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A Phenomenological Study of Rural Elementary Principals in Western and Central New York Perceptions of Isolation

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation. This study posed the question: In what ways do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation? The research design included semi-structured interviews of a purposeful sample of five rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York. This study utilized the theoretical framework of Ryan and Deci's (2018) relationship motivation theory. Six themes emerged through transcendental phenomenological analysis: distance divides, power of networks, outsider syndrome, relationships are the foundation, wearing many hats, and building know how. Findings included that rural elementary principals feel a sense of isolation, specifically from social and professional networks. Rural principals who were not teachers in their own district have a sense of being an outsider and leading change in instructional practices is seen as not needed because what has been done in the past works. To offset the lack of networks district superintendents and regional BOCES should examine how to provide regular opportunities for principals to network with each other. Some rural principals motivated themselves to create their own networks. Federal ESSA provides funding for principal development and could be used to support networking and professional development of rural principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Further research of the relationship between the rural elementary principal and their superintendent was recommended.

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A Phenomenological Study of Rural Elementary Principals in Western and Central New
York Perceptions of Isolation

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

“Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty. I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.”

~**Theodore Roosevelt**

I have many to thank for helping me face this challenge:

To God, my Lord and Savior, through which all things are possible.

To my husband Mark for your support, sacrifice, and love for so many years.

To my father and mother, for instilling faith, values, and the importance of education.

To my children, Casey, Nick, Carly, and Andy and sister, Debbie, for motivating me.

To Natasha and Christine for the encouragement, honesty, and friendship.

To Confidimus Processus VI for your friendship.

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To Dr. Robinson, Dr. Linn, and Mr. Clingerman for seeing in me what I could not see in myself.

Biographical Sketch

Bonnie Cazer is currently an elementary school principal at Marcus Whitman Central School District. Mrs. Cazer attended SUNY Oswego from 1985 to 1987 graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Zoology in 1987. She attended Roberts Wesleyan College from 2000 to 2002 and graduated with a Master of Arts degree in 2002. Mrs. Cazer received her Advanced Certificate in School Leadership from the University of Rochester in 2012. She came to St. John Fisher College the summer of 2018 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mrs. Cazer pursued her research in rural principals' perceptions of isolation under the direction of Dr. Theresa Pulos and Dr. Katharine Rumrill-Teece and received the Ed.D. degree in 2020.

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation. This study posed the question: In what ways do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation? The research design included semi-structured interviews of a purposeful sample of five rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York. This study utilized the theoretical framework of Ryan and Deci's (2018) relationship motivation theory. Six themes emerged through transcendental phenomenological analysis: distance divides, power of networks, outsider syndrome, relationships are the foundation, wearing many hats, and building know how. Findings included that rural elementary principals feel a sense of isolation, specifically from social and professional networks. Rural principals who were not teachers in their own district have a sense of being an outsider and leading change in instructional practices is seen as not needed because what has been done in the past works. To offset the lack of networks district superintendents and regional BOCES should examine how to provide regular opportunities for principals to network with each other. Some rural principals motivated themselves to create their own networks. Federal ESSA provides funding for principal development and could be used to support networking and professional development of rural principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Further research of the relationship between the rural elementary principal and their superintendent was recommended.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the most important factors influencing schools, second only to classroom teachers, as having an impact on student outcomes are school leaders, specifically principals (Coelli & Green, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood, 2011). Principals balance providing leadership, performing management duties, and instructional responsibilities. Principals who are the only administrator in their building face structural isolation related to reduced peer contact with other leaders. They also experience social isolation resulting from being in the position of supervisor over their teaching faculty and staff (Barnett, 1989). Urban and suburban principals often have administrative support within their building or geographic proximity. However, the rural principal has the additional factor of geographic isolation from peers.

The National Staff Development Council (2001) emphasizes the importance of opportunities for principals to collaboratively exchange ideas both between districts and within their districts. The small size of rural districts paired with geographic distance from collaborative opportunities creates a duality of isolation, professional and geographical, for rural principals.

Rural schools have challenges such as higher levels of principal turnover, lack of resources, and higher levels of poverty (Patterson, et al., 2005). Principal leadership has been well documented in literature, there is less research specific to the principal in a rural setting. To understand the rural principalship and isolation this phenomenological

qualitative research study explores the perceptions of isolation of rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York.

Rural Schools

Rural schools and rural communities have a wide range of definitions in the literature. The variety of definitions depends upon which context, internationally or nationally, the research has been conducted in or which agency is defining rural. The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as open country outside of urban areas with communities of less than 2,500 people, or where the population density is less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile (Ratcliff, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The New York State Education Department (2019) defines a rural school as one that has fewer than 50 students per square mile or fewer than 100 students per square mile and an enrollment of less than 2,500 (2019). For this study, the definition from the New York State Education Department was used.

Using the U.S. Census Bureau definition, more than one in four public schools in the United States is rural, which equates to over 18% of all students attending public schools in the United States. Most students attending rural schools are concentrated in 10 states, including several of the most populous and urban states, including New York State (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017).

