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How Exemplary Elementary School Principals Sustain High Achievement in High-Poverty Contexts of the Rural South

by

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DEDICATION

First of all, I would like to thank Almighty God for giving me the strength to complete this momentous accomplishment. “For truly, I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me” (Philippians 4:13 King James Version (KJV)).

I would like to thank my husband, Quintin Jefferies for being my rock. You are my best friend and my biggest supporter who I can always count on. You are so instrumental in my life and I could have never accomplished this achievement without you by my side. To my two daughters and son-in-law, Quinessia Douglas (Tony) and Shakayia Jefferies and my three precious grandchildren Nyla, Kameron and Brooklyn, I thank you for your unconditional love. I hope I have been an inspiration for you to further your educational careers.

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges in America's public education is overcoming the economic and demographic disparities facing high-poverty schools, particularly in rural areas.

Despite the obstacles, some high-performing, high-poverty schools are beating the odds.

Research on successful leadership practices in high-poverty, high-performing elementary schools has been focused primarily in urban settings. There is limited research on the

leadership practices of principals in high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools in rural contexts, particularly in the South. This study examines the lived experiences,

beliefs and daily practices of two elementary exemplary principals who lead rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools in South Carolina. Particularly, the researcher

investigated the leadership practices that support high-achievement in high-poverty rural schools in order to identify the leadership style that is employed by the principal. The

researcher selected schools that are classified by the South Carolina Department of

Education as Reward Schools. Reward Schools are Title I high-poverty schools. Using

qualitative case studies, the researcher examined how two principals in two rural,

elementary, high-poverty South Carolina Reward Schools in the Upstate regions of South

Carolina, help their schools to be successful. The two schools selected for this study vary

in their demographics. One school is predominately African Americans and the other is

racially diverse. The methods used for data collection included observations, in-depth

interviews and focus groups with the principals and stakeholders familiar with the school

principals. There were 17 participants.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

What kinds of leadership practices support high-achievement in high-poverty rural elementary schools? Scholars have long been interested in determining what kinds of leadership contribute to high-performing schools. There has, however, been far less research about what leadership practices are particular to rural and high poverty schools. With this dissertation, I am attempting to help identify those practices and leadership principles that help to create and sustain high-performing, high-poverty rural schools.

Background of the Study

The literature on leadership in high-poverty schools suggests that there are a number of shared practices for principals that are important. B. Reeves (2003), for example, conducted one of the most important studies, *High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond*, which described schools that reached a threshold of 90% or more in three areas: at least 90% of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch; at least 90% of students were members of minority groups; and at least 90% of students met district or state standards in reading or another area.

B. Reeves's study included a clear and prominent focus on school improvement, which contributed to five characteristics that are common to high performing, high poverty schools: a focus on academic achievement that was emphasized through assessments and instructional practices; student improvements were recognized throughout the school on charts and graphs:

- (a) clear curriculum choices, allowing them the opportunity to spend more time on core subjects such as reading, writing and math;
- (b) frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement were priorities.
- (c) an emphasis on nonfiction writing afforded students an opportunity to develop good writing skills through the use of rubrics. Students were directed to written responses instead of oral responses. This method helped students find answers through use of their thinking processes and helped teachers obtain diagnostic information pertaining to their students.
- (d) collaborative scoring of student work created common assessment practices among teachers and principals. Teachers exchanged student papers with other teachers and principals shared student work among other schools. In addition, principals took personal responsibility for evaluating students' work (2003, p. 3).

According to B. Reeves's (2003) study, it appears that these five characteristics are universal practices and should, therefore, be evident in rural schools as well.

Another notable publication on effective leadership in high poverty contexts is Carter's two reports on high-performing, high-poverty schools. Carter's (2002a) first report revealed that seven of twenty-one successful principals at low-income schools accepted "No" excuses for not meeting the standards of excellence. These seven principals were men and women who served in low-income elementary and secondary schools in Brooklyn, Central Harlem, Houston, Los Angeles, Calumet Heights and

Detroit. These administrators were passionate about learning and they believed that all children could excel academically, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Carter's (2002b) second report studied 21 principals from the South Carolina Department of Education Blue Ribbon program, which recognizes schools that average above the 65th percentile on national, norm-referenced tests and that have at least 75% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. This study reported that the twenty-one principals were known for holding students and teachers to high expectations and that they exhibited several common characteristics: They were identified as strong leaders who were charismatic, committed, innovative, and entrepreneurial. These principals served in private, rural, religious, public and charter schools throughout regions in the north, south, east and west (Carter, 2000, p. 15).

While the studies conducted by B. Reeves (2003) and Carter (2002a) reveal a common focus on curriculum instruction and assessment which led to improving high-performing, high-poverty schools, these apparently universal practices do not explicitly address the particular challenges facing rural schools. Such studies provide important data but, while they may be transferable to some contexts, they may not be universally generalizable. Most studies are based on national averages, or are conducted in urban or suburban settings, making their applicability to rural schools unclear. These studies may also focus on the types of leadership necessary to sustain—rather than to establish—high performing schools. We cannot assume that the practices necessary for turnaround leadership are identical to those for sustaining a well-established culture of success.

Additionally, these studies do not reveal what those leadership qualities look like in the day to day life of the schools. In this study, I want to shed light on what leadership

looks like in the daily life of rural, high-poverty schools that are succeeding against the odds. In order to understand what kinds of leadership practices I needed to seek; I first reviewed the empirical literature on leadership practices that have been linked to student achievement in general.

The researcher was sensitive to the possibility that even “best practices” may be manifested differently in rural, high-poverty settings. In such circumstances, the researcher investigated successful leadership in rural schools to capitalize on their leadership actions and behaviors.

One investigation on *Successful Leadership in Rural Schools: Cultivating Collaboration* revealed findings from 40 research studies conducted in the United States, Canada and Australia. Based on the findings dated 2005-2015, two overarching themes emerged: (a) successful rural principals promoted people-focused relationships with staff, students, parents and community members and (b) rural principals have the opportunity to be change agents through balancing local and district policies and through enacting instructional leadership (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Successful school rural leadership is rooted in healthy relationships that are promoted by a leadership style reliant on teamwork, strong interpersonal relationships among staff and collaboration among students, parents, community stakeholders and professional communities. However, on the other hand, successful rural leaders are known as leaders that stimulate change in educational organizations and they are strong instructional leaders that advocate and promote a positive school culture that affect student achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Emotional and Social Challenges of Poverty

Poverty is a complex phenomenon, with individual and collective aspects, and diverse contexts. Governmental policies on food security, income, health care, and many other areas influence the experience of poverty, while education policy must cope with the impact of these many dimensions of poverty within the school building.

Within the United States, the thresholds of poverty are determined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which identifies a person as poor when their income is below the threshold to purchase necessities such as food, shelter, clothing and other essentials (Jensen, 2009). Jensen (2009) distinguishes between six types of poverty:

- Situational poverty is often a temporary situation caused by a crisis or loss.
- Generational Poverty occurs when two generations are born into poverty.
- Absolute poverty involves a scarcity of necessities such as shelter, food and running water.
- Relative poverty is when a family's income is insufficient to meet society's average standard of living.
- Urban poverty is poverty in metropolitan areas with a population of at least 50,000 people which deals with complex aggregate of chronic and acute stressors such as crowding, violence and noise which are often dependent of inadequate large city services.
- Rural poverty is poverty in non-metropolitan areas with a population below 50,000 people which consist of more single guardian households and families that have less access to services, support for disability and quality education opportunities (p. 6).

Poverty rates among children in South Carolina are quite high. The 2012 *Rural Matters* report noted that nearly six out of every ten of South Carolina's rural students live in poverty out of a total of more than 285,000. Four in ten students are classified as minorities and 15% are English Language Learners (Strange, Johnson, Showalter & Klein, 2012). Nixon (2015) and Boocock's work (as cited in Marzano, 2001) argue that one of the highest predictors of student achievement is socioeconomic status. The higher the socioeconomic status of the student, the higher the student's achievement. As proof, Yazzie-Mintz's (2007) work noted a national study showing that 81,000 students who were not in Title I programs performed at higher levels than students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (as cited in Jensen, 2013).

Jensen (2013) detailed how seven dimensions of poverty affected low socioeconomic student performances in classroom engagement. The first dimension was poor health and nutrition, such as untreated ear infections, hearing loss, exposure to lead, and lack of breakfast (Jensen, 2013). These conditions lead to health-related factors such as attention, reasoning, learning and memory. The second dimension was vocabulary. Students who grow up in low socioeconomic backgrounds developed a smaller vocabulary than middle class students. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds hear an average of 13 million words by age four compared to middle class students who hear about 26 million and upper-class students who hear 46 million words by age four.

The third dimension was effort. Students who demonstrated a lack of effort may be related to a lack of hope and optimism, or depression and helplessness. The fourth dimension was hope and a growth mind-set. Students from low socioeconomic

backgrounds view their future as being negative instead of positive. They associate “poor with lower expectations about future outcomes.” (Jensen, 2013, p. 27).

The fifth dimension was cognition. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds performed lower on intelligence and achievement tests than high socioeconomic students. Although this is true, cognitive capacity and intelligence is a teachable skill. Students from lower backgrounds demonstrated cognitive problems such as short attention spans, high levels of distractibility, difficulty monitoring the quality of their work, difficulty generating new solutions to problems. These students usually act out with behavior or shut down (Jensen, 2013).

The sixth dimension was in relationships. In homes of children living in poverty, “three-quarters of all children from poverty have a single-parent caregiver” (Jensen, 2013, p. 28). Children who live chaotic lives or live absent from one or both parents experience an insecure or stressed brain. The seventh dimension is distress. Children who live in low socioeconomic status experiences greater chronic stress than their middle to upper class counterparts. Distress can affect brain development, academic success, social competence, impair behaviors, boosts impulsivity and impair memory. Students who are distressed typically display two types of behavior: (a) aggressive – angry, or (b) passive – a ‘leave me alone’ attitude (Delaney, 2016; Jensen, 2013).

Lyman and Villani (2004) argued that to change the learning environment of low-performing students, high-poverty schools’ educators must change their beliefs and attitudes toward children living in poverty. Jensen (2013) asserted that research from 60 high poverty schools revealed that the primary factor in student motivation and

intelligence does not exist from the student's home environment but from the student's school and their teacher.

Jensen (2009) confirmed that the effects of poverty mirrored four primary risk factors that adversely affects everyday living. Jensen referred to these risk factors as EACH: “Emotional and Social Challenges, Acute and Chronic Stressors, Cognitive Lags, and Health and Safety Issues” (2009, p. 7). Children raised in poverty are typically suggestive to emotional and social challenges which is detrimental to learning and causes delayed brain development. This adverse effect is contributed to by impoverished families that experience teenage pregnancy, depression and inadequate health care (Jensen, 2009).

The acute stress experienced from traumatic events such as abuse or violence and chronic stressors (continuous stress over time) inflicts a physical, psychological, emotional and cognitive functioning disorder which affects children’s brain development, academic achievement and social competence. These stressors are known to be more devastating to children living in poverty than their affluent peers. Jensen associated cognitive lags with children’s ability levels (Jensen, 2009). According to Baydar, Brooks-Gunn and Furstenberg’s (1993) work (as cited in Jensen, 2009) socioeconomic status is strongly associated with children’s cognitive ability levels which affects their measure of cognitive development. Moreover, Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, Guerin and Parramore’s (2003) work (as cited in Jensen, 2009) stated the achievement gap among children in lower socioeconomic status is substantial and is apparent throughout the stages of development from infancy through adulthood.

Payne's (2005) work (as cited in Barber, 2013) indicated that, "One key correlation to students who don't pass state assessments is their socioeconomic status." Levin and Riffel's (2000) work (as cited in Barber, 2013) concur, "Economic deprivation has had a profound impact on educational outcomes" (p. 19). Research by Stanford neuroscientist and stress expert Robert Sapolsky's (2005) work (as cited in Jensen, 2009) found that the lower the socioeconomic students with health and safety problems are subject to malnutrition, environmental hazards and inadequate health care. As a result, the continuous stressors contribute to the student's inability to concentrate, learn and behave appropriately.

While many challenges of poverty exist, school leaders can use the following school practices to mitigate them. According to Jensen (2009) emotional and social challenges can be lessened by embodying respect to change a student's emotional state. In doing so, leaders can give respect to students regardless of the situation, leaders can share the decision-making process in class, eliminate demanding directives and discipline through positive relationships instead of exerting power.

Leaders can embed social skills by teaching basic meet and greet skills, turn and talk skills and by implementing social-emotional skill building programs. Acute and chronic stressors can be minimized by recognizing the signs, altering the environment to reduce stress and resolve compliance issues among students and by empowering students to manage their stress levels. Cognitive lags can be lowered by pinpointing assessments to improve student's cognitive ability levels, by providing hope and support to build positive relationships and guidance and by building core skills such as attention and focus, short and long-term memory, sequencing and processing skills, problem solving

skills, perseverance and the ability to apply long-term skills, social skills, hopefulness and self-esteem (Jensen, 2013).

Health and safety issues can be decreased by increasing health-related services such as providing on-site physicians once a week, access to local pharmacies for medications, arrange dentists' visits at designated schools, educate student's caregivers on school resources, provide tutors to help assist students and improve awareness among staff regarding health-related issues (Jensen, 2013).

Policy Context: Federal Support for High-Poverty Schools Since 1964

Thousands of underachieving students live in poverty and attend unsatisfactory schools. This crisis is one of many encountered in hundreds of public education school systems across the United States (Parrett & Budge, 2012). In South Carolina, numerous schools and districts find it difficult to measure up with high-performing schools due to a lack of resources, low test scores, high staff turnover and poor leadership (Suber, 2009). Parrett and Budge (2012) argued that in order to overcome the crisis of poverty, the dilemma of underachieving students living in poverty must be a priority of policymakers, parents, taxpayers and other stakeholders.

Parrett and Budge (2012) also contended that, "High-performing, high-poverty schools demonstrate that successfully educating students who live in poverty significantly counters many barriers posed by poverty and improves children's life chances" (p. 2).

Parrett and Budge continued, "Isn't that proof enough to compel us to act?" (p. 2).

To enhance student academic achievement in urban and rural schools, educational leaders have spent the past five decades searching for appropriate reform strategies and practices to fight the phenomenon of high-poverty, unsatisfactory schools (Brown &

Green, 2014). Although there are many high-poverty schools beating the odds, most are still struggling. Why are some high-poverty schools successful and some are not? In South Carolina, there are 331 high-poverty schools in which between 76% and 100% of students are eligible for free and reduced meals. The large achievement gaps within the socioeconomic, racial, and disability divisions have resulted in federal government assistance programs such as the ESEA, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (S. C. Department of Education, 2016).

Fifty years ago, the condition of high-poverty schools prompted President Lyndon B. Johnson to declare an “unconditional war” on poverty. In his 1964 State of the Union address, referring to the “War on Poverty,” President Johnson announced, “Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it and above all, to prevent it.”

(Matthews, 2014). The “War on Poverty” consisted of four pieces of legislation:

- The Social Security Amendments of 1965, which created Medicare and Medicaid and also expanded Social Security benefits for retirees, widows, the disabled, and college-aged students.
- The Food Stamp Act of 1964, which created the food stamp program.
- The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which established the Job Corps, The VISTA program, the federal work-study program, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and the Head Start Program.
- The Elementary and Secondary Act of 1964, which established the Title I program, subsidizing school districts that have a large number of impoverished students.

President Johnson's "War on Poverty" was also a centerpiece for improving Head Start for the School Readiness Act which was enacted under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The Head Start program was designed to focus on education, health and parental involvement which initially served 561,000 3-to-5-year-old children. In 1972, congress mandated that Head Start enrollments serve at least 10% of students with disabilities (Severns, 2012).

One decade later, in 1983, The National Commission on Excellence in Education authorized President Ronald Regan's report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This report represented the quality of education in the United States as inadequate and described American workers as being incompetent to work in the global economy (Eppley, 2009). More than 23 million American adults were classified as functionally illiterate (Graham, 2013). To ensure all children met challenging state standards, President Clinton signed into law The Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 which reauthorized ESEA of 1965 (Riley, 1995).

To address academic achievement in the United States, Congress reauthorized ESEA in 2001, which was signed into law by President George W. Bush as the bill known as No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The stated purpose of this law was to provide a quality education to all races regardless of their socioeconomic and ability status. NCLB mandated that all schools make *adequate yearly progress* in reading and mathematics on state tests to continue receiving federal funding (Powell, Higgins, Aran & Freed, 2009). NCLB required testing to hold all schools accountable for the academic progress of all students. The state and the school are required to reach specified proficiency levels for English-Language Learners, students in special education, poor,

and minority children by 2014 (Klein, 2015). Under NCLB, a teacher had to be highly qualified in a core academic area by holding a bachelor's degree in the subject(s) taught, a teaching license, and demonstrating knowledge in every subject area in which he or she taught (Eppley, 2009). The constraints of NCLB presented many unique challenges for rural schools in the areas of staffing, declining enrollment, funding, curriculum, and difficulty hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers (Eppley, 2009; Powell et al., 2009). As a result, The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), Title VI, Part B, of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, was formed to provide financial resources and flexibility for rural schools and districts that are affected by location and low enrollment (Reeves, 2003). More specifically, REAP addresses the unique needs of rural school districts by providing financial assistance for small and low-income rural schools and allowing districts to consolidate federal funds (Reeves, 2003).

The most recent landscape-changing reform was President Barack Obama's education law, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was signed into effect on December 10, 2015. This bipartisan bill reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.). President Obama confirmed, "With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal--that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live--deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will" (U. S. Department of Education, 2017b)

The U. S. Department of Education (2016) notes the key ESSA provisions intended to help ensure success for students and schools. The law:

1. Advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students;
2. Requires, for the first time, that all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers;
3. Ensures that vital information is provided to educators, families, students and communities through annual statewide assessments that measure students' progress toward those high standards;
4. Helps to support and grow local innovations including evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators consistent with our Investing in Innovation and Promise Neighborhoods;
5. Sustains and expands this administration's historic investments in increasing access to high-quality preschool;
6. Maintains an expectation that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The ESSA law provides federal support for programs to serve students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Starting with the 2017-2018 school year, South Carolina will implement a Consolidated State Plan prior to submission to the U. S. Department of Education (USED). The South Carolina Consolidated State Plan will engage stakeholders in a meaningful consultation to: (a) ensure quality education for all students; (b) adopt and implement challenging content standards and high-quality academic assessments in all grades and subjects; (c) implement a statewide accountability system; (d) implement

strategies to support development and retention for educators and (e) implement strategies that will provide challenging academic standards and opportunities to obtain a high school diploma (S. C. Department of Education, 2016).

In 2016, South Carolina Governor, Nikki Haley, proposed that the state borrow up to \$200 million a year to renovate or rebuild dilapidated schools. Haley stated that some of the schools were in horrible condition. More specifically, Haley stated, some schools had leaky roofs, walls were molded and building structures were unsafe. Haley also proposed a \$15 million program aimed at recruiting teachers to rural areas with the highest turnover rates and expanded internet services to student's homes, so they could study and complete homework (Self, 2016). In addition to federal policies influencing high-poverty schools, South Carolina has passed a series of policies and approaches to accountability that measure and evaluate schools.

Context of the Case Studies: South Carolina Title I Reward Schools

The two schools chosen for this study are known as "Reward Schools." Reward schools have been acknowledged by the state for their notable achievements and significant performance improvement among high-poverty schools. For this reason, the researcher chose to conduct a qualitative case study in two Reward schools to examine leadership practices that were successful in advancing student achievement.

In 2012, South Carolina's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) granted a waiver of flexibility to certain requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, allowing the state to measure schools for their accountability and to reward them for student performance in all subject areas. To help combat the dismal performance of struggling schools, the South Carolina Department of Education (2016) publicly

identified schools as *Priority*, *Focus*, and *Reward* to showcase how well schools and districts were performing. Priority schools were identified as the bottom 5% of low performing Title I Schools. Focus schools were defined as the 10% of the Title I schools that were most successful in closing the achieving gap. Reward schools were the top 15% of high-performing Title I schools (South Carolina’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Waiver, n.d.).

In 2013, the South Carolina Department of Education was granted an ESEA waiver to replace the pass/fail system with the current statewide assessment coupled with the high school graduation rates. This analysis resulted in a letter grade accountability rating system, as noted in Table 1.1, to determine whether schools met their target or made progress toward the target (State of South Carolina Annual Report Card, 2013).

Table 1.1

ESEA/Federal Accountability Rating System

Key	Index Score	Grade	Description
	90-100	A	Performance substantially exceed the state’s expectations
	80-89.9	B	Performance exceeds the state’s expectations
	70-79.9	C	Performance meets the state’s expectations
	60-69.9	D	Performance does not meet the state’s expectations
	Less than 60	F	Performance is substantially below the state’s expectations
Overall Weighted Points		95.0	
Overall Grade Conversion		A	

Adapted from South Carolina Department of Education, 2013.

South Carolina’s Reward Schools are recognized for premier school performance and for closing the achievement gap with considerable growth. In 2015, the South Carolina Department of Education identified 158 elementary Reward Schools for Performance (the highest performing Title I schools) and 26 Title I Reward Schools for Progress (which indicates the Title I schools that demonstrated the most substantial progress in either the “all students” group or in an identified subgroup from one year to the next school year). Further, the federal accountability system categorizes reward schools by the following criteria. To determine a reward school for performance the school must:

- Have maintained an “A” or “B” school rating in the two most recent school years;
- Have a free/reduced lunch count that is greater than 50%;
- Not have significant achievement gaps;
- Have at least one tested grade on state assessments.

The criteria are altered slightly for progress than that of performance. To determine a Reward School for Progress the school must:

- Have attained an “A”, “B”, or “C” school rating in the two most recent school years;
- Have a free/reduced lunch count that is greater than 50%;
- Be one of the top 10% of qualifying Title I schools that demonstrate progress in the performance of all students or in subgroups on statewide assessments or make substantial progress increasing the graduation rate;

- Have at least one tested grade on state assessments. (S. C. Department of Education, 2016)

The ESEA waiver was an opportunity to gain greater flexibility in the way that South Carolina measure schools for accountability. This change will measure school's abilities to help all students meet the state's rigorous academic standards and to provide ways that schools, districts and the South Carolina Department of Education work together to improve struggling schools particularly, rural schools (South Carolina Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), n.d.).

Historical Background and Context of Rural Schools

In the early nineteenth century, American public schooling was categorized as predominantly rural with dispersed populations. Approximately 9.6 million public school students were enrolled in rural school districts, while 1.8 million students were enrolled in rural schools that were not classified as rural districts. The government was extremely small, unbureaucratic in structure, and relied heavily on the actions of hundreds and thousands of lay promoters and school trustees (Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Leadership during this era was described as *a calling* similar to that of a church missionary. Leaders were often characterized as *earnest, Christian character, pure, true scholar* by church membership and social service (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

The one-room schoolhouse played a major role in education for rural America. A typical school consisted of a building with a single classroom, and a teacher who taught the basic academic fundamentals of reading, writing, grammar, spelling, arithmetic, history, geography and hygiene to children ranging in age from five to seventeen

(Ornstein & Levine, 2003; Slavin, 2006). Schooling was the cornerstone of the community and known as the common place for social gatherings, civic education, the teaching of English and social behaviors (Chalker, 2002).

Exploited by *Jim Crow* laws, African Americans were required to attend separate schools (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). During this period, the landmark of the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld segregation as “separate but equal” which set a precedent for the segregation of public facilities, including schools. The inequality of “separate but equal” marked the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* which changed U. S. History. The ruling of this case confirmed that segregation denigrated African Americans by relegating them to second class citizens and depriving them of equal protection of the laws as warranted by the Fourteenth Amendment (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). During the time of desegregation, many African Americans attended formerly white public schools, but at the expense of losing African American schools, teachers and administrators. As school desegregation laws were enforced, many white communities withdrew from public education and established what was called *White Academies* (Williams & King, 2002).

During the mid-nineteenth century, there was very little control from the federal and state governments in education. Schools were locally created and controlled by lay people with a Protestant-republican ideology. The ideology is a belief that was dominant in the mid-nineteenth century which restricted government from having control over schools (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The ideology was based on the belief system John Higham called, “A source of unity in a highly decentralized nation” (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 21). Citizens’ attitudes toward education were comparable to religion today:

attend the school of your choice, thereby creating separation of class, religion, ethnicity, race, sex, and regional tastes and needs. One prominent form of education that developed was private schooling, which allowed wealthier parents to pay for what they wanted their children to be taught (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Another form of education that evolved during the mid-nineteenth century was the common school concept. A common school crusader, Horace Mann introduced the concept of common school as public education. Mann argued that it was the responsibility of the wealthy to support public education as a means to produce industrious men and women. The resulting skills and knowledge acquired would create responsible citizens, particularly from lower socioeconomic classes, that would produce better jobs and enhance the state's economy (Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

During the 20th Century, many reformers viewed rural schools as ineffective and inefficient in the areas of teaching. Rural education has been branded with roots of negative attitudes, prejudices and slurs. Common school leaders' unfavorable judgment of rural education has been the status quo for many years labeling teaching as a degrading profession (Chalker, 2002). Teachers who entered the field were hired by local lay trustees, non-self-regulating professions. The teachers hired were young, poorly paid and seldom educated beyond elementary subjects. Teaching was hardly considered a profession as a matter of fact, leaders complained that teachers were incompetent to teach, seldom received adequate training, often transient and taught by recitation and rote learning (Chalker, 2002). The teaching profession was not regarded as a lifelong

career. Teaching was dominated by males who taught during winter months when they could not farm or before going to other professions (Chalker, 2002).

Many inequities in rural schools led to the documentary “The Corridor of Shame” detailed the struggles of neglected rural schools located along the South Carolina’s I-95 corridor that were not being fully supported or providing an adequate education for South Carolina’s poorest students (Ferillo & Conroy, 2006). The court case, Abbeville County School District v. State of South Carolina (in which 40 school districts were represented) took 21 years of legislative debate and courtroom battles to adjudicate. The court ruled 3-2 that the educational funding for the poorest schools was inadequate and it is the state’s responsibility to provide a minimally adequate education (Click & Hinshaw, 2014).

The state’s motto: Dum Spiro Spero (While I breathe, I hope, Ready in soul and resource) expresses a sense of hope. Nevertheless, many rural South Carolina students are not receiving a quality education that can provide hope for their future (Rural School & Community Trust, 2003). Considering the many challenges that are facing rural schools and districts, how can South Carolina educators provide a quality education that all students deserve? In the report, *Building Strong Rural Schools in South Carolina: The Foundations We Need* (Rural School & Community Trust, 2003) the South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee revealed six foundations that must be strengthened and that are necessary to ensure all South Carolina children receive a high-quality education they deserve. This study will elaborate on three important foundations: (a) all students achieving at high levels; (b) well-trained, motivated teachers’ foundation, and (c) good leadership and a sound governance structure (p. 5). The rural public

education system differs greatly in populations served when compared to other locales as indicated in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

Percentages of Public vs. Rural Elementary and Secondary School Students

Public Elementary and Secondary School Student Percentages		Rural Public Elementary and Secondary School Student Percentages	
Ethnicity	Percentage	Ethnicity	Percentage
White	52	White	71
Black	16	Black	10
Hispanic	23	Hispanic	13
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	Asian/Pacific Islander	2
American Indian/ Alaska Native	1	American Indian/ Alaska Native	2
Two or more races	2	Two or more races	2

Adapted from NCES, 2013.

In the 2010-11 school year, the percentage of rural public elementary and secondary schools reflected higher percentages among Whites when compared to public elementary and secondary schools. However, the percentage of Hispanics attending public elementary and secondary schools were higher than in rural areas. Conversely, there was a lower percentage of Blacks, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native and two or more races being served in both schools. This table does not include data for the Bureau of Indian Education schools (NCES, 2013).

There were over 49 million students served in 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools occupied in 14,000 school districts within the United States. The research indicated that 57% of regular school districts are located in rural areas, while suburban areas represent 20%, towns 18% and cities 5% (National Center for Education

Statistics, 2013). In the United States, one in three students attend public school in rural areas or small towns with fewer than 25,000 residents, and one in five attend schools in rural areas with fewer than 2,500 residents. Additionally, nearly one-third of the public schools and teachers and almost one-half of public-school districts are in rural locations (Williams, 2003).

Approximately, one-third of 100,000 public schools in the United States represented (32,000) rural areas which was more than (27,000) in the suburbs, (26,000) in the cities and (14,000) in the towns. There were fewer students enrolled in public schools in rural areas compared to the suburbs and cities: 12 million students were enrolled in public schools in rural areas compared to 17 million in suburban areas and 14 million in cities with the exception of the smallest enrollment as 6 million in towns (NCES, 2013).

In many rural areas of the country, the hardships of school consolidations, school closings, and a declining economic base create difficulty for rural families and schools. Despite the movement for educational equality, the persistent challenges for rural schools and communities still exist today. The unique challenges facing rural schools includes staffing, declining enrollment, difficulty hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers, funding, and curriculum (Eppley, 2009; Powell et al., 2009). Nearly 25% of Americans live in rural dwellings and rural schools make up the largest proportion of public schools in the United States (Williams & King, 2002).

Rural schools face numerous pressures, requiring rural principals to play a significant leadership role in their schools. Rural leaders must be astute to handle demanding challenges of rural schools with certain leadership styles and practices in order to lead teachers successfully in attaining student achievement.

Problem Statement

One of the greatest challenges in America's public education system is overcoming economic and demographic disparities facing high-poverty schools, particularly in rural areas. Some schools are doing a good job in helping students achieve and overcome these obstacles, but most are not. Principals are well placed to create positive atmospheres and cultures to help students achieve. For instance, the Education Trust identified 33 principals (including three assistant principals) from 24 elementary, middle and high schools across rural, suburban and urban locales in 19 states that were successful in rapidly improving achievement among 75% of students on free or reduced-priced meals and 73% students of color or students living in poverty.

The 33 principals (including three assistant principals) shared four important qualities:

1. They have strong beliefs in student potential to drive their work.
2. They put instruction at the center of their managerial duties.
3. They focus on building the capacity of all the adults in the building.
4. They monitor and evaluate what leads to success and what can be learned from failure. (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013, p. 3).

Although some are principals succeeding in the field, it is noted, that school districts can also be contributors to helping principals lead their schools to success. According to the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) study, seven strategies can help principals succeed in improving student achievement and their learning environments. The first strategy is to establish a clear focus and strategic framework of core beliefs, effective practices and goals for improving student achievement; the second

strategy is to organize and engage the school board and district office in support of each school; the third strategy is to provide instructional coherence and support; the fourth strategy is to invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals; the fifth strategy is to provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices, and assist schools to use data effectively; the sixth strategy is to optimize the use of resources to improve student learning and the seventh strategy is to use open, credible processes to involve key school and community leaders in shaping a vision for improving schools (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010).

In 2007-2008, the NCES's most current data identified 16,122 schools as being high-poverty schools (2010). Researchers such as Leithwood and Riehl (2003); Kouzes and Posner (2016); Lezotte and Snyder (2011) and Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) assert that all students can learn regardless of their socioeconomic status. Therefore, the researcher found the need to study exemplary cases to learn what they do. Furthermore, there is extensive research on positive leadership in high-poverty schools that comes from urban schools, leaving a gap for rural schools that the researcher will address.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences, beliefs and daily practices of two elementary exemplary school principals who lead rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools. By conducting this study, the researcher intended to discover supportive leadership practices and the leadership style that was employed by principals in rural contexts that led to student achievement. The findings of this study can help rural school leaders to understand pathways towards success for rural schools.

In this qualitative case study, the researcher examined two (PK-5) schools of varying demographics. The researcher conducted a cross-case analysis to identify commonalities and differences among the schools, to gain an understanding of the participants' perceptions and to include enough participants to provide rich data that revealed how these principals are so successful. The methods used for data collection, which will be described more in detail in chapter three, included in-depth interviews with principals, assistant principals, reading coaches, teachers, parents and community stakeholders at each school.

Research Questions

The researcher in this study sought to examine supportive leadership practices that are demonstrated on a daily basis by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools. The researcher investigated the lived experiences, beliefs and daily practices of two elementary principals who led rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools in South Carolina to success. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?
2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face?
How do they manage these demands?

Significance of the Study

Across the nation, states are faced with the federal requirements of the ESSA. Being held accountable for student outcomes presents a significant challenge for many districts, particularly in rural areas. Despite the obstacles faced by high-poverty schools, some high-performing, high-poverty schools are beating the odds. The literature identifies leadership practices that are successful in the high-poverty context, however, there is limited research which supports rural context. Urban and rural schools are faced with many of the same challenges, such as a high concentration of low-income students, low parent educational attainment, and low college attendance from high school students. Nevertheless, rural schools receive less attention from policymakers (Rees, 2014).

In order to break down barriers in rural education, a new project called Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI), funded by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation, provided three areas of promise for improving rural education in Idaho communities: (a) push for more funding in rural schools; (b) a greater push for broadband connectivity for high-quality online instruction; and (c) more educational options through charter schools (Rees, 2014). This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge by examining exemplary cases to identify productive practices and to understand how the participants make sense of things.

Definition of Terms

The following are summaries of definitions used in this study:

ESEA (The Elementary and Secondary Act). ESEA is a law created to provide additional resources to susceptible students through use of funded grants to districts serving low income students, scholarships for low income college students and federal

funding to improve the quality of state educational elementary and secondary schools (U. S. Department of Education, 2008 & Ed. Gov. 2015).

High-Poverty Schools. High poverty schools are defined as having between 76% and 100% of students receiving free and reduced-priced meals (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

NCLB (No Child Left Behind). The No Child Left Behind Act is a mandate that every school make *adequate yearly progress* in reading and mathematics on state tests in order to continue receiving federal funding (Powell, Higgins, Aran, & Freed, 2009).

Poverty. Poverty refers to persons with an income deemed less than sufficient to purchase the basic needs for food, shelter, clothing and other essentials (Jensen, 2009).

Reward Schools for Performance. Rewards Schools for Performance is a term given to Title I schools that are the highest performing schools for the year (S. C. Department of Education).

Reward Schools for Progress. Rewards Schools for Progress is a term given to Title I schools that demonstrated substantial progress in the “all students” group or in identified subgroups from one school year to the next (S. C. Department of Education).

Title I. Title I is a federal program under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which provides financial assistance to LEA’s and schools with high percentages of low-income children to ensure all meet challenging state academic standards (U. S. Department of Education, 2015).

Limitations of the Study

There are three important constraints for this study: (a) this study is limited to only two rural, high-poverty, elementary schools in South Carolina; (b) since the research

relied upon only two elementary schools as the primary sources of data, the results cannot be generalized across similarly populated middle and high schools; and (c) the study participants only represented rural stakeholders comprised of principals, reading coaches, teachers, parents and community members in rural high-poverty schools. The researcher operated on the belief that exploring high-achieving schools was not an attempt to measure the impact but was a working assumption that leadership either helped to create, or maintained, the achievement.

