is crucial to success in globalized cognitive capitalism” (p. 4). Student achievement outcomes, such as performance on national and state assessments or schools’ graduation rates, Strange and Johnson (2010) contended, point to the urgency with which policymakers should approach improving teaching and learning conditions in rural schools in order to prevent an out-migration of students.

In another study related to student recruitment and retention, Lichter and Brown (2011) examined the premise that families are systems or organisms that grow in response to external stimuli, as part of a larger whole. Embryonic research can be valuable, they believed, in helping individuals embrace a holistic approach to understanding living systems. Lichter and Brown maintained that, thanks to Piaget, social scientists now recognize that organisms have psychological structures. Lichter and Brown also noted that researchers have examined dynamics such as family communication, organization, and established values and boundaries, but they have seldom applied these concepts to child development. As Maslow contended, life decisions are made based on satisfying needs for safety, belonging, self-esteem, cognition, aesthetics, and self-actualization. Even though economic conditions and opportunities contribute to decisions regarding where students will attend school, the safety, comfort, and support students often receive in a rural school environment significantly impact such decisions. In a rural environment where family and community



are central, educators must embrace this value when interacting with the community, making policy, and developing a strategic plan for educational success. If they do not, the most talented teachers and students may succumb to the attraction of urban schools.

In a study about an ecological approach to rural secondary school enrollment, Demi, Coleman-Jensen, and Snyder (2010) found that a systems approach should be used when considering the needs of rural students that include considerations regarding all aspects of the local culture. Demi et al. also contended that the recognition that students and families are influenced by a larger network of social systems results in people with rural backgrounds drawn to others with similar backgrounds. This concept of shared values is supported by Parke's (1950) life-span theory, Bronfenbrenner's (1980) ecological theory, and Lewin's (2008) psychological field theory, which state that studies of social dynamics should be conducted in natural settings where the effects of social variables can be observed. This approach has developed into action research that is widely used in educational studies.

Researchers often consider components of general systems theory when examining the family as a social system, which is an important factor in relation to student retention in rural schools. These components include properties of wholeness and order, hierarchal structure, adaptive self-preservation, and self-organization. As Bertalanffy (1975) argued, this paradigm maintains that distinct elements, when combined with others, will interact and morph into a changed organism. Embracing this paradigm means accepting the family as a sub-group of members, which are interactive, interdependent, and exert a continuous and reciprocal influence on one another. By

identifying the family as a system, researchers have provided a much clearer context within which to understand and explain behavior and decision making in general (Benson, 2010; Strange, 2011) Students are attracted to environments where their needs are best met, and they are often initially attracted to rural settings because their needs for safety, security, and acceptance are met (Casto et al., 2012). Whether or not students achieve self-actualization in their chosen rural environment is not clear.

In summary, these studies indicate that recruiting and retaining students in rural public schools is challenging. Curriculum and policies must reflect best practices, as well as goals and values of the community. To counter the tendency of students to gravitate toward urban schools, teachers in rural schools must capitalize on their ability to create rapport with students and their families while maintaining a family-like atmosphere of caring and support in the classroom. Foreign students can be recruited, contributing to a school's diversity and talent, because they are often attracted to simple lifestyles and conservative values. However, curriculum must be kept current, resources used wisely, advanced technology employed, and high quality teachers recruited in order to attract and retain students in rural schools.

### **Ingenuity of the Rural Community**

Rural communities often have a largely unacknowledged capacity for innovation founded on their rural traditions. In related research, Corbett (2013) explored improvisation as a curricular metaphor in imagining education for a rural creative class. Corbett discussed the role and philosophy of rural education in the modern and postmodern world and postulated that both the nature and potential of rural education

should be theorized differently. Corbett argued that improvisation is a potentially productive metaphor for curriculum, and one that draws on rural traditions and local knowledge, while at the same time incorporating a productive, forward-looking engagement with new technologies. In his research, Corbett (2013) connected multiculturalism and diversity with creativity, and in so doing, emphasized the potential of rural students. Corbett pointed out that the term rural can only be defined in relation to other terms such as urban that are opposite or different in composition. It is the differences, or diversity of the rural population, Corbett argued, that leads to curricular and instructional improvisation that characterizes rural teaching. Much like team-building exercises that challenge the imagination of participants to create a useful product from everyday components, Corbett maintained that rural teachers are challenged to use the rural environment of the student population to their advantage and to discourage parents' from distancing themselves from education and the education process. This rural environment plays to the strengths of rural students, one of which is coming from a self-sufficient, resourceful culture. It is the survivalist spirit of rural people, Corbett maintained, that helps them to adapt and overcome challenges related to education and the economy. The improvisation found in rural communities, Corbett noted, stems from necessity as the mother of invention. Corbett added, "I think by using improvisation as a core curricular metaphor, we can open up space for young people who have given up on school, while at the same time drawing on ways of working and thinking that are common in marginal social locations" (p. 3). Considering the particular challenges of growing up in a rural environment, Corbett concluded that teachers should think outside

of the box in order to implement new instructional tactics to resolve the old problems of student complacency, disinterest, and low graduation rates.

In support of this idea, Carr and Kefalas (2010) examined the rural brain drain and what it means for America. They noted that social scientists from the qualitative sociological tradition define the social lives of individuals as interactions with others, postulating that people derive their character and/or identity from their environment. This observation is important because it can explain not only how rural culture perpetuates itself, but also how individuals develop character and/or identity and behavior. Carr and Kefalas (2010) studied the negative effects of the out-migration of rural students on rural communities, pointing out that many of the most promising students and teachers choose to leave rural areas due to limited opportunities, low levels of federal and state funding, and mediocre plans and goals set by administrators and town planners. They suggested educators use the rural setting to their advantage, developing teaching strategies that appeal to rural students and challenging them toward higher achievement.

In a study about responsive relationships and institutional flexibility at a rural community college, Howley, Chavis, and Kester (2013) found that many students they did not consider community in which their school is located as rural. For those participants who did consider their community as rural, they reported that loss of economic opportunity was most often the deciding factor in considering the community rural rather than attributes such as access to nature, close local relationships, or conservative values. Howley et al. suggested that educators and community leaders build on the positive attitude held by students regarding the rural area in which they live and be

innovative and insightful in developing teaching strategies that appeal to rural students. As a result of this innovative teaching, students would be engaged in the learning process and encouraged to rise above economic disadvantages that they perceive to be hindering their success.

In an investigation into faculty issues in rural community colleges, Cejda (2010) found that when administrators demonstrate imagination and insight in policymaking and recognition of students and staff, teachers are most likely to teach at their highest levels. Cejda found that administrators who developed well designed programs of recognition for teachers demonstrating exemplary success were most like to retain a talented and motivated teaching staff. Collaboration between community and teaching staff when developing policy led to improved rapport and better dialogue between local residents and schools. In addition, Cejda recommended that administrators establish an open-door policy for their staff, encouraging a free exchange of ideas and thinking outside the box when assessing student performance, setting goals for teachers and students, and implementing new policies.

Winand and Ediefson (2009) examined rural community input into school district strategic planning and found that too few school districts foster meaningful dialogue with their communities. However, those communities that did won the support and cooperation of parents and students. Winand and Ediefson recommended that focus groups involving teachers, administrators, parents, and local residents be conducted in order to establish better communication between educators and the community. Winand and Ediefson concluded, "Immersion of school leaders in the topic of better

communication with the community will serve as a catalyst to drive the district forward in the future” (p. 54). Recognizing the challenges facing the rural community, Winand and Ediefson noted, educators and community members must be willing to exercise imagination and innovation in their efforts to motivate students and increase their opportunities for success.

In summary, these studies indicate that rural communities are ingenious in that they have a capacity for innovation founded on their rural traditions. Successful rural educators and insightful community members demonstrate innovation in relation to how they communicate and exchange ideas with each other. The diversity of the rural population also often leads to improvisation that characterizes rural teaching and learning. Researchers have also found that rural teachers are challenged to use the rural environment of the student population to their advantage, incorporating references and lessons relating material presented to popular rural activities involving nature, physical exercise, and self-reliance. Teachers who implement innovative strategies that are reflective of the rural community are most likely to keep students engaged, challenged, and ultimately more successful. In addition, rural educators and community members often use unique strategies to discourage parents from distancing themselves from their children’s educational needs, such as encouraging parents to attend school functions, soliciting their ideas and input, and educating them about technological advances, and the educational opportunities they offer to their children.

### **Social Factors That Influence Rural Communities**

Social influence, which is a fundamental area of sociological inquiry, refers to how the opinions and attitudes of one person affect the opinions and attitudes of another person. Social influences on the rural community often involve tension between tradition and modernity, obsession with frugality, and a general suspicion and resistance to new ideas and new people. In a discussion about majority versus minority influence in rural communities, Martin and Hewstone (2003) described social factors that impact the development of communities. They described societal problems of control related to conformity, obedience, and the minority influence. Even though a single individual can influence the choices and behavior of another individual, Martin and Hewstone noted that the more common dynamic involves the influence of group members on each other through an ever-evolving set of group values and norms. In their study, Martin and Hewstone examined two types of social influence that impact group norms. Social scientists generally agree that conformity is the dominant type of social control because the individual's behavior is controlled by the group's view. Because this type of social control demonstrates how a majority can cause an individual to conform, it is often referred to as the majority influence. Another type of social control is obedience, where individuals obey an authority figure, even against their own will. The third type of social control is the minority influence, where change typically originates from a small subgroup. It is these active minorities that initiate the dissenting opinions and therefore promote change. Societal tastes, fads, and trends evolve in this manner. Martin and

Hewstone concluded that the majority is not always the most influential group; instead, a smaller group often perpetuates tradition or simply exerts more influence.

In a related study about social influences related to the rural community, Benson (2010) investigated starting a new life in rural America. Benson reported that the dominant value in rural areas is individualism. Rural residents also adopt other specific values, such as belonging, emotional support, security, and predictability in order to survive in the larger social and economic environment. People relate to one another in rural areas, Benson contended, in ways that are more personal, direct, and socially supportive.

In another study about social influences, Farmer (2009) examined the uniqueness of rural school district policies and noted that rural residents are, by nature, suspicious of outside intervention, and their political attitudes favor independence, small government, and the liberty to exist in a more personal and traditional environment that operates at a slower pace. Martin and Hewstone (2003) and Benson (2010) shared this concept with Farmer that residents in rural communities remain skeptical of new ideas from outsiders, which are often introduced by national trends and politics, and therefore, they are influenced from within, often by only a few individuals. They are more susceptible to influence from within, Benson and Farmer concluded, because they perceive the individuals who introduce these ideas to be one of them.

In another study about social influences in rural communities, Kulcsar (2009) examined population change in rural communities and found that, while migration patterns change with economic and other social conditions, there has generally been an



exodus of rural populations to urban or suburban areas. To resolve this problem, Kulcsar suggested that rural community members may need to attract students and teachers from other areas, as well as being receptive to new ideas and innovation, and generally embracing change in order to make their rural communities more attractive. Kulcsar also noted that psychological pressure is often brought to bear on the individual to yield to the majority in rural communities. This pressure results in conformity, which protects and preserves tradition or the popular position. History is replete with examples of the type of social control known as obedience, which is often blind obedience to a cause or idea that could cause harm to others. The most powerful explanation offered for this unquestioning obedience is based on the power of the person who is obeyed. The leader assumes a position as the expert, who knows what he or she is doing. In support of Kulcsar's findings, Martin and Hewstone (2003) added,

Research on obedience shows that, under specific circumstances, people will obey an authority figure and commit acts they would not usually commit. The key to this process are the power and role expectations associated with the authority person that enable such persons to control others, to make them comply with their requests. (p. 347-366)

Although communities as a whole perpetuate local culture, Kulcsar concluded, the low population density in rural areas makes it easier for a few authoritative individuals to exert control over the community.

In a discussion about rural people and communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in relation to resilience and transformation, Dew (2013) found that rural communities with deep-

seated social ties, low levels of inequality, and responsive institutions are more successful than communities lacking the collective strength and overall well-being provided by societal supports. To facilitate more constructive interaction between the rural community and the school, Dew recommended regular meeting between parents, teachers, and community members where a free exchange of perceptions and ideas are encouraged and participants are open to new ideas and approaches to learning. Such actions will substantially strengthen the relationship between the school and the community.

