Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 1-2
 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p1-2

Editorial: Transitions, Thank Yous, & Introductions

Kristen Cuthrell, *Director, Rural Education Institute*
Laura Levi Altstaedter, *Executive Editor, TPRE*

This is our fourth year publishing *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*. Our editorial leadership is honored to work with our authors, reviewers, and you, our readers, in fulfilling our mission to disseminate high-quality articles addressing theoretical, empirical, and practice related issues in rural education. We are pleased to welcome Dr. Amy Swain, East Carolina University, Foundations of Education, as our next Executive Editor and Jennifer Williams, East Carolina University, Elementary Education, as our Journal Manager. As Amy and Jennifer transition into their new roles, I want to share my deepest appreciation to Dr. Laura Levi Altstatedter and Dr. Diane Kester for serving as the journal's inaugural executive editor and journal manager for the past four years. Their expertise and commitment to the journal has been invaluable and certainly a labor of love. Best wishes to both as they begin their next chapter.

As you view this issue, you will find our authors exploring timely topics across and among rural education stakeholders. We present a featured article highlighting the work of researchers in NC on rural equity principal preparation. Next, our authors in the Research Forum report on studies carried out both in K-12 and higher education contexts, focused on the following areas: rural principals' evaluative practices, preclinical field experiences with special education teachers, and community college's impact on developing human capital and social capital. Our authors in the Practice Forum explore the following themes, within teacher education and mental health contexts: implementing a teacher residency program, mobilizing community resources while integrating a trauma-informed intervention, and teacher candidate perceptions of instructional rounds. This issue also includes a book review on overcoming personal challenges of rural students with college-going systems.

TPRE is hosted by ECU Library Services and its publication is supported through East Carolina University's Rural Education Institute. All manuscripts submitted to TPRE undergo a doubleblind review process, which involves the coordinated efforts of the staff, including the Journal's Executive Editor, Journal Manager, Assistant Editors, Associate Editors, and Reviewers.

The following people and their continuous support for TPRE have contributed to the publication of this issue: Jan Lewis, Director J. Y. Joyner Library; Jennifer Williams, Journal Manager; Dr. Diane Kester, Journal Manager Advisor; Dr. Robert Quinn, Associate Editor for the Research Forum; Dr. Martin Reardon, Associate Editor for the Practice Forum; Hannah Grant, Assistant Editor; Emily Cheney, Assistant Editor; Joseph Thomas, Assistant Director for Collections and Scholarly Communication, Joyner Library; and Nick Crimi, OJS Administration, Joyner Library. We are especially grateful for the reviewers on our editorial board and the authors who contributed their work to this issue.

We are currently considering manuscripts for our next general issue, which we publish every Spring, and our guest-edited special issues on *STEM Education* (forthcoming in Fall 2022) and *Transformative Trauma-Informed Practices* (forthcoming in Fall 2023). We invite scholars and practitioners in the field of rural education to contribute their work for the Research Forum, the Practice Forum, the Digital Projects Forum, or the Book Reviews Forum. Manuscripts for our general issues are typically due in the fall with publication dates expected in May. Manuscripts for our special issues are typically due in late winter with publication dates expected during the fall.

If you are interested in becoming a peer reviewer, please go to the journal's website (http://tpre.ecu.edu) to register. Edit your profile and navigate to the tab "Roles" where you may select "Reviewer" and submit your interests concerning rural education.

About the Authors

Kristen Cuthrell, EdD, is a Professor at East Carolina University in the Department of Elementary Education and Middle Grades Education and serves as Director of the Rural Education Institute. Her research interests include reform in educator preparation, innovation in clinical experiences, and professional development in rural schools.

Laura Levi Altstaedter, PhD, is Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, ECU Harriot College of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Levi Altstaedter's research focuses primarily on second language (L2) pedagogy, including students' motivation to study foreign languages, perceptions of instructional innovations, and perceptions of assessment. In addition, her research focuses on teacher development. She has published multiple articles focused on L2 pedagogy and educator preparation in premier US-based journals in her field such as Hispania and Foreign Language Annals, as well as in international journals such as Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, and the Argentinean Journal of Applied Linguistics. She serves as the Executive Editor for REI's Theory & Practice in Rural Education.

ECU
RURAL EDUCATION INSTITUTE

Mission: Initiate and facilitate partnerships and research-driven innovations that enhance holistic development and opportunities for pk-16 students and their families in rural communities. Collaborate with stakeholders towards positive transformation in families and schools.

Vision: Be a place where educational stakeholders in rural communities come and feel at home in accessing resources and support to address the issues that confront us.

Goals: Improve educational outcomes for rural students, school, and communities through

- ECU Next Gen: We grow the next generation of rural educators and researchers
- Local and Regional Development: We collaborate with schools and communities to build capacity for all.
- Rural Education Promotion: We articulate and advocate the importance of rural schools and communities.
- Research and Evaluation: We study our practice and investigate what works in rural schools.

Sign up for our newsletter to stay informed of REI's current projects and research
https://education.ecu.edu/rei/

Contact us at ruraleducation@ecu.edu to connect and collaborate!

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 3-24
 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p3-24

The Second Most Important Decision: Protocol for Partnering for Intern Placement

Kimberly Kappler Hewitt, *University of North Carolina Greensboro*
Mark Alvis Rumley, *University of North Carolina Greensboro*

For principal preparation program success, the selection of an aspiring school administrator's internship placement/mentor principal is second in importance only to the decision about whom to select into the program. In this article, we review the scant literature on internship placement assignment processes, none of which are specific to rural places. We then describe the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) program – a partnership of 12 rural districts and a large public university – and explain the process by which the partnership co-designed their internship placement protocol and Assignment of Internship Placements tool. We then introduce the protocol, which involves program leaders traveling to each rural partner district across a wide geographic area to meet with the superintendent and District Point Person – the cabinet-level administrator who is the lead district liaison for PPEERS – to consensually select a mentor principal/internship site for each Intern, using the internship tool, which identifies factors to select for and to avoid. After describing the protocol and introducing the tool, we outline our action research methods. Utilizing a two-phase reflective inquiry process, we drew on perceptions of leadership coaches, district partners, and program leaders to reflect on contextual considerations, the impact of the tool, and ways to improve our placement practice. Contextual considerations reflect realities of rural districts, including limited placement choices in small districts, limited number of principals who fit the mentor principal criteria, and micropolitical considerations. Improvements to our process include considering the entire leadership team of a school when selecting placements; including additions to the tool regarding consideration of equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as addition of a "Goldilocks school" element; and ideas for increasing mentor principal readiness and intern knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy when placed in a school level that is unfamiliar to them. In these ways the partnership can leverage rural partner assets and address contextual challenges. We conclude with implications for rural school leader preparation programs.

***Keywords*: principal preparation, internship, mentor principal, partnership, intern placement**

For principal preparation program graduate success – measured in terms of placement in an administrative position, positive evaluation by supervisors, and promotion – the selection of an aspiring school administrator's internship[1] placement/mentor principal is second in importance only to the decision about whom to select into a leadership preparation program. This is the understanding that our team has come to after six years of leading a two-year, partnership-based, grant-funded rural leadership preparation program that centers on a full-time, yearlong internship. Based on this understanding, district partners and university program leaders have collaboratively

[1] Within our program, we capitalize the roles Intern, Leadership Coach, and Mentor Principal as a sign of respect, but we recognize that they are typically not capitalized in the literature.

designed a protocol and tool for making the most advantageous internship placement assignments. Drawing on the scant literature regarding internship placement assignment processes, none of which centers on rural leadership preparation, we describe the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) program, explain the process by which we have developed our internship placement protocol, and introduce the protocol and tool. We then outline our action research methods and share our findings. We conclude with implications for leadership preparation programs and future research.

Review of the Literature

Rural School Leadership

Rural schools offer bountiful assets. They are often centers of their communities (Tieken, 2014). They are advantaged by "abundant social capital" (Redding & Walberg, 2012, p. 31) and provide a strong sense of place and belonging (Convery et al., 2012). Rural communities have greater cohesion than their urban counterparts (McShane & Smarick, 2018) and "place emphasis on family blood lines, kinship relationships, family preservation, and a cultural emphasis on taking care of kinfolk" (Curtin & Cohn, 2015, para. 3). Rural students typically have higher reading and math scores than their urban counterparts on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests (Malkus, 2018).

Rural schools also face challenges, including "deep and persistent poverty" that is often intergenerational (LaValley, 2018, p. 4) and higher rates of child poverty. Rural communities often have low population density and geographic isolation as well as racial segregation (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Rural schools often struggle with high teacher turnover, low teacher quality, and poor working conditions (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Rural principals contend with a lack of resources, multifaceted roles and responsibilities, and the pressure associated with high visibility within the community (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals must "emphasize cultural responsiveness and attentiveness to place and context" (Johnson & Reynolds, 2011, p. 1).

Further, shortages of principals are particularly acute in rural areas (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2014; Versland, 2013), and rural districts struggle to recruit and retain effective principals, especially for high-needs schools (Pjanowski et al., 2009). Rural schools receive significantly fewer applications for principals (Pjanowski et al., 2009) and have higher rates of attrition than those of suburban and urban districts (Lochmiller et al., 2016; Versland, 2013). The challenges rural districts face recruiting and retaining principals are expected to grow more acute in coming decades (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009).

Rural School Leadership Preparation

The unique qualities of rural communities and schools, as outlined in the paragraphs above, require unique rural school leadership (Hewitt & Rumley, 2020). As such, "growing your own" school leaders is the best solution for rural districts (Wood et al., 2013). Such programs should reflect research about exemplary principal preparation.

Key features of exemplary principal preparation programs include "quality internships that provide intensive developmental opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner–mentor" (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 22). Internships differ in structure and duration, often varying widely in required hands-on hours from 110–300 or more (Campbell & Parker, 2016). Reyes-Guerra and Barnett (2017) identified three types of field experience designs for principal preparation: (1) full-time job-embedded internships that involve full engagement in the internship experience, typically for a semester or full school year; (2) detached internships – the most common – that are completed by educators working full-time as certificated professionals and completing internship tasks in snippets of time outside of their regular duties; and (3) course-embedded internships, which involve a number of field-based experiences integrated into various courses.

Beyond the structure of the internship itself, the Mentor Principal plays a crucial role in growing the intern. Mentoring, defined as an "intentional, strategic relationship to support and guide" (Swaminathan & Reed, 2020, p. 219), involves helping an intern assimilate into the role of leader and establish their professional network; contributing to the professional growth and satisfaction of interns; serving as a confidant; and

engaging in a reciprocal relationship such that the mentor grows in skills and satisfaction (Geismar et al., 2000). Research (Thessin et al., 2020) indicates that the degree to which administrative interns are assigned meaningful, authentic roles and tasks during the internship is based at least in part on the degree to which interns and Mentor Principals (MPs) develop a productive partnership marked by relational trust. Further, effective mentoring involves socialization into the role, constructive feedback, and reflection (Adams, 2013; Geer et al., 2014; Schechter, 2014). Yet, while there is evidence that the internship is an "important ingredient" (Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017, p. 241) of leadership preparation and that MPs are key to effective internships; "much of the internship literature tends to ignore or gloss over the selection, training, and monitoring of mentors" (p. 244).

Indeed, the existing literature offers little specific description or documentation of how mentors are selected, and "despite its importance to the success of the internship . . . mentor selection is often based more on convenience than on considerations of effectiveness" (Geismar et al., 2000, p. 235) and is "heavily dependent on district leadership and politically expedient criteria" (Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017, p. 242). Additionally, "rural schools may face a shortage of expert practitioners to mentor" interns (Versland, 2013, p. 16). As an exception to these generalities, Woodrum et al. (2014) described the process used for selecting Mentor Principals for the Alliance for Leading and Learning (ALL) program, a grant-funded leadership preparation program involving a partnership among the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS), the University of New Mexico, and the New Mexico School Leadership Institute:

> Interns complete an interest inventory, which identifies their strengths, goals, leadership characteristics they value, programs with which they hope to work . . . and school grade level. Principals interested in serving as mentors also apply for their positions . . . Faculty members . . . also offer insights about the interns' strengths, needs, and dispositions. The ALL management team assembles the [materials] . . . and makes tentative matches of interns and coopering principals. APS associate superintendents make the final decision about the placements. (p. 58)

In this model, all members of the partnership played a role in internship placement assignments, with associate superintendents making the final decisions. This process is in sharp contrast to that of detached internships in which an intern's principal typically serves as de facto Mentor Principal. In the following section, we describe the PPEERS program, which centers on a full-time, job-embedded internship under the guidance of an expert practitioner–mentor.

Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS)

PPEERS is a "grow your own" (Wood et al., 2013) program centered on the specialized educational leadership needed by rural principals to leverage the assets of rural places and address the challenges faced by rural schools (Hewitt & Rumley 2020). Launched in 2016, PPEERS is a mutualistic research-practice partnership of 12 rural districts and a large public university in the Southeastern United States that is focused on a persistent problem of practice in partner districts – a shallow and insufficient pool of educators to serve as effective school leaders, especially in high-needs schools. The partnership works to recruit, select, prepare, and place diverse administrators for high-needs rural schools. PPEERS is a two-year, grant-supported program that recruits high potential certified educators from partner districts (e.g., teachers, instructional coaches, counselors) into the leadership preparation program. The program – co-designed with rural district partners – results in a Masters of School Administration degree and initial principal licensure. The partnership began in 2016 and is currently preparing its fourth cohort of 20 school leaders.

Our 12 districts span a large geographic area in the Piedmont area of North Carolina and vary in demographic composition from those that are nearly all White (~90%) to some schools that are majority Hispanic. Overall, our partnership includes 222 schools serving more than 100,000 students. Of the 12 districts, two are in counties categorized as rural distant by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and 10 are in counties

categorized as rural fringe, meaning that they are near (less than five miles) from urbanized areas (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Because of their proximity to urban areas, it is not uncommon for teachers and administrators to be lured to better-paying positions in large urban districts. This is one of the challenges faced by most of our districts and one of the reasons for their commitment to our "grow your own" program that allows districts to cultivate leaders who have deep and enduring ties to their rural areas.

PPEERS centers rurality in numerous ways. These include coursework (including a required course, *Rural School Leadership*) and readings across classes (e.g., Tieken's *Why Rural Schools Matter*). Additionally, across classes we utilize rural-focused case studies, simulations based on real situations in our rural partner schools, internship placements in high-needs rural schools, and an equity-change leadership project based on a persistent problem of practice in an intern's rural school. Additionally, during the second year of the program, we hold Internship Seminars biweekly on Thursdays, hosted on a rotating basis in partner districts. Interns and district leaders help to co-design these seminars, featuring innovations, curriculum programs, and experts from districts on topics such as serving Hispanic students and parents. Further, all PPEERS courses have a rural practitioner element, whether it is a partner district administrator who teaches or co-teaches the course, practitioner co-design of project-based learning, guest speaker(s), panel of rural school leaders, etc.

A central component of the PPEERS program is a full-time, yearlong paid internship under the guidance of a Mentor Principal. Additionally, interns benefit from the support of a grant-funded Leadership Coach, who is external to the partner district; is a retired educator with extensive leadership experience, including as a highly effective principal; and serves as a non-evaluative, critical friend to the Intern. Leadership Coaches make two site visits per month to each of their interns, conducting classroom walk-throughs and debriefs with them; checking in with their Mentor Principals; supporting them on their individual Leadership Growth Plans; listening; helping interns to problem-solve and navigate challenges; and reflecting with interns.

The final member of the triad of support – the internship support team – is the clinical internship supervisor – a faculty member with experience as a principal. Supervisors plan and oversee internship seminars, conduct at least two site visits per semester, formally evaluate the intern, and provide additional resources as needed for each Intern. All members of the triad of support for interns – MP, coaches, and clinical internship supervisors – while serving in distinct roles, make themselves *available*, *approachable, and affirming*.

Internship Placements: Lessons Learned that Informed Development of the Placement Protocol

For our first cohort, district partners placed interns in high-needs rural schools. Similar to the findings of Whitaker et al. (2004), we learned from our first cohort that the experiences of interns in the internship were uneven. In some cases, interns were seen as an extra pair of hands to assist a principal who was in over their head, a principal who was struggling, or a principal who was new to the principalship or the building – or both. In these situations, interns often did not experience strong "elbow learning" (Crawford, 2011). Key to intern development, especially early in the internship, is elbow learning that interns experience by literally and figuratively learning at the elbow of their Mentor Principal through observing, engaging in meaning-making, and reflecting. Mentor principals use think-alouds (van Someren et al., 1994) to make explicit their leadership moves and decisions and engage interns in reflective discussion. Elbow learning is an important component of the broader development of interns over the trajectory of the internship by observing, then participating, and – finally – by leading (Thessin et al., 2020). We learned that MPs who were neither new to the role nor their school and whose schools were stable – even if struggling – were better positioned – and had much greater capacity – to provide meaningful think-alouds, to model adroit leadership, and to promote intern analysis and reflection.

Additionally, some MPs were more willing and able than others to distribute leadership and assign

interns meaningful, substantive leadership roles, such as leading an effort to implement and support a social-emotional learning curriculum, working with professional learning communities (PLCs), leading an effort to support new teachers, and leading a group of teachers in designing and implementing an initiative to increase student attendance. Other interns were more likely to be assigned the "three Bs" – books, busses, and butts (discipline). While this type of service added value to the school, it provided very limited opportunities for interns to develop the skills and competencies needed to be equity-focused change agents.

Other interns, conversely, had amazing experiences in which their principals engaged with them as valued colleagues, discussing challenging issues, working through problems, and explaining their leadership moves and priorities. In these situations, the bond between MP and Intern was strong and tended to endure beyond the internship either as a valued professional relationship in the graduate's professional network or as supervisor when the Intern was hired as an assistant principal for the school. Given the isolation that rural school administrators often experience (Versland, 2013), this enduring relationship is particularly important.

As the PPEERS leadership team, we observed a stark difference among interns' experiences across placements. Fortunately, our funder pushed us to work *with* our partner districts in the future to select the best internship placements possible.

Partnering to Develop a Protocol for Selecting Internship Placements

Within the framework of our partnership, the PPEERS leadership team and District Point Persons (DPPs) from our partner districts meet monthly (via Zoom, due to the large geographic distances covered by the partnership). DPPs are senior-level administrators (e.g., Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources) who represent the district in the partnership. During monthly DPP meetings, we engage in a co-design segment during which we redesign some element of the PPEERS program. Within this infrastructure, we developed a protocol and tool (see Figure 1) for selecting internship placements for interns. This process has been used for subsequent cohorts to place interns as described in the Appendix and summarized in Figure 1.

Internship Selection Process

The Internship Placement Selection Tool is part of a larger process through which we engage rural partners in placement decisions. The University team travels to each partner district in January or early February prior to the commencement of the yearlong internship in August to meet with the superintendent and DPP to match each intern with a highly effective Mentor Principal in a high-needs rural school. Because our partner districts are spread across a large geographic area, travel to these rural places is time- and cost-intensive, taking upwards of over two hours to drive to some districts. The commitment to meet in person reflects the importance of these placement decisions and the value we place on consensual decision-making. Prior to this meeting, DPPs and superintendents have conversations to determine a pool of strong potential MPs. When we meet, we discuss placement options and use the tool (see Appendix and Figure 1 below) to inform selection decisions. After making a tentative placement decision consensually, the superintendent reaches out to the prospective MP to discuss the opportunity and, hopefully, to secure the person's commitment to serve as an MP.

MPs are not paid for their service in the role. From the onset of PPEERS, superintendents felt strongly – and continue to feel – that serving as an MP is an honor and an opportunity. As such, superintendents have advocated that MPs not be paid for their service. To date, the partnership has not struggled to secure principals to serve as MPs.

Figure 1

Internship Placement Selection Tool

Priorities/Considerations	Concerns/Things to Think About
Highest priority: Selection of best Mentor Principal possible (accomplished leader, encouraging, reflective, supportive, strong instructional leader, change agent, collaborator, embodies distributed leadership, etc.).	Avoid placing Interns based on building need (another person in the building, because the principal is new to role or building, school is struggling, etc.).
Priority: Demonstrated record of increased student achievement and/or growth in the schools principal has led.	Avoid placing Interns in the same school where they have been teaching.
Priority: Demonstrated record of instructional leadership that is documented in principal's annual evaluations.	When possible, avoid placing Interns in a school their children attend or family members work.
Consideration: Placement in high-needs school with a strong leader who can serve as Mentor Principal.	When/Where anticipated, avoid placing Interns with principals who may be promoted during the year such that a change in placement and/or Mentor Principal can be anticipated.
Consideration: Principal interest in serving as a Mentor Principal and capacity to devote the time and energy necessary to devote to the Intern.	Excellent principals are excellent for all sorts of reasons, but they may not have the capacity or interest to serve as a Mentor Principal. Determining whether the principal can devote the time and energy to the Intern and whether the principal is willing and able to delegate responsibility to the Intern are important considerations.
Consideration: Mentor principals who will be mindful that Interns are students who are learning to be school leaders. The Mentor Principal should learn the Intern's strengths, knowledge, skills, and dispositions and be willing to provide opportunities for learning.	Interns are not assistant principals. They have the same legal standing as student teachers. Mentor Principals should take care to assign tasks and supervise Interns closely.

Priorities/Considerations	Concerns/Things to Think About
Consideration: Making sure Interns get K-12 experience throughout the internship, shadowing, switch experience (2-week period – around April, 2022 – during which the Intern serves at another school), etc. UNCG leadership will work with Superintendents and District Point Persons to ensure a comprehensive K-12 field experience. For each Intern, we will develop a plan for obtaining those additional experiences s/he needs at other levels. Consideration: District needs in terms of succession planning (e.g., secondary leaders needed).	Avoid placing elementary teachers in secondary internships or secondary teachers in elementary internships, purely because they need to broaden their experience. Although some teachers may adapt to a level shift quite well, it is important to consider the capabilities and needs of the Intern before a level shift is considered.

Introduction to the Selection Tool

The tool (see Figure 1) includes a column of priorities/considerations (things to select *for*), as well as a column of concerns/things to think about (things to *avoid*). The highest priority is "Selection of the best Mentor Principal possible (accomplished leader, encouraging, reflective, supportive, strong instructional leader, change agent, collaborator, embodies distributed leadership, etc.)." The main thing to avoid in selection is "placing Interns based on building need (another person in the building because the principal is new to the role or building, school is struggling, etc.)." As we consider internship placements, our first priority is assuring that Interns are placed with principals who have a proven track record as accomplished leaders, who will devote the time and energy necessary to mentor an Intern, and who are strong instructional leaders. A second consideration is placement in a high-needs school where Interns can experience the challenges and opportunities presented and can serve struggling students and those who come from low-income backgrounds, often of multigenerational poverty. We also take into consideration the future leader's past experiences (e.g., 15 years in an elementary setting) and what experiences that person needs (e.g., middle or high school) as well as the person's strengths/expertise (e.g., experience in a dual language immersion school) to inform placement decisions based on the selection tool (e.g., placement in a middle school that is starting a dual language immersion program under the guidance of an experienced principal with strong instructional and external leadership skills).

Our team engaged in action research to identify strengths and affordances of the internship Placement Protocol and Tool as well as constraints to identify ways to improve the process and effectiveness of internship placements for successive cohorts. The following section outlines our action research process.

Methods

With our rural partners, we used an action research approach (Efron & Ravid, 2020; Mills, 2011; Sagor, 2000) to examine the use of the placement tool and protocol. Our focus was to improve our placement practices, and the study was conducted by "insiders" to the partnership (Efron & Ravid, 2020), namely the PPEERS leadership team consisting of the director, co-director, and project manager as well as Leadership Coaches and District Point Persons. We used a reflective stance, including a "willingness to critically examine" our practice to improve it (Mills, 2011, p. 8). Through the two-phase inquiry process described below, we engaged in reflective practice. Reflective practice is the process of intentionally reflecting on one's practice in order to refine, enhance, or further articulate our strategies and practices moving forward (e.g. Schön, 1983; Smith

et al., 2015; Smith & Skolits, 2021). Reflective practice requires the practitioner to question their own behaviors and actions, take space to listen to and/or consider different perspectives, theorize, and deliberate regarding how to move forward in their practice, and take action based on their reflections, repeating the cycle for continued improvement or renegotiation of practice.

The question that guided our inquiry was this: How has the use of the placement protocol, centered on the placement tool, impacted the quality of rural intern placements, and how can the process and tool be improved? To address this question, we engaged in a multi-step inquiry.

Inquiry Process

Phase 1: Reflective inquiry with Coaches

To begin, the PPEERS Program Director met individually with each Leadership Coach for a reflective conversation, termed such because both director and coach reflected upon previous placements, and – while the coach mostly talked and the director mostly listened – there was dynamic interaction between the two. Because Leadership Coaches are typically on-site in the Intern's school twice a month and speak with the Mentor Principal during visits, Leadership Coaches often have the most frequent and richest opportunities to gauge the effectiveness of the internship placement.

During these conversations, the director methodically reviewed each Intern whom the Leadership Coach had served over previous cohorts, and for each asked: (1) Was this placement, in retrospect, strong, acceptable, or weak? Why? (2) What thoughts do you have about this placement? The terms "strong," "acceptable," and "weak" were intentionally left undefined by the director in order to tease out during the discussion what characterized each category in the Leadership Coach's mind. Definitions of these categories began to emerge organically through conversations with the coaches and have informed the drafting of a Placement Rubric that is being constructed by the team, based on extant research, data from these conversations, and input from DPPs. The rubric itself is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the data from the conversations with coaches helped to examine how we make sense of the quality of an internship placement.

The director scripted notes from the Leadership Coach's responses (see Figure 2 for sample) and asked clarifying and probing questions, such as "You described the MP as 'supportive.' How was she supportive?" Additionally, the director would at times share her own observations about a placement and ask the Leadership Coach if their perceptions were similar or different. For example, "My sense was that while the MP wasn't particularly strong in instructional leadership, he recognized that strength in [Intern] Erin[2] and gave her the opportunity and support to take on a lot of instructional leadership roles and duties, which helped him [the principal]. What are your thoughts on that?"

Figure 2

Sample Notes from Phase 1 Reflective Conversation

MP as good as it gets; well planned; had plan for Kirsten day she walked in; reviewed plan with Kirsten; whole [administrative] team supported her; everyone's charge to get Kirsten ready to be principal; MP still interested in growing in her own career. Learner alongside Kirsten. MP focused on leading school and leading change; released [duties and responsibilities to Kirsten] at right time; slow release. Increased responsibilities at great pace and rate. One of best -- if not best – [MP] ever seen.

[2] All proper names are pseudonyms.

The reflective conversations with coaches were also *cumulative*, in the sense that with each successive conversation, the director shared musings, hypotheses, and ideas from preceding coaching conversations to get feedback on them during successive conversations. For example, in one reflective conversation, the coach concluded that each placement of her Interns for the second cohort was a good principal but not all good principals were strong mentors. Through dynamic interaction between Coach and Director, an idea emerged to begin working with MPs earlier, prior to the commencement of the internship, and to provide more structured expectations for early mentoring activities. This idea was then shared during the next reflective conversation. During that successive conversation, the second Coach affirmed the idea and built upon it by recommending that program leaders "be more direct and assertive about our expectations" for MPs and include the Coaches in the MP training to start to build relationships among MPs, Coaches, and program leadership even earlier. Through dynamic interaction, the Director and Coach discussed the possibility of coaches collaboratively facilitating preparation of MPs. The two agreed that – at the very least – Coaches should attend to observe, participate, and build relationships.

Phase 2: Reflective inquiry with DPPs.

Key takeaways from reflective conversations with Coaches were then summarized and shared with DPPs during the co-design segment of their monthly meeting. See Figure 3 for a list of the takeaways from Phase 1, which were presented by the director to DPPs.

Figure 3

Takeaways from Phase 1 Conversations with Coaches

- Over time, we're doing better (but not perfect) at ensuring that each Intern is with a strong principal.
- Being a strong principal does not necessarily entail being a strong mentor.
- The placement tool is a good guide and should continue to be used – and refined (e.g., Goldilocks school).
- What distinguishes good MPs from great MPs tends to be 1) focus on instructional leadership; 2) action for school improvement; 3) building the capacity of others, including Intern; and 4) investment in Intern's learning and success.
- The main area for improvement is in the support and explicit guidance of MPs – and earlier in the process (in the spring semester that placements are made instead of waiting until July).

During the co-design segment, DPPs were then broken into three Zoom breakout groups for reflection. In each group was a member of the PPEERS leadership team who took notes. DPPs were asked to reflect using the following prompts:

1. What has been your experience participating in the internship placement process? (plus/delta) [positives and things to change]
2. What are your thoughts on the takeaways from reflection discussions with coaches [as reflected in Figure 3]?
3. Be ready to share out.

The following section reflects findings from phases 1 and 2 of the action research process regarding the impact of the placement protocol and tool upon the program. The succeeding section then outlines reflections on how to refine and improve the quality of internships, based on the inquiry processes outlined above.

Findings

The key takeaways from reflective conversations with Leadership Coaches, which were listed in the Methods section, are discussed below, as are the findings from the reflective conversations of the DPPs. From these two phases of the inquiry, we identify multiple strategies for improving the placement process. Interestingly, the takeaways from reflective inquiry with Coaches do not center rurality while takeaways from inquiry with DPPs do, reflecting the importance of engaging rural partners in reflective inquiry and improvement processes.

Takeaways from Reflective Inquiry with Coaches

Over time, we're doing better (but not perfect) at ensuring that each Intern is with a strong principal. With our second cohort, for the most part, each Intern was placed with a good principal. While not all of those principals were strong mentors, they did – for the most part – model strong leadership across dimensions (e.g., strategic leadership, instructional leadership, cultural leadership, human resources leadership, managerial leadership, external leadership, micropolitical leadership, and leadership for school improvement; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006, 2009, rev. 2013). While we are committed to doing "ever better," one Coach pointed out:

> Whenever you're dealing with humans, it's not going to be perfect. There is alchemy, not science, in this. You can get better, but you're never going to be 100% perfect. You can't be. We're dealing with humans. There are so many variables . . . it's very complex.

She gave as an example of an MP who was a stellar mentor to an Intern from Cohort 1 and served again as a mentor for Cohort 2. While she was a solid mentor to her Intern in Cohort 2, the two were, in retrospect, too alike. The Mentor was reserved and cerebral as was her Intern. The Intern could have grown more from someone who more proactively engaged with various stakeholder groups and modeled more visible empathy-based leadership. It is difficult to match for personalities when selecting internship placements and – indeed – that consideration is not on the placement tool. Given the limited selection of MPs and sites in some of our rural districts, it may be difficult to add an additional layer to match for personalities.

Being a strong principal does not necessarily entail being a strong mentor. This is a key takeaway. While one might conjecture that what makes someone a good principal (e.g., strong social-emotional skills, ability to give feedback, ability to scaffold support and provide gradual release of responsibility, etc.) would translate smoothly to the role of mentor, that is not always the case. Regarding one placement, a Coach spoke about an MP who did not feel comfortable being vulnerable to her Intern about what she was struggling with and therefore "kept things" from her Intern that the Intern really needed to know. In another case, an MP released responsibilities to the Intern too quickly, and the Intern "got burned" from the experience and then had to work to shift some people's early negative opinions of her. Conversely, another MP was too slow to release to the Intern meaningful, substantive leadership roles and, in doing so, constrained the Intern's learning. As a program, we must recognize that MPs do not automatically become great mentors as a function

of being strong principals. As such, as a program, we must rethink when and how we train and support MPs. We revisit this in the following section.

The placement tool is a good guide and should continue to be used and refined. While the placement tool has been incredibly helpful in providing clarity of expectations regarding placement sites and MPs, it should be seen as a living document that is refined over time as we learn more about what works and what does not work in terms of rural internship placements. One such example is the concept of a Goldilocks school. This is a term we coined after a reflective conversation with a Coach in which she discussed one placement at which everything was going so swimmingly at the small rural elementary school where an Intern was placed that the principal was not doing much leading for school improvement. Efforts were focused on refining practices that were – for the most part – effective as reflected in the school's data. Because this school was "too good," there was less opportunity for the Intern to learn about change leadership and school improvement work. On the other hand, a current Intern is in a school that is in crisis, and the principal is mostly in reactive mode and struggling to shift from reacting to proactively leading intentionally for targeted school improvement. As such, we coined the term "Goldilocks school" to refer to an internship site that is neither too small and thriving nor that is too chaotic and in crisis. The larger point is that the placement tool should be seen as a living document that is refined based on data from and reflection upon placements. That said, as discussed below, DPPs feel that sometimes there is a dearth of Goldilocks schools in rural districts.

What distinguishes good MPs from great MPs tends to be (1) focus on instructional leadership; (2) action for school improvement; (3) being a collaborative and distributive leader focused on building the capacity of others; and (4) investment in an Intern's learning and success. In trying to tease out what makes a placement "acceptable," as opposed to "strong," the distinguishing elements of strong placements seem to be – at least in part – the aforementioned. Most of our MPs, for example, are strong cultural leaders who have built a positive rural school environment that centers student learning. All are solid managers. MPs are generally adroit at navigating micropolitical environments in serving their rural school communities, which can often involve complex webs of relationships where *everybody knows everybody*. Not all the MPs, however, are particularly strong at instructional leadership. Some are regularly in classrooms, analyzing instruction and *moving the needle forward* on teaching practice, such as collaborative small group instruction, using math talks, etc.; others tend to lean away from instructional leadership, instead relying on the school's instructional coach to facilitate Professional Learning Communities, analyze data with teachers, and support planning and assessment. While some MPs center school improvement throughout the year, working toward and measuring progress on learning goals, others are more focused day-to-day on managing. While some MPs invest in growing the capacity of faculty as teachers and leaders – and work specifically to grow the leadership capacity of the Intern – others evaluate teachers – and the Intern – as required but tend to stop their efforts there. While some MPs work intentionally to build the Intern's identity as a rural school administrator and socialize them into the role by, for example, helping them build their professional network (which counters the isolation that rural school leaders often feel), others see the Intern as a temporary addition to the building whom they allow to take on roles and tasks and complete their required leadership projects (e.g., equity change leadership project). While as a program we need to examine more closely and more methodically what distinguishes good from great MPs and – ultimately – how we as a program can help lift all MPs toward being great ones, these initially identified areas give us a place to begin that focus.

The main area for improvement is in the support and explicit guidance of MPs -- and it needs to happen earlier in the process. Largely as a conclusion from the previous key takeaways, the Coaches identified our main area for improvement in earlier and more explicit guidance of MPs. As one Coach put in, we need to be "more assertive about our expectations" and "build that relationship even earlier" between MPs and the

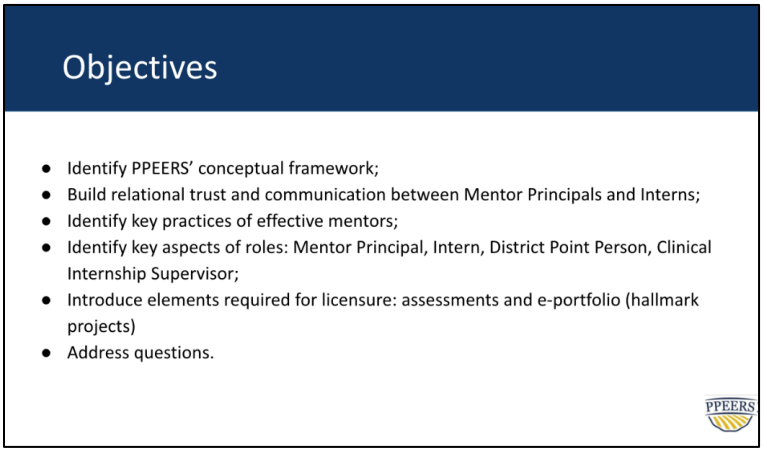
program, as well as between MPs and Coaches. When this idea was shared in a successive reflective coaching conversation, the Coach agreed and suggested that Coaches participate in any work with MPs earlier in the process to observe and build relationships and even collaboratively facilitate sessions with MPs. She encouraged the PPEERS leadership team to "at least have coaches attend to hear what is said" in order to be on the same page and use the same language regarding expectations for MPs and to "begin to build those relationships" with MPs.

Currently, once MPs are selected in February (before the internship begins in August), the clinical internship supervisors reach out to each by phone to introduce themselves, welcome MPs to the program, and thank them for their willingness to serve as an MP. That initial contact is followed by sending MPs a short video about the PPEERS program and – specifically – the format and expectations of the yearlong, full-time internship. Then, the Intern reaches out to the MP during that spring semester to get acquainted and conducts field work in the school as part of coursework in two classes (ELC 688: Rural School Leadership and ELC 694: Cultural and Political Dimensions of Schooling) and conducts projects within their (future) internship sites to start to get to know the stakeholders and culture of the school as well as the culture and assets of the community. In July, we hold a four-hour Internship Orientation, the objectives of which are featured in Figure 4. Based on the takeaways from Coaches' reflective conversations, we need more explicit learning opportunities for MPs regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of strong MPs and what new MPs can do specifically, before the internship, early in the internship, and throughout the internship to be great mentors. What is clear is that selecting MPs is the *start*, and not the *end*, of the placement process. Once MPs are selected, the real work of preparing and supporting them begins.

Interestingly, the takeaways from reflective conversations with Coaches focused little on the particularities of rural contexts. Phase 2 of the action research process, with DPPs, was different in this respect, reflecting the importance of engaging rural district partners in reflective inquiry and improvement processes.

Figure 4

PPEERS Internship Orientation Objectives



Takeaways from Reflective Inquiry with District Point Persons

Consensually selecting placements is an important process that should continue. One DPP stated, "I love the consensual process for selecting" placements. Another DPP, who has been involved with the placement selection process for all cohorts since PPEERS began, endorsed the process, explaining, "It's a strategic process that involves considering the school, the experiences of the Mentor Principal, and the best fit. We want people to be successful so that we can hire them."

Realities of rural districts impact placement decisions. In reflecting with district partners, the high standards for Mentor Principals and internship placements met with the realities of their rural districts in several ways: (1) In the cases of small districts, MPs/site selections are limited. One DPP explained that they have three Interns currently and six schools total in the district. Placements were made in February preceding the commencement of the internship in August, but shortly before the internship began, one MP left the district for a position in another district. The DPP explained that they felt "hamstrung" and had to then place the Intern in a less than ideal situation, given limited options. He explained, "The Goldilocks school doesn't always exist . . . we have what we have." (2) While all partner districts strive to have an excellent principal leading each school, sometimes there are a "limited number of principals who fit" the PPEERS MP/site selection criteria. That limited number of principals is tapped for placements not only for PPEERS Interns but also for placements for other employees in other leadership preparation programs and for those needing placements as counselor Interns. (3) Micropolitical elements add extra complexity to placement decisions in at least two ways: (a) As one DPP explained, the "same principals seem always to get Interns," which causes some disgruntlement amongst other principals, in that they feel slighted by the decisions; (b) as another DPP explained, even though the district is committed to the PPEERS internship Placement Process, the superintendent still pushes sometimes to "place an Intern at a site where help or assistance is needed." He stated that you "can't always get away from this superintendent request," and it is "somewhat inherent in placement decisions."

Districts engage in preparation work before meeting with the PPEERS leadership team to select placements. Multiple DPPs spoke about the steps that they and their superintendent take prior to meeting with the PPEERS leadership team to collaboratively select internship placements. For example, in one district, the superintendent and cabinet members bring the PPEERS Intern in for an interview to get to know them better. From there, they consider what principal would be a good match for the Intern based on their personalities. Thus, while rural districts may have limited placement options, it is possible to consider the additional layer of personality match between Intern and Mentor Principal.

Another DPP shared that the superintendent and she "consider the trajectory" of where they anticipate the Intern will end up, based on district succession planning, and consider how to give the Intern a different experience from what they are used to. They also discuss what placement will "stretch the Intern skill-wise." Another DPP shared that he and the superintendent "collectively come up with three choices" – a placement at the elementary, middle, and high levels – for each Intern to bring to the discussion with the PPEERS team. Another DPP shared that when considering placements, they discuss "what opportunities [they] and the school have to offer the Intern." Thus, district partners invest additional time and steps into planning for placement decisions above and beyond the PPEERS placement protocol.

Districts consider their needs when selecting placements. Multiple districts spoke about their main need for school administrators being at the secondary level. This identified need informs where they look for placement options for Interns. This is an element of the selection tool ("Consideration: District needs in terms of succession planning (e.g., secondary leaders needed)."). However, some districts think more broadly about placements based on succession planning. Two districts specifically have looked at middle school and high school placement options and considered not only the principal of those

buildings but also the entire leadership team when considering placements. While the formal placement tool focuses on selecting the Mentor Principal, these districts also look at site level (middle and high) and the composition of the entire leadership team to determine where the Intern will learn the most and have the most support. For example, in one case, the DPP and superintendent were not convinced about the principal of the building being an MP, but the other members of the leadership team were very strong, and they knew the Intern could learn from and be supported by the two assistant principals, one of whom was expected to become a principal within the year. As such, looking at the entire leadership team of a potential internship site may be one way to address limited options for selecting Mentor Principals in rural districts.