Nature of the Study

Case Studies are a strategy for conducting social science research when using “how” or “why” questions to seek knowledge of individuals, groups, organizations, social, political or interconnected phenomena (Yin, 2003). In qualitative inquiry, case studies are used differently in many different contexts. The researcher will use the case study strategy to explore an in-depth program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2009). For the purposes of this study, a multi-case study will be conducted to compare and contrast real-life beliefs, actions and experiences in rural high-poverty populations.

The basis for conducting a multi-case study was to seek an understanding of a complex social phenomena on rural leaders’ successful leadership practices in rural elementary schools. The potential outcome of this multi-case study is to reveal leadership practices that are common and different within successful high-poverty rural schools. Further, specifics regarding the methodology will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used for this study (Figure 1.1) is distinguished by two considerations: the role and actions of the principal, and the rural context. The proposed model is a representation of effective principal leadership in high-performing, rural, elementary schools. The elements of this framework suggest that a leader’s context determines how they manage the demands of challenges by relying on their beliefs, experiences and actions which are demonstrated through a set of leadership practices and a leadership style which determines the success of the school. This study examined the perceptions of principals, reading coaches, teachers, parents and community stakeholders influence on student achievement in two rural high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools.

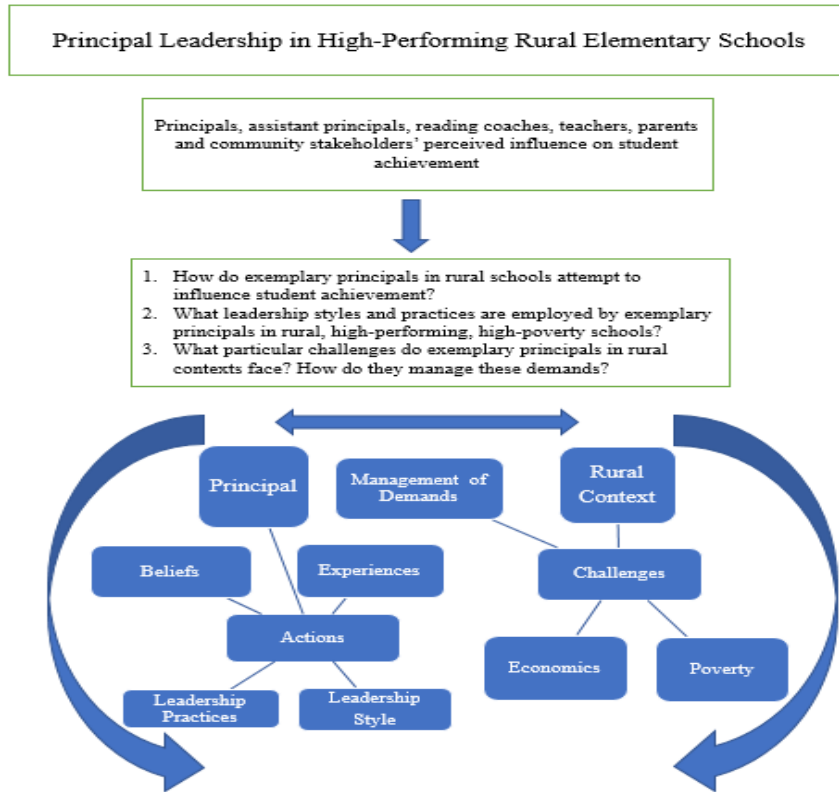


Figure 1.1 Conceptual framework: Principal leadership in high-performing, rural schools.

Subjectivity

I am a young female career changer who worked in the private sector for 14 years before entering the educational arena. I was raised by two working parents who instilled in me the value of responsibility. I learned at an early age that in order to become successful in life, I had to work hard, stay focused and to acquire patience and perseverance. At the age of 16, I acquired my first job in the retail industry and several years later, I moved on to work in business. Out of a family of six, I was the first to attend and graduate from college. Upon completion of college, my career goal was to become a Human Resources Manager in the business industry. After eight years, economic downsizing resulted in the loss of my job. I was then afforded the opportunity to teach Business Education in a high-poverty, low-performing urban middle school.

Currently, I have served a total of 17 years in education. After my third year as a Business Education teacher, I knew that I wanted to become a principal. I have always desired to be in a leadership position where I could make positive changes to serve others. Therefore, as the determined person as I am, I pursued my school administration degree to become a principal.

After my fifth year of teaching, I was promoted to Assistant Principal at the same middle school where I began my teaching career. This experience confirmed that leadership was my indeed my calling. For the first time in my life, I actually felt that I was making a difference in helping others become successful. Although it was a challenge to supervise colleagues who were formerly close friends, I managed to use my leadership skills to establish positive professional working relationships.

After serving one year as Assistant Principal, I was assigned a Principal position in a rural elementary school within my school district. After the completion of one year as principal, I quickly realized that in order to become a successful school leader, I needed to transform from that of a manager to an instructional leader. Bennis (2009) indicated that every leader must “know thyself.” Bennis stated that in order for leaders to become successful, they must know their strengths and weaknesses. They must know what they want and why they want to accomplish the task at hand. Coming from a business background, I had the management knowledge of a leader, but I lacked the elementary pedagogy. To rectify that deficiency, I established a leadership team that consisted of school and community stakeholders whose strengths were complementary with mine.

During my second year as principal, I transferred to a Title I, high-poverty inner-city school within the district. Upon my arrival at the school, it was rated as “Average” for state accountability and rated as meeting “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) for federal accountability. During this time, Title I legislation (a federal program) afforded parents the opportunity to transfer their child from failing schools to attend designated high-performing schools of their choice. After numerous low-performing students from failing schools transferred into the school at which I was principal, test scores plummeted. I was now under pressure to raise test scores to meet state and federal accountability. At this point, I was compelled to prove my leadership abilities and to confirm to the staff, parents, community members and my Superintendent that I was indeed right for the job.

In order to improve my school, I relied on what Hallinger identified as the four models of successful leadership practices: (a) Defining the school's mission; (b) Managing the instructional program; (c) Redesigning the organization; and (d) Managing the instructional program (Day, Sammons, Leithwood, Hopkins, Gu, Brown & Ahtaridou, 2011). As a leader in business and education, I defined the organization's mission by building a shared vision and by demonstrating high expectations for all stakeholders in order to meet a common goal. I managed the instructional program by holding individuals accountable for producing favorable results. I redesigned the organization by building personal relationships to establish effective communication and collaboration. I managed the instructional programs by being responsible for staffing positions, managing employees, providing resources and providing professional development (Day et al., 2011). Based on my personal experiences in business and education, I believe Hallinger's four leadership practices were successful for me in both contexts for showing improvement.

After five years of implementing the aforementioned leadership practices, among others, my school's culture improved significantly which led to improved test scores. Because of the tremendous growth, in 2013-2014, our school was recognized as a Palmetto Gold and Silver School for obtaining high levels of growth and making substantial progress in closing the achievement gaps among student subgroups. Therefore, serving as a rural and urban principal, I know there are certain leadership practices that can help to transform unsatisfactory schools into successful schools. However, they are also somewhat different based upon the context. Although I implemented most of the same leadership practices in rural and urban schools, I had to

adjust my leadership style to implement these practices based on the school's environment.

The most obvious learning curve for me going into a rural school involved the school culture, demographics, parental involvement, discipline and funding. In the rural environment, the school's culture was very reserved, there was very little interaction throughout the building and the stakeholders were not receptive to change. The school demographics represented a diverse population with 50% of the student body receiving free or reduced priced lunches. The student's aspirations for learning were high. There was consistent parental involvement and parents served on various committees. Student disciplinary issues were at a minimum which allowed greater opportunities for student learning. The funding source was the general fund budget and very limited Title I funds, which presented challenges to implementations of new curriculum and limited school personnel to hire.

In the urban environment, the school's culture was very welcoming and inviting, there was open communication throughout the building and the stakeholders were receptive to change. The student population was a high concentration of minorities with 80% free and reduced priced lunches and the student's aspirations for learning were low. Student disciplinary issues were challenging, which impeded student learning. There was very little participation in parent meetings, however, parents did attend student programs. The funding sources consisted of the general fund budget and Title I funding which provided opportunities for additional personnel to assist disadvantaged students. The demanding challenges in both contexts, required a leadership style from both transformational and transactional depending upon the situation.

James Burns, the founder of modern leadership theory, stated that two types of leadership have been successful in business and education: Transformational leadership that is focused on change, and transactional leadership that is focused on the supervisor and employee bargaining with each other. Both leadership models are noted as being complementary. However, Burns identified transformational as the most favorable style of leadership in producing results (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005, p. 13).

Organization of the Study

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction, background of the study, historical background and context of rural schools, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms, limitations of the study, nature of the study, conceptual framework, subjectivity, organization of the study and summary. Chapter 2 is the literature review. It includes provides an introduction, it analyzes the critical realism theory, leadership styles, successful school leadership, impact of poverty in schools, rural schools, principal leadership in rural schools and summary. Chapter 3 presents the introduction, research questions, population and sample, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures and summary. Chapter 4 provides the researcher's subjectivity and positionality, descriptive data, data collection, detailed analysis of data, summary of results and school leaders' address of high performance. Chapter 5 provides an introduction, summary of the study, summary of findings and conclusion, recommendations and implications.

Summary

Rural schools and districts have some of the largest student enrollments for rural areas in the nation. Startling statistics indicate that six out of ten rural students live in

poverty, four out of ten are minorities and 15% are English Language Learners. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores are near the bottom; however, the growth rates among rural and Hispanic students are noted to be among the nation's highest (Strange, Johnson, Showalter & Klein, 2012).

America's public schools are responsible for educating all students, but unfortunately, poor students have been left behind. Nationally, among impoverished students, 50% of fourth graders are unable to read with comprehension and more than 60% of eighth graders that are unable to do basic math (Kannapal & Clements, 2005; Carter, 2000). The success of middle-to-upper class white students in relation to lower class, poor, minority students is evidence that poor children have fallen between the cracks.

In this study, the researcher sought to discover successful leadership practices that principals, assistant principals, reading coaches, teachers, parents and community stakeholders perceive as being primary contributors to their success in rural, high-poverty, schools. The results of this study enhance the literature on rural school leadership by revealing what supportive leadership practices are and what they look like in rural, high-poverty, schools. This study may be used as a body of knowledge to study exemplar cases of rural schools and to assist rural principals and districts with implementing leadership practices that can help turn unsatisfactory, high-poverty, schools into high-performing schools.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The review of literature was organized to examine the leadership practices used in high-performing, high-poverty schools. The literature was designed to investigate key concepts specific to this study. To demonstrate understanding of the literature and evaluate research, the following topics were examined: leadership theories, leadership styles, successful school leadership, school leaders in rural schools, rural schools, characteristics of highly effective schools, and the impact of poverty in schools. In addition, literature was examined to identify the characteristics of leaders who lead effective school team, leadership models, behaviors, and core practices. While the focus was on school leaders, it was also important to target leaders of rural schools and their essential practices.

Critical Realism Theory

Critical realism is a meta-theory for social sciences (Fletcher, 2017). It is concerned with what constitutes an explanation, a prediction, and what the objectives of social science ought to be. For the purposes of this study, the research centers on Bhaskar's theory of critical realism. According to Bhaskar's work (as cited in Fletcher, 2017) from the 1970s, critical realism provided a philosophical framework for social scientific research with respect to ontology (the reality) and epistemology (knowledge of the reality). This theory utilizes three levels to identify and to explain underlying structures (events, activities, or phenomena) to explicate what is known and understood (as cited in Amber, 2017). For this

study, the researcher addresses the first level, which is empirical. At this level, events or objects are experienced and measured empirically. These events are explained with common sense and mediated through human experience and interpretation. The empirical level is also known as the transitive level of reality where social ideas, meanings, decisions and actions occur.

To frame this study, the researcher utilized Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) four leadership practices as the primary referencing theories. Additionally, other secondary theories contributed to the foundation of this study, including the idea of transformational (leaders recognize that a need or demand exists from followers) and transactional (leaders exchange one transaction to another among followers) leadership, as described by Burns (1978) and Bass (1990) (as cited in Bass & Riggo, 2006), as well as the three successful school leadership models: (a) the five exemplary leadership practices as described by Kouzes and Posner (2016); (b) the seven correlates for effective schools as described by Lezotte and Snyder (2011); and (c) the meta-analysis that discovered 66 behaviors within 21 areas of responsibilities that are key to principal leadership as described by Marzano et al., 2005).

Many studies have attempted to identify the general leadership principles and practices that support high-performing K-12 schools; however, there is limited research for rural contexts. The researcher seeks to discover two principals' beliefs, experiences and actions in rural high-achieving, high-poverty elementary schools.

To understand the beliefs, experiences and actions of principal leadership, the researcher must first explain these terms to show relation to how they interact within leadership styles. The study of belief is understood to be a cognitive act or state of a

proposition taken to be true (Egan, 2017). Experience is the skill or knowledge received by the act of direct observation or participation (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Authors such as Horvath, ABPP, Misra, Epner and Coope (2016) stated that over time, life experiences tend to shape the set of beliefs which ultimately influence behavior. Action is defined as a manner of performing (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

Leadership Styles

Understanding leadership styles allows a picture for leaders to understand operationally what methods are being used for providing ways, executing plans, and encouraging people (Marzano, 2005). Research indicates that many leadership styles exist in leaders of organizations, however, for this study, the researcher will focus on transformational and transactional leadership styles which are believed to be the most prominent in education and business.

James McGregor Burns theorized leadership in the form of two leadership styles: transformational and transactional leadership. Burns claimed that both forms of leadership have been influential in leading school leaders (Ubben et al., 2011). Bass's (1997) work (as cited in Bass & Riggio, 2006) stated that transformational and transactional leadership are present universally in all forms of organizations.

Transformational leadership is a leadership style that inspires individuals to work toward a committed goal in collaborative and independent working environment (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). This leadership style emulates shared leadership, an approach in which the leader delegates and surrenders power over people in order to achieve goals. This leadership envisions teachers as "craftsmen" rather than laborers.

Transactional leadership is a leadership style that operates based on a reward and

punishment system to gain cooperation. This style entails bargaining with followers. In transactional leadership, principals are viewed as micromanagers and teachers are viewed as laborers (Sergiovanni & Green, 2015).

Transactional Leadership Style

In order to lead an organization, it is important for the leader to understand the importance of order and structure (Bolman & Deal, 2013). A transactional leader is someone who values order and structure (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). They are likely to lead projects that require rules and regulations to complete objectives in an organized way.

Foster's work (as cited in Ubben et al., 2011) indicated that transactional leaders' ethical responsibilities operate from four characteristics. First, they help the organizational members learn through investigating situations and project. Second, transactional leaders are critical in encouraging leaders and individuals to evaluate the organization and the appropriateness for all individuals. Third, they are ethical in encouraging people to self-reflect and evaluate their values. The fourth characteristic is a transformative leader who is committed to social change. They seek to build a community who believe they can make a difference (Ubben et al., 2011).

Transactional leadership focuses on the management side to keep the status quo, which is essential to running an effective organization. This leadership style is known to provide negative criticism or punishment when followers fail to meet goals (Deng, 2017). Transactional leadership employs three components: contingent rewards, active management and passive management (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders who employ contingent rewards set expectations with agreed upon objectives for their followers in exchange of their support. To keep the organization running efficiently, active

management by exception leaders monitor their followers' work to prevent deviation from the assigned production. Passive management by exception is a leadership style where leaders anticipate mistakes and then act. This leadership style should be avoided because it gives the impression that something is always wrong, which may potentially cause harm to the organization (Deng, 2017).

Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational leadership motivates people to attain notable results (Sagor & Rickey, 2012). School leaders who operate in transformative styles provides educators with opportunities to have independence over specific jobs. Transformational leaders aim to redefine who they are and what they do. Those leading transformative organizations create new opportunities to share common characteristics and strategies (Sagor & Rickey, 2012).

Bass and Avolio's (1994) work (as cited in Marzano et al., 2005) characterized the behavior of transformational leaders as the "Four I's" of transformational leadership: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (p. 14). Kenneth Leithwood's (1994) work (as cited in Marzano et al., 2005, p. 15) stated that for principals to meet the needs of the 21st century, employing the Four I's of transformational leadership is crucial. The Four I's of Leithwood's transformational model, are defined as:

1. Individual consideration - the school leader must pay special attention to the needs of all staff members including those who may feel isolated.
2. Intellectual stimulation - the effective school administrator must help staff members to become innovative thinkers.

3. Inspirational motivation - the effective school administrator must communicate high expectations for students and teachers.
4. Idealized influence - the effective principal must model positive behavior for teachers through personal accomplishments and demonstrated character (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 15).

According to Bass and Riggio (2006) transformational leaders promote being effective leaders by serving as a role model to their employees, by motivating and inspiring others, by encouraging creativity from their employees and by attending to their followers' needs. Transformational leadership focuses on articulating and aligning the vision with followers for the purposes of changing the status quo to keep the competitiveness of the organization. This leadership style empowers followers by considering modeling high morals, considering the needs of others and by challenging followers through idealized influence. They inspire and motivate through inspirational motivation, they mentor and coach through individualized consideration, and they encourage creativity through intellectual stimulation (Deng, 2017).

Bass's (1998) work (as cited in Deng, 2017) noted that to achieve the best results both transformational and transactional leadership are needed within organizations. Based on my own experience as a leader, which is described in the subjectivity section of this paper, transformational and transactional leadership styles were used to accomplish school goals within in particular school contexts. As such, numerous studies have been conducted on transactional and transformational school leadership.

Research Studies on Transactional and Transformational Leadership

Multiple studies have been conducted on how principals modeled their beliefs, experiences and actions based on a transformational or transactional leadership style. This research was established to help the researcher in identifying leadership characteristics that existed in transformational and transactional rural leaders. In many ways, the successful integration of theory and practice is exemplary in understanding school leaders. The transferable embodiment of school leadership, in essence, demonstrates how educational leaders go beyond the bounded organizational context and extends into the wider social context within which schools are located and from which our students come (Shields, 2008). Therefore, researchers are eager to examining the leadership styles of transformational and transactional leaders.

In Veland's (2012) qualitative study of transformational leadership, eight principals (seven males and one female) with 5-32 years of experience were geographically selected throughout the state of Georgia. In pursuit of the findings, this study sought to answer the following research question: "What are the dispositions of transformational high school principals in the state of Georgia?" (p. 35). The findings of this study revealed that 10 dispositions were displayed by the eight principals. They were all team-centered, humble, compassionate, passionate, ethical, fair, reflective, empathetic, spiritual and had integrity. Moreover, these dispositions were found to be aligned with the definitions by the Interstate School Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

In Dorathy's (2013) qualitative study, eight principals in small rural southeast districts in Arizona were investigated to determine the level of degree of their

relationship among leadership styles and student achievement. Qualitative and quantitative research was conducted to determine the impact of transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership attributes on student achievement at the school level. The findings for the qualitative research revealed common leadership themes consistent with leadership styles of transformational attributes as measured by the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X). The characteristics on display included the following: the principals indicated that communication was important to raise awareness of self and others; it was important to value other's opinions; there should be self-reflection and clear information provided through meetings. Principals managed their day-to-day operations and provided vision by supplying guidance to the staff, by being visible throughout the school, by being familiar with problems and finding solutions and by mandating district, school board, and school principles and values. Principals show a commitment to growth to all their employees by working with all individuals, providing professional development to certified and classified employees, purchasing materials, being a good listener and acting as needed, using data to drive instruction, being hands on, being supportive, holding individuals accountable and having an open-door policy.

To build a school community, principals involve stakeholders to form committees, participate in community organizations, conduct quarterly community forums, and they are accessible to work with others. Finally, principals exhibited behaviors of foreknowledge by being involved, communicating with staff to know their concerns and needs, always looking for ways to improve, practice being proactive instead of reactive, prepare teachers for success, and make decisions to support the direction in which you are headed. The findings in Dorathy's (2013) study identified that prominent

leaders used contingent rewards and were transactional. Furthermore, the study showed no evidence of a relationship that existed among leadership and student achievement at the school level.

In Deng's (2017) qualitative study, research was conducted to provide insight into a comprehensive view of leadership in an education abroad office in a state university in the northeastern United States. This study employed a transformational-transactional theory approach to examine the leadership behaviors of one leader and eleven followers in the education abroad office. The findings of this study were that the WU EAO director demonstrated a transformational leadership style by exhibiting the 4 I's: inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration and idealized influence (p. 144).

Niece's (1983) qualitative research on effective leaders (as cited in Whitaker, 1997, p. 155) revealed three major themes:

1. Effective instructional leaders are *people oriented and interactional*. These principals do not allow the day-to-day operations to interfere with their interactions among the staff in the building. They remain visible and interactive with all stakeholders.
2. Effective instructional leaders' function within a network of other *principals*. Principals kept in contact with their peers on state, local and national levels.
3. Effective instructional leaders had administrators who acted as mentors.

In the previous studies, the distinctions among transformational and transactional leadership were identified in Balyer's research. Balyer's (2012) qualitative research study of the transformational leadership behaviors of school principals, examined the

perceptions of 30 teachers of six different schools in Istanbul, Turkey, were purposively chosen for the study. The study found that principals demonstrated high level characteristics of transformational leadership on a daily basis, which had a significant direct and indirect impact on teachers' willingness to change and on their work performance. Principals demonstrated idealized influence behaviors by imitating exemplary work ethics; by inspiring and encouraging followers to reach the goals they displayed through inspirational motivation behaviors; they presented individualized consideration behaviors by serving as a coach to help followers reach their goals; and they displayed potential and intellectual stimulation behaviors to promote innovation and creativity to increase productivity. These four transformational leadership behaviors were positively related to greater employee acceptance and increased performances and job satisfaction at school. In addition, it was asserted that female principal behaviors are more respected than their male counterparts.

Successful School Leadership

Show me a good school and I'll show you a good school leader...when you poke the inner workings of a successful school, you will find--without fail--a skillful leader who understands how to transform educational practice, not just transact educational business. (Crews & Weakley, 1995, p. 5)

In leadership, principals enter schools with their own set of values, beliefs and philosophies, all of which impact the organization's expectations. The impact of the principal's effectiveness is determined by what is valued as being important by the principal, the use of clarity, and the commitment to those values. The principal's values shape the direction of leadership and influences others to follow (Ubben et al., 2011).

Many authors claim that America is hurting for great leadership. To determine the veracity of that statement, one must first define great leadership. Burns (1978) declared that the urgency of leadership does not measure up to the efficacious leadership that is required in a leader. Instead, men and women in power have personified mediocrity or irresponsibility in their leadership roles and responsibilities. According to Gardner (1990) leadership must be distinct and not confused with authority, status or power. Kouzes and Posner (2016) stated that leadership is not about status but about the direction you are headed and how you guide others to get there.

Equally important, Burns (1978) advocated that to understand leadership one must first understand the essence of power through relationships. Power should be used collectively among the leader and constituency and not passed around like a baton (Burns, 1978). Many leaders exhibit power, but all power holders are not gifted in leadership to use power effectively (Gardner, 1990). Gifted leaders use non-threatening power through relationships to know their followers' needs, aspirations and their fears (Gardner, 1990).

Throughout history, leadership has been viewed differently based on the leader's context. In most societies, great leaders in leadership positions were commonly referred to as "head of state," "military commander," "chief," or "king" to differentiate the ruler from other members of society (Bass, 1990, p. 11). Theorists Burns (1978) and Gardner (1990) defined leadership as leaders influencing followers to believe in the vision of both the leaders and followers. There are as many definitions of leadership as there are scholars (Bass, 1990).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, researchers and educators were examining and conducting studies on schools to determine why some schools were effective in spite of the high levels of poverty and minority (Edmonds, 1981). The Effective School Movement, conducted by the late Ronald R. Edmonds, stated that if specific practices such as the “Correlates of Effective Schools” were implemented in high-poverty low performing schools, student achievement would increase (Brown, 2012). Edmonds’s defined the characteristics of the effective school and put them into practice in a number of poor schools in New York City. Today, approximately 42% of the nation's school districts, base their programs and procedures on effective school’s research (Brown, 2012). The overriding principles of the effective school movement are that all children can learn, that schools can be effective, and that schools must be held accountable for becoming effective and providing "learning for all."

In the 1980s, the quality of schooling in relation to the quality of learning was a direct reflection of the role that school leadership played among their teachers and staff (Sergiovanni, 2001). The belief that principal leadership makes a difference in school success alluded to several studies conducted in 1978 by Gilbert Austin. These assertions led to findings in 18 high-achieving and 12 low-achieving schools that performed outside the average statistical band on the state's accountability test for all Maryland schools. These studies revealed that principals who exerted strong leadership, participated directly in instructional matters, maintained high expectations for success and were oriented toward academic goals that greatly influenced the school's effectiveness and success (Sergiovanni, 2001). Understanding the effectiveness of principals in these studies and others have leader to effective models for school leaders.

Leadership Models

How we define leadership ultimately depends on the individual leader, context, and the nature of the goals being practiced. Most definitions of leadership operate at two core functions: providing direction and exercising influence (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leadership persuades, inspires and influences others to obtain goals, to act or respond in a shared direction and to motivate and coordinate to accomplish objectives. Above all, “Leaders create visions for others and then direct them to achieve that vision” (Dubrin, 1997, p. 1).

Furthermore, Hallinger’s (2003) work (as cited in Day, Sammons, Leithwood, Hopkins, Gu, Brown & Ahtaridou, 2011) on instructional leadership indicated that there are three categories of practices that are important in successfully improving schools. Understanding the mission, instructional program and the school climate are important to the functions of the school leader who focuses on instruction. The three categories are described as:

1. Mission – Define the school’s mission by communicating the school’s goals and setting directions.
2. Instructional program – Manage the instructional program by supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum and by monitoring student progress through the teaching and learning program.
3. School climate – Promote a positive school learning climate which encompasses protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers

and providing incentives for learning to develop people and refine and align the organization (Day et al., 2011, p. 19).

To support this claim, Niece (1993) and, Smith and Andrews (1989) and Hallinger (2003) pointed out successful leaders are instructional leaders who communicates a shared vision, manages the instructional program, establishes relationships, promotes a positive school climate and has an administrative mentor (as cited in Whitaker, 1997; Day et al., 2011). Further, Schein (1980) believed that in order to achieve effective organizations, establishments require good leadership and good membership working hand in hand (as cited in Gardner, 1990). Maxwell (2011) stated, “Good leadership isn’t about advancing yourself. It’s about advancing your team” (p. xx). In *5 Levels of Leadership*, Maxwell (2011) provided five proven levels that maximize leadership potential:

1. Positional leadership is an entry level position. Individuals at this first level have no influence and are considered bosses instead of leaders. These individuals rely on rules, regulations and policies to control their people.
2. Permission leadership is based on developing relationships. At this second level, for leaders to develop relationships they must establish trust by getting to know their people.
3. Production leadership is based on results. At this third level, leaders are known as change agents. People follow these types of leaders based on their influence and the credibility of their accomplishments for the organization. Leaders in this position, get work done, boost morale, increase retention,

resolve challenging problems, make difficult decisions that make a difference and achieve goals.

4. People development leadership refers to leaders that become great by empowering others. These leaders invest their positions, relationships and productivity into their followers to develop leaders. As a result, life-long relationships are established because of the personal investment in their employees.
5. Pinnacle leadership is the highest and most difficult to accomplish. Only naturally gifted leaders make it to level 5. These leaders develop people to become leaders and they gain a positive reputation because of who they are and what they represent. (p. 6).

The *Five Levels of Leadership* function as a process rather than a position.

According to Maxwell's process, for leaders to become successful, they must lead well and help members to become effective leaders. These five principles of beliefs are to move leaders from Level 1, the level at which people follow because they are required, to Level 5, the pinnacle level where people follow because of who you are and the values you represent (Maxwell, 2011).

Additionally, to lead effectively, leaders must adopt certain beliefs. *Learning Leadership*, adopted by Kouzes and Posner (2016), confirmed five beliefs for leaders to guide their journey to become exemplary leaders. First, leaders must believe that they can lead a school to excellence. The greatest obstacles leaders will encounter is themselves. To lead others, leaders must believe in themselves and their leadership abilities. Leaders must be confident that authentic leadership comes from within and that

to lead successfully one must establish a commitment to becoming a better leader. Specially, the “best leaders are the best learners” (p. 52). The exemplary has to aspire to excel. The best leaders have a clear understanding that it is not about them, but about helping others to succeed. Top performing leaders lead not to shine in the spotlight but to make a difference in the mission they serve (Kouzes & Posner, 2016). Next, the exemplary leader needs to challenge self. Leaders perform at their personal best when they challenge themselves. To do so, leaders must step outside of their comfort zone and challenge the status quo to open doors for new growth opportunities (Kouzes & Posner, 2016).

The exemplar leader must also engage support. To become your best, leadership requires seeking help from others to learn and grow. The best leaders seek good advice and counsel from coaches, role models and people who can open doors. Successful leadership requires teamwork, collaboration, feedback, mutual trust, and support of others to make extraordinary things happen (Kouzes & Posner, 2016). Finally, the exemplar leader needs to be deliberate in how they practice success. Being an exemplary leader requires a commitment of lifetime daily learning and assessment. Leaders should carry the mantra of a twenty-first learner, “No matter how good I am, I can always get better” (p. 178).

According to Kouzes and Posner (2016) leaders can learn to become better leaders and build upon their capacity to lead by believing in themselves, by aspiring to excel, by challenge themselves, and by engaging in support and practicing deliberately. Comparatively, the work of Maxwell (2011) and Kouzes and Posner (2016) inferred that leaders’ beliefs, behaviors and values influence their leadership practices daily.

Characteristics of Effective School Leadership

Schmoker (2016) revealed that the real path to success requires leaders to focus on what is vital and embrace simplicity and diligence. A leader's effectiveness relies heavily on taking care of what Covey's (2004) work (as cited in Schmoker, 2016) calls "first things." Leaders must take care of things that are priority and demonstrate a focused leadership. Mike Schmoker (2016) in his book, *Leading with Focus*, formed a five-step formula for ensuring effective school leadership in the areas of teaching and learning.

- Step 1. Research-Carefully. Leaders must carefully determine the best possible actions or practices for their schools. It is critical that decisions be based on best practices instead of popularity.
- Step 2. Reduce-Until it Hurts. Once leaders have conducted their research from various resources, they must select the initiatives that will be most effective for their schools.
- Step 3. Clarify-Obsessively. Leaders must make clarity a priority to establish clear communication. Schmoker (2016) maintained that in order to lead effective schools, leaders need to shun the academic jargon such as metacognition, balanced literacy, differentiated instruction, etc. and develop a clear understanding of professional terms. According to Schmoker (2016), popular terminology produced havoc on clear conversations which are required for improved practice.
- Step 4. Practice-Repeatedly. Leaders should repeatedly provide practice opportunities for teachers to obtain mastery. When implementing new

curriculum, leaders should provide teachers ample time and multiple opportunities to practice what they have learned with additional follow-up practice sessions.

Step 5. Monitor-and Respond Immediately. Leaders must be fixated on monitoring daily teaching practices and how they are being implemented. Administrators cannot assume that instructional practices are so embedded that monitoring is not required. Schmoker (2016) stated that, “What gets measured and monitored gets done” (p. 23).

The influential work of Brookover and Edmonds’s (1979) work (as cited in Sergiovanni, 2001) characterized successful school leadership in three aspects. First, successful principals have high regards toward staff with conformity to pursue shared goals and purposes with a clear sense of the mission. Secondly, successful principals are goal oriented, articulate and model the school’s purpose. Third, successful principals are proactive and use their energy toward building and formulating a vision of what the school can become. Kafele (2017) quoted, “Before you can think realistically about what your school can accomplish, you must already have a vision for what it will accomplish” (p. 14).

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) asserted that successful school leadership can be summarized by five claims. Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers’ instruction. School leaders, both teachers and principals, provide most of the leadership in schools, but other potential sources of leadership exist. This is particularly effective when a core set of leadership practices form the “basics” of successful leadership and are valuable in almost

all educational contexts. Successful school leaders respond productively to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented policy context in which they work. They also respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students.

Leadership success varies upon a leaders' values, qualities and skills to understand underlying problems while simultaneously resolving these matters in context (Day et al., 2011). Cotton (2003) asserted that there are 26 principal behaviors demonstrated in successful schools that are classified into five categories. In Category 1, leaders establish a clear focus on student learning. In this category, the principal has a vision, clear learning goals, and high expectations for learning for all students. In Category 2, the school leader must establish interactions and relationships. In this category, the principal must communicate and interact; provide emotional and interpersonal support; be visible and accessible; and extend outreach and involvement to parents and the community. In Category 3, the school leader must establish school culture. In this category, the principal welcomes shared decision making, collaboration, support of risk taking, and continuous improvement. Category 4 supports the school leader who establishes instruction. In this category, the principal discusses instructional issues, observes classrooms, gives feedback, supports teacher autonomy, and protects instructional time. The final category requires the school leader to establish accountability. In this category, the principal monitors progress and uses student progress data for program improvement.

Cotton's (2003) five categories of leadership behaviors aligned with Leithwood and Riehl (2003), Kouzes and Posner (2016), Lezotte and Snyder (2011), and Marzano,

Waters, and McNulty (2005) successful school leadership models (Table 2.1). According to the data, there are at least five leadership behaviors that are present in successful high-achieving, high-poverty schools which are centered on student learning, relationships, school culture, instruction and accountability. I believe these leadership behaviors may be found evident in rural high-achieving, high-poverty schools.

Behaviors of Effective School Leaders

Effective school leaders in today's schools exhibit multiple behaviors in performing the duties and responsibilities specific to teaching and learning. They are involved in curricular and instructional issues, management, counseling and the list continues (Cotton, 2003). Research conducted by Elmore (2000), and Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2000) confirms that this important role extends beyond the scope of the school principal to involve other leaders as well. As such, research has been conducted on leadership behaviors.

Cotton (2003) found five categories of leadership. She maintains that school leaders must have a keen interest in instruction. First, school leaders must establish a clear focus on student learning to ensure the success of the population they serve. Further, school leaders must establish opportunities for interactions and build relationships with all school stakeholders, both internally and externally. The key stakeholders in instructional leadership include students, leadership team, teachers, support staff, parents, and the community. School leaders also must establish a culture of learning where instruction is top priority and expectations for students and schools are met. Exhibiting these behaviors will ensure accountability for learning to ensure students within that school are all successful.