In summary, a variety of social factors influence rural community residents stemming from friction between traditional thought and modern ideas and advances. Martin and Hewstone examined two social factors that either maintain group norms or act to change them. The first social factor is conformity, which is continuing with the status quo or the popular consensus. The second social factor is obedience, where individuals obey an authority figure, even against their own will. The third type of social factor is the minority influence, where change typically originates from a small sub-group that initiates dissenting opinions and promotes change. Societal tastes, fads, and trends often evolve in this manner. In a related study about social influences related to the rural community, Benson (2010) investigated life in rural America, and reported that the dominant value system in rural areas is individualism. Rural residents also adopt specific values, such as belonging, emotional support, security, and predictability in order to survive in the larger social and economic environment. Benson contended that rural residents interact in ways that are more direct, personal, and socially-supportive. Kulcsar

(2009) examined population change in rural communities and found that migration patterns change with economic and other social conditions. Most recently this dynamic has led to an exodus of rural populations to urban or suburban areas. To resolve this problem, Kulcsar suggested that rural community members should endeavor to attract students and teachers from other areas, while remaining receptive to new ideas and innovation, and generally embracing change in order to make their rural communities more attractive. In a discussion about rural people and communities Dew (2013) concluded that rural communities with deep-seated social ties, low levels of inequality, and responsive institutions are more successful than communities lacking the collective strength and overall well-being provided by societal supports.

### **Rural School Administrator as Change Agent**

The rural school administrator, often the principal or the superintendent, can act as a change agent in the community. Educational leaders are ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the organization for which they are responsible. This premise is also true in public school systems. Brown, Carr, Perry, & McIntire (2010) studied the attitudes and perceptions of school administrators and found that the most successful administrators actively solicited community and staff involvement in decision making. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) explored the leadership practices of effective rural superintendents. Forner et al. examined the leadership practices of seven rural superintendents, selected through random sampling which identified disadvantaged rural districts that had experienced a marked increase in test scores during the superintendent's tenure. Forner et al. compared these superintendent's practices to Waters and Marzano's

(2006) six correlates of effective school district leadership practices. Forner et al. used a multiple case study design involving a site visit to each of the seven rural districts, including interviews with four individuals: the superintendent, one principal, one teacher, and one board trustee. Secondary sources included meeting minutes, school newsletters, school memoranda, and observations. Forner et al. identified seven core leadership practices among the superintendents, consistent with previous research on leadership, with one exception: that the goal setting in these rural districts was largely driven by the superintendent, not through a collaborative, bottom-up process. Leadership practices shared by all the superintendents included (a) obtaining support for reform through direct conversation with school faculty and staff and community leaders, (b) incorporating constructive confrontation to assist struggling students and faculty, (c) removing low-performing teachers and principals, (d) fostering good working relations with building principals, (e) taking a hard line on union contract negotiations, and (f) aligning financial commitments to match district priorities based on student outcomes. Forner et al. found that superintendents realized success, as measured by student success and quality teacher retention, by keeping their priorities limited to helping students achieve academic success, recruiting and retaining high quality teachers, and creating or acquiring resources to support necessary academic reform. Adding to their success were holding faculty and staff accountable, effectively utilizing available resources, and sustaining the occasional short-term constituent wrath likely to occur when difficult decisions are made and changes are implemented.

In a discussion of rural leaders and rural places in relation to problems, privilege, and possibility, Budge (2006) noted that even though rural school administrators face many challenges, they are also in a unique position to resolve issues in their communities through collaboration, resulting in policies and practices that will improve their schools and enhance student learning. Budge also noted that it is difficult to establish a universal set of characteristics to describe or rural communities and rural schools, making it more difficult to identify common issues and solutions. Budge concluded that while most rural leaders view their role as presenting more problems than possibilities in the lives of most students, the rural environment should be viewed as a positive in that school administrators have a greater opportunity to influence and impact the rural school system more directly than their urban counterparts due to the close knit nature of the rural community.

In a discussion about improvisation as a metaphor for imagining education for a rural creative class, Corbett (2013) examined seven rural school districts and found that, “rural communities contain a largely unacknowledged innovative capacity founded on improvisational traditions” (p. 1). While improvisation is nothing new to teachers of drama, performance, and music, Corbett noted that teachers of other disciplines have not historically used improvisation. Corbett also contended that these traditions are rooted in work practices and other rurally-based productive activities, in addition to the virtual space created by relatively new technology. Corbett reaffirmed the idea that rural superintendents face some unique rural contextual challenges, including addressing high poverty levels among rural families, taking on additional duties not normally assigned to

suburban and urban school district superintendents, and interacting with a small but vocal public. Instead of shrinking from these challenges, Corbett found that some superintendents view their responsibilities as opportunities. Because of the very public nature of their job, Corbett found that they were able to emphasize high expectations and the need to change and improvise at every opportunity.

In summary, administrators in rural schools are often required to serve as change agents in the process of educational reform. Studies have shown that they are in a unique position to guide their schools toward success. Successful school administrators have often obtained support for reform through direct conversation with school faculty and staff and community leaders, incorporating constructive confrontation to assist struggling students and faculty, removing low-performing teachers and principals, fostering good working relations with building principals, taking a hard line on union contract negotiations, and aligning financial commitments to match district priorities based on student outcomes. Superintendents have also realized success, as measured by student achievement and teacher retention, by limiting their priorities to helping students achieve academic success, recruiting and retaining high quality teachers, and creating or acquiring resources to support necessary academic reform.

### **Challenges Related to Rural Education**

A review of the literature for this study indicated that one of the challenges in investigating issues common to rural schools is to define the term rural. In an examination of rural leaders, Budge (2006) found it difficult to establish a universal set of characteristics to describe or define rural communities or schools. Johnson (2011)

examined the population decrease in American counties and found that the term rural is too often defined by outside and urban perspectives. Johnson pointed out that the difficulty of defining and describing rural is exacerbated by the frequent substitution of the term metropolitan for urban and the term nonmetropolitan for rural. While most definitions of the term rural rely on geographic parameters, a lack of consensus remains, yielding a wide array of inconsistent classification patterns. Budge reported two consistent patterns that could be used to develop a definition of rural. The first pattern is that rural people usually live on farmsteads or in groups of homes separated by farmland, pastures, or trees and that these communities contain between 5,000 to 10,000 people. The second pattern is that rural people spend most of their time on farms. These observations are consistent with the rural commonalities that Ferris, Oosterhoff, and Metzger (2013) identified, which includes such characteristics as low population density, economic distress, school and community interdependence, an out-migration of young talent, and an attachment to place. In a synthesis of international rural education issues, Stelmach (2011) maintained that because the term rural remains conceptually evasive, a lack of consensus about this definition is problematic and leads to inaccurate portrayals of rural students, which can affect rural educational policies and practices.

Among the common challenges to schools identified as rural are frequent out-migration and gender inequity. In their portrayal of two teachers in the rural south, Burton and Johnson (2013) contended that one of the most challenging issues for rural teachers is the continuous in- and out-migration of students, making instructional progress in the classroom difficult. Demi, Colemand-Jensen, and Snyder (2013)

investigated secondary school enrollment within a rural context and suggested an ecological systems approach to retaining families in rural areas, which is an approach that considers all conditions existing within the rural community. They concluded that economic development may be the key to successful schools in rural areas. Particularly worthy of note, Farmer (2009) contended, is the fact that retention rates for rural male students are considerably lower than rates for female students. In a related study, Wilson, Gresham, Williams, Whitley, and Partin (2013) examined female-only classes in a rural context in relation to self-concept, achievement, and discourse, and they found that female students generally possessed higher self-esteem and performance levels, including graduation rates, than their male counterparts. Thus, these studies highlight the importance of the challenges that rural educators face in relation to retaining students and addressing gender-equity issues.

In another study about the challenges that rural educators face, Farmer (2009) examined rural inter-county politics and found that rural poverty and the associated lack of funding and resources were consistent among counties, resulting in the neediest children attending the most poorly supported schools. Farmer also found that migration patterns show rural populations moving to urban areas that may offer more favorable employment opportunities, and as a result, rural school districts are left with increasing financial shortfalls. Farmer contended that rural districts face unique challenges due to large geographic size combined with lower population density, including increased transportation expenses, and an economy of scale associated with increased labor costs for smaller class size, and lower levels of federal funding.



In a discussion about the challenges ahead for rural schools, Gibbs (2010) contended that even though students in rural schools perform as well, or better, than their urban counterparts, the challenges that need to be addressed include a lack of support from the federal and state government and the tendency of rural educators to direct their students toward jobs in the lower to mid-level ranges of skill distribution. Gibbs proposed education as a development strategy for rural areas, contending that “better schools promote higher achievement and earnings” (p. 23). Gibbs added that even though improvements in local schools often boost local employment, much talent is lost due to increasing numbers of young adults out-migrating to urban areas for college or higher paying jobs. In a discussion of resilience in relation to rural schools and communities, Dew (2013) supported this contention, noting that local economic development is a strong catalyst for transformation and progress in the rural community.

In another related study, Munsch and Boylan (2009) investigated perceptions about teaching and living in rural Alaska and found that teachers formed misconceptions about the hardships and challenges associated with teaching in a remote area. Munsch and Boylan noted that the solution for many of the inherent struggles that teachers face associated with rurality is professional development that will give them accurate information about the rural environment in which they would work and live in order to equip them to face the challenges of poor funding, low expectations for student achievement, fewer technological resources, and a lack of parental support often found in rural areas. Munsch and Boylan concluded that adopting these recommendations will help teachers change their pre-conceived ideas about teaching and living in rural areas.

Woodrum (2009) discussed rural education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of identity, place, and community in a global world. Woodrum noted that even though the direction of public schools, both philosophically and organizationally, has traditionally been toward reflecting the values of middle class America, consideration should be given to those student populations who live in poverty and who respond more effectively to instruction that reflects their economic condition and is integrated into their own cultural traditions. Woodrum also noted that other challenges associated with rural education included minimal support from the federal government, low expectation for student achievement, limited access to technology, and a less talented teaching staff to employ diverse instructional strategies and encourage students to pursue post-secondary education and higher paying jobs.

In summary, researchers report that rural educators face significant challenges in meeting the learning needs of their students. Out-migration of students and their families negatively affects learning in the classroom and the financial support necessary to provide enhanced learning experiences, especially in the area of technology. Gender inequity also presents a challenge to rural educators, as preconceived notions regarding the life choices of male and female students hinder efforts to educate and improve graduation rates for both genders. Rural teachers are also affected by a lack of community planning because community leaders fail to set and pursue specific achievement goals for their students. Rural poverty is a consistent challenge in rural communities, often resulting in the neediest children attending the most poorly supported schools. Migration patterns also show rural populations moving to urban areas that may

offer more favorable employment opportunities, and as a result, rural school districts are left with increasing financial shortfalls. As rural school districts combat the out-migration of students by recruiting foreign students, educators face the unique challenge of communicating with these students and providing the quality of education and support these students and their parents expect and demand.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This chapter included a discussion of the literature search strategies that were used to conduct this review and how the conceptual framework of this study applies to current research. In addition, the following topics in relation to rural education were addressed: (a) the experiences of rural teachers in local communities, (b) rural educator recruitment and retention, (c) student awareness of their rural environment, (d) rural student recruitment and retention, (e) the ingenuity of the rural community, (f) social factors that influence rural communities, (g) rural school administrators as a change agents, and (h) challenges related to rural education.

Several themes emerged from this literature review. One of these themes was the unique challenges that rural educators face in recruiting and retaining students, administrators, and teachers in rural communities. These challenges include a lack of funding, a lack of opportunities for post-secondary training and higher paying jobs, and the absence of nearby institutions of higher learning (Met Life Survey, 2012). Glasgow and Brown (2012) noted that residents in rural communities are ageing and often caught up in the past and must realize the expectations and challenges students in today's society face. This realization on the part of community residents will assist in student and teacher

retention because residents will become open to new ideas and to the creation of a healthy dialogue among students and teachers. Recognition, Glasgow and Brown contended, is the first step in developing an effective plan to address these shortcomings. Howley, Howley, and Yahn (2014) emphasized the need for educators to improve curriculum and instruction in rural schools in order to challenge, encourage, and equip students to seek post-secondary education.