While placing Interns in a new school level is meaningful, they need preparation in the curriculum and instruction of that level. As an element of the selection tool, we seek to ensure that Interns get K-12 experience (elementary, middle, and high) throughout the internship through the placement itself as well as through shadowing/site visits and a differentiated "switch" experience to another school, which can be up to two weeks in April–May of the internship year. Interns, DPPs, and Clinical internship Supervisors (the latter of whom are university faculty) develop a switch/shadow plan for each Intern (see Figure 5). Thus, while we often place Interns in a level that is new to them (e.g., a former high school teacher in a middle school placement), we avoid placing an Intern in a specific level solely to give them a novel experience. While the PPEERS approach is generally lauded by stakeholders, one DPP voiced an important concern: "With the instructional leadership piece, it can be difficult to throw people in [to a new school level] when they do not know the curriculum." Instead of recommending that we rethink placing Interns in unfamiliar school levels, he instead suggested that prior to entering their internships that Interns "need a short course in secondary curriculum 101 or elementary curriculum 101" that is targeted and supplementary to their courses on instructional leadership. Doing so would help Interns enter their placements with at least an initial grounding in the curriculum of the school that they could then build from. Preparing Interns to lead at all school levels provides rural district leaders with greater flexibility regarding hiring PPEERS graduates.

Figure 5

Placement in a New School Level as an Element of the PPEERS internship Placement Tool

	Consideration: Making sure Interns get K-12 experience throughout the internship, shadowing, switch experience (2-week period – around April, 2022 – during which Intern serves at another school), etc. UNCG leadership will work with Superintendents and District Point Persons to ensure a comprehensive K-12 field experience. For each Intern, we will develop a plan for obtaining those additional experiences s/he needs at other levels.		**Avoid** placing elementary teachers in secondary internships or secondary teachers in elementary internships, purely because they need to broaden their experience. Although some teachers may adapt to a level shift quite well, it is important to consider the capabilities and needs of the Intern before a level shift is considered.

In summary, reflective inquiry with Leadership Coaches and DPPs yielded new insights about placements and new ideas for how to improve them. While the collaborative placement protocol and tool are generally respected and considered strong, these elements are living documents that need to be refined, such as by including a Goldilocks school criterion. Selecting strong principals to serve as mentors is the beginning and not the end, as we need to work earlier and in a more structured way to help strong principals be strong mentors. Realities of rural districts – in terms of limited placement options and micropolitical dynamics – inform placement decisions beyond the placement tool. Rural partner districts consider their needs and invest in various activities prior to meeting with the PPEERS leadership team to be ready to select the best placements possible for Interns. Finally, Interns may need targeted instruction in the curriculum and pedagogy of a different level of schooling prior to starting their internship.

Overall Impact

The selection tool has without doubt helped to improve placement decisions. No more do we have Interns placed with first-year administrators or with those who are in over their heads and need an extra set of hands. Nonetheless, the tool and selection process are not a panacea, and we continue to be challenged – especially during the time of Covid – with securing a highly productive placement for each Intern. For example, with our current cohort, we have an Intern named Anesha originally placed with a Mentor Principal who – prior to the internship commencing – was moved to turn around a high school in the district. Because the MP would be new to the school and would be taxed with turnaround efforts, Anesha's placement was changed to an MP – Silvia – who had served as a strong MP for our program in the past. Our DPP in the partner district did not realize that an Intern from another program had requested placement – and been approved for it – with Silvia by the new head of human resources (HR) in the district. Silvia made neither the DPP nor head of HR aware that she had agreed to mentor two Interns. This oversight was discovered at the district's administrative retreat in early August, at which time both Interns were introduced as working with Silvia. Given the late realization of the double-placement, we originally decided to move forward with the placement, given that Anesha had already completed multiple tasks for the school over the summer. However, within the first weeks of the internship, it was clear that Anesha was not getting the elbow learning and investment of time and focus that are needed for an Intern. Complicating this situation was race: Anesha is a Black woman, Silvia is a White woman, and the other Intern is a White man. It is highly problematic to shift the placement of a Black woman *twice* while honoring the original placement of the white man. It seemed a testament to deep and enduring – and often denied – racial inequities in rural areas (Billings, 2016; Tieken, 2014). Silvia did not feel that she was favoring the other (White) Intern and believed that if serving as MP to two Interns was not feasible that she should mentor the White man, Conroy, since she had committed to him first. The program director and assistant director read this situation as one of implicit bias and race (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016; Irving, 2014). We held many conversations amongst ourselves and with the DPP about the micropolitical and racial dynamics and what was best for Anesha, who felt strongly that she cared less about her placement than about taking great care not to "burn bridges." The team ultimately decided that the situation was untenable and that Anesha's learning was suffering under the double-placement. We worked with the DPP to shift Anesha's placement to another MP in October. Her new MP welcomed her into the school community, was highly engaged in mentoring Anesha, and invested a great deal of care, time, elbow learning, and trust by assigning authentic leadership experiences to Anesha. Consequently, Anesha is now thriving. Thus, while the placement tool and protocol have substantially improved placement success, they are not guarantees, which this example demonstrates, and racial and micropolitical challenges within rural contexts will continue to require thoughtful decision-making. Further, to date there has been no element of the placement tool that speaks to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As such, the following addition has been made to the Placement Tool: "Consideration: Consider issues of race, gender, and other dimensions of difference when

making placement decisions. Reflect on how implicit bias may inform decisions and work to disrupt such bias."

Ideas to Build On

In addition to speaking candidly about challenges associated with enacting the MP/site placement process, DPPs and Leadership Coaches also surfaced ideas that the partnership can use to refine and improve our practice. One of these is in the area of curriculum readiness for Interns. While the partnership generally works to ensure that Interns are placed in a level where they have not previously served (e.g., an Intern with elementary experience may be placed at a middle school) and then have a "switch" experience in another level, as needed (e.g., high school), we can go above and beyond our initial instructional leadership coursework (one course pre-internship and the other during the first semester of the internship) by providing a mini-course or intensive experience shortly before the commencement of the internship that dives into the curriculum of that level. We can leverage the assets of rural partner districts by tapping district curriculum leaders, principals, and building instructional coaches to co-design and facilitate the short courses – one for each level (elementary, middle, and high). As one DPP explained, "With the instructional leadership piece, it can be difficult to throw people in when they do not know the curriculum." This can be especially problematic because there are "lots of principals who don't know curriculum and instruction," so having curriculum specialists lead short courses before the internship may be a way to supplement coursework in a targeted, intensive way to allow Interns to hit the ground running in their internship.

Additionally, we can consider the entire leadership team of a school – and not just the principal – when making placement decisions, which can help to address limited options of Mentor Principals who meet selection criteria. Another key idea to build on involves preparation for MPs that is earlier and more structured such that they enter the internship experience not only as strong principals but also as strong mentors. We can co-design this support with Coaches and some of our strongest rural MPs from past/current cohorts. Other more minor ideas include tweaks to the placement tool itself, including adding an element about Goldilocks schools, although we need to be mindful that such schools may not always exist within rural partner districts.

Implications

The internship placement protocol and tool are invaluable for establishing strong internship placements for full-time, job-embedded internships; they may also be productive in establishing strong course-embedded internships (Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017). Their utility for detached internships, which often occur, de facto, in an Intern's own school under their supervising principal, is less certain.

While the placement protocol and selection tool have resulted in much stronger placements for Interns, the selection of the MP is the beginning, and not the end, of work to build a strong internship. Indeed, beyond the *will* to be an excellent mentor, MPs also need the *skill* (Jackson, 2013). As Wilmore and Bratlien (2005) found, over 60% of MPs received no formal training. MPs must know the expectations for the role and build skills in conducting think-alouds, promoting reflection, and scaffolding support through the gradual release of responsibility as Interns take on more substantial leadership roles. Additionally, Interns themselves play a role in cultivating a successful internship experience in which they are given substantive leadership roles by demonstrating a strong work ethic and making value-added contributions to the school to build trust and credibility in their skills (Thessin et al., 2020) – all of which increase their opportunity to lead.

Thus, within the rural partnership structure, we can leverage assets (e.g., curriculum leaders to provide intensive short courses on curriculum; entire leadership teams to mentor an Intern) and solve for challenges (e.g., limited placement options in districts with few schools). Additionally, the commitment of program leaders to travel great distances to meet with rural partners and partners' additional work beyond the placement protocol (e.g., interviewing Interns before placement meetings to inform placement decisions) reflect the

joint commitment to and value for internship placements.

References

Adams, M. R. (2013). *Growing as a leader through developing others: The effect of being a mentor principal* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Nebraska.

Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (2016). *Blind spot: Hidden biases of good people*. Bantam.

Billings, D. (2016). *Deep denial: The persistence of white supremacy in United States history and life*. Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books.

Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Allen, L. W. (2006). Preparing principals for high-need rural schools: A central office perspective about collaborative efforts to transform school leadership. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *21*(1), 1–16.

Campbell, J. T., & Parker, R. (2016). A comparison of internships among Louisiana University principal preparation programs. *Research in the Schools, 23*(2), 17–27.

Convery, I., Corsane, G., & Davis, P. (Eds.). (2012). *Making sense of place: Multidisciplinary perspectives*. Boydell Press.

Crawford, J., Wasonga, T. A., & Howell, C. (2011, Fall). Elbow learning: A redesigned school district leaders' internship. *UCEA Review*, 25–27.

Cruzeiro, P. A., & Boone, M. (2009). Rural and small school principal candidate: Perspectives of hiring superintendents. *The Rural Educator, 31*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v31i1.437

Curtin, L., & Cohn, T. (2015, January). Overview of rural communities: Context, challenges, and resilience. *Psychology and AIDS Newsletter*. https://www.apa.org/pi/aids/resources/exchange/2015/01/rural-communities

Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2020). *Action research in education: A practical guide*. Guilford Press.

Fusarelli, B. C., Fusarelli, L. D., & Wirt, L. G. (2018). Developing and sustaining school-university-community collaborative partnerships to develop school leaders in rural areas. In R. M. Reardon & J. Leonard (Eds.), *Innovation and implementation in rural places: School–university–community collaboration in education* (pp. 3–28). Information Age.

Geer, G. C., Anast-May, L., & Gurley, D. K. (2014). Interns' perceptions of administrative internships: Do principals provide internship activities in areas they deem important? *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 9*(1), 1–5.

Geismar, T. J., Morris, J. D., & Lieberman, M. G. (2000). Selecting mentors for principalship interns. *Journal of School Leadership, 10*(May), 233–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/105268460001000302

Hewitt, K. K., & Rumley, M. A. (2020). Specialized educational leadership for rural students living in poverty. In B. S. Zugelder, C. Greene, & J. Manner (Eds.), *Handbook of research on leadership and advocacy for children and families in rural poverty* (pp. 425–251). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-2787-0.ch020

Irving, D. (2014). *Waking up white and finding myself in the story of race*. Elephant Room Press.

Jackson, R. R. (2013). *Never underestimate your teachers: Instructional leadership for excellence in EVERY classroom*. ASCD.

Johnson, J., & Reynolds, S. (2011). Innovative teaching and learning strategies for leadership in context: A rural example. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, *6*(3), 1–10.

Klocko, B. A., & Justis, R. J. (2019). Leadership challenges of the rural school principal. *The Rural Educator, 40*(3), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i3.571

Lavalley, M. (2018). *Out of the loop: Rural schools are largely left out of research and policy discussions, exacerbating poverty, inequity, and isolation* (Center for Public Education). National School Boards Association. https://education.wsu.edu/documents/2018/12/center-public-education-rural-schools-report.pdf/

Lochmiller, C. R., Sugimoto, T. J., & Muller, P. A. (2016). *Teacher retention, mobility, and attrition in Kentucky public schools from 2008 to 2012* (REL 2016–116). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences,

National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs

Malcus, N. (2018). A statistic portrait of rural education in America. In M. Q. McShane & A. Smarick (Eds.), *No longer forgotten: The triumphs and struggles of rural education in America* (pp. 9–28). Rowman & Littlefield.

McShane, M. Q., & Smarick, A. (2018). Introduction. In M. Q. McShane & A. Smarick (Eds.), *No longer forgotten: The triumphs and struggles of rural education in America* (pp. 1–8). Rowman & Littlefield.

Mills, G. E. (2011). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher.* Pearson.

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). NCES locale classifications and criteria. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/locale_classifications.pdf

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2006, 2009, rev. 2013). *North Carolina standards for school executives*. Author. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/507/download

Orr, M. T., & Orphanos, S. (2011). How graduate-level preparation influences the effectiveness of school leaders: A comparison of the outcomes of exemplary and conventional leadership preparation programs for principals. *Educational Administration Quarterly 47*(1), 18–70. http://doi.10.1177/0011000010378610

Pijanowski, J. C., Hewitt, P. M., & Brady, K. P. (2009). Superintendents' perceptions of the principal shortage. *NASSP Bulletin, 93*(2), 85–95. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636509343963

Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. E. R. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *The Rural Educator, 38*(1), 6–15. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v38i1.231

Redding, S., & Walberg, H. (2012). *Promoting learning in rural schools* (Center on Innovation and Improvement). Academic Development Institute.

Reyes-Guerra, D., & Barnett, B. D. (2017). Clinical practice in educational leadership. In M. D. Young & G. M. Chow (Eds.), *Handbook of research on the education of school leaders*, (pp. 229–261). Routledge/UCEA.

Sagor, R. (2000). *Guiding school improvement with action research.* ASCD.

Schechter, C. (2014). Mentoring prospective principals: Determinants of productive mentor-mentee relationship. *International Journal of Educational Reform, 23*(1), 52–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791402300103

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

Smith, T. L., Barlow, P. B., Skolits, G. J., & Peters, J. M. (2015). Demystifying reflective practice: Using the DATA model to enhance evaluators' professional activities. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 52*(2015), 142–147. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2015.04.004

Smith, T. L., & Skolits, G. J. (2021). Conceptualizing and engaging in reflective practice: Experienced evaluators' perspectives. *American Journal of Evaluation, 43*(1), 5–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214020983926

Swaminathan, R., & Reed, L. (2020). Mentor perspectives on mentoring new principals. *Journal of School Leadership, 30*(3) 219–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619884785

Thessin, R. A., Clayton, J. K., & Jamison, K. (2020). Profiles of the administrative internship: The mentor/intern partnership in facilitating leadership experiences. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 15(1), 28–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775118770778

Tieken, M. C. (2014). *Why rural schools matter*. UNC Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469618487.001.0001

van Someran, M. W., Barnard, Y. F., & Sandberg, J. A. C. (1994). *The think aloud method.* Academic Press. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.821.4127&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Versland, T. M. (2013). Principal efficacy: Implications for rural 'grow your own' leadership programs. *The Rural Educator, 35*(1), 1–10.

Whitaker, K. S., King, R., & Vogel, L. R. (2004). School district-university partnerships: Graduate student perceptions of the strengths

and weaknesses of a reformed leadership development program. *Planning and Changing*, *35*(3&4), 209–222. (EJ737638) ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ737638.pdf

Wieczorek, D., & Manard, C. (2018). Instructional leadership challenges and practices of novice principals in rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 34*(2), 1–21.

Wilmore, E. L. & Bratlien, M. J. (2005). Mentoring and tutoring within administrative internship programs in American universities. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, *13*(1), 23–37.https://doi:10.1080/13611260500040047

Wood, J. N., Finch, K., & Mirecki, R. M. (2013). If we get you, how can we keep you? Problems with recruiting and retaining rural administrators. *The Rural Educator*, *34*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i2.399

Woodrum, A., Borden, A. M., Bower, D., Olguin, S., & Paul, L. (2014). Raising the quality of principal leadership development: Lessons from a collaboration between an urban school district, a state leadership institute, and a university leadership program. In K. L. Sanzo (Ed.), *From policy to practice: Sustainable innovations in school leadership preparation and development*, (pp. 47–70). Information Age.

About the Authors

Kimberly Kappler Hewlett, **PhD**, serves as an associate professor of educational leadership in the Division of Research, Discovery, and Innovation at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. She is the principal investigator and director of the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) program, which was awarded the 2021 Exemplary Educational Leadership Program award from the University Council of Educational Administration. She teaches instructional leadership, methods, and culturally responsive leadership courses. Her research centers on leadership preparation, research practice partnerships, rural education, and equity and social justice. Prior to her work at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, Hewitt held the roles of teacher, principal, District Instructional Specialist, and Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. She can be reached at kkhewitt@uncg.edu.

Mark Alvis Rumley, EdD, serves as a faculty member for and the assistant director of the Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS), an innovative and nationally recognized school leadership preparation program within the School of Education at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. He has been a lifetime educator, having served for nearly 40 years in the roles of teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, assistant professor, and a state-based educational director for superintendents and boards of education through the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. He continues to serve as an executive coach and presenter for school districts regarding leadership for rural schools, beginning teacher support and retention efforts, equity-based education, and leadership development through cognitive coaching. He is also a co-owner of and the secretary for Leadership B.A.N.C., Inc. (www.leadershipbanc.org).

Funding Acknowledgement

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program.

Appendix: *Internship Placement Selection Tool*

Assignment of Internship Placements

As we consider internship placements for PPEERS Interns, our first priority is assuring that Interns are placed with principals who have a proven track record as accomplished leaders, who will devote the time and energy necessary to mentor an Intern, and who are strong instructional leaders. A second consideration is placement in a high-needs school where Interns can experience the challenges and opportunities presented and can serve low-performing students and those who come from low-income families.

As we consensually choose Intern placements, we should think about the priorities, considerations, and concerns listed below, which were generated from co-design among leaders in our partner districts and PPEERS personnel during District Point Person meetings and are also informed by research (e.g., Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017).

In preparation for the internship placement meeting in your district (which will include the Superintendent, District Point Person, and Hewitt, Rumley, and Jordan from the UNCG leadership team), please begin thinking about which great leaders in your district reflect the characteristics in the table below. You can use this document, as you wish, to check off considerations and concerns as you think about who would be the best Mentor Principal for each Intern.

As we consider internship placements for PPEERS Interns, our first priority is assuring that Interns are placed with principals who have a proven track record as accomplished leaders, who will devote the time and energy necessary to mentor an Intern, and who are strong instructional leaders. A second consideration is placement in a high-needs school where Interns can experience the challenges and opportunities presented and can serve low-performing students and those who come from low-income families.

As we consensually choose Intern placements, we should think about the priorities, considerations, and concerns listed below, which were generated from co-design among leaders in our partner districts and PPEERS personnel during District Point Person meetings and are also informed by research (e.g., Reyes-Guerra & Barnett, 2017).

In preparation for the internship placement meeting in your district (which will include the Superintendent, District Point Person, and Hewitt, Rumley, and Jordan from the UNCG leadership team), please begin thinking about which great leaders in your district reflect the characteristics in the table below. You can use this document, as you wish, to check off considerations and concerns as you think about who would be the best Mentor Principal for each Intern.

	Priorities/Considerations		Concerns/Things to Think About
	Highest priority: Selection of best Mentor Principal possible (accomplished leader, encouraging, reflective, supportive, strong instructional leader, change agent, collaborator, embodies distributed leadership, etc.).		Avoid placing Interns based on building need (another person in the building, because the principal is new to role or building, school is struggling, etc.).
	Priority: Demonstrated record of increased student achievement and/or growth in the schools that the principal has led.		Avoid placing Interns in the same school where they have been teaching.
	Priority: Demonstrated record of instructional leadership that is documented in principal's annual evaluations.		When possible, avoid placing Interns in a school their children attend or family members work.
	Consideration: Placement in high-needs school with a strong leader who can serve as Mentor Principal.		When/When anticipated, avoid placing Interns with principals who may be promoted during the year such that a change in placement and/or mentor principal can be anticipated.
	Consideration: Principal interest in serving as a Mentor Principal and capacity to devote the time and energy necessary to devote to the Intern.		Excellent principals are excellent for all sorts of reasons, but they may not have the capacity or interest to serve as a Mentor Principal. Determining whether the principal can devote the time and energy to the Intern and whether the principal is willing and able to delegate responsibility to the Intern are important considerations.
	Consideration: Mentor principals who will be mindful that Interns are students who are learning to be school leaders. The Mentor Principal should learn the Intern's strengths, knowledge, skills, and dispositions and be willing to provide opportunities for learning.		Interns are not assistant principals. They have the same legal standing as student teachers. Mentor Principals should take care to assign tasks and supervise Interns closely.

	Priorities/Considerations		Concerns/Things to Think About
	Consideration: Making sure Interns get K-12 experience throughout the internship, shadowing, switch experience (2-week period – around April, 2022 – during which the Intern serves at another school), etc. UNCG leadership will work with Superintendents and District Point Persons to ensure a comprehensive K-12 field experience. For each Intern, we will develop a plan for obtaining those additional experiences s/he needs at other levels.		Avoid placing elementary teachers in secondary internships or secondary teachers in elementary internships, purely because they need to broaden their experience. Although some teachers may adapt to a level shift quite well, it is important to consider the capabilities and needs of the Intern before a level shift is considered.
	Consideration: District needs in terms of succession planning (e.g., secondary leaders needed).		

Our Process for Selecting Mentor Principals:

DPPs and superintendents will have conversations and determine a pool of strong potential MPs/sites with preferences identified. Then discuss thinking/reasoning with UNCG team and come to consensus on placements.

The timeline we will follow:

Nov/Dec/beginning of Jan: DPPs and superintendents discuss MPs/sites for pool and identify their preferences.

- Jan. 14–Feb. 8: UNCG folks (Kim Hewitt, Mark Rumley, and Onna Jordan) will meet with DPP and superintendent via Zoom meetings for 45–90 minutes (depending on how many Interns the district has) to discuss and decide on placements. Due to Covid we are unable to conduct these meetings in person.
- Feb. 2-15: DPPs/superintendents speak to selected MPs.
- Feb. 9-21: Upon final confirmation with districts, UNCG leadership will announce to cohort members where their intended (tentative) placements will be.

Please avoid:
Making an Intern school testing coordinator. An Intern can serve as assistant testing coordinator.

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 25-40
 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p25-40

A Study of Rural Principals' Evaluative Practices Using the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System

Matthew K. Driver, *West Texas A&M University*
Irma Harper, *West Texas A&M University*

The study of effective school leaders and teacher evaluators has been a topic of interest to researchers for decades. While there have been a number of studies performed on urban schools, this study seeks to add to the body of research from the perspective of rural schools. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the strategies and practices teacher evaluators employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses. The study highlights the important role that relationships, communication, organization, training, targeted feedback, and calibration play in creating an environment. While each principal noted the factors above are important to the evaluation process, they differed in their beliefs and approaches to improving teacher performance. Findings suggest that principals must use a variety of tools and methods to engage teachers in the evaluation process, which in turn, will help improve their instructional practices.

***Keywords*: educational leadership, teacher development, school principals, teacher evaluation, rural education**

Successful schools are led by influential leaders who enhance student academic success by empowering their teachers and staff with the necessary tools, motivation, and ownership to support the mission (Clifford et al., 2014). This leadership responsibility is daunting, especially with the demands of teacher evaluations. The historical purpose of teacher evaluations is to measure teacher effectiveness accurately (Fan, 2022). The surge of reform in teacher evaluations has "expanded the role of principals as instructional leaders, but little is known about principals' ability to promote teacher development through the evaluation process" (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016, p. 1).

School reform has focused on the redesign of teacher evaluations. Most research in this area has been conducted in urban and suburban settings (Giles, 2016). However, in rural settings, challenges occur for school leaders, such as a lack of time for personnel management (Hansen, 2018), inadequate financial resources (du Plessis, 2017), and demands and expectations from the community (Hansen, 2018; Parson et al., 2016). These challenges also include limited capacity and a lack of alignment between policy demands and the realities of rural school communities (Battelle for Kids, 2016). These present several issues for rural school leaders, especially in the area of teacher evaluations. While conforming to teacher evaluation policy reforms, are these evaluations producing results that lead to practices that will enhance instruction and student achievement?

Purpose of the Study

"Despite major changes to teacher evaluation since 2009, scant research examines how principals enact these policies" (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018, p. 531). This qualitative study aimed to identify the strategies and practices that Texas

rural principals employ in the teacher evaluation process to improve instructional practices. Texas uses the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) as a teacher evaluation tool. The purpose of this tool is to improve instructional practices on their campuses. While most public school districts in Texas use some form of the T-TESS, there is a wide array of practices that take place in this process between the teacher and the evaluator in different districts and campuses across the state. Bearing in mind how vital school improvement is, rural schools in Texas are confronted with the dilemma of making the most of the interaction that occurs between the teacher and evaluator. Training is in place in Texas to certify that principals, assistant principals, and other designated campus leaders are qualified to evaluate teachers. However, there is room for improvement. To best understand this challenge and potential room for improvement, this study sought to answer, "What are the strategies and practices rural teacher evaluators in Texas employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses?"

Theoretical Framework

The sensemaking theory is the guiding framework for this study. The sensemaking theory addresses how people and organizations interpret and implement policies and reforms (Coburn, 2005; Halverson et al., 2004; Rigby, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002). Weick (1995) introduced the idea of sensemaking in organizational studies. He elucidated that sensemaking involves the process of giving meaning to the situations that people encounter. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking theory recognizes that past experiences and prior knowledge shape learning and that learning occurs through our social and situational context. The theory seeks to analyze how people process, understand, and respond to change (Halverson et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995) and attempts to explain how and why social learning occurs (Weick et al., 2005). Empirical and theoretical research proposes that school leaders, such as principals, often engage in sensemaking to understand their role and responsibilities better (Bengston et al., 2013; Cottrell & James, 2016).

Sensemaking theory is suitable when attempting to answer questions about how individuals attempt to resolve policy demands and then implement those policies. This theory is applicable to this study due to the conflicts that principals face when juggling the demands of how to evaluate teachers. While principals determine their strategies for the evaluation process implementation, they are "situated precisely at the accountability nexus between education policy and practice" (Magno, 2013, p. 179). Principals are confronted with the conundrum of using the teacher evaluation process as performance accountability, resulting in rewards or dismissal, or using the evaluation process as a means of support and feedback to improve instructional practices. The various paths one takes while making sense of a policy is a reason why sensemaking theory provides another critical lens to analyze the data in this study. Principals in Texas implement the T-TESS, a state-developed tool mandated by several schools in Texas. The parameters of the T-TESS are set, and principals are required to follow those parameters (Teach for Texas, 2022). How they choose to use the T-TESS process reflects the sensemaking theory.

Research Literature

The literature review addresses rural schools and their effect on student outcomes, rural school leadership, the teacher evaluation process, and the practices and strategies employed in evaluation feedback. In addition, a review of the literature on rural school leadership and the challenges and opportunities that rural schools present will be conveyed.

Rural Schools

According to the *Why Rural Matters 2018–2019* report, there are more than 9.3 million, or nearly one in five, students in the United States attending a rural school (Showalter et al., 2019). This means "that more students in the U.S. attend rural schools than in the nation's 85 largest school districts combined" (p. 1). Texas certainly contributes to these numbers. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, Texas has more than 2,000 rural campuses, educating nearly 7000 students.

Nationally, Texas has more schools in rural areas than any other state, with more than 20% of campuses located in rural areas (Texas Education Agency, 2022a).

Rural schools are generally ignored because of their size and small enrollments, especially compared to urban school districts. When examining financial support, "national and state legislation tends to be more directly applied to the larger districts in an attempt to affect the most positive change for as many students as possible" (Bailey, 2021, para. 1). Nationwide, rural school districts receive just 17% of state education funding. Inequity in rural schools is particularly troublesome in Texas. Even though these numbers are high, Texas invests relatively low amounts ($5,386 per rural student) in instruction (Showalter et al., 2019).

Rural schools offer several benefits that make them attractive. They have smaller classroom sizes, a low teacher-to-student ratio, and a strong sense of community value (Kotler, 2017). Rural communities expect schools to play a central role in the community and with the student if they are to be successful (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Israel et al., 2009). Building social capital between the school and community is catalyzed and bolstered by nurturing the rural community's robust sense of place and social capital, inviting parental involvement, and utilizing community stakeholders as a resource (Bauch, 2001). Rural families frequently have deep-seated connections in the community and dense social networks that support community norms, morals, and viewpoints (Bauch, 2001).

Rural School Principals

The rural school principal is seen as an integral part of the rural community, and great expectations rest on the principal's shoulders by the constituents as a result (Preston et al., 2018). Rural communities demonstrate a solid identification and pride in their communities. Because schools mirror the attributes of the surrounding populations, the idea of reform in the school is frequently a contentious subject for rural principals (Preston et al., 2018). Due to the smaller enrollment of rural schools, principals report that they have the prospect of meaningful relationships with students, which yields greater consideration of the individual student, awareness of student learning, and evaluation of student needs (Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

Principals in rural areas are often required to be adaptable in performing their jobs. They encounter "complex daily tasks in their efforts to articulate visions and goals, motivate teachers, allocate resources, discipline students, and develop organizational structures in order to foster an effective learning environment" (Yang et al., 2021, p. 2). This role is impacted by the lack of resources, various responsibilities, and the obligation of maintaining a prominent, visible role within the community (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Wood et al. (2013) identified struggles presented in the rural setting, including greater and higher demands of the principal from the community, federal and state mandates, and the internal public, with limited time and resources. In consideration of these struggles, it is essential to note that the ultimate goal for any school leader is increasing student growth and academic achievement (Fox et al., 2015; Wise, 2015). Indeed, rural principals face diverse challenges that are unique to their settings, and there is limited research that targets this group (Preston et al., 2018).

T-TESS

To create more frequent, timely, formative feedback that incorporated multiple indicators of success, including student measures, the Texas Education Agency created the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). In the 2016–17 school year, T-TESS was initiated in Texas. A study conducted by Lazarev et al. (2017) during the piloted years of the T-TESS suggested that the T-TESS process demonstrated the potential to be an effective, consistent, and efficient evaluation tool.

The T-TESS evaluation structure presents each teacher with the prospect to develop their teaching practices by supporting professional development and professional goal identification and realization (Texas Education Agency, 2016a). The goal-setting and professional development plan and the evaluation rubric are considered a pivotal part of teacher progression utilizing T-TESS (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). A key point of T-TESS

is the opportunity to shift the evaluation perspective from teacher fault to an innovative pattern of constant cooperative feedback with the encouragement of professional development and growth (Texas Education Agency, 2016a).

The Principal's Role in T-TESS

The charge of adhering to the T-TESS principles rests on the evaluator's shoulders because of their grasp of the system. The school district has the authority to assign this role to any of its school campus leaders. In rural schools, due to their size, this responsibility generally falls on the campus principal.

Being a T-TESS appraiser/evaluator involves several aspects. The pre-conference, post-conference, goal-setting, and professional development phases of T-TESS allow evaluators significant opportunities to offer actionable, well-timed feedback to teachers throughout the process (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). These crucial parts allow teachers to self-reflect on pedagogy and recognize areas for improvement (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). Furthermore, teachers are urged to utilize their reflections to change their instructional practices.

All T-TESS appraisers must obtain certification training and complete a certification assessment online on the teacher observation process (Texas Education Agency, 2016a). Appraisers are also expected to attend training at their educational service centers and are required to meet Texas Education Agency prerequisites and any following certification through online instruction. The T-TESS certification process involves the prospective appraiser observing a teaching situation video, scripting a teacher's lesson, and responding to appraiser-related questions from the video. Although scripting is not a new phenomenon in formal observation, the training stresses its value in T-TESS. Appraisers utilize scripting notes throughout feedback conferences, which supports objective and encouraging feedback during the cooperative conversation (Templeton et al., 2016). New teachers must complete T-TESS training prior to the fourth week of school and no less than two weeks before the formal classroom observation (Texas Administration Code, 2022a).

Once training concludes, both teachers and principals are needed to approve the teacher's self-determined goals for the impending year. Texas Education Agency procedures charge that a goal-setting and professional development meeting should transpire between the appraiser and each teacher in their first year in a district (Texas Administration Code, 2022b). After the goal-setting meeting, some campus principals and teachers continue formative discussions about the teacher's individual goals and professional development growth. Campus principals offer teachers appraising data all through the formal appraisal procedure. These procedures have comprised the compulsory pre-observation and post-observation meetings in addition to the walk-through requirements, goal-setting, and professional development conferences (Texas Education Agency, 2016b). The evaluator's final opportunity to collect additional evidence before finalizing the written requirement as part of the T-TESS procedure is at the end-of-year summative meeting between teachers and principals (Texas Education Agency, 2016a).

Principal Feedback

Hattie and Yates (2014) stated, "The vital role that feedback plays in assisting learners in improving their performances has been recognized from the beginnings of behavioral science" (p. 66). The T-TESS process depends on quality feedback to help improve instructional improvement. This feedback is critical during the pre- and post-conference held between the principal and the teacher. The pre-conference is a time for the principal to learn about the lessons being taught. In the post-conference meeting, the principal gives the teacher feedback on areas that were done well and areas for improvement (Teach for Texas, 2022). This feedback is the basis for instructional improvement. Research by Hattie and Yates (2014) stated that there was a direct impact on student achievement when teachers sought feedback on their instructional practices.

Research on feedback reveals practices that improve teacher performance. When teachers are provided with specific performance-based feedback, their instructional practices improve

(Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Feeney, 2007; Weisberg et al., 2009). The idea that appraisals must be practical and valuable is required for appraisers to give reliable and valid feedback on appraisals (Napier & Latham, 1986). When the teacher is questioned in a manner that encourages reflective higher-order cognitive processes, their teaching practices improve (Feeney, 2007; Tang & Chow, 2007). These practices encourage teachers to engage in self-regulating methods that aid in developing skills that enhance their performance in the classroom (Tang & Chow, 2007).

Texas principals have been empowered to increase their instructional leadership role by using the T-TESS appraisal instrument (Templeton et al., 2016). The Texas Education Agency (2016a) asserted that a beneficial and accepted method of supporting educators during goal setting includes engaging teachers through effective feedback to contemplate their instructional practices.

Evaluation Strategies and Practices for Principals

It is the intent that the teacher evaluation process should measure a teacher's strengths and weaknesses through a precise and consistent approach that provides timely and helpful feedback (Callahan & Sadeghi, 2015). In addition, the process should inform instructional strategies and professional development opportunities (Marzano, 2012). To accomplish this, principals should be equipped with strategies and practices to promote positive educational outcomes.

To give applicable feedback, one strategy is to incorporate professional development opportunities. According to Kelley and Maslow (2005), "Teacher evaluation systems ideally should foster improvement in both professional development opportunities and teaching practices" (p. 1). "The key is providing professional development that is timely, relevant, and effectively delivered" (Callahan & Sadeghi, 2015, p. 49). Professional development should be designed specifically for the teacher being evaluated. These trainings should be personalized and founded in professional learning communities and through peer mentoring to be truly effective (Ruppert, 2019). Bickman (2014) reinforced that professional development should also focus on context, content, and product; should include knowledge, relevance, personal impact; and should have practical application to the educator. It is critical for them to be sustainable and ongoing (Callahan & Sadeghi, 2015).

A key strategy in implementing an effective teacher evaluation is quality communication between the principal and the teachers. Communication regarding performance feedback is critical during the evaluation process and must be present to secure teacher growth (Jiang et al., 2015). The quality of communication in the feedback process is a central feature of the evaluation process and has been shown to relate to overall evaluation quality (Kimball & Milanowski, 2009). According to Stiggins and Clark (1988), quality communication includes the way the teacher perceives the "evaluator's credibility, quality of ideas, depth of information, and persuasiveness of rationale for suggested changes, as well as the quality of the relationship between a teacher and an evaluator" (as cited in Donahue & Vogel, 2018, p. 35).

The teachers' and principals' perceptions of the evaluation system are critical. According to Kraft and Gilmour (2016), differing perceptions about the purpose of evaluation among principals, teachers, and the district sometimes undercut the trust and buy-in required for meaningful conversations about instructional improvement (p. 741). The principals need to do what they can to create a positive perception of the evaluation process. Tuytens and Devos (2014) suggested that if principals develop a school climate built on trust, vision, support, and structure as key dimensions, this could influence the teachers' perceptions of their appraisal system. A positive school climate creates buy-in for teachers. Kraft and Gilmour (2016) interviewed principals that recently implemented reforms in their teacher evaluation system; they reported that the principals described how teacher buy-in and investment in the improvement process were essential to its success.

A strategy that principals need is to attend and invest in a training and support program. Mestry (2017) stresses that "principals can make a significant contribution to schools' achieving the

educational goals and improving learner performance, if they are adequately prepared for their leadership role" (p. 8). It is essential to consider that the effective feedback teachers receive due to the evaluation process is highly dependent on school leaders' skills, capacity, and goals (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). This issue brings concern about how principals will accomplish these tasks while fulfilling their other duties. A study conducted by Kraft and Christian (2021) found that "promoting teacher growth through evaluation feedback likely requires evaluators who are instructional experts with the *time and skills necessary* to provide frequent, actionable feedback to teachers and actively involve them in assessing their own practice" (p. 33, emphasis added). Given the multi-tasking that principals experience and the demand that they also serve as successful teacher evaluators who can give effective feedback, it is critical to examine principals' enactment of current evaluation policies (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018).

Methodology

This study addresses Texas rural school principals' experiences and practices related to teacher evaluation and improving instructional practices and student outcomes on their campuses related to their role as principals through a qualitative approach. The experiences of the principal participants are critical in this study because of their unique rural circumstances and demands.

Research Design

A qualitative design was employed in this study. A qualitative design was chosen because of the need to explore the strategies and practices that rural principals use. It is important to know these strategies and to understand why the participants chose them. This design allows for the investigation of *what*, *how,* and *why*. A critical aspect of the study is the rural setting. This setting exhibits distinctive challenges for principals, including the community's continuous access to the principal (Hansen, 2018; Parson et al., 2016), geographic remoteness (Hansen, 2018), and the vast scope of obligations of rural principals (du Plessis, 2017).

Participants

Participants for this study included rural secondary principals who were awarded Principal of the Year honors through the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (TASSP) for the 2020–2021 school year. These secondary principals of the year were nominated by their teachers and schools for outstanding service in: (a) culture-wellness, (b) culture-equity, (c) culture-student-centeredness, (d) learning-results-orientation, (e) learning-collaborative leadership, and (f) learning-innovation (TASSP, 2022).

The participants were from campuses that the Texas Education Agency awarded the Campuses of Distinction title. Campuses received this award in recognition of their outstanding academic achievement (Texas Education Agency, 2022b). There were three participants in the study, all of whom were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity and aid in the confidentiality of the data collected during the interview processes. Principal Anderson was a veteran principal in his 17th year in education. At the time of this study, he was the middle school principal and had previously served as a principal at the elementary level. Principal Baker was a veteran principal with 25 years of experience in education. He had served as a high school principal for 11 years. Finally, Principal Clark was serving his fifth year as the principal of a high school and had been in education for a total of 14 years.

Data Collection

Once the participants were determined, and their letters of consent were signed, each participant was sent a pre-questionnaire. The purpose of the pre-questionnaire was to set a foundation for the upcoming interviews. These questions provided information that helped the interviewer become familiar with the participants, and it also gave a background of their educational experience. Demographical information was asked, as well as questions such as:

- What are you passionate about in the field of education?
- Why did you become an educator?

- What is your philosophy on education as a principal?

These questions acted as a springboard for the interviews and provided more information about the participants.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility in the interview. The interview was guided by the study's research question, "What are the strategies and practices rural teacher evaluators in Texas employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses?" The literature review and the pre-questionnaires assisted in the development of these questions. Some of the questions that were asked were:

- What advice would you give a first-year principal to ensure that they are effective administrators during the evaluation process?
- Do principals have a plan that they follow to ensure a productive conversation about the evaluation process in order to improve instruction?
- What strategies and practices would you recommend?
- What type of trainings have you received that you feel were the most helpful?
- What do you do as an administrator to be reflective and supportive during the evaluation process?
- How do you engage the teacher to encourage reflective thought and conversation?
- What do you specifically do in the evaluation process to ensure that the instruction of the teacher is truly improved?

The interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate the participants' schedules and to follow health guidelines due to concerns about COVID-19 at the time of the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced with compiling data. The data included the pre-questionnaire, interview protocols, and interview transcripts. The Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013) was utilized to analyze the data. The first step was transcribing the data. The researcher used GoToMeeting transcription software to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The second stage consisted of the familiarization by immersing in the data. This stage included reading transcripts and listening to audio recordings multiple times. The third step was coding. Inductive analysis was used by establishing codes from the participants' words and the meaning that is communicated by extended phrases (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Some of the codes that were identified include *willingness*, *ability and skill*, *planned*, *deliberate*, and *organized*. The fourth step included grouping the codes based on similarities or building a "working analytical framework" (Gale et al., 2013, p. 5). A provisional label for each group was formed. In the fifth step, a framework was developed by analyzing the data to find common themes. The next step involved the creation of a matrix to map out the data from the synthesized and coded data. The last step included interpreting the data built on the findings identified in the matrix and any analytical memos logged during the research process.

Findings

The research question focused on rural principals' strategies and practices employed in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses. This study focused on the strategies and practices that principals used during the T-TESS appraisal system. One theme, *communication and relationships*, emerged throughout the interview process among all three participating principals. A second theme, *a deliberate and organized approach to evaluation*, appeared that emphasized developing a deliberate plan and schedule to execute the evaluation process. An organized approach is required because of the time and diligence that effective teacher evaluation requires. A less prominent theme in the study was *T-TESS training, targeted feedback, and calibration*, centered around T-TESS training—a training that all administrators are required to complete before they can evaluate teachers. Targeted feedback and calibration among evaluators on the campus and across the district also appeared to be important for evaluators to improve instructional practices on their campuses.

Theme One: Communication and Relationships

The rural school principals in this study consistently voiced that communication with teachers and the relationship they built with the teachers was pivotal to improving instructional practices on their campuses. They credited their rural setting to the close relationships they had with their teachers. The principal participants mentioned that understanding their communication style and the style of the teacher was important. Building positive relationships with teachers often involved finding the good things that teachers were doing in their instruction and recognizing it. The principal participants agreed that proper questioning technique was essential during all the phases of the appraisal process (pre-conference, post-conference, goal-setting, and professional development phases) and sometimes required scripting questions to invite reflective conversations with teachers. They also discussed that ensuring that the teachers understood that the evaluation process was about growth required clear communication from the evaluator. Finally, they reiterated that maintaining a positive relationship with the teacher allowed for teacher growth.