Table 2.1

Comparison of Successful School Leadership Models

Cotton (2003) Five categories of leadership behaviors	Leithwood & Riehl (2003) Four Core Leadership Practices	Kouzes & Posner (2016) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership	Lezotte & Snyder (2011) Seven Correlates of Effective Schools	Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005) 66 Behaviors within 21 of Principals Responsibilities
Category 1: Establish a clear focus on student learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting Direction: Develop goals and inspire a mission through building a shared vision. Foster acceptance of group goals. 	Model the Way to allow your actions to align with shared values.	Develop a clear and focused mission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on setting clear goals. Optimize to inspire and lead. Provide direct involvement in curriculum, instruction and assessment.
Category 2: Establish interactions and relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop people by offering intellectual stimulation. Offer individualized support and consideration. Model appropriate values, beliefs, behaviors and practices. 	Encourage the Heart by recognizing contributions and celebrating values.	Provide opportunities to learn/provide time on task.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide affirmation to recognize and celebrate rewards. Communicates and provides self confidence in the ideals/beliefs. Take risks as a change agent. Provide contingent rewards to recognize accomplishments and rewards. Demonstrate visibility to provide contact and interaction with teachers, staff and students.
Category 3: Establish school culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redesigning the Organization Attend to internal and external relationships to enable school functions as a professional learning community. 	Enable others to act by establishing relationships trust, teamwork, confidence and empowerment.	<p>Provide a safe and orderly environment.</p> <p>Provide positive home school relations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide input to involve teachers with the decision-making process. Provide communication to keep strong lines of conversation. Provide order to maintain an orderly school. Establish a culture to promote a cohesive staff.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the school culture. • Modify organizational structure. • Build collaborative process. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish awareness of teachers and their personal lives to form relationships. • Provide outreach to be an advocate for the school. • Provide situational awareness to identify under current situations.
Category 4: Establish instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage the Teaching and Learning Program • Focus on teaching and learning through staffing the program. • Provide instructional support. • Monitor school activity. • Align resources. • Buffer staff from distractions to their work. 	Inspire a Shared Vision by enlisting others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create strong instructional leadership. • Establish frequent monitoring of student progress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources (materials, supplies, professional development, etc.) that are necessary to enhance teaching. • Hands on approaches to knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessments. • Provide discipline to protect teacher's instructional times.
Category 5: Establish Accountability:	Create high expectations and communicate directions.	Challenge the Process by taking risks and looking for innovative ways to improve.	Create high expectations for success.	Providing feedback through monitoring/evaluating.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) created four core leadership practices based on research conducted on effective school leaders that they deem necessary for school success. First, they believe school leaders who have a clear vision set directions for learning. In order to fulfill their vision, they have to create a system that supports continuous development for those they lead. Oftentimes, it requires redesigning the organization to meet those instructional needs. Another core leadership practice addresses how the school leader manages the teaching and learning program.

Kouzes and Posner (2016) addresses five behaviors of exemplary leadership when leaders are operating at their best. Leaders lead by example, as such it is important for leaders to model the way in which they want their team to operate. Further, the vision has to be clear, thus the school leader needs to inspire a shared vision. Often unspoken is how the leader challenges the process for learning. Accepting average is never enough. Additionally, when the school team sees the work of an accountable leader, it enables others on that team to act. Lastly, but certainly not least is the leader must encourage the heart.

Lezotte and Snyder (2011) highly recommends seven correlates that are successful for school improvement in effective schools. Lezotte worked with Edmonds (1981) to conduct research that began the process for these correlates. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) believes that school header must have high expectations for success and perform as a strong instructional leader. Strong instructional leaders operate with a clear and focused mission. Throughout the school day, there are consistent opportunities for learning with uninterrupted time on task. The instructional leader also inspects what they expect (Covey, 2004) by frequently monitoring of student progress. All teaching and

learning occur in a safe and orderly environment. Lastly, instructional leaders know that success cannot happen in school without a positive home-school relations.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) conducted extensive research to identify 66 behaviors which they packed into 21 areas of responsibility in which they maintain are key to principal leadership. These include situational awareness, order flexibility, discipline, and outreach. Instructionally, they list monitoring and evaluating, culture, resources, knowledge of curriculum, involvement in curriculum and instruction, intellectual stimulation, instruction and assessment. Operationally, they believe the leader must allow for input, change agent, focus, contingent rewards, communication, and ideals/beliefs. Additionally, the instructional leader must maintain visibility, optimization and establish positive and ongoing relationships.

These leadership behavior practices are critical and have been linked to high performances in urban and suburban high-poverty schools. However, they do not necessarily provide a clear and complete picture of the kinds of leadership that are necessarily in rural settings, since many rural schools are impacted by the disadvantages of poverty, limited English speaking students, inadequate resources, and challenges of the rural context (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). The principles and practices may be somewhat particular to the context. Further, they do not necessarily help us understand what those practices look like in the day to day operations of the rural school. In Table 2.2, the researcher revealed findings from two case studies that were conducted in rural schools which reveal insight on what supportive leadership behavior practices could possibility look like in rural contexts.

Table 2.2 Leadership Behavior Practices in Rural Context

Leadership Behavior Practices in Rural Elementary & Secondary Schools	
Setting Directions	<p>In Wallin and Newton’s (2013) study, 12 rural teaching principals in Alberta and Manitoba explored instructional practices in the area of setting directions. The findings revealed that teaching principals felt their role as a teacher and principal increased their ability to provide instructional leadership in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One principal maintained a clear vision by having daily contact with students and focusing on student needs. • Principals focused their vision on citizenship, early years programming (with outcomes, assessment with literacy and numeracy), community and global responsibility. In addition, principals continuously tried to develop values of confidence, honesty, independence and good work ethics in their students by seeking input from others, spending time learning about local culture and their communities and developing relationships among students. • Principals communicated their vision during staff meetings, in school settings throughout the school and by establishing open lines of communications with stakeholders. • Principals set high expectations through leading by example. Principals demonstrated that teaching was privileged over administrative responsibilities except for emergencies. Therefore, principals observed classrooms regularly and set expectations of and provided support for parents. • Principals developed shared goals through staff discussions and tailored professional development. • Principals motivated and inspired students, staff, parents and community members. <p>In Hartnett’s (2004) study, three principals in Maine explored principal leadership in improving rural schools. The findings revealed the following:</p> <p>Principals Set a Common Vision and Goals for the school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals reinforced the purpose of the school by setting clear directions and goals, establishing staff member commitment and holding staff accountable for the commitment.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals focus on learning and protecting time spent in the classroom. • Principals prepare students to compete with any student in the world upon graduation. • Principals provide frequent monitoring and attention to staff conversation to build staff commitment and empowerment. • Principals recognized the important of growth through a school leadership team to help promote development through the school's direction. • Principals attempt to create a culture of family or team. <p>Principals held High Expectations for Staff and Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals set an expectation for beliefs and practices by providing clarity for what high expectations were, and what they should look like, for adults in the buildings and staff are held accountable. • Principals set expectations by putting non-negotiables in writing and by following through with the staff. • Through in-depth orientation, principals discussed expectations with new staff members when they were hired. • Principals set the bar high for expectations and accountability for students by empowering a committee to design universal practices for students regards preparing themselves to become learners.
Developing People	<p>Wallin and Newton's (2013) study found that in the area of developing people, teaching principals characterized themselves as learners, not experts. Principals' viewed themselves in a facilitative role as "learning leaders," the "guide on the side" or "back-seat leaders."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals modeled appropriate values and practices through leading by example, establishing open lines of communication, respecting others, and by demonstrating their familiarity with curricula and assessment. • Principals developed others by providing opportunities for leadership, by providing professional development through use of networking with other administrators and by providing individualized support for struggling students. • High visibility and relational boundaries potentially took emotional and physical tolls on the principals. <p>Hartnett's (2004) study found that in developing people:</p>

	<p>Principals Modeled Beliefs and Behaviors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals modeled a desired behavior and attitude in the school. The principal communicated expectations for the students and provided a clear message to the staff, parents and community members about what is important. • Principals modeled personal responsibility by taking full responsibility of the progress of the school and by providing important interaction by greeting students, staff and parents. • Principals modeled the behavior of being visible inside and outside of school at events or games. • Principals walk the walk and talk the talk without comprising themselves. <p>Principals Supported and Developed Staff and Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals took steps to motivate and move staff members to new and better levels of performances through individualized support and attention. • Principals worked individually with staff members and provided opportunities and feedback in support of their work practices. • Principals provide opportunities for staff members to develop into their craft. • Principals have an open-door policy when it comes to listening to staff. • Principals share resources to help teachers grow. • Principals worked individually with at-risk students who needed individual attention and support. • Principals provide support to students who drop out of school by calling them to see if they are okay or they would like to return to school. • Principals created individualized plans for struggling students in order for them to have an opportunity to become successful. • Principals developed their staff by challenging their beliefs and assumptions which led staff to think differently and change their practices.
Redesigning the Organization	<p>Wallin and Newton's (2013) study found that in the area of redesigning the organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals restructured their schools into multi-age/multi-grade programming due to declining enrollments. <p>Hartnett's (2004) study found that in redesigning the organization:</p> <p>Principals Focused on the Instructional Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals restructured the school's schedule and classes to better enhance access and rigor and to increase contact time and improve learning for students.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals eliminated remedial courses to challenge all students. • Principals redesigned structures in the schools to assist students in meeting success by providing every student with an adviser for help or guidance. • Principals placed a high emphasis on instructional and management moves to improve classroom practices. <p>Principals established an Orderly and Consistent School Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals established consistency due to lack of order and follow-through. • Principals established appropriate conduct for staff. • Principals emphasized the focus of the school that school comes first. • Principals managed external factors and the central office.
Managing the Teaching Learning Program	<p>Wallin and Newton's (2013) study found that in the area of managing the instructional program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals spent a lot of effort in accessing external support from community, grant writing opportunities and fundraising for their instructional programs. • Principals organize internal support to share resources, professional development and to utilize targeted staffing initiatives to achieve goals. • Principals take on additional responsibilities and offer small incentives to support and retain staff whenever necessary. • Principals were noted for being highly flexible, committed to working above and beyond and were devoted to their community. • Principals used creative scheduling to provide opportunities for teaming, professional development, teacher preparation and to develop time for resource and intervention for students. • Principals were faced with reduced budgets which presented challenges to hire, retain, and to effectively place staff due to increasing responsibilities and diminishing program opportunities. <p>Hartnett's (2004) study found that in managing the teaching and learning program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals Hired Excellent Staff • Principals hired the right candidates to operate more efficiently and deliver for students. • Principals must hire candidates who believe and support the school's vision. • Principals must be willing to fire teachers who are not performing.

Research Studies Demonstrating Core Practices of School Leaders

Multiple studies have been conducted that demonstrates the core practices of highly effective leaders. One such practice that appears most often in research is the focus for managing teaching and learning is to provide frequent monitoring of student progress. Frequent monitoring consists of using data to guide instructional decisions. Students' progress can be monitored in two ways: First, the students' progress can be monitored in a summative manner which is the final score; and second, the students' progress can be monitored in a formative manner which allows the teacher to use performance results to acknowledge strengths and work on weaknesses to adjust. For principals to create a culture that is data driven, two important steps are required:

1. Principals must develop an effective data management system that is timely, comprehensive, and coherent, and has a level of continuity that provides information on student progress over time.
2. Principals must ensure that staff members receive the training they need to utilize data effectively and efficiently in instructional decision-making (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011, p. 96).

The involvement in curriculum, instruction and assessment is a critical component for instructional leaders. For principals to provide guidance and lead teachers, they must have knowledge of effective practices with curriculum and instruction, observe and recognize good teaching and provide instructional feedback to teachers (Marzano et al., 2005). According to Marzano et al., (2005) feedback is the most powerful modification that enhances student achievement.

Both studies in Table 2.2 revealed that Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) four core practices: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization and managing the teaching learning program are evident with contributing success within these two rural schools. The study further indicated that principals expressed how their leadership influenced their school's improvement through a shared vision and high expectations, modeled beliefs and behaviors, support and development of staff and students, focus on the instructional program, focus on providing a safe and orderly environment and a focus on hiring the right candidates who are on board with the school's vision.

Based on the two studies, one may assume that principals spend more time improving schools with setting directions and developing people than they do with redesigning the organization and managing the teaching learning program. A second assumption may be that leadership practices used in urban and suburban high-achieving; high-poverty schools are consistent with those used in rural contexts. Insight from these studies, will help the researcher reveal whether leadership practices that are used by principals in urban and suburban are consistent with principals who lead two rural reward high-poverty elementary schools in South Carolina.

School leaders have used multiple strategies, programs and techniques to create changes in schools in an effort to affect teaching and learning. Numerous studies have been conducted on redesigning the organization, developing teachers, and managing teaching and learning programs. Researchers are interested in depicting the principal's core beliefs, experiences and daily practices in high-performing, high-poverty schools

(Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Kouzes and Posner, 2016; Lezotte & Snyder, 2011; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).

One important aspect of redesigning the organization is building relationships. Successful leaders build relationships that require mutual communication, listening, admitting mistakes, daily visibility and accessibility (Brock & Grady, 2012). Effective relationships are based on trust. Kouzes and Posner (2016) stated that in order to “enable others to act” leaders must first establish an environment of trust and facilitate relationships. A critical component to earning trust is getting to know your employees and allowing them to know you (Brock & Grady, 2012). In Barth (2006) and Irons and Aller’s (2007) work, “Trust is not freely given. Instead, it must be earned and modeled through honesty and ethical practices” (as cited in Brock & Grady, 2012, p. 95).

Effective leaders earn trust by sharing their beliefs of teaching, learning, discipline and interest in parental involvement with all stakeholders. Moreover, effective leaders place an expectation of high regard for school academics, for assuring parents that their children are cared for, and for assuring teachers that they will work simultaneously along with them (Brock & Grady, 2012). Maintaining trusting relationships requires an environment of mutual communication and a culture of open feedback where staff and students are free to express their opinions (Brock & Grady, 2012).

Exemplary leaders realize they cannot make things happen alone, that it takes invested partners who work as a tenacious team to make remarkable things happen (Kouzes & Posner, 2016). Outreach to invested partners is very important for the success of schools. Effective leaders advocate and act as a spokesperson on behalf of the school for all stakeholders. In doing so, the leader must comply with all district and state

mandates, be a counsel for parents, the district office, and the community as a whole (Marzano et al., 2005). Parental involvement plays a major role in positive home-school relations. In effective schools, parents and members of the community are acclimated with the school's mission (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Henderson and Mapp's review of research found that students whose parents were involved in their academics were more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher level programs, pass their classes, exhibit better social skills, behavior, and more likely to graduate and attend college (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011).

The school principal is the key element in developing a safe and orderly environment for the school (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). School cultures and climates that are orderly, purposeful and free from physical and emotional harm are climates that are conducive to the teaching and learning environment. Creating and maintaining a safe and orderly environment is imperative to creating an effective school (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Studies conducted by Ylimaki, Jacobson and Drysdale (2007) in the USA, UK and Australia revealed that principals brought order to chaos by displaying authoritarian or directive leadership styles.

Research conducted by Karin Chenoweth (2007) suggested that successful disciplinary approaches leads to safe and orderly schools (as cited in Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Chenoweth examined 15 schools that had significant numbers of students of color, low-income, or both, that had high academic proficiency or impressive pace of improvement. The school facilities were different in terms of parent and community involvement, and district support. Based on the research findings, these schools minimized the traditional discipline by implementing school wide behavior expectations

that focused on positive behavior and productive use of time. In addition, these schools shared an underlying respect for both the students and adults within the school. Brown and Anfara's (2002) research (as cited in Lezotte & Snyder, 2011) suggested that successful schools that are good at creating safe and orderly environments and positive school cultures have principals who promote collaboration and collegiality among the staff.

In the study, *Successful leadership in challenging, US schools: Enabling principles, enabling schools* (2005,) seven challenging schools, of which six were “high need,” were investigated to determine if the principals utilized Leithwood and Riehl’s (2003) core practices. The core practices are setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. In addition, the study looked at what enabled these leaders to translate Leithwood and Riehl’s (2003) core practices in the areas of accountability, caring, and learning.

The school samples consisted of five elementary schools (various age groups), one middle school (grades 5-8) and one high school (grades 9-12). The diversity and educational experiences of the principals studied consisted of five women, two men, three African Americans, four Caucasians, two held doctoral degrees, five had 30 years of experience, three had 19 years of administrative experience, one maintained leadership at multiple sites and four were novice principals. The schools selected represented various school contexts: three schools were located within the same large urban district, two schools were located in two small districts (one with primarily urban characteristics and one rural characteristics), one school was from a first-ring suburban district and one from a rural district.

The findings of this study revealed that all seven principals in the study employed Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) core practices: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization to a greater or lesser extent. Depending on the internal and external factors, each principal had to adapt their core practices to meet the conditions in their contextual environment to enable school improvement. The evidence revealed that the majority of principals and mid-career teachers were appreciative of the transparency that the standards and high stakes testing brought to their teaching practices. Veteran teachers, however, considered the tests an infringement on their autonomy, and felt that the time invested in testing had a negative impact on effective learning. Jacobson et al., (2005) stated special education teachers argued that standardized testing was inappropriate for their students because it caused "psychological damage" (as cited in Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki & Giles, 2005). Jacobson et al., (2005) further noted that the special education teachers felt marginalized by their principals whom they perceived favored test scores more than student needs.

The caring principal prioritized the development of people. The principals in this study were able to establish positive school cultures and support teachers professionally and personally by responding to their daily needs. The learning principle strengthened the redesigning of the organizations. Principals encouraged teachers to share instructional leadership functions that targeted improving student and their own learning. As a result, the following three practices emerged that helped demonstrate how school redesign was developed by the learning principle: (a) de-privatizing practice - principals used best practices as a public resource in faculty meetings to improve teaching and learning and as peer coaching, which allowed teachers to share their practices in public; (b) modeling and

mentoring – principals modeled instructional leadership by leading by example. For instance, principals purposefully attended workshops, discussed professional articles and journals with teachers and assisted teachers with conducting research on ways to improve student learning. In addition, principals mentored teachers to help them assume responsibilities to become teacher leaders for committee work and conducting faculty meetings. Some principals encouraged teachers to pursue their careers in leadership preparation programs; (c) collaborative structures – principals established interconnected committees which consisted of teachers, parents and students assuming leadership roles to make decisions that were focused on the improvement of student learning. In addition, principals were proficient in decreasing teacher isolation by changing school structures and schedules to facilitate collaboration and teamwork.

The overall conclusion of this study was that the seven principals demonstrated competence with core practices: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization which Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) contended are necessary for school success in any context. In addition, the study concluded that the principal's exhibited practices that enhanced the accountability, caring, and learning principles which in turn enabled their schools to succeed.

A separate research study, drawn from a larger international study, examined successful principals of challenging high-poverty schools in the USA, England and Australia. The reported case findings of 13 challenging schools identified four schools in USA, four in Australia, and five in England. The study *Making a difference in challenging high-poverty schools: Successful principals in the USA, England, and Australia* by Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale (2007) was conducted to understand

leadership practices that were used by the principals and head teachers of high-poverty schools to combat culturally diverse school challenges. The conclusion of this study revealed that the 13 schools often demonstrated similar leadership traits and leadership practices.

In setting directions, the evidence revealed that all 13 principals expressed concurrent intentions to secure the building and redefine the school's focus on teaching and learning. The principals provided a safe environment for students and faculty and provided an "open door" policy for parents and community members. In developing people, principals of challenging schools had to be creative with providing personal and professional resources to help people grow as teachers and learners. These principals used their own expertise to develop teachers or sought external programs. In addition, principals noted that the use of authentic learning was important to developing teachers. In redesigning the organization, successful principals designed their schools as effective organizations. Teachers and students were supported and sustained in their performances. Regarding safety of their schools, principals designed the schools into effective places for teaching and learning. Principals used a five-site based management committee to distribute key responsibilities which consisted of parent representation in the areas of: curriculum, discipline, parent involvement, morale and beautification. The study further indicated that the leadership traits exhibited were empathy, passion, persistence and flexible thinking.

Impact of Poverty in School

One of the most difficult challenges in rural schools are dealing with school cultures. Creating environments which are conducive to learning in rural schools are

with good intentions however, often accomplished (Gorski, 2008). It is noted, students living in poverty do not perform as well as wealthier students (Gorski, 2016). Kozol (2005) signified that public education's most pressing challenges are those of poverty (as cited in Peter Balonon-Rosen, 2015). Therefore, one may ask, why are poorer students performing lower than wealthier students? Although there are many responses, Kozol (2005) pointed out four important key factors which pointed to race and poverty (as cited in Peter Balonon-Rosen, 2015). One significant factor alluded that inequalities among race and class lines started long before children entered school furthermore indicating that every child has a right to obtain an early childhood education. Moreover, the availability and actual recruitment often lacked representations and enrollment among African Americans and Latino families in the developmental pre-K program.

Secondly, unequal access to early education has lasting effects. Although school segregation is illegal, a recent report of the Boston Public Schools found that students in low-income, African American and Latino families were not afforded early access to early education. Thirdly, a focus on testing pushes schools toward takeover, which can benefit businesses more than students. More specifically, school officials that are confronted by continual low scores are more prone to seek outside the district toward businesses and nonprofit communities to find a solution and lastly, corporate interests now have a larger role in education policy discussions. In particular, the more collaboration extended to business-minded organizations leads to invitations for businesses to participate in policy making for public schools particularly, in schools with black and Latino students (as cited in Peter Balonon-Rosen, 2015, p. 2).

Examining beliefs about students in poverty, alluded to Oscar Lewis's 1961 book, *The Children of Sanchez*, Lewis conducted an ethnographic study of small Mexican communities. The study revealed approximately 50 attributes that were centered on frequent violence, a lack of a sense of history and a neglect of planning for the future. Lewis findings suggested a universal culture of poverty on the premises that people in poverty share a consistent and observable "culture." Conversely, researchers around the world confer there is no such thing as a culture of poverty but rather a collection of false stereotypes. Opponents supporting the claim of a culture of poverty, indicated that poor people are unmotivated and have weak work ethics when in reality poor people do not lack work ethics or lower levels of motivation. Instead, poor working adults work more hours each week than their wealthier colleagues.

Another stereotype is that poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education. According to Gorski (2008) poor parents hold the same values about education than wealthier counterparts do (as cited in Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Leichter, 1978). Allegory, low-income parents are less likely to attend school functions or volunteer because they have limited access to school involvement and not because they care less about education. In addition, poor parents are categorized as having a linguistically deficient language but on the contrary, low-income students are no less sophisticated than those who speak "standard English." Lastly, poor people are stereotyped to abuse drugs and alcohol more likely than their wealthier counterparts. In contrast, Chen, Sheth, Krejci, and Wallace (2003) presented that white middle-class student's alcohol consumption is significantly higher than black high school students (as cited in Gorski, 2008). Paul Gorski alluded that

educators should never, under any circumstance, make assumption about a student or parent-about their values or culture or mindset-based on a single dimension of their identity ...the “culture of poverty” is a myth. What does exist is a culture of classism, a culture most devastating to our most underserved students. This is a culture worth changing (Gorski, 2008; Barber, 2013).

The culture of classism is known as the deficit theory. The deficit theory points out students’ weaknesses instead of their strengths. In addition, the theory insinuated that poor people are poor due to their own moral and intellectual deficiencies. The deficit theory justifies strategies such as (a) well-established stereotypes and (c) ignoring inequitable access to high-quality school that support the progression of poverty. Several theorists such as Carey (2005), Karoly (2001), Gorski (2003), Barton (2004), and the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2004 (as cited in Gorski, 2008) argued that to tackle the culture of classism in our schools, educators must economically strengthened the following inequitable access: limited funding provided to poor students, lower teaching salaries, limited computer and internet access, high student-teacher ratios as a result of large classroom sizes, less rigorous curriculum, inexperienced teachers and sufferings from health issues cause by infestations from the uncleanliness of schools.

In conclusion, the challenge for rural schools, is to overcome the unrestrained inequities in our schools and to combat the “culture of classism” among low-income students. According to Gorski (2008), in order to eliminate the socioeconomic gap for low-income students, schools must stop trying to “fix” poor students and focus toward eliminating how schools perpetuate classism (Barber, 2013; Gorski, 2016). Focusing on improving school reform was a prevalent belief that schools alone could overcome

poverty which manifested in the book titled *No Excuses* (2000) by the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D C (as cited in Ravitch, 2012). In *No Excuses*, Carter (2000) revealed twenty-one high-poverty schools with high test scores further confirming that education reform is key to fixing poverty.

Rural Schools

In America, nearly 18.7% of the population (8.9 million) attend rural public schools while less than 15% are enrolled in rural districts. Approximately, one in four rural children are predominantly African American, one in nine are transient and almost half represent low-income families (Showalter, Klein, Johnson & Hartman, 2017). In this section, the researcher brings to light distinctive characteristics about rural schools and the challenges they face. In Figure 2.1, the percent of rural students represent student populations in rural areas which reflects 15.9% students in South Carolina that attend rural public schools (Showalter et al., 2017).

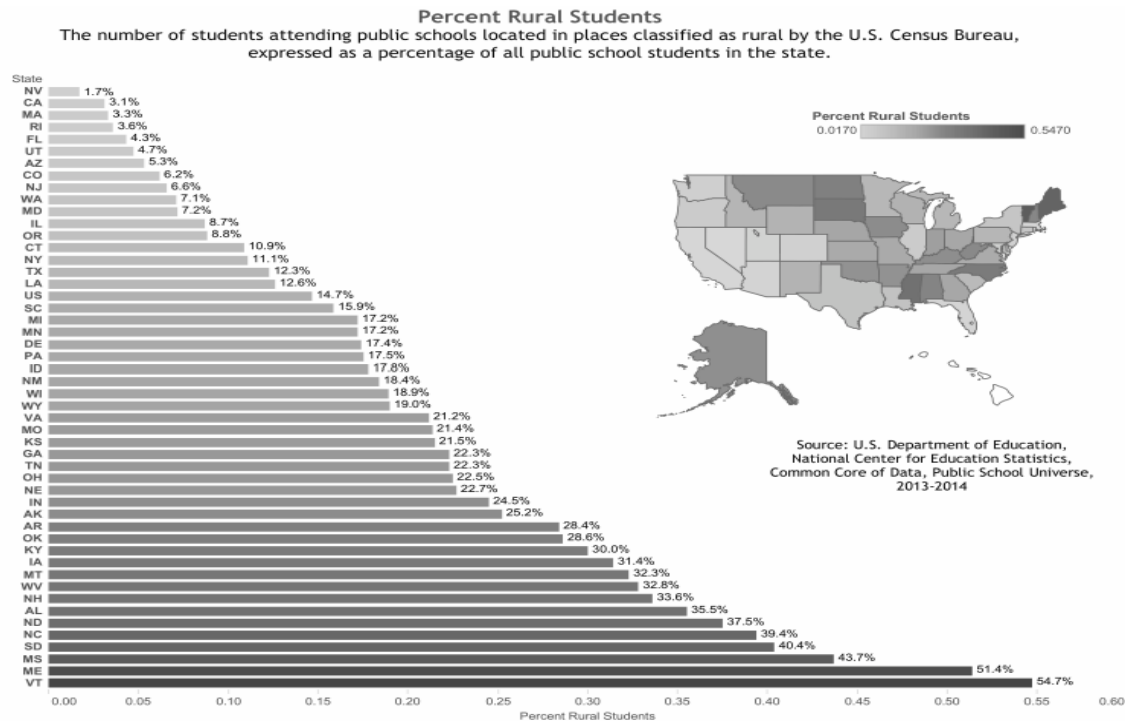


Figure 2.1 Percentage of rural students by state (Showalter et al., 2017).

In Figure 2.2, the percent of rural schools represent poverty in rural elementary and secondary public schools which reflects 68.5% in South Carolina (Showalter et al., 2017). Jolliffe (as cited in Jensen 2009) noted that there has been a 5% difference in the average poverty rates among the urban (10-15%) and rural (15-20%) for the past 30 years. A recent research report, *America's Forgotten Children: Child Poverty in Rural America*, Nadel and Sagawa's (2002) work found that:

- Rural America is home to 2.5 million children locked in deep poverty.

Rural poverty is highly concentrated in six regions of the country (Central Appalachia, the Deep South, the Rio Grande border, the Southwest, the Central Valley of California, and the American Indian Reservations in the Northern Plains:

- Child poverty is greater in rural America than in urban areas. Of 200 counties persistently poor, 195 are rural, with child poverty rates often exceeding 35%.
- Rural poverty has begun to mirror urban poverty in the past decade (as cited in Lyman & Villani, 2004, p. 13).

Rural schools face astounding challenges. Education literature indicates that rural schools must combat high rates of poverty, diversity, students with special needs, deficient resources, inadequate teacher and administrator recruitment and retention, shortage of early childhood services (which include high quality pre-K, childcare and Head Start programs), insufficient funding and other challenges (Normore, 2004; Showalter, Klein, Johnson & Hartman, 2017). Even with these challenges, however, overall rural schools are thriving. Most research presumes that rural schools are remotely located, serve high-poverty communities, and are in locations with declining and limited economic opportunities. In fact, however, some rural locations are in close proximity to larger

communities and there are agricultural families with substantial means and college degrees (Showalter et al., 2017; Redding & Walberg, 2012).

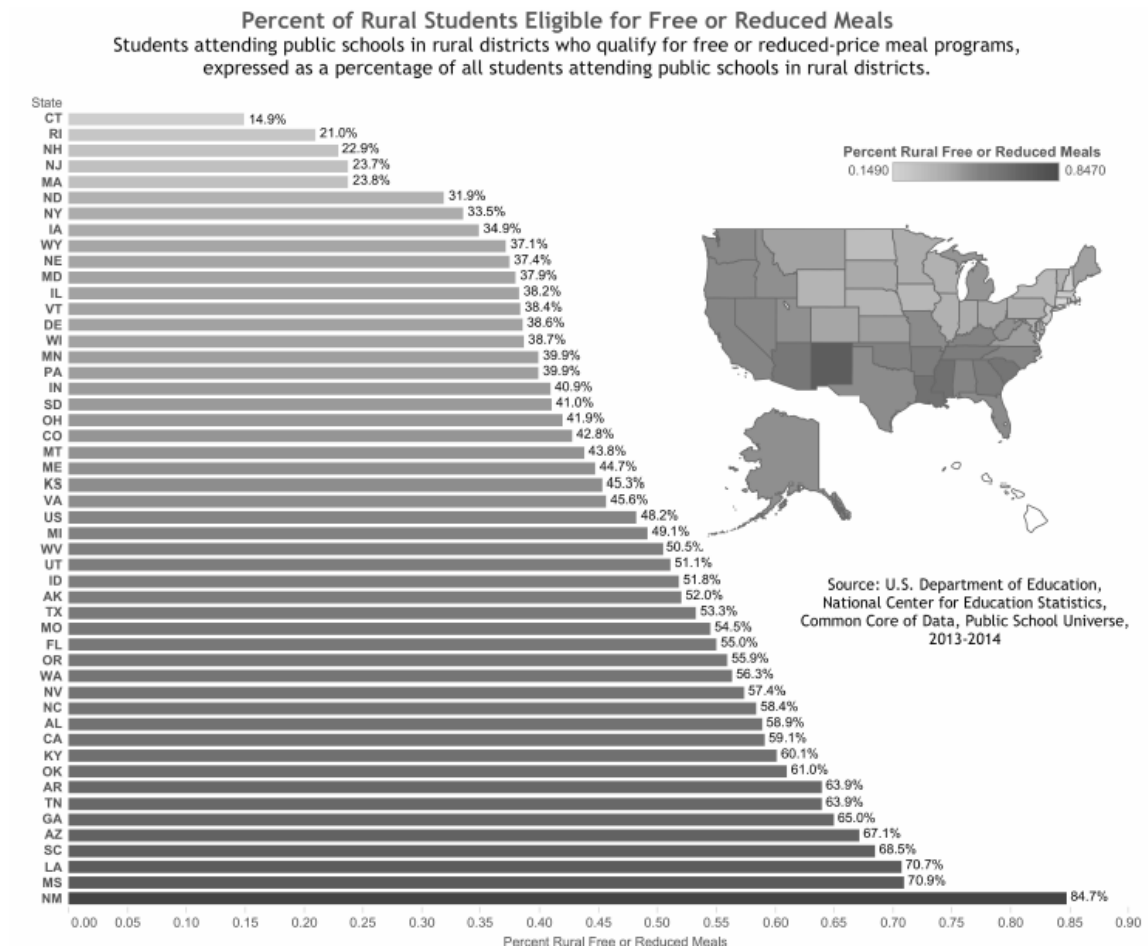


Figure 2.2 Percentage of rural school students in poverty by state (Showalter et al., 2017)

High-poverty challenges have a major effect on the demographics and populations served in South Carolina. In South Carolina, there is a population of 4,820,419, of which 735,960 are living in poverty. According to the Center of American Progress (2018), the demographics poverty rate, gender and age overall represent 15.3% and rank 37th below the poverty line for a family of four. Of which, children represent 22.7% and ranked 42nd below age 18 below the poverty line. Working-age women represent 16.4%, rank 39th for women-ages 18 to 64 below the poverty line. Whereas, working-age men

represent 11.9%. The race and ethnicity percentage represent African Americans 24.8%, Asian American 10.7%, Latino 25.8%, Native America 16.9% and White 10.8%.

Recent rural education research conducted by Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), in conjunction with the Rural Advisory Committee (RAC), prioritized challenges that rural schools faced in implementing NCLB's provisions which has been recently renamed ESSA (Arnold, 2004). Although ESSA is a replacement for NCLB, there are some elements that were maintained and some that were altered. The elements that were altered are prioritized into the nine themes:

Theme 1: Opportunity to learn – In a meta-analysis on student achievement conducted by Marzano's (2000) work (as cited in Arnold, 2004) an opportunity to learn was found to be the strongest relationship to student achievement. Therefore, as a method to increase student achievement, the expectation was that all students should have an opportunity to access a vital curriculum and effective instruction through district and state content standards. For rural students to meet the South Carolina graduation mission, (Appendix A), which outlines world class knowledge, world class skills, and life and career characteristics, it is imperative that implementation of advanced coursework become a priority so that students can be successful in the global workforce (U. S. Department of Education, 2017).

Theme 2: School size and student achievement – Research conducted by Lee, Smerdon, Alfeld-Liro and Brown's (2000) work (as cited in Arnold, 2004) examined the relationship between school size and student achievement in the organizational school system. Two strands were examined: (a) how smallness affects the school, and (b) how economic aspects of smallness affects the cost-benefits analyses. The findings revealed

that the organizational focus favored smaller schools while the economic focus suggested benefits from increased school size. Although there were contradictory views, the research suggested that to increase student achievement priority should be given to providing smaller school sizes.