Another theme was the transient nature of the student and teacher populations, which translates into budgetary challenges and planning issues in rural areas. In an examination of internal migration in the United States, Molloy et al. (2010) described the current trend of out-migration from rural areas and the negative effect it has on rural schools. Mattingly (2011) referred to rural schools as “more poor kids in more poor places” (p. 3). In a study about rural schools, brain-drain, and community survival, Sherman and Sage (2011) found a loss of talented students in rural areas due to deteriorating economic conditions. Casto et al. (2012) found that some educators in rural school systems have implemented the unusual tactic of recruiting international students in order to increase enrollment and school funding to improve the quality of education. They reported that these recruiting efforts, as well as foreign adoptions and marriages, have served to boost student enrollment and improve services.

The value of communication and cooperation among school staff, community leaders, and rural citizens emerged as another theme. Brown, Carr, Perry, and McIntire (2010) examined principals’ perceptions of community and staff involvement in shared decision making and found that increased communication and cooperation between

community and school staff improved rapport and the quality of educational programming. In a discussion of rural American in an urban society, Lichter and Brown (2011) identified a need for rural communities to embrace new ideas and concepts that encourage growth and progress. In a discussion about learning to be rural, Theobald and Wood (2010) contended that in a growing modern society, individuals develop an increasing awareness that all things are connected, including urban/metropolitan and rural/nonmetropolitan education. Theobald and Wood concluded that school redesign, which is focused on the creation of viable rural communities, requires a different set of expectations in keeping up with global advances.

Another theme found in this literature review was that researchers recommended many different strategies that rural educators and community members should consider to resolve some of the special challenges presented by rural schools. These strategies include actively recruiting and retaining teachers and students, providing personal attention and recognition to all students, and developing a relevant curriculum that challenges and inspires students to reach their academic goals. Cady and Rearden (2009) suggested online educational programs to bring supplemental instruction to rural students, especially in the areas of mathematics and science. While some researchers such as Sherman and Sage (2011) emphasized the loss of talented and promising rural students through out-migration, others such as Winchester (2009) and Golden et al. (2011) identified the influx of bright and talented students into rural areas precipitated by migration from urban to rural areas. These researchers contended that educators must

employ policies and curriculum that is current, relevant, and conducive to challenging students whose goal it is to compete in the modern workplace.

Several research gaps were also found in this review of literature. One gap is that little qualitative research has been conducted about rural education, particularly in relation to the contributions that rural schools make to their local community. In addition, little research has been conducted about the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of rural community residents with their schools in meeting the educational needs of their children. More research should be conducted to determine how rural schools contribute to their communities in order to develop a deeper understanding of how to maximum benefits from improved communication and cooperation between schools and their communities.

As a result of these research gaps, I selected a single case study design in order to present a rich picture of the phenomenon of the relationship between a rural public school district and their community. I describe that research method in Chapter 3, which also includes a description of the case study design and rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment and participation, the data collection and analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed by this study was the impact that rural public school districts have on their community culture is not known. Many factors contributed to this problem, including a lack of research about the values and beliefs that rural community residents have about education and public schools and a lack of research about the interactions that occur between rural public school educators and community residents in educational settings such as local school board meetings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of a rural public school district on the community culture. The central research question was as follows: How does a rural public school district contribute to the community culture? The related research questions were as follows:

1. How do the values and beliefs of rural community residents about education and public schools contribute to the community culture?
2. How do documents that are related to school district policies, school board meetings, and local educational news contribute to the community culture?
3. How do interactions between public school district educators and community residents contribute to the community culture?

This chapter includes a description of the research method. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection, and the instruments that I have designed. In addition, I discuss procedures related to recruitment and participation, data collection, and data analysis, as well as issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research design that I chose for this qualitative study involved a consideration of the research process from conceptualization to formulation of the research questions, to data collection and analysis, culminating in writing the report of findings. Yin (2014) commented, “The design is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions” (p. 18). This process is how researchers move from broad philosophical and theoretical perspectives to the validation of a study.

I chose a single case study design for my research. Yin (2014) defined case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 17). Yin added,

The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 18)

In addition to an emphasis on specific boundaries and the use of multiple data sources, Yin noted that a case study design includes the following characteristics: (a) It supports a focus on “how” and “why” questions, (b) it is difficult to manipulate the behavior of those involved, and (c) it is desirable to consider contextual conditions because they are believed to be relevant to the study. Considering that the purpose of this study was to



describe how a rural public school district contributes to the community culture, this impact could not be examined appropriately outside of its rural boundaries. In addition, the use of multiple data sources provided a richer picture of the case.

The decision to conduct this study on the role of schools in contributing to rural communities was based on a philosophical assumption that schools located in remote areas of the United States reflect the identity of the surrounding community by perpetuating its values, standards, and culture. My own values and beliefs also informed my choice of a research design for this qualitative study. Creswell (2005) suggested that the philosophical assumptions that guide research are based on the following:

a stance toward the nature of reality (ontology), how the researcher knows what he or she knows (epistemology), the role of values in the research (axiology), the language of the research (rhetoric), and the methods used in the process (methodology). (p.17)

This framework supports my views about human motivation. I brought to this research a belief that human beings seek affiliation with other individuals who share their values and beliefs. In his theory of human motivation, Maslow (1968) posed the question, “What is the good life, and how ought children to be brought up to be sound adults?” (p. 149). Maslow contended that people are motivated to seek the good life and to raise their children in an environment in which they feel safe and loved and where self-actualization and personal growth is possible. For many individuals, this environment is rural. In addition, Yin (2014) contended that a valid case study research design embraces a theoretical proposition, which is drawn from the existing knowledge base and which

influences the research questions, data analysis, and findings. The theoretical proposition for my study is that rural public school districts contribute positively to the community culture.

Other research designs were considered for this study, including ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative research. Creswell (2005) defined ethnography as a research design focused on describing a cultural and social group over an extensive period of time, which was not the purpose of this study. Creswell noted that narrative research involves the study of the lives of one or more individuals who tell stories about their lives, while phenomenology is defined as research that describes lived experiences of individuals in order to identify the core essence of these experiences. I decided that these designs were not well suited for an in-depth study of the impact of a rural public school district on the community culture. The decision to implement a case study design was based on Yin's (2014) belief that case study design allows for a richer picture of the phenomenon under investigation because multiple sources of evidence are used within a bounded system, which includes a specific setting or context.

### **Role of the Researcher**

During this study, I was the only person responsible for all data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Therefore, the potential for researcher bias existed, and I used several strategies to address this potential bias. During the data collection process, I collected interview responses from all participants while maintaining their confidentiality. This approach fostered interactivity with participants in order to elicit their in-depth, context-rich personal responses. Advantage was taken of face-to-face

interaction with participants because I collected their responses in their natural setting, which allowed me to develop rapport with the participants. In my role as observer, I attended school board meetings to observe the interactions of rural school educators and community members. I recorded field notes based on specific criteria that I established for the observation data collection form. In relation to data analysis and interpretation, I maintained a reflective journal in which I reflected on my biases and assumptions as well as decisions I made during the data collection and analysis processes. I also used specific strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. These strategies are described in more detail later in this chapter.

I currently work as the assistant warden of programs in an adult male correctional facility in this western state, and therefore, I had no personal or professional relationships with the participants in this study, even though I lived in a neighboring rural community. However, I was not a public school educator or a resident of the community.

### **Participant Selection**

The potential participants for this single case study were residents who lived in a small rural community located in a western state. All of the residents in this rural community lived in the attendance area of the public school district. These residents were selected according to the following specific inclusion criteria: (a) participants must currently live in the rural community, and (b) participants must have children currently enrolled at the high school in the public school district. Participants were selected without regard to any other criteria, including gender, race, or religious affiliation. Six participants were selected.

### **Instrumentation**

For this study, I designed two instruments for data collection. The first instrument was the oral questionnaire that I used to conduct the interviews (see Appendix B). I developed the questions for this instrument based on Merriam's (2009) recommendations for conducting effective interviews for qualitative research. The interview questions were focused on the values and beliefs that community residents have about education and the contributions that they believe a rural public school district, which their children attend, makes to their rural community. I asked an expert panel consisting of three individuals with advanced degrees in education currently to review this instrument to ensure that all interview questions were aligned to the research questions. In addition, I presented this alignment as part of my application for IRB approval.

The second instrument that I designed was the observation data collection form that I used to conduct observations of the interactions of rural public school educators and community residents at three local school board meetings (see Appendix C). These meetings were scheduled for the time that I conducted the data collection process. I designed this instrument based on the following criteria that Merriam (2009) developed for conducting observations in any setting for qualitative research and that I adapted for this study: (a) the physical setting of the school board meetings, (b) the number and type of participants at each school board meeting, (c) the agenda and activities for each school board meeting, (d) the general conversation topics among participants at each meeting, (e) subtle factors such as unexpected events and nonverbal communication that occurred at these school board meetings, and (f) the researcher's presence during the meetings.

This instrument allowed me to record field notes and reflections for these criteria. The same expert panel also reviewed this instrument to determine alignment of the observation criteria to the research questions. I also presented this alignment as part of my IRB application.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

In relation to recruitment, I posted flyers that provided information about this study in the local public library and on community bulletin boards outside a convenience store and the local post office. Potential participants had the option of calling me on the phone, e-mailing, or mailing me a request to participate. I included a phone number, a mailing address, and an e-mail address in the flyer. I selected the first six individuals who expressed an interest in participating in this study and who met the inclusion criteria. In addition to this flyer, I used the sampling technique of snowballing to seek recommendations from those individuals who responded in order to identify other potential participants.

In relation to participation, once potential participants expressed an interest to me about participating in this study, I sent all of them a letter of invitation. In this letter of invitation, I explained the purpose of the study. In addition, I explained that participants were required to sign the enclosed consent form and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope that I provided within 1 week if they were interested in participating in this study. When I received the signed consent forms, I contacted participants by telephone to schedule their individual interviews.

In relation to data collection, I conducted all of the individual interviews with participants in the local public library, using the approved interview questions. The public library was chosen because of its central location in the community and because it had ample lighting, comfortable temperature and seating, and a quiet, nonintimidating, and comfortable atmosphere. Interviews were conducted in a private meeting room, behind closed doors to ensure privacy. I recorded the interviews by placing a recorder on the table. At the conclusion of the interviews, I thanked individuals for their participation and reminded them of the confidential nature of their participation. In addition, I conducted observations of three school board meetings that were open to the public. I stayed for the entire meetings, which varied in length from 1 to 2 hours. During each observation, I used the observation data collection form to record field notes and researcher reflections, using the criteria that Merriam (2009) recommended for observations in any setting and that I adapted for this study. From the superintendent's website, I collected documents such as school board policies related to community involvement and agendas and minutes from previous school board meetings. These documents are part of the public record and are available on the school board web site. I obtained copies of newspaper articles directly from the newspaper office or online, and I surveyed any relevant local blogs and watched the local televised news for education reports.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

For this case study, I analyzed data at two levels. At the first level, I used a transcription service to transcribe the interview data, and I categorized these data by

establishing initial codes after reading through the interview transcripts and listening to recordings and making marginal notes. I used line-by-line coding that Charmaz (2006) recommended for qualitative research, and I used the constant comparative method that Merriam (2009) recommended to construct categories from the codes. I followed the same procedures when analyzing the observation field notes and reflections. I used a content analysis for all documents, which involved describing the purpose, content, and use of the documents. At the second level, I used categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns. The themes and discrepancies that emerged from the coded and categorized data determined the key findings, which I analyzed in relation to the central and related research questions for this study and interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework and the literature review.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In order to present trustworthy qualitative research, other researchers studying the same phenomenon must be able to replicate this study and reach similar findings. Criteria for evaluating qualitative research differ from criteria for evaluating quantitative research, in that the focus is on how well the researcher has provided evidence that the findings or results represent the reality of the situations and the persons studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This section includes a discussion of the strategies that I used to improve the trustworthiness of this qualitative study in relation to the constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and objectivity.