Principal Anderson was a proponent of understanding his communication style and the communication style of his staff. He emphatically noted,

> You've got to look and feel your communication style and then try to learn everybody else's. I could have the best idea ever, but if I can't communicate it to the 60 to 80 people that I'm responsible for, then my idea is not gonna go anywhere. (Principal Anderson, personal communication, June 8, 2021)

Principal Baker shared the same sentiment in his interview by stating, "Whether it's with the teacher or administration, no one communicates exactly the same. The goal is to build a positive, good rapport with the teachers" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Anderson held communication style in such high regard that he asked his staff to fill out a communication survey at the beginning of the school year to better understand the communication styles of the teachers on his campus. He also mentioned that this would not happen in an urban campus due to the large size. Principal Anderson utilized the data gained from the communication survey to be more effective in the evaluation.

Principals Baker and Clark repeatedly spoke about the importance of building positive relationships with their teachers. Principal Baker stated, "I try to give feedback on the initial walk-through that tells them they are doing something well. That way, the teacher walks into the first meeting about their feedback, knowing that they are doing well" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker emphasized the significance of putting an encouraging perspective on all his feedback, "Everything that we do, how do we put a positive spin on it? How can we get a better outcome in a positive way?" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker affirmed later in the interview when asked about how his evaluation practices have changed, when he stated, "I think the key part is, once you have a positive relationship with the teacher, the evaluation turns to, I'm here to help you. How can I make it better?" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Clark liked to build relationships with his teachers in a similar manner. He stated,

> Hopefully, the culture where my time and energy are going to go is in recognizing the job they're doing and tying it to instruction toward their student achievement. Let's celebrate those successes; let's recognize it. I want the culture to celebrate their success in the classroom, tied to pedagogy and student achievement. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Theme Two: A Deliberate and Organized Approach to Evaluation

The rural school principals in the study all expressed the importance of utilizing a methodical process regarding the evaluation process. Principals face many trying circumstances when it comes to maintaining reliability in implementing the T-TESS timeline and required components. These requirements expect the rural school principal to manage their time wisely and make appropriate

choices regarding each evaluation. Each principal provided several examples of approaching these pressures and cited the value of following the T-TESS method. Principal Clark specified that the planning process needs to start early. He stated,

> Well, I think the first thing I'll say is it needs to be planned. You have to lay out an evaluation calendar at the start of the year. Otherwise, it's not done in a timely manner. You'll look up, and it'll be April. And you're trying to cram in all your observations, and I know, because I've done that before. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Principal Clark also referred to applying scripted questions to the evaluation procedure that tied back to the T-TESS rubric, "We have some scripted questions that we are working through in the planning domain. We always follow the T-TESS post-conference structure plan that allows for reinforcement and refinement of the teacher's plan of action" (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021). Principal Anderson reflected on the evaluation follow-up organization:

> I think the biggest thing that we miss out on as administrators is really having a good, solid follow-up time. I think it's unfair to just say, 'Hey, go do this and get better and then not really have a plan to follow up.' (Principal Anderson, personal communication, June 8, 2021)

Principal Anderson described how he approached different needs with teachers. A quick follow-up would be applied to something that needed to be addressed in the classroom urgently while a longer time could be allowed to follow up with less pressing needs.

Principal Baker held himself and his administrators to a high standard regarding classroom walk-throughs. When Principal Baker was asked about the strategies and practices he recommended for teacher evaluation, he responded, "Be in the classroom. Just the presence makes a big difference. We do walk-throughs that are not on T-TESS. We're in the classroom for every single teacher five times a week" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Clark summarized the importance of planning and how it applies to teacher growth,

> So, at a minimum four periods, which is half of our day, I'm going to be spend working with one of our teachers. It forces you to spend time if you're going to be an instructional leader. As a principal, there's no shortcuts to that. You have to spend that time with them. And so, it really forces us to do that and to spend time in instructional leadership. (Principal Clark, personal communication June 23, 2021)

Theme Three: T-TESS Training, Targeted Feedback, and Calibration

All three rural school principals emphasized the T-TESS training process for principals. While they may have expressed some consternation about using T-TESS initially, the three principals changed their thoughts about T-TESS and agreed that there was inherent value in the training process concerning improving instructional practices on their campuses. Targeted feedback that is tied to the T-TESS allowed the principals to cite precise areas for improvement for teachers in their practices. The principals talked about the importance of calibration among all the evaluators in their district. To clarify this point, they explained that calibration was when different evaluators across the district yielded similar results. This was possible by their district training and keeping in mind that their evaluations were focused on campus and district goals, visions, and mission statements. The principals considered calibration a strong training tool and validation process for the principals. The participants stressed that their personal goals were continual improvement of the evaluation process and, thus, instructional practices.

All three principals agreed that the T-TESS training was a necessity for performing effective teacher evaluations to improve instructional practices. An interesting extension of the training was how valuable calibration among different evaluators was to the rural school principals. Principal Clark remarked,

> This wasn't formal training, but as a district, we want to ensure our calibration across administrators and evaluators on our campus.

> So, I'm with an elementary principal and a middle school principal and a curriculum director, special education director, and other people who evaluate. We went through several classrooms and evaluated and discussed, and that was very powerful. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Principal Baker shared, "Besides the T-TESS training, of course, we calibrate as a district" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker added that he would perform about 30 walk-throughs with a new administrator to calibrate before he permits them to submit feedback to a teacher. Both Principals Baker and Clark referred to the calibration practices within their districts as an informal extension of the T-TESS training that all teacher evaluators are required to complete prior to performing teacher evaluations.

The rural school principals felt that T-TESS allowed them to provide specific feedback to improve instructional practices. When asked about how his practices have changed since the inception of T-TESS, Principal Baker responded, "I actually believe it's made us more aware as principals of more specific details as far as the individual features and how the teachers are teaching" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Baker gave targeted feedback; he stated, "When I give immediate, targeted feedback in a walk-through I want to sit down and go through the feedback with them" (Principal Baker, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Principal Anderson shared a similar sentiment,

> T-TESS having the number of structures that it has, allows you to point out with evidence and the language out of the rubric and tie it back directly to the instruction that the teachers are doing. It's good for me to point, specifically, within the rubric and be able to say, "here are the targeted things that you need to work on." (Principal Anderson, personal communication, June 8, 2021)

Principal Clark enhanced his targeted feedback by recording the evaluation of each class period on his computer with audio and video because he felt like he was missing crucial pieces of the evaluation process due to scripting the evaluation. Principal Clark revealed,

> And so, what I've gone to recently is adding video recordings to everything. And so, everything is on video, so what I write down is different, you know, when I'm scripting. I can pause it, catch stuff. The teacher gets a copy of the video. I had a teacher this year tell me that was one of the most powerful things in her career in professional growth was watching herself teach because it looked different to her from a third-person view. I'm able to show what I'm seeing on video, and ask questions directly related to the rubric. (Principal Clark, personal communication, June 23, 2021)

Discussion

Being a school principal is a difficult, demanding, and complicated role that requires leaders to be focused on student success. Consequently, school leaders and scholars seek ways to increase student performance by developing teachers with the evaluation process (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). The study aimed to add to the body of research by addressing the strategies and practices that rural principals use in the evaluation process to improve teacher instruction.

Weick (1995) introduced the idea of sensemaking in organizational studies to move away from a focus on traditional decision-making toward an emphasis on activities that indicate the meaning of the decisions enacted in the behavior (Mendez, 2020). The processes of the sensemaking theory were evident throughout the interviews as the principals reflected on their experiences with the implementation of the T-TESS. While principals determined their strategies for the evaluation process, they were "situated precisely at the accountability nexus between education policy and practice" (Magno, 2013, p. 179). The T-TESS presents several challenges for principals as they attempt to successfully implement the evaluation policies of the school while mastering their role as instructional leaders and campus managers. Empirical and theoretical research proposes that school leaders, such as principals, often engage in sensemaking to understand their role and

responsibilities better (Bengston et al., 2013; Cottrell & James, 2016).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the strategies and practices teacher evaluators employ in the evaluation process to improve instructional practices on their campuses. This study relates specifically to award-winning rural principals of secondary public schools in Texas. This study intended to gain a greater understanding of how these rural school principals in Texas utilized the T-TESS to improve instructional practices on their campuses.

Through the data analysis of the responses, three main themes emerged: (a) communication and relationships, (b) a deliberate, organized approach to evaluation, and (c) T-TESS training, targeted feedback, and calibration. The theme, *communication and relationships*, encompassed all the aspects of communication in the evaluation process and building positive relationships with campus teachers. Forming positive relationships and communicating clearly with teachers required the principals to understand both how they communicate and how individual teachers communicate. The principals also relied on pre-scripted questions to spur teachers' reflective thinking and ensure that proper questioning technique was utilized.

The second theme, *a deliberate and organized approach to evaluation*, referred to laying out a schedule at the beginning of the school year regarding the evaluations process and following through with it. The principalship can be chaotic. A school administrator can start the day with a clear calendar and not get anything accomplished because of various things that occur and require immediate attention. Scheduling teacher observations, conferences, and walk-throughs required deliberate planning and a willingness to follow through with the commitment. Prioritizing the teacher evaluation process in the principal's calendar ensures that a complete and thoughtful evaluation transpires. The principals advocated for following scripted questions and the T-TESS rubric to guide questions and conversations with teachers to stimulate reflective thoughts on their teaching practices.

The third theme was *T-TESS training, targeted feedback, and calibration*. All three principal participants valued the T-TESS teacher evaluator training process. While many aspects were addressed during the T-TESS evaluator process, targeted feedback and calibration arose as strong points of the initial training and less formal training that followed in the principals' respective districts. Targeted feedback was touted as a strong point of the T-TESS as was allowing principals to isolate specific skills that teachers may be directed to improve. Calibration was a form of district training where a group of principals evaluated a teacher. After the evaluation, the principals met to discuss the teacher's ratings and come to a consensus. Calibration helped hone the principals' skills and made them feel more confident in their abilities.

Conclusions

The principals in this study were complimentary of T-TESS and clearly learned to apply it to improve instructional practices on their campuses (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Mastering the art of conversation and thoughtful questioning was considered a necessary skill by the principals to improve teacher instructional practices, an idea cited in the literature (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015) . In addition, the principals cited a constant desire to improve communication skills that would increase the effectiveness of their feedback to engage teachers in instructional practices. This sentiment was also shared in the literature by Stringer and Hourani (2016), who highlighted the need for professional development for teacher appraisal and feedback conversations.

As noted in previous research (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Feeney, 2007; Weisberg et al., 2009), this study found performance-based feedback to teachers about their instructional practices and questions that prompt reflection from teachers is a critical practice for improving instruction in the classroom. In addition, the principals in this study found that encouraging teachers to contemplate their teaching methods in the evaluation process buoyed the development of proficiencies that

improved instructional practices, an idea cited in the literature by Tang and Chow (2007).

Principals have gained the prospect of increasing their instructional leadership roles by employing T-TESS (Templeton et al., 2016). T-TESS has determined that principals are their campuses' primary instructional leadership coaches. The Texas Education Agency (2016a) included comparable language by asserting that T-TESS evaluators asking teachers to contemplate their instructional practices is a beneficial and accepted method to support educators during the goal-setting progression.

Strengths and Limitations

The principals in this study were selected as principal of the year finalists for their respective educational regions in Texas due to their campus successes. This fact yields merit to the responses of the principals and their expertise in the evaluation process.

Limitations existed in this study. The first limitation was the small sample size of three participants. However, when the criteria for participants required award-winning principals in rural schools, the pool of candidates for inclusion in the study was small.

An added limitation in the research was trying to conduct a study in the heart of a global pandemic. Due to COVID-19, the interviews were not able to be conducted in person. This limited the interviewer's ability to monitor the nonverbal behaviors of the interviewees.

The timing of the study presented a third limitation. COVID-19 presented challenges to scheduling due to quarantines, illness, and other issues that arose from the pandemic. After soliciting several participants, only three participants followed up with an interview which caused a decrease in the depth of the study. All interviews occurred after the conclusion of the school year for these districts.

Implications

Results from this research yield important implications that could aid campus and district-level school leaders in the pursuit of greater learning outcomes for students in Texas public schools. This study offers educational regional service centers, principal preparation programs, and district leaders' awareness of the needs and support of rural principals. Developers of teacher evaluation systems can employ findings from the research as well. While the research focused on Texas principals, the results from this study will benefit school leaders beyond Texas as well. Managers trusted with developing people in their charge will benefit from the generalizability of this study. While educators are a highly specific group, the findings of this research can be applied to a variety of organizations and practitioners of employee growth. Teachers could benefit from school leaders that are more skillful in their leadership practice. Finally, students could be the benefactors of improved educational outcomes because of the pursuit of enhanced teaching methods that effective school leadership can provide.

References

Bailey, D. (2021). Addressing the challenge of rural students. *Education Equity, Edutopia.* https://www.edutopia.org/article/addressing-challenges-rural-students

Battelle for Kids (2016). *Generating opportunity and prosperity: The promise of rural education collaboratives.* http://battelleforkids.org/docs/defaultsource/publications

Bauch, P. A. (2001). School-community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *76*(2), 204–221. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327930pje7602_9

Bengtson. E., Zepeda, S. J., & Parylo, O. (2013). School systems' practices of controlling socialization during principal succession: Looking through the lens of an organizational socialization theory. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 41*(2), 143–164. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212468344

Bickman, D. (2014). Professional development and learning in middle grades. *Research summary. AMLE.* https://www.amle.org/professional-learning-and-professional-development-in-the-middle-grades/

Callahan, K., & Sadeghi, L. (2015). Teacher perceptions of the value of teacher evaluations: New Jersey's ACHIEVE NJ. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, *10*(1), 46–59. https://ncpeapublications.org/attachments/article/676/2015-3219%20Callahan.pdf

Clifford, M., Hansen, U. J., & Wraight, S. (2014). *Practical guide to designing comprehensive principal evaluation systems: A tool to assist in the development 111 of principal evaluation systems* (Rev. ed.). Center on Great Teachers and Leaders. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED532778.pdf

Coburn, C. E. (2005). Shaping teacher sensemaking: School leaders and the enactment of reading policy. *Education Policy, 19*(3), 476–509. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904805276143

Cornelius, K. E., & Nagro, S. A. (2014). Evaluating the evidence base of performance feedback in preservice special education teacher training. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *37*(2), 133–146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406414521837

Cottrell, M., & James, C. (2016) Theorizing headteacher socialization from a role boundary perspective. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 44*(1), 6–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214549976

Danielson, C., & McGreal, T. L. (2000). *Teacher evaluation to enhance professional practice.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Donahue, E., & Vogel, L. R. (2018). Teacher perceptions of the impact of an evaluation system on classroom instructional practices. *Journal of School Leadership*, *28*(1), 31–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461802800102

Donaldson, M. L., & Woulfin, S. (2018). From tinkering to going rogue: How principals use agency when enacting new teacher evaluation systems. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *40*(4), 531–556. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623 73718784205

du Plessis, P. (2017). Challenges for rural school leaders in a developing context: A case study on leadership practices of effective rural principals. *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship, 82*(3), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.82.3.2337

Fan, X. (2022). Teachers' perspectives on the evaluation of teacher effectiveness: A focus on student learning objectives. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *110*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103604

Feeney, E. J. (2007). Quality feedback: The essential ingredient for teacher success. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *80*(4), 191–198. https://doi.org/10.3200/TCHS.80.4.191-198

Fox, J., Gong, T., & Attoh, P. (2015). The impact of principal as authentic leader on teacher trust in the k-12 educational context. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *8*(4), 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21341

Gale, N. K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S., & Redwood, S. (2013). Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *13*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117

Giles, J. (2016). It's not a gotcha: Interpreting teacher evaluation policy in rural school districts. *The Rural Educator, 38*(2), 11–22. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v38i2.224

Halverson, R., Kelley C., & Kimball, S. (2004.) Implementing teacher evaluation systems: How principals make sense of complex artifacts to shape local instructional practice. In W. Hoy & C. Miskel (Eds.). *Research and Theory in Educational Administration*. (3rd ed., pp. 153–188). Information Age Publishing.

Hansen, C. (2018). Why rural principals leave. *The Rural Educator, 39*(1), 41–53. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v39i1.214

Harmon, H. L., & Schafft, K. (2009). Rural school leadership for collaborative community development. *The Rural Educator, 30*(3), 4–9. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v30i3.443

Hattie, J., & Yates, G. (2014). *Visible learning and the science of how we learn*. Routledge.

Israel, G. D., Beaulieu, L. J., & Hartless, G. (2009). The influence of family and community social capital on educational achievement. *Rural Sociology*, *66*(1), 43–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2001.tb00054.x

Jiang, J. Y., Sporte, S. E., & Luppescu, S. (2015). Teacher perspectives on evaluation reform: Chicago's REACH students. *Educational Researcher*, *44*(2), 105-116. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15575517

Kelley, C., & Maslow, V. (2005). The effects of teacher evaluation on equity and system change in large, diverse high schools. In *Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association,* Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Kimball, S. M., & Milanowski, A. (2009). Examining teacher evaluation validity and leadership decision making within a standards-based evaluation system. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *45*(1), 34–70. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08327549

Kotler, K. (2017). *Rural school advantages, challenges, and solutions.* Linkedin. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/rural-school-advantages-challenges-solutions-dr-ruth-kotler

Kraft, M. A., & Christian, A. (2021). Can teacher evaluation systems produce high-quality feedback? An administrator training field experiment. *American Educational Research Journal*, *59*(3), 500-537. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211024603

Kraft, M., A., & Gilmour, A. (2016). Can principals promote teacher development as evaluators? A case study of principal views and experiences. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 52*(5), 711–753. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X16653445

Lazarev, V., Newman, D., Nguyen, T., Lin, L., & Zacamy, J. (2017). The Texas teacher evaluation and support system rubric: Properties and association with school characteristics. REL 2018-274. *Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED576984.pdf

Le Fevre, D. M., & Robinson, V. M. J. (2015). The interpersonal challenges of instructional leadership: Principals' effectiveness in conversations about performance issues. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *51*(1), 58–95. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X13518218

Magno, C. S. (2013). *Comparative perspectives on international school leadership*. Routledge.

Marzano, R. J. (2012). The two purposes of teacher evaluation. *Educational Leadership, 70*(3), 14–19. https://merainc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Boogren-The-Two-Purposes-of-Teacher-Evaluation.pdf

Mendez, C. C. (2020). *New Jersey PK-12 principals' sensemaking of their experiences with environmental sustainability efforts*. [Doctoral dissertation, The University of West Florida]. Proquest. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2557189477?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true

Mestry, R. (2017). Empowering principals to lead and manage public schools effectively in the 21st century. *South African Journal of Education*, *37*(1), 1–11. https://web.archive.org/web/20180429213403id_/http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/saje/v37n1/08.pdf

Napier, N. K., & Latham, G. P. (1986). Outcome expectancies of people who conduct 0performance appraisals. *Personnel Psychology, 39*(4), 827–837. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1986.tb00597.x

Parson, L., Hunter, C. A., & Kallio, B. (2016). Exploring educational leadership in rural schools. *Planning & Changing, 47*(1/2), 63–81 http://education.illinoisstate.edu/planning/articles/vol47.php

Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. E. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *The Rural Educator, 38*(1), 6–15. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v38i1.231

Preston, J. P., Jakubiec, B. A. E., & Kooymans, R. (2018). Common challenges faced by rural principals: A review of the literature. *The Rural Educator*, *35*(1), 1–12.

Renihan, P., & Noonan, B. (2012). Principals as assessment leaders in rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, *33*(3), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v33i3.407

Rigby, J. (2015). Principals' sensemaking and enactment of teacher evaluation. *Journal of Educational Administration 53*(3), 374–392. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JEA-04-2014-0051

Ruppert, N. B. (2019). Personalized professional development plans. *Current Issues in Middle*

Level Education, *24*(1), 19–23. https://doi.org/10.20429.240105

Saldaña, J., & Omasta, M. (2018). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life.* Sage.

Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). Why rural matters 2018–2019: The time is now. A report of the Rural School and Community Trust. *Rural School and Community Trust.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604580.pdf

Spillane, J. P., Reiser, B. J., & Reimer, T. (2002.) Policy implementation and cognition: Reframing and refocusing implementation research. *Review of Educational Research* *72*(3), 387–431. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543072003387

Stringer, P., & Hourani, R. B. (2016). Transformation of roles and responsibilities of principals in times of change. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *44*(2), 224–226. . https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214549971

Tang, S. Y. F., & Chow, A. W. K. (2007). Communicating feedback in teaching practice supervision in a learning-oriented field experience assessment framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *23*, 1066–1085. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.07.013

Teach for Texas (2022). *Implementation guidebook: T-TESS: Texas teacher evaluation & support system.* https://teachfortexas.org/Resource_ Files/Guides/T-TESS_Implementation_Guidebook.pdf

Templeton, N. R., Willis, K., & LaVelle, H. (2016). The coaching principal: Building teacher capacity through the Texas teacher evaluation and support system (T-TESS). *International Journal of Organizational Innovation*, *8*(4), 140–145. https://openriver.winona.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=educationeddfaculty works

Texas Administrative Code (TAC). (2022a). 150.1001 – 150.1008 – State Board of Education Certification: Principals Standards. https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac$ext.TacPage?sl=R&app=9&p_dir=&p_rloc=&p_tloc=&p_ploc=&pg=1&p_tac=&ti=19&pt=2&ch=149&rl=2001

Texas Administrative Code (TAC). (2022b). 150.1003(i) – State Board of Education Certification: Principals Standards. https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac$ext.TacPage?sl=R&app=9&p_dir=&p_rloc=&p_tloc=&p_ploc=&pg=1&p_tac=&ti=19&pt=2&ch=149&rl=2001

Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (2022). *Texas principal and assistant principal of the year selection criteria and rubric.* https://www.tassp.org/assets/POY_APOY/2023%20POY%20Selection%20Criteria%20and%20Rubric.pdf

Texas Education Agency. (2016a). *T-TESS appraiser handbook: T-TESS Texas teacher evaluation and support system.* https://teachfortexas.org/Resource_Files/Guides/TTESS_Appraiser_Handbook.pdf

Texas Education Agency. (2016b). *T-TESS implementation guidebook: Texas teacher evaluation and support system*. https://teachfortexas.org/Resource_Files/Guides/TTESS_Implementation_Guidebook.pdf

Texas Education Agency. (2022a). *Rural school task force*. https://tea.texas.gov/texas-educators/educator-initiatives-and-performance/rural-schools-task-force

Texas Education Agency. (2022b). *2020–21 school report card definitions*. https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2021-src-definitions.pdf

Tuytens, M., & Devos, G. (2014). The problematic implementation of teacher evaluation policy: School failure or governmental pitfall? *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *42*(4), 155–174. https://doi.org/10.1177/174114321350218

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations.* Sage Publications.

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science, 16*(4), 409–421. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133

Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). The widget effect: Our national failure to acknowledge and act on differences

in teacher effectiveness. *New Teacher Project*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED515656

Wise, D. (2015). Emerging challenges facing school principals. *Education Leadership Review*, *16*(2), 103–115. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1105451.pdf

Wood, J. N., Finch, K., & Mirecki, R. M. (2013). If we get you, how can we keep you? Problems with recruiting and retaining rural administrators. *The Rural Educator, 34*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i2.399

Yang, M., Lee, S. W., & Goff, P. T. (2021). Labor dynamics of school principals in rural contexts. *AERA Open*, *7*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858420986189

About the Authors

Matthew K. Driver, EdD, is an instructor at Terry B. Rogers College of Education and Social Sciences at West Texas A&M University. He has worked for 12 years in public education in Amarillo, Texas. He received his bachelor of arts, master of education, and doctor of education leadership from West Texas A&M University. His scholarly pursuits focus on improving educational outcomes for all students through teacher evaluation and education leadership. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dr. Matthew K. Driver, Department of Education, West Texas A&M University, Canyon, Texas. E-mail: nmdriver@wtamu.edu

Irma Harper, EdD, is an associate professor in the doctoral program in educational leadership at West Texas A&M University. She previously served as the associate vice chancellor of academic affairs for the Texas A&M University System. Her research and practice focus on teacher attrition and teacher quality.

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 41-63
 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p41-63

Early Career Special Education Teachers' Views on Preclinical Field Experience in Rural Areas

Jeongae Kang, *Illinois State University*
Stephanie Gardiner-Walsh, *Illinois State University*

Preclinical field experience helps teacher candidates practice teacher roles and responsibilities in authentic learning environments. Based on the framework of situated learning and sensemaking theory, this mixed method study argues that the preclinical field experience activities in rural areas contribute to special education teachers' (SETs) confidence and perceptions of preparedness. We used a survey and interviews with early career SETs who had preclinical field experience in rural areas. In this mixed method study, early career SETs showed overall positive views of their preclinical field experiences, in particular for gaining a better sense of their profession and readiness; however, during the individual interviews, early career SETs expressed desire to have had more experience in specific areas (e.g., assessment, classroom management, collaboration with family, IEPs). The findings of this study underscore that preclinical field experience plays a critical role in shaping teachers' confidence and perceptions of preparedness. Also, the areas where SETs shared they needed more support indicate that teacher educators need to provide more experiential opportunities during teacher preparation.

Keywords: **rural education, early career special education teachers, preclinical field experience**

In the United States, about 57% of school districts are in rural areas with 24% of school-aged students attending rural schools (Institute of Education Science, 2013). Between 1999 and 2015, the overall enrollment of students with disabilities in rural schools increased by about 0.4% while midwestern rural regions showed 2.1% enrollment growth of students with individualized education programs (IEPs) (Johnson et al., 2018). Although it is logical to expect to have more rural teachers because of the increase in exceptional student enrollments, rural areas experience significant teacher attrition. For example, Meyer and colleagues (2019) reported that multiple midwestern states (e.g., Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota) lost about 17% of rural teachers between 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years. In particular, about 40% of initially licensed teachers of one midwestern state left their position within three years of teaching (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018). These rural special education teachers (SETs) often move to less rural areas (Meyer et al., 2019) or leave the education field completely (Dewey et al., 2017).

Teacher attrition needs to receive administrative attention because of its multiplicative impacts on various areas within a school. For example, rural school districts resort to hiring unqualified or underqualified teachers to fill the vacancies (Shepard et al., 2016; Sutcher et al., 2016). Teacher shortages increase inequity in learning opportunities for students with disabilities in rural areas as many emergency hires have no teaching experience and have not worked with individuals with disabilities. Not being able to maintain early career SETs becomes a critical barrier for providing individualized education for students with disabilities (Feng & Sass, 2017; Milanowski & Odden, 2007; Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

Furthermore, rural school districts must spend considerably to replace, retrain, and re-acculturate new teachers. In addition, it is estimated that replacing a new teacher impacts rural schools financially through administrative costs of approximately $4,300 (Carroll, 2007). With all the adverse effects caused by teacher shortages, it is critical to investigate rural SETs' attrition factors and find strategies to encourage early career SETs to stay longer in rural areas.

Literature Review

Areas of Skills Early Career SETs Need More Support

SET preparation research consistently showed that early career SETs experience difficulties in implementing specific skills required to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. For example, many beginning SETs shared challenges related to non-instructional duties like excessive paperwork (McLeskey et al., 2004), understanding the school system (Kilgore et al., 2003), locating instructional materials and resources (Whitaker, 2003), and collaborating with general education teachers (GETs) (Griffin et al., 2009). Other SETs shared that they struggle with instructional duties, such as teaching multiple subjects to a range of grade-level students (Schwartzbeck et al., 2003). Unlike their urban counterparts, rural SETs encounter challenges related to the need for broader skills with fewer potential supports (Fuqua & Roberts, 2021). They frequently teach a range of grades and subjects with students with different disabilities because of staff shortages (Brownell et al., 2005). Adding to these challenges, early career SETs perceived that they have little support from their workplace to resolve these issues (Billingsley, 2010; Bettini et al., 2016), which negatively affected their instructional effectiveness (Bettini et al., 2016) and increased teacher stress (Leko & Smith, 2010). In response, Berry and Gravelle (2013) highlighted the need for better support for rural SETs in these challenging areas because such challenges cause teacher job dissatisfaction and teacher attrition. SETs are not always prepared appropriately for their dynamic roles and responsibilities (Shepherd et al., 2016).

The Initial Special Education Preparation Standards Council for Exceptional Children provide guidance for preparing SET candidates (CET, 2012). The standards reflect the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for early career SETs. The expected competencies include: a) understanding individual developmental and learning differences, b) creating safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning environments, c) individualizing learning experience, d) using multiple ways to assess students to make instructional decisions, e) using evidence-based instructional planning and strategies, f) using professional learning and ethical practice, and g) collaborating with other stakeholders. However, when early career SETs start their profession, these expectations depend on school-specific needs, and are difficult to predict when accepting a teaching position. Early career SETs who are not prepared for their roles and responsibilities are less likely to thrive and stay longer in the rural schools.

Field Experience as a Teacher Recruitment and Retention Tool in Rural Areas

Field experience opportunities play a critical role in preparing teacher candidates to be ready for their profession. For example, field experience provides practicing opportunities for preservice teachers to transfer course knowledge into practice (Brownell et al., 2020; National Education Association, 2013). In addition, field experience contributes to self-confidence in using required skills to meet student needs. By practicing professional skills, preservice teachers become confident in making positive impacts on student outcomes, which leads to the retention of early career teachers (Burley et al., 1991).

To maximize their effectiveness, researchers emphasized providing field experience opportunities in authentic settings, and aligning the field experience with coursework, teacher competencies, and career expectations (e.g., Brownell et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Kang et al., 2018; Shepherd et al., 2016). Participating in field experience where authentic interaction occurs with future colleagues and students enables teacher candidates to become active agents in a specific context and better

understand the area's norms and culture that are hard to know as an outsider. For example, teacher candidates report that immersion in urban communities aids in the development of skills necessary to independently teach in such environments in the future (Anderson & Stillman, 2010). Knotts and Keesey (2016) also reported that rural teacher candidates could find unique communication methods with educational stakeholders after being immersed in the rural community through field experience. Additionally, such field experiences changed preservice teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about schools and communities (Versland et al., 2020). Furthermore, more community engagement helps teachers' career plans, especially for those who did not come from the area surrounding a school community (Ulfers, 2016). Such field experiences have been used frequently as a teacher retention and recruitment tool in rural areas (Versland et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework includes situated learning theory (Lave & Wegner, 1991) and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). Both theories amplify the rationale of providing location-specific field experience. Situated learning theory indicates the learning should occur in an authentic context to get to know about ordinary teacher practice by actively engaging in the learning activities (Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this situated learning context, teacher candidates get to experience the norms of future workplaces. Although some of the norms are not explicitly shared in public, getting to know about the hidden rules is known as a critical factor in teacher success and retention (Mastropieri, 2001). Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) explains that SET roles and responsibilities are hard to predict because of misalignment between teacher preparation and teacher roles and responsibilities. Indeed, preparation programs cannot directly teach everything needed related to details in diverse contexts like student characteristics, service-delivery model, instructional content, and non-instructional responsibilities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019); however, authentic field experiences help early career SETs make sense of uncertain teacher roles and responsibilities by situating the knowledge and experience they gained from their teacher preparation programs with mentorship (Jones et al., 2013; Mathews et al., 2017).

In teacher preparation, preclinical courses cover the knowledge of teacher roles and responsibilities and sometimes offer teacher candidates aligned field experience. These courses are offered before student teaching. Given that these courses intend to help teacher candidates understand teacher roles and responsibilities, teacher candidates need to be involved in field experience that is carefully aligned with coursework (Leko et al., 2015). Without situated experience, it is difficult to sense teachers' roles and responsibilities. However, little research has been conducted on preclinical field experience, particularly with respect to preparing SETs for roles and responsibilities in rural classrooms (Azano & Steward, 2015).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of preclinical field experience in rural areas on SET candidates' confidence and perception of the preparedness. This study addresses three main questions: (1) How do early career SETs, prepared through rural education experiences, report confidence in their preparation and skills for teaching? (2) What components of their preparation program do special education teachers feel were the most beneficial for their preparation? (3) What types of preparation did early career SETs wish to have before starting their teaching profession?

Methods

The university where this study took place is in a large, rural county in the midwestern United States. The university's mission statement and strategic initiative plans indicate that it places a high value on professional-based learning and community engagement. The teacher preparation program at this university offers an undergraduate level Elementary Education and Special Education dual program for an initial teaching license. To complete the special education teacher preparation program, preservice SETs need to complete 137 credit hours related to Elementary Education and Special Education. Additionally, teacher candidates need to complete 40 hours of *preclinical* special

education-related *field experience* before practicum and student teaching. Those experiences align with coursework and teacher competencies that effective SETs need to demonstrate on their first day of teaching (Table 1). The field experiences occur at the surrounding rural school districts.

Participants in this study were graduates of the special education preparation program where the first author was a course instructor. Most students enrolled in this program are considered first-time-in-college (FTIC), beginning coursework immediately after high school. According to the annual program data, most students are white females (about 90%) and from the three nearby midwestern states. About half of these students come from rural areas, and most of those students plan to return to their hometowns after completing this program. Each year over the last five years an average of 28 students have graduated with a special education degree. Of those, about 99% of graduates had teaching positions when graduating. Recently, the rural area where the university is located has had difficulty recruiting and retaining special education teachers. As a result, some of the teacher candidates from this program started their teaching profession through a paid student teaching incentive with a commitment to stay for several years before moving.

Research Design

This study used a mixed method sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to examine the effects of preclinical experience on early career SETs' perceptions of their effectiveness. This study used quantitative data obtained through a survey with four-point Likert scale questions (Phase One). The dataset does not meet the assumptions for robust statistical analyses (e.g., chi-square, factor analysis); therefore, only descriptive statistics will be used to describe findings. The findings of Phase One data were supplemented through qualitative data obtained through semi-structured individual interviews (Phase Two) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) (Figure 1). In other words, we used qualitative interview data to explain the quantitative survey findings. This section explains the methods for each phase, including participant recruitment process, data collection and data analysis.

Phase One: Quantitative Data (Survey)

Participant Recruitment. We used social media in recruiting participants to share their perceptions of the effects of preclinical field experience on their own preparedness and confidence in using core skills for their teaching. SETs with teaching experience totaling five years or less were invited to participate in the survey, as existing studies found that the first five years of teaching experience is a critical period for teachers to make decisions for their career plan of whether stay in the profession or not (e.g., Hammerness, 2008). Participants were recruited for one month, following the close of the school year. Of a potential 140 early career SETs who graduated within the five years prior, 30 graduates (21%) responded to the survey. It is unknown how many of these graduates interacted with recruitment efforts on social media.

Participants. Most participants in this study survey were white and female, reflecting the typical demographics of U.S. educators (with white females being about 80% of the whole population), and the general population of this teacher education program (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Out of 30 early career SETs, 67% worked in special education settings (e.g., resource rooms and self-contained classrooms) while 20% worked in inclusive settings. About 83% of the participants worked with students in elementary grades (K–5) while 17% worked at secondary grade levels (6–12) (Table 2).

Table 1

Examples of Preclinical Field Experience Activities

Course work	Preclinical Activities	Activity purposes aligned with course objectives	Activity description and settings	Student products
Intro SPED I	Service-learning project	To understand diverse individuals with disabilities and their needs	Interacting with individuals with disabilities through recreational or educational activities (e.g., bowling, crafting) at university campus or community locations (e.g., group homes, community center, early childhood center) depending on the activities	Service-learning activity log Reflection paper
Intro SPED II	Teacher observation and interview project	To understand teachers' roles in supporting students' unique needs across settings	Observing students with disabilities in general and special education settings at local schools and interviewing both special and general education teachers of the focus student	Observa-tion and interview log Reflection paper
Special Education Methods Courses	Life skill field day	To provide life skill lessons in supporting students with disabilities	Inviting rural K–12 students with moderate to severe disabilities to the university campus and teacher candidates delivering life skill lessons	Life skill lesson plan Reflection paper
	Collabor-ating and co-teaching days	To understand the roles and responsibilities of SETs in collaborating with GETs	Collaborating and co-teaching with general education major teacher candidates in delivering literacy lessons	Observa-tion log Lesson plan Reflection paper
	Teaching at rural schools	To practice multiple skills from coursework to support student needs in the classroom settings	Planning for the full day lessons, collaborating with SETs, and delivering instructions; reflecting on their role as prospective beginning SETs	Lesson plan Reflection paper

Figure 1

Research Design

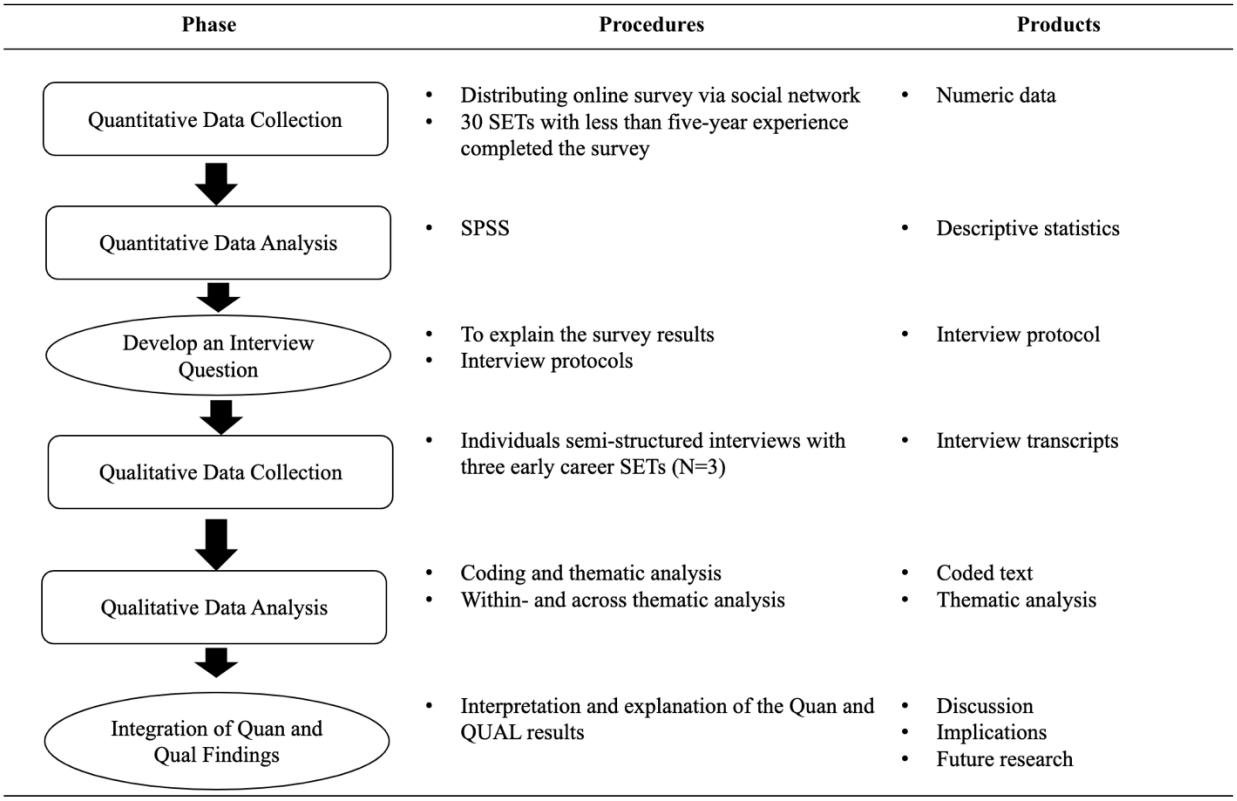


Table 2

Survey Participant Demographic Data

Demographic	N	Percent
Gender		
Male	2	6.7
Female	28	93.3
Race		
Black or African American	1	3.3
White	28	93.3
Rather not to respond	1	3.3
Teaching experience		
Less than 1 year	11	36.7
1–2 years	7	23.3
2–3 years	8	26.7
3–5 years	4	13.3
Grade levels of students		
K–5	25	83.3
6–12	5	16.7
Classroom setting		
Inclusion	6	20
Resource room	14	46.7
Self-contained classroom	7	23.3
Other	3	10

Data Collection and Data Analyses.

An online survey was developed based on other studies of teachers' perceptions of preparedness and confidence in completing roles and responsibilities (e.g., Condermann & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2013). The purpose of the survey was to examine SETs' perceived preparedness and confidence. This survey included two sections. The first section includes ten questions about the participants' demographic information (e.g., age, race, teaching experience, teaching placements) (see Table 2). Two questions were about the participants' intentions to stay at their current teaching sites the following year. The second section of the survey contained questions about the participants' perceptions of their preparedness and confidence in using specific teaching skills. The first author reviewed preclinical courses and field experience materials taught at the teacher preparation program to develop the questions, including course maps, course syllabi, and field experience descriptions. The first author gathered all course outcomes from each syllabus into a Word document and eliminated identical ones. She matched each course outcome with competencies of the national CEC initial teaching standards (2012). To compare participants' perceptions on their level of preparedness and confidence, the first author duplicated each statement twice to make parallel statements, starting with "I am well prepared to . . ." and "I am confident in . . .". One question examined the degree to which the SETs agreed that preclinical field experience had prepared them for working with students with disabilities. This section included 23 Likert-scale items (Appendix A).