Theme 3: Teacher Quality – The federal regulations that originated from NCLB required that all core subject teachers be highly qualified which resulted in disadvantages for rural schools to recruit and retain teachers. Under ESSA, highly qualified teacher requirements were eliminated and under the new requirements “all state plans to provide assurance that all teachers and paraprofessionals working in programs supported by Title I-A funds meet state certification and licensure requirements. For many years, rural schools struggled with recruiting and retaining teachers” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2015, p. 6). According to Jimerson (2005) teachers are less attracted to rural schools due to low salaries, challenging students, remote locations and school conditions. Research conducted by McREL (2004) (as cited in Arnold, 2004) suggested that three areas to be explored for the quality of rural teachers: (a) Certified teachers should be recruited and strategically placed in rural schools; (b) Effective professional development should be implemented and aligned with research-based strategies and school improvement goals for teachers, and (c) Teachers should be retained in geographically isolated schools.

Theme 4: Administrator Quality- Rural school districts struggle with recruiting and retaining administrators more than their urban and suburban colleagues. Rural principals struggle with high demands and heavy workloads, lack of resources, greater visibility in the community, less compensation and inability to attract employees at all

levels (e.g., instructional leaders, managers, teachers, athletic directors, bus drivers, etc.). Research suggest that distributed leadership exercised in the form of shared responsibility and mutual accountability could be used as a prospective resolution to reduce the burden on rural school administrators.

Theme 5: School and District Capacity – Rural schools and districts face challenges with building internal capacity while struggling with limited economic and human resources. These challenges include a lack of assistant principals, guidance counselors, professional development and funding. Research highlights that improving student achievement requires administrators to develop and examine strategies that build school and district capacity.

Theme 6: School Finance – Like most schools, rural schools receive a considerable amount of funding from the state. State budget cuts lead to rural school funding shortages. These financial constraints are primarily due to high per-pupil expenditures: (a) It costs more in smaller districts, and (b) That leads to district consolidations.

Theme 7: Local Control and Alternative Organizational Structures – In rural America, consolidation due to budget cuts has been a problem as communities struggle to maintain local control of their schools. Many rural communities value local control of schools despite disagreement by educators and policymakers. Jimerson’s (2004) research (as cited in Arnold, 2004) stated that advocates of local control believe that local governance is an important part of the community culture. Research conducted by McREL (2004) suggested that alternative organizational structures, were there has been

experimentation, reduce administration cost while ensuring local policy decision-making as a compromise to both sides of the debate (as cited in Arnold, 2004).

Theme 8: School Choice – Research conducted by Arnold (2004) stated that the lack of educational alternatives weakens parental choice. Arnold argued that for parents to meet the needs of their child, school choice is compulsory particularly in isolated communities.

Theme 9: Community and Parent Aspirations and Expectations - Parent expectations are an important factor in improving student achievement. The rural economic development can influence the success of rural school improvement efforts if low-skill, low-wage jobs are continued. Marzano’s work (2003, p.129) (as cited in Arnold, 2004) stated, “High expectations communicated to students are associated with enhanced achievement.” Furthermore, Marzano (2003) added rural schools can increase student achievement with the encouragement of parent and other community members when they recognize the potential of higher aspirations and expectations (as cited in Arnold, 2004).

Other challenges were noted in the report *Why Rural Matters 2015-16: Understanding the Changing Landscape* (2017) discovered many challenges facing rural schools in South Carolina. To be exact, the report revealed that 69% of students and families are low-income, the fourth highest rate in the nation. Nearly half of rural students are minorities, the fifth highest in the country. Two of every five schools in South Carolina are considered rural. South Carolina rural schools were rated the 12th lowest in per-student spending and ranked 30th in the nation for the spending on rural schools. South Carolina rural schools were ranked the sixth lowest in levels of

achievement in fourth grade math and science and sixth lowest in taking advanced placement courses, and the 11th lowest in high school graduation (Showalter et al., 2017; Brack, 2017).

In addition, the report *Why Rural Matters 2015-16: Understanding the Changing Landscape* (2017) conveyed the condition of rural education in 50 states. The report uses five gauges to examine rural schools in each state and to determine the student's importance by providing a priority rating of the condition of each state. The five gauges are (a) the importance of rural schools; (b) diversity of each family; (c) educational policy context; (d) educational outcomes, and (e) college readiness. The higher the gauge ranking for each state the more important and urgent the needs are for the rural schools. In Appendix B, the report described the conditions of South Carolina in rural education (Showalter et al., 2017).

The ten highest priority states in rural education based on five measures were identified with Mississippi as the highest. South Carolina was fourth. The most urgent needs in South Carolina's rural areas have become more suburban than any other state in the past decade. Half of all rural students are students of color and 68.5% are from low-income families. In addition, achievement and graduation rates for rural students are among the nations' lowest (Showalter et al., 2017, p. 10). The challenges presented in rural context require unique principal leadership in rural schools. A key challenge for rural schools.

Principal Leadership in Rural Schools

Across the United States, elementary principals are challenged to meet diverse needs of rural student populations, particularly in the areas of federal and state

accountability requirements. Compared to urban principals, rural schools have unique characteristics that require unique leaders (Chalker, 2002). In fact, research conducted by Hill (1993) stated that there are five characteristics that distinguish the rural principalship. These findings are based on research and Hill's (1993) personal experiences as a principal:

1. Rural principals generally do not have an assistant principal or support staff.
2. Rural principals are often given other duties which consist of central office tasks, teaching or serving as principal on another site.
3. Student discipline problems are less complex and severe.
4. Community networks are more invasive and more powerful, just as the principal's role in the community is more visible.
5. Because there are few school administrators, there is a lack of organizational or peer support (p. 1).

Decades of studies have indicated that principals are essential to the school's effectiveness. Primarily, the success of principals hinge on their skills as administrators (Stern, 1994). Without exception, the school principal's role in education is key to improving student achievement. For many decades, The Wallace Foundation (2013) has supported continuous efforts to improve leadership in public schools. As a result, an effective principal employs these five essential practices:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students.
- Creating a climate hospitable to education.
- Cultivating leadership in others.
- Improved Instruction.

- Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement (p. 4).

Principal leadership is a multifaceted process that researchers have been unable to explain by a leadership model. Morrison (2002); Day (2003) and Lazaridou (2007) indicated principals must act according to their school contexts and to the needs of their students and staff (as cited in Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra & Angelidou, 2011).

Research Studies to Support Successful Rural School Leadership

To anchor my study on the importance of successful principal leadership in rural schools, I identified four studies that were particularly valuable in their analysis and interpretation of four domains of supportive leadership practices. In the first study, from Cyprus, four successful school principals in rural primary schools were considered as part of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP). Purposeful sampling was used to select the four schools. No measurable student achievement existed, necessitating that the schools be identified by inspectors and observations and assessment of principals be conducted (Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra & Angelidou, 2011).

The case studies revealed four domains of practice for successful school leadership: (a) People Centered Leadership; (b) Values and Vision; (c) Promotion of Learning and (d) Networked Leadership (Figure 2.3). According to Blanchard (2015), people centered leaders put the welfare and success of their people first and meet the needs of their people. Leaders were value driven and create a vision for success. Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra, and Angelidou (2011) created an environment that allows teachers to continue learning. They also believed that school personnel should network with parents and community members to provide support and needed resources.

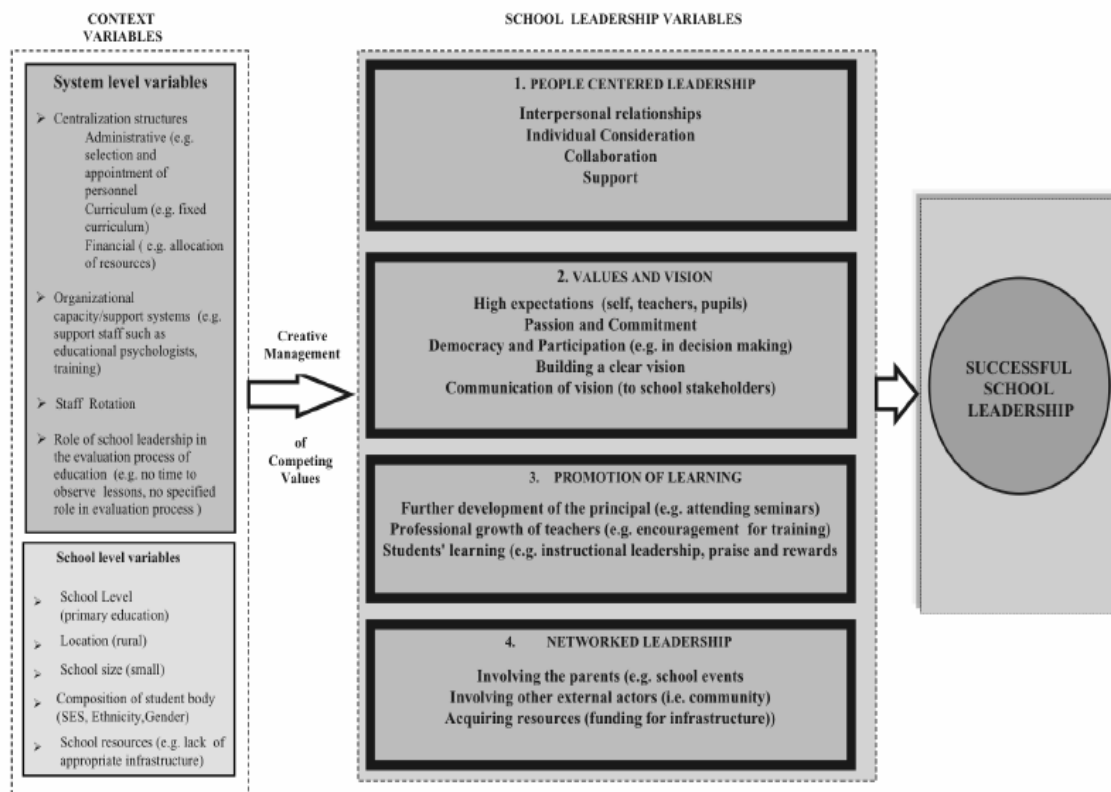


Figure 2.3 Domains of practice for successful school leadership. (Adapted from Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra & Angelidou, 2011, p.550)

The key findings of the case studies differed at each school. Primary School A is located in a small village with an average social and economically homogeneous population. The school leader has been a teacher for 35 years and has been principal at this school for five years. Confronted with a deteriorating physical environment, major discipline problems, low student achievement, disempowered teachers and hostile parents, the principal’s initial response was to form interpersonal relationships with teachers and students.

Forming these relationships proved to be vital for the development of a positive school climate. The principal’s relationship with teachers was viewed as a motherly. The teachers viewed their leader as “their friend” and “their mother.” The students viewed

their principal as a “superwoman” and “proper friend.” As a result, all stakeholders viewed the principal as a super ordinate mother figure who unconditionally supported all teachers and students. The principal created a professional learning environment through use of collaborative teaching.

In this study, the principal did not limit her duties to administrative work nor emphasize the hierarchical status. Instead, the leader considered herself as one of the teachers and took on roles and responsibilities in the school. The principal’s professional experiences prompted teachers to follow by example which in turn created a school culture of professional learning and commitment. Teachers were regularly praised for their hard work and effort. The persistently clear communication for high standards encouraged teachers to work harder. The principal practiced distributed leadership, whereby authority and responsibility were shared among teachers and students to enhance the commitment of the school goals. To improve low student achievement, the best teachers of the school were assigned to lower grades to create a solid and stronger foundation for younger children. To combat discipline issues, an educational program was implemented that helped improve emotional and behavioral outbursts of anger and tension.

The principal addressed complex challenges at the school by building relationships and strong social networks with external stakeholders. This effort created ties with the local community and made active use of networks and funds to assist with improving the school’s physical environment. These actions restored the deteriorating relationship with parents. The holistic combination of strong interpersonal relationships

and support and clear communication of the school vision were contributing factors to this school's success.

Primary School B is in a rural village outside, but in close proximity to, the capital of Cyprus with an average socio-economically, homogeneous population. The school leader has been a teacher for 28 years and has been principal for three years, spending two years at another school. The principal battled with discipline issues of aggression and disobedience, low student achievement and low motivation by teachers and students. These challenges were handled by establishing interpersonal relationships with all stakeholders.

The principal's approachable personality established a positive school climate of cooperation and mutual respect. The leader served in the capacity of a servant leader to meet the needs of the community instead of serving in the role of authority figure. Defining the role as a servant leader allowed the principal to portray a caring and understanding relationship with demonstrated consideration for all stakeholders. The environment was a supportive climate where the principal supported all teachers and in turn teachers were supportive of each other. The principal developed interpersonal relationships by teaching one lesson in each class to get to know students. As a result, students were won over by their principal.

To improve low levels of achievement, the principal placed a great emphasis on developing and communicating a clear vision and instructional practices were implemented by providing feedback to teachers and by giving praise for exemplary work. Teachers were engaged in a collaborative environment which consisted of the principal regularly providing discussions about instructional methods. Teachers were engaged in

peer observations and presented with opportunities for professional development. Teachers were held to high standards of expectations and treated as professionals.

To establish relationships with the community, the principal established networks with external stakeholders by becoming actively involved in the community. The principal's role as a servant leader defined high expectations, passion and commitment, values, and vision for the school, which contributed to their success.

Primary School C is one of two rural village schools outside, but near, the capital of Cyprus. The school population is comprised of many “outsiders,” such as Turkish refugees, affluent residents and immigrants. The school leader has been a teacher for 30 years and has been principal for three years. The principal was confronted with challenges of a two-year building program which led to unexpected challenges related to physically dangerous safety issues for the students. Further contributing to the challenges were low student achievement, low motivation by teachers and non-existent relationships with parents.

The admirable social skills demonstrated by the principal laid the foundation for quality interpersonal relationships and a strong culture of cooperation. Shared decision making was set in motion by the principal, whereby she allowed teachers and students to make decisions collectively on issues that impacted education. The principal provided support for both the teachers and students. Teachers were provided with teaching materials, facilitated with peer observations, and encouraged to use novel methods of active teaching and to seek further professional development. In addition, arrangements were made to assist struggling teachers with designed model lessons. Students were

provided opportunities to participate in a two-year educational program that addressed their emotional and behavioral needs to reduce anger and fighting.

To build external relationships, the principal actively encouraged participation from parents, other administrators and local community members. The stakeholders played a significant role in teaching about issues about which they were most knowledgeable. Students were given opportunities to participate in community projects. The principal's stance on professional growth of the teachers, student learning and interactive relationships with external stakeholders contributed to the school's success.

Primary School D is in a rural small village located outside, but in close proximity to, the capital of Cyprus. The school has a moderately socio-economically homogenous population of village students and nearby village students. The school leader has been a teacher for 33 years and has been principal for three years. The principal coped with challenges of bullying toward new students of the village, low parental involvement and non-existent relationships with the community.

The principal confronted these challenges by establishing a supportive environment with an honest consideration of the teachers and students' individual needs. This was established by supporting the teachers professionally, personally and emotionally when confronting the daily challenges of the school. The principal's commitment to the school was displayed by hard work to address challenges of the school. The school portrayed a positive school climate due to the principal's low-profile leadership style.

This principal's leadership style employed cooperation and solidarity among teachers and parents prompting a calm approach in the event of disagreements. The

principal's demonstration of hard work and respectful interpersonal relationships created a strong culture where the same work ethics were displayed among teachers and students.

Professional learning communities were established to further education for teachers by introducing them to novel teaching practices and seminars. Teachers were afforded opportunities to experience open classrooms, discuss issues of concern, and special attention was given to weaker teachers through use of designed model lessons that were demonstrated to them. Teachers were praised for their efforts of teaching creative lessons instead of traditional lesson.

The principal created interactive networks with external stakeholders by encouraging parents and community members to actively participate in school organized events and by providing awareness of relevant issues. The principal's interpersonal relationships with teacher's, and the active involvement of external stakeholders contributed greatly to the school's success.

Based on the studies conducted, the following generalizations can be made about successful leadership in rural schools. Principal leaders in rural schools exhibited high expectations for staff and students, provided opportunities of learning for staff, provided cooperation among stakeholders, created a positive school climate, promoted external relationships with parents and community members and exhibited exceptional administrative leadership.

Summary

To provide an understanding of how effective leadership is essential to school success, the literature review highlights leadership, successful leadership practices, rural schools, principal leadership in rural schools and characteristics in high-performing

elementary schools. The researcher unveils leadership practices performed in high-poverty contexts for the purpose of uncovering what leadership practices look like in rural successful schools. Henceforth, the researcher will conduct research in two South Carolina high-poverty rural elementary schools to reveal what supportive leadership practices look like in rural high-performing, high-poverty contexts.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges in America's public education system is overcoming economic and demographic disparities facing high-poverty schools, particularly in rural areas. Although some principals have been effective with ameliorating this challenge, many still struggles. The purpose of this study is to investigate and explore the lived experiences, beliefs and daily practices of two elementary principals who lead rural, high poverty, “Reward Schools” in South Carolina.

Chapter 3 describes the qualitative research design and methodology used to examine the successful leadership practices exhibited in rural, high-poverty South Carolina schools. By using qualitative research, the researcher seeks to understand the participants’ experiences, beliefs and behaviors (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Maxwell (2005) noted that in qualitative studies, researchers should be concerned not only with physical events and behaviors which occur but be in-tune with how the participants make sense of what is occurring and how their understanding influences their behavior.

In this study, the researcher used a descriptive case study to gain in-depth knowledge of leadership practices. Yin (2003) noted that case studies are used to investigate situations, which contribute to the knowledge of the phenomena being studied. The case study strategy used to conduct this research was a holistic approach to

compare the commonalities and differences of real events which occur in two rural, elementary, high poverty elementary schools.

Research Questions

For the purposes of this study, the following research questions were explored:

1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?
2. What leadership styles and exemplary practices are employed by principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face?
How do they manage these demands?

Population and Sample

For many years, there has been a misconception of the meaning of “rural.” The U.S. Government defined rural as “nonmetropolitan” while the United States Census Bureau defines rural as all populations or neighborhoods with between 1000 to 2500 inhabitants per square mile not located in an urban area, which is defined as 2500 people and more (Chalker, 2002; Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria, 2010). In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), along with the United States Census Bureau, created a new locale classification system to represent four major locale categories – city, suburban, town and rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Rural school districts in South Carolina are determined by the National Council for Education Statistics (NCES) District Locale Codes. The U.S. Bureau of the Census developed locale codes that are based on proximity to metropolitan areas, population size

and density. Although the codes do not represent the entire attendance area or residence of enrolled students within the district, they are the most accurate for identifying the types of communities in which students live (Rural School & Community Trust, 2003; Phan & Glander, 2007).

The (NCES) District Locale Codes were used as a starting point in specifying districts. Non-rural and rural districts in South Carolina are identified as follows:

Non-rural is defined as NCES Locale Codes 1 (Large City), 2 (Midsize City), 3 (Urban Fringe of Large City), 4 (Urban Fringe of Midsize City) and 5 (Large Town). Rural is defined as NCES Locale Codes 6 (Small Town), 7 (Rural, Inside a Metropolitan Statistical Area), and 8 (Rural, Outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area) (Rural School & Community Trust, 2003).

NCES uses locale codes in their data files to categorize schools and districts for a wide range of analyses. These codes are useful for determining eligibility for various grants and for districts to compare themselves to other school districts with the same locale codes (Phan & Glander, 2007). The researcher will use purposeful sampling to study the participants. According to Patton's (1990) work purposeful sampling is used for the identification, and selection of, information-rich cases to investigate in-depth issues of a phenomenon (as cited in Glesne, 2006).

The sites selected for this study were identified from the South Carolina Department of Education website for South Carolina's Reward schools. Reward schools are identified as the top 15% of high-performing, Title I schools (South Carolina's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), n.d.). The South Carolina

Department of Education (2017) identified 158 elementary Reward Schools for Performance and 26 Reward Schools for Progress.

The researcher selected two elementary schools, located in the Upstate region of South Carolina, from the Rewards Schools Performance list. The school demographics represent approximately 380-530 students with a 75% or higher free or reduced cost lunch status (free or reduced cost lunches are provided for low-income students). The study population consisted of one principal, one assistant principal, one reading coach, one teacher leader, five teachers, one highly engaged parent and one community stakeholder in each elementary school. There were a total of 17 participants.

Data Collection Procedures

The initial step in data collection involved multiple forms of a qualitative data analysis of document materials, audio recordings, observations, focus groups and in-depth interviews. The researcher reviewed document materials such as student and faculty handbooks, websites, newsletters, announcements, school report card and other available documents. Two types of audio recordings such as a cassette recorder and an iPhone 6 were used during the interview as a back-up. The approval process for conducting the study required several additional steps in the district. First, the superintendent was emailed to request permission to conduct research at two pre-identified schools. Once approval to conduct research was obtained, the principals were contacted via phone and email to make introductions and to outline the study. Once the principal showed interest in participating in the study consent forms were emailed for the principals. Follow-up phone calls were made to answer potential questions and concerns. Once verbal permission to participate had been obtained, the researcher arranged an

interview at the convenience of the principals and scheduled focus groups interviews to discuss the consent form in detail.

The participants were informed that every effort would be made for confidentiality to be maintained. Research information collected was analyzed and reported confidentially to protect the identity of the participants (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). For the participants that participated in the study, the researcher provided a letter of consent which emphasized that the study was voluntary and not required. Participants were informed that data would only be made available to the dissertation team and would be stored on a USB drive and locked in a secure place at the researcher's home.

The interview participants were taken to a quiet secure location to conduct face-to-face interviews and to provide confidentially. Before the interviewing process, each participant was asked to review the consent form and ask questions or concerns. There were no additional questions or concerns, so the consent forms were signed that indicated full understanding of the purpose of the study, rights of participation, confidentiality, risks, and benefits of the research. The data collection process began once signatures were obtained.

Two interviews were conducted for 60 minutes individually with each principal and one focus group interview were conducted for 50 minutes individually with assistant principals, teachers, reading coaches, parents and community stakeholders at each site. The researcher used open-ended questions that were unbiased and conducted in a conversational manner. Respondents were asked to answer questions about facts of the matter and their opinions about events (Yin, 2003). An audio recorder was used near the

interviewee for purposes of accurate transcription after the interview. In addition, the researcher took hand written notes for back-up.

Upon arrival at the school to conduct interviews, the researcher conducted observations throughout the school to record information as it occurred. According to Yin (2003), case studies of real-life events involve collecting data from people and in their everyday situations. Field notes were taken to document behaviors and activities of individuals at the research site (Creswell, 2009).

Managing and Recording Data

The researcher operated as the observer to create field notes from interviews, documents and audio recordings. Handwritten notes were used to document open-ended questions during individual and focus groups interviews. The researcher used audio to transcribe the interviews.

The researcher recorded data and used multiple recording procedures for documenting directly observed data. Descriptive notes were used to document descriptive settings of the school, events and activities. Reflective notes were used to document the researcher's personal thoughts (Creswell, 2009). The researcher analyzed public documents (handbooks, minutes of meetings, reports and other document materials). To analyze the data, the researcher used coding to identify themes, patterns, commonalities and differences among schools (Creswell, 2009).

Data Analysis Procedures

The initial step in data interpretation involved a qualitative analysis of interviews, document reviews and audio recordings. The analysis used a multi-step process triangulation to provide validity in the study and to make sense of the data. First, the

researcher transcribed transcriptions from Rev.com to analyze the interviews and field notes. Next, all collected information was reviewed to reflect upon the overall meaning of the data. Thirdly, a manual step-by-step process of analysis by Merriam (2009) and NVivo 11 software program was used to organize and sort data into chunks and segments. Lastly, the coding process will consist of reviewing notes to discover common themes to describe patterns and the phenomenon (Glense, 2006; Creswell, 2009).

Data interpretation is the summary of the outcome form of written transcripts, recorded interviews, field notes and documents. Once data has been compiled and determined, if there is not enough evidence, the researcher will conduct a follow-up interview to obtain additional data. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were provided for individuals and sites (Creswell, 2009). The findings from this study are useful in describing successful leadership practices for principals in struggling, rural, high-poverty schools.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to explain the qualitative research design for this study. Qualitative research was used as means for exploring and understanding a social phenomenon (Glense, 2006). Through the process of qualitative research, the researcher used emerging questions, data collection techniques, managing and recording data, and data analysis procedures to make interpretations of data.

CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This case study examined the leadership practices of two exemplary principals in high-performing, high-poverty, rural elementary schools. The stories, voiced by the school leaders themselves, paint a portrait of two successful schools led in two different ways. To understand their thoughts and capture the core of what works and does not work in the identified schools, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?
2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?

In May 2018, the case study began after approval was granted from IRB approval. I then developed a process for identifying the selected schools and school leaders (described in Chapter 3). I used a holistic approach for data collection to compare the commonalities and differences of real events. The data were collected and placed in a raw data matrix, tables, and two case study narratives. The data were analyzed and presented based on themes that emerged from using multiple steps to identify patterns and variations among the responses from the participants.

Researcher's Subjectivity and Positionality

As a researcher, I have both a working knowledge of the subject from professional experience and from engaging the literature. As I reflect on the subject associated with this study, I am invested in the subject of educational leadership. However, my subjectivity is not simply connected to my college education that allowed me to acquire this position. My role and work as a Christian, educator, family member, friend and leader have influenced my professional work as a school principal. Culturally, I am drawn to education because it has always been viewed as a *way out* for people of color. Additionally, my work as a school leader is linked to social and cultural factors that create biases and assumptions that influence how I conduct research. I therefore try to show that I am aware of the influences on my subjectivity in the interpretation of my research.

In reflecting on my own positionality, I find that I am positioned in various contexts. I am a middle class African American female who has been in education for more than 17 years. I have worked in rural and urban districts as a teacher and now as a principal. As I attempt to respond to the positionality, I take in conducting this research, I must examine all who have influenced me in my educational and personal journey and the context of that path.

Growing up, my parents had high expectations for learning for all of their four children. Neither eschewing education nor failure was an option, but excellence and education were the ultimate goal. The expectation was that I would go to college and I would become a teacher. The dream my parents had for me was not that of a principal, but that of a teacher. The dream to continue in educational leadership and become a

principal came from my parents push for us to always do more. Without saying it verbally, my teachers and parents were preparing my positionality. My positionality in life is governed by my position in society and networks of relationships which have the flexibility or ability to change (Maher & Tetreault, 1994).

Through my work overtime in education, I have seen schools change significantly and gradually based on the school's leader. As a teacher, I have shifted my educational beliefs to align with the school leader. I have seen much that have worked, and some that has been perfect on paper, but with limited educational impact. Therefore, the subject of a school leader's impact on academic achievement has been of interest to me. Further, my role as a school leader and my desire to do my best to serve the teachers and students led me to investigate the perceptions of exemplary principals and how others see them in their role as school leaders. In my quest to obtain accurate information from others, I have used multiple methods to reduce the risk of bias in this study.

The nature of qualitative data makes it difficult for the researcher to separate oneself from the data (Merriam, 2009). To maintain objectivity and avoid bias as much as possible, I followed several steps in analyzing the data. After collecting the data and setting these up in data cells and tables, I coded using NVivo 11, then sent the transcribed data to participants for member checking and to review the findings.

Descriptive Data

This qualitative case study research detailed information, collected from a small group of individuals, that resulted in a narrative description of the experiences from two schools. Case Study 1 is Alpha Rewards Elementary School, and Case Study 2 is Omega Rewards Elementary School. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide demographic information that

includes the participants' positions, the processes in which they participated (interviews, focus groups, observations), gender, and pseudonyms. The participants in the study were given pseudonyms with realistic names for greater readability and to tell their story.

Table 4.1 describes the participants in Case 1. There were nine participants including the principal, who is the lead participant. Eight women and one male participated at Alpha Rewards Elementary School. Also, the gender of the participants was noted in Table 4.1 to further bring reality to each case. The male principal participated in several interviews, provided documents and was observed during the general operations of the school and while overseeing a grade level meeting with second grade teachers. One parent and a community member participated in a focus group. A second focus group included the reading coach, the teacher of the year and the assistant principal. The final group was observed during a second-grade level meeting.

Table 4.1

Alpha Rewards Elementary School Participants

Participants Positions	Data Collections	Gender	Pseudonyms
Principal	Interview Observation	Male	Wilbur Love
Parent	Focus Group 1	Female	Mary Charles
Community (Church)	Focus Group 1	Female	Diane Stuart
Reading Coach	Focus Group 2	Female	Rita Rounds
Teacher of the Year (5 th)	Focus Group 2	Female	Carol Couch
Assistant Principal	Focus Group 2	Female	Nelly Sims
Second Grade Teacher 1	Observation	Female	Mattie Smith
Second Grade Teacher 2	Observation	Female	Jackie Jones
Second Grade Teacher 3	Observation	Female	Courtland Evans

Table 4.2 describes the participants in Case 2. There were eight participants including the principal, who is the lead participant. Eight women participated in the case at Omega Rewards Elementary School. Also, the gender of the participants was noted in Table 4.2. The female principal participated in several interviews, provided documents and was observed during the general operations of the school and while overseeing a grade level meeting with third grade teachers. One parent participated in a focus group with one community member. A second focus group included the reading coach, the teacher of the year and the instructional coach. The final group was observed during a third grade, grade level meeting.

Table 4.2

Omega Rewards Elementary School Participants

Participants Positions	Data Collections	Gender	Pseudonyms
Principal	Interview Observation	Female	Lisa Smith
PTO President	Focus Group 1	Female	Beth Little
Community (Church) Member	Focus Group 1	Female	Angela Gold
Reading Coach	Focus Group 2	Female	Lynn Hasting
Teacher of the Year (4 th)	Focus Group 2	Female	Wanda Lindsay
Instructional Coach	Focus Group 2	Female	Cindy Worth
Third Grade Teacher 1	Observation	Female	Kimberly Boyd
Third Grade Teacher 2	Observation	Female	Tarsha Peeler

Data Collection

The data collection process involved participants from two schools. I collected data from nine participants at Alpha Reward Elementary School and eight participants at Omega Reward Elementary School. I used the interviews, focus groups and documents to collect data. In-depth interviews, focusing on their leadership, were conducted with

the individual principals at each school. During the interviews, the participants described their experiences and perceptions as school leaders of their respective school. Focus groups were conducted to ascertain information about the principals from the perspectives of the assistant principals, parents, teachers, and community members. Additionally, I reviewed documentation, such as websites, newsletters, assessment data, handbooks, announcements, workshops and family night.

The research findings for this study are based on the triangulated data from the four sources: interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents. The structured and semi structured interviews, the detailed information obtained about personal and group thoughts, and an assortment of educational documents provided a wealth of information that led to the findings for this study.

Detailed Analysis of the Data

A qualitative case study was designed to collect and analyze data on two exemplary school leaders. Two mini cases were analyzed, and the information was shared from the first-person point of view of the participants. The method that was used to analyze the data was the manual step-by-step process of analysis used by Merriam (2009) and NVivo 11 software program.

First, Merriam's Step-by-Step Process of Analysis was repeated separately for each mini case. Category construction was the first step in which the reading and organizing of information took place for the interviews, focus groups and documents data (Tables 4.3 and 4.4). The document information recorded in Table 4.3 represents materials collected and analyzed from Alpha Reward Elementary School.

Table 4.3

Alpha Reward Elementary School Documents

Research Questions	List of Documents	Description of Documents
1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?	Student Handbook	School Goals, Mission Statement, bell schedule, placement of students, parent-teacher conferences, guidance services, absences and excuses, anti-bullying policy, school crisis mission statement, school crisis management team, School Improvement Council, PTO, operating policies and procedures., and The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.
	Internet and newsletters	School address and phone number, school calendar, listing of staff, resources for staff, parents and students.
2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?	Staff Newsletter	Scheduled Meetings: professional development (PD), grade level, vertical, data chart conversations, study group, RtI data. PD links for classroom management, components of a success, building relationships with parents, excerpts from books, etc. Reminders, Parent workshops; Letters from the Principal; STEM; Hands-on Lessons, Interactive Read A-louds and Writers Workshop.
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?	Counselor's Log	Evidence of visiting families in hotels; meeting with local and state services for families living in cars.

The document information recorded in Table 4.4 represented materials collected and analyzed from schools Omega Reward Elementary School.

Table 4.4
Omega Reward Elementary School Documents

Research Questions	List of Documents	Description of Documents
1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?	AdvancED Executive Summary	School's purpose, notable achievements, improvement and additional information.
	Staff Handbook	Information/Schedules: vision, mission, beliefs, faculty roster, duties, responsibilities, general information, classroom instruction, staff expectations, student support, home-school relations, district information, safety forms, and calendar.
	School Website	News about the school, school address and phone number, school calendar, department listing of staff, resources for staff, parents and students.
2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?	Video: Make a Difference	Principal provides two daily tips: Smile and Gratitude.
	September 2018 Safety Meeting Minutes	Reflections and growth mindset: Lockdown reminders, evacuation, and other safety strategies.
	September 2018 Faculty Meeting Minutes	Presenter on retirement; New P.E. Curriculum: CATCH; Teacher of the Year Forum Update, Hands Assessment Training, Presenter on Poverty Simulation: Operational procedures, policies and tips.
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?	PTO Newsletter	Welcome Back, school supports/fundraisers, monthly spirit nights, Open House, about the PTO and PTO events.

I placed each research question on a separate poster board. I printed the transcribed interviews and focus groups on pink stock paper, cut them apart, and posted on the board according to the research question. The process continued with the field notes from the observations being printed on blue stock paper. Finally, the documents collected from the principal and other staff members, the internet, school website, bulletin boards, and Department of Education were copied (when a document had more than one page, only the first page was copied) on green stock paper. I read all of the cards a second time to ensure the accuracy of the placement of the cards. When necessary, I rearranged the cards. Analyzing the data took multiple forms of coding using a two-step process. Both steps were comprehensive. As described, the first step required the category construction; and the second step further refined the data by sorting and placing into sub-categories.

The second step, after the color-coded cards, was the sorting of categories and data. Using codes, field notes, and initial data, a lot of the original categories become sub-categories (Merriam, 2009). I made revisions as the process of sorting and reorganizing continued. Each unit of data identified the participant's pseudonym, name of document, location of documents, etc. The process was repeated using the NVivo 11 software program to confirm the manual results of the analysis. In cases where the information differed, changes were made based on the participants' perspectives when they conducted their member check. During this step, I identified themes. Each theme was color coded using a different color highlight. I created a raw data matrix with themes and sub-themes as displayed in Tables 4.5 and 4.6. In each of these two cases, themes were aligned to the three research questions guiding this study.

Case Study 1 examined the leadership style and leadership strategies and procedures of one male principal of a rural, high-performing, high-poverty elementary school. In Case 1, data were collected and analyzed according to each research question of which themes emerged that helped to create the narrative. Table 4.5 depicts the ways in which the themes were aligned to each research questions (RQ). There were five themes aligned to RQ 1 and 14 sub-themes. For RQ 2, there were three themes and 12 sub-themes. There were three themes aligned to RQ 3 and seven sub-themes. The themes were captured from data collected and analyzed from one interview with the principal, two focus groups, an observation of the principal leading a team meeting, and multiple documents.