## **Credibility**

Credibility is the internal validity of a study or how research findings match reality (Merriam, 2012). Establishment of credibility parallels the criterion of validity in quantitative research in that it ensures that the researcher reports what actually took place and not what the researcher expected to take place. In addition, credibility requires that the data reported support the findings. Merriam recommended that researchers use the following strategies to improve the credibility of qualitative research: triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, reflexivity, and peer review.

I used several strategies to enhance the credibility of this study. I used the strategy of triangulation, which is described as “a process of using multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings” (Merriam, 2009, p.215). I triangulated the data by comparing and cross checking data sources, including interviews, school board meeting agendas and minutes, school district policies, and local newspaper and television reports, to corroborate my conclusions. Another strategy that I used to improve the credibility of this study was to present negative instances or discrepant findings that challenged the emergent findings. I also used the strategy of member checks by asking participants to determine if the tentative findings of this study were plausible.

## **Transferability**

In qualitative research, Merriam (2012) defined transferability as external validity or the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. Transferability is not determined by whether or not the study includes a representative



sample, but how well the study makes it possible for the reader to determine whether similar processes and methods will apply to their own settings. Merriam (2009) recommended improving the transferability of a qualitative study by using the strategies of rich, thick description to present the setting and findings of a study and implementation of either maximum variation or typicality of a sample.

For this study, I used rich, thick description to present the setting of the study, the participants, the data analysis procedures, and the findings. In addition, I used the strategy of typicality of the sample in that the rural community that I selected was typical of many rural communities located in this western state.

### **Dependability**

Merriam (2012) defined dependability in qualitative research as reliability or consistency, which is the extent to which research findings can be generalized. Merriam suggested the strategies of triangulation, peer examination, reflectivity, and the audit trail to improve the dependability of a qualitative study.

For this study, I used the strategy of triangulation as previously described. In addition, I used the strategy of peer examination by asking participants to review the tentative findings of this study for their plausibility. I also used an audit trail by maintaining a researcher's log in which I recorded decisions and reflections related to the research process.

### **Confirmability**

The concept of confirmability corresponds to the idea of objectivity in qualitative research. The researcher needs to provide findings that are the result of the research, not

the result of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Qualitative research requires a measure of self-disclosure regarding the researchers' biases, dispositions, and assumptions about the research that they conduct. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) added, "Researchers do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and a temporal general knowledge" (p. 961). The test of confirmability is the degree to which a study's outcomes can be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers.

In this study, I used the strategy of triangulation to improve the objectivity of this study by continuously cross-checking my data sources during data analysis. In addition, I ensured the objectivity of this study by using the strategy of reflexivity to ensure that the data I collected and analyzed represents the experiences, opinions, and beliefs of the respondents, not the researcher. Merriam (2009) defined reflexivity as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" (p. 219). Researcher bias must be realized up front, and should be clarified in order to present an honest report and avoid subjectivity. I provided that clarification by reflecting on my personal beliefs and assumptions about this study in a researcher log that I maintained. I also minimized subjectivity and bias by following strict protocols for data collection and analysis. The decisions that I made about this research were as objective as possible, and all findings were addressed through reflective commentary in the researcher's log that I maintained.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethics, also known as a moral philosophy, is defined as the study of what is right and wrong and how individuals ought to live. Singer (2011) offered the following definition:

To live ethically is to think about things beyond one's own interests. When I think ethically I become just one being, with needs and desires of my own, certainly, but living among others who also have needs and desires. (p. 4)

Merriam (2009) noted that the trustworthiness of a study depends on the ethics of the investigator. Therefore, I followed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines that Walden University supports in order to be sensitive to ethical considerations through all phases of this study. The IRB approval number is 04-24-15-0034453. I assured participants that the interview responses they provided would be held in the strictest confidence and that pseudonyms would be used to identify them, the school district, and the community. In relation to positive social change, I also informed participants that this study had the potential to improve their lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren by providing them with a deeper understanding about how to facilitate greater cooperation between the school staff and community members. Participants were also reminded that they could discontinue their participation at any time, for any reason. I also made every attempt to minimize my presence in the observations I conducted about the interactions that occurred at local school board meetings between the rural public school district and community residents.

## Summary

This chapter included a description of the research method that I used to conduct this study. I chose a case study research design for this qualitative study. Yin (2014) contended that a valid case study research design is guided by a theoretical proposition that influences the research questions, data analysis protocols, and findings. Creswell (2005) supports this idea, contending that the role of theory is dependent upon the research design. The theoretical proposition for this study is that a rural school district positively impacts the culture of a community. The purpose of this case study was to examine how a rural public school district contributed to the community culture. I considered but dismissed other qualitative designs such as narrative inquiry and phenomenology, because they focused on the experiences of individuals. Instead, I chose to examine the interactions between a rural public school district and a rural community. Case study design seemed suited to the nature of this inquiry because this research design allowed me to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context, using multiple sources of evidence to provide a rich description of the phenomenon.

In relation to the methodology, participants included residents of the local rural community, and they were selected from a criterion based sample. I collected data from multiple sources of evidence, including individual interviews with community residents who had children currently enrolled at the high school in the public school district, observations of local school board meetings, and documents that reflect the relationship between school and community, including school board policies, school board meeting

agendas and minutes, and relevant local media about educational activities. I used a transcription service to transcribe the interview data, and I analyzed all data at two levels for this single case study. At the first level, I coded and categorized the interview and observation data. I used line-by-line coding that Charmaz (2006) recommended for qualitative research. I used a content analysis for the documents. At the second level, I used categorical aggregation of all data sources to establish themes or patterns and discrepancies, which determined the findings for this study. I analyzed the data in relation to the central and related research questions, and I interpreted the data in relation to the conceptual framework and the literature review. During data collection and analysis, I was mindful of the need to be ethical at all times. I also used specific strategies to improve the trustworthiness of this study.

Chapter 4 is about the results of this case study research. In this chapter, I included a description of the setting, participant demographics, the data analysis procedures, and evidence of trustworthiness. Results are analyzed in relation to the central and related research questions.

## Chapter 4: Results

The impact that rural public school districts have upon their rural communities is often not known. Many factors contribute to this problem, including a lack of research about the values and beliefs that rural community residents have about education and public schools and a lack of research about the interactions that occur between rural public school educators and community residents in educational settings such as local school board meetings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of a rural public school district on the community culture. The central research question was the following: How does a rural public school district contribute to the community culture? The related research questions were as follows:

1. How do the values and beliefs of rural community residents about education and public schools contribute to the community culture?
2. How do documents that are related to school district policies, school board meetings, and local educational news contribute to the community culture?
3. How do interactions between public school district educators and community residents contribute to the community culture?

In this chapter, I present the results of this study. I include a description of the study setting, demographics relevant to the participants, and the data collection process. In addition, I present a detailed analysis of the interview data, the observation data, and the documents. I also present evidence of trustworthiness, and I analyze the results in relation to the central and related research questions.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in a rural community located in a mountainous setting in a Western state. In 2015, the population of this community was 679, which had risen gradually between the 2000 and 2010 census. The 679 residents comprised 169 families. The community, which serves as the county seat, is located in the Rocky Mountains at an elevation of 9,953 feet. It is the fifth highest incorporated town in the state and experiences average temperatures of 70 degrees in the summer and 10 degrees in the winter. The unique geography of this community serves to both isolate residents and to bind them closer together. Even though weather and terrain in the mountains is often severe, restricting travel and therefore attendance at community and school functions, the small size and location of this rural community contribute to the intimate relationship among teachers, students, and residents. The community primarily includes white-collar workers, with a median household income of \$61,710.00 and a median age of 41.64 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

In 2014-2015, the community included three public schools: one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school in a single school complex, with a total school population of 605. The high school, which was the focus of this study, enrolled 133 students and employed 13 teachers. The student-teacher ratio at the high school was 10:1, in comparison to the state average of 17:1. An elected school board comprised of five members governed the school district. The teachers in this district provided instruction in a core curriculum consisting of English language arts, social studies, science, mathematics, health and physical education, music, and art, as well as

extracurricular activities such as sports, band, and conservation programs. Due to the size and close-knit nature of the community, high school educators enjoyed a strong volunteer program in which community residents were engaged in such activities as fund raising, employing students, coaching, and offering special programs such as hiking, conservation, and art.

During the data collection period, I did not encounter any adverse or unusual conditions that impacted participants during the time this study was conducted. Even though several participants noted employment opportunities as a motivating factor for moving to this rural location, they all expressed satisfaction with their choice of where to live and raise their families.

### **Participant Demographics**

Participants that I selected for this single case study were residents of this small rural community. I determined potential participants according to the following inclusion criteria: (a) participants must currently live in the selected rural community, and (b) participants must have children currently enrolled at the high school in this public school district.

Based on inclusion criteria, I used purposeful sampling technique to select six participants for this study without regard to gender, race, or religious affiliation. The participant identified as JB was the mother of two children enrolled in the school district and had resided in the community for 26 years. The participant identified as KH was also the mother of two children enrolled in the school district but had resided in the community for only 6 years. The participant identified as LB was the mother of three



children enrolled in the school district and had resided in the community for 13 years. The participant identified as SW was the mother of two children enrolled in the school district and had resided in the community for 12 years. The participant identified as TC was the mother of two children enrolled in the school district and had resided in the community for 30 years. The final participant, identified as RC, was the father of two children enrolled in the school district and had resided in the community for 22 years. Thus, participants included five females and one male, and their years of residency in this community ranged from 6 to 30 years.

### **Data Collection**

I began the data collection process by conducting individual interviews with all participants. I conducted these interviews at the local public library, using the interview questions found in Appendix B. I recorded the interviews by placing an audio recorder on the table and presenting a copy of the interview questions to each participant. Interviews took an average of 30 minutes each to complete. I conducted the first interview with JB on July 9, 2015 at 4:15 p.m. and the second interview with KH on August 6, 2015 at 1:00 p.m. I conducted the third interview with LB on August 6, 2015 at 2:00 p. m. and the fourth interview with SW on August 6, 2015 at 3:00 p. m. I also conducted the fifth interview with TC on August 6, 2015 at 6:15 p.m. and the sixth and final interview with RC on August 6, 2015 at 7:00 p.m.

I also conducted observations of three school board meetings that were open to the public. The meetings took place on May 14, 2015, June 11, 2015, and July 9, 2015, and all meetings began at 6:30 pm. I stayed for the entire meeting, which varied in length

from 1 to 2 hours. During each observation, I used the observation data collection form to record field notes and researcher reflections, using the criteria that Merriam (2009) recommended for observations in any setting and that I adapted for this study, found in Appendix C.

From the school district website, I collected documents such as school board policies related to community involvement and agendas and minutes from previous school board meetings. These documents were part of the public record and were available on the school district web site. I also obtained copies of newspaper articles related to school district news directly from the newspaper office or online, and I examined any relevant local blogs and watched the local televised news for education reports.

I collected all data by adhering to the plan that I presented in Chapter 3. I did not encounter any unusual circumstances that might have influenced the data collection process.

### **Level I Data Analysis**

For this case study, I analyzed data at two levels. At the first level, I used a transcription service to transcribe the interview data, and I coded the transcribed data for each interview question and the observation data for each criterion by using line-by-line coding that Charmaz (2006) recommended for qualitative research. I used the constant comparative method that Merriam (2009) recommended to construct categories from these codes. I used a content analysis for the document review by describing the purpose,

content, structure, and use of each document. These analysis processes for each data source are presented below.

### **Interviews**

The first interview question asked, “How long have you lived in this community?”

Table 1 indicates participant responses to this question.

Table 1

#### *Length of Participant Residency in Community*

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<i>Participant pseudonym</i>	<i>Years residing in community</i>
JB	26
KH	6
LB	13
SW	12
TC	30
RC	22

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These data reflect a community population that is stable. Participants have remained in the community for protracted periods of time, which may indicate that residents are satisfied with the place they have chosen to call home.