Each statement used a four-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*). The validity check was conducted by two special education faculty members of the teacher preparation program, where participants of this survey completed their degrees. Based on their feedback, minor editing for wording was completed. Internal consistency was measured via Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient to investigate the reliability of survey items. The field's acceptable criterion for α is greater or equal to .80

(Henson, 2001). The score reliabilities across the overall survey, preparedness, and confidence were α= 0.95, 0.90, and 0.89, which indicated high internal consistency. The online survey, vetted and approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB) was distributed via a Google Form. Descriptive statistics, including mean score and standard deviation (SD), were used to analyze the survey responses from participants. We listed survey responses of the highest to lowest mean scores of the two domains to compare participants' preparation and confidence. Then, Q1, which measured the overall preparedness and not specific skills, was removed, and we grouped survey findings into tertiles (high, middle, and low groups) based on participants' responses. Tertiles (T1, T2, T3) on perceptions of preparedness and perceptions were determined by subtracting the minimum and maximum mean scores, then dividing by three. T1 had a range of scores from 3.7 to 3.51; T2 from 3.50 to 3.32; and T3 from 3.31 to 3.13.

Phase Two: Qualitative Data

Recruitment for Interviews. Participants for the semi-structured interviews were recruited through the survey in the first phase of this study. The survey's last question asked about their intention to participate in the follow-up interview. Four teachers initially agreed to participate, but one of them could not complete the interview because of a schedule conflict.

Participants. Three early career SETs volunteered to participate in an interview. All participants were white females representing the general early career teacher population of the region. They were teaching in the same rural area where they had completed preclinical field experience during the teacher preparation. Amy and Shelby taught at an elementary school while Jane was a middle school SET. Jane had completed a semester of teaching, Shelby had completed her second year of teaching, and Amy had completed her first year of teaching. All the participant names are pseudonyms.

Interview Questions. Based on the survey responses, interview questions were developed. The interview protocol was approved through IRB. Each interview asked interviewees about: (a) teaching and profession context, (b) overall early career teaching experience, (c) areas or aspects of preclinical field experience beneficial for their current teaching roles and responsibilities, and (d) areas or aspects of preclinical field experience for which they wished to be better prepared. Four interviewing questions (see Appendix B) were introduced during the interview to guide conversation, but the participants were allowed to share any aspects of unique experiences during their preparation and practice.

Data Collection and Analysis. The first author of this study and each participant met virtually using Zoom. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was recorded. The researcher transcribed each interview. The researcher and a research assistant separately conducted inductive coding to identify words, concepts, phrases, or themes that frequently appear (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The research team cross checked codes each other and found 95% agreement. After discussion, they reached 100% agreement for the initial coding. Then, the researchers engaged in axial coding to do thematic analysis. Then, they conducted within- and cross-case analyses to reduce the risk of inferential errors that may arise from using either method alone. Axial coding and thematic analyses through within- and cross-case analyses showed 100% agreement between coders.

Findings

In this following section, we described findings of each phase. Following guidelines for mixed method study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), both qualitative and quantitative findings will be integrated in the discussion section.

Quantitative Findings from the Survey: Early Career SETs' Perceived Preparedness and Confidence

The mean and SD for early career SETs' preparedness and confidence scores for SETs competencies are presented in Table 3. All means

fall above 3.13, indicating that teachers feel more prepared or confident than not. The range of means across skills was from 3.13 to 3.7.

The average perceived preparedness from three statements is slightly higher than perceived confidence. While these differences are small and would not show significance, for programmatic purposes, the results may be helpful for gaining insight into the experiences of preservice SETs. For example, regarding the statement "*create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to students with exceptionalities*," the results of the survey show higher preparedness (Q4: M=3.7, SD=0.47) than confidence (Q5: M=3.63, SD=0.49). The mean score for the statement asking their preparedness for *collaboration skills with students' families* (Q20: M=3.53, SD=0.63) was higher than the one for their confidence in using the skill (Q21: M=3.4, SD=0.67). Similarly, they responded that they were well prepared to use collaboration skills with other educators (Q22: M=3.5, SD=0.50), and they were confident in doing this (Q23: M=3.37, SD=0.67). On the other hand, the mean of six statements showed a higher rating for confidence than preparedness. The statements regarding "*Professional learning and ethical practice*" (M=3.6, SD=0.62 for preparedness; M=3.7, SD=0.47 for confidence) and "*Supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students"* (M=3.23, SD=0.63 for preparedness; M=3.3, SD=0.6 for confidence) are examples. "*Selecting" (*Q12 & Q13: M=3.13, SD=0.73) or *"using evidence-based instructional strategies"* (Q14 & Q15; M=3.23, SD=0.63), showed identical means for preparedness and confidence (Table 3).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Early Career SETs' Perceptions about Preparation and Confidence for SET Roles and Responsibilities

Specific Skills	CEC Competency*	Preparation		Confidence	
		M	SD	M	SD
Entered the field with appropriate knowledge and skills needed to immediately add value to the organization in which I work.	NA	3.27	0.64	*	*
Provide meaningful learning experiences to students with exceptionalities.	1	3.64	0.49	3.67	0.48
Create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments for students with exceptionalities.	2	3.7	0.47	3.63	0.49
Individualize learning for students with disabilities.	3	3.43	0.57	3.47	0.51
Supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students.	3	3.23	0.63	3.3	0.6
Use multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making instructional decisions.	4	3.2	0.61	3.23	0.63
Select evidence-based instructional strategies.	5	3.13	0.73	3.13	0.73
Use evidence-based instructional strategies.	5	3.23	0.63	3.23	0.63
Adapt evidence-based instructional strategies.	5	3.2	0.67	3.27	0.64
Professional learning and ethical practice.	6	3.6	0.62	3.7	0.47
Use effective collaboration skills with families of students.	7	3.53	0.63	3.4	0.67
Use effective collaboration skills with other educators.	7	3.57	0.50	3.37	0.67

Notes. This competency is based on CEC initial teacher competency.

* There was no survey item investigating the overall confidence.

Each statement used a four-point Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*.

Table 4

Ranked Skills Based on Mean Scores of Perceptions about Preparation and Confidence for SET Roles and Responsibilities

Tercile	Perception of preparation by skills (Survey #)	M	SD	Perceptions of confidence in implementing skills (Survey #)	M	SD
Higher	Create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to students with exceptionalities (Q4)	3.7	0.47	Using professional learning and ethical practice (Q19)	3.7	0.47
	Provide meaningful learning experiences to students with exceptionalities (Q2)	3.64	0.49	Provide meaningful learning experiences to students with exceptionalities (Q3)	3.67	0.48
	Using professional learning and ethical practice (Q18)	3.6	0.62	Create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to students with exceptionalities (Q5)	3.63	0.49
	Use effective collaboration skills with other educators (Q22)	3.57	0.50			
	Use effective collaboration skills with families of students (Q20)	3.53	0.63			
Middle	Individualize learning for students with disabilities (Q6)	3.43	0.57	Individualize learning for students with disabilities (Q7)	3.47	0.51
				Use effective collaboration skills with families of students (Q21)	3.4	0.67
				Use effective collaboration skills with other educators (Q23)	3.37	0.67
Lower	Supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (Q8)	3.23	0.63	Supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (Q9)	3.3	0.6
	Use evidence-based instructional strategies (Q14)	3.23	0.63	Adapt evidence-based instructional strategies (Q17)	3.27	0.64
	Use multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making instructional decisions (Q10)	3.2	0.61	Use multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making instructional decisions (Q11)	3.23	0.63
	Adapt evidence-based instructional strategies (Q16)	3.2	0.67	Use evidence-based instructional strategies (Q15)	3.23	0.63
	Select evidence-based instructional strategies (Q12)	3.13	0.73	Select evidence-based instructional strategies (Q13)	3.13	0.73

Researchers ranked SETs' perceived preparedness and confidence scores into 'high, middle, and low' tertiles (Table 4). Perceptions of confidence in implementing skills indicated similar findings to the perception of preparedness, with only subtle differences. *Creating or providing meaningful learning environments to students with disabilities* (CEC 1, 2), *pursuing life-long professional learning or ethical practices* (CEC 6), and *using collaboration skills with other fellow educators or families of students with disabilities* (CEC 7) were ranked into the higher group of perceptions of preparation by skills. *Individualizing learning for students with disabilities* (CEC 3) was ranked in the middle group in preparation, along with confidence in using collaboration skills (CEC 7). SETs' perceptions of preparation in *supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students* (CEC 3), u*sing multiple assessments and data sources in making instructional decisions* (CEC 4), and *selecting, using, and adapting evidence-based instructional strategies* (CEC 5) were listed in the lower group.

Qualitative Findings from Interviews: Reflections on Early Career SETs

Findings from interviews with three of the early career SETs provided more in-depth information to understand the survey findings. Through dialogue, researchers were able to decipher what skills participants wished they had more preparation for and their suggestions for how to implement changes. This section shares findings of: (a) field experiences that early career SETs felt beneficial, and (b) areas and aspects of field experience that early career SETs felt needed improvement (see Table 5).

Supportive Preclinical Field Experiences

All three teachers agree that their preclinical field experience was beneficial for their current practice. Through the thematic analysis, researchers were able to identify two overall themes related to which aspects of preclinical field experiences they found beneficial along with additional sub-themes (see Table 4).

Classroom Experience. These three teachers stated that having classroom experience was helpful for developing a sense of classroom cultures, and that lived experience helped them make a smooth transition into their current teaching position.

Jane described the preclinical experience as "eye-opening" because it helped her better understand school expectations of SETs during her teacher preparation. Jane also said interacting with students and practicing aligning standards, instruction, and assignments were helpful. At the end of the preclinical field experience, Jane had to take a long-vacant SET position prior to completing student teaching. Although she did not have enough time to prepare for her new classroom, Jane reflected that she could complete most of her duties with success. Jane shared that her preclinical field experience made her feel confident and prepared on her first day of teaching.

Table 5

Interview Summary

	Jane	Amy	Shelby
Beneficial Areas and Aspects of Preclinical Field experience	Classroom experience • Interacting with students in the classrooms • practicing aligning standard, instruction, and assignments • Meaningful and authentic tasks • Saw an IEP documents through IEP software that teachers are using • Practice collaboration all the time, that is what she uses every day as a special teacher	Classroom experience • Staying in the classroom • Meaningful and authentic tasks • Reviewed IEP document through scavenger hunt • Special education teacher showed how to use online software to complete IEPs	Classroom experience • Starting field experience in the real classroom from freshmen was helpful • Coming up with strategies based on the needs of students with students • Meaningful and authentic tasks • Always practiced collaboration strategy not only in the field experience but also during course work • Collaboration as a critical survival strategy
Challenging Areas and Aspects of Preclinical Field Experience	Difficulty in transferring knowledge into practice • understanding paperwork (e.g., goals, progress monitoring) • Updating progress monitoring Need practicing with authentic student samples. • Practicing paperwork Lack of knowledge and training • Collaborating and communicating with family	Difficulty in transferring knowledge into practice • IEP amendment and progress monitoring • Connecting data collection with IEP goals Lack of knowledge and training • Behavior and classroom management • Parent teacher conference with families	Difficulty in transferring knowledge into practice • Completing IEPs • Documenting student progress • Data collection

Shelby shared that having field experiences in various classrooms from her first year at college was powerful because those experiences helped her think through strategies to meet students' needs.

> You are immediately in the classrooms (during) freshman year—you're in the classrooms. . . . I had all my practical experiences . . . like all of the different field experiences. They prepare you to like think on your feet. I had it all planned

> out then when I go there, I was told that three of my kindergarteners didn't speak very much English. So you just kind of have to think on your feet. And I think all the experiences . . . definitely helped. (Shelby, personal communication, June 28, 2019)

Meaningful and Authentic Tasks. Teachers felt that the preclinical field experience was beneficial because those experiences included meaningful and authentic tasks. Teachers shared moments describing how IEP-related activities or collaboration practice were meaningful to them.

IEP-Related Activities. Amy said that she loved the preclinical field experience as a part of her coursework because she was able to see how the knowledge learned from the coursework applied to what she would do in her future teaching. She also mentioned that those experiences were authentic and based on hands-on activities. Specific examples for those activities include IEP scavenger hunt or writing IEPs by using electronic IEP software, *SPED track*. "She showed us SPED track at that time. And I'm grateful because that's what we use (Amy, personal communication, June 25, 2019). Jane shared looking at the actual IEP was meaningful.

> [My cooperating teacher] opened up SPED track, which is the program that we used, and she showed us kind of how to navigate around. And that was the first time I had seen like a real IEP. So that was very eye opening for me. (Jane, personal communication, June 24, 2019)

Collaboration. Jane and Shelby shared that practicing co-teaching and collaborating with general education teacher candidates during teacher preparation helped their level and quality of collaboration with other educators at their current workplace.

> We practiced collaborating during college all the time. And (now) I have an hour each day where I meet with my team. And so, we're able to talk about like kids and what's going on, if they have like behaviors that are coming out or missing assignments. Just simple things like that can do so much for a team and for your kids and for like the whole level aspect is great. (Jane, personal communication, June 24, 2019)

Besides roles and responsibilities SETs need to do, Shelby highlighted collaborating as a critical strategy for early career SETs, which is why her preclinical field experience was beneficial for her current practice.

> It's easy for first- or second-year teachers to get discouraged, because it is so overwhelming. And what I usually tell people is like go and find your person. And I think we get told that in college all the time. . . . Go find your someone that you can complain to about the stupid things, that you can cry to when you're frustrated, that you can go get lunch with. You have to have a person or school, or a couple that you can rely on . . . If you don't, that's where I see people like exiting the career, not being a teacher anymore, because you can't do it alone raising all these kids and making sure they get their education. It is such a team effort. . . .We also always did group projects. Whether you hate group projects or not. It's definitely a group effort. (Shelby, personal communication, June 28, 2019)

Preclinical Field Experience for Which SETs Wished to Be Better Prepared

During the interviews, all three early career SETs reported that although they had the knowledge of many aspects of their practice (e.g., IEPs, behavior management, collaboration), they felt underprepared to implement this knowledge and lacked confidence that their skills were applied appropriately. In this section, researchers organized teachers' voices according to these themes (See Table 4).

Applying Course Knowledge in Practice. All three teachers shared their lack of preparation and confidence in writing IEPs. They admitted that they were prepared for writing IEPs in some ways, but they did not feel completely prepared. They also reported that they wished to have more preparation for IEP-related skills, including data collection, progress monitoring, and amendments.

IEP Writing. Shelby shared the challenges of applying her course knowledge on writing IEPs. She

learned about IEPs from courses, and she felt she knew enough about completing them. However, actually writing an IEP was a different story.

> I did not feel as prepared in was kind of all the different IEPs. . . . We have our transition class and assessment class, and those two are great. But I know that like sitting down and writing my first IEP for the first time and (like) making sure I check all the boxes and all the different changes. . . . I knew what an IEP was. I knew how to kind of write one. But like sitting down and writing one I was like "HUH?" . . . I didn't know exactly what I should have been doing or (like) different steps. (Shelby, personal communication, June 28, 2019)

Progress Monitoring. All three teachers were concerned that they did not feel confident monitoring student progress or doing service amendments based on process monitoring. For example, Jane faced a challenging moment when she had to update an IEP for her students only two days after starting her teaching, and she needed to evaluate if the student met benchmarks of existing IEP goals.

> I had to go through all of their goals and find like three to four samples to file away and I just I was not very comfortable with going through all of their paperwork and like making sure that it met their goals. And a lot of it was because I didn't write those goals. And I didn't have a full understanding of what they were looking for. It stressed me out. (Jane, personal communication, June 24, 2019)

Shelby also expressed being overwhelmed in documenting student progress.

> We do a lot with like individual lesson planning and assessment and things like that. But when it comes to like chronological from point A to point B over like a hundred-day time frame. I think that was a little bit overwhelming . . . I struggled with a lot my first year is documenting my progress notes. All the goals my kids had and having to write their progress on the progress notes. I would get to some of them and be like, "oh crap, I did not document this very well my first year." And I am still kind of struggling with that my second year. I've gotten better . . . being able to think ahead. (Shelby, personal communication, June 28, 2019)

Amy wished she had more experience making IEP amendments because she did not know about it before doing it for her students:

> Since college, we were exposed to the IEP, and we ended up doing a few IEPs. I'm glad that I had that. But I also wished I would have had more experience with like amendments to IEPs, because I had no clue that was something or progress reports at the end of every semester. Let's say we have a first-grader coming into second grade. We have to amend their service times. Let's stay in first grade they only provide you like 30 minutes for reading. And second grade they provide you 50 minutes. So I would have to call the parents and say: "Hi, I need to amend your child's minutes for services next year because second grade is at different times. Would that be okay?" And they have to say yes or hopefully not no. But after that I have to go through and do like a notice of action and all this stuff to amend their service minutes. I wish I would have been prepared for that. (Amy, personal communication, June 25, 2019)

Data Collection. Three teachers shared their challenges related to data collection, which also affected IEP writing components. For example, Jane shared that she had to lead IEP meetings several days after being hired. Jane said it was challenging to create IEPs for students she had just met, and she was not sure what data to collect to write students' present-level statements. Similarly, Amy also wished she had learned to collect behavioral data explicitly.

> Another thing is I wish they would have done a class with that showed you how to take data collection. For their IEP goals, because trying to look at a bunch of IEP goals and then think of ways to take that data collection took me awhile to figure out as well. That is definitely something with data collections that paperwork side. (Amy, personal communication, June 25, 2019)

Shelby was unsure what documents she needed or what data to collect, saying "Okay, I have

this progress note due in two weeks. What documentation do I need? What do I need to do in my classroom? Do I need to do a running record?" (Shelby, personal communication, June 28, 2019).

Need to Practice with More Authentic Samples. The teachers pointed out the need for practicing with student samples, which would help them learn and sustain knowledge. Jane shared practicing with student samples would be helpful.

> It would be very beneficial to get a ton of work samples from children and tell the SET student: "Hey, find um, find this child's comprehension." And then like having to go through those documents and say like, "Oh, this child has this much comprehension." Just getting the experience of going through the paperwork and the data and finding those tasks. (Jane, personal communication, June 24, 2019)

Lack of Knowledge and Training. SETs felt they needed more training in several areas, including behavior and classroom management, collaborating with parents, and parent–teacher conferences.

Behavior and Classroom Management. Amy said her class had more than five students with behavior issues, so she wished for more field experience activities related to classroom management. "More behavior. I felt like I was very unprepared for. And I know this year this coming year I think I have five or six kiddos with behavior. So that'll be interesting" (Amy, personal communication, June 25, 2019).

Collaborating with Parents. All interviewees wished to have had more preparation in collaborating with parents in several ways. For example, Jane said,

> I was just in shock whenever I found out the kids' home lives. Just the, um, the poverty levels, the experience that they've gone through. I wasn't prepared for that. So it was so hard not to–like get too attached. And not want to–'cause I–you can't do anything about it. So, that was my hardest thing is just trying to realize, like y'know, I'm doing all I can here. And you just hope they have help at home. (Jane, personal communication, June 24,2019)

Jane continued,

> Parent contact could be a little bit more helpful. We did practice in practicum a little bit with reaching out to the parents and writing a letter. But even working on like–y'know not only greeting them, just one time when you start, but reaching out to them and talking to them. Like–I tried to reach out at least once a month and not only give like a negative thing. But just praise the child on what they're doing as well. Just the progress, a little bit more parent contact, and just getting experience to understand that you can't control what's going on at home (Jane, personal communication, June 24, 2019).

Parent–Teacher Conferences. Like Jane, Amy wished to have learned more about leading parent–teacher conferences in special education. Although she practiced a parent–teacher conference in elementary education courses and she knew she worked for a special education teacher, she did not think about preparing for special education-related parent–teacher meetings.

> I think even like if we were to have done like a practice parent–teacher conference. But we did a practice one. And I remember in one of my regular ed classes . . . I wish like I would have been on the special ed side of a parent–teacher conferences before I went into one this year. Because I like, I don't know what to say . . . The first one I remember I just felt like I said a lot of negative stuff, and I'm like I really wish I would have done like a positive, negative, positive type of a thing. (Amy, personal communication, June 25, 2019)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived preparedness and confidence of early career SETs who had rural field experiences. This study argued that the preclinical field experience activities in rural areas improve preservice SETs' sensemaking about their roles and responsibilities at their future workplaces and help SETs pursue their careers in the same area. Findings of this study provided a compelling rationale for teacher educators in rural areas to find ways to facilitate

preclinical field experience for preservice SETs at the surrounding rural schools. Beginning SETs who completed preclinical field experiences at rural areas before practicum and student teaching showed overall positive views of their preclinical field experiences; however, they also shared the areas where they wished to have more field experience. Survey results and interview responses resulted in a deeper understanding of which skills most contributed to confidence and knowledge reflections. For example, when examining the ranked preparation and confidence items (Table 4), themes reported in interviews (Table 5) supported and clarified why some survey items had greater variation and lower mean scores. This section discusses early career SETs' preparedness and confidence based on the synthesis of the findings of the survey and interviews and the preclinical field experience activities.

How and Why Did Early Career SETs Feel Confident and Prepared?

Survey responses (Q2–5 & 18–19) paired with interview responses (see Table 5) confirm that early career SETs felt prepared and confident in *providing quality learning environments or experience*, *creating safe, inclusive learning environments for students with exceptionalities*, and *using professional learning and ethical practices*. As Shelby shared during the interview, the authentic learning environment of preclinical placements in rural education classrooms supported teacher candidates in developing routines and understanding responsibilities and roles in such skills. Indeed, observing the unique roles of teachers in local rural settings through *Teacher Observation and Interview Projects,* in addition to *Teaching at Rural Schools* (Table 1), helped them to integrate skills in their current practice.

While both prepared and confident in individual teaching pedagogy, early career SETs responded that they felt highly prepared but are less confident in using interactive skills such as *collaborating with families* (Q20 & Q21)*, collaborating with colleagues (Q 22 & Q 23)*, and *managing student behaviors (Q8 & Q9*) in the survey (Table 3). During the interviews, SETs shared their confidence in collaborating with other educators. Through *co-teaching and collaboration days*, indeed, teacher candidates collaborated with other teacher candidates or other school personnel (Table 1). In addition, interviewees responded that they had multiple group work opportunities with instructors' explicit guidance for collaboration with other educators. However, their work environment and personnel dynamics in their workplace seem to reflect their confidence in collaborating with other educators. On the other hand, these teachers did not have as many opportunities to practice collaborating with family members. Early career SETs wished to have had more practicing opportunities to communicate with parents or lead parent–teacher conferences with families with disabilities. Lastly, early career SETs expressed a desire to have more experience in behavior management and progress monitoring. Several of the areas in which SETs felt underprepared (e.g., parent contact, managing IEP meetings) are activities that are frequently led by fully licensed teachers both for legal reasons and for protective reasons. These data show the importance of close alignments between coursework and field experiences (Leko et al., 2015) and the need to continue to develop experiences to supplement those that cannot be authentically experienced in the practicum environments.

How and Why Did Early Career SETs Not Feel Confident and Prepared?

Despite intense preclinical field experience opportunities, participants in this study shared the areas where they wished to have had more preparation. The survey findings showed that SETs felt both less prepared and less confident in *supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs, using multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making instructional decisions*, and *selecting, using, and adapting evidence-based strategies*. On the other hand, the common challenge addressed during interviews was completing IEPs, understanding their connections with data collection, and progress monitoring. These teachers shared that they learned how to complete IEPs during the teacher preparation program; however, they felt using the knowledge to complete their roles and responsibilities is another story. The gap between SETs' perceived

preparation and confidence in these areas is understandable given that no specific field experience was assigned for IEP-related activities (Table 1), and IEPs consist of comprehensive paperwork that is impossible to practice within one specific field experience. Although teachers shared excitement about an IEP electronic software program, it is surely difficult for teachers to use the program without the foundational understanding of IEPs. This is not the first study to note that IEP paperwork and data-driven practices are areas that need more support and continue to be an area that all programs can benefit from examining (Hester et al., 2020; Poznanski et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Rokowski, 2020).

Limitations

This study has several methodological limitations. All participating teachers completed one specific SET preparation program. Also, three SETs who participated in the interviews worked for a single school district. These factors make this study's findings difficult to generalize in other school districts, regions, and states. Therefore, future research needs to replicate this study by recruiting beginning SETs in different locations who started their teaching profession in the areas where they had preclinical field experience.

This study explored the teachers' perceived preparedness and confidence in using skills related to SET roles and responsibilities. Several factors might affect teacher responses. For example, clinical activities like student teaching might affect preservice SETs' understanding of roles and responsibilities. In addition, work environment, including administrator support, collaborations with other school personnel, and professional development resources, shapes the quality of early career SETs' professional experience (e.g., Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Therefore, future research needs to control for these variables in analyzing the effects of preclinical field experience on early career SETs' experience.

Implications

Implications for Teacher Educators

Preclinical field experience placements aid teacher candidates in developing a sense of confidence in applying what they have learned in the classroom to their future practice. While SETs felt more prepared and confident for the skills that they had practiced during preclinical field experience, they did not feel confident in some skills, such as IEP drafting skills or collaborating with families because the skills were hardly included in the designated preclinical field experience. However, shaping more professional-based and authentic field experience would not be possible without having strong partnerships with surrounding school districts.

Therefore, teacher educators need to engage in continuous collaboration with local schools in providing a variety of preclinical field experience. In addition, teacher educators need to consider having strategic curriculum plans, aligning coursework and preclinical field experience (Leko & Smith, 2010) with effective pedagogies. For example, SETs in this study shared that they were excited to learn about the materials they would use in their future classroom. However, those SETs reported difficulties in completing IEPs because they were not sure how collecting data, progress monitoring, and drafting PLAAFP statements and IEP goals relate with each other. Bruner's spiral curriculum (2009) suggests that students learn better when key concepts are repeated but with varying intensity throughout the curriculum. Teacher educators will need to use effective scaffolding pedagogical strategies (e.g., reflection, connotation, interleaving) along with revisiting key concepts so that teacher candidates can make connections with IEP components in the big picture and make sense of applying the whole process in their profession.

Implications for Researchers

This study suggests the need for research examining outcomes of providing profession-based authentic and diverse field experience in multiple aspects. First, future research needs to examine the effects of preclinical field experience on SETs' intent to stay at their workplace. To discuss SET retention,

the additional data to be collected should include quality of work environment (e.g., opportunities for SETs to grow, collaborate, mentorship). The targeting outcome is not only limited to the position of early career teachers but also needs to include administrator satisfaction. In addition, future research needs to pay attention to student outcomes because the foundational goal for teacher preparation and field experience is to provide positive impacts on students with disabilities.

Implications for School Administrators

This study also indicates the need for rural school administrators to clarify SET roles and responsibilities and communicate these expectations with preservice teachers, teacher educators, and early career SETs. Given the critical impact of role confusion on SET attrition, school administrators need to collaborate with teacher educators to provide more practicing opportunities for preservice SETs in the building, aiming for recruiting new SETs who could remain for long periods of time at the school (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Versland et al., 2020). To facilitate teacher retention, school administrators need to provide practicing teachers and mentors with continuous training on how to support each other and collaborate. SETs leave the field when SETs feel the workplace is not favorable for personal and professional growth (Billingsly & Bettini, 2019). When SETs get more support from colleagues, they are known to feel less stress and burnout and are less likely to plan to leave (Berry et al., 2011; Garwood et al., 2018). Thus, administrators need to establish supportive teaching environments.

Conclusion

This study provides an initial examination of early career SETs' perceptions of preclinical field experience and its influence on their preparedness and confidence in exercising the expected teacher roles and responsibilities. Despite some methodological limitations and affecting variables, the findings of this study underscore the idea that preclinical field experience plays a critical role in shaping teachers' perceptions of preparedness and confidence. Also, the areas in which SETs need more support indicate that teacher educators must provide more experiential opportunities during teacher preparation. Careful consideration of adding and aligning field experiences to reinforce teacher candidates' course knowledge can improve their perceptions of preparedness and confidence as early career SETs. These efforts will help SETs become more prepared for their roles and responsibilities, feel more positive self-efficacy, and, with support, remain in their workplace.

References

Anderson, L., & Stillman, J. (2010). Opportunities to teach and learn in high-needs schools: Student teachers' experiences in urban placements. *Urban Education*, *45*(2), 109–141. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085909354445

Azano, A. P., & Stewart, T. T. (2015). Exploring place and practicing justice: Preparing pre-service teachers for success in rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 30*(9), 1–12. https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/30-9.pdf

Berry, A. B., & Gravelle, M. (2013). The benefits and challenges of special education positions in rural settings: Listening to the teachers. *The Rural Educator*, *34*(2). https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i2.400

Berry, A. B., Petrin, R. A., Gravelle, M. L., & Farmer, T. W. (2011). Issues in special education teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development: Considerations in supporting rural teachers. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *30*(4), 3–11. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/875687051103000402

Bettini, E., Park, Y., Benedict, A., Kimerling, J., & Leite, W. (2016). Situating special educators' instructional quality and their students' outcomes within the conditions shaping their work. *Exceptionality*, *24*(3), 176–193. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2015.1107831

Billingsley, B. (2010). Work contexts matter: Considerations for improving new special educators' experiences in schools. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 23*(1), 41–49.

Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *89*(5), 697–744. http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495

Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning.

Educational Researcher, *18*(1), 32–42. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X018001032

Brownell, M. T., Jones, N. D., Sohn, H., & Stark, K. (2020). Improving teaching quality for students with disabilities: Establishing a warrant for teacher education practice. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *43*(1), 28–44. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0888406419880351

Brownell, M. T., Ross, D. D., Colón, E. P., & McCallum, C. L. (2005). Critical features of special education teacher preparation: A comparison with general teacher education. *Journal of Special Education*, *38*(4), 242–252. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00224669050380040601

Bruner, J. S. (2009). *The process of education*. Harvard University Press.

Burley, W. W., Hall, B. W., Villeme, M. G., & Brockmeier, L. L. (1991, April). A path analysis of the mediating role of efficacy in first-year teachers' experiences, reactions, and plans. In *annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago*.

Carroll, T. G. (2007). Policy brief: The high cost of teacher turnover. *National Commission on Teaching and America's Future*.

Conderman, G., Johnston-Rodriguez, S., Hartman, P., & Walker, D. (2013). Honoring voices from beginning special educators for making changes in teacher preparation. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *36*(1), 65–76. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406412473311

Council for Exceptional Children. (2012). *CEC initial level special educator preparation standards*. https://www.cec.sped.org/~/media/Files/Standards/Professional%20Preparation%20Standards/Initial%20Preparation%20Standards%20with%20Elaborations.pdf

Creswell, J. W. & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Darling-Hammond, L., Holtzman, D. J., Gatlin, S. J., & Heilig, J. V. (2005). Does teacher preparation matter? Evidence about teacher certification, Teach for America, and teacher effectiveness. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13*(42), 1–48. http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v13n42.2005

Dewey, J., Sindelar, P. T., Bettini, E., Boe, E. E., Rosenberg, & M. S. Leko, C. (2017). Explaining the decline in special education teacher employment from 2005–2012. *Exceptional Children, 83*(3), 315–329. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0014402916684620

Feng, L., & Sass, T. R. (2017). Teacher quality and teacher mobility. *Education Finance and Policy*, *12*(3), 396–418. http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00214

Fuqua, M., & Roberts, P. (2021). People, places, and communities in an urban century: Broadening rural education research. In *Ruraling education research* (pp. 287–300). Springer.

Garwood, J. D., Werts, M. G., Varghese, C., & Gosey, L. (2018). Mixed-methods analysis of rural special educators' role stressors, behavior management, and burnout. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *37*(1), 30–43. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/8756870517745270

Gehrke, R. S., & McCoy, K. (2007). Considering the context: Differences between the environments of beginning special educators who stay and those who leave. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *26*(3), 32–40. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/875687050702600305

Griffin, C. C., Kilgore, K. L., Winn, J. A., Otis-Wilborn, A., Hou, W., & Garvan, C. W. (2009). First-year special educators: The influence of school and classroom context factors on their accomplishments and problems. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *32*(1), 45–63. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0888406408330870

Hammerness, K. (2008). "If you don't know where you are going, any path will do": The role of teachers' visions in teachers' career paths. *The New Educator*, *4*(1), 1–22. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15476880701829184

Hester, O. R., Bridges, S. A., & Rollins, L. H. (2020). 'Overworked and underappreciated': special education teachers describe stress and attrition. *Teacher Development*, *24*(3), 348–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2020.1767189

Johnson, J., Ohlson, M. A., & Shope, S. (2018). Demographic changes in rural America and the implications for special education programming: A descriptive and comparative analysis. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *37*(3), 140–149. https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870518771381

Jones, N. D., Youngs, P., & Frank, K. A. (2013). The role of school-based colleagues in shaping the commitment of novice special and general education teachers. *Exceptional Children*, *79*(3), 365–383. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001440291307900303

Kang, J., Farnan, S., & Lynn, T. (2018). Responding to the needs of early career SETs through educator preparation programs. *The Advocate*, *23*(6), 1–8. http://dx.doi.org/10.4148/2637-4552.1002

Kilgore, K., Griffin, C., Otis-Wilborn, A., & Winn, J. (2003). The problems of beginning special education teachers: Exploring the contextual factors influencing their work. *Action in Teacher Education*, *25*(1), 38–47. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2003.10463291

Knotts, J. D., & Keesey, S. (2016). Friendship with Old Order Mennonite teachers develops cultural responsiveness in preservice special education teachers. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *35*(4), 10–17. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/875687051603500403

Lave, J., & Wegner, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355

Leko, M. M., Brownell, M. T., Sindelar, P. T., & Kiely, M. T. (2015). Envisioning the future of special education personnel preparation in a standards-based era. *Exceptional Children*, *82*(1), 25–43. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0014402915598782

Leko, M. M., & Smith, S. W. (2010). Current topics in review Andrea M. Babkie, Associate Editor: Retaining beginning special educators: What should administrators know and do?. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *45*(5), 321–325. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1053451209353441

Mastropieri, M. A. (2001). Is the glass half full or half empty? Challenges encountered by first-year special education teachers. *Journal of Special Education, 35*(2), 66–74.

Mathews, H. M., Rodgers, W. J., & Youngs, P. (2017). Sense-making for beginning special educators: A systematic mixed studies review. *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies*, *67*(1), 23–36. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.05.007

McLeskey, J., Tyler, N. C., & Saunders-Flippin, S. (2004). The supply of and demand for special education teachers: A review of research regarding the chronic shortage of special education teachers. *Journal of Special Education*, *38*(1), 5–21. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00224669040380010201

Meyer, S. J., Espel, E. V., Weston-Sementelli, J. L., & Serdiouk, M. (2019). Teacher retention, mobility, and attrition in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota. *National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance REL 2019-001.* https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL_2019001.pdf

Milanowski, A., & Odden, A. (2007). *A new approach to the cost of teacher turnover* (Vol. 13). Seattle, WA: School Finance Redesign Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education. https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/wp_sfrp13_milanowskiodden_aug08_0.pdf

National Education Association. (2013). *Profession ready teachers.* https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/profession-ready-teachers.pdf

Poznanski, B., Hart, K. C., & Cramer, E. (2018). Are teachers ready? Preservice teacher knowledge of classroom management and ADHD. *School Mental Health*, *10*(3), 301–313. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-9259-2

Robinson, O. P., Bridges, S. A., Rollins, L. H., & Schumacker, R. E. (2019). A study of the relation between special education burnout and job satisfaction. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, *19*(4), 295–303. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12448

Rokowski, E. G. (2020). *Understanding the complexities of the IEP goal writing process: A case study of special education teachers* [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/understanding-complexities-iep-goal-writing/docview/2471451445/se-2?accountid=11578

Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, *50*(1), 4–36. http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0002831212463813

Schwartzbeck, T. D., Prince, C. D., Redfield, D., Morris, H., & Hammer, P. (2003). How are rural districts meeting the teacher quality requirements of No Child Left Behind. *Charleston, VA: Appalachia Educational Laboratory*. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.488.4925&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Shepherd, K. G., Fowler, S., McCormick, J., Wilson, C. L., & Morgan, D. (2016). The search for role clarity: Challenges and implications for

special education teacher preparation. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *39*(2), 83–97. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0888406416637904

Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/coming-crisis-teaching.

Taie, S., & Goldring, R. (2020). *Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results From the 2017–18 National Teacher and Principal Survey First Look* (NCES 2020-142). U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2020142.

Ulfers, J. D. (2016). A brief summary of teacher recruitment and retention in the smallest Illinois rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, *37*(1). https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v37i1.292

Versland, T., Will, K., Lux, N., & Hicks, J. (2020). Envisioning the rural practicum: A means to positively affect recruitment and retention in rural schools. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*, *10*(1), 103–118. http://dx.doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2020.v10n1p103-118

Weick, K. E. (1995). Sensemaking in organizations. *Foundations of Organizational Science* (Vol. 3). Sage.

Whitaker, S.D. (2003). Needs of beginning special education teachers: Implications for teacher education. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 26*(2), 106–117. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/088840640302600204

About the Authors

Jeongae Kang, PhD, is an assistant professor at the Department of Special Education at Illinois State University. Her main research agenda is to prepare effective special education teachers and provide professional development. Her recent papers included preparing preservice special education teachers with professional development using evidence-based practices. In addition, she wrote about using case learning in preparing preservice special education teachers and investigating factors for special education teachers' stress and burnout during Covid-19.

Stephanie Gardiner-Walsh, PhD, is an assistant professor in Deaf Education and Special Education at Illinois State University. Her research emphasis focuses on deaf and hard of hearing students in the mainstream classroom and teacher preparation for underserved populations. Prior to her time at ISU, she served as an itinerant teacher of the deaf in rural North Carolina and a classroom teacher in urban North Carolina.

Appendix A. List of Survey Items

Q1. As a graduate of the Special Education Program, I entered the field with appropriate knowledge and skills needed to immediately add value to the organization in which I work.

Q2. I am well prepared to provide meaningful learning experiences to students with exceptionalities.

Q3. I am confident in using my knowledge about exceptionalities to provide meaningful experience to students with exceptionalities.

Q4. I am well prepared to create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to students with exceptionalities.

Q5. I am confident in creating safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments to students with exceptionalities.

Q6. I am well prepared to individualize learning for students with disabilities.

Q7. I am confident in individualizing learning for students with disabilities.

Q8. I am well prepared in supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of the students/adults that I work with.

Q9. I am confident in using supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of the students/adults that I work with.

Q10. I am well prepared to use multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making instructional decisions.

Q11. I am confident to use multiple methods of assessment and data sources in making instructional decisions.

Q12. I am well prepared to select evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of students with disabilities.

Q13. I am confident in selecting evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of students with disabilities.

Q14. I am well prepared to use evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of students with disabilities.

Q15. I am confident in using evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of students with disabilities.

Q16. I am well prepared to adapt evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of students with disabilities.

Q17. I am confident in adapting evidence-based instructional strategies to advance learning of students with disabilities.

Q18. I am well prepared to engage in the lifelong learning to advance the profession.

Q19. I am able to continuously learn and adapt to new environments.

Q20. I am well prepared to use effective collaboration skills with families of my students.

Q21. I am confident in using effective collaboration skills with families of my students.

Q22. I am well prepared to use effective collaboration skills with other educators (e.g., paraprofessionals, general education teachers, administrators).

Q23. I am confident in using effective collaboration skills (e.g., paraprofessionals, general education teachers, administrators).

Appendix B. Interview Guiding Questions

1. Please describe your current teaching position (e.g., setting, grade, student profiles under your caseload, years of your teaching experience).
2. How was your experience as a special education teacher?
3. From your teaching preparation program, what areas or aspects of your preparation (e.g., course work, experience) were the most beneficial for you to be a strong special education teacher?
4. What areas of preparation did you wish to have before starting your teaching?

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 65-82
 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p65-82

Community Leaders' Perceptions of the Small, Rural Community College Contributing to Quality of Life in Rural Communities

Jared Reed, *Southeastern Community College*
Janice Friedel, *Iowa State University*

This phenomenological study investigated community leaders' perceptions of the small, rural community college contributing to quality of life. Guided by the Community Capitals Framework (Flora & Flora, 2013), six focus group interviews were conducted across three communities in the Midwest that included 39 participants selected through key informant sampling. The study found that community leaders perceive the small rural community college contributing to quality of life through three major themes: a) providing access and opportunity, b) economic and workforce development, and c) partnerships. Findings suggest that small, rural community colleges contribute to quality of life by increasing human and social capital through the themes. Implications for practice include increasing student support services resources at community colleges, increasing service learning through partnerships, and developing a framework for self-assessment to further develop the small, rural community college understanding of its impact on developing human capital and social capitals.