Table 4.5

Emerging Themes for Case 1

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-themes	
1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?	Cultural Events Instructional Support/Leaders School Climate Strategies Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement • Communication • Community • Culture • Expectations • Family • Instructional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation • Parents • Respect • Safe • Strategies • Transitions • Love
2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?	Empowerment Vision Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awards • Collaboration • Communication • Consistent • Leadership • Mission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedural • Relationship • Respect • Rewards • Routine • Vision
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?	Poverty Family Environment Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring • Environment • Family • Love 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs • Poverty • Safety

Table 4.6

Emerging Themes for Case 2

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-themes	
1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?	Leadership Vision School Climate Observations Accountability Instruction Decisions Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement • Accountability • Common planning • Data Driven • Efficient • Expectations • Goals • Google Classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lesson plans • Love • Maximizing time • Motivation • Observation • Strengths • Transition • Vision • Weaknesses
2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?	Leader Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Communication • Consistent • Leadership Love 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship • Routine • Support • Vision
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?	Uniqueness Vision Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency • Needs • Opportunity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Safety

The third step required naming the categories and changing when necessary. The fourth and final step in the analysis of data were create a finished document to share the findings.

Summary of the Results

This section shares the summary of the results presented by Case 1 of Mr. Wilbur Love, principal of Alpha Reward Elementary School; and Case 2 of Mrs. Lisa Smith, principal of Omega Reward Elementary School. Case 1 and Case 2 were presented according to the three research questions that guided this study. Several themes emerged during the analysis of the interviews, focus groups observations, and the examination of

document data. The themes were representative of each case and aligned to the research questions which guided this study.

Case 1: Alpha Rewards Elementary School

Case 1 delved into the life of Mr. Wilbur Love, principal of Alpha Reward Elementary School in his ongoing search for how best to lead a high performing school. Mr. Love's experiences span more than four decades with the last two years as principal of Alpha Rewards. Mr. Love began his educational career as a secondary level teacher in 1975. Mr. Love spent 12 years teaching before he entered into the field of administration at the secondary level as an Assistant Principal in 1987. Mr. Love has served in several administrative capacities during his tenure. He has served 6 years as an assistant principal, 15 years as a secondary level principal, 8 years as Personnel Director, and 1 year as Title 1X Director.

Mr. Love received his bachelor's degree in Education from the University of South Carolina in 1975. He continued at Converse College where he earned his master's degree in Administration in 1978. After several years of teaching, Mr. Love pursued and received his Educational Specialist Degree in 1984. Mr. Love has received the following awards during his tenure.

- Principal of The Year for Guidance Counselors of South Carolina
- Writing Hall of Fame
- Literacy Spot
- Red Carpet
- Reading School of The Year for South Carolina
- Three Palmetto Silver Awards (recognition for rising test scores or closing the achievement gap among sub-groups)
- Seven Palmetto Gold Awards (recognition for rising test scores or closing the achievement gap among sub-groups)
- Two Top Ten Title One Schools in North Carolina
- One State Runner-Up for Title One School of The Year

The interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents provided the data for the narratives of story of leadership at a rural, high performing, high poverty elementary school. Case 1 provided the analysis of the data about the principal of Alpha Rewards Elementary School by each of the three research questions and further described by themes that emerged from the extensive refining of the data. It can be argued that instructional leadership is an important characteristic for leading a school. However, data from the study also showed the importance of instruction coupled with love in a warm caring environment as key to student achievement.

Research Question 1

How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?

In Research Question 1, the discussion centered on the perceptions of selected stakeholders of Alpha Rewards Elementary School about how the principal attempted to influence student achievement. The main points discussed that emerged after refining the themes were instructional support/leadership, school climate, strategies, communication and cultural events.

School leadership was seen by many as one of the most important factors in student achievement (Coleman, 2013; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Leaders can influence the quality of instruction by expecting all to be of value to the process. Mr. Love's motto, "*Don't wait to be great.*" was his mantra that guided his work in leadership. The words love, respect, motivate, expect, and learning permeated his thoughts and actions as he walked the halls, shared with teachers and

parents, responded to callers, and engaged with students. According to Mr. Love, his major goal was to increase student achievement.

In Mr. Love's quest to increase student achievement, he shared multiple factors that supported the increase of student achievement. He saw himself as a leader with a clear vision. He believes a healthy school climate is critical to student success. School climate was a leading factor in explaining student learning and achievement (Maxwell, Reynolds, Lee, Subasic, & Bromhead, 2017). Further, Mr. Love thought that the behavior of his teachers, parents, support staff, and community impact student achievement. He declared, "You have to love your students. Everyone, not just the teachers. You must have high expectations of students and a team of educators who are all going in the same direction."

Instructional support/leadership. Instructional Support and leadership are both necessary to build effective and meaningful schools. Instruction is a process to maximize individual student success, while at the same time serving as a filter for teachers, parents and students who may need more (Provasnik, 2007). Support came in many forms at Alpha Elementary School. According to Diane Stuart, a community member,

We have a School Improvement Council (SIC) that consists of some teachers, parents, and community. We have meetings and they will come in and everybody gets together and discusses the plans for the school. They discuss our test scores and try to stay involved as much as they can from the outside, helping from the inside to improved instruction.

Mr. Love believed that SIC and other groups such as the PTA provided the academic support that helped to redirect the school. He also understood that you must

know your students in order to provide meaningful support. He stated, “Once again, it goes back to knowing your students. Knowing their needs, inside and outside of school to support specific needs. Then you must work collaboratively to create a plan based on those needs and set success goals.” Carol Couch, the Teacher of the Year, shared that

I pretty much agree with Mr. Love. I think we have some teachers who strive for success. We're always trying to better ourselves, keep up with the current trends which sometimes go back to previous things that we saw that work well. We want each child to feel successful in their own way. That doesn't mean you have to, of course, be an A student, but that you achieve, and that each child knows they're doing their best. That's all we ask of them, to do your very best.

When he accepted this job three years ago, he empowered the staff to examine the available data to make decision about what was needed to begin to see greater improvement. After determining the need for a focus on literacy, he allocated funds to create classroom libraries. He said, “We purchased books for each classroom based on the readability levels of the students. We did not want the children to be frustrated in reading.” The students began to read for pleasure with level appropriate books.

Small group instruction was another decision that the teachers made to improve instruction. Mr. Love shared his insights from his beginning at this school. He remembered, “When I visited the classrooms, I noticed most teachers were teaching using whole class instruction.” After conversing with the teachers in grade level meetings and individual conferences, “we started implementing small group instruction and guided reading.” He also remembered the rate at which it was implemented. “It took some time,

and of course there was a little bit of resistance at first, but I think it did not take long for our good teachers to start seeing the results, and that it made a difference.”

Carol Couch shared her insights on the small group instruction for the literacy and the math groups:

As far as small group instruction that was the other area that was a big emphasis. Each grade level pretty much tried to have math groups as well as literacy groups. I know especially in the upper grades, they love having the math groups since you have students on different ability levels, they're all mainly working on the same thing, but that way you could group them to work with each individually. The students had a chance to rotate through usually four different station throughout that week. They all had a chance to be doing the same thing and the teacher had a chance to work with each student individually or in the small group setting. That was great this year. We did that for literacy as well as math.

Rita Rounds discussed how they used Title I funds to bring in a reading interventionist who worked 14 hours a week with first grade students. Mrs. Rounds shared that “the interventionist was certified and met district qualifications.” Mrs. Couch added, “Tutors worked in an inclusive classroom had something specific that you needed them to pull them out to go work with them on. Having that second pair of hands is wonderful.”

At Alpha Rewards, they also used funds to alter their school level professional development. Educational consultant Joy Ballinger provided a common-sense approach to helping teachers and students in literacy. According to Mr. Love, “Joy brought research based best practices about literacy and learning. It did not take long to get the

staff on board and excited about literacy.” Rita Rounds confirmed that the literacy consultant “came in this year and worked with kindergarteners, our 4-K, 5-K and first grade mainly and some second grade. She also worked with the teachers on using running records effectively to move children forward.” A running record is an ongoing assessment to track students reading progress by systematically evaluating oral reading and identifying error patterns (Clay, 2007; Frost, Buhle, & Blachowicz, 2009).

Mrs. Rounds explained how they used part of their Title I funds to bring in an educational specialist. She mentioned that consultants have come from different places all over the state including the state’s capital, upstate museums, the Brigament Science Center, and Spartanburg Science Center. She believed that, “just bringing somebody in that has a different view and can give teachers new ideas for instructional strategies and let kids hear about a different point of view. I think all that has helped with our instruction.”

Another professional development was with the authors of *Just a Chicken*, Preston Thorne and Langston Moore. They came to the school to work with one of the sub-groups as noted on the school’s data. Mr. Love noted, “Our data were very similar to a lot of low performing schools in the beginning. Our African American males’ subgroup was not performing in ELA.” According to Mr. Love, “They are probably the best program I’ve ever seen in a school. They do a workshop with just the boys.” The results were more about motivating the boys to excel in school.

Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Stuart added additional programs used at the school to improve instruction and to focus on reading. Mrs. Charles looked at the accelerated reader program as a program to encourage literacy. She recalled, “The children are

encouraged to read. They reach so many points, they earned an award and participated in the AR celebration.” Mrs. Stuart remembered a retired teacher who volunteered to work with the younger children in the AR program and she encouraged the students to read who participated in the program and the scores improved. The morning announcement is *read, read, read and write, write, write.*

School climate. High-quality school climate is advantageous for all students and may be particularly beneficial for at-risk students. School leaders promoted an inclusive, caring and supportive school climate that promoted the academic success and wellbeing of each child (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Mr. Love shared a story that supported his claim that fostering support for the teacher and student helped to foster a positive school climate:

My first year in administration, I was an assistant principal at a middle school. We were getting out for Christmas. With one minute to go, we would make the announcements, load the busses, and everyone would be happy. Just at the moment came the proverbial door knock. There stood Matt, who was usually a good-natured young man. Matt said he had been, “kicked out of class and was told to come to the office.” It seems that Matt got a little stuffed animal from his girlfriend that morning for Christmas. The teacher told him to put it up until the end of the day. Then about four minutes before 12:00, he got it out and had it on the top of his desk. The teacher snatched it off the desk and Matt said something disrespectful and lost his temper. The teacher got mad and threw it in the trash. I suspended Matt three days for three reasons...inappropriate language, not following instructions, and disrespect.

According to Beaudoin and Taylor (2009), stressed and unsupported teachers were more inclined to treat students with disrespect while failing to see their own behavior as disrespectful. While the conversation was limited on the commitment to fostering an environment of respect at Alpha Rewards, much of the discussion highlighted the principal's demand for mutual respect of which created a positive school climate.

In the ongoing search for how best to continue to lead a high performing school, the principal of Alpha Rewards Elementary School brought his leadership skills to the school when he continued to improve the climate of the school by demonstrating love, understanding and motivation daily (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The conversation on the day of Christmas break continued when Mr. Love returned to Matt teacher's classroom to share his decision:

When I entered the room, I asked her where the stuffed animal might be. She told me the trash. I went to retrieve it and she wanted to know what I was doing. I told her I was getting the little thing out to give back to Matt before his mom picked him up. She let me know quickly that she did not appreciate my decision. I told her that I was doing it for two reasons. First, I thought it was the right thing to do considering he was suspended for three days. And second, that I was trying to save her from an embarrassing conference with his parents. I told her—The student is suspended, but you did not handle this thing well, either. I proceeded to tell her that my eyes saw students that needed discipline through love, understanding and motivation.

Mr. Love saw himself as a leader at Alpha Elementary School where he created a positive school culture that people could feel as soon as they entered the building; and a

place where children felt safe and learned. He said, “You should work in a school where you love what you are doing and those around you have the same feeling. That is the place where children learn.” Students look to school leaders and teachers to model empathy, kindness, and maturity (Deal & Peterson, 2010). “School climate is the heart and soul of a school. It is about that essence of a school that leads a child, a teacher, an administrator, a staff member to love the school and to look forward to being there each school day” (Freiberg & Stein, 1999, p. 11).

Mr. Love recalled the excessive discipline problems when he first came to the school. He noted, “When I say a lot of discipline problems, I mean a lot of discipline problems, okay? My first few months here, I had to suspend a lot of children, and that's not what I like to do. But I had no recourse.” Mrs. Mary Charles, a parent who participated in focus groups, mentioned the discipline policy that came as a result of the discipline problems. She discussed the point system plan and how it was applied. “We have a point system with our discipline plan. Kids with problems will drop their points and get mad. They don't want their points dropped.” Mr. Love appeared troubled by the number of discipline problems he encountered that first year. He went on to say,

Now, first and foremost, I absolutely love kids and I don't suspend a kid without talking to them, trying to reach their very soul. But the discipline was just totally out of control here. Teachers were frustrated, kids were out of control, it was just a mess.

The second year Mr. Love found a way to minimize out of school suspension by creating in-school suspension. This is what he found, “I took a hard look at our related arts classes. Here's what I found. We had enough related art extra periods to create an in-

school suspension classroom.” In the end, he had more students in school, working on academics and less out of school. However, the in-school suspension program at Alpha Reward was handled a bit differently from the traditional programs.

The in-school suspension program had a different name and different structure. The program was called *The Academic Behavioral Character (ABC) Room*. According to Mr. Love the program was scheduled during related arts and non-traditional:

This was not a traditional in-school suspension room. We worked with the kids, we helped them with their work, we talked to them about character, we had our guidance counselor involved in it. We had our computer lab and library involved in it, because that was part of our related arts rotation. They would get to go to the computer lab to get caught up academically.

A turning point for changing the culture and climate of the school was how they did discipline. Mr. Love responded, “The ABC Room changed the culture of our school. No longer did we have 10 to 12 kids up here in the office waiting to see me taking a tremendous amount of frustration off the teacher's back.”

Love went on to discuss the need to have parental support in maintaining a positive school culture. He said, “Parents just want you to love their child. And, see the good in them, even when they're making bad decisions. And, to let them know, it's okay, everybody has bad days.” Mr. Love believed in allowing students to start over each day. He referenced, “Students learn best when they do not have something hanging over their heads. I look at today as just one day with tomorrow as a fresh start.” Love then referenced his teachers regarding their work with students in starting over, “My teachers

know that I do not just care about the children, I also care about them. Encouraging them harder to love all our children, even the challenging ones (laughter and head shake).

When asked what lesson Mr. Love had learned and thought was essential for operating a rewards school, Mr. Love said:

In life as well as schools, there always has been and always will be uncomfortable decisions regarding students who get into trouble. You, as teachers, and I, as principal, obviously continue to care for students who get into trouble. Yes, even the ones who challenge us, act disrespectfully, cause us heartache, and so on. As this first semester ends, let us continue to discipline through love, understanding, and motivation. Disciplining in this way, will help us in the end to have a school that stands out above all others, both with continuous academics and improved behavior.

Strategies. With the implementation of the common core state standards throughout the country, improving test scores is the goal of all school leaders and teachers. Mr. Love believed there were certain strategies that work in all schools. Small groups, team meetings, and having compassion are keys to success in all schools. He also felt that rural schools did not always utilize best practices. Love shared, “If I could add anything to my previous statement, it would be becoming more reflective and vertical.” Nelly Sims, the assistant principal concurred with Mr. Love about how teachers are reflective. Nelly mentioned, “I would attribute this school’s success to the teachers being reflective. Always looking back at what they've done, thinking about what lead to successes, how to address the challenges that they've noted.”

In addition to being a reflective staff, the teachers also used vertical planning. Vertical planning is a term used by school leaders for district level planning from elementary, to middle, to high schools; and school level planning from grade to grade (High Schools that Work, 2013). Carol, the teacher of the year, shared, “We've done vertical planning as well as horizontal.” Mrs. Rounds remembered that Mr. Love brought a form when he came to this school that was designed to monitor the child's reading level and then they had to put down a comment about each child on this chart.

Love addressed how his teachers worked together to improve transitions and raise student achievement through vertical planning:

First grade teachers are aware of kindergarten standards, their standards and second grade standards. Second grade teachers know first and second grade standards and knowing what third graders need and becoming vertical in that way. There is not a lot of duplication. It is important to know the state standards, because that's what they're going to test students on.

Further, Mr. Love believed that having a compatible teaching team is critical. “After you've been at a school for two or three years, you really ought to have your teams put together so that they're smart and compatible and work well together.” He goes on to say, “By my third year, I always try to say now we have got to become vertical.”

Mr. Love also participated in grade level meetings. He was observed working with his second-grade team. There were three teachers present. They began the discussion about grouping. The initial conversation centered on level groups. Mattie Smith, one of the third-grade teachers informed the group, “You had a few that were higher, then you had only a few of them that were lower. I had seven IEP children, one

ELL student and he ended up getting an IEP during the school year. And one thing I liked about it was that I could take our standards and simplify them down and it worked better across the board.” She then went on to discuss how they taught writing across the third-grade classes:

In writing I had students who could not write a word without copying it from something. When we were doing narrative writing with them, we were going sentence by sentence whereas in the upper, the middle high groups, they were doing it paragraph wise, but we were still doing writing. We were still meeting the standards, but I was able to simplify it then that even the ones that were really low were getting something out of it, but it was very difficult for me because I had so many that needed one on one attention, all the time I felt like I wasn't able to meet what the middle kids needed.

Mrs. Smith then shared her frustration with the process. Members of the team and Mr. Love asked her a series of questions. She shared that the grant they received for working with the middle level children was the best thing she saw that worked for her students. Mr. Love asked a question about the time of day the interventionist came into the room. After some back and forth, until Mrs. Smith answered:

The interventionist stayed in more for the writing portion of my day. She did come at the very end of math and then she was there for the beginning part of writing. I enjoyed when she was in there, because she was like an extra pair of eyes, an extra pair of hands to work with these children.

She was reassured by the principal, “No, that's what this meeting is all about. It is to train your eyes, to analyze situations.” Mrs. Smith said, “The interventionist that pulled them

out was not consistent, as to when she pulled them out, and I don't... (she trailed off as if she did not want to discuss further).” The teachers moved on to discuss a situation from the previous year that did not have favorable results. Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Evans were praised by Mr. Love for their teaching skills and what he had observed when he went into their classrooms:

I want to say this Mattie, every time I was in your classroom your children were engaged, so I understand what you're saying even agree with it. Okay? All of you do a tremendous job teaching with what you have and looking at it with the intel that you've given back, I love the positive progression.

He continued by talking about what happened in the first-grade classrooms (The connection to his discussion about the first grade to the second-grade class was not made at this time).

Looping is the practice of a teacher staying with the same group of students for two or more years (Rhoads, 2007). Looping is also an effective strategy to jump start a class since the teacher is familiar with the students from the previous year. Mr. Love felt that looping should be used, “as much as possible, so that you could at least get one class to get a jump on it.” He further believed that, “When you loop, you pick up about six weeks.” He has used looping as an effective strategy.

Mr. Love and his teachers also did something a bit different for instruction. In discussing this somewhat non-traditional approach for instruction, Mr. Love said,

We semi-grouped our first grade, and our second grade too. Now, a few years ago, I probably would have never done that, but after realizing that reading is the most important beginning of their life. I realized what I was doing as a principal

was not working, so I started talking to parents and others about something we wanted to try.

They started the semi-grouping process by grouping the high and medium students together for instruction. They made some assessments after the first month and regrouped based on the needs of the students. This teacher's comments represented the thought of other, "I have one student who needs to be in the higher group." My response was always the same, "Well, we need to contact the parent and explain it." Mr. Love added, "My response was not based on whether we moved the students to a lower group versus a higher group. I simply knew that parents need to be informed about the education of their children."

Student rotation based on need was another approach used at Alpha Reward Elementary School. After the first semester, Mr. Love felt the teachers and children needed the flexibility to change classes, while continuing to learn. In the morning, the children would continue their math and reading academics. However, in the afternoon, teachers had the latitude to move children around with ease. Mr. Love described the program, "If a teacher was working on writing in the afternoon, she would be responsible for taking all students who needed help with writing skills or completing a writing assignment." The process continued based on academic needs. Mr. Love was proud when the State assessment rate for the first graders more than doubled.

The writing teacher continued the conversation during their team meeting about the level writing process. Mrs. Jones shared her satisfaction with the process:

I didn't have the struggle of the very lows. I had pretty much the highest of all four classes. Which I think was good for me as a teacher in my first year in

second grade. It was awesome, but it was good for me too, to be able to go in with those kids and take learning like one step further. So, in my classroom we did a lot of Hands-On, which I loved. But writing was a struggle for my kids all in all. And it was more of a chore, they didn't have the will to write. You would describe almost lazy or lethargic, they just didn't want to do it. That was a struggle with my higher kids, because they just got so bored. With writing you have to sit there, you have to put it on paper, and I think they just got so bored so quickly because of how they were in trained in the classroom.

Mr. Love listened, then asked Mrs. Jones, “And what did they write about? Was it self-selected?” Mrs. Jones shared that they struggled a little bit in the beginning, then she tried to connect the writing to something that they had background knowledge on.

Something in which they were interested. She talked about the one child who could write to any prompt and one who would not write on any topic. She was able to conference with the non-writer until he finally found a topic that interested him. “And then my three IEP kids, I love the inclusion part of the interventionist rather than the pull out.” The topic moved to the students who were pulled out for instruction.

Mr. Love continued to conference with the grade level team. He shared with them that they would be changing the groups next year. He then asked a series of questions about what the plan was for now:

What are you going to do for your time now? What are you planning for your top group? Are you planning for your top group? Because let me say this, okay? This would probably be my last parting shot. The top kids, if you're not careful, could be at-risk kids okay? You've got to take care of your top kids. Now, look here,

I've spent 30 years in administration and at risk has been my love and my life.

Here's what I have found over those 30 years, if you're not careful, your smartest kids, the brightest kids will become at risk, if you do not make their days. Have your plan to take them as far as you can take them without frustrating the child. Never stop elevating strategies to better your child.

Mrs. Jones chimed in with several recommendations, "I think workshops is one good way to do it. Grouping your workstation kids by ability, allows you to give those kids modified assignments, and take them just one step further." The conversation continued with helpful suggestions from all the team members. Mrs. Jones shared, "You need to teach kids to become an expert in any subject, so they embrace perfection. " I know how to do this, and I know you know how to do this, but then actually applying these concepts is another beast entirely."

Next, the team discussed guided instruction. Mrs. Smith shared, "I did the guided math a lot this year because my kids were really high in reading, I did have more of a heterogeneous group when it came to math. I had some that really struggled. I had some that were okay. And as they were doing that, I was forming, small groups." Mrs. Evans shared, "I'm doing listening centers this year. One of my prime reading centers is going to be listening centers, and I've got portable CD players and a little disk man." They proceeded to discuss where they got the CD player from on eBay and the cost for the same on Amazon. Plus, additional conversations were centered on purchasing reading materials. The conversation continued for approximately five minutes on types of books. Mr. Love ended the meeting with the following:

Well I will tell you for all your struggles. Ya'll did a fantastic job and I just encourage you to be a little bit better next year and if you taught a good lesson share it with everybody. Be proud of your achievements and proud to share them with the world.

Rita Rounds believed that procedures were essential for making the school run smoothly and for keeping everybody on the same page. She noted,

There are procedures as far as for what times activities and meetings are scheduled on our school calendar. I think basic procedures, having that in place helps the school run smoothly because without that a lot of teachers get very upset not being in the loop. They don't know what's going to happen, when it's going happen, and who's going lead it. Some people can just go with the flow, but basically, we need procedures in place to help the school run seamlessly, keep teachers calm, and maximize achievement for kids.

Carol Couch added that from the teacher's perspective, "utilizing pacing guide with our standards and our curriculum and instruction, will allow teachers to use time to stay on task to make the day as effective as we possibly can."

After the enactment of No Child Left Behind, school leaders were required to be more accountable for student learning (Klein, 2015; Powell, Higgins, Aran, & Freed, 2009). As such, many leaders found creative ways for collecting and storing data. The accountability and assessment movements lead principals to set up areas to display, analyze, and apply data (Depka, 2019). Many principals used rooms specifically for data to put information out in the open to learn more about trends and zero in on problem areas. The two major forms of data used at Mr. Love's school were Response to

Intervention (RTI) and Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). RTI is a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavioral needs. MAP is a norm-referenced measure of student growth over time. Mr. Love described how they examined the data. He shared the process, “Our literacy coach has a data wall where the teachers meet. They look at our MAP and RTI data. The students with academic or behavior problems are identified by the teacher and given an RTI assessment.” The electronic RTI map allowed teachers access to information about every child in the school, and that information determined needed resources. Carol Couch believed that the principal ensured students kept learning because of his precise use of data. She said, “I can say Mr. Love used data, but it wasn't overwhelming.” Couch discussed the things they did that were useful to the teacher as well. She said, “That way he introduced the chart for tracking individual student progress helped teachers keep up with the strategies taught and learned.”

Communication. Educators must be able to express themselves both verbally and in writing to parents and the community. According to Mr. Love,

I'm a big communicator. I send parents' letters each month. In August, we send the Success Plan contract (Appendix H). Parents sign that, children sign, the teachers sign it. The plan is designed for all stakeholders in the education process to be accountable for teaching and learning and to have high expectations for everybody.

Rita Round concurs with Mr. Love. She thinks it is important for everybody to collaborate:

Collaboration is essential for success because we learn from each other. We know that learning is social, and the same thing applies to teachers sharing ideas, sharing strategies that work. I think that collaboration within grade levels and then vertical teams is necessary. These two concepts are crucial for success. I cannot express the importance.

Further, Rita believed in communication as it allowed everyone a voice at the table.

“Everybody's voice needs to be heard when they're making decisions. Nobody wants to be told this is what you'll do. It's a lot easier when everybody has input and especially teachers who have input about everything.”

Like Mr. Love, Rita Rounds, the reading coach, and Nelly Sims, the assistant principal believed that being a community school contributed to student success. Rita thought the school was successful because,

It's a community school and that people are willing to work together and pull together because they feel like it benefits their neighbors, their family members, their friend's children. I think they also like the feeling that a community school brings. A feeling of family and I think that leads to success.

Mr. Love felt that it was important for teachers to communicate with parents for them to explain the strengths and weaknesses of their students. He said, “I think when we communicate often, parents will understand the message and be more receptive rather than defensive. This is especially important when the teacher conveyed a difficult message. The message must be delivered clearly and with tact.” Additional data showed communication with parents and teachers using multiple processes: formal parent teacher conferences (invitation letters and schedules), informal parent teacher conferences (sign-

in sheets), phone conferences (phone logs), notes, and report cards. Teachers also send monthly newsletters that highlight academic subject information, upcoming projects, and classroom updates. There academic subject information included in the monthly newsletter is predetermined by the school's academic plan: September – reading, October – math, November – social studies, December – science, then cycle repeated.

Cultural events. The faculty and parents worked to bring cultural opportunities to the students at Alpha Reward. At Alpha Rewards Elementary School, quarterly events were held that were engaging and interactive. According to Mr. Love, “everything we do we invite parents.” Mr. Love provided a list and commented on the events that happen yearly with a lot of parental support: September – Open House, October – Oktoberfest, December – Old Timey Christmas, and Winter Fest – February. All the events were designed as cultural days. According to Rita Rounds, “We have four family engagement nights a year. That's our Title I program that we were required to have. He did some special things, I thought, this year that really made a difference.” Mrs. Sims chimed in, “Yeah, Old Timey Christmas.” Mrs. Rounds responded,

The Old Timey Christmas was a big hit with our whole school. It's changed what we used to do, but we had it at night, and he had to sell us on it. We did it at night and each grade level had to set up a booth outside. We had it outside in December, then brought in some local musical groups to sing. They had a stage set up out there for them. Inside we served hot dog plates and then we had learning stations.

Mrs. Sims remembered “the arts and crafts.” Mrs. Rounds added,

One grade level made gingerbread houses. It's like the fourth and fifth grade and they had gingerbread houses, but they taught it with a book, a read-aloud.

Kindergarten, first, and second had a read-aloud math book and they tied that in with Christmas games. We had our book fair going on at that time, too.

Mrs. Couch confirmed the comments from the principal about Octoberfest day, "where teachers had set up art integrated activities and community activities were rotated throughout the day." Couch concurred with Mr. Love,

It wasn't like a wasted day with children thinking about Halloween and trick-or-treating and how much candy they were getting. That was neat because we spent the day moving to different stations. There was a storyteller. We had someone come from DNR [South Carolina Department of Natural Resources] and he even had some live animals and the students loved it. We had a presentation from India. There were some cool activities and they learned and retained a lot of that information.

They all agreed that "It was a good day. Parents, grandparents, and guardians were invited and participated in the activities. They loved it. When holidays fall on school days that can be a difficult day to keep children focused. That was a good day."

The related arts teachers in charge of the planning had Mr. Love beaming, "It is a beautiful thing. It's just something the students and parents will remember the rest of their lives." The school is decorated in different cultural traditions so that learning does not stop. Mr. Love commented,

The last day we were in school for the Christmas holiday, we had a carnival-like atmosphere where we had music in one section of the parking lot, each grade

level had a little store, and the children got their face painted, with lots of fun foods like popcorn, candy apple and plenty more. It's just a beautiful thing where the community and the school can come, and it's just a sweet little old timey Christmas is what it is.

He shared that more than 50 parents commented on how much they appreciated the activities.

Mrs. Rounds believed the work in the art department is a continuous activity that has enhanced the cultural opportunities at the school. She shared, “One thing that we do well is art progression. For that, our art teacher writes the \$18,000 Dab grant yearly. The artists that she brings are integrated into the curriculum.” She goes on to describe some types of art projects embedded into the curriculum. “Our third graders had sweet grass basket weavers. We also had artist to play and create music from different time periods; and artist with Japanese handwriting.” Bringing in different artists helped to create excitement with the students, teachers and parents according to Mrs. Rounds.

Mr. Love attributes much of the school’s success to the interactions with parents that are fun and engaging. He said, “Bringing parents in is part of the success and making them feel welcome. The last thing we did this year, we had a big celebration. All day fun fest for celebrating our million minutes.

Summary of Research Question 1. According to the analyzed data specific to Research Question 1, the principal of Alpha Rewards Elementary, a rural, high-poverty school lovingly influences student achievement in multiple ways. One-way Mr. Love influenced success was focusing on instruction. Further, he did not rely simply on one strategy, but used strategies such as continuous engagement with students and teachers,

monitoring the school campus, and introducing new techniques to enhance instruction. Additionally, the principal took pride in creating a warm and welcoming environment. Communication and cultural events was key with all stakeholders and ensured a culture of learning that was inviting. The themes that emerged from Research Question 1 were also evident when examining the data specific to the leadership styles and practices used by Mr. Love.

Research Question 2

What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?

In Research Question 2, the leadership styles and practices of Mr. Love were discussed regarding his performance in leading a rural, high-performing, high-poverty school. The main points that emerged for discussion were empowerment, vision and monitoring.

Creating the conditions under which effective leaders' styles are used and practices are implemented is the job of the principal. However, in order to lead individual schools, principals implement different approach and styles. When members of the faculty at Alpha Rewards were asked, a myriad of responses were provided. According to Mrs. Rounds, the principal demonstrated patience, yet he was a *fireball* when he understood and surveyed the situation. She described how she saw his style emerge:

Our principal was with us for a year and half. He came in the middle of the year.

When he first came, he took a backrow seat and he mostly followed what was already in place here. As he took over, he put an increased emphasis on literacy

and on small group instruction. We were told that we had to keep literacy at the forefront of all that we do.

As Mrs. Rounds attempted to remember the program that he implemented to encourage a literacy laced curriculum, Nelly Sims echoed, “Million minutes celebration and the 30 for 30 Book Club.” Diane Stuart added, “We actually had a 30 Minutes Celebration the other day for reading. We've encouraged the kids to read that million-minute thing. We had the slides, but we also had PTO come in and did snow-cones and treats.” The 30 for 30 is where everyone reads at least 30 minutes a night for a month. Mrs. Rounds continued, “Mr. Love challenged the school to read a million minutes and then had a big celebration at the end of the year. He also started his own book club and then ignited the Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) program.”

During the focus group discussion, the participants remembered getting \$1000 per teacher to use in creating classroom libraries. Carol Couch recalled, “We didn't know how we were spending the money at first. It was like, what do we do?” Mrs. Sims confirmed, “We never had this.” Mrs. Rounds explained, “Mr. Love did something that I though was great with our Title I budget. He provided \$1000 for each classroom to buy books. That was like a B12 shot!” Mrs. Stuart added, “We spent a lot of money in those classrooms this year. Teachers could order materials specific to instructional needs. They picked what they used in their classroom, which I think was very, very good.”

Empowerment. Mr. Love did not give a specific name to his leadership style, but he did believe that it was necessary for him to empower his staff if he was to govern effectively. When asked about his leadership style, he responded,

I really don't have just one. I've stayed the same for 30 years. I guess you could say I lead by empowering others. I've always had the premise that cream rises to the top if you let it. And I try to empower people. I try to plant seeds. I try to plant seeds and then sit back and let them think they thought of it. Okay?

He noted that he did not have a problem making the hard decisions because that was his job. "But when there's something out there and we need to do something, I really try to let people grow." He thought of himself as a person who tried to raise the bar for people. He shared, "I try to show teachers that we can be as good as we want to be. I'm never satisfied with mediocrity, never. I've been surrounded with wonderful people."

Rita shared Mr. Love's position that all of his staff needed a voice at the table.

Rita said,

Everybody's voice needed to be heard when they are making decisions. Nobody wants to be told this is what you'll do, this is what you'll do. It's a lot easier when everybody has input especially teachers. Input they had about everything from what kind of celebrations you can have for good behavior to programs and tools to improve behavior.

Carol Couch concurred with everyone having had the opportunity to share their thoughts. She looked at their team meeting as an opportunity for her voice to be heard. She discussed how teaming was significant, "Teaming is such a huge deal. To have that opportunity to sit down with your fellow team members and talk and discuss what's working for you, what's not working. Maybe a child with a behavior issue somebody else could share something to help enlighten you." Mrs. Couch added a few final thoughts on the leadership of Mr. Love, "He got two eyes on the teachers. Those things he watched

and saw that we needed are things we needed to work on. He's very hands on. The children love him."

Vision. Mr. Love had a vision of success when he took on the leadership of any school. He was clear on what he believed and wanted for the children at Alpha Rewards. The work that he supported and recommended for implementation was guided by his belief in what was best for children emotionally, academically, and communally (socially). While Mr. Love's core belief is consistent, his goals were modified to adjust to the needs of the children in his school. He sent the Four-Year Plan that was developed by all stakeholders who had a vested interest in his children. The opening paragraph addressed the purpose of the plan "Alpha Reward Elementary School's four-year plan that will put our school in the top quartile of South Carolina test scores. We ask that you join us on this journey."