The second interview question asked, “Why were you motivated to live in this community?”

Participants described similar and differing motivations to live in this rural community. Common motivations included employment opportunities, a close knit community, an excellent school system, and the beauty and peace of the rural setting. LB

reported that job opportunities were the primary motivation for living in this community but also noted that we have “good administrators and teachers that do their best to offer, you know, everything a rural school can offer.” RC added, “The schools do a really good job, and we’re ranked pretty high compared to other school districts, as far as academics go.” JB remarked, “I think we have a very hands-on community,” and KH noted, “My husband and I were seeking a place where we could retire that was beautiful, that was peaceful, and we wanted a simpler life.” Motivations that were not so common were the cost of living and family ties. JB noted, “Our first motivation to live here was cost.” LB added, “I went to high school here and my family is here.” TC noted that she moved here to live by her brother.

The third interview question asked, “How would you describe this community in relation to their beliefs and values about education?”

Participants expressed similar responses about their beliefs and values concerning education. TC reflected the common belief that “this is a real conservative community, with strong beliefs.” Participants generally agreed with TC. JB added, “The community believes in doing what’s right and raising their children to respect their country, obey rules, and to always give their best.” RC also added, “We have a lot of good people volunteering and doing the right things to demonstrate their support for education.” Another common response was that they believed the community supports education, indicated by the construction of a new school complex in 2010 and a strong and active volunteer base. In addition, RC noted, “We have many businesses that donate time and money to school projects.” SW added, “We have many outside agencies such as the Park

Service, Forestry Department, and conservation organizations coming into the schools and presenting subjects and ideas the students would not otherwise receive.” Two participants, SW and TC, noted that even though many members of the community value and support education, “Some families out here do not see the value, or care about what kind of education their child receives.” JB added, “Second home owners and older residents don’t care so much about the quality of education in the community.”

The fourth interview question asked, “What are your expectations for this public school district in meeting the educational needs of your children?”

Responses to this question were variations of the same sentiment. Parents reported that they wanted their children to receive a comprehensive and quality education, with teachers at the school reinforcing their value systems, which they identified as the conservative beliefs, ideals, and values of their parents and grandparents. RC commented, “I am expecting them to model and support what my value system is.” RC added, “I believe that because we are a smaller community, they have more of my value structure than a big-time school that maybe sends their children to school with the expectation that the school will teach children their values.” Several participants noted that they would like school district educators to offer more programs such as drafting, wood shop, and auto mechanics to their children, but they also said they understood that limited resources were available, and they preferred a quality education and good rapport between teachers and students over a large number of programs.

The fifth interview question asked, “What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of this public school district in meeting the educational needs of students?”

Participants agreed that the overriding strength of the school district was its small class sizes, resulting in the opportunity for educators to interact with students on a personal basis. TC remarked, “Unlike in larger schools, our kids have the same teacher for two grades in a row, so there is not that uncomfortableness or uneasiness while the teacher and student get to know each other.” Participants agreed that the small size of the community and the intimate knowledge teachers have of students and families were the strengths of this school district. Participants also commented on the sports program, noting that it was very important to the community and well attended. Parents appreciated the fact that students who desire to play can play, unlike the more competitive programs in larger schools. KH added, “You don’t hear that in big schools.” However, participants also noted that the rural location and small size of the school were also weaknesses because fewer programs and opportunities were available to students. JB remarked,

The weakness is our rural location. You know, we can’t offer as many programs as larger schools, but you know like the trade [off] is our school may not have as many programs, but we can ski, we can hike, and we can bike. These are educational opportunities that schools in more populace areas may not have in such abundance.

Several participants also reported that inadequate school funding that would provide additional programming was a weakness of this school district.

The sixth interview question asked, “What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of this community in meeting the educational needs of students?”

Participants agreed and disagreed in describing the strengths and weaknesses of this community for meeting the educational needs of students. The major strength was that the community was close knit and bonded together by the goals of quality education and excellence in citizenship. Participants also expressed appreciation to local businesses for hiring many students as part of a school-endorsed work study program. JB referred to the community as “small in numbers, but huge in heart.” Participants noted that community residents, even those members with no children in school, attended school activities, supported work-study programs, and volunteered in significant numbers. However, participants also noted that many residents in the community were unaware and unconcerned with school activities. SW noted, “You have some families out here who do not see the value, or care about what kind of education their child receives.” Another weakness that participants highlighted was that the community did not offer students enough opportunity to work, which they believed weakened the fabric of the community and the relationship with the school.

The seventh interview question asked, “How do you believe the community supports this public school district?”

Participants reported similar beliefs about how the community supports this school district. They reported that local businesses supported the school district by hiring students, making donations, promoting fundraisers, and posting flyers announcing school events. Participants also noted that a significant percentage of local residents regularly attended sporting events, concerts, and other school functions, both as volunteers and as spectators. JB added, “It’s just strong community support throughout, whether in good or

challenging times.” However, SW noted, “I don’t think they support them like they should,” adding that many parents “don’t have a clue” what goes on in the schools and that “school staff have become baby sitters and teachers at the same time.”

The eighth interview question asked, “How do you believe this public school district supports the community?”

Participants also expressed similar beliefs about how the public school district supported the community. They cited examples of how school district educators have supported local officials and organizations by inviting employees of agencies such as the U.S. Forrest Service, Division of Wildlife, local law enforcement, and the Emergency Medical Service, to discuss their organizations’ missions and goals with students and teachers. TC noted that “this increases student understanding of their community, while making the jobs of public servants easier.” JB added, “Although the school encourages student attendance at activities sponsored by the community, sometimes the school gets stuck in their own little world, and forgets that there’s a community out there.” Other support mentioned was offering school facilities to host community events and recognition of community sponsors and groups through banners, newspaper articles, and ceremonies. SW noted,

I would love to see them [the school] open up more areas for community use, such as the playground and athletic fields, but you’ve got some in the community who won’t follow the rules, and ruin it for others.

RC added,



There's a good system at the school that's been implemented. Kids do volunteer work in the community, and they are recognized with a silver cord for 100 hours of community service or a gold cord for 200 hours, worn with their gown at graduation.

Thus, strong concurrence was reported among parents that school district educators do a good job of supporting community agencies, businesses, and events.

The ninth interview question asked, "What kind of relationship do you believe exists between the educators in this school district and the community residents? Why do you believe this relationship exists? How could this relationship be improved?"

The responses to this question were also similar. Most of the participants believed that a good relationship existed between the educators in this school district and the community residents. LB noted, "The community is so small, that you run into everyone all the time, so the school staff and community interact on a daily basis." However, TC remarked, "The relationship between educators in this district and community residents is not as strong as it could be, because residents who do not have children in the school are not as aware or involved." In particular, participants gave high praise to the school district teachers. RC noted that "the teachers are engaged and do their best to stay in touch with parents and the community," and JB added that "the teachers are dedicated, focused, and busy, and go the extra mile to interact with the community." However, participants also expressed concern that this relationship could be impacted by the fact that teachers in this community had no privacy to enjoy a social life because students and community members scrutinized their activities and behavior. Considering the small size

of the community, and a limited number of places to gather socially, they believed that teachers were always in a fishbowl. Participants also believed that if residents had children enrolled in the school district, they were more likely to interact with teachers and develop rapport with them. Participants also noted that many teachers had children of their own enrolled in the school district, which served as a natural pathway to closer association with parents. Participants also believed that parental interest and involvement in the activity and education of their children was directly related to how strong the relationship was between the school district and the community. SW noted,

If a parent expects the school to do everything, the relationship between teachers and community is weakened. Parents or guardians often have no idea what their children are doing, or even who their teachers are.

Regarding strengthening the relationship between educators and community residents, participants offered several solutions. In homes where children are raised by a single parent, or a grandparent, participants believed that the family often lacks structure. This lack of a family structure, they believed, translates into an effort on the part of the teacher to be both parent and teacher, which may create strained relationships between the community and the school district. Participants proposed that educators and community members offer more activities to bring parents, community, and school staff together, in a positive setting, in order to build bridges between the school and community.

Table 2 includes a summary of the categories that I constructed for the analysis of the interview data.

Table 2

*Summary of Categories From Interview Data Analysis*

<i>Interview question</i>		<i>Categories</i>
IQ 1	Duration of residency	Ranging from 6 to 30 years
IQ 2	Motivation for residency	Finding job opportunities Finding lower cost of living Liking strong community ties Enjoying small class size Supporting conservative values Enjoying beauty, peace of rural life
IQ 3	Educational beliefs & values	Believing in conservative values Valuing teachers & administrators Supporting student success
IQ 4	Educational expectations	Expecting small class size Expecting support for conservative values Expecting close teacher-student relationship Expecting strong sports programs Appreciating music and art programs
IQ 5	Strengths and weaknesses of school district	Liking small class sizes Liking dedicated administrators Liking dedicated teachers Liking close administrator-teacher relations Appreciating that all children can participate in sports of their choice Providing limited programs Providing limited funding
IQ 6	Strengths and weaknesses of community	Noting strong community support Noting large volunteer base Noting frequent donations to schools Lacking involvement in school activities Noting complacent attitudes about education Lacking opportunities for students to work
IQ 7	Community support of school district	Noting many volunteers at school events Noting work-study program Noting strong attendance at school events
IQ 8	School support of community	Noting student support at community events Noting strong community service program

(table continues)

<i>Interview question</i>	<i>Categories</i>
IQ 9	Relationship between educators Noting close personal ties between teachers and community residents Noting parents value education Noting lack of personal privacy for teachers Noting some community uninvolved

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## **Observations**

I observed three school board meetings in this rural community in relation to specific criteria that Merriam (2009) recommended for observations in any qualitative research setting. The first observation criterion was the *setting* for these school board meetings. All of the school board meetings were held in the school district's administration building, adjacent to the high school. In terms of use of space, the room was set up identically for all three meetings that I attended. Tables were placed in the front of the room to accommodate the school board members, the school superintendent, and the executive secretary. Rows of chairs were set up facing the front tables to accommodate any community members who chose to attend the meetings. Concerning the use of print and non-print materials, agendas were distributed at each meeting, as well as documents detailing any special proposals or presentations to the board. The only technology used during these meetings was a tape recorder to create a record of the proceedings and a speaker phone to communicate with board members who were unable to physically attend the meetings.

The second criterion was related to the *participants* who attended these school board meetings, including board members and the public. The school board participants consisted of two men, the vice president and a director, and four women, the president,

the secretary/treasurer, a director, and the superintendent. I was the only non-board member attending the three meetings that I observed, with the exception of one teacher at one meeting who presented a proposal to take students on an overnight field trip.

The third criterion included the specific activities that were conducted during the school board meetings. The purpose of the monthly school board meetings was to provide quality governance to guide the school district's commitment to high academic achievement for all students. All three meetings began with a call to order, a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, and a reading of the school district mission. A roll call of school board members was taken, the meeting agenda was approved, the previous meeting's minutes were approved, the payment of specific bills was approved, a discussion of any correspondence was submitted, and a time was provided for audience comments and questions. Reports from board members, administrators, and committees were given, the superintendent presented monitoring reports on the relationship between the school board and the superintendent, the learning environment found in the schools, financial issues, operational limitations, and asset protection. Select policies were reviewed for approval or revision, action items from the agenda were addressed, any additional items were brought up for discussion, and the meeting was adjourned. Specific topics discussed at the three meetings included teacher/staff hiring decisions, budget, school district policy for off-campus field trips, the school lunch menu, a proposal to augment electrical power to the schools with a solar array, and purchase of replacement computers for school staff.

No community residents spoke at any of the three meetings that I observed, because no residents attended them. Even though no community members were in attendance, school board members provided a specific time and called for community residents to raise concerns or ask questions. The lack of community attendance may have been due to the fact that two of the three meetings I attended were conducted during the summer break.