***Keywords*: community college; community leader; quality of life; rural life**

Rural and urban communities are two distinct environments. Rural communities offer natural resources, wide open spaces, less dense population, which makes them attractive to many residents. While they seek to provide a good quality of life for their residents, many rural communities experience social and economic challenges due to lack of resources including human and financial capitals (Morgan & Lambe, 2009). These communities experience declining population, higher unemployment, and insufficient resources (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Friedel & Reed, 2019). As a result, rural communities often rely on assistance from a variety of organizations, such as non-profit groups, educational institutions, community foundations, government agencies, and public–private partnerships (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). One of the tools available to rural communities to assist with development issues is the small, rural community college.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural community leaders perceived the small, rural community college contributing to quality of life in a rural community. Previous studies have explored rural communities and examined particular challenges they face in today's society. In addition, previous studies have been conducted examining the concept of quality of life. Other research studies have analyzed the rural community college to help shed light on the functionality, mission, and purpose of this type of institution. Brisolara (2019) states, "Less attention at a national level has been centered on the role that institutions of higher education can play in improving conditions and possibilities for rural people" (p. 11). The existent literature is devoid of research focusing specifically on how the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life in the rural community. Rural communities represent a significant portion of places and

population in the United States. Rural community leaders play a particularly pivotal role in rural communities due to population decline. Rural communities do not have a large pool of residents to draw from to fill leadership roles. As a result, the views and perceptions of these rural community leaders become valuable sources of insight into challenges facing rural communities. In addition, rural community colleges provide educational services and programs to a large number of students across the nation who reside in rural communities. Rural students may rely on the rural community college for services and programs due to a lack of access to those services and programs elsewhere in the community. As a result, the rural community college can serve multiple purposes to rural students and residents. Therefore, it is important to know how rural community colleges contribute to the rural communities they serve. This study contributes to that knowledge by focusing specifically on exploring how rural community leaders perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life in a rural community.

One research question guided this study: How do community leaders perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life?

Literature Review

Community colleges often have a noticeable relationship with the communities they serve (Torres et al., 2013). Yang and Venezia (2020) stated, "almost 60 million people, or 20% of the population, live in rural America" (p. 424). In the United States, there are 553 rural community college districts and 922 rural campuses. This figure represents almost 60% of all community college campuses across the nation (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). In fall 2019, 5.5 million students were enrolled in public two-year colleges. About 1.9 million students were full-time, and 3.6 million were part-time (Community College FAQs, n.d.). Rural community colleges "serve changing student populations, the result of growing numbers of non-traditional students, dislocated workers, and individuals looking to increase their work skills" (Howley et al., 2013, p. 2).

A small, rural community college is defined as those institutions with less than 2,500 annual unduplicated student enrollments (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). These community colleges show mean enrollments per district of 1,699 and 1,155 per campus (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Rural communities often rely more heavily on the community college to function as a catalyst for social and economic development in the region (Friedel & Reed, 2019; Torres et al., 2013) than their urban counterparts. Miller and Deggs (2012) stated "rural settings typically have lower education completion levels, higher than national average obesity rates, poor health, and lower than national average wage earning" (p. 331). Rural communities, according to Yang and Venezia (2020) have "struggled with low-skilled economies, poverty, outmigration of young and educated people, and lower educational attainment" (p. 424). Yang and Venezia (2020), citing Hillygus (2005), state "of all these struggles, educational attainment is probably the most critical because of its strong ties to employment, income, and civic participation" (p. 424). Citing Drabenstott, Novack, and Weiler (2004), Torres et al. (2013) noted there are important elements that rural regions need in order to grow that require the involvement of the community college: "engagement by higher education, an entrepreneurial culture, and educational and training programs that serve the region's needs" (p. 4).

The rural community college serves a unique role, different from the urban community college (Howley et al., 2013). Previous studies have documented the role of the rural community college as a cultural center, sometimes being the only source of cultural activities and cultural awareness for students and residents (Cejda, 2012; Howley et al., 2013; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Pennington et al., 2006). Garrett et al. (2021) stated, "The community college is a key access point for an increasingly diverse student population. The rural community college is even more critical to students given the potential distance to a more diverse and more urban institution – and the challenges a long commute can bring" (p. 108).

Rural community colleges face a unique set of challenges that differentiate them from community

colleges in urban settings. Other studies have shown that community colleges in rural areas experience a challenge of providing their programs and services to a population that is spread out over a larger geographic area (Cejda, 2012; Pennington et al., 2006). Geography is a challenge for rural community colleges for several reasons. Crookston and Hooks (2012) noted that "many rural Americans reside in areas that are not within reasonable commuting distance to a community college" (p. 351). Students face additional barriers such as increased transportation costs when they must travel significant distances in a rural area in order to pursue higher education (Howley et al., 2013). Other studies have noted that the limitations caused by geography may create barriers for the rural community college to recruit and retain faculty and staff (Cejda, 2010; Pennington et al., 2006).

Previous studies show that the discussion of the challenges facing rural community colleges is ongoing (Cejda, 2012; Eddy, 2007; Garza & Eller, 1998; Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Torres et al., 2013; Vineyard, 1979). Further understanding the role of the community college in a rural community is important to helping local students be successful in entering the college environment after they complete high school (Hlinka et al., 2015). Hlinka (2017) states, "community college freshmen tend to be less college-ready, have access to fewer financial resources, and possess lower social resources" (p. 145). Rural students have "less college access, less institutional choice, and lower graduation rates" (Yang and Venezia, 2020, p. 424). Rural communities often experience the "brain drain" phenomenon described by Sowl et al. (2022) as, "the funneling out of talented young people from rural areas in search of better opportunities" (p. 303).

With the review of literature, there are gaps in the existing literature that need to be addressed. Most of the research existing on rural community colleges is more than five years old. This presents an urgent need for additional studies examining the rural community college and its broader impact on the rural community. This study helps address that need by making an important contribution that builds on existing literature by linking together previous research that identified challenges experienced by rural communities and rural community colleges.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions will be used:

Community Leader

The authors operationalized the definition of a community leader based on the research question guiding this study: A person who has lived in, worked in, or both, in a community in this study and has a level of understanding of the community as a result of professional or civic involvement in the community. Due to the nature of their involvement, a person has a position, or role, in the community that could be described as a leadership role.

Descriptive Coding

Descriptive coding is defined as:

> Assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data. Provides an inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing. Appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, ethnographies, and studies with a wide variety of data forms (Saldaña, 2013, p. 262).

Rural Community

Hancks (2011) cited The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University of Pennsylvania as the source of two definitions for the term "rural community". The first definition, provided by the United States Census Bureau, refers to any community with up to 2,500 people. The second definition refers to a community of up to 25,000 people living outside a metropolitan area. For this study, the second definition is more appropriate because it is a more representative description of the communities investigated in this case study.

Small, Rural Community College

A community college with an unduplicated headcount below 2,500 serving students from urban, suburban, and rural areas given the location of the campus in a rural-like setting (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007).

Quality of Life

The Oxford Dictionary defines Quality of Life as: "The standard of health, comfort, and happiness experienced by an individual or group." This definition was used to operationalize the term Quality of Life in this study.

Urban

In 2010, the Census Bureau provided two definitions for two types of urban areas. First, the term Urbanized Areas (UAs) refers to places of 50,000 or more people. Second, the term Urban Clusters (UCs) refers to places of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. After the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau proposed changes to how it defines urban. First, it proposed raising the minimum population threshold from 2,500 to 10,000 residents or more to define urban. Second, it proposed eliminating the previous two types of urban areas classified by the Bureau. For the purposes of this study, the term "urban" refers to a community with 50,000 or more residents.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the Community Capitals Framework presented by Flora and Flora (2013) in their book, *Rural Communities: Legacy & Change* (4th ed.). The Community Capitals Framework presents seven capitals that refer to resources that exist and come together to form what we experience as part of a community: "natural capital, cultural capital, human capital, financial capital, built capital, social capital, and political capital" (p. 10).

Two of the seven capitals were used for this study – human capital and social capital. Human capital refers to the "education, skills, health, and self-esteem" (p. 11) to increase an individual's economic and cultural power. Flora and Flora (2013) state, "Human capital includes those attributes of individuals that contribute to their ability to earn a living, strengthen community, and otherwise contribute to community organizations, their families, and self-improvement" (p. 84). In other words, human capital refers to developing the ability and aptitudes of individuals to acquire the necessary skills in order to be able to take action to improve their overall stability and well-being in life. Human capital includes having the ability to successfully navigate "interpersonal experiences, the values an individual holds, and the leadership capacity that an individual possesses" (p. 85). Gary Becker, a Nobel Prize laureate in Economics, as cited in Flora and Flora, takes the concept of capital as many people think of it (money, equipment, stock, other physical and financial assets) and states:

> But these tangible forms of capital are not the only ones. Schooling, computer skills, a healthy lifestyle, and the virtues of punctuality and honesty are also capital. That is because they raise earnings, improve health, or add to a person's good habits over much of his lifetime. Therefore, economists regard expenditures on education, training, medical care, and so on as investments in human capital. They are called human capital because people cannot be separated from their knowledge, skills, health, or values in the way they can be separated from their financial and physical assets (Becker, 2002).

The second capital used in this study is social capital. Social capital refers to the "mutual trust, reciprocity, groups, collective identity, working together, and a sense of a shared future" (Flora and Flora, 2013, p. 11) that rural communities often experience. Social capital is a capital that involves people interacting with each other in group environments. It refers to the ability of individuals to establish, build, and sustain relationships through mutual customs and mutual trust. It is these relationships that collectively strengthen the rural community. Flora and Flora state, "Communities can build enduring social capital by strengthening relationships and communication on a communitywide basis and encouraging community initiative, responsibility, and adaptability" (p. 119). In rural communities particularly, more robust relationships and communications can result from nurturing increased interactions among unlikely groups "inside and outside of the community and increased availability of information and knowledge among community members" (p. 119).

Context

The site of this study was Southeastern Community College (SCC), a public, rural two-year college situated in the southeast Iowa region along the Mississippi River. The institution is a regional institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and the Iowa Department of Education. It is one of 15 community colleges in the state. This open-admission, publicly supported institution has two campuses and one regional center in a four-county service area of 1,824 square miles with a population of roughly 107,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b, c, e, f). The four counties are Des Moines County, Henry County, Lee County, and Louisa County. The main campus, which is also the administrative center, is located in West Burlington, a community that borders the larger community of Burlington, the county seat and largest city, in Des Moines County. The Burlington-West Burlington community is the largest population center in the region and could be described as the regional hub of Southeast Iowa. To the south, Lee County has two county seats, Fort Madison and Keokuk, each with similar population (~10,000 each) and dominant economic activity in the healthcare and manufacturing sectors. SCC has another campus in Keokuk, in southern Lee County. In 2020, SCC opened a new center located in Fort Madison. In Henry County, SCC maintains a center in Mount Pleasant, providing a limited number of credit and non-credit courses and services here. Even though the college serves the 4 counties discussed here, in this study, participants were selected only from Burlington, Keokuk, and Mount Pleasant because those communities are where the community college has a physical presence with sites (the Fort Madison Center became operational after this study was conducted).

Methods

This study was a phenomenological study that explored the perceptions of rural community leaders and how they perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method defined as "an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it" (Neubauer et al, 2019, p. 91). This method suited the study's purpose because it focused on exploring the perceptions of rural community leaders and allowed the investigator to explore the lived experiences of participants. Data were collected from 39 participants in six focus groups across three separate communities. There were two focus group interviews conducted in each community. In selecting participants and assigning them to a focus group, careful effort was taken to make sure that there were no known relationships between participants that could lead to a power imbalance (supervisor-subordinate) in the focus groups. A range of leaders (business owner, public employee) were assigned to each group with no specific focus on selecting individuals from specific sectors to be assigned to a group (doctors, lawyers, teachers, business owners, civic activists, etc., for example). To be consistent, community leaders were assigned in an unstructured manner for all six focus group interviews.

Ryan et al. (2014) identified two types of focus group design perspectives: Type A, or Individualistic Social Psychology Perspective; and Type B, or Social Constructionist Perspective. The Type A design perspective indicated that the focus group interview was designed with "…a scientific orientation where the investigator uses his or her study skills to control bias, extract relevant information and discard irrelevant information" (p. 331). The Type B design perspective focus groups indicated that the structure of participant interaction in the focus group was free flowing, enabling participants to share observations and experiences. In Type B focus groups, the role of the investigator is "…inhibited or subordinated through the use of loosely structured protocols with a few open-ended questions" (p. 331). The focus group interviews in this study were conducted according to Type B design as indicated by Ryan et al. (2014) using an interview protocol (See Appendix).

Table 1

Demographics of the participants in Keokuk

Participant Characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Keokuk, IA			
Participant ID	*Gender*	*Role in the Community*	*Length of time in community*
Carol, age 55	Female	Administrative Assistant	45 years
Melanie, age 63	Female	Business owner	44 years
Thomas, age 65	Male	Municipal administrator	55 years
Martha, age 60	Female	Community organization director	24 years
Jameson, age 49	Male	Business owner	49 years
Alicia, age 31	Female	Municipal administrator	20 years
Lynn, age 62	Female	Retired educator	34 years

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #2, Keokuk, IA			
Participant ID	*Gender*	*Role in the Community*	*Length of time in community*
Amanda, age 35	Female	Social Worker	14 years
Tim, age 37	Male	Business Owner	20 years
Aaron, age 55	Male	Retired counselor	28 years
Marcia, age 49	Female	Local workforce development advisor	29 years
Meredith, age 51	Female	Banker	16 years
Todd, age 60	Male	Municipal administrator	27 years
Vivian, age 30	Female	Community organization director	30 years

Participants were selected for participation in this study using key informant sampling. This method assists in identifying individuals in the community who, based on their role or position, were identified to have a knowledge and/or awareness of the community that perhaps was unique to them based on that role or position. Participants were recruited through relationships established between the investigator and community leaders and through snowball sampling. Each participant in this study participated in one focus group which lasted approximately 1 hour in length and included 6-8 participants. Invitations to participate were sent by email and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook). An audio recording of each focus group interview was made by using a portable audio recording device.

The data collected in this study were coded using two cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2013). The purpose of first cycle coding is to initially summarize segments of data (Saldaña, 2013). Codes were determined by the researcher according to the words and phrases used by participants to answer questions during the focus group interviews. The first cycle coding method used in this study was descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013).

The second cycle coding method used in this study was Pattern Coding (Saldaña, 2013). Pattern Codes are "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation" (p. 236). As regularities were identified, they were documented as a theme in the transcripts.

Data analysis started with the focus group audio recordings being transcribed. A transcript of each audio recording was used to start the data analysis process. Each transcript was coded manually instead of using data analysis software. Lichtman (2006) recommends developing a broad list of codes. Descriptive coding was used to develop a list of initial codes that summarized passages.

Table 2

Demographics of the Participants in Burlington, IA

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Burlington, IA			
Participant ID	*Gender*	*Role in the Community*	*Length of time in community*
Kevin, age 56	Male	Non-profit administrator	12 years
Clyde, age 40	Male	Municipal administrator	40 years
Brian, age 50	Male	Business owner	25 years
Jack, age 65	Male	Retired police officer	43 years
Steven, age 50	Male	Firefighter	50 years
Kathy, age 46	Female	Education administrator	46 years
Edward, age 55	Male	Municipal administrator	55 years
Tammy, age 50	Female	Nurse	31 years

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Burlington, IA			
Participant ID	*Gender*	*Role in the Community*	*Length of time in community*
Dale, age 58	Male	Municipal administrator	51 years
Darren, age 51	Male	Municipal administrator	12 years
Clark, age 40	Male	Business owner	36 years
Ben, age 39	Male	Municipal administrator	14.5 years
Richard, age 60	Male	Education administrator	8 years
Betty, age 62	Female	Retired educator	61 years

Table 3

Demographics of the Participants in Mount Pleasant, IA

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Mount Pleasant, IA			
Participant ID	*Gender*	*Role in the Community*	*Length of time in community*
Joanna, age 27	Female	Education administrator	4.5 years
Barbara, age 40	Female	Nonprofit director	15 years
Denise, age 44	Female	Local workforce development advisor	44 years
Jennifer, age 55	Female	Local economic development official	34 years
Marlene, age 45	Female	State government employee	45 years

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #2, Mount Pleasant, IA			
Participant ID	*Gender*	*Role in the Community*	*Length of time in community*
Robert, age 59	Male	Municipal administrator	30 years
Kay, age 59	Female	Educator	30 years
Anne, age 55	Female	Educator	35 years
Lisa, age 30	Female	Community development official	8 years
James, age 57	Male	Education administrator	22 years
Shawn, age 56	Male	Healthcare administrator	23 years

The initial codes were compiled into a document that was used to start identifying patterns and narrowing down the codes. Pattern coding was used to narrow down the broad list of initial codes. During this process, the large number of first-cycle codes was collapsed into a smaller number of odes. The transcripts were reanalyzed using the pattern codes and this led to the development of themes. Based on Creswell (2013), "the themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 186).To establish trustworthiness, triangulation and member checking occurred in this study. Triangulation occurred using multiple data sources (six different focus group interviews) and multiple sites (three separate communities). Member checking was performed as the data were reviewed by the participants themselves to make sure that the data (transcripts) were accurate.

Positionality

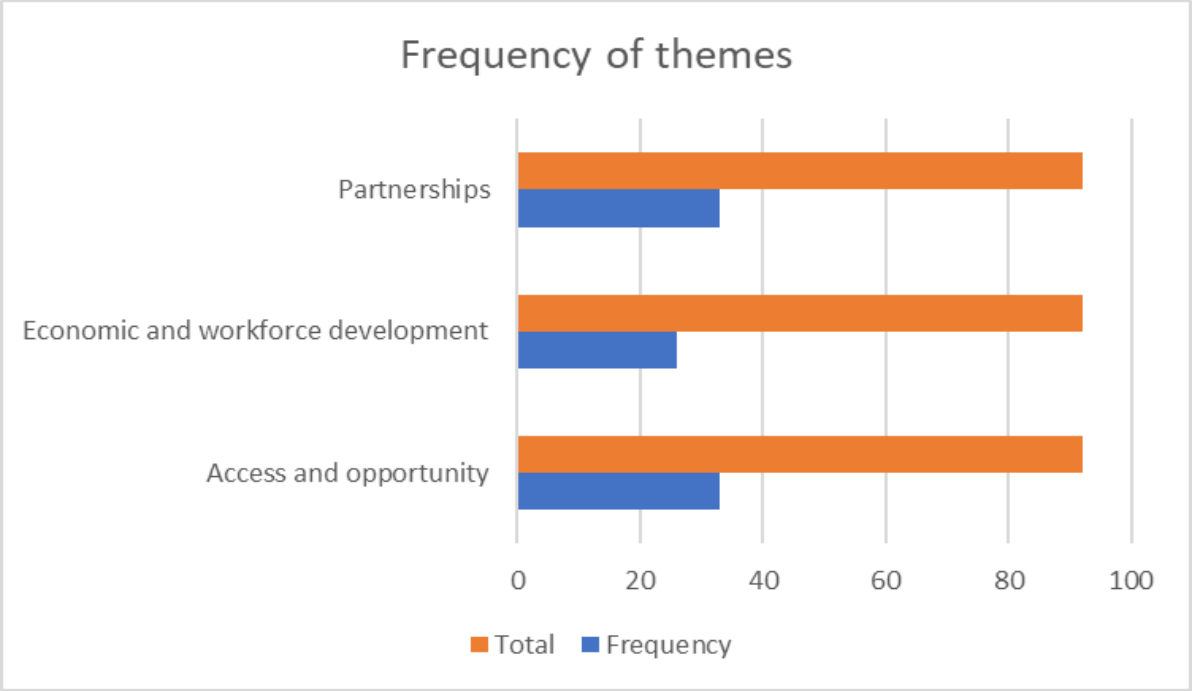
The positionality of the investigator was disclosed to the fullest extent to the study participants. Participants were informed that the investigator was born and raised in a small town in the Midwest and had a unique interest in better understanding rural communities and rural community colleges. Participants were informed that the investigator had a curiosity in this topic due to being a community college practitioner and an employee of Midwestern Community College study who resides in Carpenter County, one of the counties within the college's service district. The investigator informed participants of his intent of this research, which was to explore their perceptions of the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life. The investigator was deliberate to inform participants of the relationship with the Midwestern Community College so that participants had a full disclosure of the relationship between the investigator and the college. Participants were informed that due to this relationship, effort was made to be transparent and purposefully remaining as neutral as possible while conducting this research so as to explore their perceptions as objectively as possible and allow them to freely exchange perceptions in the interviews without influence. During the interviews, the investigator had opportunities to ask more probing questions based on individual responses but decided against doing so. This decision was made based on positionality and wanting to remain as neutral as possible during the interviews so as to not lead the conversation in a specific direction.

Findings

Through analysis of the data collected from the participants in the focus group interviews, three major themes were identified from the data related to the research question, how do community leaders perceive the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life? The findings of this study suggest that the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life by providing 1) access and opportunity; 2) economic and workforce development; and 3) partnerships. By offering academic programs for credit and non-credit, athletic, and cultural events, and other supportive services, the small rural community college provides access and opportunity to residents in the community. Community leaders also perceived the impact of the small rural community college on the rural economy and workforce development through the adaptability of the community college to be able to respond to the changing economic and workforce needs of the community. Finally, community leaders identified ways in which they perceived the community college impacting quality of life through interactions with K-12 districts and developing partnerships to create opportunities for students. The frequency of how often participants mentioned words associated with each theme is presented in Table 4 below. There were 92 total instances of participants mentioning words included in the three themes presented here.

Table 4

Frequency of major themes from data.



Theme 1: Access and Opportunity

Participants discussed how access to education means more than just classes leading to a degree. To them, it meant participation in athletic and cultural events as well as continuing education programs. Participants saw a connection between the community college and a quality-of-life impact in the community in which it was located. Participant Carol commented, "If you have an education and then you get a job, then you contribute more to the community because you aren't worrying . . . You have more time. You can volunteer more." The opportunity to explore individual interests and build human capital was expressed by Clyde: "Having the opportunity to learn about whatever your interests are, different resources to learn and educate yourself will enhance your quality of life. The opportunity is there." Jennifer agreed and echoed similar sentiments:

> You can enhance your quality of life because it offers the learning opportunities. Whether it's to get a degree or just your general interests or wanting to upgrade your skills in computers it will enhance that quality of life through the educational component.

Darren commented on access to opportunities in the areas of athletic events that are the result of the community college:

> You can go to basketball games, soon to be soccer, soon to be other things too so I think that alone is pretty good addition to the quality of life. Adding things to do. Also, I think some people in the community, although most people are from around here, it brings in some of the athletes, it brings in a little different mix into the community and that always kind of improves the quality of life somewhat.

Participants also noted the access to opportunities at the community college and the flexibility of program offerings at the community college. Joanna noted: "In a flexible way too, which I think is important. Not everyone can jump into a classroom and spend the day if they are working full-time." Participants also commented on recognizing the low cost of the community college and personal attention provided by the community college. Betty stated:

> It is a less expensive way to go to school and smaller class size and I just think that traditional and nontraditional students get a lot more assistance, there's more available, more people to talk to if they are having problems. You kind of get lost in a university, or you can, and at the community college there is always someone available to help the students out.

Theme 2: Economic impact and workforce development

Community leaders also acknowledged the impact of the small rural community college on the rural economy and workforce development. Kevin stated, "Impacts on quality of life I think would be economic. The facilities that are provided, the infrastructure that is out there. That's a big thing for the community. I think the economic value of the community college is huge." Participants also observed the importance of the community college role in contributing to workforce development, with focus on the broad range of impacts the community college can have. Joanna stated her observation:

> I think workforce. I think there has to be a thriving workforce. We need education for . . . soft skills, hard skills, trade, business degrees and further education (to continue our) quality of life. I am big proponent of culture and athletics. Anything where you can broaden that experience in the community. And the community college can do all of that.

Participant Brian reflected on the ability of the community college to change programming to meet specific industry needs by stating:

> Doesn't the community college kind of become molded by the community itself? Based on the local hospitals needing good nurses, the community college has a nursing program. To manufacturing needing certain skills, they depend on the community college to provide that service. Community colleges are able to adapt to what's going on or what they think the future might need.

Participant Ben spoke to the notion of how the community college contributes to quality of life by potentially impacting workforce development:

> Workforce is the number one thing. It doesn't matter union or nonunion, it's just people, you got to have the right people. Regionally we are able to tell a much better story about how we can develop and train and retrain our workforce with the community college. If we didn't have the community college here, and we had to go to larger metro areas, I think it would be a really big disadvantage.

Theme 3: Partnerships

Community leaders identified ways in which they perceived the community college impacting quality of life through interactions with K-12 districts and businesses. Participant Kathy made this observation about partnerships and the small, rural community college:

> The community college has to be more than just an open door, it has to be a partner with agencies. The community college creates community partners, demonstrating that we are all in it together and we're building what we need because it's not just there for us.

Specifically, participants discussed opportunities for high school students to take college courses through dual credit opportunities. Aaron commented:

> Well, good or bad, dual-credit courses. We have high school students who are, you know, getting a year . . . at least a semester, if not more. There's a lot of initiatives out there for people to get education, whether it's online, whether it's night classes."

Other participants also noted the partnerships that the community college has with industries in the region and how the college is able to respond to the needs of industry. Alicia observed:

> I think the community college is an amazingly powerful asset to our community. I think they're amazingly responsive to the needs of our community, especially with this new technology center. Industry identified a very specific need and within a very short amount of time, we now have a building and a plan. In education, it takes longer to get those pieces into place, so I feel

like the community college was quick to act based on a need.

Discussion

Community colleges provide open access to postsecondary education services to students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds as well as providing economic and workforce development training programs to help individuals acquire new knowledge and skills leading to high quality employment. Community colleges are flexible and responsive to local needs of the community. Using the Community Capitals Framework, one of the ways in which the community college contributes to quality of life is by developing human capital. As stated in the Theoretical Framework, "human capital can be referred to as education, skills, and training" (Flora and Flora, 2013, p. 11). Through providing access and opportunities, economic and workforce development, and partnerships within the community, the small, rural community college directly impacts increasing human capital in rural communities

Access and opportunity in higher education are sometimes difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons (economics, transportation, childcare, job loss). The findings suggest that human capital can be increased by the small, rural community college because of the way that the institution creates opportunities for individuals regardless of what their interests are. The small, rural community college offers residents the chance to take classes to earn a degree and to take a particular class to increase specific skills (using spreadsheets, computer-aided design, and computerized accounting, for example) or of general interest (birdwatching and knitting, for example).

Through providing a broad range of course offerings to suit different needs and interests, the community college contributes to quality of life by providing opportunities to develop relationships and connections between people and directly increases human capital in the rural community. Residents in rural communities are likely to have limited access to opportunities to increase their skill level without the community college. If the community college were not located in the rural community and accessible to residents, then the access and opportunity of residents to increase their educational attainment and increase their skills and employability would be limited. The consequences would have a negative impact on the rural community due to the challenges already facing them (declining population, stagnant economy, declining infrastructure).

As rural residents become more aware of the community college programs and services available, and participate in the education, training, and workforce development classes and training opportunities, residents continue to increase their human capital. Increased human capital is a community development tool because as people increase their education, skills, and training and are able to work for a higher wage, they have more money to contribute to the rural economy. If they are able to increase their skills and training, they are able to increase their standard of living, thus enhancing their quality of life. This could mean that individuals are allowed more time and resources to contribute to the collective quality of life of the rural community.

The small, rural community college is a vital tool in the toolbox of rural communities to use in building human capital and social capital. Not only does the community college provide tools and opportunities necessary for individuals to increase their educational attainment and employability skills, the institution also can serve as a conduit for communities to build social capital. By offering a variety of programming on their campuses, small rural community colleges are creating opportunities for residents to come together in groups and not only learn about a new topic or experience an athletic or cultural event but also those residents the opportunity to meet other residents and build relationships with people in the community that they may not normally encounter. As mentioned in Flora and Flora (2013), this group function is an important step in building social capital in a rural community because social capital is not built at the individual level.

Why do rural residents continue to live in an area with declining population and job scarcity? They like the quality of life that the rural community provides. They like the wide-open space where

everyone knows everybody and people look after each other. They also like the fact that they have access to what larger communities provide but at a distance. The colleges are a valued part of rural life, providing cultural activities and sporting events as well as opportunities for further education and skill development; they help keep existing industry there. The results highlight that community colleges should engage the community in determining needs that can be served through the community college.

Career and technical program faculty utilize local employers to serve on their advisory committees and connect their students to industry internships and post-college job opportunities. Faculty expertise may be utilized to serve on local conservation boards or the board of a local social service agency. The college facilities are a community asset. Classrooms may be used for industry training and retraining, and gymnasiums and sports fields may be used by the K-12 school districts for a variety of community events. The child development center may be utilized to provide daycare for families in the community. The college auditorium may be utilized to host speakers, cultural events, and other performances for the public. These kinds of activities may be especially appealing to the older rural residents and foster their support of the college (i.e., the college foundation, scholarships, tax levies). Professional development activities can be provided to K-12 teachers in use of distance learning and other technologies.

Implications for Practice

Targeted investment in providing intrusive student supportive services

The community college has an opportunity to address a vital need in the rural community regarding access and opportunity. Rural residents may not even attempt to pursue postsecondary education after high school because they do not believe they can be successful at it, they cannot afford to go to college, they do not know how to get started applying for college, or maybe the thought of going to college is intimidating to them and so they give up on the idea of doing so.

Increasing human capital requires individuals to pursue postsecondary education to acquire new information, develop knowledge, and learn new skills for employability. The small rural community college needs to act by making an investment of resources to provide adequate staff to help ensure that each student is assigned an advisor during the time they are enrolled in either a non-credit or credit program at the institution. These positions can take on different names – student success coach, student success advocate, pathway navigator. The purpose of these positions is to guarantee that students at the community college have an individual assigned who will assist that student through each step of their academic journey – from discussing short- and long-range goals, navigating admissions and registration, discussing financial aid programs available to help pay for training, and providing supportive services to the student while they are enrolled and completing their training program.

Rural residents and rural students graduating from high school and looking at postsecondary educational opportunities could benefit from additional supportive services at the postsecondary level to assist them with navigating the higher education environment. By creating a stronger support system within the community college, rural students arriving on campus could have a stronger chance at increasing their human capital through successful postsecondary educational attainment. By investing in human resources to provide information, guidance, and one-to-one interaction with rural students to assist them through each step of their educational journey, community colleges are playing a vital role in increasing human capital in rural communities.

Not only would high school or traditional college-aged students benefit from this type of resource at the community college, non-traditional students would, too. With the changing economic activity in rural communities, companies have closed plants as a part of their business plan. When plants close, employees become dislocated workers, are laid off, retire, relocate, or find another job locally. One option for dislocated workers is to further their educational attainment and possibly retrain for a new career field. For these individuals, some of whom may have been out of the educational environment for several years,

including decades, the thought of going back to school can be overwhelming and frightening. The small, rural community college can provide that supportive environment to help these potential students to successfully navigate the higher education environment, providing supportive services along their way to help them be successful in completing their training program. This direct action would lead to an increase in human capital and social capital in the rural community.

Utilize key partnerships to increase community- and service-learning opportunities.

One way to build social capital in communities is through service-learning opportunities. The small, rural community college should utilize partnerships with agencies and local companies to provide students with opportunities to apply concepts and theories learned in the classroom environment to a workplace environment. This type of learning can increase social capital in the rural community. Increasing social capital means that individuals are building relationships, strengthening interpersonal interactions, identifying problems in their communities, and working together to find workable solutions – all things that can lead to a stronger quality of life in the community. The small, rural community college has an opportunity to increase social capital by creating access and opportunity and providing supportive services to help rural students navigate the higher education environment.

Rural students develop interpersonal skills, along with technical skills, and build relationships with faculty and other students during their time enrolled at the community college. They have discussions related to course content and other ideas in the classroom environment and perhaps outside of the classroom as well. It is this type of social interaction for rural students that can help increase social capital in the rural community because rural students learn new information, develop knowledge, learn concepts, and improve social skills, all of which they are able to bring back to the rural community and incorporate them into their daily lives. Perhaps they form a committee to develop a new economic development plan for the rural community or they decide to develop a new festival as a community attraction to draw outsiders to the rural community during the summer months. Whatever the case, the small, rural community college has the opportunity to further increase social capital in rural communities by providing the environment for rural residents to develop the skills and abilities needed to build and strengthen interpersonal relationships, work to identify problems that affect their communities and share ideas on developing short- and long-range solutions to those problems, which can lead to an enhanced quality of life in the rural community.

Providing a framework for institutional self-assessment

Another implication for practice from this study is that it provides a framework for other institutions to conduct similar self-assessments aimed at providing important insight from members of their communities in helping the institution better understand how the work performed impacts the communities. This type of study can be replicated by institutions in order to enhance their awareness of how the community perceives the work that they do and what additional actions can be taken to improve the impact of this work on stakeholders in the community (residents, businesses, the regional economy, and workforce). This study assists community leaders and community college administrators in further developing their understanding of the work and functions performed by the small, rural community college and the perceived role of the community college in the community. The results of this study tell the boards of trustees, administrators, faculty, and staff that the small, rural community college is viewed as an important part of the community. Visibility in community organizations and events is the role of everyone at the community college.

Limitations

Although the number of participants allowed for exploration of perceptions of rural community leaders, the perceptions explored in this study may not represent those of all rural community leaders. Rural community leaders are not a homogenous group, regardless of their shared experience of living and/or working in a rural community. Additionally, the focus group method may have

restricted the expression of some participants who felt uncomfortable sharing their perceptions within a group setting.

Another limitation of this study was that the investigation was led by an employee of the community college under study in this research. Participants were made aware of this relationship between the investigator and the community college at the start of the focus group interviews. With this disclosure, some participants may have limited their responses to hide perceptions that they felt would have been damaging or not well-received. For future research, or replication of this study, using an independent investigator with no affiliation to the community college under study would be advantageous to conducting research to gather insights.

Conclusion

Rural and urban communities are two dissimilar settings each with their own unique characteristics, features, and challenges. Rural communities offer natural resources, wide open spaces, and less dense population, which makes them attractive to many residents. While they seek to provide a good quality of life for their residents, many rural communities experience social and economic challenges due to lack of resources including human capital, financial capital, social capital, and built capital. Over time, rural communities sometimes experience deteriorating infrastructure along with other socioeconomic challenges due to the lack of resources needed to adequately support and sustain their environments. These communities experience declining population, higher unemployment, and insufficient resources (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). As a result, rural communities often rely on assistance from a variety of organizations, such as non-profit groups, educational institutions, community foundations, government agencies, and public–private partnerships (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). One of the tools available to rural communities to assist with development issues is the small, rural community college.

The small, rural community college is a vital tool available in rural communities to help directly strengthen rural communities by increasing human capital and social capital through the functions of providing access and opportunity, economic and workforce development, and partnerships. By taking deliberate action to create access and opportunity for residents in rural communities to pursue higher education, the small rural community college increases human and social capital. Creating chances for rural residents to access and pursue programming at the community college produces a direct benefit to rural communities because the institutions is constructing opportunities for rural residents to become prepared and qualified to participate in the local economy and workforce by gaining new information, creating knowledge, and learning skills. Without the small, rural community college, these opportunities may not exist in rural communities.

The small, rural community college contributes to quality of life in a rural community by increasing social capital as well. The opportunities for rural residents to learn new skills and increase their knowledge through post-secondary education can increase social capital by increasing residents' ability to establish and build effective relationships, increase their skills in interpersonal interactions, and increase their ability to identify problems in their communities and share ideas about solutions to solving those problems.

Social capital in rural communities can be increased when rural students access the small rural community college. Participating in class discussions, where course content is discussed in depth, ideas are talked about and exchanged, and knowledge is constructed can increase social capital by increasing the ability of rural students to go back to their communities and establish new relationships and strengthen existing ones, become more involved in identifying problems facing their communities and having the skill sets needed to identify solutions to these problems through sharing and implementing ideas.

Human capital and social capital are two important ways that rural communities can strengthen their growth and development. Human capital reflects the ability of rural residents to participate in the local economy and workforce, and social capital reflects the ability of rural residents to

contribute to the continued development and improvement of the rural community through social action designed to improve the existence of the community for the people who inhabit it. These two capitals are important for continued sustainability of rural communities, and the small, rural community college plays an important role in building these two capitals in these communities.

References

Becker, G. S. (n.d.). *Human Capital*. Econlib. https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/HumanCapital.html

Brisolara, S. (2019). Leveraging strategies and capacities in rural communities for LGBTQIA+ students. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2019*(188), 11–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20375

Cejda, B. D. (2010). Faculty issues in rural community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2010*(152), 33–40. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.425

Cejda, B. D. (2012). Competencies in the heartland. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2012*(159), 53–61. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20026

Community College FAQs. (n.d.). Retrieved August 30, 2021, from https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community-college-faqs.html

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Crookston, A., & Hooks, G. (2012). Community colleges, budget cuts, and jobs: The impact of community colleges on employment growth in rural U.S. counties, 1976–2004. *Sociology of Education*, *85*(4), 350–372. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040712441376

Drabenstott, M., Novack, N., & Weiler, S. (2004). New governance for a new rural economy: Reinventing public and private institutions: A conference summary. *Economic Review*, *89*(4), 55–70.

Eddy, P. (2007). Grocery store politics: Leading the rural community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *31*(4), 271–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920701242670

Flora, C. B., & Flora, J. L. (2013). *Rural communities: Legacy and change*. Westview Press.

Friedel, J. N., & Reed, J. W. (2019). Community colleges: Drivers of economic development in small rural communities. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2019*(187), 19–29. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20366

Garrett, S. D., Miller, V., & Gilbert, C. (2021). The challenge of culturally responsive teaching in rural community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2021*(195), 107–118. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20470

Garza, H., & Eller, R. D. (1998). The role of rural community colleges in expanding access and economic development. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 1998*(103), 31–41.

Hancks, J. W. (2011). *Keepin' it rural: The role of rural public library educational programming and outreach in community economic sustainability efforts* (Publication No. 874246054). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Hardy, D. E., & Katsinas, S. G. (2007). Classifying community colleges: How rural community colleges fit. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2007*(137), 5–17.

Hillygus, D. S. (2005). The missing link: Exploring the relationship between higher education and political engagement. *Political Behavior, 27*(1), 25-47. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-005-3075-8

Hlinka, K. R. (2017). Tailoring retention theories to meet the needs of rural Appalachian community college students. *Community College Review, 45*(2), 144–164. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552116686403

Hlinka, K. R., Mobelini, D. C., & Giltner, T. (2015). Tensions impacting student success in a rural community college. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *30*(5), 1–16.

Howley, C., Chavis, B., & Kester, J. (2013). "Like human beings": Responsive relationships and institutional flexibility at a rural community college. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 28*(8), 1–14.

Lichtman, M. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide*. Sage.

Miller, M. T., & Deggs, D. (2012). The role of rural community colleges in the development of personal identity. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 36*(5), 330–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2012.632753

Miller, M. T., & Kissinger, D. B. (2007). Connecting rural community colleges to their communities. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2007*(137), 27-34. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.267

Morgan, J. Q., & Lambe, W. (2009). Find a way or make one. *Economic Development Journal*, *8*(3), 5–13.

Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & L. V. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education, 8*(2), 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019/0509-2

Pennington, K., Williams, M. R., & Karvonen, M. (2006). Challenges facing rural community colleges: Issues and problems today and over the past 30 years. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *30*(8), 641-655. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920600746086

Ryan, K. E., Gandha, T., Culbertson, M. J., & Carlson, C. (2014). Focus group evidence: Implications for design and analysis. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *35*(3), 328–345. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214013508300

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Sowl, S., Smith, R. A., & Brown, M. G. (2022). Rural college graduates: Who comes home? *Rural Sociology, 87*(1), 303–329. https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12416

Torres, V., Viterito, A., Heeter, A., Hernandez, E., Santiague, L., & Johnson, S. (2013). Sustaining opportunity in rural community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *37*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920903213040

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Burlington City, Iowa; United States. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2019, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/burlingtoncityiowa,US/PST045218

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Des Moines County, Iowa; United States. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2019, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/desmoinescountyiowa,US/PST045218

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Henry County, Iowa; United States. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2019, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/henrycountyiowa,US/PST045218

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Keokuk city, Iowa; United States. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2019, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/keokukcityiowa,US/PST045218

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Lee County, Iowa; United States. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2019, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/lecountyiowa,US/PST045218

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Louisa County, Iowa; United States. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2019, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/louisacountyiowa,US/PST045218

U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Mount Pleasant City, Iowa; United States. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2019, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/mountpleasantcityiowa,US/PST045218

Vineyard, E. E. (1979). The rural community college. *Community College Review*, *6*(3), 29–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/009155217900600305

Yang, L., & Venezia, S. (2020). The impact of financial aid on associate degree attainment for rural community college students: A comparison of rural, urban, and suburban patterns. *Community College Review*, *48*(4), 423–454. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552120935975

About the Authors

Jared Reed, PhD, is a higher education administrator and instructor with over 10 years of experience working in community colleges, particularly in the areas of adult education/workforce development, academic affairs, and student affairs. Currently, he is the Director of Financial Aid at Southeastern Community College in Iowa. Reed has been an adjunct faculty member since June 2010 and teaches graduate and undergraduate courses. His scholarship includes a co-authored book chapter on rural community college economic development in *New Directions in Community Colleges* (2019). He is an expert in rural community colleges and has presented his research at the Council for the Study of Community Colleges as well as the Rural Community College Alliance. A native of Michigan, he earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Iowa State University, Master of Arts degree from Western Illinois University, and a Bachelor of Science degree from Central Michigan University. He has research and teaching interests in rural education, the intersection of post-secondary education and community growth and development, student persistence and retention, student affairs leadership and practice, student engagement, and organizational development, particularly community college organizational development, with a particular focus on exploring these interests at rural community colleges.