The actions of a servant leader were demonstrated in his pledge to the parents. His caring nature was demonstrated in the first line of the plan, "Administrator will love each child." Further, it declared that the "administrator will have high expectations for everyone involved with our school." His beliefs were developed from multiple collaborations with his faculty and staff. His guiding questions often seeks to learn additional information about the child. Mr. Love might ask the site leader as well as staff, students, and parents, "What's strategies have you used with your writers? How are they selecting the writing topic?" really important at this school?" Or "What are you striving to create here?"

School leaders seek to support the students and faculty emotionally. Mr. Love has worked with his parents and faculty to support the emotional needs of students. He

also works to support his faculty. Mr. Love created the ABC Room to support students with behavior problems. Being able to remove the students from the classroom served dual purposes. First, the students were given a chance to redirect their behavior. Mrs. Stuart added, “the teachers were able to feel less overwhelmed when they no longer had to deal with the children’s negative emotions and bad behaviors.” According to Mrs. Charles, PTO member, “Mr. Love wrote each child a *Don’t Wait to Be Great* post card to welcome them back to school, hoping they had a good summer, wishing them well with the new school year.” In a team meeting, Mrs. Smith remembers him saying, “Don’t worry about making mistakes, don’t worry about ... Just think out the box, don’t worry about trying things. If it doesn’t work, then don’t do it anymore. But just keep climbing.”

In the four-year plan, Mr. Love pledged to the students and parents that he would keep a data chart for each child to monitor progress; read writings from students K-2; read and conference with grades 3-5 on writing prompts; read progress data on all children; give parents opportunities to share information with the principal regarding placement of children for next year. In their interview, teachers and the assistant principal commented on those practices.

Collectively, Mr. Love worked with teachers and parents to make the best decisions for their students. Mrs. Couch, the Teacher of the Year, described Mr. Love, “*He’s patient. Has a lot of patience. He loves the children.*” Mrs. Rounds echoed her sentiments, “He loves these children.” Mrs. Charles added, “He explains it to them. And let’s them know if they have to go home or you have to sit out of recess, or something. He’s gonna let them know what they did wrong.” Mr. Love always encourages those he

works with to not be afraid to make mistakes and to share. He ends his team meeting with, “Ya’ll did a fantastic job and if you taught a good lesson share it with everybody.

He believed that awards were acknowledgements of meeting goals that fulfill his vision and a signal that some goals have been achieved. He recalls his first school as a leader. “We were in the bottom quartile. And in four years, we were the Reading School of the Year for South Carolina! And we were the first, and to my knowledge, only school that ever-won Reading School of the Year, Literacy Spot and Writing.” They made remarkable progress as recognized by the Gold Star given to them for improvement. The school received five Gold Stars in a row for their continuous growth and improvements. He attributes that success to “just wonderful teachers, and they bought into it, and I’ve been blessed. I’ve been blessed to work with good people.”

Monitoring. Elementary school leaders have days of constant leadership with endless responsibilities. Fortunately, Mr. Love had an assistant principal to share his responsibilities. However, he was the principal and the ultimate responsibility of leading rested there. An ordinary day at Mr. Love’s school took many directions in his quest to lead and it started off at the car rider line:

My day started out in the mornings on car duty and waving and talking to all the parents and opening doors for kids. I’d repeat hundreds of times, *Good morning, how you doing?* Children love to hug me, especially the little ones, and I’m always careful to pat them on top of the head, you know? You have to be careful nowadays.

Mrs. Rounds described what she witnessed daily from the principal during his morning duties. She shared, “We had morning duty together every day between 7-7:15.

Mr. Love was outside greeting parents, putting out small fires sometimes. When children came in, he recognized children that had a problem and he'd pull that child over to him, give them a hug to start the day off and just say, "You know, we're gonna have a good day today, right? You're a good boy."

Mr. Love then monitored the hall to make sure there were no students misplaced. He mentioned, "I always walked up and down the halls, and I usually go into every classroom just to say good morning." Mrs. Sims thought from an affective standpoint, every morning part of her routine was to walk the halls with Mr. Love. She described why monitoring the halls and communicating with the students and staff was important to leadership. She said, "I just feel like they need to know that I loved them. I cared. I valued them. That's just setting the tone for the day."

Monitoring the classrooms was an important part of Mr. Love's day. Mrs. Sims observed him going in and out of the regular classrooms while continuing to put out fires along the way. Mrs. Sims also noted that she had observed Mr. Love, "Meeting with teachers, having those post observation conferences with teachers. Sometimes I'd sit in on those as well."

Monitoring the school throughout the school day was important to Mr. Love. He made it a point to monitor the lunchroom daily. "I tried to be in the cafeteria when lunch starts as much as possible." He mentioned the deterrent for him not getting in the classroom would be meetings. He said, "A lot of my time during lunch was with IEP meetings. That's just who we were, you know? We still had good referrals, so I had to do that. And a phone call, of course, that's worth saying."

Throughout the day, Mr. Love monitored the hall. He noted, “I always stopped to talk to kids if I saw them in the hall, especially if it was one of my old boys.” He would ask the boys a series of questions to ascertain information about their overall academics and behavior. He asks, “How are you doing? How is that homework?”

Being visible during recess was also an important part of Mr. Love’s daily routine. “When I can, I go outside at recess and throw the football with some boys, and kind of play football with them. We had the Eagle Bowl this year, and I quarterbacked for them. That was for kids that had good behavior the month of January.” The third, fourth, and fifth graders got to play a tag football game. The members of the focus groups also added that Mr. Love’s day was routine with some things that did not happen as often. Mr. Couch and Mrs. Sims mentioned the study groups. Mrs. Rounds mentioned the meeting he would host with different community members or the PTO.

Mrs. Charles discussed how she observed him stop in to monitor the afterschool program. She noted, “Mr. Love would stop to the afterschool program. I never had a principal to stop in that cafeteria when I was working in the afterschool program as much as he has. He even came in there and join in the activities. He let them know he loves them.”

Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Stuart described the process Mr. Love used in the morning program which mirrored the routine described by others. Mrs. Stuart confirmed all that was said about Mr. Love’s daily routine. At the end of the day, the teachers, parents and community received an electronic message on remind app from the principal stating, “Thank you for reading during DEAR. Know that I love and appreciate you.”

Summary of Research Question 2. The principal of Alpha Rewards Elementary used multiple practices to lead the school, which was attributed to his multiple leadership styles. Leadership styles vary depending upon the situation the leader is faced with in certain circumstances (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). While Mr. Love, the principal in this study, exhibited the characteristics of a servant leader, he engaged in other leadership styles as needed. He empowered his staff to lead as necessary, but Mr. Love was not afraid to make the tough decisions and did so as necessary. Evidence showed how he assessed the school in order to create a school vision that was targeted on increasing student achievement. Mr. Love monitored instruction in and out the classroom to ensure teachers were teaching and children were continuously learning. Yet, Mr. Love's successes were not met without challenges as described in Research Question 3.

Research Question 3

What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?

In Research Question 3, Mr. Love, like other school leaders in rural areas, faced many challenges, but found ways to manage them while focusing on the needs of the students. The main points that emerged were poverty, family environment and safety.

The need for quality education is more important now than ever with the changing face of rural America and the growing divide between the rural and urban schools (Farmer, 2017). However, about poverty and safety, America's cities and rural schools and communities may have as much in common as not. Similarly, in urban districts, poverty and safety are a mainstay in rural communities.

Poverty. The concentration of poverty is another important contextual factor in rural areas (Farrigan 2017). People living in poverty are typically clustered in certain regions, counties, and neighborhoods. In rural places with high poverty, a person may face impediments beyond individual circumstances (Balonon-Rosen, 2015). With this being a rural school, Mr. Love was able to meet with parents and found that most of them did not have a high school education. He knew that “We have to overcome poverty, culture, drugs in our community. Our kids came from homes with all those problems. Apathy.”

Mr. Love believed that poverty played a major factor in the illiteracy rate. He noted, “A lot of our parents don't have high school educations. Also, many of my parents are in jail or have been in jail.” He linked the problem with his African American male boys to their fathers, “Almost all my hard cases, especially with the boys, their fathers either have been in jail or in jail now. It's sad that we must overcome poverty, culture, drugs in our community. Our kids come from homes with all types of those problems. Apathy.” When asked specifically about poverty and the effect on education, he shared:

Well, poverty directly affects so many things. A child in poverty has a disadvantage from the very beginning. You know, Euclid had a theory in math that if any two things that were alike, if a third thing came along, if one was equal to it, the other had to be too. It's the same thing with society. If poverty and poor health are equal, then education and lack of education, must be equal.

Mr. Love went on to discuss the lack of political involvement and the effect on how we educate children and what politicians know about education. He went on to say:

And people up in Washington just don't get it, in my opinion. I don't mean to get into politics, but until there's an understanding of politics and people, until we have universal healthcare, until we understand what it is to live in poverty and not have healthcare and not have adequate education, we won't change a whole lot. It's good for some people. Until we understand how other people live, we're not going to change. It's going to keep being the same old, same old. And everybody says things are going good by now, but if you are living in the projects, it's not good. And that affects the children we teach.

Much of the conversation among the focus group centered on challenges faced in education. Specific to their school, Mrs. Couch, Mrs. Sims, and Mrs. Rounds all agreed that poverty was a major challenge that they were forced to deal with while serving the students in their school. Rita Rounds believed that “sometimes our children have behavior problems, that's a challenge we face. I think that a lot of times those problems come because of poverty in the home.” Mrs. Sims concurred. Mrs. Rounds went further to say:

I think sometimes when families are feeling stressed, it transfers to the children and I think that's, like our teacher leader said, people try to look out for our children because we're aware of the issues at home associated with poverty. I think that supporting people in times of need, just like knowing kids that need food at their house and knowing when kids need shoes. I think it starts when kids come to school in anger. Oftentimes, there home life is in the midst of chaos.

Mrs. Couch went on to say, “We have had kids who've lived in cars before, and who have lived in local motels. The also move from family to family, and from foster

family to the next foster family.” Mrs. Sims added, “We have had some come to school who did not have running water at home.”

Family environment. Schools throughout America have features that are unique to that school. Alpha Rewards Elementary is no exception to that fact. The family and community environment were talked about as an asset during my data collection.

Describe what you find exceptional about your school. Rita Rounds believed that it was an asset to have their school in the heart of the community. Nelly Sims saw the school as a family environment. Rita Rounds added,

Yeah and more than that. We have the buddy booth set up here. People use the school for events and the fields outside are used year-round by local youth: baseball, football, and cheerleaders. I think the community feels like they own this school. Everybody knows where Alpha Reward is and knows the business of the school really.

Mrs. Couch discussed the poverty issues in the context of the school and family support. She said, “Education may not be your number one concern at the moment when we have students who are angry or who are hungry.” She shared what the cafeteria manager did when she saw a student having a difficult time. Couch said, “I have seen the manager literally work one-on-one with some of the hardest to deal with children, those are the ones that she would take under her wing and love.”

According to Carol Couch, “Alpha Rewards is an older school. It's a very established school. You can just about run into anybody who went to the elementary school here.”

To me I think we had so many people who were so loving and so caring. I mean, you had people who went out of their way. If there was a family in need, we were taking up food sponsoring families at Christmas. We knew our students. We sent home food on the weekends to students that we know are in need to make sure they had enough to get them through to Monday morning. We had people who provide hats, gloves, scarves, shoes, I mean anything you could think of, someone there did it daily. It is just phenomenal.

Mrs. Sims shared a similar example of her observation of the cafeteria manager's interaction with students. She said,

I can attest to that personally of her love and kindness toward staff. The goal of our cafeteria manager was to adopt someone that was new to the school and that would need some extra loving just because they were new. I was the lucky person. When I first got here, I was expecting. I went out on maternity leave September 15th or something, but I would come in my office, there would be pairs of shoes for my baby, just anything, all kinds of treats. This was happening on a weekly basis. I was always trying to find out who is this person doing all these nice things, but they would not tell me. Nobody would tell me, but I found out one week who it was at our level meeting, but I had never been in a place where it's just so much caring, loving and warmth. We really cared about each other. Now we had our disagreements, but you know love conquers all.

Mr. Love credits parents and used the remind app for helping to improve communication and making the school grow. When asked about his growth, he shared:

One of the things that's really helped is that we do have a group of parents that are involved. I have a remind app, and I have 230 parents that are on that remind app. Periodically, I'll send reminders that that maybe grade level specific things that will help their kids. Like a kindergarten, 10 central things to help your child learn to read. 10 central things if you have a child that is autistic. Those type of things. And they appreciate that.

Mrs. Stuart said, "Parents send Mr. Love their phone number. He added them to his remind app and they got reminders throughout the day. He was informative. He tried to let everybody know what's going on. The kids loved it, because when he came into the classroom it may be set on remind." Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Stuart both agree that the remind app has been very effective.

Parental satisfaction affected how educators communicated with students and ultimately, how students performed in school. Mrs. Sims felt the parenting workshops had helped the school to grow. According to Mrs. Sims, "We teach parents different strategies for helping kids at home and helping themselves as well. Having the information center available to parents about community events or just different outlets for them to become better, parenting classes or things like that." Mr. Love mentioned parent communication as another reason for his success. He stated,

We do have involved parents. And just having our school open and an open-door policy to my office, I've had numerous parents come in and sit in that chair and say, *I'm not happy*. And we talk it through, and we talk it out. Most of them leave happy, or at least satisfied that I listened to them.

The assistant principal concurs,

Well, we do have an open-door policy. Parents feel comfortable coming in and voicing their concerns or sharing their concerns. We have a policy, I believe it's 48 hours for administrators to get back to parents, to answer their questions or concerns via phone calls or emails. I think that holds everybody accountable, especially administrators.

Mrs. Stuart confirmed the comments made by Mrs. Sims:

He had good relationships with all his teachers. He had an open-door policy. If you had a problem, you come in and they talked about it. He pretty much backed his teachers. He tried to listen to them and sought to see their needs or if they've got a problem with something, he tried to address it.

Rita Rounds recalled how the people from the community came into the school to contribute. She shared, "We have people who care. For example, if we had behavior problems, a certain grandfather, you can call and will come in and talk to the children and work with the children." On another occasion, there were not enough presents for the students to give out at the Secret Santa Shop. Mrs. Rounds recalls, "A grandfather helped by going around our district and the community to gather supplies." Nelly Sims added, "I guess the main thing that leads to our success is understanding that it really does take a village. We know that, and we believe that, and we act like that."

Mrs. Stuart credited the Title I program as one of the biggest successes at the school. She was impressed with the PTA evening programs. "They had parental programs where parents were invited. They gave free books away for the kids that showed up. There were classroom visits, then the family was fed." Mrs. Stuart thought the parenting skills that were shared at all meetings were very beneficial. She said, "We

had somebody there that was training them how to teach your child, how to work with them on reading or how to work with them on even maybe hygiene.” The community was encouraged to participate in the training to join with the school to help the parents to help the children.

Mrs. Charles discussed the First Steps program as successful with the younger students. She said, “Children up to five years old are a part of the program. Training is conducted to help the parents help the children.” Additionally, there were resources connected to the needs of the parents. “If parents do not know anything, they may be looking for a job. They couldn’t find those resources, or they didn’t know where to go, so we provided that for them.” A calendar of nutritional and healthy food and snacks were sent to homes each week through the Save the Children program. Also, there are recipes parents can make with the children, different activities, and exercises they can do with the children.

Safety. Mr. Love worked with faculty, staff, parents, and students to administer safety rules, drills and guidelines to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the school. Mr. Love discussed the safety drill held at school. Mrs. Sims concurred, “We conduct all of our safety drills when we’re supposed to. Most recently we had our local sheriff’s department come in and help observe our lockdown drills and provide us with feedback on what we did good and what we can do to improve considering all the craziness that’s going on.”

Mrs. Couch shared information about the key card, “Once the school did the key cards with our lock system that was a huge weight that was lifted. That was around the time some of the schools were having issues with school shootings and things.

Sometimes we had to remind each other, keep the doors closed, don't prop them open.”

Mrs. Sims nodded in the affirmative. She added, “You can appreciate that as an administrator, I got the other end of the stick because people didn't understand why that was so important. And you were just like, "How can you not understand?" Mrs. Couch provided an example of an irate parent over custody issues who was able to come into the building before they got the key cards. The angry parent came through the backdoor and come down the hall. Fortunately, Mr. Love was able to get the situation under control.

Mr. Love, Mrs. Couch and Mrs. Sims all mentioned in some form the types of monthly drills the staff conducts: fire drill, bus evacuation drill, tornado drill, intruder drill, and earthquake drill. Mrs. Couch highlighted the need for school safety. “With so much going on, school safety is so important this day and time.” Mrs. Couch noted that she stressed to the children, "If you watch the news, there's something happening in schools with intruder violence all the time." Some of the students did not have a firm grasp of this because they are young, and this is an elementary school. Teachers have had more classroom discussions about what to do if something would happen. Mrs. Couch noted that she had seen a different importance of the drills among students. “You see how important it is now, when we are practicing intruder drills and things like that. You understand the importance now.”

Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Stuart both felt that Mr. Love tolerated no bullying. Mrs. Stuart said, “That is one of the biggest things that Mr. Loved stressed with us here. He doesn't tolerate, we have the no bullying policy.” He would question the students to help them find a resolution to the problem. Mrs. Stuart added, “As far as safety, we do have the bell you have to ring to get into the school. You have to be buzzed in after identifying

yourself and purpose.” Mrs. Charles added about how it makes all feel safe. She said, “You don't have a key, you have to be buzzed in or someone has to let you in.”

Mrs. Rounds added, “Mr. Love is a stickler for making sure parents have had background checks; there is supervision for the buses and car riders; and then we have supervision in the halls and outside too.” Safety is of the utmost importance at Alpha Reward Elementary School. Mrs. Stuart concluded the discussion about Mr. Love with one final thought, “He is literally bubbly. He's just, you know ... that way. When he greets you and you sit and talk to him, you're going to think you've known him forever.”

Summary of Research Question 3. The principal of Alpha Rewards Elementary faced multiple challenges. One challenge that he faced was poverty. Children educated in rural schools have been found to experience a serious lack of education in comparison with children in urban school (Jensen, 2009; Payne, 2005). Despite efforts implemented by state and federal programs to target education for children in at the primary and secondary levels, the rate of education still remains low, especially in rural areas (Farmer, 2017). Mr. Love found it best to work with parents to support instruction for children. He also supported the staff in offering needed services to families. Mr. Love also encouraged a family-like environment for the school as a way to make parents feel welcome when coming to the school. Additionally, creating a safe and welcoming environment was a major focus for the principal.

Case 1 Overview

Case 1 explored the life of Mr. Wilbur Love, the principal of Alpha Rewards Elementary School, a career professional teacher and school leader who exhibited the

majority characteristics of a transformational leader. He was seen as a leader who loved children and enjoyed seeing them thrive.

Mr. Love used cultural opportunities to empower the children to know who they are and understand the importance of their culture. He did not see poverty as an obstacle, but more as an opportunity. Instructional leadership was how he led and supported the teachers to teach and learn; and how he welcomed parents into the school to become a part of the learning process. He worked to create a school climate that embraced learning. Mr. Love used multiple strategies and communicated daily with all stakeholders. He saw himself solely as a person who loved children and a dedicated professional whose main goal was to empower teachers to lead and make instructional decisions so children can learn. He also created a vision for learning based on the specific needs of the school. Instruction and the success of children were important to him, so he was seen monitoring the school's environment before, during and after school.

There are multiple similarities and differences observed and acknowledged in the data between the two school leaders. Case 2 provided the analysis of the data about the professional life of Mrs. Lisa Smith, principal of Omega Rewards Elementary School. Case 2 is organized using the three research questions created for the purpose of collecting organized and specific data for this study. The information is presented by themes that emerged from the extensive refining of the data.

Case 2: Omega Rewards Elementary School

Case 2 delved into the life of Mrs. Lisa Smith, principal of Omega Reward Elementary School and her desire to impact how students learn and teachers teach in a loving and caring environment. Mrs. Smith began her educational career as an

elementary school teacher in 1999. She spent 14 years teaching before she entered into the field of administration as an Assistant Principal in 2012. She has served two years as an elementary Assistant Principal, and four years as an Elementary School Principal.

Mrs. Smith received her bachelor's degree in education from Converse College in 1999. She returned to Converse College where she earned her master's degree in Elementary Education in 2001 and her educational specialist degree in 2012. She has received the following awards during her tenure.

Teacher of the Year – Elementary
Teacher of the Year – Intermediate School
District Teacher of the Year
STAR Teacher – PSTA – PSTA (Palmetto State Teacher Association)

In Case 2, several themes emerged during the analysis of the interviews, focus groups, observations, and the examination of document data. Personal narratives and observations about the principal of Omega Rewards Elementary Schools helped the readers understand how Mrs. Lisa Smith led in a rural, high-performing, high-poverty school.

Research Question 1

How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?

Research Question 1 focused on how selected stakeholders of Omega Rewards Elementary School perceived the principal's efforts to influence student achievement. The main components that emerged from the refinement of the themes were leadership, vision, school climate, observations, accountability, instructional decisions, and support.

Reward schools for progress are designations given to Title I schools that demonstrate the most substantial progress in either the *all student* group or in identified

subgroups from one school year to the next. Omega Reward Elementary school was identified in the subgroups area. Omega was awarded for performance in the following areas:

- Have attained an "A" or "B" in the two most recent school years.
- Have a free/reduced lunch count that is greater than 50 percent.
- Not have significant achievement gaps.
- Have at least one tested grade on state assessments.

Mrs. Smith had some strong beliefs about how she influences student achievement. She believed achievements should be rewarded and celebrated with students and teachers. Accountability was expected of everyone with expectations to reach goals efficiently. Additionally, common planning provided an opportunity for teacher to discuss strategies specific to individuals, small groups and the class. This process kept everyone one on the same page with the same goal to strive for perfection. Keeping kids interacting with technology such as Google docs provided skills that prepared them for the future.

Empowering leader. Omega Reward Elementary School was considered successful because of its Title I designation. Community members, parents and staff were proud of that award. However, each person had different understandings of school success. Angela Gold, a community member from the local church, felt the leadership was positive. She said,

They have some amazing teachers and right now they have a great principal. She loves children. She's enthusiastic. She's come in and made a lot of changes. She's made that school so kid friendly. She loves the kids and it shows. She involves them in so much and she's got the community involved. She just has everybody

involved. She has a great personality and she reaches out. Before, I've not seen as much of that.

Beth Little, PTO president, also attributes the success of the school to the leadership. She stated,

The school is successful because of the teachers but we also have a great principal. She will go all out for this school. We also have a great community that wants to come in and give their time. It's like a combination of everybody working together to achieve a goal. The principal that we have is one of the best I've ever worked with. She has a lot of energy and she just keeps going and going and going. She always has a smile on her face that brightens your day. She gets very involved with the students. It's not just getting to know them academically but also personally. I think the principal is the rock of the school.

Lynn Hasting, the reading coach, believed that school was successful because, "I would say we have leadership that's positive. We have a principal who empowers us with anything that we need to promote student achievement." Mrs. Hastings continued sharing why she thought the principal contributed to the success of the school, "She's always looking for ways to motivate us and encourage us and she's hands on. She's in the classrooms. She's working with children. She knows what every classroom is doing in the name of literacy and math." Mrs. Wanda Lindsay and Mrs. Worth nodded in agreement. Mrs. Lindsay added, "When she forms relationships with them, they are better able to perform in class. She gets to know the parents." Mrs. Lyndsay talked more about the teachers and how they contributed to the success of the school. She said, "It's the same with our teachers. We take the time to get to know our kids. When you form relationships

with them, they're more able to perform in class because they're more comfortable with you.” Mrs. Lindsay said, “Speaking as a parent, I have three kids here. They always, when something happens, must share it with Miss Smith. That's the kind of principal she is. They like to share with her too.”

Vision. Research says the school leader's mission vision should always be student-centered and focused on better serving students (Meador, 2017). Mrs. Smith concurs:

I think the success from this school comes from everyone having a shared vision and mission. We met as a leadership team and discuss what we're all about, what we want for our students, what we want for our teachers. And everyone has a shared vision and mission, and we want to provide a very safe, positive environment where all the leaders, the students, and the teachers can lead, learn, and grow to their fullest potential.

She further believes that students and teachers need to set personal and achievable goals. The principal and the leadership team's roles are to support the teachers and students in achieving their goals. Mrs. Smith added, “As far as strengths, we've seen how teachers have led students to goal set, and to take ownership in their learning. Seeing a big jump like we did this year, really praising the teachers and then asking their feedback.” Mrs. Smith also believed that teachers buy into the vision when they are able to be professionals. She said, “I value their insight, and their feedback so it's not just me running the ship all alone.” Mrs. Smith also believed that teachers who are accountable for student learning, “will have high expectations for their students, allowing them to

actually drive their own bus, set those goals, create that positive vision for themselves. We've seen great success with that.”

School climate. School leaders strive to create a climate that promotes a caring and loving environment (Walker, 2007). Mrs. Smith believed that you had to have a vision of excellence that promoted a positive school climate for your school. She said, “You cannot influence student achievement without looking at the underlying things such as love and safety.” When schools promote a positive climate, there can be greater equality in educational opportunities (Astor, 2016; Walker, 2007). A positive school climate promotes opportunity. Mrs. Smith believed that students needed to feel like they could take risks, “When students take a risk, they need to be supported to take that risk for a lesson that might not be a conventional lesson. It might be something out of the box. Teachers need not be afraid to engage their students and make learning meaningful for them.” She later added that risk-taking happens “in a loving environment, even when we give feedback to students, it's within a loving context.”

Beth Little felt the principal was the reason for the positive school climate. She discussed the change since Mrs. Smith came to the school, “She has only been there two years, but the energy bus (a positive behavior school program inspired by the book, *The Energy Bus: 10 Rules to Fuel your Life, Work, and Team with Positive Energy*, Gordon, 2007), oh, my goodness. She gets the kids, teachers and everybody involved. I know it's made a big difference in the building.” She went on to compare the changes to the past. “At one time, the walls it didn't look like a kid friendly elementary school. That's been a big, big difference that I've noticed. Mrs. Smith puts her whole heart into it. She lives and breathes the school.” Mrs. Gold added, “She loves children. She's enthusiastic. She's

come in and made a lot of changes. She's made that school so kid friendly. She loves the kids and it shows.”

Mrs. Cindy Worth, the instructional coach felt a strength of the school was that, “Children came first.” Mrs. Hasting added that the “expectation and I think the example that our principal sets or shows, she's always positive. She's always asking about the kids first. It's always about student learning, student growth.” Mrs. Worth said, “When it comes to safety, yes. She sets that bar high and I think everybody is trying to work to reach that.”

Mrs. Hasting, Mrs. Lindsay, and Mrs. Worth agreed that the major lessons that they learned that they could implement in other rural schools was the need for positivity. Particularly they all echoed, “Think before you speak.” Mrs. Lindsay added, “T-H-I-N-K, think is it helpful? What else? Is it kind? Is it necessary? I forget what the other one is.” Mrs. Worth added, “Always have the mindset of not yet. If you don't know it, it's not yet, but you will. We are striving to get to that.”

Many things happened at Omega Reward Elementary that added to the positive school climate. Mrs. Worth described the healthy schools’ initiative:

We had booths set up promoting healthy living. Chartwell came out and they gave out fruit and healthy snacks and waters. Then, they invite different organizations from the community. They came out to serve the community, show their presence, they even had the dentist there. The children loved it.

Mrs. Gold remembered what she saw as a way of making the school successful:

Mrs. Smith reaches out to people who have helped to make a difference. She pulled in one of the board members and they had a big rally for the kids. I

remember one time I got a flower arrangement one day at my house. Just a little flower arrangement. But it is the little things like that that makes everyone want to do more.

Observation. Following policy that aligned with practices played a key role in changing the effectiveness of student achievement, particularly when administrators see value in teacher observations as a practice that support the teaching and learning (Waite, 2017). Mrs. Smith looked at her teachers' observations as a necessary practice that aligned to district policy. When asked about teacher observations, she responded, "I observe my teachers weekly. I make a point to schedule so that I'm in as much as possible. My goal each week is to be in every classroom. If it's just a walkthrough, or a longer evaluation."

Based on those observations, Mrs. Smith made some overall assessments and judgements about the strengths and weaknesses associated with instruction and about the strength she observed from students and teachers during class visits:

More students are willing to take risks. They feel safe in their classrooms. That's fantastic. Our teachers are getting better at analyzing formative and summative assessments, just to guide their instructions for the very next day. They know who has already mastered a skill, who has not, who needs help.

Mrs. Smith enjoys visiting classes to be a part of the instruction. She thought it was important to be in what she calls *the trenches* with her teachers. She said, "I love being in the classrooms, I love being engaged with our students and really knowing what they're doing in the classroom." She moved learning beyond the classroom when she continued her questioning strategy in the common areas of her school. Mrs. Smith enjoys

finding out what the students are learning. She asked those questions in more relaxed setting,

Simple things like, talking to them in the cafeteria and asking questions such as: What have you learned today? Tell me what you've learned. If they can verbalize what they've learned, they've gained something that day. Or it might be in the cafeteria, or the playground asking them questions, *how's your day going? What did you do in math today?*

She also encourages her teachers to stand in the shoes of the students. Throughout the year, the teachers take the student assessment. During an observation, the teachers were taking the fifth-grade math test, that allows them to sit in that child's seat and experience what they go through. She added, "It gives you an insight too to know how to support your teachers, you've just got to support them because they're the ones that are instilling the love of learning and encouraging students when they don't feel like they can achieve something." She called herself, the chief energy officer, and sees her job as knowing how her students and teachers were feeling and how learning is happening.

Accountability. One major emphasis in education has been on accountability to increase student performance (Dimke, 2011; Strange, Richard & Catano, 2008). Mrs. Smith also saw the benefits of maximizing instruction. She had observed teachers being more mindful, particularly during transitions. She shared that the staff continuously worked to ensure that "every single second counts." Just maximizing instructional time and being aware of transitions when switching classrooms, returning from lunch. We were very efficient so that we have the most amount of time for instruction." Further, they addressed weaknesses and at the same time, she led her staff in efforts to sustain the

strengths. She said, “For looking at maximizing instructional time, we evaluated our schedules to ensure what we are doing helps to get started with instruction sooner. Creating simple exercises to find additional time for instruction has been very eye opening for the teachers.” One teacher said, “Wow, I scheduled that in my time for my daily schedule, but I don't need that much time to walk from activity to my classroom.” She shared how a 10-minute transition was changed to two minutes!

The focus group started with weaknesses when asked to share some of the strengths and weaknesses observed in the classrooms. Mrs. Hasting stated, “We've had big turnover in our faculty the past couple years, got a lot of new teachers here, some fresh right out of college. I don't really see that as a weakness, but more a lack of experience and knowledge.” Further, literacy was also seen as a negative since Mrs. Hasting mentioned, “What I'm looking at takes experience and it takes getting in there and getting to know kids and knowing what to look for. When I look at that this year, I wouldn't necessarily say it's a weakness. It's just something like, we're new. We're brand new.” Mrs. Lindsay agreed with Mrs. Hasting.

Mrs. Lindsay shared how she had found success when she switched from grade to grade and subject to subject. She said, “I went from two years in math and science in fifth grade to all subjects last year in third grade. This year, I'm just doing science and social studies. As a teacher, I've found that I was good at teaching science, ELA, not so much.” She looked at that as a weakness to continue to change a teacher without the teacher getting to a comfort level in a grade or subject even though the change from year to year eventually helped her to find the subject of which she feels is good at teaching. Mrs.

Hasting added, “We've gotten teachers. Fairly new teacher that had gone from fourth grade to first grade, who never taught first grade before. It's just very different.”

Changing the conversation during the common planning time lead the principal and teachers to begin the process of looking at time on task in the classrooms. Finding additional time from in the halls, lead them to looking more at classroom transitions and asking pertinent questions such as: What are you doing? How are you thinking ahead to make sure that your materials are ready? How does the transition look from a whole group into small group? Is there a more efficient way of doing that? Mrs. Smith added, “Having those conversations in our common planning meeting times weekly has helped tremendously with adding additional instructional time.” Looking at how to maximize time has led to more time for data driven instruction.

Mrs. Smith is very passionate when it comes to looking at students who are struggling. She said, “At our school, we do not focus on student weakness. What are their strengths? Because each child has their strengths, so how can we highlight that to help them gain confidence, so they try the subject that they're struggling with.”

Instructional decisions. In this era of increased accountability, nearly every principal has begun using data to help drive instructional practices (Fenton & Murphy, 2018). Mrs. Smith was also using data to make decisions about what the school should focus on to enhance the curriculum. The focus for Omega Reward Elementary School was on writing across the content areas. Mrs. Smith shared that their data revealed that “our writing scores are a little lower than our rating in math scores, so we want to talk about strategies for writing across the content area.”

The principal and the teachers also made changes with how they plan. When asked about how teachers analyze the lesson plans, Mrs. Smith said:

This year we're doing something a little different. In the past I would have teachers turn in their lesson plans to the google drive, the google classroom. I put them up, and on my own I would look through them, see if their lessons were aligning to the rigor and to the depth of knowledge (DOK) level of that standard that it requires. But this year, we're bringing the lesson plans to the common planning, so we can have a face to face conversation about what's in their plans, how is that decided, just like the questions that I showed you on that wall was, what we're focusing on this week, why are we focusing here? What backs up that decision to go there? What if they already know it? What if they don't know it by the end of the week, or by the end of that study? So just always thinking ahead, "What are all the needs of the classroom, and how am I going to address them?"

There was not a particular criterion as far as how the lesson plan should be written. The teachers are given the autonomy to design their lesson plans that work best for their teaching style. Mrs. Smith felt that formats are not that important as long as the lesson plan included, "standards, a focus question, and then of course they need to plan the procedures, and the materials." Additionally, Mrs. Smith was keen on asking the essential questions, "What questions have you planned out?" She learned the importance of asking the right question from her work with new teachers and early on in her career.

Because a lot of times we have several new teachers. When I first started out, if I didn't plan those higher-level questions, they weren't asked. Thinking ahead, thinking how to raise the rigor level so that the standard by the planning ahead

with good questions and allow students to think deeper about that content standard.

Mrs. Smith was comfortable speaking about how success was achieved at her school. She provided an example from the previous school year. She referenced examining the data to make decisions.

I kept going back to last year because that's when we really started digging into data as a faculty group. We had done it previously, but I would say we didn't have students in on this until last year. Everybody plays a part, and a lot of the times when the students realize where they are and where they need to be, they can rise to the occasion. If I already feel like I'm already in the victory lane, then I don't have anything to strive for. But if I seem okay, I'm back here at the yellow then I need to get my bus moving. You know?