The fourth criterion was the conversations that took place during the meetings. School board members followed the published agenda, and they demonstrated a spirit of cooperation among themselves. Even when board members often disagreed on an issue, they were careful to allow others to present their views. Subjects were discussed at length and thoughtfully. However, I did not observe any conversation among community residents or between school board members and community residents because no community residents were in attendance.

The fifth criterion was *subtle factors* that I observed during the meetings, such as unplanned events, connotative language, and nonverbal communication. Board members were clear in their intentions, followed the published agenda, and articulated their thoughts about various issues carefully and courteously. I did not observe any unplanned events or interruptions to the meeting agendas. I also did not observe any use of connotative language or nonverbal communication that could have distracted from the meeting agenda. The school board appeared to be a cohesive group, with a genuine concern for doing the right thing for students, staff, and community.

The sixth criterion was related to *researcher presence* during the meetings. I sat in the back row at all three meetings that I attended. My intent was to be as inconspicuous as possible, as a non-participating observer. The only exception to these observations was during the first meeting, when I was asked to introduce myself and explain my purpose for attending these meetings. I was the only non-community member in attendance at any of the three meetings, with the exception of one teacher who attended one meeting to obtain approval to take students on an overnight field trip when school re-convened. Due to the lack of community attendance, my presence at my initial meeting stood out. However, beyond the personal introduction that I was asked to give, I had no interaction with board members or community residents during these meetings.

Table 3 includes a summary of the categories that I constructed for my analysis of the observation data.

Table 3

*Summary of Categories From Observation Data Analysis*

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Categories</i>
Criteria 1    Setting	Occurring in administrative building Seating board members at tables in front Seating community in chairs facing tables Using audio recorder to tape meetings Using speaker phone for those not present Noting meetings began at 6:30 p.m. Noting meetings adjourned at 8:00 p.m.
Criteria 2    Participants	Consisting of 6 school board members and 1 superintendent Consisting of 2 males and 5 females (female superintendent) Noting 1 teacher who presented proposal
Criteria 3    Activities	Calling meeting to order Reciting Pledge of Allegiance Reading school district's mission Calling roll Approving meeting agenda Approving previous meeting's minutes Approving payment of bills Discussing correspondence Providing time for audience comments Reporting from board members administrators, and committees Presenting monitoring reports Reviewing select policies Discussing action items Adjourning meeting
Criteria 4    Conversation	Observing no community members present Providing time for residents to speak
Criteria 5    Subtle Factors	Noting no interruptions to meetings Following agenda Using no connotative language Using no nonverbal communication Showing courtesy to each other
Criteria 6    Researcher Presence	Sitting in back row at meetings Staying as inconspicuous as possible Introducing myself to board as asked Noting no community residents present



## **Documents**

Document analysis involved a detailed description of the purpose, structure, content, and use of each document. The documents that I collected included (a) the school board agendas, (b) the school board meeting minutes, (c) school board policies related to community involvement in school activities, and (d) newspaper articles about educational activities in the community.

**School board agendas and minutes.** The school board agenda and minutes for the first meeting included the following topics that were unique to that meeting: (a) the superintendent's contract, which was discussed and approved, (b) discussion and approval of the high school science curriculum, (c) discussion and approval of high school electives, (d) discussion of personnel matters (closed session), (e) second reading of school policies regarding accreditation, instructional staff contracts, instructional staff assignments and transfers, preparation for postsecondary and workforce success, early literacy and reading comprehension, students with food allergies, physical activity, school-level Title I parent involvement policy, and parent involvement in education, and (f) discussion and approval of school resource officers.

The school board agenda and minutes for the second meeting included the following topics that were unique to that meeting: (a) discussion and approval of the 2015-2016 budget, (b) discussion and approval of certified school staff for 2015-2016 (closed session), (c) discussion and approval of classified staff for 2015-2016 (closed session), (d) review and approval of the graduating class of 2015, and (e) discussion of school transition to solar power.

The school board agenda and minutes for the third meeting included the following topics that were unique to that meeting: (a) discussion and approval of the Grade 8 field trip, (b) discussion and approval to remove previous district bookkeeper on all signature accounts and add new bookkeeper, (c) discussion and approval to request bids for water, waste disposal, propane, and natural gas, (d) discussion of employee contract (closed session), (e) first reading and discussion of school district policies related to field trips, nutritious food choices, and employee general leave, and (f) discussion and approval of 2015-2016 school handbooks.

**School district policies related to community involvement.** School district policies relevant to this study were obtained through the school district website. One of these policies was the Community Involvement in Decision Making Policy, which endorsed the concept that “community participation in the affairs of the schools is essential if the school and community are to maintain mutual confidence and respect and work together to improve academic achievement of students in the district.” This policy encouraged school staff to be responsive to the ideas, concerns, and judgments that community residents have about the schools through such means as written suggestions or proposals, presentations at hearings, responses to surveys made through interviews, written instruments or other means, comments at meetings of the board, service on citizen’s advisory committees, participation in focus groups, and involvement in community engagement processes.

Another policy related to community involvement was the Public Concerns and Complaints Policy, which stated that constructive criticism, motivated by a sincere desire

to improve the quality of the educational programs, or to equip the schools to do their tasks more effectively, is welcomed by the district. This policy encouraged those community members with complaints or grievances to resolve them “as close to their origin as possible,” with the proper channels of complaints regarding instruction, discipline, or learning materials to include the teacher, the principal, the superintendent, and school board members. The policy also noted that any complaint about school staff should always be referred through the proper administrative channels before it is presented to the school board for consideration and action.

Another policy was the School Visitor Policy, which encouraged parents, guardians, and other citizens of the district to visit classroom, activities, and functions at any time to observe the work of district educators. The policy stated that “there is no better way for the public to learn what the schools actually are doing.” This policy also emphasized the need to maintain security, ensuring that no unauthorized persons enter buildings with wrongful intent, that all visitors to the school report to the school office upon entering, and that visitors show proper identification and a valid reason for being at the school. Also noted in this policy was the state law prohibiting smoking, chewing, or use of any tobacco products by staff, students, or visitors while on school property.

Another policy related to community involvement was the Public Concerns/Complaints about Teaching Methods, Activities, or Presentations Policy, which stated that parents/guardians or patrons should be allowed to challenge the use of any teaching methods, activities, or presentations, but must express their objections through procedures established in this policy. The progression of filing a complaint consisted of

meeting with the teacher first, then, if necessary, the school principal. If still dissatisfied with the results of conferences, the complainant was advised of the “Citizen’s Challenge or Objection to Teaching Methods, Activities, or Presentations” form, which must be submitted, along with any supporting documentation, to the review committee appointed by the superintendent within 10 working days for resolution. A written recommendation from the review committee must be forwarded to the superintendent and all concerned parties within 60 calendar days. This policy allows for legal counsel at any step of this procedure.

Another policy was the Relations with Military Recruiters, Postsecondary Institutions, and Prospective Employers Policy, which established district rules intended to provide reasonable guidelines for these groups to have access to school facilities and students for recruiting purposes. This policy required all groups to be treated uniformly with regard to the conduct of on-campus student recruitment. This policy also included requirements to announce a schedule of recruiter visits, in advance, to the student body, permission for recruiters to conduct meetings during the day with those students who are interested, and approval to conduct follow-up visits to the high school in order to meet with individual students upon request of the student and upon authorization of the high school administration.

The Crisis Management Policy was also related to community involvement because it addressed “the necessity of preparing a school response framework to adequately prepare school personnel, parents, and the community to respond appropriately to any crisis that involves the school community.” This policy required the

superintendent to appoint a district-wide safety plan coordinator to work with the superintendent to develop a school safety plan, recruit and train building-level teams, coordinate in-service programs for all teams and staff members, and serve as a liaison between central office and staff and between the district and local emergency agencies. In addition, policy required the superintendent to establish a training program for all district employees as an integral component of the school safety plan.

The Public Information and Communications Policy was also linked to community involvement because it provided guidelines about keeping the public informed about school policies, administrative operations, objectives, and educational programs in the schools. This policy recognized that schools are an important aspect of the community, and the residents of the district are interested in the programs and activities in the schools. This policy was also intended to provide the means for providing complete and accurate information, favorable and unfavorable, in addition to interpretation and explanation of school plans and programs. This policy placed importance on the role of the teachers as “communicators and interpreters” of school programs to parents/guardians and the general public.

The Community Use of School Facilities Policy was also related to community involvement because it recognized the importance of allowing the community to use school facilities as a means of unifying both parties. Allowing the community to use school buildings and athletic fields is an important means to bring community and school staff together and promote good will and a spirit of cooperation. This policy provided rules and procedures for reserving, scheduling, and utilization of school facilities, as well

as expectations for behavior while utilizing the facilities, reporting damage, and cleaning up after the approved activity.

**Local educational news.** Aside from posters and fliers announcing upcoming events such as fairs, sales, and concerts, one newspaper in this area is published bi-monthly and services 6 small communities. Six editions of the newspaper were examined during the study period, and limited content relating to educational subjects were found. One article described a donation of \$4717.99 by groups to non-profit organizations such as student clubs, and another article provided a nostalgic look at school days past in an effort to contrast the educational past with the present. There was no TV coverage of educational issues during the conduct of this study.

Table 4 provides a summary of the categories that I constructed from a content analysis of the documents.

Table 4

*Summary of Categories from Document Review*

<i>Type of document</i>	<i>Category</i>
Type 1 SB Meeting Agendas & Minutes	Retaining quality staff Providing relevant course curriculum Being fiscally sound Providing healthy food for students Providing a healthy learning environment
Type 2 SB Policies Related to Community	Committing to emergency preparedness Creating dialogue between community and school Detailing methods of communication with the community Addressing emergency procedures Offering school facilities for community activities Detailing complaint procedures Involving community in decision making Maintaining a safe environment for students

Type 3	Local Educational News	Announcing upcoming events Reporting school donations to non-profit organizations Describing school activities past and present
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### **Level II Data Analysis**

For the second level of data analysis, I examined the categorized data across all sources for this single case to determine emergent themes and discrepant data. These themes and discrepant data are described below.

#### **Emergent Themes**

**Theme 1.** Participants were motivated to live in this community because they were able to secure employment, and they liked the lower cost of living, strong community ties, small class size, support for their conservative values, and the beauty and peacefulness of rural life.

**Theme 2.** In relation to their beliefs and values, participants described their community as conservative, which meant that they raised their children to respect their country, obey rules, and to always give their best, as they were taught to do by their parents and grandparents. Participants also valued school volunteers and support for education as demonstrated by the construction of a new school complex.

**Theme 3.** Participants expected the school district to provide a quality education to their children, while reinforcing the conservative beliefs and values of their parents and grandparents; they also expected small class size, close student-teacher relationships, and strong sports programs.

**Theme 4.** Participants believed the strengths of this school district were small class sizes, dedicated administrators, dedicated teachers, close administrator-teacher relations,

willingness of educators to get to know their children, and a sports program that allowed all students to participate.

**Theme 5.** Participants believed the weaknesses of this school district was limited funding and programs, due to the small size of the community.

**Theme 6.** Participants believed the strengths of this community included strong support for education, particularly through a large volunteer base and frequent donations to the schools. Participants also believed that residents were bound together by similar goals for quality education and excellence in citizenship, the support of local businesses in hiring students as part of a school-endorsed work study program, and community support for students and school activities.

**Theme 7.** Participants believed the weaknesses of this community were that some families in the community did not care about their children's education or recognize the value of a quality education and as a result, they were not involved in school activities. Some participants believed there were not enough opportunities for students to work, which weakened the relationship between community and school.

**Theme 8.** Participants believed the community supported the school district by employing students, donating to the school, promoting school fundraisers, posting flyers announcing school events, and attending sporting events, concerts, and other school functions, both as volunteers and as spectators.

**Theme 9.** Participants believed the school district's support for the community was demonstrated through students' attendance at community events and participation in community service programs. School district educators invited representatives of public



agencies to present their work to students, increasing student awareness and understanding of their community, using its facilities to host community events, and recognizing community sponsors and groups during school gatherings.

**Theme 10.** Participants believed that a strong relationship existed between school district educators and community residents because the community was small and close-knit and teachers, residents interacted with each other frequently, often in social settings, and parents valued education.