Janice Friedel, PhD, is a professor of education at Iowa State University where she joined the faculty in the Educational Policy and Leadership Studies Department within the College of Human Sciences in August 2011. She has more than 30 years of experience in community colleges in Iowa and Kentucky where she has served in a variety of executive level community college positions, including the community college presidency, and as the state administrator for a system of community colleges and the state director for career and technical (vocational) education for secondary and postsecondary education. Other community college administrative experience includes vice chancellor of academic affairs and planning for a multi-college community college district, director of curriculum development and program evaluation, and dean of community and continuing education. A native of Iowa, she earned her doctorate, master, and bachelor degrees at the University of Iowa. Friedel's scholarship include over forty articles, books, and chapters on program evaluation, labor market assessments, environmental scanning, strategic planning, the community college mission, workforce development, the role of community colleges in high school reform, and the economic benefits of attending the community college. Her current research interests center on rural community colleges, higher education public policy, community college leadership development, the community college mission and governance, career and technical education, the economic benefits of community college attendance, and dual/concurrent enrollment.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. How does "quality of life" exist in this region?
2. Tell me about the ways in which you perceive the community college contributing to "quality of life"?
3. Describe your perception of the relationship between the community and the community college today.

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 83-104
 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p83-104

Using Improvement Science to Develop and Implement a Teacher Residency Program in Rural School Districts

Leigh Kale D'Amico
Hall S. West
Melissa A. Baker
George J. Roy
Rachelle Curcio
Kristin E. Harbour
Stephen L. Thompson
Jessie Guest
Catherine Compton-Lilly
Amber Adgerson
University of South Carolina

As teacher preparation paths change and rural areas have opportunities to engage qualified community members in the teaching profession, a flagship university co-developed a teacher residency program with two school districts located in rural communities. Through this partnership, the Networked Improvement Community focused on root causes of recruitment and retention challenges in the rural school districts. Using an improvement science approach, a 14-month residency model was developed to recruit qualified community members to transition to the teaching profession, with a focus on mirroring the diversity of the local community. This study focuses on the development of the residency model and the recruitment of teacher residents for the initial cohort of this alternative teacher preparation program.

***Keywords*: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, rural education, teacher residency**

Teacher recruitment and retention have been areas of focus in educational research for more than 50 years with researchers speculating and studying causes and effects of recruiting and retaining high quality teachers (Charters, 1956; Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2021). The focus on recruitment and retention is warranted as teachers have been identified to be among the greatest influencers of student growth and achievement within the school setting. An effective teacher has cumulative effects on students and can increase students' likelihood to achieve at higher levels in future grades, attend college, and earn higher salaries over their lifetimes (Chetty, Friedman et al., 2014; Chetty, Hendren et al., 2014; Hattie, 2009; Rivkin et al., 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

Recent trends in the workforce have made understanding recruitment, preparation, and retention of effective teachers even more prominent. Currently, more teaching positions are available because fewer individuals enter traditional pipelines (i.e., undergraduate teacher preparation programs) to become teachers, retention rates during the induction years of teaching are decreasing, and teacher retirements are increasing (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement, 2021; Ingersoll, 2007). The number of teaching positions has also been increasing due to policy initiatives focused on improving education for all students (Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll et al., 2014; Ingersoll, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2021). As such, a renewed focus on recruitment has been noted as retirements and instability of the workforce have increased (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

School districts in rural and urban environments often have greater challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers (Cowan et al., 2016; McClure & Reeves, 2004; McVey & Trinidad, 2019; Monk, 2007; Rosenberg et al., 2014). Understanding the root causes that inhibit or enhance recruitment, preparation, and retention in different areas is

necessary as well as implementing policy and practice that recognize and address these causes. In South Carolina, the number of new teachers hired who graduated from in-state college-/university-based preparation programs has been hovering around 22% recently. Preparing teachers from traditional pathways alone is not enough to meet the demand to fill the teacher vacancies across the state. According to the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement (2021), "the number of South Carolina students preparing to become teachers has been declining mostly each year requiring districts to hire teachers from other programs and sources" (p. 4). As such, there are many alternative pathways to teacher certification that have become more prominent in addressing the demand for as well as quality of individuals entering the teaching profession (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007; Shuls & Trivitt, 2015; Whitford et al., 2018).

This study focuses on the development and initial implementation of Carolina Transition to Teaching, a cohort-based residency program emphasizing the recruitment, preparation, and eventual retention of prospective teachers in rural communities funded by a U.S. Department of Education Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant. The purpose of the TQP grant is to develop innovative strategies and programs to "recruit highly qualified individuals, including minorities and individuals from other occupations" and enhance their preparation and professional development to ultimately improve student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2022, para. 1).

The leadership team for the program, which includes university-based members from the College of Education, a team of program evaluators from a university-based center, and two district representatives from rural communities, used systematic methods of inquiry within an improvement science approach to develop, explore, and inform the implementation of the program. The development and initial recruitment for Carolina Transition to Teaching took place from November 2019 through August 2020 through regular meetings of the leadership team and sub-groups of the leadership team as well as events focused on recruitment within the districts. The initial cohort (Cohort 1) began the program in Summer 2020.

The goal of Carolina Transition to Teaching is to produce a professional pathway into teaching for career changers as well as promote a career ladder for individuals currently working and living in rural districts who are not certified to teach (e.g., paraprofessionals, substitute teachers). Research suggests that *grow your own* programs focused on recruiting teachers from the community, particularly people who are in paraprofessional roles within the educational system, can be successful in increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of teachers and retaining teachers in the profession (Gist et al., 2019).

Teacher Residency Model

In addition to being a *grow your own* approach, teacher residency programs present promising teacher preparation pathways for recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers in high-needs districts. Since 2001, teacher residency programs have grown in popularity and have been used to recruit and retain teachers in both urban and rural settings (Guha et al., 2017). Based on the medical residency model, teacher residents complete a year-long clinical experience situated in an authentic school context while receiving mentoring and taking university coursework. Guha et al. (2017) identified several key components of high-quality teacher residency programs. These include (a) university-school district partnerships; (b) recruitment efforts driven by district needs and that target qualified and diverse candidates; (c) provision of a year-long clinical experience working alongside a mentor; (d) coursework integrated with the clinical experience; (e) selection and recruitment of mentors; (f) incorporation of cohorts of residents; (g) mentoring and support for residents after program completion; and (h) financial support in exchange for a commitment to teach in the partnering district.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Studies conducted on the impact of teacher residency programs have generally focused on three areas: teacher recruitment, retention, and effectiveness. In terms of recruitment, studies have shown that teacher residencies tend to recruit candidates who are ethnically diverse, often underrepresented in the teaching field, and with

diverse backgrounds. In a study of a teacher residency program in New York City, researchers found that half of the enrollees were people of color, and 42% of program completers across five cohorts of residents were from underrepresented groups (Sloan & Blazevski, 2015). Additionally, 69% of teacher residents in this program were career changers (Sloan & Blazevski, 2015). Similar findings occurred in studies of teacher residencies in Boston and San Francisco; in both cases, teacher residency graduates were more ethnically diverse than peers in the districts they served (Guha et al., 2017; Papay et al., 2012).

Studies also show that graduates of teacher residency programs are retained at high rates and often exceed the retention rates of their colleagues. Sloan and Blazevski (2015) studied the *New Visions Hunter College Urban Teacher Residency* (UTR) in New York City and found that the UTR graduate retention rate was 93% after four years, which exceeded city-wide retention rates. In a study of the *Boston Teacher Residency* (BTR), Papay et al. (2012) found that 75% of BTR graduates were retained after five years compared to 51% of other public school teachers. Similar rates of retention were found in a study of the *San Francisco Teacher Residency,* with 80% of residency graduates retained after five years of teaching (Guha et al., 2017).

Teacher Effectiveness

Regarding teacher effectiveness, Sloan and Blazevski (2015) found that the students of graduates of teacher residency programs outperformed students of teachers not trained in a residency program on state exams. Similarly, in a study of the *Memphis Teacher Residency* program, the students of teacher residency programs had greater academic achievement gains than students of other novice teachers and greater student academic achievement gains than veteran teachers on most statewide standardized tests (Guha et al., 2017). Additionally, Papay et al. (2012) found that the students of residency program graduates were comparable to other public school teachers in their ability to raise students' English language arts scores. In terms of mathematics scores, residency graduates initially underperformed when compared to other teachers, however, by their fourth year of teaching, the effectiveness of residency graduates exceeded that of their colleagues (Papay et al., 2012).

Methodological Approach and Methods

Improvement science informed the development, initial implementation, and data collection related to this teacher residency program. The leadership team, also referred to as the Networked Improvement Community (NIC), is a cornerstone of improvement science. "Membership in a NIC means placing priority on solving a problem together, rather than pursing a theoretical predilection, methodological orientation, or personal belief" (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 17). As outlined in improvement science, the NIC focused on six improvement principles: (a) make work problem-specific and user-centered; (b) focus on variation in performance; (c) see the system that produces current outcomes; (d) focus on accountability/measurable outcomes; (e) use disciplined inquiry to drive improvement; and (f) accelerate learning through networked communities (Bryk et al., 2017). With a focus on making the work problem-specific and user-centered while attending to the system producing current outcomes, the NIC began its work by exploring School Report Card data (Table 1), identifying systemic barriers contributing to recruitment, preparation, and retention issues, and interrogating solutions (e.g., national and international programs) that worked in the short term, but were not successful in the long term.

The NIC focused its work on three core improvement questions: "What is the specific problem that I am now trying to solve? What change might I introduce and why? And how will I know whether the change is actually an improvement?" (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 9). Based on discussion of these questions during leadership team and sub-committee meetings at the onset of this work (January 2020–August 2020), the NIC developed Carolina Transition to Teaching to support effective recruitment, preparation, and retention within rural communities.

The program honored the experiences of instructional teacher assistants who may have

previously experienced barriers to becoming a teacher or who may not have realized a viable path into the profession. In addition, those working within rural communities as instructional assistants may be more likely to be embedded in the community. To recruit residents who brought a desire to become teachers and a deep commitment to the community, the NIC purposefully designed strategies that focused on building community and relationships among the applicants, teacher residents, university faculty, and district leaders.

Context

Two rural school districts, Colleton County School District and Orangeburg County School District, participated in the NIC that designed and implemented Carolina Transition to Teaching. According to Renaud and Bennett (2020), both counties are considered rural based on three indicators: *Urban Influence Code* and *Rural–Urban Continuum Code* developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as well as the *Core Based Statistical Area* developed by the Office of Management and Budget. Whereas the populations of each county may be larger than expected for rural areas, their sizeable geographic area and landscape classify them as rural. Colleton County School District is in a county with a total population of 37,677 and a district population of 5,500 students (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020; South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). Orangeburg County School District is in a county with a total population of 86,175 and a school district population of 10,000 students (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020; South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). Like other rural counties, both counties in which the school districts are located have higher percentages of students living in poverty and scoring below standards in mathematics and reading than some neighboring counties and the state in general (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020; Renaud & Bennett, 2020). The two participating districts were also eligible to be partners under the TQP grant guidelines because they met the definition of high-needs school districts based on: (a) having more than 20% of children living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017); (b) having a teacher turnover rate greater than 15% (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019); and (c) qualifying as Opportunity Zones, a federal designation indicating a community experiencing financial hardship.

Participants

Networked Improvement Community

The Networked Improvement Community (NIC) was composed of four university faculty in teacher preparation programs, one program coordinator hired, two program evaluators through a university-based center, and two district representatives, with one representing each district. The university faculty members were identified based on their interest in developing a residency program and their program area grade-band expertise (two faculty in elementary education, two faculty in middle level education). The two program evaluators had appointments in a university-based research and evaluation center that served the university as well as the state. The two district representatives were appointed by their superintendents based on their leadership positions within the districts and their understanding of teacher recruitment and retention.

Cohort 1 Applicants and Residents

An interest survey was disseminated in Spring 2020. Potential applicants gained information through a series of program information sessions, district-based recruitment efforts involving principals and school leaders, websites, or referrals from colleagues or friends who heard about the program. Forty-three individuals completed the interest survey.

Table 1

Demographics and Educational Indicators of Counties

Indicator	Colleton	Orangeburg	South Carolina
Total Population 2019	37,677	86,175	5,148,714
Percent of Population: Black	37.5	62.2	27.1
Percent of Population: Hispanic/Latinx	3.3	2.4	6.0
Percent of Population: Other Race	1.4	1.7	2.4
Percent of Population: White	57.9	33.8	64.5
Median Family Income	$35,498	$37,474	$59,514
Percent of Children in Poverty	33.5	36.5	22.1
Percent Testing Below Standard: 3rd Grade Math	64.5	58.8	42.3
Percent Testing Below Standard: 3rd Grade Reading	70	71.1	50.2
Percent Testing Below Standard: 8th Grade Math	79.4	87.9	63.4
Percent Testing Below Standards: 8th Grade Reading	71.9	74.5	55.4

Of the 43 individuals who completed the survey (Table 2), 88% identified as females and 12% as male. Most applicants (79%) identified as African American or Black, 19% as White, and 2% as Asian or Asian American. Most applicants (70%) held bachelor's degrees and 25% held master's degrees. During their most recent degree, a majority (74%) of applicants had a grade point average of 2.75 or higher. A large percentage of applicants (77%) also reported that they had at least one to two years of experience in an educational setting; 26% had more than ten years of experience. More than half (63%) of the applicants were currently employed by one of the partner districts, and of those, 70% were teaching assistants/paraprofessionals, 26% were substitute teachers, and one applicant held a non-teaching-related position in a school.

Of the 14 who became teacher residents (qualified based on state requirements and completed a university-based application for admission), 86% identified as African American or Black, 14% as White, and most of the teacher residents identified as female (80%). Most of the teacher residents were between the ages of 30 to 49 (65%), 14% were in their fifties, and 21% were aged 60 or above. Table 3 includes teacher resident demographic information. At the time of the Summer Institute (July 2020), one resident withdrew from the program for personal reasons and is not included in this information.

Table 2

Demographics of Applicants for Cohort 1

	N	%
Gender		
Female	38	88
Male	5	12
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	34	79
Asian or Asian American	1	2
White	8	19

All teacher residents admitted into the program had earned at least a bachelor's degree as required for the program; 29% had master's degrees. From their most recent degree, a majority (71%) had a grade point average of 2.75 or higher. At program entry, nearly all (93%) teacher residents reported that they had at least some experience in educational settings. Of those, 62% had five or more years of experience in educational settings. A large percentage (71%) also reported they currently held positions as a teaching assistant/ paraprofessional or as a long-term substitute teacher in one of the partner school districts at the time of application submissions. All teacher residents in this cohort were seeking elementary education certification. A middle-level track is planned for future years.

Table 3

Demographics of Cohort 1 Residents

	N	%
Gender		
Female	11	79
Male	3	21
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	12	86
Asian or Asian American	0	0
White	2	14
Age		
30–39	5	36
40–49	4	29
50–59	2	14
60 or Above	3	21

*Data includes all residents (N=14) who completed the Summer Institute in July 2020.

Data Collection

The planning process began in November 2019 with the identification of the Networked Improvement Community (NIC). In-person meetings of the NIC began in January 2020 but shifted online in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the planning process, program evaluators used a mixed methods approach to data collection that included participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and the interest survey to document the development of Carolina Transition to Teaching and initial interest. An embedded mixed methods design was used to better understand issues to elicit a range of potential solutions through analysis of qualitative and quantitative data (Cohen et al., 2018). We used qualitative methods during the planning stages as most of our work involved meetings and communication within the NIC. Program evaluators used member checks and a collaborative analysis process to promote the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To better understand participant interest in the program, we used a predominately closed-response interest survey (results presented in Table 2) that was disseminated through university- and district-based channels including websites, career fairs, and schools. At program entry, we conducted focus groups with the residents to gain insight into their rationale, motivations, and expectations for being involved in the program.

Participant Observation

Program evaluators, who were also members of the leadership team, engaged as participant observers capturing field notes during NIC meetings beginning in January 2020. These meetings occurred bi-weekly or monthly across initial program planning, recruitment, and early implementation (January 2020-August 2020). In addition, the program evaluators participated in and gathered field notes at the June 2020 virtual teacher resident orientation and observed multiple sessions during the virtual 2020 Summer Institute, a two-week professional development learning experience for incoming teacher residents.

District Representative Interviews

The program evaluators conducted online interviews via Zoom with each district representative serving on the NIC (n=2). These interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes; program evaluators used a semi-structured interview protocol that was co-constructed with university leadership in June 2020 (see Appendix). One program evaluator facilitated the focus group, and the other program evaluator took notes during the interview. Interviews were not recorded to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the district representatives.

University Faculty Focus Group

Following the Summer Institute, program evaluators conducted a 90-minute online focus group with the teacher residency university-based leaders (n=6). Program evaluators used a semi-structured protocol to gain information about the recruitment process, the initial implementation, and their early experiences with the residents. The focus group was recorded and transcribed.

Data from field notes, observational notes, and interview/focus group transcripts were combined and coded using an open and axial coding process to identify emerging patterns and then identify operative themes. One evaluator led the coding process, and a second evaluator reviewed the codes and added additional open codes as needed. Finally, the codes were member checked by the NIC to promote rigor and trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Teacher Residency Interest Survey

A 19-item interest survey was co-constructed within the NIC. The program evaluators, in collaboration with the NIC, developed the survey to gain information from individuals who expressed interest in Carolina Transition to Teaching. The survey was open from March 24, 2020 to June 30, 2020. Questions were organized around the following areas: (a) demographics, (b) previous degrees and grade point averages, (c) work experience, (d) interest in teaching/program, and (e) preferences of grade level and school district. Responses were received from 43 individuals. Results from the survey were analyzed using

descriptive statistics. These results are reported in the participant section (Tables 2 and 3) and were used by the NIC to develop the Carolina Transition to Teaching program components and understand those who expressed interest in the program and ultimately the teacher residents.

Resident Focus Groups

In July 2020, program evaluators conducted 60-minute online focus groups via Zoom with the Cohort I teacher residents during the virtual Summer Institute, the first professional development aspect of Carolina Transition to Teaching. Teacher residents were randomly placed in one of two groups to allow for opportunities for each resident's voice to be heard.

Transcripts and field notes from the focus groups with the residents were coded using open and axial coding processes. Direct quotes were identified to highlight the specific areas of focus (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One evaluator led the coding process, and another evaluator reviewed the coding schematic and quotes. The two program evaluators came to consensus on the predominant codes.

Findings

Program *Development*

Six overarching themes emerged across field notes, district representative interviews, and a university faculty/staff focus group related to NIC work and program development. By focusing on improvement science principles that made our work problem-specific and user centered, we explored the system that was producing current outcomes and specific aspects to address the problems (Bryk et al., 2017). In short, the NIC sought to use data, their various expertise, and feedback from other colleagues to address the development of Carolina Transition to Teaching. Table 4 presents overarching codes (axial codes), sub-codes (open codes), and illustrative data.

Table 4

Program Development Emergent Codes and Themes

Organized and engaged core leadership team	
Brief Description Common philosophies/grounded in goals Driven Agenda, minutes, and action items Frequent meetings—twice per week at some points Continuous communication Embraced conditions and did not give up/persistent Perceived as organized, professional	"The commitment of the level of people is high—having trouble keeping up with them." District representative interview notes, June 2020 "Communication has gone well—we have had enough meetings to keep us updated." District representative interview notes, June 2020
Navigating university/district level policies/systems	
Brief Description Advertising/recruiting Application Registration University Alternative Certification Program Financial Aid University EdQuarters Leadership changes Communication channels Responsibilities of district leadership/ multiple roles Transparency, importance of tone/modeling in interactions	"I know there were a couple of issues with the application process and The Graduate School. Working through that to make it easier for next cohort." District representative interview notes, June 2020 "We have a totally new shift in leadership at the district levels and we have to think about how that impacts us and how we have communication issues." Leadership team focus group, July 2020

Understanding residency population *Brief Description* First impressions are critical Remove barriers/Set them up for success Productive struggle Having faith—residents' approach to program Reduce anxiety, develop teacher identity, equity Purposeful building of collegial relationship Professional stability—develop professionalism Support systems (residents supporting each other, faculty supporting/valuing residents, school, and district support)	"There have been different initiatives that have been tried in different places, but tapping into people in our community and offering them that opportunity. I think it will be a return on the investment for sure." District representative interview notes, June 2020 "Principals love this program—they see it as an opportunity to grow our own." District representative interview notes, June 2020
Embracing conditions and adapting to situations through persistence and determination *Brief Description* COVID-19 shift to online recruitment/online Summer Institute Barriers turned to strengths Recruited residents, continued despite COVID Don't give up Deal with roadblocks, drove kits to pick-up spots Seek support/take risks "Did not know what to expect; never thought about canceling"	"Challenge has been that we haven't been able to fully function to not be able to do things we had planned to roll them out [pandemic]." District representative interview notes, June 2020
Promoting common vision and philosophy of teaching *Brief Description* Teachers learning from practice Boundary spanning/Blurred and flattened power structures Coaching teachers learning alongside residents and faculty Intentionality Modeling Collateral learning—shaping colleagues, students, families Community building and capacity building Position residents as learners and doers Contributing/being the change in communities, schools, and with students	"We're getting them out there and they're applying their knowledge, they're gaining feedback, they're reflecting on that and developing as reflective practitioners and then they're taking what they learn and going back and trying it again." Leadership team focus group, July 2020 "…our beliefs, our values related to teaching and teacher education are very similar with relation to equity, social justice, inquiry, trying to meet the needs of marginalized populations, that's at the forefront…of all of our work." Leadership team focus group, July 2020
Developing sense of community among stakeholders (residents, faculty, district liaisons) *Brief Description* Summer Institute as foundational pillar to establish sense of community Promote authenticity Develop system of support Online Summer Institute promoted more holistic viewpoint—saw homes, families, glimpse of life	"You will be heard, we see you, we hear you, we will be in contact with you.' And so that, I think, made a big difference early on." Leadership team focus group, July 2020 "They [the residents] were saying how they were really liking each other and getting along really well. We mentioned friends . . . and they quickly changed that word to family." Leadership team focus group, July 2020

These axial themes showcase the culture of the NIC and guided the development of Carolina Transition to Teaching in 2020. The model that emerged from the NIC's work was multifaceted and components are described below.

Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency Components

Based on the NIC's work, predominantly focusing on January 2020 through August 2020, the following components address recruitment, preparation, and retention of teacher residents in rural communities. Although each part of the residency model may individually contribute to the program, when taken collectively, their intersection has the potential to address systemic challenges in recruitment, preparation, and retention. The emphasis was on forming new strategic partnerships to share the responsibility for preparing teachers in radically different ways (Milner, 2010; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). The residency program aimed to provide requisite educational content and serve as the pedagogical foundation residents could use in classrooms and provide a wide range of clinical experiences to complement coursework. To encourage participation, residents received a grant-funded living-wage stipend (i.e., $15,000) to offset the costs of completing the full-time graduate residency program. After recruitment, each resident participated in an intensive two-week Summer Institute that coincided with the start of the Master of Education in Teaching that they would complete simultaneously with the year-long classroom residency.

The Summer Institute launched the program with goals to build rapport, support transition to the full-time graduate program, and provide initial theory and practice opportunities. During Week 1, residents worked mainly with the university faculty members who facilitated much of the coursework and provided exposure to guiding pedagogical theories and practices. Throughout Week 2, the residents and university faculty engaged with groups of elementary-aged students from the rural districts who were provided free summer learning opportunities and materials (online in Summer 2020), which enabled residents to implement instructional strategies explored during the first week of the institute.

At the onset of the academic year, virtual graduate courses provided teacher residents with experiences to develop a pedagogical foundation by exploring issues of practice as identified as important by professional educators (e.g., issues of equity). Additionally, site-based methods courses were designed to meet at local schools where teacher residents could observe and authentically interact with P–12 students under the careful guidance of university faculty and classroom teachers (see Hodges & Mills, 2014). Consequently, most of the graduate courses were developed and taught by the university faculty who participated on the NIC. Courses taught by program faculty outside of the NIC met periodically with the NIC faculty to structure each course and ensure that the distinctive characteristics and circumstances of our school district partners and their rural communities (e.g., physical geographic area, district merging) were addressed.

To immerse teacher residents into the role of being a teacher, including extensive school-based experiences in rural schools and school communities, teacher residents co-taught alongside classroom-based mentors (i.e., teacher of record) from the partner school districts. This ongoing school-based coaching and mentoring drew on established co-teaching models (Friend & Cook, 2000) and provided systems of support among mentor teachers, university supervisors, school administrators, and university faculty.

Our model provided an alternative pathway that led to full teaching licensure. Carolina Transition to Teaching program is a State Department of Education approved collaboration among school districts and the state's flagship university with the goal of creating a high-quality alternative pathway into teaching that focuses on the expertise of local teachers, schools, districts, and institutions of higher education. The pathway also involved competency-based experiences through the completion of a series of micro-credentials (DeMonte, 2017) that allowed individuals to learn and demonstrate mastery of skills that are tied to the statewide teacher evaluation framework.

Figure 1

Carolina Transition to Teaching Pathway

Finally, Carolina Transition to Teaching was created with teacher retention in mind to decrease the rate at which teachers were leaving the profession (Ingersoll & May, 2011; McClure & Reeves, 2004). After coursework and the yearlong residency, each teacher resident will be supported through the Carolina Teacher Induction Program, a three-year support program that targets the retention of early career teachers by supporting their self-efficacy and job satisfaction while also addressing the stressors that often accompany early career teaching. The induction support is offered through group workshops, personalized coaching, and providing classroom support to early career teachers to assist them as they implement effective pedagogical practices ranging from behavior management to instructional strategies. In sum, the intersection of the aforementioned components comprises our program's approach to recruitment, preparation, and retention of teachers in rural communities in the state.

Entering Resident Focus Group

To gain information from those who were beginning the Carolina Transition to Teaching Program, focus groups with residents occurred during the 2020 Summer Institute (July 2020). The purpose of the focus groups was to better understand their perceptions of recruitment and evolving program components. Themes from the focus groups were related to: (a) recruitment, (b) attractors to the program, (c) teacher needs and challenges, (d) concerns, (e) communication needs, and (f) recommendations. Each theme is described below.

Recruitment

Recruitment was community-driven and encouragement was often individualized. Most residents were working in some capacity within a partner district and became aware of Carolina Transition to Teaching through personal contact from a district or school administrator. Resident James, a former teacher's assistant, stated,

> I learned by my principal. She called me up front to her office. I thought I had done something terribly wrong and there were others there, in fact [another resident was there] and she introduced us to the program…and she recommended that we apply, and so I did (James, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Other residents heard about the program through peers or colleagues and within school or district announcements or posts. A few residents also mentioned attending a recruitment event in their community.

Residents had roots in the community and were focused on helping children and their communities succeed. Two residents from different partner school districts discussed wanting to learn how to help children in their respective communities and help solve teacher shortage and retention challenges. Carrie, one of these residents, stated:

> It just really hurts my heart because I really love this county. I'm glad I'm back, I'm never leaving again, and I want to be a part of the solution, not just somebody on the sidelines not making a difference (Carrie, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Attractors

The residency program made certification possible, higher degrees attainable, and learning more meaningful. Several residents discussed the residency program as providing a flexible pathway to certification in a teaching area of their interest. Specifically, other alternative pathways to certification were described as more rigid with certification areas strictly based on the subject area of residents' bachelor's degrees. Tanya explained the residency program was more attractive because:

> [In this program] I would end up becoming licensed and would be able to teach in the elementary setting, which is the route that I have wanted to go. Because all of the other alternative programs that I had saw . . . it [certification] was, like, based upon my background, which was human resources (Tanya, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Residents also appreciated getting a master's degree (not just another bachelor's degree), teacher certification, and teaching experience in schools. Several teacher residents cited obtaining a master's degree as a major attraction of the program. When asked, one teacher resident remarked, "Getting a master's degree. That's what drew me in" (Angie, focus group, July 15, 2020). For some residents, the timeframe of the program was attractive; this was particularly important to residents who were changing careers. Residents also appreciated the residency aspect of the program, which entailed working in classrooms.

Support from residency program faculty and staff during residency was essential. Residents discussed feeling fully supported by residency program faculty and staff as they pursued their certification. Some residents had observed a lack of support for teacher candidates in other teacher certification pathway programs. One resident stated that long-term support was a "big thing" (Angie, focus group, July 15, 2020), and another resident stated, "they [faculty] have been supportive from day one and like [another resident] said, they'll be there after we get out" (Theresa, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Teacher Needs and Challenges

Residents sought to learn new teaching tools and techniques to help students in high-needs schools. Residents discussed wanting to learn skills to encourage student engagement, manage classroom behavior, and help students who may be struggling or need remediation. For example, Sam said, "I'm excited about learning about the different pedagogies and strategies that I can use going into the classroom to capture kids' minds" (Sam, focus group, July 15, 2020). Others mentioned needing behavior management techniques; something they had struggled with in previous teaching roles. One resident, Marvin, added, "For me, it would be classroom management. Techniques to manage the classroom especially when you have more than one student that has extreme behavior problems" (Marvin, focus group, July 15, 2020). Another resident recalled observing students in classrooms who needed, but did not get, extra help. Tanya elaborated, "Main thing I really want to focus on is literacy . . . I've subbed and seeing some of those kids coming out of third grade going into fourth grade, some of those kids struggled a lot…that was a big deal for me" (Tanya, focus group, July 15, 2020). Residents also discussed wanting to create a sense of community with parents and students.

Pandemic-related challenges during the residency centered around using technology and making virtual learning accessible and engaging for rural students. Residents discussed the COVID-19 pandemic context of schooling and challenges associated with moving from face-to-face to virtual instruction. Some residents were feeling challenged by technological demands. Deborah stated:

> I'm not very tech savvy. I'm kind of proud of myself for getting this Zoom stuff and finding my Google doc, so, you know, having to apply that and manage and help, you know, with

> Chromebooks and this and that . . . that's where having a co-teacher is really going to be very beneficial (Deborah, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Other residents discussed feeling challenged to engage and connect with students within a virtual learning format. Kara explained:

> Because of everything going on right now, I would have to say keeping the children engaged with everything being virtual learning. I mean, as an adult, I'm fidgety in my seat, so I can only imagine how it would be for an elementary student (Kara, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Another resident felt that while he was confident in being able to connect with students in face-to-face learning formats, he was less confident in virtual formats. Sam noted:

> Just . . . having the impact that I have on the kids. Basically, I'm hoping that that can transfer via screen. I've been told that I do well and I have a good rapport with the kids, but I may not be able to reach out to them or impact them and have that physical connection that will get the lessons or that understanding across between us (Sam, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Additionally, some residents noted that Internet access was a challenge in their rural districts. Residents worried that virtual learning might be hard to access in the more remote areas of their counties. One resident, however, felt that being a resident right now, in this context – taking coursework online and potentially teaching online as a resident – was a positive thing. Carrie discussed this further:

> I think it's actually kind of genius that we're doing this right now because we'll be able to learn both sides if this was ever to happen again. [Virtual education] will be a benefit for students, even in rural areas, if they can get the kinks out with the internet and the broadband and all of that. Because I know in [my county] . . . that's a big deal for us, because we don't have broadband (Carrie, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Residents were eager to work with coaching teachers but recognized that mutual respect was not always a characteristic of mentoring relationship. Residents were looking forward to working with a coaching teacher throughout the academic school year, but had some concerns. As one resident stated, "I'm really excited about the side-by-side with the coaching teacher" (Kara, focus group, July 15, 2020). However, some residents cited past experiences and expressed concerns about getting along with their mentor teacher. One resident explained, "I just hope that this experience will allow the teacher that I'm working with to have the respect for me as an equal shared person rather than someone working under them" (Marvin, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Prior experience in district schools could help but also potentially hinder their residency experiences. Some residents displayed confidence in various teaching skills including differentiating instruction as well as connecting and engaging with students based on their prior experience in district schools. Additional advantages included established relationships with students, other teachers, and administrators. However, due to these established relationships, some residents expressed concern about leaving their current school for their residency placement at another school.

Although these residents expressed a desire to remain with their former schools, one resident was concerned that if he stayed at his current school where he had been a teaching assistant, students may not respect him as a lead teacher. This resident elaborated:

> I want to make sure that . . . I've been seen as a teaching assistant, which means I wasn't the head of the classroom and I just hope the students are able to understand the transition, not looking at me as the teaching assistant but understanding that I now carry the reins to the classroom (Sam, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Concerns

Work–life–academic balance. The residents recognized that they would have to manage personal, academic, and work demands as they

pursued teacher certification. For instance, one resident stated:

> Every time I hear the word 'homework,' I'm like, 'oh my God! I don't have the energy to stay up to 1 o'clock in the morning, I've got two kids!' But I wouldn't have signed up if I didn't think it was possible, but I am nervous about the energy, you know, getting through it (Deborah, focus group, July 15, 2020).

While the energy needed to keep up with graduate coursework and balance other responsibilities was described as a challenge, Sam felt optimistic:

> I agree with them in making sure I can keep up, but the energy that has been presented since we started it kind of has me thinking, like, I'm going to be able to get through it. We will have courses and work, but like there's no way we can't get through it if we put our best foot forward (Sam, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Residents also expressed concerns about being a university student again, taking the state teacher certification exam (i.e., Praxis), and the financial cost of the program. For some residents, it had been many years since they received their bachelor's degree. For these residents, being a university student again was a concern. One resident explained, "Getting back into the books [is challenging]. It's been years since I've been in the books" (Ruth, focus group, July 15, 2020).

A few residents were anxious about passing the Praxis test needed for certification; one resident had a hard time with the Praxis in the past and needed to overcome her test anxiety. Other residents mentioned finances as a concern. As Carrie put it, "This is scary from a financial point" (Carrie, focus group, July 15, 2020).

Communication Needs

Residents indicated that support and timely, detailed communication regarding application processes, expenses, and expectations of the program were necessary. At the time of the focus groups, residents indicated they felt fully supported by university faculty and staff and communication was prompt and helpful. However, a few residents identified gaps in communication between when they were accepted and beginning the program. James elaborated, "From the time we signed up you know, even from the time at the job fair that day, there was a huge gap in there where you didn't hear anything from them" (James, focus group, July 15, 2020). Others reiterated this point, however, Beatrice reported that she reached out directly to program staff and this was helpful:

> People were asking me about the program and then a week later, I made a phone call. And that was when I was asking questions to [the program coordinator] and this was when she was telling me about different things that was happening next. So, I kept in contact with her . . . and as long as I kept the communication between her and myself, if I had a question that needed answered, she would answer it (Beatrice, focus group, July 2020).

A few residents wanted more details regarding the cost of the program. Sam reported, "I know everyone was excited or was positive when we heard about the stipend, but I still have not yet today heard, like, what the cost of this degree is. Like still now I don't know that" (Sam, focus group, July 15, 2020). Finally, a couple residents discussed the need for clarification regarding residency expectations and programmatic activities.

Recommendations

Residents offered recommendations to aid in program development and implementation. The following recommendations were either drawn explicitly from residents or derived implicitly through focus group discussions based on resident experiences. Recommendations included: (a) communicate regularly with applicants early on during the application process; (b) be clear about costs of the program earlier in the process; (c) provide more details regarding the resident stipend and expectations; (d) provide more details regarding the program activities during the residency and expectations; (e) aid applicants in the graduate school application process to avoid difficulties; (f) promote the program for career changers working in the community but outside of partner school districts; and (g) consider residents'

prior experience in district schools in determining residency placements.

Discussion

Based on the needs and past experiences of two rural school districts, the NIC developed a 14-month teacher residency program that included a living wage stipend, university/district created teacher education experiences, graduate coursework, professional development from district-based coaching teachers (mentors) and university partners, and intensive engagement in classrooms during the preparation process.

Program Model

The program model and the residency selection process were based on the NIC's identified need to recruit and prepare teachers who were more likely to be connected to the rural communities, committed to the students in these communities, and remain in these communities over time. The program model emphasized the university–school connections and learning opportunities. District representatives, who were part of the core planning process through the NIC, influenced the program model based on their experiences within the rural communities. The model highlights the co-construction of learning through immersion in schools while completing cohort-based graduate-level coursework and professional development, which have been found to be components of high-quality residency programs (Guha et al., 2017).

Residents confirmed their desire for teacher certification options for people like themselves who were currently working in schools. Residents highlighted their commitment to their community, which bodes well for retention and aligned with scholarship related to the benefits of teacher residency program and *grow your own* programs (Gist et al., 2019; Papay et al., 2012; Sloan & Blazevski, 2015).

Recruitment

The school–university partnership developed a set of core values to drive the program and empower community members to pursue teacher certification and a master's degree in education. Instructional assistants, paraprofessionals, and long-term substitutes within the district – a *grow your own* approach – were the focus for recruitment as these individuals tended to be more likely to be connected and committed to the community and the local school district.

Recruitment data indicated that the program was successful in reaching interested applicants with 43 people completing an interest survey and 14 residents enrolling in the program. Most Cohort 1 residents identified as African American or Black, and most of the residents resided within the county where the district is located or in an adjacent county, which the leadership team hypothesizes will lead to more effective teachers and greater retention in the district and field based on their commitment to students and their community (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement, 2019; Gist et al., 2019).

There were recruitment opportunities and challenges that emerged that impacted the size of Cohort 1, which was designed for up to 24 residents. Three residents withdrew from the program prior to the 2020–2021 academic year based on unanticipated factors (e.g., contracting COVID-19). Reasons for non-matriculation will be explored among those who completed the interest survey but did not complete additional steps to enroll in the program or withdrew from the program after gaining acceptance.

Next Steps

With input from the leadership team, program evaluators are continuing the focus on improvement science to address improvement science guiding questions: "What is the specific problem that I am not trying to solve? What change might I introduce and why? And, how will I know whether the change is actually an improvement?" (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 9).

Data collection strategies to address the improvement science guiding questions include NIC meeting observations/field notes, entrance and exit surveys of residents, entrance focus groups with residents, end-of-year surveys of mentor teachers, end-of-year interviews with principals, annual interviews with district representatives,

annual focus group with university faculty, and annual interviews with induction coaches working with former residents. Interviews and surveys with differing stakeholders will allow for program improvement and assessment of interim outcomes.

As the program model and recruitment process continue to be refined and improved through data, the NIC has identified areas of needed growth, both personally and programmatically. One such area was the personal need of teacher residents for advanced training in learning systems and technology to function well in their coursework and in schools. The pandemic may have accelerated the degree to which school districts and classrooms rely on technology, and it appears technology will continue to be increasingly prevalent in classrooms in the future. In addition, the match between teacher residents and coaching teachers is being explored to ensure effective placements for residents. Finally, a survey specific to paraprofessionals is under development to explore motivations and interests of people currently employed in non-certified educational positions to identify obstacles to teacher certification. This will guide continued recruitment efforts and allow for the matriculation of more people who are interested in the program.

Limitations

While aspects of Carolina Transition to Teaching and the focus of our *grow your own* approach may align with the needs of other states and regions, the program was specifically designed to meet needs in two rural school districts using a NIC focused on local data. Data collection related to the development and initial implementation of the residency program included observations, interviews, focus groups, and an interest survey and may only be generalizable to similar geographic locations and populations. While the COVID-19 pandemic shifted aspects of the program such as the Summer Institute and course delivery mode, the implications of these changes are unclear at this time.

Conclusion

A large flagship university partnered with two school districts in rural communities to address challenges and barriers in teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention in a southeastern state. Using an improvement science approach, the NIC developed a residency program that included core components designed to facilitate effective teachers who were more likely to be retained in rural schools and school districts. The NIC achieved its goal of recruiting candidates who are underrepresented in the profession (Center for Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement, 2019) and have connections to their local students and communities; however, more focus is needed on interested instructional assistants who do not matriculate into the program to meet the needs of the school districts.

In the development and initial implementation, the focus was on two aspects of improvement science: "make the work problem specific and user centered" and "see the system that produces the current outcomes" (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 21/57). These shaped the formation of the NIC and development of Carolina Transition to Teaching. Now, the NIC will "focus on variation in performance" at the district and school level and measuring outcomes related to teacher effectiveness and teacher retention (Bryk et al., p. 35).

References

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2020). *Kids count data center: South Carolina*. https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#SC/2/0/char/0

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2017). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.

Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement. (2019). *South Carolina annual educator supply and demand report: 2020–2021 School Year.* https://www.cerra.org/uploads/1/7/6/8/17684955/2020-21_supply___demand_report.pdf

Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement. (2021). *South Carolina annual educator supply and demand report: 2021–2022 School Year*.

https://www.cerra.org/uploads/1/7/6/8/17684955/2021-22_supply_demand_report__1_.pdf

Charters, W. W., Jr. (1956). What causes teacher turnover? *School Review, 64*(7), 294–299. https://doi.org/10.1086/442335+

Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., & Rockoff, J. E. (2014). Measuring the impacts of teachers II: Teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood. *American Economic Review 2014, 104*(9): 2633–2679. http://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.9.2633

Chetty, R, Hendren, N., Kline, P., & Saez, E. (2014). *Where is the land of opportunity? The geography of intergenerational mobility in the United States*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 19843. https://doi.org/10.3386/w19843

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Cowan, J., Goldhaber, D., Hayes, K., & Theobald, R. (2016). Missing elements in the discussion of teacher shortages. *Educational Researcher, 45(*8), 460–462. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16679145

DeMonte, J. (2017). *Micro-credentials for teachers: What three early adopter states have learned so far.* American Institutes for Research.

Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2000). Co-teaching. *Interactions: Collaborative skills for school Professionals* (3rd ed.). Pearson.

Gist, C. D., Bianco, M., & Lynn, M. (2019). Examining grow your own programs across the teacher development continuum: Mining research on teachers of color and nontraditional educator pipelines. *Journal of Teacher Education, 70*(1), 13–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487118787504

Guarino, C. M., Santibañez, L., & Daley, G. A. (2006). Teacher recruitment and retention: A review of the recent empirical literature. *Review of Educational Research, 76*(2), 173–208. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543076002173

Guha, R., Hyler, M. E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). The teacher residency: A practical path to recruitment and retention. *American Educator, 41(*1), 31–34, 44. (EJ1137804). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1137804.pdf

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.