In order to continue the allocations of funds to support student achievement at this school Mrs. Smith returns to discussing data. She stated:

This is backed by data, just looking at our data trends over a time where we've seen the strengths, where we've seen the weaknesses. Then by sharing that data with teachers, and us discussing instruction; What type of instruction worked, where do we need to go with this next group? What are their needs? It's a perfect recipe, but it's very intentional in how we spend our funds. We have Title I funds, so thankfully we have extra funds for classroom libraries.

Instructional decisions had been made from examining the data. Mrs. Smith stated,

Just through looking at our data, math fluency tended to be our weakness just for our students. They could solve the problems. The teachers bought the math wrap ups some years ago and found it easy. They're just easy to take, and they're self-checking, so it's just a constant repetition of those math facts through that, then it helps them with other math problems that they'll have to solve.

The focus group agreed that using data to make instructional decisions, very important for everybody involved with the data driven process. Mrs. Lindsay provided an example:

My kids are taking their science test right now. When they're done, we will grade their tests, put it into a chart that tells me what each kid misses, and then which questions were missed the most often. Then, that will help me see what kids next week need maybe reteaching on this. Do I need to change my lessons that I've already thought of for next week? Which questions did they miss the most will be the questions that get spiraled back onto their next test until everybody gets it. I think that's how everybody does that.

Mrs. Hasting discussed grade level meetings as an effective method for making instructional decisions:

We meet as grade levels each week. In those grade level meetings are the teachers that touch those kids. We've got an interventionist working with kids. She's in that grade level meeting also. It's so that we're all working together looking at data and reflecting and planning.

Mrs. Hasting (with agreement from Mrs. Worth) went on to describe how the grade level meeting would be an example of how success was achieved:

I mean our grade level meetings would be an example, bringing our data to the table and looking at it. This happens at our school, but it's also a district-wide initiative. Every kindergarten, first, and second grade teacher is being trained in reading recovery/the literacy lessons model where they may only teach two children as opposed to four. They're not getting full certification, but they're going through that training for an entire year and learning the reading process.

Support. The school was considered a community school. Therefore, Mrs. Smith enjoyed being knowledgeable to have those answers for the community businesses and elderly people. Parents were very supportive of the work in the school and the decisions around discipline.

The Boys and Girls Club of America is all over the world, and the teachers noted that they were fortunate to have one in their school community. Additional support comes from,

Power hour a homework and tutoring program for those parents that are working long hours. We have certified teachers who stay an hour after school and work with our students just giving them intensive instruction. I could also go into our RTI process of just knowing each child's story, knowing their strengths, knowing their weaknesses.

Mrs. Smith shared how passionate she was about literacy and early literacy. She said, "We have the free little libraries outside just to get books into the hands of our little ones even before they even come here. It's for parents who have one and two-year old kids to come grab a book, just sit down, and read with your child.

Summary of Research Question 1. The principal of Omega Rewards Elementary, a rural, high-performing, high-poverty school, passionately embraces literacy to influence student achievement. One-way Mrs. Smith influenced success was employing strong leadership skills. Strong leaders understand the importance of creating a positive school climate. Therefore, she was seen daily observing instruction and creating opportunities for teachers, students and parents that highlighted what students were learning. She made instructional decisions that held her accountable for learning. Data was used in making decisions that support the curriculum for the students.

Research Question 2

What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?

In Research Question 2, the leadership styles and practices of Mrs. Smith were examined to better understand how she performed in a rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools. The main points that emerged after refining the themes were leader and monitoring.

Leadership styles comes in many forms when talking to school leaders. Keeping the conversation focused on educating children is the one constant when examining the practices of school leaders. Researcher have found that teaching and learning is critical to improving academic achievement (Mingers, 2002; Provasnik, 2007). Mrs. Smith thinks a servant leader is the best approach in rural elementary schools. Servant leaders tend to live by conscience in that they try to do what they feel is right and just in order to endure (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002).

Leader. When I asked Mrs. Smith to describe her approach to leadership and changes, she has made over time, she immediately shared how she had become more confident in her ability to lead. Mrs. Smith stated,

I would hope that my leadership style would be described as shared leadership. I would like to be thought of as a servant leader because, ultimately each day, I always keep this right in front of me; it's not about me. It's about, students, first and foremost. It's about teachers. It's about parents. Serving them, how can I help them? How can I encourage them? How can I support them?

Mrs. Smith provides an example of how she saw her role as a servant leader. She said,

It's being available. There was this student, just then as we walked through the cafeteria, and asked that simple question of, *how's your day going?* And, the first thing out of his little mouth, he's a first grader, *My mom and dad were in a fight last night, and my mom kicked my dad out of the house.* Her concern was about that student and ensuring that he was of a mindset to focus on his school work and not the problems at home. Therefore, the first things she did was go to the teacher and ask, "Are you aware of John's concern? If she says yes, we may discuss next step." And she goes, "Yes, ma'am." And, we talked about it this morning. So, just being visible.

During the interview, Mrs. Gold continued to refer to Mrs. Smith as a leader. "Before Mrs. Smith came to this school, we didn't always feel welcome. She opened that up. She involves the community. She's the principal. She's the one that is the leader. She made the school friendlier. It makes a difference."

Mrs. Smith shared how she made decisions for parents, teachers and the community with love. She said, “They know I love their kids. And, I don't take it lightly that, when they drop their child off, or when they put their child on the bus, they are sending and entrusting me with their entire world. And, I'm humbled by the opportunity to be able to love them.” Mrs. Smith is comforted by the fact that her teachers know she is going to support them. She shared a story that happened a couple of years ago:

There was a parent that was a little forceful with her conversation with two teachers. I just happened to walk by. I stepped in the minute I heard a parent berating the teachers. I shared a pleasant look at the parent and said, *Well, I tell you what, I'm going to let these two teachers get back to their rooms, because they have to get back to their students, and you and I can talk.*

Taking care of that confrontational situation for my teachers meant a lot to them. While she wanted to remove the teachers from the situation, her ultimate goal was to protect the instructional time for her students.

Mrs. Smith was seen as a leader who does not give up. Beth Little, the PTO president, remembers how it was when she first came to Omega. She recalled,

Mrs. Smith pushing students in a way that they don't realize they're being pushed. She wants to go beyond and above to make them better than what they are, but yet they don't know she's doing this because of the way her personality is with them. The way she works with them. She's pushing them to go further, to do their best but yet she's tender. She's tender to the kids, and they don't know she's pushing them.

School leaders have to participate in a number of meetings, conduct observations, conference with parents, students, teachers and others. A grade level meeting was held with the third-grade teacher. The teacher spent the entire hour discussing a new student who was in a foster home and having discipline problems. Mrs. Smith asked multiple questions to ascertain information about the problem, Is the behavior just starting? Did he have problems at the other school? Are the negative behaviors being displayed throughout the day? Has he been bounced around?" One of the teachers responded, "We don't know. I would suggest we call his former elementary school." Data driven decision-making and action planning assures that all students meet goals for achievement. The teams discussed the information extensively, then proceeded to create a plan of action.

Servant leadership was how Mrs. Hasting described the principal's leadership style. "She is a servant leader." It has changed a bit. She came in year one with a bang and she's toned down. She recognized that and made a conscious decision to slow a little bit." Mrs. Hasting went on to say, "She doesn't ask you to do anything that she wouldn't do! Actually, today she's taking the math test in fifth grade." Mrs. Lindsay added, "Next week, she's taking my science test." Mrs. Hasting added, "Any kid that makes better than her, she's buying their lunch." Both provided additional examples and shared. That was just an example of her level of involvement.

Monitoring. Being an elementary school principal appears to be an endless job because of the multiple responsibilities. Elementary principals are often the only administrator in the school and charged with the responsibility for teachers, staff, students, as well as those stakeholders associated with the operations and support of the

school. At Omega Reward Elementary School, Mrs. Hasting mentioned, “On any given morning, there may be music blaring out there as kids get out of the car at the car rider line. Everyone knows it's going to be a positive morning.” “You get out of the car rocking. Kids come in singing. She's on car rider duty. She makes a quick announcement in the mornings to start the day, get everybody going. Sometimes she makes an appearance on the morning news.” An ordinary day at Mrs. Smith’s school took many directions for her to support teaching and learning:

First thing in the morning our day starts at 7:00 a.m., the teachers and administrative team are outside greeting students with smiles, high fives and hugs. We’re setting the stage for a great day. After all students are in their classrooms, I begin the day with morning announcements. The announcement is when I publicly share my expectations for academic excellence, and where I encourage students to practice positive energy. I end my announcements with a personal challenge then say, “*I'll see you around the building.*”

After the announcements, Mrs. Smith went to her office briefly to check her schedule and messages, then she began her informal walkthroughs. She shared,

I start going into some classrooms, participating with the students. I respond to questions as I walk the hall and try to intervene in any circumstances that need my attention. My goal is to ward off potential discipline problems. There may be times when I have to deal with discipline, but we haven't had a lot of discipline that I've had to deal with. Most of the time I'm getting pulled out of a classroom is because, our ... We have some special needs in the building. So, sometimes I have to assist those teachers in the classrooms.

Mrs. Smith does her informal walkthroughs to assess the school’s emotional climate. It is incumbent upon school leaders to assess the emotional climate of their school. The perspective of the school’s leader can be gained by systematically assessing the staff and students’ readiness to learn. The daily walkthroughs allow the school leaders to gather valuable insights about the safety of the staff and students and their readiness to teach and learn. Mrs. Smith added, “I also do safety checks. As we did today. Just checking the exterior doors, we have several exterior doors. And, with safety being our number one priority, that's what I'm doing. I share that responsibility with our SRO and our custodians.”

Mrs. Hasting, Mrs. Lindsay, and Mrs. Worth have witnessed Mrs. Smith walking the halls in the morning. She usually stopped by classrooms just to say, *Hey, how are you?* She did principal read aloud. She went around to each classroom reading a story that goes along with the energy buzz. Mrs. Lindsay, mentioned, “Yesterday, she came in my room. She was in there for a while watching our review for our science test.” She was often in rooms observing. Mrs. Hastings remembered that when she first got here, she sat in on several reading recovery lessons just to get a clear understanding and why it was so important. She had a middle school math background that was totally new to her. Hastings added, “She's not one to sit at her desk. Unless she's got something to do. Very often it's hard to find her sometimes.”

While Mrs. Smith’s routine was altered a bit during lunchtime, the morning and afternoon routines were quite similar. Mrs. Smith continued to discuss her daily routine. “Around lunchtime, I try to be in the cafeteria with the students. That is my opportunity to talk to the students; see how they’re doing; see what they are excited and passionate

about; and see what they're learning. Or, just, how's their day?" She continued to discuss the afternoon routine which included recess. "After lunch, I go outside at recess to see students release energy. I take advantage of those moments to interact with the students, so they know I care. On those rare time we have discipline issues it makes things easier." Mrs. Smith wanted her student to see her love and support. She noted, "I want them to see me as their biggest cheerleader, who knows they can do anything they set their mind to. And, I don't want them to feel like they are ever alone." "I don't want them to feel that they didn't grow up with a lot, so not a lot was ever expected of them. But I do want them to know that each of us is destined for greatness."

The school day ended at 2:30 p.m. at Omega Reward Elementary School. Mrs. Smith left her office each day at 2:15 to greet the parents in the car rider line. She stated she goes out purposely, "because it gives me a good opportunity to talk to parents."

After Mrs. Smith shared her day from start to finish, she talked about the importance of teacher observation and the frequency of those classroom visits. Teacher observations serve to assess a teacher's fitness to teach so student learn and as an opportunity for personalized need for professional growth opportunities (Maxwell, Reynolds, Lee, Subasic, & Bromhead, 2016). Mrs. Smith prefers to look at teacher observation as a collaborative opportunity for professional growth. She stated, "The intention of teacher observation is that it becomes a tool for professional development that enhances student learning." To ensure teacher learning mirrored that of students, regarding teachers she said, "We don't give up. We find opportunities to support our teacher so that they continue to be better teachers." Regarding students she countered, "We never give up on our children. If we try one strategy for a student and it doesn't

work, we're going to find something else that works. And, we're going to keep searching for a way for them to learn.” She cited several support staff who are available in her building to assist the teachers with enforcing skills, “We have the reading coach, reading interventionist, math coach, and instructional assistant who work closely with the child, to make sure that we’re helping them achieve.” Mrs. Hasting added, and Mrs. Worth agreed, “For the most part, she's probably here until 5:30. It is rare that I'm still in the building and she's not.”

Summary of Research Question 2. The principal of Omega Rewards Elementary used many of the skills attributed to that of a servant leader. The servant-leader is a servant first; it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002). Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of leadership skills that were found during the analysis of data in which Mrs. Smith’s strong skills as a transactional leader and transformational leader emerged. Mrs. Smith exhibited the skills of a transactional leader because she was often seen as someone who valued order and structure (Sergiovanni & Green, 2015). She was also seen as a transformational leader who valued creativity and innovation and sought to motivate and inspire her staff (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Mrs. Smith functioned between both styles but operated mainly as a servant leader because most important to her was her desire to serve. She empowered her teachers to lead with careful oversight as to what was being implemented. Mrs. Smith monitored the instructional program to ensure continuous learning happened at Omega. Further, it was important for Mrs. Smith to address the ongoing challenges and any challenges that she

may encounter throughout the day described in Research Question 3.

Research Question 3

What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?

Mrs. Smith faced many challenges but saw them mainly as opportunities. The main points that emerged after refining the themes were uniqueness, vision, and poverty. These themes guided the discussion in this section.

The responsibilities of school leaders can be extremely challenging for rural schools with the uniqueness of the schools, the lack of available resources, and the increasing plight of students in poverty. Although researchers continue to examine the current needs of school principals, limited research has targeted the rural principal's unique needs and circumstances. When focusing on the effectiveness of leadership in rural schools, it is important to examine the challenges.

Uniqueness of the school. Schools throughout America have features that are unique to that school, and Mrs. Smith was eager to share what she thought was exceptional about her school. She described her school's location as unique:

I love that we are in the middle of a neighborhood. We also have a ball field, if you noticed when you came in, we have a ball field. That is used by our little leagues. At the end of the day, you'll see families coming, and they're on the ball fields, and you have little cheerleaders practicing at Omega. Or, you have community members who are walking on our track. That's what I love about this place. It's here to serve our community.

Next, she described supports that are in her building that are there for the wellness of special needs students and teachers:

We have a sensory room, to serve two of our special needs' classes. That's based off a model of a nearby school. We have a teachers' lounge that's been converted into an entire fitness room. Just to contribute to the wellness of our teachers. I love our outdoor classroom. We have our student-made garden that we just started. We also have our bus that's coming out of the wall that reminds students all the time that, they are the driver of their bus. There's a mirror there to remind them, they're driving their bus. They get to choose the day they have.

The teachers in the focus group were quick to discuss the energy buzz when sharing a feature that was exceptional about Omega Reward Elementary School. Mrs. Worth said, "We are energy buzz. That's a new thing for us." Mrs. Hasting described, "The focus on positivity is- Buzz is, there's positive sayings everywhere. You all give a smile whether you want to or not. You put it on before you walk in the door." It is good for helping students have a positive attitude. Mrs. Worth said, "The children need that because you don't know. You don't know how a student's morning has been. They need to see that first thing in the morning, start their day off well in a positive way." Mrs.

Lindsay added,

Its responsibility for their learning, responsibility for their actions, just being responsible for them. For example, we have the driver manuals. On the inside of it, they have a paper they had to fill out about being a good driver. They filled out how can they be a better driver for themselves? What are some things they may need to work on? It's a little self-assessment. Then, in the back of it past the

energy buzz stuff we have data charts. Every time my kids take a science test, they write the name of the test and then they fill in the bar graph. It's showing them after each test accountability and being responsible.

Mrs. Lindsay provided an example of what students learned from the energy buzz.

Maybe they made a 70 and the next week they made an 80 and the next week they made a 70 again. What did they do different to get that higher grade? Did they not understand it? Did they need to talk to their teacher? Did I not study as much as I did? We're all about making them responsible for their learning.

Vision. An effective educational leader fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by facilitating the development, communication, implementation, and evaluation of a shared vision of learning that reflects excellence and equity (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008). According to Mrs. Smith, “At our school, I think the vision is clear. Everybody needs a voice at the table, let me say this, even assistants need a voice at the table. Because we've heard that this year. They've talked about how they like being included, they knowing what's going on. All voices need to be of value. Everybody needs to be respected. Everybody needs to realize that there is a place for them to express their opinions and to contribute what they have to contribute. Mrs. Lindsay echoed similar sentiments, “We talk about missions of our class. The missions of our class should line up with our school’s mission. And, our school’s mission should line up with our district’s mission. And, when everybody is all going in the same direction, great things are going to happen.” Mrs. Smith added, “The work that we did is about the people in the building.” She made a point by providing a number of questions a person may asked in getting to know what an organization is all about. She further made her point by adding, “you can

get in the bus all day long, but if you don't know where you're going, you're going to be, like I was without GPS years ago (laughter). You're just wandering around.”

The way you live and lead with your heart can change how an organization operates including schools (Spaulding, 2015). When new teachers make changes that changes the heart, Mrs. Smith swells with pride:

And, all in all, I love this. We have a new teacher that came to us this year from another school within the district. And, she mentioned, *when I came here, I was a little nervous, because I knew this was a positive school. And, it's not in my nature to be positive.* Well, now I just smiled and listened to her, and she said, *but, when I came and helped registration, she said, it was in the air.* I thought that was the greatest story. She said she could just feel it in the air. And that she was surrounded by people who love what they do.

Mrs. Smith continued as she shared how her leaders helped to sustain the achievement of a reward school in a challenging context. She credited her staff for maintaining a positive learning environment:

I have a very competitive staff. They are fantastic, and you'll hear me just say over, and over, how much I love and appreciate them. I can share scores with them, just like I did this year, and tell them how proud I am of the results that we were able to get this year. But, every single time, they will say on their own, *We can do better. We can do better.* And, that is just the mindset, that's the culture of the school.

She added, “We also have a culture of, no excuses. There are no excuses. We feel like we can get any child to reach their goal.” Although Mrs. Smith had some trying times when

she arrived at Omega Rewards, she never let that stop her. Mrs. Gold remembered those beginning days when it was clear that her vision was to make children learn in a caring environment:

When Mrs. Smith first came to our school, she was so energetic, and the staff/faculty had been used to doing their own thing... well some of them. They were not onboard with her, but that didn't stop her. She just kept pushing and kept bringing it on. Now, as far as I know, she's got pretty much all the teachers right on board with her. Therefore, the children are doing better. If the teacher's not crazy about something, they're not going to interfere with the children learning. That's something that she's done. She has stuck in there and made those teachers want to be a part.

Poverty. Twenty-two percent of South Carolina families are living in poverty, and 42% of single-parent families live in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2014). Despite our state's recent economic gains, poverty remains stagnant and disparities across racial, ethnic, and geographic lines continue to grow.

All schools are faced with challenges that inhibit student success. Mrs. Lindsay and Mrs. Worth shared their knowledge of challenges and strategies. They both agreed that there were a lot of personal challenges. Other than school related activities, there was not a lot of parent involvement in the highly impoverished area. Parents came with a lack of experience. Mrs. Hasting noted, "Over the years. Looking at trend data for our 4K, each year the kids are coming, the majority of the kids are coming in less prepared for school on those experiences. That is a challenge." To compensate for the students, lack of skills, Mrs. Lindsay said,

It's knowing your kids and knowing which ones don't have that involvement at home and who's going to need the extra love. Not that you don't love all your students, but it's just giving them that extra care that they need and it's not just academic. It's personal love. Our school provides those lessons in a backpack for kids that need food at home or on weekends. We have a clothes closet.

At Christmas, parents can come in and sign up if they feel like they're not going to be able to afford Christmas for their children. The school takes up donations. Teachers also make home visits to check on poor conditions that may exist in the home, such as no running water, or if there's no power. The school/district helps take care of that.

Mrs. Smith shared her knowledge of challenges at her school and provided examples of growth opportunity that have been implemented. She thought it was important to ensure that the teachers provided stability for the students:

A lot of our students come from very unstable homes. Now, we have some families in our school that are very stable homes. But, for the majority, they come from unstable homes. So, they need consistency. They need that one person, at least one person, in their lives that is going to be that stable person.

There was also the mentoring program that supported stability for students. Mrs. Smith described the acronyms associated with the BUS Stop mentoring program where, “the B stood for the beginning of the day. The U stood for up, and the S stood for send-off. So, students that really are struggling with needing somebody, that stable person, was in our bus stop mentoring program.” The BUS mentoring program operates throughout the school day for children to have at least one person in the building who is their go-to who checks on them throughout the day and sets a goal with them.

Mrs. Gold described a firsthand account of the impact of poverty at Omega Reward and how the school implemented change. She recalled:

The backpack program got started about five years ago with a little kindergarten girl. Her nickname was Peanut, so that's what I use. It was the last day before Christmas holiday and we were getting out at 11 o'clock and the little girl said, "We can't go home, yet. I have not had lunch." Her teacher said, "You'll have to eat lunch at home, today." She got down on the floor and cried. She said, "We don't have any food at my house." She had two brothers at that school at that time; one in the third grade and one in the fourth grade, and they were either so embarrassed or so proud, that they didn't want anybody to know they were hungry. The little girl was in a special needs class, so she just come on out with it. Well, before we went out to our fancy Christmas lunch that day, we went to Wendy's and bought all of the kids a happy meal and a meal for the parents. We took them food to their house, just so our guidance counselor could look around.

Mrs. Gold can still remember the shock of seeing an empty refrigerator and nothing in the cabinets. So, that night before some of the faculty and staff went home for their holiday break, they purchased groceries for that one family. Mrs. Gold shared her heartbreak of realizing that people within miles of her home were going to bed hungry. She knew it was a problem, but not in her community. She said, "It absolutely broke my heart. I knew that there were people who had more, people who had less, but never in a million years and not even a mile and a half away from our school. Going to bed hungry and I thought, what can we do?" After, much research, the birth of the Backpack program was started with support from businesses, churches, and individuals. By the time school

started in August that year, Mrs. Smith said, “We call it *Blessings in a Backpack*. A lot of people call it *Book Bag Buddies*, but that's how it got started in our school and then, now we serve all schools in the district.”

Mrs. Smith described other resources to help those in need who attend Omega Reward Elementary School:

We have a lot of students that are not sure where their next meal is coming. So, that's why I am so thankful we have food and shelter, and a safe environment.

That's why I am so thankful we have the Boys and Girls club here, because that allows our school to be open all summer. I like to say that the bus never stops rolling here, we keep rolling all through the summer. That provides a breakfast, a lunch, and a supper for all students who are participating.

Additionally, Mrs. Smith's faculty did a poverty study and simulation to better understand the level of poverty their students experienced. She added, “We don't give up. And, in saying that, if we try one strategy for a student and it doesn't work, we're going to find something else that works.” The same type of support happens to encourage and support parental involvement. Mrs. Smith said, “We have a very involved PTA. They're fantastic. I think they should probably be on the payroll here, because they're here just as much as we are.” There were other services at that school, which included several family nights:

We have family fitness night. We have a literacy night. We have a, meet the teacher open house. All those things help parents know how they can assist their child at home. We also, for our kindergarten students, our 4k and 5k students, we have our *Boo Hoo Yahoo* breakfast, because we have some parents who are *boo-*

hooing and then we have some parents who are celebrating. Our reading interventionist goes through how they can help their child read at home. Mrs. Smith does not stop according to Mrs. Gold. She shared, “If I had to describe our principal. I would just say that she is herself, and she's persistent. She keeps on smiling and loving and that's what she does best, and I really don't know her that well, but that's just what I've observed.”

Summary of Research Question 3. The principal of Omega Rewards Elementary embraced the challenges she was met with when accepting her first assignment as principal. The uniqueness of her school was seen as a challenge by some, but she saw it as opportunity that lead to the richness of the community. Others have seen the community as a place afflicted with poverty, but Mrs. Smith looked at the school that sat in the middle of neighborhood as a place for the community to engage. Her belief that this was place for all to be a part of the educational process was what undergirded her vision. She further believed that all voices needed to be heard and everyone needed to have a place at the table. This was especially important to Mrs. Smith because people in poverty often feel they do not have a voice in the educational process. Mrs. Smith supported the programs at the school that provided services for the families and encouraged other businesses to become a part of the problem to address to the high levels of poverty witnessed at Omega Reward Elementary School.

School Leaders Address High Performance Expectations

Leading an exemplary school is difficult yet rewarding. Effective school leaders are confronted with complex, multi-dimensional problem in their quest to be rewarded. They utilize multiple skills to identify and prioritize issues to improve teaching and

learning which is necessary to build their capacity and meet the challenges of leading a rural school. Two principals used different approaches, but both are on their way to committing to a Title I Rewards School. Both principals share their thoughts for school leaders of high performing schools based on what they believed has helped to form their vision for success.

Principal of Alpha Reward Elementary School

Mr. Love, the principal of Alpha Reward Elementary School, leads a school that has received the Title I designation of Reward School. While the label is no longer used to describe the performance level of the school, there are still those who remember the glory associated with being a school of such distinction. Using Mr. Love's unedited voice, this section provided his list of actions for high performing principals using six elements he deemed critical for rural, high poverty schools. His thoughts are presented as his words were transcribed. The headings below were deemed important for leaders by Mr. Love:

- Compassion;
- Inspiration;
- Formal and Informal Trainings;
- Knowledge of the Environment;
- Do What's Best for Children; and
- Literacy First

This section about Mr. Love, the principal of Alpha Rewards Elementary School, concludes with his final thoughts.

Compassion. As I think back on my professional and personal experiences that prepared me for effective leadership in a rural community, I have to go all the way back to my childhood. My daddy had a sixth-grade education, yet he put a lot of emphasis on me getting education. I mean it was paramount to him that I got an education. He worked two jobs to put me through school, as my mother worked in the mill. The main thing I got from my daddy was compassion for people. He was just a poor farmer, but I saw compassion my dad had for other people. I think that inspired me to want to be a teacher.

Inspiration. Athletics was a love of mine that inspired me to be a coach. I was tremendously blessed with wonderful coaches in my life like Harold McManus, Hall of Fame Basketball Coach in South Carolina. And Billy Smith, my mentor and football coach in high school. I learned a lot of leadership qualities from them. It really helped me to be a leader in my classroom. I truly loved teaching just as I loved coaching. However, I used those leadership skills when I went into administration. I was fortunate enough, after seven years of doing assistant principal duties to work for an incredible man. Joe Walter opened my eyes to a world of curriculum that I had never known before. Not only the world of curriculum, but the passion for curriculum. That's what I learned from Mr. Walter with my time with him. Since that day, which was almost 25 years ago, curriculum has been a passion of mine for research, reading, implementing, and experimenting. I've just been very blessed with good people in my life. What I learned under Walter Williams is what I molded together, and that training is what I became as an administrator.

When I think back about my career, it is hard for me to say what was self-guided versus provided because I've been provided with so much inspiration. What I know for

sure is that if you do not have it in your heart to be an educator, if it's not God-given, it's hard to teach somebody passion. Now, you can walk people through all the books in the world. You can show everybody all the best practices in the world, but you cannot put love, passion, and compassion in somebody's heart. That must be God-given. You must be born with that. That's my opinion.

Formal and Informal Training. Back in the day, when I started in administration, there wasn't a lot of formal training. Not like today. Administrators and teachers, I think, are much better prepared and trained today than I was initially. A lot of mine was just self-taught back then, or you learned on the job. Today, there is leadership administration programs at the masters and doctoral levels. There are more clinical opportunities today than years ago. I took a few education courses. Got a job and started teaching. Got a master's degree and went into administration, but I didn't have a lot of hands-on experience other than just common sense. Today, school leaders have internships and other requirements for leadership. I think that's a good thing. I think it's a really good thing. Things are more complicated today too, than it was thirty years ago.

Knowledge of the Environment. It has been advice from many leaders who helped me prepare for success in schools, particularly in rural schools. Anybody that's going into public education in a rural setting, or any setting but especially a rural setting today, you better know your demographics. But you better know if you're going into school administration. Anybody who's going into public elementary education in a rural setting or any setting, but especially in a rural setting today, you better know your demographics and curriculum. You better understand early childhood education. You better be able to understand vertically how kindergarten through middle school works,

and how if they do not ... if they're not prepared in the early grades, they're going to suffer in the middle and upper grades.

We put so much emphasis on higher education, such as high schools today, and sometimes elementary schools get neglected. The high school is a showcase, and I don't begrudge that at all. I hope nobody takes that wrong, but elementary school is a breeding ground for the teachers. It is the fertile field where if you don't plant the seeds correctly, you're not going to teach children, so they can learn. Anybody going into administration, especially in elementary education, you better know how to communicate with people. You better understand the curriculum and how it works vertically, and you better be able to hire good people, and you better be able to have good instincts in hiring teachers because you can do a lot of things, but you cannot make mistakes in hiring.

Principals need to know how to do an interview and have a deep understanding of people in those interviews. It's not always the best interviews. A lot of people can talk about interviews and do a good job in interviews, but sometimes you got to trust your instincts. I've hired shy people before because I felt they had a deep sense of loving kids and a good work ethic. A lot of people don't interview well, but you call their student teacher or their cooperating teacher and institute, *tell me about this person*, and they say, *Well, they're shy, but they sure do a great job in the classroom*. I've had people come in, who lacked energy, but who was willing to learn, not what they already know. It's kind of a complicated thing, but it all works out, if you're willing to put the time in.

Teaching and leadership are not for the lighthearted, it's not for the weak hearted and certainly not for the lazy. It's hard work. And if you don't love it, it's not worth your time.

Do What's Best for Children. Leading an exemplary school is difficult and rewarding. I went to one school where a very popular principal preceded me, and that principal had passed away. It was a very complex culture at that school, and the best practices in that school was not conducive to children. It was conducive to the teachers, always best for the teachers, not what's best for the children. It was a stressful situation for a while, but we had to implement best practices for the children, and some people were very unhappy. It took a while, but my daddy was a peach farmer, and he taught me a long time ago, when I was just a child, you don't get good peaches unless you prune some limbs, and you thin out some peaches, because if you have too many peaches, there's not enough juice to go to all the peaches, so therefore, you get little peaches, little knotty peaches, instead of big plump juicy peaches, so you have to thin things out.

We had to thin out some real bad attitudes at that school. When we left, that was the best faculty I had ever seen, certainly the best faculty I have been part of putting together. My last year there, we were third in the state in Title I schools. I would say that God blessed me for being there. It was a stressful job, the years that I was there. In the end, I wouldn't take anything for having been part of it.

Literacy First. It is hard to determine what needs to happen first in education since so much is important. However, I think all children need to be able to read. Literacy. We had to spend Title I funds on classroom libraries, level books, and restock the library. One of the things we had to do, we had a librarian that was totally worn out and stressed out, and we brought in a wonderful energetic, creative librarian who changed the culture of the school. Just talking about literacy and challenging all stakeholders to

support reading in the school helps to create a reading environment in the school that just lives and breathes literacy.

We honored reading throughout the year. *Children that read!*

Final Thoughts. I pray every day that the future of our public-school system will become strong; and I think we're going to have to do it by ourselves. I don't think we're going to get any kind of federal help anytime soon. Our leaders aren't necessarily supporters of public education. I don't think that's a secret. I don't think I'm breaking any news bulletins there. We are in more competition now more than ever with private and charter schools and those type things. I guess that's not a bad thing, maybe that will make us work harder.

I just don't think it's constitutional or ethical. The constitution of South Carolina only provides for public schools through tax dollars. I think we need to abide by that. I'm not against private schools or church schools or any kind of other schools, as long as they don't take tax dollars. The only way we can stay strong is to hold to that premise. We cannot say sometimes we're not our own worst enemies. We have to improve, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror and say, *Are we doing a good job? And we have to ask ourselves that every day; Are we doing the best we can do; and Are we providing our children with the best education that we possibly can give them?*

I don't think every school has good leadership. Every district doesn't have good leadership. We need people that are dedicated and compassionate for children. I'm speaking of the leader who will work to teach the world. The world for my grandchildren, and their grandchildren. The Japanese have a saying, they call it *Kaizen*.

Kaizen means, *improving one tenth of one percent every day*. And if you do that for a year, you're going to increase 36% over a years' time.

We just need to keep doing the best we can do, but I'll close with this, our teachers need to become more political minded. They need to support people who support us, regardless of party. I'm not pushing for a political party here. They need to investigate political candidates that support public education, and then they need to vote for those people.

Principal of Omega Reward Elementary School

Mrs. Smith, the principal of Omega Reward Elementary School, leads a school that has received the Title I designation of Reward School. The label is no longer used to describe the performance level of the school. However, it is important for current and future school leaders to continue to lead a high performing school that ensures the success of children. Mrs. Smith provides thoughts on how he addresses issues and action for high performance.

Using Mrs. Smith's narrative, this section provided thoughts and actions she deemed important for high performing principals. She believed that high performance leaders operate schools with:

- Focused Instruction;
- Caring and Nurturing Environments;
- Preparation and Inspiration; and
- Formal and Informal Training.

This section about Mrs. Smith, the principal of Omega Rewards Elementary School, concluded with her final thoughts.

Focused Instruction. A few years ago, we looked at our math scores, and math overall was just low. So, we started looking at what are some trends, what are some patterns that we were seeing. This was the first year that I was here. We noticed there was not common language, there was not common vocabulary being used at each grade level, and that came from teacher feedback. There was a variety of supplemental materials being used. So even with the supplementals, it was different from grade-to-grade. So, we decided to focus only on the standard vocabulary, make that consistent so that when the student learns that vocabulary in first grade it maintains the same meaning throughout. For example, if a student used, or a teacher used Math Out of the Box, on first grade. Well, Math Out of the Box will have specific vocabulary for certain things dealing with patterns. It might be different in the second or third grade, so we decided only to focus on the standard vocabulary, and that seemed to make a great impact on our scores.

Caring and Nurturing Environment. In order to achieve success as a leader, I have had to learn to prioritize and focus mainly on those that would improve teaching and learning in your school. First, we have to make sure that it's a safe environment, we have to do that first before any type of learning can take place. One of my favorite quotes, and it's even posted in here, is that *people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care*. So that's first and foremost, we have to make sure that that culture and that climate was established. It was already a good start and we just enhanced it with our Energy Bus journey. Then from there, just looking at data, what does the data tell us. It's almost a GPS to the road of success, really. You have to look at triangular data, you have to look at it from several different ways. Just to determine is there a pattern, because you

can't focus solely on that one rating score, you have to look at the whole, "What are they doing from a day-to-day basis? What are they doing with math results?"