**Theme 11.** No interactions were observed between community residents and school board members at observed school board meetings, perhaps due to the fact that two board meetings were conducted in the summer when school was not in session.

**Theme 12.** School board agendas and minutes revealed an interest in retaining quality staff, providing relevant curriculum, being fiscally sound, and providing healthy learning environment for students.

**Theme 13.** School board policies about community involvement revealed a commitment to emergency preparedness, positive dialogue between the community and the school, community involvement in decision making, and maintenance of a safe learning environment for students.

**Theme 14.** Newspaper articles credited the school district with making donations to nonprofit organizations and provided a nostalgic look at school days past.

### **Discrepant Data**

The theoretical proposition for this study was that this rural public school district made a positive contribution to the community culture, which was defined as

conservative in relation to their shared values, norms, and traditions. I did not find any significant data that challenged this theoretical proposition. Although two participants did not feel as strongly about the contributions of the school district to the community as the majority of participants, they still believed that the school district provided a high quality education for their children, the teachers were capable and dedicated, and students were prepared to become good citizens.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is important because researchers must demonstrate rigor in conducting a study that allows other researchers studying the same phenomenon to replicate this study and reach similar findings. Criteria for evaluating qualitative research differ from criteria for evaluating quantitative research, in that the focus is on how well the researcher has provided evidence that the findings or results represent the reality of the phenomenon under investigation. In this section, I describe the strategies that I used to improve the trustworthiness of this qualitative study in relation to the constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and objectivity.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research is defined as the alignment of the research findings with reality. I used several strategies to enhance the credibility of this study. I used the strategy of triangulation, which is described as “a process of using multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings” (Merriam, 2009, p.215). I triangulated the data by comparing and cross checking multiple data sources to corroborate my conclusions, including interview

data, observation data, and documents. Another strategy that I used to improve the credibility of this study was to present any negative instances or discrepant findings that challenged the theoretical proposition. I also used the strategy of member checks by asking participants to determine if the tentative findings of this study were plausible.

### **Transferability**

Transferability in relation to qualitative research is defined as the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. For this study, I used rich, thick description to present the setting of the study, the participants, the data analysis procedures, and the findings. In addition, I used the strategy of typicality of the sample in that the rural community that I selected was typical of many rural communities located in this western state.

### **Dependability**

Dependability or reliability in relation to qualitative research is defined the extent to which the findings can be replicated. For this study, I used the strategy of triangulation as previously described. In addition, I used the strategy of peer examination by asking participants to review the tentative findings of this study for their plausibility. I also used an audit trail by maintaining a researcher's log in which I recorded decisions and reflections related to the research process.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability in qualitative research is defined as the objectivity of the study or the degree to which the outcomes of the study can be confirmed or corroborated by others. I used the strategy of triangulation to improve the objectivity of this study by

continuously cross-checking my data sources during data analysis. In addition, I ensured the objectivity of this study by using the strategy of reflexivity to ensure that the data I collected and analyzed represented the experiences, opinions, and beliefs of the respondents, not the researcher. Researcher bias must be realized up front, and should be clarified in order to avoid subjectivity. I provided that clarification by reflecting on my personal beliefs and assumptions about this study in a researcher log that I maintained. I also minimized subjectivity and bias by following strict protocols for data collection and analysis. The decisions that I made about this research were as objective as possible, and all findings were addressed through reflective commentary in the researcher's log that I maintained.

### **Results**

For this study, I present the results or findings in relation to an analysis of the central and related research questions. I first present an analysis of the related research questions, followed by an analysis of the central research question, which is a synthesis of the related questions.

The first related research question asked, "How do the values and beliefs of rural community residents about education and public schools contribute to the community culture?"

The key finding was that the values and beliefs of rural community residents about education and public schools contributed to the community culture of conservatism. Participants believed that conservative values meant that they raised their children to respect their country, obey rules, and to always give their best, as they were

taught to do by their parents and grandparents. Observations of the school board meetings also revealed support for these conservative values and beliefs through recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and commitment to the school district's mission at the beginning of each meeting, which included the belief in maintaining a partnership between home, school, and the community. Local educational news articles also supported the conservative culture of this community by emphasizing student citizenship and patriotism through service to the community and donations to nonprofit organizations throughout the past 50 years.

The second related research question asked, "How do documents that are related to school district policies, school board meetings, and local educational news contribute to the school community?"

The key finding was that school district policies, school board meeting agendas and minutes, and local educational news contributed positively to this community. Several school district policies encouraged and valued the input and involvement of the local community. These school district policies emphasized the value that the school district placed on community opinion and support, as was evidenced by such policies as "Public Information and Communications", "Public Concerns/Complaints about Teaching Methods, Activities or Presentations", and "Community Involvement in Decision Making." School board agendas and minutes also revealed a desire of educators to contribute to the community through retention of quality staff, providing relevant curriculum, implementing sound fiscal management, and providing a healthy learning

environment for students. In addition, local educational news revealed a tradition of student service and financial contributions to local educational causes.

The third related research question asked, “How do interactions between public school educators and community residents contribute to the community culture?”

The key finding was that public school educators had created a close and personal relationship with community residents, largely due to the small size of the community. Participants reported that teachers frequently interacted with residents by meeting in public settings, often socially, to discuss students and school activities. These interactions linked the community together with school staff in working toward a common goal of providing quality education and encouraging good citizenship for all students. This close relationship between educators and community residents was also evident in several school district policies that encouraged dialogue with each other, the free exchange of ideas, and public access to school district staff and to school facilities. The sincerity of school board members’ commitment to the improvement of school-community relations was evidenced in the development and implementation of relevant district policies and the inclusion of opportunities for public comment and input at school board meetings. News articles also emphasized close school and community relations and the conservative values and beliefs of residents, highlighting the long tradition of student public service and fund raising for non-profit organizations.

The central research question asked, “How does a rural school district contribute to the community culture?”

The key finding was that the rural school district contributed to a conservative community culture by reinforcing the shared beliefs and values of the residents about education and citizenship. Participants reported that their expectations regarding the quality of education received by their children and the reinforcement of their values and belief systems were met or exceeded. Participants defined their traditional and conservative values as training their children to respect their country, obey rules, and to always give their best as parents had been taught. Participants believed that educators in the school system shared and communicated these values to students. Observation data also revealed that school district educators supported the beliefs and values of residents by supporting dedicated administrators and teachers who maintained close personal relationships with students and their families and who supported the shared conservative community values. These school district educators also maintained small class sizes to meet the learning needs of individual students. Documents revealed that school district educators demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting community activities by making their facilities available to residents. Policies indicated a strong desire to communicate with the community, maintaining a positive dialogue, addressing their suggestions and complaints, and creating a cooperative approach to school and community emergency situations.

The school district also contributed to this community culture by providing support for opportunities to students, equipping them to become productive citizens. Educators implemented a volunteer work program, encouraging students to serve the community and receive recognition for their hours of public service at graduation. In

addition, most participants noted the high quality of school administrators and teachers and their contributions to preparing students, academically and socially, to take their place in the community as responsible citizens.

Educators in the school district also contributed to this community culture by presenting student activities and performances that enhanced leisure time for residents in the community. Participants noted that educators had developed art and music programs, enhanced by volunteers from the community, to develop the talents of students and to display these talents at art shows and musical performances.

School district educators also contributed to this conservative rural community culture by working collaboratively with community businesses to inform students of opportunities to serve the community through nonprofit organizations and government agencies and to maintain a strong work study program, encouraging students to work in local businesses so that they could earn a respectable wage and credits toward graduation.

### **Summary**

This chapter included the results of this study. In this chapter, I described the setting and participant demographics in depth. I also described the data collection procedures and the Level 1 and Level 2 data analyses procedures. In addition, I identified emergent themes and discrepant data. I addressed evidence of trustworthiness for qualitative research, using the constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In the results section, I presented key findings for the related and central research questions.



Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. In this chapter, I will present a summary of the findings, interpret the findings in relation to the literature review and the conceptual framework, identify limitations of the study, make recommendations about future research, and discuss how this study contributes to positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the impact of a rural public school district on its community culture. To accomplish that purpose, I described how the values and beliefs of community residents and the interactions between rural educators and residents, as well as how educational documents, such as rural public school district policies, school board agendas and minutes, and local media contribute to the community culture. The research design that I chose for this qualitative study involved a consideration of the research process from conceptualization to formulation of the research questions, to data collection and analysis, culminating in an analysis and interpretation of the findings. I chose a single case study design for my research in order to collect data from multiple sources in order to present a rich description of the impact of this rural public school district on the community. The decision to conduct this study was based on a philosophical assumption that schools located in remote areas of the United States reflect the identity of the surrounding community by perpetuating its values and beliefs.

### **Summary of Findings**

Several key findings emerged in relation to the related research questions for this study. Concerning the values and beliefs of these community residents, the key finding was that their values and beliefs about education and public schools contributed to a community culture of conservatism. Participants believed that conservative meant that they raised their children to respect their country, obey rules, and to always give their best, as they were taught to do by their parents and grandparents. Observations of the

school board meetings also revealed support for these conservative values and beliefs through a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and a restatement of the school district's mission, which included the belief in a strong partnership between home, school, and the community. Local educational news articles also supported the culture of this community by emphasizing student citizenship and patriotism through service to the community and donations to nonprofit organizations throughout the past 50 years. Concerning document analysis, the key finding was that school district policies, school board meeting agendas and minutes, and local educational news contributed positively to this community.

Several school district policies also encouraged and valued the input and involvement of the local community. School district policies relating to community involvement in decision making, submission of public concerns and complaints, crisis management, and community use of school facilities all emphasized the value that the school district placed on community opinion and support. School board agendas and minutes also revealed a desire of educators to contribute to the community by retaining quality staff, providing relevant curriculum, implementing sound fiscal management, and providing a healthy learning environment for students. In addition, local educational news revealed a tradition of student service and monetary contributions to local causes. In relation to interactions between educators and community residents, the key finding was that public school educators established a close and personal relationship with community residents, largely due to the small size of the community. Participants reported that teachers frequently interacted with residents by meeting in public settings, often socially, and discussing students and school activities. These interactions linked the community together with

school staff toward a common goal of providing quality education and encouraging good citizenship. This close relationship between educators and community residents was also evident in several school district policies that encouraged dialogue with each other, the free exchange of ideas, and public access to school district staff as well as school facilities. The sincerity of school board members' commitment to improvement of school-community relations was evidenced in relevant district policies and the inclusion of opportunities for public comment and input in school board agendas. News articles also emphasized close school and community relations and the conservative values and beliefs of residents, highlighting the long tradition of student public service and fund raising for donations to nonprofit organizations.

In relation to the central research question, the key finding was that the rural school district contributed to a conservative community culture by reinforcing shared beliefs and values of the residents about education and citizenship. Participants reported that their expectations regarding the quality of education that their children received and the reinforcement of their values and beliefs were met or exceeded. Participants defined their traditional values as training their children to respect their country, obey rules, and to always give their best as they had been taught, and they strongly believed that educators in the public school district shared and communicated these values to students. Observation data revealed that school district educators supported the beliefs and values of the residents about education and citizenship by employing dedicated administrators and teachers who maintained close relationships with students and shared the conservative community values while maintaining small class sizes in order to meet the

needs of individual students. Documents revealed that the school district educators demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting community activities by making their facilities available to residents. Policies indicated a strong desire to communicate with the community by maintaining a positive dialogue, addressing their suggestions and complaints, and planning for a cooperative effort between educators and community members in addressing emergency situations.