Hodges, T. E., & Mills, H. (2014). Embedded field experiences as professional apprenticeships. In K. Karp & A. R. McDuffie, *Annual perspectives in mathematics education 2014: Using research to improve instruction* (pp. 249–260). National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Humphrey, D. C., & Wechsler, M. E. (2007). Insights into alternative certification: Initial findings from a national study. *Teachers College, 109*(3), 483–530. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810710900304

Ingersoll, R. M. (2007). Short on power, Long on responsibility. Reprinted from *Educational Leadership*, *65*(1), 20–25. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/129

Ingersoll, R. M. (2017). A quarter century of changes in the elementary and secondary teaching force: From 1987 to 2012. *National Center for Education Statistics* (Institute of Education Sciences). https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/494/

Ingersoll, R. M., & May, H. (2011). Recruitment, retention, and the minority teacher shortage. https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/226

Ingersoll, R. M., Merrill, L., & Stuckey, D. (2014). *Seven trends: the transformation of the teaching force* (CPRE Report #RR-80). Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania.

Ingersoll, R. M., Merrill, E., Stuckey, D., Collins, G., & Harrison, B. (2021). The demographic transformation of the teaching force in the United States. *Education Sciences*, *11*(5), 234–263. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11050234

McClure, C., & Reeves, C. (2004). *Rural teacher recruitment and retention: Review of the research and practice literature*. Appalachia Education Laboratory. (ED484967). ERIC. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED484967.pdf

McVey, K. P., & Trinidad, J. (2019). *Nuance in the noise: The complex reality of teacher*

shortages. Bellwether Education Partners. (ED596444). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596444.pdf

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed). Jossey-Bass.

Milner, R. H. (2010). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Harvard Education Press.

Monk, D. (2007). Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural areas. *The Future of Children, 17*(1), 155–174. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2007.0009

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010). *Transforming teacher education through clinical practice: A national strategy to prepare effective teachers.* Author. http://caepnet.org/~/media/Files/caep/accreditation-resources/blue-ribbon-panel.pdf

Papay, J. P., West, M. R., Fullerton, J. B., & Kane, T. J. (2012). Does an urban teacher residency increase student achievement? Early evidence from Boston. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *34*(4), 413–434. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373712454328

Renaud, S., & Bennett. K. (2020, August). *What is rural?* South Carolina Center for Rural and Primary Healthcare. https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/medicine/documents/rural_definitions_whitepaper_final.pdf

Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica, 73*(2), 417–458. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2005.00584.x

Rosenberg, L., Christianson, M. D., Angus, M. H., & Rosenthal, E. (2014). *A focused look at rural schools receiving school improvement grants*. Institute of Education Sciences. (ED544784). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED544784.pdf

Sanders, W. L., & Rivers, J. C. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center.

Shuls, J. V., & Trivitt, J. R. (2015). Teacher effectiveness: An analysis of licensure screens. *Educational Policy*, *29*(4), 645–675. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904813510777

Sloan, K., & Blazevski, J. (2015). *New Visions Hunter College urban teacher residency: Measures of success.* Rockman et al. https://www.newvisions.org/page/-/UTR_Year%205%20Final%20Evaluation_03.31.2015.pdf

South Carolina Department of Education. (2019). *SC School Report Card*. https://screportcards.ed.sc.gov/

U.S. Census Bureau. (2017). Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE): School district estimates [Data set]. https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe/datasets/2017/2017-school-districts/sd17-sc.txt

U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *About us: Teacher Quality Partnership*. https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/effective-educator-development-programs/teacher-quality-partnership/about-us/

Whitford, D. K., Zhang, D., & Katsiyannis, A. (2018). Traditional vs. alternative teacher preparation programs: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27*, 671–685. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0932-0

Appendix

District Representative Interview Protocol

District and Community Characteristics

1. Tell me about your community.
2. Describe your district.
    a. How would you compare it to neighboring districts?

District Needs

3. Describe your district's ability to provide high quality instruction within elementary and middle school classrooms.
    a. What are some areas of strength?
    b. What are some challenges?
4. Describe your district's ability to recruit high quality teachers.
    a. What practices do you think would be successful in recruiting teachers to work in your district?
5. Describe your district's ability to retain high quality teachers.
    a. What factors do you think contribute to teacher attrition?
    b. What practices do you think would be successful in helping to retain teachers?

Teacher Residency Program

6. What are your initial thoughts regarding the Transition to Teaching (T3) program?
7. So far, what have been the greatest challenge(s) in implementing this program in your district?
8. Looking forward, how do you think implementation could be improved?
9. What outcomes do you expect to see from participating in this program?

Carolina Transition to Teaching University Faculty/Staff Focus Group Protocol

We will start with the Summer Institute and then gain your perspectives about the larger project.

1. Tell us your thoughts about the Summer Institute
    a. What was successful?
    b. What could have been improved?
2. Thinking about the upcoming fall semester/beginning of the school year, what are your thoughts about the preparation and readiness of the
    a. District leadership including principals
    b. Coaching teachers
        c. Residents
        d. UofSC faculty to facilitate courses
3. What opportunities have you discovered through the Cohort 1 recruitment process?
4. What challenges have you discovered through the Cohort 1 recruitment process?
5. As the grant leadership team, what are your greatest concerns moving forward?
    a. What supports do you have?
    b. What supports do you need?

About the Authors

Leigh Kale D'Amico, EdD, is a research associate professor in the Research, Evaluation, and Measurement Center at the University of South Carolina. Her research focuses on early childhood education, PK–12 curriculum and instruction, teacher preparation, professional development, and student success.

Hall S. West received her PhD in Educational Psychology and Research from the University of South Carolina in 2016. She is a research associate at the Research, Evaluation, and Measurement Center at the University of South Carolina where she serves as an evaluator for various educational programs and efforts across South Carolina.

Melissa A. Baker, PhD, is a clinical assistant professor at the University of South Carolina where she serves as a professor-in-residence at a local middle school. Her research centers on the intersections across clinically-centered teacher preparation, recruitment, induction, and retention within PDS partnerships, primarily in rural settings.

George J. Roy, PhD, is a professor of middle level education at the University of South Carolina (UofSC). He received a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Rollins College and a master's and a doctorate degree in education from the University of Central Florida. Prior to joining the faculty at UofSC, he was a public school mathematics teacher where he earned a National Board of Professional Teaching Standards certification in Early Adolescence Mathematics. Currently, he teaches in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education. His current research interests include examining uses of technology in mathematics classrooms, preservice teachers' development of mathematical knowledge for teaching, and university-school district partnerships.

Rachelle Curcio, PhD, is a clinical assistant professor in elementary education at the University of South Carolina. Her research is grounded in an inquiry stance and focuses on clinically-centered teacher education and preparing teacher candidates for 21st century racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse classroom contexts.

Kristin E. Harbour, PhD, is an associate professor of mathematics education at the University of South Carolina. Her scholarly agenda includes: (a) support systems for both general education and special education teachers to advance their ambitious and inclusive mathematics teaching practices, and (b) teacher preparation with a focus on authentic experiences to navigate the complexities of the teaching and learning of mathematics.

Stephen L. Thompson, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. His research interests center on improving elementary and middle level science education, especially in high-need communities, through reform-based teaching strategies, and the influence of involving preservice teachers in guided curriculum enactment utilizing reform-based approaches within authentic classroom settings.

Jessie Guest, PhD, is a clinical assistant professor at the University of South Carolina. She completed her doctoral studies at the University of South Carolina. She is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor Supervisor as well as a Registered Play Therapist Supervisor. Her research interests and publications consist of social emotional learning, mindfulness and well-being, play therapy, countertransference, and trauma. She currently coordinates the graduate certificate in Play Therapy. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2521-2689

Catherine Compton-Lilly, EdD, holds the John C. Hungerpiller Chair at the University of South Carolina. She engages in longitudinal qualitative research. Her interests include examining time as a contextual factor

as children progress through school and construct literate identities. She has published widely in academic and practitioner literacy journals.

Amber Adgerson is a native South Carolinian, scholar, and educator activist who brings over a decade of practical, public-school experience to the field of academia. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Teaching and Learning at the University of South Carolina and is also the graduate assistant for the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant program, Carolina Transition to Teaching. Guided by her experiences as a former classroom teacher, her research focuses on STEM and teacher education. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8938-5987

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 105-115
 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p105-115

Strength in Numbers: The Promise of Community-Based Participatory Research in Rural Education

Lauren Davis, *Montana State University*
Rebecca Buchanan, *Emory & Henry College*

Montana is a state that is ravaged by a suicide epidemic and mental health crisis, particularly among its youth. In an area in which harsh climates, geographic challenges, and distance to rural healthcare providers are significant barriers to mental healthcare accessibility, educators are faced with the acute social and emotional challenges of their students on a daily basis. This article documents the process and promise of utilizing novel and innovative community-based participatory research to support rural schools. By integrating a trauma-informed intervention in the school setting, while mobilizing local community resources, this interdisciplinary approach shows the ability to address the needs of adolescents while supporting rural educators.

***Keywords*: trauma, community-based participatory research, rural, adolescent, yoga**

Teachers and school administrators often cite feelings of frustration and isolation resulting from high stress levels in the workplace. These stressors are often derived from an increased workload, reduced pay and autonomy, and external pressure from federal accountability measures (Von Der Embse et al., 2016). To put it simply, educators are being asked to do more and more with fewer resources, time, and support each year. In addition to teachers' own stressors, students are also exhibiting record levels of anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues as a result of increased academic stressors deriving from factors like standardized testing and shifts to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; Chaterjee, 2021; Cook-Cottone, 2017; Guessom et al., 2020). As a former K-12 teacher and administrator, this author knows all too well the overwhelming expectations today's educators face; therefore, the purpose of this study is to test the feasibility and sustainability of integrating community agencies and external resources into the school system to support students' emotional well-being so that teachers have the mental space and time to focus on teaching rather than crisis management (Noddings, 2005).

Study Context: Rural Montana

This study took place in a rural Montana community during the 2019–2020 academic year. The mental health crises for residents in the state of Montana are at epidemic levels. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), the state has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation. Research indicates that from 2010–2014, 39.1% of Montana adolescents aged 12–17 sought treatment for a major depressive episode at some point during the study (Montana Department of Health and Human Services, 2015; Montana Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Montana's suicide rate, which is nearly double that of the United States may be due to higher instances of mental illness throughout the state (Rosston, 2022), Further, the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey for the county in which this study was conducted indicated that 20% of high schoolers made a concrete suicide plan, 16% attempted suicide, and 39% experienced severe depression symptoms (Montana Office of Public Instruction,

2019). Due to this mental health crisis, this community became the focus of this researcher's efforts to develop a multifaceted community-based approach to support the mental health of these adolescents.

Rural Mental Healthcare Challenges

Accessing quality mental health care can be challenging in rural America. Barriers include but are not limited to a lack of qualified providers, isolation due to geographic location, stigma associated with mental health, and severe weather conditions preventing travel to/from providers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2016). Over 40% of Montana's population is considered rural or frontier (National Network of Libraries of Medicine, 2020). As a result, it is important to explore ways to provide opportunity and access for individuals in rural communities that will support their overall mental health and wellness. Through a school-based intervention of trauma-informed yoga (which was identified early on as a desired program by the high school involved in this study), this project was designed to help mitigate the impact of contributing factors by providing healthy coping strategies for adolescents in order to improve overall student wellness. However, this author had relocated to Montana herself in 2018 and therefore had no existing relationships with any necessary community partners for this work; therefore, the most appropriate approach to this community-identified issue was through community-based participatory research (CBPR).

Partnership Processes: Community-Based Participatory Research

Israel et al. (2003) define community-based participatory research as "focusing on social, structural, and physical environmental inequities through active involvement of community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process" (para. 1). For this project, the principal investigator (PI) focused on developing a partnership with a school system and local yoga studio within a rural Montana community; the purpose of building this partnership was to mitigate high school students' issues surrounding adverse childhood experiences or other less severe challenges to their mental health and equilibrium.

In this framework, the community is the genesis of the study, whereby stakeholders create a shared purpose, question, and goals for the study, rather than being driven by an external researcher's agenda. This shared decision-making of the research processes and products are central to community-based participatory research (Faridi et al., 2007). By shifting the burden and responsibilities of the study from the researcher to the community, CBPR "recognizes the importance of involving members of a study population as active and equal participants, in all phases of the research project, if the research process is to be a means of facilitating change" (Holkup et al., 2004, para. 3). Change is achieved when stakeholders contribute "their expertise to enhance understanding of a given phenomenon and integrate the knowledge gained with action to benefit the community involved" (Holkup et al., 2004, para. 6).

Rurality is often situated in a deficit orientation in cited literature; it is therefore critical to acknowledge the expertise and local funds of knowledge within a community (and school district's) context whereby the researcher repositions rural community members, school faculty, and students as experts who identify community needs and solutions (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Tuck, 2009). By viewing rural communities and school systems from a strengths-based perspective, researchers unlock the expertise of local stakeholders, allowing for rigorous, interdisciplinary, collaborative research to occur, fueling place-based pedagogy (Cordova, 2017; Elfer, 2011; White, 2008).

Phase 1: Establishing Relationships

This collaboration began slowly; as mentioned earlier, the principal investigator relocated to this area of Montana in 2018, and the recent influx of people moving to Montana from other states, driving up real estate prices and changing the face of Montana as locals have known it, has led to a certain modicum of distrust of "outsiders" (Hegyi, 2019). Knowing this, the principal investigator instigated initial contact with the school district by reaching out to the high school co-principals and

requesting a meeting over lunch. Rather than launching into her research agenda, the researcher instead sought merely to get to know the principals as well as the local culture and community of the school and town. When opportunities presented themselves, she asserted her own interest in trauma-informed approaches in the education setting, having been a former teacher and school administrator herself.

While this initial meeting went well, there was a long lapse in time before contact was re-established with these administrators, as the beginning of the new academic year is always fraught with time-consuming challenges. The principal investigator "checked in" via email periodically over the following six months, and around the new year (2019), she received a phone call from one of the co-principals of the high school, who indicated that the school nurse was beginning an after-school yoga program and was interested in having a conversation about what contributions the principal investigator could make to the project. This led to a meeting with the school nurse, which resulted in the principal investigator sharing instrumentation and survey materials so the high school could measure outcomes of this after school program. The principal investigator also analyzed data from this pilot study and disseminated results back with the school district as part of her outreach, which further strengthened the fledgling relationship with the district. This ultimately led to district leadership support of the principal investigator's National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant, which funded the study outlined in this manuscript (NIH award no. P20GM104417).

Phase 2: Gathering Community Input

To continue to grow trust within the relationship with the school district, the principal investigator felt it was important to also facilitate additional community relationships that support the school district. The principal investigator joined the local community wellness/resilience committee that focuses on suicide prevention and de-stigmatization of mental health care; this participation led to the PI receiving an invitation to join the school district's suicide, intervention, and response to treatment committee. From these committees, a community advisory board (CAB) was formed from various members of the school district (co-principals, district level administrator, physical education teacher, and school nurse) and community agencies (the county's health department director and community health coordinator from the local hospital); community advisory boards are often lauded as a positive, formalized mechanism for ensuring equitable community representation in research studies (Newman et al., 2011). Missing components to this CAB include a parent and student representative as well as (at least) one of the involved yoga instructors; plans are in place to recruit these additional members for the CAB in moving forward with this project.

In September 2019, the principal investigator facilitated a focus group discussion of both male and female high school students at Park High School to gauge student interest in the project and determine best approaches to promote recruitment and retention in the project, particularly with male students. These focus groups were facilitated through the Principal Advisory lunchtime program with the high school principal and lead investigator. Based on responses to these focus groups, the collaborative decision was to hold the study during the school day during a regularly scheduled physical education class in the spring 2020 semester, rather than as a voluntary after school program. This was in response to student scheduling conflicts with athletics, extracurriculars, family and farm care, and other employment obligations. Following these focus groups, select members of the CAB gathered to discuss survey instrumentation, and school personnel indicated their desire to change instrumentation. As a result, their choices were honored and used in this study. Lastly, in the weeks before the study began, the principal investigator held informational lunch meetings with students enrolled in the identified physical education class to answer questions students had about the study.

Phase 3: Study Implementation

As the study began, the physical education teacher who allowed the research to take place in his class invited the PI to share about the project with the entire class and answer any questions the

students may have had about the process. While there were some initial groans and comments like "do we have to do the yoga?" the general consensus was positive; all but one student in the class agreed to participate (with parental consent, which was mostly obtained verbally as students did not return signed consent forms). Throughout the intervention, the PI used the framework of participant observation to engage with all participants and instructors, joining in the yoga practice each session. According to Hammer (2017), "participant observation can provide depth and context to observations and help minimize mistaken assumptions routinely made based on observations from a distance" (p. 441). While it is noted that participant observation is frequently used in cultural and anthropological research contexts (Fletcher, 2003), participant observation is gaining momentum as an accepted framework for community-based participatory research so that the research considers broader the sociocultural factors at play in community-identified issues (Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009, as cited in Hammer et al., 2017).

Through this unique research design, a sense of community developed with all participants and the research team while further strengthening the relationships with the school and community. Members of the CAB as well as local university teacher education candidates and education graduate students involved in education initiatives were also invited to join in the sessions,. By inviting community stakeholders and connecting the university with local school districts, additional connections were made, one of which has resulted in a potential job opportunity for one of the teaching candidates. The high school participants also seemed to enjoy having "visitors," and anecdotally, the PI noted that participant engagement and focus was increased on days with additional people joining in the practice.

Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic truncated this study just before its conclusion. However, it presented a unique opportunity to strengthen these community and school partnerships. When schools in the state abruptly closed due to the virus, the school nurse (who became pivotal to the success of this study) provided tremendous assistance to the principal investigator in trying to salvage any results from the study. After calls to students and parents, as well as a gift card incentive for survey completion, student post-surveys were collected remotely while students were quarantined at home. While the response rate was not 100%, 16 out of 19 participants completed the post surveys within a week of the study's abrupt conclusion.

It is worth noting that collective trauma has a way of forging strong bonds between those who experience it (Saul, 2013). While the coronavirus crisis is still ongoing at the time of this manuscript's creation, the sense of community and support between the PI and CAB has noticeably strengthened. Phone calls and emails communicating about preliminary study results inevitably evolved into conversations about the status of students from the study, then morphing into checking on each other's families and loved ones. Stemming from a time of great difficulty for all involved, these community-based research relationships have blossomed into meaningful friendships and a deep feeling of trust, which will only further strengthen future collaborative projects in this community.

Outcomes of CBPR Process

Phase 1 Results: Relationships Solidified

As discussed previously, this project formed a strong community–school–university partnership. As with many CBPR studies, concerns about program sustainability are still present, especially with funding concerns. Prior to the coronavirus crisis, the physical education teacher involved in the study expressed a desire for his students to continue a once-weekly yoga practice in his class and asked the research team about this possibility. While funding did not provide additional monies for a yoga teacher beyond the study duration, the principal investigator was able to find a yoga teacher employed by the county's health department. Under the purview of her job as a community health coordinator, that instructor volunteered to teach a yoga class once a week to the same physical education class, free of charge to the high school. Unfortunately, the mandatory school closures due to the virus made this an impossibility. At the time of this manuscript

preparation, the principal investigator was seeking ways to find remote yoga instruction available to students in the study to support them during their time in quarantine.

Phase 2 Results: Gathering Community Feedback

Because of the success of this partnership and program, the community and the school district are eager to continue this study; one administrator noted the following takeaways resulting from the study in an email communication, cited here with permission:

> "We can get parent permissions and can conduct screening in the socioemotional domain."
>
> "We can participate in really, really cool research that can tell us meaningful things about what might improve mental health indicators for our kids."
>
> "The people working together on it (names redacted for confidentiality) are all really, really fine people who work together well and truly care about (name of town redacted for privacy)'s kids."
>
> "Yoga is cool and the trauma-informed version appears to be good for student well-being."
>
> "Students are likely to embrace being involved in future studies and feel they're part of something important."
>
> "Other stakeholders among our staff, families and community like it."

To further quantify the community engagement process through a validated measure, the Quantitative Community Engagement Measure (Goodman et al., 2017) was distributed to members of the community advisory board approximately six weeks after the study concluded, so as to allow for time to share preliminary data results from the study. This survey assessed quantitative measures of quality of the CBPR process (as defined by Goodman et al., 2017) and included 58 questions scored on a Likert scale from 1–5, with 1 being *never* and 5 being *always*. The survey assessed how well the researcher performed the following 11 community engagement principles:

1) Focus on local relevance and determinants of health;
2) Acknowledge the community;
3) Disseminate findings and knowledge gained to all partners;
4) Seek and use the input of community partners;
5) Involve a cyclical and iterative process in the pursuit of objectives;
6) Foster co-learning, capacity building, and co-benefit for all partners;
7) Build on strengths and resources within the community;
8) Facilitate collaborative, equitable partnerships;
9) Integrate and achieve a balance of all partners;
10) Involve all partners in the dissemination process; and
11) Plan for a long-term process and commitment.

The research team added an open-ended response item at the conclusion to address any areas of feedback that the other survey items did not address.

Results from this survey were compiled from six out of seven CAB members and were generally positive. Nearly every question had responses of either "always" or "most of the time" and "always" with the following exceptions:

- Focuses on cultural factors that influence health behaviors (rarely, n = 1; sometimes, n=1; most of the time, n = 2; always, n = 2)
- Gives credit to community members and others for work. (sometimes, n =1; always, n = 5)
- Helps community members with problems of their own. (sometimes, n =2; most of the time, n = 2; always, n = 2)
- Helps community members disseminate information using community publications. (sometimes, n = 3; most of the time, n = 1; always, n = 2)
- Asks community members for input. (sometimes, n = 1; always, n = 5)

- Changes plans as a result of community input. (sometimes, *n* = 1; most of the time, *n* =1; always, *n* = 3)
- Asks community members for help with specific tasks. (sometimes, *n* = 1; most of the time, *n* = 1; always, *n* = 4)
- Informs the community of what happened when their ideas were tried. (sometimes, *n* = 1; most of the time, *n* = 1; always, *n* = 4)
- Helps community partners get what they need from academic partners. (sometimes, *n* = 1; most of the time, *n* = 1; always, *n* = 4)

These exceptions illuminated areas of needed improvement and refinement in the next iteration of the study and ongoing CBPR process. Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) encourage researchers to consider the "four R's" of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility when generating a community-based participatory research study. While the survey results indicate high relevance of the study's importance to community-identified needs for mental health support for its adolescents and respect for community partners, improvement is indicated across the remaining two R's. The research team has a grave responsibility to focus on the cultural factors that influence poor mental health. While the intervention was successful amongst its participants, the intervention could not address the systemic issues of poverty, health disparities related to low socioeconomic status, geographic isolation, and extensive substance abuse in this community. Further, it is of utmost importance to practice reciprocity in the CBPR process; more attention must be given by the researcher to ask what the school and community needs from the university—not the other way around—and request more involvement from CAB members and students with the next cycle of study design and implementation. The lack of student involvement in the CBPR process of this study is perhaps the most glaring oversight that must be corrected. Research indicates that adolescents, especially those that have been traumatized, lack a sense of agency and control over their lives (van der Kolk, 2014). By not involving participants beyond more than inviting their involvement in focus groups, the cycle of overlooking our already disenfranchised youth continues. This omission will be top priority to rectify in the second iteration of this study.

Despite the shortcomings identified in the survey measure, the qualitative feedback provided by two respondents at the conclusion of the study were still positive: "At this time I have no feedback for improvement. The project was well run." Another respondent noted:

> Having worked alongside the team at [this university] for this study, I must say that the study was conducted in a first-class manner. The scientific process was strictly adhered to and the integrity of the project was at the highest level. I would gladly work with this team again in the future.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, additional stakeholders (that is, a student or multiple students) and community members need to be included in the CAB in the next iteration of this study to gather more feedback. While it is clear that there is room for improvement in actively involving community stakeholders in the process and implementation and in being responsive to cultural factors within the community, the research team feels that the overall CBPR process for a pilot study was an effective and successful one in its initial year.

Phase 3: Gathering Participant Feedback

In an informal survey of study participants, feedback was gathered to ascertain program strengths and challenges as well as gather qualitative feedback. Despite outwardly expressed disinterest in the yoga sessions during class, as identified by sighs, rolling eyes, and sometimes negative comments, anonymous and confidential feedback was overwhelmingly positive from students. Below a table provides random student responses from this survey.

As an aside, the author of this study found it interesting that the majority of the students preferred meditation over the physical practice, especially given that this intervention took place in a strength training class; this result indicates that students found that practice to be more beneficial and deserves to be given more attention and time in future iterations of this study.

Table 1
Sample Student Responses

Question	Sample Responses
How did the yoga classes make you feel emotionally and mentally (feelings, stress, anxiety, etc.)?	- "It made me feel good like even if I messed up it was okay and made me relax more." - "It was very good help me take a break during stressful school hours did calm me down." - "It was almost like having a morning cup of coffee but in the middle of the day and WAY healthier." - "They made me feel way more relaxed in school than I've been in the past."
How did the yoga classes make you feel physically (in your body)?	- "Definitely helped with flexibility, strength and recovery with injuries/muscle soreness" - "I made my muscles sore but it was nice using muscles that i (*sic*) would have not thought of using before." - "Relaxed and happy" - "Sore at first but after loose"
Do you think the yoga classes impacted your work at school? If so, how?	-"Allowed me to preform (*sic*) better on some test in the upcoming school day" - "I do believe that it helped me in school and not be so stressed out. It has made me pay more attention in classes." - "Yes. I was more focused." - "Yes because it makes me relaxed and focus better."
Do you think the yoga classes impacted your life outside of school? If so, how?	- "With sports and other physical activities I was able to preform (*sic*) better" - "I believe it has made me a happier person over all (*sic*)." - "It cleared some head space for sure." - "Yes it makes me feel good about myself."

Question	Sample Responses
What aspect(s) of the yoga classes did you enjoy the most — yoga poses or meditation at the end of the sessions (when you were lying down)?	Meditation: 71% Yoga Poses: 29%
Are there any tools or practices from this experience you feel that will be useful for your life moving forward?	- "Yeah, learning to breath (*sic*) and relax then try something new" - "allowed me to go into my mind in certian (*sic*) stressful negative situations" - "I believe that these practices will help me out in the marine keeping my breathing proper and keeping my body relaxed after stressful events." - "Breathing, I tend to forget"
How could the classes have been better?	- "Better time management and more time to get comfortable with certain poses. Also, less disruptions from students." - "Could've been longer" - "More challenging and more spaced out" - "More music"
Would you like to continue a yoga practice in your future?	Yes: 35%; Maybe: 59%; No: 6%
Please share anything else you'd like us to know about your experiences in this study.	- "I really enjoyed all [the] positivity in the class. Thanks to all the teachers and instructors." - "I would like to find out more routines and practices also would like to know how or what to use on my back as mentioned in class would like more information." - "Everyone should do yoga" - "had a good time although wish some of the other students would've taken advantage of the opportunity or let others enjoy instead of taking from the overall experience"

Some students noted that they did not like writing in their reflective journals at the conclusion of each session, and others shared that they did not feel any change or difference resulting from the practice, citing that they wanted more of a physical challenge. There were also a handful of students, varying in each class, who were disengaged intermittently and caused distractions and disruptions in the practices, which were frustrating to other participants (as noted in the above table). Two students indicated physical discomfort in the back and wrist during the intervention, and these students were referred to the physical education teacher; students were offered breaks, modified poses, or to abstain from the practice if they were too uncomfortable. However, other than these outlying comments, students appeared to have genuinely enjoyed and received benefits from this intervention. Mental health and other secondary outcomes were also tremendously positive and promising for potential school-based interventions, but these findings are not the focus of this manuscript.

Conclusions and Implications for Educational Research

Community-based participatory research is common in fields of public health, social sciences, and organizational sciences (Holkup et al., 2004), but rarely is CBPR instigated by educational researchers for implementation within the K-12 setting. More commonly, educational CBPR is conducted by those outside of the field of education, such as sociologists or psychologists studying an intervention in a school setting. As the author of this study is a former K-12 educator and administrator, she feels it is of utmost importance to engage all stakeholders and appropriate community agencies to create a multidisciplinary approach of mitigating adverse childhood experiences; this stance is also supported by best practices in the medical and psychological fields of childhood trauma (Burke-Harris, 2018; van der Kolk, 2014). This study sought to begin this type of multidisciplinary approach in a small rural town ravaged by a suicide epidemic and mental health crisis, especially amongst its most vulnerable demographic of adolescents.

Many barriers had to be overcome to bring this pilot study to fruition: initial relationships with a school district and newly relocated researcher had to be forged; trust and credibility had to be obtained through an iterative process of volunteerism, input-gathering, and providing feedback by the primary researcher; student and faculty buy-in had to be earned through focus groups and multiple planning meetings; and the flame of a virus billowed to a wildfire pandemic during the intervention, ultimately ending the study prematurely. However, through these obstacles and study limitations, true partnerships were formed between community health and wellness agencies, the school district, and the local university with whom the PI is employed. The fledgling successes of this study are indicative of the need and great potential for further CBPR-focused interventions in K-12 education—particularly those tied to mental well-being and holistic educational approaches. As the old African proverb asserts, “it takes a village to raise a child,” communities must rally around schools and children to bolster positive youth development with supportive networks of caring adults.

Funding

The authors disclose receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research highlighted in this article was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, award no. P20GM104417 (grant year 2019).

References

Biddle, C., & Azano, A. (2016). Constructing and reconstructing the “rural school problem”: A century of rural education research. *Review of Research in Education, 40*(1), 298-325.

Burke-Harris, N. (2018). *The deepest well: Healing the long-term effects of childhood adversity.* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Adverse childhood experiences.* https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Suicide mortality by state*.

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm

Chatterjee, R. (2021). *Child psychologists warn that the pandemic may be driving up kids' suicide risk.* National Public Radio. https://www. npr. org/sections/health-shots/2021/02/02/962060105/child-psychiatrists-warn-that-the-pandemic-may-be-driving-up-kids-suicide-risk

Cook-Cottone, C. (2017). *Mindfulness and yoga in schools: A guide for teachers and practitioners.* Springer.

Cordova, R. (2017). "It was the river that taught me": The Southern rural ecology as educative space. In W. Reynolds (Ed.), *Forgotten places: Critical studies in rural education* (pp. 279-289). Peter Lang.

Elfer, C. (2011). *Place-based education: A Review of historical precedents in theory and practice.* https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/elfer_charles_j_201108_phd.pdf

Faridi, Z., Grunbaum, J., Gray, B., Franks, A., & Simoes, E. (2007, July). Community-based participatory research: necessary next steps. *Preventing Chronic Disease, 4*(3), A70. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1955426/

Goodman, M., Sanders Thompson, V., Johnson, C., Gennarelli, R., Drake, B., Bajwa, P., Witherspoon, M., & Bowen, D. (2017). Evaluating community engagement in research: Quantitative measure development. *Journal of community psychology*, *45*(1), 17–32. https://doi. org/10. 1002/jcop. 21828

Guessom, S., Lachal, J., Radjack, R., Carretier, E., Minassian, S., Benoit, L., & Moro, M. (2020). Adolescent psychiatric disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. *Psychiatric Research, 291,* 113–264. https://doi.org/10.1016/j. psychres. 2020. 113264

Hammer, B. Fletcher, F. Hibbert, A. (2017). Participant observation: Enhancing the impact measurement in community based participatory research. *The Qualitative Report, 22*(2), 439-455. https://doi. org/10. 46743/2160-3715/2017. 2553

Hegyi, N. (2019). *The next Yellowstone: How big money is building a new kind of national park*. KUER. https://www.kuer.org/post/next-yellowstone-how-big-money-building-new-kind-national-park#stream/0

Holkup, P., Tripp-Reimer, T., Salois, E., & Weinert, C. (2004). Community-based participatory research: an approach to intervention research with a Native American community. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *27*(3), 162–175. https://doi.org/10.1097/00012272-200407000-00002

Israel, B., Schulz, A., Parker, E., Becker, A., & Allen, A. III, & Guzman, J. (2003). Critical issues in developing and following community-based participatory research principles. *Community-based Participatory Research for Health* (pp.53–76). Jossey-Bass.

Kaiser Family Foundation. (2016). *Mental health care health professional shortage areas (HPSAs) 2016*. https://www. kff. org/other/state-indicator/mental-health-care-health-professional-shortage-areas-hpsas

Kirkness, V. J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First nations and higher education: The Four R's — respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, *30*(3), 1–15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24397980

Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. (2015). *Montana adolescent substance abuse facts*. HHS Office of Adolescent Health. https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/facts-and-stats/national-and-state-data-sheets/adolescents-and-substance-abuse/montana/index.html

Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. (2016). *2016 Suicide mortality review team report*. https://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/2016 Montana Suicide Mortality Review Report.pdf

Montana Office of Public Instruction. (2019). *Park County, Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey.* https://opi.mt.gov/Leadership/Data-Reporting/Youth-Risk-Behavior-Survey

National Network of Libraries of Medicine. (2020). *General Facts: Montana*. https://nnlm.gov/pnr/about/montana

Newman, S., Andrews, J., Magwood, G., Jenkins, C., Cox, M., & Williamson, D. (2011).

Community advisory boards in community-based participatory research: a synthesis of best processes. *Preventing chronic disease*, *8*(3), A70. PMCID: PMC3103575

Noddings, N. (2005). What does it mean to educate the whole child? *Educational Leadership, 63*(1): 8-13.

Rosston, K. (2022), *Suicide in Montana: Facts, Figures, and Formulas for Prevention.*Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/suicideprevention/SuicideinMontana.pdfSaul, J. (2013). *Collective trauma, collective healing: Promoting community resilience in the aftermath of disaster.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203842188

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review* *79*(3), 409-427. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* Viking.

Von Der Embse, N., Sandilos, L., Pendergast, L., & Mankin, A. (2016). A mediation analysis of teacher stress, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. *Learning and Individual Differences, 50,* 308-317. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2016.08.001

White, S. (2008). Placing teachers? Sustaining rural schooling through place-consciousness in teacher education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 23*(7). http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/23-7.pdf

About the Authors

Lauren Davis, EdD, is currently an assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction for Montana State University and was formerly the Education Department Chair and Director for the Neff Center for Teacher Education at Emory & Henry College in Emory, Virginia. Prior to her work in higher education, she was a middle school teacher and building level administrator in North Carolina. She earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education and her master's degree in middle grades education at Appalachian State University) and her doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University. Her research interests revolve around middle level and high school students and how trauma and poverty impact student achievement, especially in rural contexts.

Rebecca Buchanan, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Health and Human Performance at Emory and Henry College in Emory, Virginia. She also serves as the education division chair and director for the Neff Center for Teacher Education. She earned her master of science degree in sport management and her PhD in education from the University of Tennessee. Her research interests include the link between cognition and physical activity as well as trauma-invested practices and resilience in education. She has traveled throughout the United States and several countries, including Russia, Argentina, Scotland, Canada, Japan, and Greece, for both athletic and academic endeavors.

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 117-132
 ISSN: 2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p117-132

Teacher Candidate Perceptions of Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds

Curtis P. Nielsen, *University of Northern Iowa*

Field experience is at the heart of many teacher education programs in America. The early field experiences teacher candidates receive can set a foundation for future success in their teacher education program and even throughout their teaching career. The students in this study were enrolled in a university in a rural Midwestern state and 90% claimed residency in that state. The Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds were embedded in a 25-hour early field experience to provide a small group of teacher candidates with the opportunity to see multiple elementary teachers teach in their own classrooms in real time. Teacher candidates used a discussion protocol to debrief what they witnessed and reflected on how the experience influenced their learning about teaching. Over a two-year span, the teacher candidates who participated in Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds were surveyed to ascertain their impressions of the instructional rounds experience. The survey also asked teacher candidates about the potential impact of Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds on their future teaching practice. The survey results indicated that the time spent in the instructional rounds process was time well spent.

Keywords: **early field experience, instructional rounds, teacher education**

Field experiences are an important part of a teacher candidate's matriculation toward a degree and licensure in teaching (Voytecki et al., 2020). Elementary teacher candidates (TCs) participate in a variety of field experiences, which may include emphasis on classroom environments, curriculum areas, mentor teacher examples, and real-time hours spent working with students in the classroom. Additionally, TCs may have memories from their own K–12 experiences that may influence their knowledge base of teaching.

I have three aims in this paper: (a) to describe a process called Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds based on the City et al. (2009) framework of instructional rounds, (b) to report on teacher candidates' perspectives on the process, gathered through an anonymous survey, and (c) to conjecture about how involvement in Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds benefited candidates in a rural school setting.

Instructional Rounds

Teacher effectiveness leading to student achievement is at the heart of instructional rounds methodology. Meyer-Looze (2014) declared instructional rounds worked best when there was a system-wide improvement process that focused on specific embedded goals. Each goal should address a need that had been identified through data analysis and linked to the school's vision. In a more pragmatic sense, Solan (2020) indicated that student achievement results from instructional rounds, when teaching learning and teacher self-efficacy is aligned. Instructional rounds foster collective teacher learning at the forefront rather than the individualistic improvement cycles that can be prevalent in educational settings (City et al., 2009).

In rural schools there can be limited resources and opportunities for professional development. Instructional rounds can be a way to offset these potential scarcities; they can afford teachers, as well

as administrators, opportunities to learn from each other through what City et al (2009) calls "holding up a mirror" (p. 37). Additionally, Elmore (2007) found that individual schools can benefit from instructional rounds. Isolated rural school districts that include instructional rounds can cultivate a culture of teacher efficacy, which, in turn, can positively impact student achievement.

Bringing instructional rounds to the early field experience level required modification to the City et al. (2009) instructional rounds framework. The Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds (EFEIR) offered teacher candidates the opportunity to observe an experienced teacher, in real time, then discuss with other TCs what they witnessed. This process provided the TCs an opportunity to:

- view multiple grade level teaching examples,
- practice observational skills through note taking,
- experience a group debriefing protocol to discuss and reflect on their observations, and
- provide feedback to the host mentor teacher.

In this article, I first describe the literature surrounding instructional rounds. I then shift focus to discuss how the EFEIR TCs were exposed to the modified form of preservice teacher instructional rounds during their field experience. I then describe the survey results before segueing into comments regarding future directions for EFEIR.

Literature Review

Instructional rounds incorporate cycles of observation, reflection, and discussion that work to enhance teacher quality and student learning (Lee, 2015). The instructional rounds process was first developed by Elmore (2007) through the Connecticut Superintendents Network. He focused on the rounds process medical practitioners conducted and how it could be implemented in education. A group of 12 Connecticut superintendents formed a network and agreed to meet once a month to visit one of their schools to observe classrooms specifically looking at a problem of practice. Elmore recounted how, through a series of protocols, the superintendents who participated in the network observed classroom instruction, presented their notes from their observations, and discussed what they had witnessed. From the basis of Elmore's work, City et al. (2009) wrote *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*. In this influential text, the researchers provided information on how instructional rounds could be implemented in different contexts. They asserted that "the rounds process is an explicit practice that is designed to bring discussion of instruction directly into the process of school improvement" (p. 3). The instructional rounds process can be adapted for use with a wide range of school personnel groupings.

The central framework to instructional rounds comprises the four steps shown in Figure 1: (a) identification of a problem of practice, (b) observation of teaching, (c) debriefing the observation, and (d) identifying the next level of work (City, 2011; City et al., 2009; Meyer-Looze, 2014; Philpott & Oates, 2015; Teitel, 2009).

The four-step process presumes the availability of documents from the school and district, such as mission and vision statements, goals, and school improvement plans. More specifically, Meyer-Looze (2014) concluded that rounds were most successful when they were focused on stated goals and objectives within the improvement plans adopted by the leaders of the school or district.

As an aside, I believe that a key element underpinning the nexus between instructional rounds and student achievement is Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE). Wilcox et al. (2014) studied rural high school graduation rates and the impact that CTE had on the students' performance. They noted that "teachers in the higher-performing schools spoke of being encouraged to take the risk to innovate to meet student needs, and administrators spoke of how receptive teachers were to new ideas" (p. 9). The school culture of high-performing schools in rural environments has a significant alignment with Collective Teacher Efficacy CTE (e.g., CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York, 2012; Harris et al., 2020).

Figure 1

Framework for Instructional Rounds

Step	Characteristics
1. Identification of a Problem of Practice	Instructional core is the main focus Needs to be observable and high leverage Connected to school improvement goals Within the school district's control
2. Observation of Teaching	Not evaluative Needs to be precise Focused on instructional core Linked to problem of practice
3. Debriefing the Observation	Describe what was observed Analyze the data Conclude what the students were learning
4. Identify the Next Level of Work	Share the district's process for action Share the district context, what's currently going on Brainstorm the work for next week/month/year Connect suggestion to the district's process for action

Does school culture drive CTE, or does CTE drive a school culture? This question is outside the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that each is a factor in teacher and student success.