So just looking at that across the board several different ways, looking for patterns. Then, when we notice that there's a pattern, like this year we noticed that writing, across the board, tended to be lower than our reading and math scores. So that's where we're focusing in, and we feel like we can get our bang for the buck by focusing on content, authentic writing.

In order to build capacity for internal and external support in the total school community to affect positive change and success for your students and teacher, I had to be very intentional. You have to work with a goal and communicate it. *Okay, we're going to make this mind shift change to impact our culture.* It's in the day-to-day conversations, being very mindful of teachers having a conversation and she's saying, *Okay, a student can't do this, they can't do this, they can't do this.* What are they doing well? Kind of shifting that conversation, pointing out the celebrations, pointing out the shout-outs to one another. Yes, cultivating that has to be very intentional for a leader.

Preparation and Inspiration. I had multiple events that prepared me for today, particularly for this rural community. My very first teaching experience, I was at a Title I school. Twenty-nine different countries were represented in that school. I was able to learn how to reach out to families of diverse backgrounds. I even remember having one student come to me, it was his third day in the United States from South Korea, he had absolutely no English experience at all, so learning how to communicate in multiple ways. One of those students from Ukraine is now graduated from college. I share a memory with her. She just recently wrote me a letter and said, "I don't know if you

remember, but you sat and drew pictures with me, it made such an impact. I knew how much you cared then." That was really, really neat. She's graduated from Commerce College, I'm so excited for her. She's just outstanding.

I later became the Teacher of the Year at that school, which was the start of leadership outside of the classroom for me. My next experience was in an intermediate school as a fifth-grade teacher. I worked under a very strong leader, and I watched her. I loved the feedback that she gave me as an educator. She inspired me to grow continuously, just by her drive and what she modeled for us. She expected greatness from herself, she expected greatness from us. I really considered her a mentor. She's actually the one that came to me and said, *You need to go into administration*. She's the one that pointed out that quality that maybe I didn't see in myself. So that was why I'm so passionate now about helping students see their greatness, helping teachers see their greatness, because somebody did for me.

As I have been a principal now for four years, I continue to be inspired by other leaders around me. Our superintendent is fantastic, very involved in our schools. He knows the teachers, he knows students. It's just phenomenal because our district is small enough that I know I can pick up the phone and call my Superintendent, or I can call my Assistant Superintendent of Instruction any time I have any questions. We have data conversations. I would say a combination of experiences and leaders helping me along the way lead me to now. At another school, I became Teacher of the Year again. This led me to become District Teacher of the Year, which allowed me to really kind of network with educators all around the state that were just great. I've been very fortunate just to work with really strong people over the years. Also, following the works of Jon

Gordon, author of *The Energy Bus*, has taken me on an inspiring journey to help me approach life and work with the kind of positive, forward thinking that leads to true accomplishment. And Niki Spears, *Energy Bus for Schools Leadership Journey*, they're so passionate about a positive team and what the research says that impacts culture and results.

Through it all, I have always looked to see how I can improve myself, just because I feel like the students deserve it, the teachers deserve it, parents deserve it. They deserve someone that's leading the way by example. I need to be the lead learner here. Through it all, I can't sit back. I need to be the one going after it, connecting with people on Twitter across the country. I have several principal friends across the country. I have principal friends in Colorado, Florida, Texas, Alaska, Arkansas, and Alabama who I talk to frequently. We're all passionate about reaching kids and supporting teachers.

Formal and Informal Training. I think my training was a combination of formal and informal learning. For example, I have the formal training that is very good, that I can take back and implement it. But, a lot of the training that I receive is hands-on when things happen. For example, different things that come up just on a day-to-day basis are unexpected. So, you are learning in the field. I have several resources, like I said before, at our central office, or fellow principals that I can call and say, *all right, what do you think about this? What would you do, where would you go from here?* That type of training I consider to be very valuable.

Final Thoughts. I have been preparing for this day all of my life. The work that I do, how I behave all leads me to be a person who cares about my students learning. I attend principal conferences where I learned a lot there and bring back a good bit as well.

I don't know if I can put a number on it, but there's a lot of value in both formal and informal learning. My strength's in math and science. So early literacy is a focus of mine, just because I spent the years in fifth grade. Just learning and collaborating. I know that all school leaders must be loving and caring to kids. That's important, but it's not everything, but it does have to happen first before everything else falls into place. Yeah, now I'm so thankful to be here.

I am so fortunate. I must reflect on just the parents, and the students, and the staff that I get to work with. I am inspired by them daily. I see with my staff, my faculty and staff. I see their passion. I see their desire to reach students. I get tickled sometimes because my teachers are so passionate about reaching out. And, I love seeing that.

Summary

The analysis of the data was presented for two principals of rural, high-performing and high-poverty schools. The principals were similar in many ways. They both believed in the importance of monitoring and operating the school in a safe and caring environment. Further, both principals exhibited the characteristics of servant leadership. They focused on the growth of their staff, students and parents. Their ultimate goal was the well-being of the people they serve.

The results of the findings and conclusions will be presented in Chapter 5. Additionally, recommendations will be made for future research and practice. Implications will be made based on the conclusions and review of the literature.

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Chapter 5 is a summarization of the study in which the researcher examined the lived experiences, beliefs and daily practices of two elementary school principals who lead rural, high-performing, high-poverty Reward schools. By conducting this study, the researcher found supportive leadership practices that were demonstrated daily by both principals. The findings of this study can help rural school leaders maintain the operation of a high performing school. The examination and analysis of data provided answers to the research questions and uncovered the principals' leadership styles that made high student achievement possible. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?
2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?
3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face?
How do they manage these demands?

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study, summary of the findings and conclusions aligned to the three research questions, recommendations for future research and recommendation for future practices. The chapter concluded with implications of the study. The summary is inclusive of the researcher's reflections on this investigation.

Summary of the Study

This study used two case studies designed to provide a portrait of how two elementary exemplary school principals sustained the performance of two elementary schools identified as high-achieving Title I schools in previous years. They demonstrated substantial progress in the *all students* group or in identified subgroups from one school year to the next. The key themes emerged from the interview of two school leaders who were recently assigned to these schools. Additionally, the researcher conducted focus groups composed of parents, community members, teachers, reading coaches, assistant principals, and other staff. Further, observations were made of both principals leading their school during grade level meetings, principal-teacher interactions, and conducting walkthroughs. The findings were based on research questions and emerging themes that identified the leadership style and practices of the two exemplary principals.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The findings and conclusions from this study created a meaningful understanding of how two experienced exemplary principals led two rural schools in a southeastern state. The knowledge and skills of these leaders provided insight into their leadership styles. Individual interviews and focus group provided contributed to an understanding of how these principals exhibited leadership skills. The people interviewed for this study were asked to discuss the experiences and reveal attributes of their principals who continued the elements of a reward school.

Summary of the Findings

Prior to starting this research, the researcher believed that considering the responsibilities of all elementary school leaders and the need for change to impact student

achievement, the rural school leader would be either transformational leaders or transactional leaders. However, a servant leader, by definition, shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform at their highest potential. Servant leadership is a lifelong journey that includes discovery of one's self, a desire to serve others, and a commitment to lead (Greenleaf & Spears, 2002).

Based on the review of literature and the analysis of the data, the leaders of both the rural elementary schools in this study were servant leaders who strived to be caring, visionary, empowering, relational, and involved. The leadership styles of both leaders employed the elements of a shared leadership. According to Mrs. Smith, "I would like to be thought of as a servant leader because, ultimately, it's not about me. It's about students, first and foremost. It's about teachers. It's about parents. Serving them." The actions of a servant leader were also demonstrated in Mr. Love's pledge to his parents. His caring nature was demonstrated in his pledge to students, "Administrator will love each child."

Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) core practices (setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization) were discussed in the literature and observed by the principals in the study. Both principals created a climate for learning with clear directions on how success would be achieved. Further, it was Mr. Love's life's purpose to develop people; and Mrs. Smith's used continuous professional development to develop her staff. In addition, the study looked at what enabled these leaders to translate Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) core practices in the areas of accountability, caring, and learning.

In the review of literature, school leaders strive to create a climate that promotes a caring and loving environment (Walker, 2016). Throughout the analysis of the literature,

both leaders were described as caring and loving. Further, when they discussed their leadership and activities in the school, the words caring, and love were frequently used in their responses. When discussing the school climate, Mrs. Smith responded “when we give feedback to students, it's within a loving context.” When discussing the school’s climate, Mr. Love said, “My teachers know that I do not just care about the children, I also care about them. Encouraging them harder to love all our children, even the challenging ones.”

Creating a positive school climate was discussed in the literature and presented in several research studies. Niece (1993) and Soder (1987), Smith and Andrews (1989) and Hallinger (2003) pointed out successful leaders are instructional leaders who promotes a positive school climate. “School climate is the heart and soul of a school” (Freiberg & Stein, 1999, p. 11). When discussing how principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement, creating a positive school climate was a theme that emerged for both leaders. Mr. Love changed the culture and climate of the school by altering the way they administered discipline dispositions for students. Children were rarely suspended, but instead they were allowed to remain in school to engage in behavior modification instruction.

Further, findings suggest that positive school climates promoted an environment for learning. In the literature, it was found that a positive school learning climate encompassed protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers and providing incentives for learning to develop people and refine and align the organization (Day et al., 2011). Participants and documents provided evidence as to how both principals supported

positive changes to their school climate since coming to the reward schools. Parents shared how they felt welcomed when coming into school Alpha Reward. There was evidence that they were invited to be a part of educational decision making. At Omega Rewards, the teachers addressed being a part of the decision-making team. Both schools showed strong evidence that children felt safe and learned.

Another finding suggested that principals with a vision tend to know where they are going and how they will get there. In the review of literature, a comparison of successful school leadership models were presented. Two of the models, Four Core Leadership Practices (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) and Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2016) the need to have a shared vision. Both principals discussed having a clear vision to focus on student learning. The principal of Omega Reward often spoke about what she wanted to do to increase achievement. While the word vision was only used on two occasions during the collection of evidence, the action of the principal, faculty and parent suggested that the school was focused on increasing the achievement of students. Conversely, the word vision was used more than 20 times during the data collection process. Additionally, the principal of Alpha Reward spoke of his vision and shared his plan for making the children literate.

They set specific goals and create a plan of action to achieve those goals. The literature revealed that principals who exerted strong leadership were oriented toward academic goals that greatly influenced the school's effectiveness and success (Sergiovanni, 2001). Mr. Love, the principal of Alpha Reward, said he always had a vision and believed the best way to achieve the goals set for of leading a school to excellence is through literacy. Mrs. Smith saw literacy as one of the most important

factors for high performing schools in rural areas for high poverty schools. The participants from Alpha Reward school all spoke about the reading materials that were purchased for classroom libraries. There were other programs to support literacy: Accelerated Reader and Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). Teachers and parents shared how the four culture nights had an embedded literacy focus.

Establishing a positive school culture was further address through empowerment which was a common theme at both schools. Kouzes and Posner (2016) discussed how successful school leaders enable others to act by establishing relationships, trust, teamwork, confidence, and empowerment. Research results indicated that when faculty, parents and students are empowered, students make improvements. The principal of Alpha Reward prided himself on raising the bar for people. He shared, “I try to show teachers that we can be as good as we want to be. I’m never satisfied with mediocrity, never. I guess you could say I lead by empowering others.” Teachers of Omega Reward noted how they had the freedom to create instruction that promoted student achievement. One teacher said, “She empowers us to do what works for children.”

Elementary school leaders have days of constant leadership with endless responsibilities. Both principals monitored the operations of their schools from the first child arriving in the car rider line to the last child getting on the school bus. Both principals also monitored the daily recess. Additionally, both principals made efforts to enter the classrooms daily to observe instruction and to provide reflective feedback to teachers.

Conclusions

The theoretical foundation for this study is based on the belief that school

principals who demonstrate high performing qualities in high-poverty schools can strongly influence the outcome of student achievement. It can be concluded that the principals of rural schools use a variety of strategies and behaviors to influence student achievement. Based on the findings of this study, several conclusions can be made:

- Principals of rural schools must share some of the characteristics of a servant leader. They must be kind, caring, loving, respectful, and want to do what is right for teaching and learning.
- Principals of rural schools must have a vision if they want to affect school change in a positive manner.
- A positive school climate is one of the most important aspects to impact increased academic achievement.
- Principals who empower the staff to be a part of the decision-making process will have a staff that wants to be a part of decisions they think are best for children.
- It can be concluded that when principals monitor the school's campus, fewer discipline issues will occur, leading to more instruction.
- It can be concluded that rural principals of high poverty schools, must have consistent leadership practices that impact change.

Conclusions were also drawn from the analysis of themes described according to each research question.

Research Question 1. In Research Question 1, themes emerged from the analysis of data that addressed how the exemplary principals of two rural, high poverty schools attempted to influence student achievement. More than 30 sub-themes emerged that resulted in 12 themes from RQ1. The common themes for both schools were school

climate and instructional support. Sub-themes associated with school climate were love, caring, motivation, community, respect, family and teaching. Those sub-themes led to traits of servant leaders and a positive school climate. Therefore, it can be concluded from the study that a principal of high poverty schools can influence student achievement using servant leadership style and creating a positive school climate.

Research Question 2. In Research Question 2, five themes and more than 20 subthemes emerged when the leadership styles and practices employed by two exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools were examined. The common themes for both schools were servant leadership and monitoring. Sub-themes associated with servant leadership and monitoring were love, communication, collaboration, routines, relationships, and leadership. Those sub-themes were traits of the school leaders. Therefore, it can be concluded from the study that a successful principal of a rural school operates as a servant leader and monitors the school daily. Evidence collected does not directly link the findings to student achievement, although it was implied.

Research Question 3. Research Question 3 addressed the particular types of challenges exemplary principals in rural contexts face, and how the demands associated with those challenges are managed. More than 20 sub-themes emerged that resulted in 6 themes from RQ2. The common theme for both schools was poverty. Sub-themes associated with poverty were communication, collaboration, consistency, leadership, routine, supportive, and vision. Evidence collected, analyzed and examined does not directly link the findings to student achievement, although it was implied.

Recommendations

This study was designed to bring awareness to exemplary school leadership in high-poverty, high-performance rural schools. Based on the findings and conclusions, several recommendations are suggested for future research and future practice.

Recommendations for Future Research

School leadership continues to be a priority in America's schools. The importance of schools being led by competent principals is not minimized based on the location. It is necessary to have good leaders, and therefore, research on school leadership is ongoing. Based on the findings from this study and the review of literature, this researcher recommends that further research be conducted on proven rural school leaders. It is highly recommended that the collection of data mirrors the process of the Effective Schools Research conducted by Ron Edmonds (1981), which are: (1) Climate of high expectations; (2) Frequent monitoring of student progress; (3) Opportunity to learn and student time on task; (4) Safe and orderly environment; (5) Positive home-school relations; (6) Strong instructional leadership; and (7) Clear and focused mission.

Research has shown that school leaders can make a difference in schools and on student performance if they are granted autonomy to make important decisions. It is recommended that a qualitative study on the types of autonomy school leaders are granted be conducted with school leaders. Often, school leaders are aware of programs or activities that support instruction. It would be beneficial to know how principals use autonomy to act to address what they see the, need.

Principals are charged with evaluating, supporting, and developing the instructional program at their schools. As such, school leaders must be able to adapt the

instructional needs to their specific schools. It is recommended that a qualitative study be conducted on the decision-making process of rural school leaders to determine how they meet the basic, instructional, and managerial needs of the school. Specifically, the study needs to address the level of discretion school leaders have in setting strategic direction, goal setting, and developing plans for academic success.

This study revealed how two principals, who were assigned to schools that were successful when they were hired, were able to maintain them as high performing schools. It is recommended that a mixed method study be conducted that would examine the school's effectiveness over a five-year period. It is recommended that quantitative data be collected on student academic data, student attendance, student racial and economic status, teacher turnover, teacher experience, and teacher qualifications. Qualitative data should be collected from the school leader on their thoughts, opinions and/or experiences. Such a study might assist in developing solutions that would avoid school failure during transitions of leadership.

School leadership has become a priority for rural superintendents and seen as a key factor in improving the climate of the schools. Therefore, it is recommended, that a study be conducted on the strategies used by school leaders' and the outcomes they seek when influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improving education.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Further research is necessary for the continuous improvement of quality and effective schools. However, the day to day practices of leaders should also be adjusted to meet the managerial and instructional needs of students and teachers. Making such

changes would improve the quality of schools, while holding school leaders accountable for students learning and teachers teaching. Further, it is necessary for principals to know and understand effective practices with documented significant results.

Researchers regard the organizational effectiveness of the school to be related to the health of the school's climate. A healthy school climate (showing love, caring, thoughtfulness, and respect) was shared by both school leaders in this study. Successful rural school principals promote people-focused relationships that show they care about staff, students, parents, and community members. It is recommended that principals of rural schools create ample opportunities to demonstrate to teachers and staff that they are valued by creating opportunities to promote *acts of kindness*.

A rural principal tends to have the responsibility of multiple tasks that are handled by multiple people in larger school districts. It is recommended that the rural principal use this opportunity to grow leaders. Empowering others to lead ensures the decision-making process does not rest with one, but with many. Research has shown that many educators leave rural and small districts because they do not feel there are opportunities to excel and grow (Arnold, 2004; Brack, 2017; Chalker, 2002; Coleman, 2013).

Empowering others allows the rural principal to build leaders and it also removes some of the administrative burden.

Leadership in schools continues to change for various reasons. In rural school, changes tend to happen more frequently due to the lack of opportunities that are continuously provided in larger districts or through the mobility of today's workforce. As such, it is recommended that school leaders keep a journal of their day to day operations to include strategies and comments. The journal would be an effective tool to

pass on to the next principal, or simply a guide for discussion during a transitional meeting. Schools that have earned honors can continue to grow if new school leaders have information about previous successes.

Many school leaders share their expertise and knowledge daily with their staff. However, school leaders, particularly in isolated and rural district would benefit professionally by sharing their expertise with likeminded leaders. It is recommended that rural school leaders find opportunities for exchange at local and national conferences. When honors and distinctions are awarded to the school, leaders have done many things right and should take the opportunity to share those effective strategies. Attendance and participation at conferences would benefit leaders by helping them avoid the isolation of the job and by allowing them to experience pride in representing their school.

Instructionally, it is recommended that rural school leaders conduct classroom walkthroughs every day. Teachers want to have reassurance that they are conducting themselves and instruction appropriately. Walkthroughs are an outstanding technique to observe what is being taught in the classrooms, head off any parent concerns, quell discipline issues, and show the faculty and students that you care about the work that they are doing. It is also the best way to collect information on instruction in order to have meaningful instructional conversations.

Implications

Research has underscored the need and importance of effective school leaders for improving the academic outcomes for schools (Mullford, Kendall, Edmunds, Kendall, Ewington, & Silins, 2007). School leaders who seek to build successful schools must be

capable of transforming a school's environment so that its students and teachers can flourish (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

Many schools are unsatisfactory, yet more district leaders are recruiting and hiring principals with predominantly transformative and transactional leadership styles. It would benefit the district leaders to consider hiring principals with servant leadership styles or the behaviors of servant leaders. Many schools are looking deeper into servant leaders because they lead by empowering their staff to do more. What they do is based on practice and not just talk (Greenleaf, 2002).

According to the "Corridor of Shame documentary," impoverished rural schools in South Carolina continue to fail in spite of the funds provided in the "Read to Succeed" grant that targeted literacy in poor and unsatisfactory schools (Ferillo & Conroy, 2006). The two school leaders in this study demonstrated that the servant leadership styles improved their school climate and increased the literacy rates of their students. District leaders would benefit from considering the recommendations in this report.

In rural locations, there can be serious implications for school leaders who fail to consider some of the findings and recommendations from this study. First, school leaders must understand the importance of creating a warm and nurturing environment that promotes open dialogue and an atmosphere for teaching and learning. In the past, leadership was limited to the charismatic leader whose skillset was impossible to replicate. Instead, it is a school leader who can transform a school environment so that its students and teachers can flourish. School leaders who changed that culture and climate with a clear plan for success had shown some positive results. The findings and conclusions from this study should be considered by school and district leaders. The high

rate of school unsatisfactory and poverty in rural schools in South Carolina are major factors that prohibit the success of students.

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APPENDIX A. SOUTH CAROLINA GRADUATE PROFILE

**PROFILE OF THE
South Carolina Graduate**

<p>WORLD-CLASS KNOWLEDGE</p> <hr/> <p>Rigorous standards in language arts and math for career and college readiness</p> <p>Multiple languages, science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), arts and social sciences</p>		<p>WORLD-CLASS SKILLS</p> <hr/> <p>Creativity and innovation</p> <p>Critical thinking and problem solving</p> <p>Collaboration and teamwork</p> <p>Communication, information, media and technology</p> <p>Knowing how to learn</p>
<p>LIFE AND CAREER CHARACTERISTICS</p> <p>Integrity • Self-direction • Global perspective • Perseverance • Work ethic • Interpersonal skills</p>		

© SCASA Superintendents' Roundtable
Adopted by: SC State Board of Education, SC Department of Education, SC Education Oversight Committee, SC Arts Alliance, SC Arts in Basic Curriculum Steering Committee, SCASCD, SC Chamber of Commerce, SC Council on Competitiveness, SC School Boards Association, TransformSC Schools and Districts.

APPENDIX B. SOUTH CAROLINA STATE GAUGE RESULTS

SOUTH CAROLINA - More than any other state over the past decade, South Carolina's rural areas have been disappearing due to suburban sprawl. Although fewer than one in six students in South Carolina now attends school in a rural district, these students face substantial challenges. Half of all rural students are minorities, and two thirds are eligible for free or reduced lunches. Instructional spending is low overall and teachers are paid at a rate below the national average for rural teachers. Achievement scores are among the nation's lowest, and graduation rates are low compared to rural districts in other states.

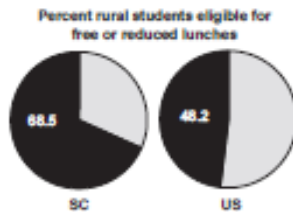
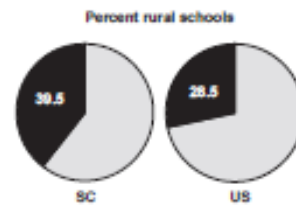
PRIORITY RANKING

4

GAUGE 1: Notable | Important | Very Important | Crucial

Importance 33

	SC	Rank*
Percent rural schools	39.5%	21
Percent small rural school districts	2.6%	41
Percent rural students	15.9%	32
Number of rural students	115,889	22
Percent state education funds to rural districts	17.5%	30



GAUGE 2: Fair | Serious | Critical | Urgent

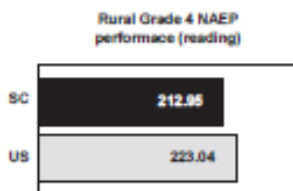
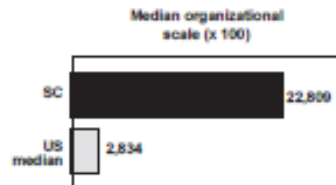
Student and Family Diversity 4

	SC	Rank*
Percent rural minority students	49.5%	5
Percent rural ELL students	4.0%	13
Percent rural IEP students	14.8%	20
Percent rural students eligible for free or reduced lunches	68.5%	4
Percent rural mobility	11.3%	21

GAUGE 3: Notable | Important | Very Important | Crucial

Educational Policy Context 12

	SC	Rank*
Rural instructional expenditures per pupil	\$5,203	12
Ratio of instructional to transportation expenditures	\$12.71	41
Median organizational scale (x 100)	35,774	6
State revenue to schools per local dollar	\$1.19	22
Rural salary expenditures per instructional FTE	\$55,118	22



GAUGE 4: Fair | Serious | Critical | Urgent

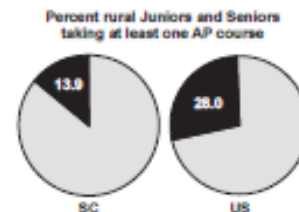
Educational Outcomes 0

	SC	Rank*
Rural Grade 4 NAEP performance (math)	235.16	6
Rural Grade 4 NAEP performance (reading)	212.95	6
Rural Grade 8 NAEP performance (math)	281.74	14
Rural Grade 8 NAEP performance (reading)	261.20	8
Rural Grade 8 NAEP performance (science)	150.62	12

GAUGE 5: Fair | Serious | Critical | Urgent

College Readiness 6

	SC	Rank*
Overall graduation rate in rural districts	80.6%	11
Graduation rate for rural minority students	72.2%	19
Graduation rate for rural free or reduced lunch eligible students	75.5%	14
Percent rural Juniors and Seniors taking at least one AP course	13.9%	6
Percent rural Juniors and Seniors who took the ACT or SAT	35.1%	12



* A rank of 1 is most crucial or most urgent

APPENDIX C. CANDIDATE PARTICIPATION LETTER

Dear Principal,

My name is Sharon Jefferies, the principal of B. D. Lee Elementary School. I am a doctoral candidate for the Educational Leadership & Policies Department at the University of South Carolina, and I am conducting research on The Leadership Practices of Exemplary Principals in High-Performing, High-Poverty Rural Elementary Schools. After a careful review of the South Carolina Department of Education Rewards' School listing, your school was identified as one of the Performance Reward Schools (the highest performing Title I school). I would like to solicit your participation for this study.

This study will explore two high-performing, high-poverty elementary principal's leadership practices in rural schools to explore what successful leadership practices look like in this context. To conduct data for this study, the researcher will consult with the principal to receive consent to participate in the study. Participation in the study will involve the researcher scheduling time with the principal to schedule observations of the principal's behaviors, school actions during meetings, to review school public document materials and to conduct two 60-minute interviews. One interview will be conducted at the beginning of the research and the final interview will be conducted toward the end of the initial research. Each interview will be an individual in-depth interview with the principal. In addition, the researcher will schedule interviews with two focus groups. One focus group with the assistant principal, reading coach and teacher leader and the second focus group with a highly engaged parent and community stakeholder.

The participation for this study is completely on a voluntary basis. The participants will remain anonymous and pseudo names will be given for the privacy of the school and participants. The school observations and interviews conducted will be summarized by the researcher and stored in a safe location at the researcher's home. Two types of audio recordings such as a cassette recorder and an iPhone 6 will be used during the interview as a back-up.

For more information regarding this study or if you have any concerns as a research participant you may contact my faculty chairperson, stevickdoyle@email.sc.edu. In addition, if you have any questions please feel free to contact me via email at jefferies37@bellsouth.net or by phone (864)-761-6435.

Your participation in this study will be greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Sharon Jefferies

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR THE PRINCIPAL

Interview Protocol for the Principal

Institution:

Interviewee (Title and Name):

Interviewer:

Documents Obtained:

Introduction for Interview

Hello, My name is Sharon Jefferies, I am a doctoral student from the University of South Carolina. The purpose of this interview is to understand the lived experiences, beliefs and daily practices of elementary school principals who lead rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools. By conducting this study, the researcher intends to discover supportive leadership practices and the leadership style that was employed by exemplary principals in rural contexts that led to student achievement. There are no right or wrong answers therefore, I would like for you to feel comfortable saying what you feel or think. If it is okay with you, I will be tape recording our interview conversation considering it is hard to write everything down while trying to be attentive in conversation with you. Everything you say will remain confidential. As the participants you will remain anonymous and pseudo names will be given for the privacy of the school and participants. The data will only be made available to the researcher and dissertation team. The participation for this study is completely on a voluntary basis and you may decide not to participate at any given time.

From your profile online, it seems you've been in education for X years and at this school for # years. Is that correct?"

Please know that I respect and appreciate your time and I am not asking for more than an hour. But if you have more to share, I will not cut you off. I will set the timer for 50 minutes so that I am mindful of the time. Thank you for your participation in this study.

Research Questions

School Principal Interview Questions

<p>1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is this school successful? 2. Are there specific policies or procedures that contribute to the school's success? 3. What lessons have you learned here that could be implemented in other reward schools? 4. Can you provide some examples of how success was achieved here? 5. How do you prioritize the allocations of funds to support student achievement in your school? 6. You have formal data about performance and informal sources of information that help you to check the pulse of the school. Data show that you lead a high poverty high performing school. Can you describe the formal sources of data and how you use them? How are intangibles measured and quantified?
<p>2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals employ in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe your approach to leadership and share how you think your leadership style has changed over time? 2. Walk me through an ordinary day: Define and explain your consistent daily routines that support teaching and learning? What actions are typical? Share examples.
<p>3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Schools throughout America have features that are unique to that school, describe what you find exceptional about your school. 2. All school are faced with challenges that prohibit student success. Share your knowledge of challenges at your school and provide examples of growth opportunities that have been implemented.

APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR THE FOCUS GROUP

Interview Protocol for the Focus Group

**(Assistant Principal, Reading Coach and Teacher Leader)
(Parent and Community Member)**

Institution:

Interviewee (Title and Name):

Interviewer:

General Information before the interview:

Questions	Assistant Principal	Reading Coach	Teacher Leader
How long have you been in education?			
How long have you been in this position?			
How long have you been at this school?			
What is your highest degree?			

Introduction for Interview

Hello, My name is Sharon Jefferies, I am a doctoral student from the University of South Carolina. The purpose of this interview is to understand the lived experiences, beliefs and daily practices of elementary school principals who lead rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools. By conducting this study, the researcher intends to discover supportive leadership practices and the leadership style that was employed by exemplary principals in rural contexts that led to student achievement. There are no right or wrong answers therefore, I would like for you to feel comfortable saying what you feel or think. If it is okay with you, I will be tape recording our interview conversation considering it is hard to write everything down while trying to be attentive in conversation with you. Everything you say will remain confidential. As the participants you will remain anonymous and pseudo names will be given for the privacy of the school and participants. The data will only be made available to the researcher and dissertation team. The participation for this study is completely on a voluntary basis and you may decide not to participate at any given time. From your profile online, it seems you've been in education for X years and at this school for # years. Is that correct?" Please know that I respect and appreciate your time and I am not asking for more than an hour. But if you

have more to share, I will not cut you off. I will set the timer for 50 minutes so that I am mindful of the time. Thank you for your participation in this study.

Research Questions	Focus Group One Questions
<p>1. How do exemplary principals in rural, high-poverty schools attempt to influence student achievement?</p>	<p>Why is this school successful?</p> <p>Are there specific policies or procedures that contribute to the school's success?</p> <p>What lessons have you learned here that could be implemented in other reward schools?</p> <p>Can you provide some examples of how success was achieved here?</p>
<p>2. What leadership styles and practices are employed by exemplary principals in rural, high-performing, high-poverty schools?</p>	<p>Describe your principal's approach to leadership and share how you think his/her leadership style has changed over time?</p> <p>Walk me through an ordinary day that you have observed from your principal or leadership team: Define and explain consistent daily routines that support teaching and learning? What actions are typical? Share examples.</p>
<p>3. What particular challenges do exemplary principals in rural contexts face? How do they manage these demands?</p>	<p>Schools throughout America have features that are unique to that school, describe what you find exceptional about your school.</p> <p>All school are faced with challenges that prohibit student success. Share your knowledge of challenges at your school and provide examples of growth opportunities that have been implemented.</p>

APPENDIX F. PRINCIPAL OBSERVATION

<p>The Leadership Practices of Exemplary Principals in High-Performing, High-Poverty Rural Elementary Schools</p> <p>PRINCIPAL OBSERVATION FORM</p> <p>Principal observations will be conducted by using components from the South Carolina Program for Assisting, Developing, and Evaluating Principal Performance (PADEPP)</p> <p>Participant: Principal 1 Date:</p>	
<p>Vision: An effective educational leader fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by facilitating the development, communication, implementation, and evaluation of a shared vision of learning that reflects excellence and equity.</p>	<p>Evidence of Supporting Data</p>
<p>Instructional Leadership: An effective educational leader fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by leading the development and alignment of the organizational, instructional, and assessment strategies that enhance teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Evidence of Supporting Data</p>
<p>Effective Management: An effective educational leader fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by managing the school organization, its operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.</p>	<p>Evidence of Supporting Data</p>
<p>Climate: An effective educational leader fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a positive, equitable school climate.</p>	<p>Evidence of Supporting Data</p>
<p>School/Community Relations: An effective educational leader fosters the academic success and well-being of each student by collaborating effectively with stakeholders.</p>	<p>Evidence of Supporting Data</p>

Retrieved from website <https://ed.sc.gov/scdoe/assets/File/educators/teacher-evaluations/PADEPP%20Guidelines%202017%20FINAL%20PDF%20DOCUMENTS.pdf>

APPENDIX G. PRINCIPALS' SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interviewee: Principal 1

Date:

Investigator:

Leadership

1. Leading an exemplary school is difficult and rewarding. Can you give an example of a complex, multi-dimensional problem and how you resolve it?

Successful School Leadership

2. You have achieved much success during your leadership at Brown Elementary School. How did you identify and prioritize the issues or things which needed your immediate attention to improve teaching and learning in your school?

Rural Schools

3. How did you build capacity for internal and external support in your total school community to affect positive change and success for your students and those you supervise?

Principal Leadership in Rural Schools

4. Please describe the professional and personal experiences that prepared you for effective leadership particularly in a rural community. Probing questions: What role did your training play? How much was self-guided vs. provided? How much training was formal vs. informal?

Characteristics of High-Performing Elementary Schools

5. This is our final opportunity to meet for my research. Please share with me anything you would like to add.

APPENDIX H. PLAN FOR SUCCESS

Teachers will:

- use a variety of instruction to better meet the needs of the children.
- differentiate for all children—including those at the top.
- model manners and respect for their students.
- familiarize students with state standards according to their grade levels.
- provide timely newsletters to keep parents informed of what is going on at school.

Administrators will:

- love each child!
- keep a data chart for each child to monitor progress.
- read writings from students k-2.
- read and conference with grades 3-5 on writing prompts.
- read progress data on all children.
- provide development for teachers in small group, guiding reading and writing.
- give parents opportunities to share information with the principal regarding placement of children for next year.
- ensure teachers are not distracted from teaching.
- provide parents with materials to enhance student success.
- have high expectations for everyone involved with our school.

Students will:

- cooperate with teachers to maximize learning in the classroom.
- work cooperatively with classmates.
- help make our school a zero-bullying school.
- never lash out at others.
- help create a family atmosphere in the classroom.
- give your best in all subject areas.
- read at home.
- know the “Writing Process” according to your grade level.
- use soft voices in the classroom and the halls.
- always move about the school in an orderly manner.
- treat everyone with kindness.
- read more self-selected books.
- help our school to be a true “Writing School”.
- let your teacher help you with test taking skills.
- learn from mistakes and move on.
- have school pride.

Parents will:

- provide a place for your child to do schoolwork at home.
- work with your child on reading, writing and analyzing.
- communicate with your child’s teacher when you have questions or concerns.