The school district contributed to this community culture by providing support for and opportunities to students, equipping them to become productive citizens. Educators implemented a volunteer work program, allowing students to serve the community and receive recognition for their hours of public service at graduation. In addition, most participants noted the high quality of school administrators and teachers and their contributions to preparing students, academically and socially, to take their place in the community as responsible citizens. The school district also contributed to this community culture by presenting student activities and performances that enhanced leisure time for residents in the community. Participants noted that educators had developed art and music programs, enhanced by volunteers from the community, in order to develop the abilities of students and display their talents at art shows and musical performances. School district educators also contributed to this rural and conservative community culture by working collaboratively with community businesses to inform students of opportunities to serve in nonprofit and government agencies and by maintaining a work study program that encouraged students to work in local businesses, earning a wage and credits toward graduation.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

For this study, I have interpreted the findings in relation to current research presented in Chapter 2. I have also interpreted these findings in relation to the conceptual framework, which was based on Maslow's motivational theory as it relates to a hierarchy of human needs. I have presented an interpretation of the related research questions first, followed by the central research question.

#### **Values and Beliefs of Community Residents**

The key finding for the first related research question was that the values and beliefs of rural community residents about education and public schools contributed to the community culture of conservatism. Participants viewed conservatism as raising their children to respect their country, obey rules, and to always give their best, as they were taught to do by their parents and grandparents. Current research also supports these findings. Burton and Johnson (2010) explored teacher motivation to work in a rural school and found that the choice to live and teach in rural areas is based upon the commonalities shared by teachers and residents. Burton et al. (2013) presented an analysis of literature related to teaching in rural areas that supported the contention that shared values play a significant part in deciding to teach in a rural area. Benson (2010) explored life in rural areas and reported that those individuals who teach and reside in rural areas adopt specific values, such as belonging, emotional support, and predictability, in order to survive in the larger society. In a study about the uniqueness of rural school district politics, Farmer (2009) noted that rural residents expect liberty to exist in a more personal, traditional environment, while Strange and Johnson (2010)

found that the contributions made by rural schools to their local community have often been ignored.

These conservative values are deep-seated, and they also correlate with Maslow's motivational theory, which maintains that after humans meet their physiological and safety needs, they are motivated by affiliation or the need to belong. In order to truly belong to a community, which satisfies the need for self-actualization, members of that community must share beliefs and values. Participants in this study agreed that their sense of belonging to this rural community was supported by the school district's commitment to meeting their expectations for a quality education and support of the conservative values and beliefs they tried to instill at home.

### **Policies, Meetings, and News**

The key finding for the second related research question was that school district policies, school board meeting agendas and minutes, and local educational news contributed positively to this community by encouraging intracommunity communication, cooperation, and responsiveness to one another's needs and goals. In this rural community, educators designed and implemented school district policies and school board meetings that encouraged the involvement of community residents. Current research also supports this finding. Forner et al. (2012) explored the leadership styles of school administrators and found that the leadership practices of effective school administrators includes listening skills, open minds, and support for a recognition program for staff and community residents. Fry and Anderson (2011) explored the motivations of newly hired rural teachers and reported that the morale of school staff and

parents was largely dependent upon the level of support they received from administrators. The importance of intracommunity communication cannot be over emphasized, as Griffin and Galassi (2010) found in their study about parent perceptions of barriers to academic success in a rural middle school. Griffin and Galassi found that parents often believe that their children do not reach their potential due to a lack of communication between parents and teachers. In a study about principals' perceptions of community and staff involvement in shared decision making, Brown et al. (2010) concluded that a mutually supportive collaborative process between school and community is important.

This finding and this research is also supported by the conceptual framework for this study because Maslow believed that people are motivated by a need to belong, respect, and cooperate with one another. In a discussion of social influence and the need of individuals to be valued and accepted, Maslow contended that all people seek acceptance, recognition, and support in their quest for self-actualized lives. The need for improved rapport and communication among teachers, administrators, and community is consistent with Maslow's contention that people seek safety, security, love, and belonging on their road to self-actualization.

### **Interactions Between Educators and Community Residents**

The key finding for the third related research question was that public school educators established a close and personal relationship with community residents, largely due to the small size of the community. Current research also supports this finding. In a study about faculty issues in rural community colleges, Cejda (2010) reported that



effective school administrators and community residents alike have recognized that maintaining open lines of communication, entertaining new ideas, and demonstrating empathy and support for those individuals with conflicting view and ideas builds stronger schools and stronger communities. Harmon and Schafft (2009) explored rural school leadership in collaborative community development and found that educators in rural areas recognize the value of reaching out, collaborating with, and demonstrating genuine interest in their students, their families, and the community. In a discussion about improvising curricula for rural communities, Corbett (2013) contended that the establishment of close personal relationships with students and community residents leads to increased student self-esteem and parental and community confidence in teachers and administrators. Corbett also found that rural educators support student involvement in the arts, which addresses the human need for aesthetics. In a study about first-year teachers in rural schools, Fry and Anderson (2011) found that these teachers were motivated to remain in rural areas because of the rapport they enjoyed with their students, colleagues, and the local community.

This finding and this research correlates with Maslow's belief that people are motivated by a need for social acceptance in order to reach self-actualization. Maslow contended that all people seek self-actualization and are capable of achieving that goal. Maslow believed that people seek an environment where they can become what they wish to be. This notion supports the fact that people seek an environment that embraces and perpetuates their values and beliefs.

### **Contributions of School District to Community Culture**

The key finding to the central research question was that this rural public school district contributed to a conservative community culture by reinforcing the shared beliefs and values of the residents about education and citizenship. Current research supports this finding because students and families feel most at home in an environment where their values and beliefs are shared. Howley et al. (2013) explored institutional relationships and flexibility in rural community colleges and found that because educators at these schools support traditional values and beliefs, they often do not consider their community as rural, and therefore do not acknowledge any potential sacrifices associated with rural living. In reflecting on her early school days in a rural community, Campbell (2012) contended that caring teachers and faculty, encouragement, and harmony between her parents and the school resulted in a positive learning environment for her. Campbell also believed that every family member is inextricably embedded in a larger system, and he or she cannot be fully understood outside of the context of that system. In a discussion about starting a new life in rural America, Benson (2010) maintained that people in rural communities relate to one another in ways that are more personal, direct, and socially supportive. Thus, educators who are employed in rural school districts support community residents by adhering to and reinforcing the traditional social values and beliefs that these residents share.

Maslow's (1968) theory of motivation also supports this finding and this research. Maslow maintained that after humans meet their physiological and safety needs, they are motivated by affiliation or the need to belong, followed by self-esteem needs, cognitive

needs, and aesthetic needs, culminating in the need for self-actualization. Maslow contended that people will seek to become all they can become, which is the basis of the human need for self-actualization. This need can most easily be satisfied in a supportive and cohesive environment. Maslow also believed that these needs are similar to instincts in animals, because they play a major role in determining choices and behavior. For this study, these needs also influenced where community residents choose to live, work, and raise their families and how successful they believed the schools were in meeting their expectations as residents of the community.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study were related to the design of this study. The first limitation of this study was the single case. Yin (2104) contended that multiple cases often present more robust findings, and therefore, they offer better opportunities for the transferability of findings. This single case study, therefore, may be limited in the transferability of its findings to other similar school districts located in small rural communities. The second limitation was that I conducted only three observations of school board meetings during the summer when schools were not in session, which may have limited the richness of the data. The third limitation was that I interviewed participants once, which may also have limited the richness of the data.

### **Recommendations**

Several recommendations emerged from the findings of this study. One recommendation is that further research should be conducted in other small rural school districts across the United States to determine if similar findings would result. These

studies should also include additional initial and follow-up interviews with community residents and additional observations of school board meetings when schools are in session.

Another recommendation is that teachers and students in rural public school districts should be included in future research about the impact of public schools on community culture. Teachers and students could add useful knowledge that educators and researchers could use to improve the relationship between schools and their communities.

A third recommendation is that school district policies should be closely examined to determine their suitability for rural community residents. In this study, community residents placed great importance on the school reinforcing their values and beliefs. Educators should attempt to accommodate these expectations through careful consideration of policies and curriculum, and further research about these policies and the intent behind them would contribute to cooperation and information sharing among teachers, staff, and community.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The results of this study have the potential to positively impact social change at all levels, including the individual, the family, the organization, and society. At the individual level, teachers, parents, and community members could use the results of this study to become more aware of their roles in the school and community and how to improve the quality of education and relationships between the school and the community. Families could use the results of this study to learn how to assist their children in developing positive interactions with educators, and educators could develop

a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in interacting with students, parents, and community members. At the organizational level, educational and community organizations could use the results of this study to discuss needs and formulate policies that maximize educational improvement and support concepts of American citizenship. Society will also benefit from the results of this study, equipping students with the skills necessary to become better educated and more productive young citizens, while satisfied parents and community residents will result in support for students and teachers, leading to a higher quality education experience.

### **Conclusion**

As society seeks solutions to better educate young people, much can be learned from this snapshot of a small rural community and the impact of a rural public school on their community culture, which included their beliefs and values about education. Participants voiced their expectations that the public schools in this rural community reinforced their values and beliefs and provided their children with a quality education in a more complete and personal fashion that urban schools can. It is clear from the results of this study that frequent communication that results in a strong relationship between educators and community residents has significant value in creating a positive learning environment for students, as well as encouraging them to graduate and lead productive lives as young adults. This personal human dynamic among students, teachers, and community cannot be ignored by educational and community leaders and policymakers. All of us, as students of educational systems and as community residents, must plan and

execute our responsibilities for positive social change in the present with insight and an eye on past successes and failures.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study about how a rural school contributes to the local community culture. I am inviting you to participate in the study because you are a resident of this community. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Lynnwood “Lynn” Baade, who is a doctoral student at Walden University, an accredited institution of higher learning.

### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore how a rural public school district contributes to the community culture.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 30 to 45 minute individual interview with me at the XXX Public Library at a time convenient for you. In addition, I will ask you to review my interpretation of your responses for their plausibility.

Here are some sample questions:

1. How long have you lived here in this community?
2. Why were you motivated to live in this community?
3. How would you describe his community in relation to their beliefs and values about education?
4. What are your expectations for this public school district in relation to meeting the educational needs of your children?
5. What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of this public school district in relation to meeting the educational needs of students?

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision about whether or not you choose to participate in this study. No one in your community will treat you differently if you decide not to participate in this study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Participating in this study involves some minimal risks. For example, you may find some of the interview questions challenging to answer.

The benefit of participating in this study is that you may develop a deeper understanding about how this rural public school district contributes to the community culture.



**Payment:**

No compensation will be provided for your participation in this study.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher has no legal obligation in this state to report any information divulged during the interviews. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research study. In addition, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. The researcher will keep all data secure and confidential. Data will be kept for 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via e-mail at [lynnwood.baade@waldenu.edu](mailto:lynnwood.baade@waldenu.edu). If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss concerns with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here** and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.**

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

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## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How long have you lived in this community?
2. Why were you motivated to live in this community?
3. How would you describe this community in relation to their beliefs and values about education?
4. What are your expectations for this public school district in relation to meeting the educational needs of your children?
5. What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of this public school district in relation to meeting the educational needs of students?
6. What do you believe are strengths and weaknesses of this community in relation to meeting the educational needs of students?
7. How do you believe the community supports this public school district?
8. How do you believe this public school district supports the community?
9. What kind of relationship do you believe exists between the educators in this school district and the community residents? Why do you believe this relationship exists? How could this relationship be improved?

## Appendix C: Observation Data Collection Form

Field NotesResearcher Reflections**Setting**

- Specific location of school board meetings
- Use of space for community residents
- Use of print and non-print resources, including technology

**Participants**

- Number
- Type
- Gender

**Activities**

- Purpose or objectives of school board meeting
- Topics discussed at school board meeting
- Open forum for community residents to speak

**Conversation**

- Among school board members
- Among community residents
- Between school board members and community residents

**Subtle Factors**

- Unplanned events
- Nonverbal communication
- Use of connotative language

**Researcher Presence**

- Location of researcher during school board meeting
- Awareness of researcher presence by other attendants
- Interactions among board members, community residents, and researchers

# **WANTED**

**Parents of children currently attending public high school in the XXX School District to participate in a study examining the impact of the school district on the local community.**

**Participants must have resided in the XXX School District for a minimum of two years, and must not be a past or current employee of the school district.**

**If you would be interested in participating in this study, by taking part in a short one-on-one interview,**

**Please Contact:**

**Lynn Baade at XXX**

**or via E-Mail: XXX@geogroup.com**