Instructional Rounds in Preservice Teacher Contexts

Instructional rounds, also known as teacher rounds (Del Prete, 2013), education rounds (Goodwin et al., 2015), or rounds (Regan et al., 2017), have been proposed by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010) as a technique that could benefit TCs as they gain knowledge of teaching (Reagan et al., 2017). Reagan et al. (2013) studied how residency programs implemented instructional rounds. They found there were many different approaches. Teaching rounds were organized at Wake Forest University to allow TCs to see master teachers' teaching practices. The TCs chose to analyze specific instructional acts during this procedure. Student participation was used to evaluate these teaching behaviors (Baker & Milner, 2016). Reagan et al. (2015) studied a residency program with graduate students in New York City and how educational rounds impacted the participants' understanding of teaching and learning. At one university, faculty used video to record teachers in rural settings so that TCs could view multiple teachers with a critical eye for a myriad of teaching competencies (Voytecki et al., 2020). The aim of faculty in each program was to provide numerous teaching examples to their TCs.

Field Experience Context

The EFEIR process was an activity embedded within a teacher education required 25-hour field placement course. The course was scheduled for a full semester with each course including a maximum of 18 TCs. However, the required placement was only for 8 weeks of the 16-week semester so class members were randomly assigned to either the first

8 weeks of the semester or the second 8 weeks of the semester, resulting in a maximum of nine TCs in the school at any point. Each of the TCs was assigned a volunteer mentor teacher who hosted them for their required 25-hour field experience. During weeks 2 through 7, TCs worked directly with their mentor teacher and the classroom students. It was during these weeks that TCs were pulled out of their mentor teacher's classroom to join the other TCs in the school to participate in the EFEIR process.

EFEIR Process

In my role as field coordinator, I contacted all general education teachers in the host school the week before the placements occurred to inquire as to their interest in volunteering to host an EFEIR observation. Teachers did not have to be hosting a TC to be eligible to host an EFEIR. Since the focus of elementary early field experience is not content specific, the content of the teaching during these instructional rounds observations was of no consequence.

The EFEIR included a 15-minute teaching segment by a host teacher, which was witnessed by the TCs, as well as a post-observation debriefing. Once in the classroom, the TC's utilized an observation form (see Appendix) that I provided to note what they saw, noticed, and heard during the observation. Prior to entering the classroom, the TCs were instructed to observe for teaching strategies and organizational arrangements or dispositions they could incorporate in their future teaching experiences. At the end of the observation, the TCs left the classroom and reconvened in a group space in the school to complete the rest of the observation form individually. The TCs were asked in the last section of the observation form to identify a specific observation through a sentence taken from Harris (2017): "Because the teacher _____, the students were able to do _____." To conclude the observation form, the TCs had an opportunity to write questions and conjecture about how the EFEIR observation impacted their learning about teaching.

Debriefing Protocol

To wrap up the EFEIR, I conducted a 30 to 45-minute debriefing in which TCs shared what they observed and learned from the EFEIR host teacher. The debriefing protocol followed a round-robin format where one TC at a time stated an item they saw, noticed, or heard. The protocol allowed for three cycles of statements by the TCs (Harris, 2017). During the sharing of observations, I jotted down each stated observation on a blank EFEIR observation form (see Appendix) to record the discussion.

After all the TCs completed their observation forms and the discussion had concluded, each TC turned in their form to me. I made copies of the observation forms for the host teacher and met with them the next day. During that meeting, I highlighted the common themes of the observations from the TCs. Each TC and host teacher were informed that the observations were non-evaluative in nature and would not be shared with school administration.

Framework for EFEIR

The framework of EFEIR was grounded in the practice of the City et al. (2009) instructional rounds process shown in Figure 1. The EFEIR process is described in Figure 2, and Figure 3 provides a comparison between the City et al. instructional rounds process and the EFEIR processes.

As shown in Figure 3, EFEIR differs from the City et al. (2009) process of instructional rounds in several ways. EFEIR takes place early in the TCs teacher education program as opposed to during a TC's internship. EFEIR is not conducted with a view to sustaining a system-wide process of school improvement by means of the instructional rounds process as City et al. intended. The fourth step of EFEIR, as shown in Figure 2, is focused on providing the EFEIR host teacher with feedback regarding what the TCs saw during their observation. Instructional rounds with an experienced teacher as observer might entail observation for an entire class period; EFEIR was strictly limited to 15 minutes.

Figure 2

Framework for EFEIR

Step	Action
1. Brief Introduction of the Observation Form	University field coordinator hands out observation form TCs instructed to only write notes in the top section during the observation TCs told about focused observations, looking at one thing a time TCs state some things to look for in the classroom, e.g., whom teacher calls on, what is on the walls, where does the teacher look, where is the teacher stationed in the classroom, etc.
2. Observation of Teaching	University field coordinator walks TCs to host teacher's classroom TCs spread out around classroom 15-minute observation TCs note what they "Saw," "Noticed," and "Heard" during the teaching
3. Debriefing the Observation	University field coordinator leads debriefing protocol Each TC reads something they observed. Go around the group three times. No comments by others in the group. University field coordinator notes what TCs read Protocol ends with a discussion of questions TCs had and what they learned
4. Host Teacher Review	University field coordinator makes copies of TC observations University field coordinator highlights common observation themes University field coordinator meets with host teacher to discuss common themes

Figure 3

Difference Between City et al. (2009) and EFEIR

Step	City et al. (2009)	EFEIR
1. Identification of a Problem of Practice	Different action. EFEIR allows TCs to observe what they want and has them use a uniform recording form.	Brief Introduction of the Observation Form
2. Observation of Teaching	Same action, but there could be different foci of observation and time allotments for the classroom visit.	Observation of Teaching
3. Debriefing the Observation	Same action, but there could be different protocols used to debrief.	Debriefing the Observation
4. Identify the Next Level of Work	Different action. City et al (2009) step allows for instructional rounds group to make decisions on next level of work. EFEIR step focuses on the field coordinator meeting with the host teacher to review the TCs.	Host Teacher Review

Method

The purpose of my study was to examine TCs' perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of EFEIR and how the process might impact their future teaching. I gathered qualitative data through an anonymous Qualtrics survey provided to each TC who participated in my study.

Setting and Participants

EFEIR was conducted over the course of four semesters that included eight field experience classes and a total of 83 TCs. Each field experience class was divided into two sessions with a maximum of nine TCs in each. Each TC spent six weeks at the school, spending at least 25 hours in their assigned mentor teacher's classroom. These hours were part of the 80 required hours of field experience prior to internship. Table 1 illustrates the basic organization of each of the eight field experience classes. EFEIR was an exercise embedded within the second of three required field experiences prior to internship.

The host elementary school was in a rural Midwestern city of 40,000 residents and was one of seven elementary schools in the district. The host school served approximately 650 students and employed 25 general education classroom teachers. The host school also employed 10 paraeducators as well as a school counselor, associate principal, and principal. The host school had a long history of supporting early field experience students. As evidence of their commitment, in the four semesters on which my study focused, 21 of 25 (84%) general education teachers volunteered to host a TC for the 25-hour field experience.

The TC participants in my study were enrolled at a university of approximately 11,000 students located in the same rural Midwestern city as the elementary school. Ninety percent of the students at the university claim residency in this rural Midwestern state. The TC participants were sophomores and were in the middle of their teacher education journey. Many had attended elementary schools smaller than the host elementary school. Some TC participants came from rural communities with fewer residents than the population of the host elementary school. Each of the TC participants was admitted to the institution's Teacher Education program prior to enrollment in the early field experience.

Broader Perspective

To provide broader perspective, two years following EFEIR, all the TCs in this cohort will conclude their teacher education journey by completing a full-semester internship experience. Ninety percent of internship placements will be completed in one of the nine regions in the state; the other 10% will be completed in out-of-state or international locations. Approximately 67% of school districts in six of the nine regions in the state enroll fewer than 1,000 students (Iowa State Department of Education data).

Table 1

Field Experience Semester Class Organization

Session A First 8 Weeks	Session B Second 8 Weeks
W1 seminar with Field Coordinator	W1 seminar with Field Coordinator
W2–W7 in mentor teacher's classroom	W2–W7 in mentor teacher's classroom
W3 EFEIR	W3 EFEIR
W5 EFEIR	W5 EFEIR
W8 wrap up seminar with Field Coordinator	W8 wrap up seminar with Field Coordinator

Note: Two classes per semester; "W" is the abbreviation of "Week"

Study Setting

At the host school, a total of 12 teachers and at least one teacher from each of the seven grade levels volunteered to host an EFEIR session. Each of the host teachers held a degree in elementary education and a master's degree in various educational fields. Each teacher had more than 10 years of experience in the classroom at the time they hosted the TCs for an EFEIR session.

A field experience coordinator, who was employed by the university, monitored the TC participants and their colleagues throughout their participation. The field experience coordinator had 22 years of experience at the K-6 classroom level, 18 years of experience at the university level, and held a doctorate in education. As the field coordinator, I visited with the TC participants and their colleagues each day they were in a classroom. My visits to classroom included conversations with TCs about experiences working with children, what teaching and classroom management strategies they witnessed, and what questions they had about the field experience process.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of EFEIR, TC participants in my study and their colleagues were provided with the opportunity to complete an anonymous Qualtrics survey addressing their EFEIR experiences. The survey consisted of four questions:

1. What are the positive aspects of EFEIR?
2. What are the negative aspects of EFEIR?
3. What impact, if any, did EFEIR have on your learning about teaching?
4. The 30-40 minutes spent during EFEIR was time well spent/time not well spent. (Choose one.)

Forty-eight TCs responded to the survey, and, given qualitative nature of the data, I decided to code the responses in Nvivo (https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home) to "[break] down the initial responses into discrete parts" (Saldaña, 2009). The first code I assigned was what I perceived to be the main idea of the comment. Then, I assigned a code identifying one of five thematic categories: instruction, environment, organization, experience, and reflection. Given the open-ended nature of the data, it was common for a response to warrant my assigning more than one of the thematic category codes to it. Samples of TC participant responses to Question 1 are illustrated in Table 2.

I devised the five thematic category codes based on my observations of the TCs during the EFEIR notetaking and debriefing phases. As discussed above, I was prepared to assign more than one thematic code to each TC's survey response. My preparedness to do so was in accord with Saldaña's (2009) qualitative research principles. My experience with applying my pre-determined thematic codes to the data validated their applicability.

I looked for specific attributes in assigning a thematic code to a response. For example, I assigned "instruction" to comments that focused on the teaching the TC reported observing during the observation. I assigned "environment" to responses that focused on the classroom organization, or posters on the walls, or other tangible classroom elements. I assigned "organization" to responses that focused on the host teacher's classroom management or the EFEIR process. I assigned "experience" to responses that focused on the TC's experience during EFEIR. Finally, I assigned "reflection" to those responses that drew a comparison to the experiences the TC had in their assigned field experience classroom with their mentor teacher.

Results

The anonymous Qualtrics survey was completed by 48 of the 83 TCs (57%) and included three open-ended and one binary-choice question. The coded results from my coding of the first three questions are shown in Table 3.

The low response rate may have been influenced by the anonymous nature of the survey, that its completion was not a class requirement, or that there was no inducement to respond. I noted that a further 17 responses had been partially completed. If those 17 responses were from distinct

individuals, the response rate would have risen to 78% (65 of 83 TCs).

Findings

Tables 4, 5, and 6 summarize my findings in relation to the responses to the first three questions in the Qualtrics survey. "Instruction" and "environment" codes dominated the positive characteristics of EFEIR. It is possible that, in these early field experiences, TCs went into the host teachers' classrooms narrowly focused on the instruction they were seeing. Indeed, there may be a link between the "instruction" and "environment" codes. They appear together in 16 of the 48 (34%) favorable remarks regarding EFEIR. Quotes 1 and 2 in Table 4 typify the TC's responses in this category. In these statements, "room set up" or "how they run their classrooms" suggested to me a focus on "environment" while "method of teaching" and "teaching styles" suggested a focus on "instruction." In Quote 3, the TC mentioned "hands-on" teaching. I interpreted this as an interesting way to describe entering the classroom and seeing the teaching with their colleagues. Prior to entering he classroom for EFEIR, the TCs were instructed to look for things that they might be able to use in their own classrooms someday. This frame of reference may have influenced these remarks.

Table 2

Sample of Implementation of Coding Process

TC Response	First Code	Thematic Code
It allows you to get into another teacher's classroom and see how they had their room set up as well as see their style of teaching. I think observing many different teachers is important in helping you find your teaching style.	Room arrangement Style of teaching	Instruction Environment
I was able to see different types of teaching in different classrooms. I picked up and many classroom management strategies and learning techniques that may be useful in my own classroom.	Another classroom Teaching styles	Environment Instruction
Instructional Rounds were a huge positive aspect to me as a future educator. It showed me how teachers at different levels run their classrooms and their teaching styles. I learned that grades can be learning similar things but taught differently and there is still a lot of success.	Teaching styles Different grade levels	Environment Instruction

Table 3

Frequency of Thematic Codes Assigned to TC's Responses

	Question	Instruction	Environment	Organization	Experience	Reflection
1	Positive aspects of EFEIR	31	29	3	3	7
2	Negative aspects of EFEIR	1	6	28	4	0
3	Impact of EFEIR on TC learning about teaching	28	16	3	2	3
	Total	60	51	34	9	10

In sum, I coded 60 of the 73 positive aspect comments as exhibiting either an "instruction" or "environment" focus. This conformed to my expectation, given that the TCs were in the early stages of their teacher education program. I suggest it is reasonable that TCs would instinctively look initially at the teacher's instructional actions and the instructional context when observing an experienced teacher in their own classroom.

Question 2

The second question on the Qualtrics survey asked TCs about negative aspects of EFEIR. Supporting quotes from the TC's responses are shown in Table 5. There were 39 responses to this question, and the code I most readily assigned was "organization," with 28 instances out of 39 responses (72%). One TC's comment summed up the general feeling I gained from the survey respondents: "it took time out of the classroom we were working in." Another stated, "it takes time away from you in your own classroom, and you can't teach a lesson during that time slot either." I was interested to note that, in the TC's responses both "too much time" and "not enough time" were stated as negative aspects to EFEIR. There were 30 negative survey responses related to time, 20 (67%) of which mentioned being out of their mentor teacher's classroom as a negative. Quote 1 in Table 5 alludes to this criticism. The remaining 10 (33%) responses asserted that there was not enough out-of-the-classroom time devoted to EFEIR.

Quote 2 in Table 5 mentions the shortness of the EFEIR: "you don't get to stay in the classroom very long."

In the one response that did not mention time, one TC wondered if what they were seeing was reality for the classroom. Other responses that highlighted negative aspects of EFEIR focused on the observation form, the flow of the classroom being impacted by a group of TCs watching from the back of the room, the leaving of the mentor teacher's classroom, and the number of adults in the host teacher's classroom when EFEIR was taking place.

Table 4

Typical Positive Aspects of Instructional Rounds

Quote	Response
1	It allows you to get into another teacher's classroom and see how they had their room set up as well as see their style of teaching. I think observing many different teachers is important in helping you find your teaching style.
2	Instructional Rounds were a huge positive aspect to me as a future educator. It showed me how teachers at different levels run their classrooms and their teaching styles. I learned that grades can be learning similar things but taught differently and there is still a lot of success.
3	You get to experience hands-on teaching experiences at a welcoming school. You can observe how teachers guide their students in a no-pressure situation for you. You get to know the teacher and their atmosphere of the classroom so you get to see a wide array of situations throughout the rounds.

Table 5

Typical Negative Aspects of Instructional Rounds

Quote	Response
1	It took some time out of my classroom and being with my mentor teacher and the children that I was working with.
2	You don't get to stay in the classroom very long so you have to soak in as much information as you can. We also only visited two classrooms so we did not get to see how the whole school functions as time would not permit that.
3	I think one of the biggest negative aspects might be that the time that is being observed might not be 100% reflective of how the class normally functions. For example, we are only there for a few minutes, so the short amount of time might not be accurate for how the class might normally function. Also, we could be entering the classroom at a time that is disruptive or different from their normal routine.

Question 3

The final open-ended question on the Qualtrics survey inquired about what impact EFEIR had on the TC's learning about teaching. I coded 85% of the responses to this question as "instruction" and "environment." From my perspective, the responses provided several different examples of what TCs would take away from their EFEIR experience. One TC mentioned the importance of being yourself when you teach (see Table 6, Quote 1). This TC's comment was meaningful to me because I believe that TCs tend to want to emulate other teachers and follow a role model. However, to become successful teachers, TCs have to find comfort with their own teaching style and with their teaching dispositions. The TC from whose response I excerpted Quote 1 was aware of that developmental imperative.

Another TC looked at the impact in terms of the classroom environment. In Quote 2 in Table 6, it is clear to me that this TC had come to the realization that active engagement by the teacher with the students is paramount to effective teaching. Moreover, they were aware that it is not only important for the teacher but also the children that they learn to gently correct each other. Their response highlights the essence of the environment in the classroom this TC observed.

Finally, another TC's response highlighted the general overall view they took away from EFEIR and the teaching practice they observed. Stepping into the practical environment to see how a particular teacher addressed the circumstances with which they were confronted helped this TC to build their knowledge of teaching at different grade levels from their current assigned field experience. This is a valuable aspect of EFEIR since the TCs could be certified in up to eight different grade levels through current state credentialing.

On balance, it seems to me that the majority of TCs' interactions with EFEIR were positive. It gave them the opportunity to observe new teaching techniques and classroom management practices as well as giving them a window into their potential careers as teachers. EFEIR afforded the TCs an opportunity to observe in an authentic classroom

Table 6

Typical Responses Highlighting Projected Impact on TC's Teaching Practice of EFEIR

Quote	Response
1	I think it showed me that every teacher teaches in a different way. Not one teacher, I observed, taught with the same methods or used the same strategies. It showed me that when I am placed in a classroom that I have free range to teach my way and not to compare myself to other educators.
2	It really taught me the importance of classroom management and to be involved with the children as they learn. When teaching a lesson, it really needs to be fun and engaging because it keeps students focused on what is going on. The environment needs to be fully positive because it gives students the power to not be shy when answering a question. One room that sticks out the most to me is the room where the teacher had the students come up to the board and write down a math problem and solve it. This student did have an error, and her peers used positive words in telling her what she did wrong and how she could fix it.
3	Instructional rounds impacted my learning about teaching by allowing me to see other teachers and their effective teaching methods. I was also able to see a variety of grades and the ways approaches to teaching differ when the grade level changes.

environment. It gave them the chance to make connections between what they were learning in the university classroom, the reality of teaching, and their future as a teacher.

Question 4

The final question on the Qualtrics survey inquired about the TCs' thoughts regarding the time spent in instructional rounds. This closed-ended question prompted TCs with "the 30-40 minutes spent during instructional rounds was…" and they had the choice of two responses: either "time well spent" or "time not well spent." Interestingly, given their comments about the negative aspects of EFEIR, 45 out of 48 (94%) TCs indicated that EFEIR was time well spent. This near-unanimous positive assessment when confronted with a binary choice is somewhat confounding given the participants' responses to Question 2, which were much more nuanced. Of course, a binary choice is not conducive to nuance, but I wonder:

- When a TC began the survey, did they feel compelled to respond to every question? This question comes to mind because eight (17%) of the TC participants stated there were no negatives to EFEIR. Another four (12%) of the respondents didn't respond at all or responded with "none." Did 75% of the TCs respond because they thought they had to do so?
- Were TCs torn between the EFEIR process and their mentor teacher's classroom? The answer to this question, I believe, is that some were torn. In response to Question 2, 19 out of the 48 respondents indicated being absent from their mentor teachers' classroom caused some issues for them. The issues ranged from not being able to get a "flow" that day to not being able to see their mentor teacher teach a subject they were going to have to teach in the next week.

The responses to Question 4 supported the comments TCs made in response to Question 1. It is reasonable to assume there is a connection between these two questions. The EFEIR process was seen as positive and assisted TCs see more clearly their potential as teachers.

Limitations

One limitation of EFEIR, as well as instructional rounds in general, is the necessity of obtaining the trust of regular classroom teachers to let a small group of young future teachers witness their teaching. Even the most experienced teachers may feel uneasy and anxious about being observed by others, even if it is a non-evaluative observation. The classroom teacher must maintain a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) to make this experience a positive one for all involved.

Lee (2015) made mention of three other possible limitations for sustaining rounds in education. First, the amount of time required for organizing, planning, and debriefing the rounds process takes can be difficult to find. Teachers are inundated with many demands on their time during the school day. Next, if preservice teachers are asked to observe practicing teachers, there could be issues because of their differential levels of practical teaching knowledge. Roegman and Riehl (2015) expressed concern that the practicing teachers' expertise may be overlooked because preservice students may lack the knowledge to understand why such instructional methods are more ineffective than others (Lee, 2015). Does the instructional rounds process lead preservice teachers to adopt a single point of view of good teaching? If common forms of teaching frameworks are used to observe teaching during rounds, TCs may determine there is one method of good teaching. They could overlook the fact that there are many forms of teaching success in the classroom that exist (Lee, 2015). This is a programmatic question that should be considered before scaling up instructional rounds to any teacher education program.

Overall Comments

The anonymous TC survey indicated that the participants considered EFEIR a beneficial program for their early field experience. The TCs were given access to classrooms that they would not normally be privy to and they were able to discuss their observations with peers who had observed the same lesson. TCs mentioned that they were able to see multiple ways of teaching, classroom management techniques, organization, and

classroom arrangements to enrich their teacher education knowledge and dispositions. When asked if the EFEIR was worth the time, 94% of the survey participants agreed that yes, it was worth the time. The EFEIR increased the number of general education teachers the TCs had an opportunity to observe teaching from one to three. Based on the work of City et al. (2009), the EFEIR process allowed 83 TCs to view not just their field experience mentor teacher but also two additional teachers in action.

Another element of the EFEIR process that TCs mentioned often in their survey responses was that of time. Seventy-seven percent (30) of the negative comments about EFEIR referenced time as some of the TCs (33%) wanted more time in the classroom during EFEIR. Other TCs (67%) thought that the time away from their field experience classrooms was an issue. I can readily see that time could be an issue when pulling students from what they see as their role in a process to immerse them in another classroom, especially when they are heavily focused on the practice of teaching. During my informal discussions with EFEIR host teachers, several mentioned that they would like to schedule time with the TCs following the observation to debrief about their observation I can see the potential for this to benefit both the TCs and host teachers in the EFEIR process, but, again, time would be a barrier to be overcome.

My informal survey of the university internship coordinators from around the state revealed that approximately 50% of interns are hired by a school district within the region they interned. Rural school districts seem to hire those interns who successfully complete their internship in that district. This is not a surprising revelation given the current teacher shortage, the advantage that districts have of being able to see interns teach prior to extending an offer of employment, and the advantage the interns have of being able to know something of the district prior to potentially accepting that offer. The value of TCs having experience with an instructional rounds process prior to their internships thus could benefit both the TCs and the rural school districts they serve.

Experience with the 21st-century skills of observation, debriefing, reflecting, collaboration and questioning that are embedded in EFEIR might make graduates more valuable to a rural district that has a need to create professional development opportunities from within. I believe it cannot be overstated that teacher education at universities can impact change in school districts through their graduates. Teacher education, according to Häkkinen et al., can be a potent channel for triggering long-term change and supporting the integration of 21st-century skills into daily educational activities (as cited in Valtonen et al, 2021).

Finally, the significance of instructional rounds, according to City et al. (2009), rests in bringing "direct discussion of instruction into the process of school improvement" (p. 3). If the term "school improvement" was replaced with "teacher education," the relevance of EFEIR might be heightened for all schools.

Future Directions

There are several ways the EFEIR program could be modified to fit other field experiences. A cross-school visitation rotation might be something worth looking at. Also, my study was conducted at a rural midwestern elementary school, but a similar experience could be completed in a middle or high school also. However, to expand this program comprehensively, allowing time for TCs and host teachers to talk about the lesson would be advantageous. Perhaps online video conferencing could allow for TCs and host teachers to discuss the observations virtually, at different times of the day. As I have mentioned over and over, time is often a barrier to discussion and reflection.

Finally, the intrinsic benefits of this process on TCs could be studied. Would this process enhance the dispositions of TCs in a way that would be advantageous to those entering the teacher workforce in a rural school? Could these TCs bring a different mindset to school communities that have limited access to professional development? A deeper dive into these questions may be well worth the time.

References

Baker, S., & Milner, J. O., (2016). Building discretionary authority in a teacher education program. *Action in Teacher Education, 38*(2), 91–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2016.1155098

City, E. A. (2011). Learning from instructional rounds. *Educational Leadership, 69*(2), 36–41.

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education*: *A network approach to improving teaching and learning*. Harvard Education Press.

CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York. (2012). *Career and technical education: A driving force in school improvement*: Author. http://nyctecenter.org/images/files/Publications/CTE-A-Driving-Force-in-School-Improvement.pdf

Del Prete, T. (2013). *Teacher rounds: A guide to collaborative learning in and from practice.* Corwin. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452268200

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success.* Random House.

Elmore, R. (2007). Professional networks and school improvement. *School Administrator, 64*(4), 20–24.

Goodwin, A. L., Del Prete, T., Reagan, E. M., & Roegman, R. (2015). A closer look at the practice and impact of "rounds." *International Journal of Educational Research, 73*, 37–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.06.006

Häkkinen,P., Järvelä, S., Mäkitalo-Siegl, K., Ahonen, A., Näykki, P., & Valtonen, T. (2017). Preparing teacher-students for twenty-first-century learning practices (PREP 21): A framework for enhancing collaborative problem-solving and strategic learning skills, *Teachers and Teaching*, *23*(1), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1203772

Harris, J. C., Warner, M. T., Yee, K., & Wilkerson, S. B. (2020, May). *Assessing the alignment between West Virginia's high school career and technical education programs and the labor market*. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at IES. ERIC (ED605044). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED605044.pdf

Harris, L. (2017, August 15). *Learning labs: Another piece of the teacher-leadership puzzle* [Paper presentation]. Central Rivers Area Education Agency Professional Leadership Series, 2017–2018. Cedar Falls, IA.

Lee, C. K-E. (2015). Examining education rounds through the lens of lesson study. *International Journal of Educational Research. 73*, 100–106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.07.001

Meyer-Looze, C. L. (2014). Creating a cycle of continuous improvement through instructional rounds. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 10*(21), 29–45.

National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2010). *Transforming teacher education through clinical practice: A national strategy to prepare effective teachers.* http://caepnet.org/~/media/Files/caep/accreditation-resources/blue-ribbon-panel.pdf

Philpott, C., & Oates C. (2015). Learning rounds: What the literature tells us (and what it doesn't). *Scottish Educational Review, 47*(1), 49–65.

Reagan, E. M., Chen, C., Roegman, R. & Zuckerman, K. G. (2015). Round and round: Examining teaching residents' participation in and reflections on education rounds. *International Journal of Educational Research, 73*, 65–76. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.05.003

Reagan, E. M., Roegman, R., & Goodwin, A. L. (2017). Inquiry in the round? Education rounds in an [sic] teacher education program. *Action in Teacher Education, 39*(3) 239–254. https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2017.1317299

Reagan, E. M., Roegman, R., Goodwin, A. L., & Zuckerman, K. (2013, April 27). *Inquiry in the round? A qualitative case study of education rounds in a residency program* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, United States.

Roegman, R., & Riehl, C. (2015). Playing doctor with teacher preparation: An examination of rounds as a socializing practice for preservice teachers. *International Journal of Educational*

Research, 73, 89–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.05.001

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* SAGE.

Solan, J. F. (2020). *Instructional rounds and the development of teacher efficacy for student achievement.* (Publication No. 27964620) [Doctoral dissertation, Southern Connecticut State University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Teitel, L. (2009). Improving teaching and learning through instructional rounds. *Harvard Education Letter, 25*(3), 1–3.

Valtonen, T., Hoang, N., Sointu, E., Naykki, P., Virtannen, A., Poysa-Tarhonen, J., Hakkinen, P., Jarvela, S., Makitalo, K., & Kukkonen, J. (2021). How pre-service teachers perceive their 21st century skills and dispositions: A longitudinal perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior, 116*(2021), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106643

Voytecki, K. S., Tripp, M. C., Wilhite, K., & Warren, S. H. (2020). Video grand rounds in rural teacher preparation. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education, 10*(1), 119–140. https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2020.v10n1p119-140.

Wilcox, K. C., Angelis, J. I., Baker, L., & Lawson, H. A. (2014). The value of people, place and possibilities: A multiple case study of rural high school completion. *Journal of Research in Rural Education 29*(9), 1–18.

About the Author

Curtis P. Nielsen, EdD, is an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa. During his 32 years in education, he has taught at the elementary, middle school, high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels. He has supervised over 850 university teacher education students as they completed their required field experience. His research interests include professional learning communities, teacher to teacher: teachers learning from each other, and teacher candidate instructional rounds. He also serves as part of a leadership team at an elementary school.

Website: https://curtnielsen.wixsite.com/cpn2018 Author's contact: curt.nielsen@uni.edu

Appendix

Early Field Experience Instructional Rounds Observation Form

I saw…	I noticed…	I heard…

Because the teacher _____, the students were able to _____.

What questions come to mind as you observed the teaching segment? You do not need to complete all three questions blanks.
1.

2.

3.

How will this observation impact my learning about teaching?

Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)
2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, Pp. 133-137

 ISSN:2642-7170
https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v12n1p133-137

Book Review
Higher Education Access and Success of Rural Students: Ensuring College-going Advice is Relevant to Rural Populations

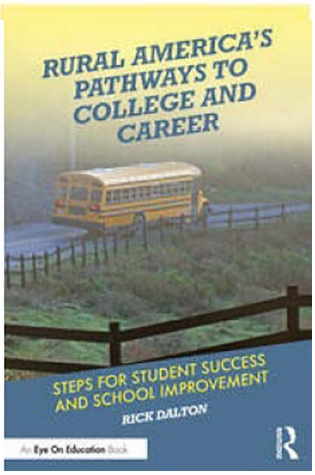
Karen Ganss, *University of Colorado Boulder*
Ty McNamee, *Columbia University*
Shadman Islem, *Boston College*

Book Reviewed: *Rural America's Pathways to College and Career: Steps for Student Success and School Improvement,* by Rick Dalton: Routledge, 2021. ISBN 978-1-003-02026-8. 283 pages.

Despite the inclusion of "rural" in the title, *Rural America's Pathways to College and Career: Steps for Student Success and School Improvement* covers content more specific to a particular college access organization than it does direct guidance on rural student achievement. In this review, the authors discuss areas of academia and college access where content of the book may be applied practically to some rural and other populations as well as caution readers to take a critical approach to claims made by author Rick Dalton. Authors conclude that although areas of the book offer practical advice for increasing access to college and career to underrepresented student populations in general, including rural students, there are deficit perspectives on rural people, places, and education presented that warrant more rural-relevant and strengths-based examples in order to more effectively contribute to the current literature on rural education.

Keywords: **college access, college success, rural education, community-based organizations**

Discussion of rural access to postsecondary education has surged within the past five years. For better or worse, mainstream media spotlighted this topic following the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Belkin, 2017; Marcus & Krupnik, 2017; Pappano, 2017), coinciding with emerging research investigating rural Americans' relationship with higher education (Ardoin, 2018; Koricich et al., 2018; McNamee, 2019; Means et al., 2016; Sansone et al., 2020). Rick Dalton's *Rural America's Pathways to College and Career: Steps for Student Success and School Improvement* (2021) is the latest entry into rural college access literature, described as a "how-to guide for building college and career readiness within rural schools" (p. i). The book centers around Dalton's college access organization, College for Every Student (CFES) Brilliant Pathways. CFES's claims of helping 100,000 low-income students enroll in college is supported by case studies delineating how CFES students overcome personal challenges and is accompanied by detailed instructions for creating college-going support systems, sometimes in rural spaces.



Review of the Text

Chapter one begins with a broad, but unfortunately often deficit-focused, discussion of

rural America and the "hidden crisis" in rural schools (p. 1), describing how rural communities have been left out of public discourse. The author discusses barriers to higher education for rural students and how a lack of college access impedes rural populations from acquiring jobs that are not "dead-end" and "unskilled" (p. 2). Dalton's personal connections and CFES initiatives in rural schools are outlined, generally adapted from urban programs. The chapter concludes by encouraging readers to focus on "rural students, rural schools, and rural communities" (p. 19).

Chapters two through six focus on ways rural secondary schools build college-going cultures with the author attributing such success to CFES partnerships. Chapter two highlights a particular rural school, Crown Point Central, located at the junction of rural Upstate New York and Vermont. The author creditsCFES's work with educators, school board members, and students to alter pedagogical and leadership practices as the impetus to turn low test scores and college-going rates around for the better.

CFES's trademarked "Essential Skills: Goal-Setting, Teamwork, Leadership, Networking, Perseverance, and Agility" are detailed in chapter three. Dalton discusses how students can build and implement the Essential Skills, including school activity examples and an Essential Skills self-assessment rubric. The concluding discussion covers why such skills help rural youth pursue higher education.

Chapter four focuses on CFES' "college- and career-readiness (CCR) advisors" (p. 86). The author uses "The Rural Trap" (p. 87) to describe how capable and intelligent rural students face "cultural, financial, and logistical obstacles to higher education" (p. 110) and lack individuals to provide college-going knowledge. In response, CFES trains and credentials educators and community members to be CCR advisors who support students in developing the Essential Skills. The funding, job description, and longevity of CCR advisors is unclear.

Chapter five delves into ensuring students are also career-ready. Again, ascribed to CFES's work, Dalton details school–business partnerships to foster students' professional skills. A guide to building such partnerships are outlined, with the author discussing how urban examples can be adapted to rural contexts (yet does not provide specifics on how to accomplish this).

Returning to college-going topics, chapter six credits CFES with tools and strategies to foster college readiness—including a college-readiness assessment rubric, student to-do lists, and suggestions on building school–college partnerships. While examples of rural students and schools are provided, most tips outline college readiness broadly, not specifically to rural students.

Chapters seven through ten, while relevant, are a bit disjointed in discussing varying concepts about rural students' access to and readiness for college. Chapter seven centers on rural issues of broadband connectivity while encouraging rural communities to leverage technology to access education and technological jobs. This conversation is couched within the COVID-19 pandemic that expanded remote learning. While the rest of the book does not often mention rural students returning to their hometown after graduation, this chapter effectively discusses ways to recruit individuals to live and work in rural areas.

Chapter eight outlines "rural America's dropout crisis" (p. 187), detailing the need to recruit and retain rural students to and throughout college. Dalton expands on rural college student dropout rates by describing the complexity of rural family buy-in and cultural clashes between higher education and rural students' backgrounds. Practical solutions, tips, strategies, and university initiatives for preparing rural students to thrive in college are provided.

The author in chapter nine details how science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers are important to the future of rural communities while also describing issues faced by rural students in pursuing STEM degrees. Like earlier chapters, examples of programs to interest students in STEM are outlined, followed by features of rural students who pursued STEM careers.

Chapter ten focuses on financial issues, including stories of rural students who encountered

obstacles to pay for college. Practical tips to assist students and families in understanding the financial aid process and examples of rural scholarship programs are provided. While not specific to rural students, this chapter provides a lengthy list of financial aid myths and realities, explanations about deciphering financial aid packages, and a "Glossary of Financial Aid Terms" (p. 250). It concludes with specific lessons learned from one student's experience in funding their collegiate pursuits.

The conclusion summarizes issues rural students encounter accessing college degrees and indicates "the relationship between rural America and higher education has grown fraught in recent years" (p. 267). While examples of how rural schools and communities have built college-going cultures are included, the conclusion, as the rest of the book, directly mentions CFES college and career readiness activities. Dalton concludes by describing how rural students not pursuing higher education is a loss for themselves and their communities, reiterating the importance of helping rural students reach their "full potential" (p. 269).

Strengths and Weaknesses

Dalton's book is a valuable guide for those looking to understand the basics of college access advising—yet a glaring issue lies in the inclusion of 'rural' in the title, as examples, suggestions, and experiences described rarely utilize rural populations, instead relying on the broader implication that rural schools will also benefit from these strategies. In fact, as rural education researchers ourselves, we conclude that most content is not specific to rural education at all, but instead an expanded summary of CFES accomplishments. In providing solutions to rural educational challenges and serving as a guide for building college and career readiness in rural schools, the author provides a one-dimensional perspective, based substantially on CFES experience. The rural lens seems out of place, given the CFES website states only 23 percent of students in the organization are from rural communities (Brilliant Pathways, 2021).

Despite the broad applicability, Dalton fails to mention other college access organizations and initiatives. Another glaring weakness appearing is the lack of recent research or citations in general. Although the book is not presented as scholarly research, mention of interviews conducted are not backed by documented citations nor is detail provided as to the scope of interviews. Recent scholarship regarding rural student college enrollment, retention, and success is also missing (such as Chambers, 2020; McNamee, 2019; Means, 2019; National Student Clearinghouse, 2020; Sansone et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2019). Additionally, the deficit perspective of rural America presented throughout is disappointing, highlighting CFES as more a savior than a college access organization. Despite good intentions and some mention of successful rural schools and communities, the language depicts rural schools as "a hidden crisis" (Dalton, 2021, p. 1) without acknowledging more deeply the strengths of rural schools, communities, educators, and students.

Dalton's extensive experience brings substantial strengths to this book for those interested in providing access to college for underrepresented populations. The practical resources in building college and career readiness allow educators, community members, or students to implement advice almost immediately. Through examples, it is clear that CFES activities are leading more underrepresented students to pursue and complete college degrees (although including more data would be helpful in substantiating claims).

Prospective Audience

For the field of education generally, this book contributes a succinct, easy-to-read introduction to college access. Therefore, audiences who would benefit include community members, educators, and students with little prior knowledge of college and career readiness best practices. However, its applicability in an undergraduate or graduate classroom is limited, and it would best be used as a practical college preparation guide for scholar-practitioners. Intellectually, while this book presents little new knowledge or research related to rural education, its practical implications (based on a long-standing, reputable organization) are worthy of a quick read.

References

Ardoin, S. (2018). *College aspirations and access in working-class rural communities: The mixed signals, challenges, and new language first-generation students encounter*. Lexington Books.

Belkin, D. (2017, December 1). For colleges, a rural reckoning. *Wall Street Journal.* https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-colleges-a-rural-reckoning-1512159888.

Brilliant Pathways (2021). *Where we work.* CFES Brilliant Pathways. https://brilliantpathways.org/where-we-work/

Byun, S., Meece, J. L., & Agger, C. A. (2017). Predictors of college attendance patterns of rural youth. *Research in Higher Education*, *58*(8), 817–842. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9449-z

Chambers, C. R. (2020). Let's give 'em something to talk about: Spurring college conversations among rural students, schools, and families. In H. C. Green, B. S. Zugelder, & J. C. Manner (Eds.), *Handbook of research on leadership and advocacy for children and families in rural poverty* (pp. 279–294). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-2787-0.ch013

Dalton, R. (2021). *Rural America's pathways to college and career: Steps for student success and school improvement.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003080268

Koricich, A., Chen, X., & Hughes, R. P. (2018). Understanding the effects of rurality and socioeconomic status on college attendance and institutional choice in the United States. *Review of Higher Education*, *41*(2), 281–305. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.0004

Means, D. R., Clayton, A. B., Conzelmann, J. G., Baynes, P., & Umbach, P. D. (2016). Bounded aspirations: Rural, African-American high school students and college access. *Review of Higher Education, 39*(4), 543–569. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2016.0035

Means, D. R. (2019). Crucial support, vital aspirations: The college and career aspirations of rural black and Latinx middle school students in a community-and youth-based leadership program. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *35*(1), 1–14. https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/35-1.pdf

Marcus, J., & Krupnick, M. (2017, September 27). The rural higher-education crisis. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/09/the-rural-higher- education-crisis/541188/

McNamee, T. (2019). Social capital in the rural United States and its impact on educational attainment. In P. George & R. Bartee (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives on social capital in educational contexts* (pp. 201–220). Information Age Publishing, Inc.

National Student Clearinghouse (2020). *High school benchmarks - 2020: National college progression rates.* https://nscresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks/

Pappano, L. (2017, January 31). Colleges discover the rural student. *New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/education/edlife/colleges-discover-rural-student.html

Sansone V. A., Sparks C. S., & Cano-McCutcheon, P. (2020). Metro and non-metro variation in postsecondary enrollment: The role of race, ethnicity, and residential location in Texas, *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis 9*(1), Article 6, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11013

Wells, R. S., Manly, C. A., Kommers, S., & Kimball, E. (2019). Narrowed gaps and persistent challenges: Examining rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary outcomes over time. *American Journal of Education 126,* 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/705498

About the Authors

Karen M. Ganss, **MS,** is a student affairs professional with the College of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Colorado Boulder in Boulder, Colorado. She has a BA in business administration (2009) from Western Colorado University and a MS (2014) in college student services administration from Oregon State University. As a rural Colorado native and first-generation college student, both her research and professional passions surround increasing awareness and support of rural higher education students.

Ty McNamee, MA, is a doctoral candidate in Higher and Postsecondary Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Concurrently, he serves as a Graduate Research Associate at the American Council on Education and Instructor in the Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Colorado State University. Ty holds a BA in English (2013) from the University of Wyoming and a MA in Higher Education and Student Affairs (2015) from the University of Connecticut. Growing up on a farm/ranch in rural Wyoming greatly influenced his research interests, which focus on rurality and social class related to higher education, particularly college access and equity for rural students as well as teaching and learning and faculty development at postsecondary institutions.

Shadman Islem, **MA,** is a first-year doctoral student in Higher Education at Boston College. Prior to attending Boston College, he worked in Graduate Student Affairs at Columbia University's School of Engineering and Applied Science. He holds a BS in Brain and Cognitive Sciences (2017) from the University of Rochester as well as an MA in Higher and Postsecondary Education (2018) from Teachers College, Columbia University. His research interests are in spatial inequality and the geography of opportunity, shaped by his experiences as both a first-generation American and college student.