Challenges rural schools face include high rates of principal turnover, high rates of poverty, and the lack of funding (Bauch, 2001; Hansen, 2018; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013). Principal turnover in rural districts has a higher rate compared to urban and suburban counterparts. Principal turnover is defined as when a principal does not return to the same school building from one year to the next (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2018).

Principal turnover is concerning because of the crucial role principals are expected to play in leading school improvement, school culture, and student achievement. DeAngelis and White (2011) found that rural principals in Utah are 59% more likely than urban principals to leave or change positions. In a review of literature of 36 empirical studies related to principal turnover, Snodgrass-Rangel (2018), concluded that principal turnover was negatively associated to student achievement, teacher turnover, school culture, and resources. Fullan (2001) posits that school improvement can take 5 to 7 years and each time leadership changes there is a period of adjustment which can stop or reverse school improvement.

Lack of funding is often an issue cited by rural principals according to Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013). Lack of funding exacerbates issues such as travel costs for professional development to state and national conferences, travel costs for extracurricular sports, reliable access to Internet, and infrastructure problems. Research highlights that a concern for rural principals includes creating financially effective budgets (Parson, Hunter, & Kallio, 2016; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). Rural districts typically do not benefit from federal funding at the same rate as urban and suburban districts. For example, formulas for Title I funding which is distributed based on the concentration of poverty and overall number of low-income students tend to favor urban districts where there is a larger number of low-income students. Urban schools may also be awarded the competitive grants offered under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as they can show more students will be impacted by the grant funds as well as more resources being available to write a successful application (Brenner, 2016; Johnson & Howley, 2015).

Rural communities are susceptible to high levels of poverty due to lack of accessibility to transportation services, physical isolation, and scarcity of employment opportunities. It is not poverty per se, but the risk factors associated with poverty that have a harmful effect on children's development. Examples of risk factors that are likely to contribute to the adverse developmental effects of poverty include food insecurity, challenges related to distance to health care facilities, infectious disease, and psychological stress related to the child's rearing environment. In 2016 U.S. rural poverty rates of children under the age of 6 were higher than their urban counterparts, 28.7% and 23.1% respectively (Showalter, Klein, & Johnson, 2016).

Isolation

Researchers have commented on the multiple definitions of isolation and often the terms isolation and loneliness are used interchangeably. It is important to define isolation and loneliness as two different concepts to avoid confusion. Leming (2016) studied the emotional impact on patients with end-stage renal disease and sought to differentiate between social isolation, loneliness, and disengagement for improved patient care. Leming specifically differentiates between loneliness and the concept of isolation stating that social isolation and loneliness are similar, however loneliness is a feeling and often is part of a diagnosis for depression and mental health diagnosis.

Most studies have defined isolation in similar ways with only slight variations. Bauer, Silver, and Schwartzer (2017) define isolation as a sense of feeling alone at work, not necessarily the structural isolation from others. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) connect chronic isolation to the subjective feeling of loneliness and the impacts on the emotional and physical well-being of individuals. Forsyth and Hoy (1978) defined isolation as the

extent to which organizational participants “feel” they are estranged or isolated as a result of their position in the organization. Based on the definition of loneliness offered by Perlman and Peplau (1981), loneliness at work and professional isolation are one and the same. They defined professional isolation as the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relations at work is deficient in some important way. Isolation is sometimes addressed in literature as a broader term applied to different constructs. The three constructs of isolation most referred to are emotional isolation, social isolation, and professional or workplace isolation.

Emotional isolation is an absence of needed emotional affection or a separation from a group, referring to the perceived presence or absence of someone in your life who serves as a caring friend who validates your existence (Weiss, 1973). Social isolation is a deficiency of needed friendship or lack of satisfying social relationships and an absence of a sense of belonging. Professional isolation or workplace isolation is noticeably different from loneliness as it reflects the employee’s need to be part of a network of colleagues who provide help and support in specific work-related needs. Professional or workplace isolation represents the employees’ perceptions of co-workers, peers, and supervisor’s availability for work-based social support (Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007).

In considering the experience of isolation, Weiss (1973) made a distinction between the loneliness of social isolation and that of emotional isolation. The loneliness of social isolation results from the absence of an engaging social network that can only be corrected by access to a satisfying social network. The loneliness of emotional isolation stems from the absence or the loss of a close attachment relationship. Emotional isolation

can only be resolved through an individual having an emotional attachment to another person (Weiss, 1973).

The defining attributes of social isolation are lack of engagement with others, an absence of the sense of belonging, and lack of quality relationships in social situations (Leming, 2016). Chronic feelings of social isolation can trigger a series of physiological responses which are comparable to the health risks such as high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity, and can accelerate the aging process (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988).

Professional isolation, also referred to as workplace isolation is the employee's perception of detachment from co-workers and the organization (Ali, Hamdan, & Munir, 2016; Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007; Munir, Khan, & Sadiq, 2016). Workplace isolation has two dimensions. First is workplace isolation from the organization where there is a perception of lack of support from the supervisor and company. A second form of workplace isolation is where an employee feels isolated from support and friendships of coworkers. Employees with perceptions of workplace isolation report a lack of access to career support and mentoring from managers, consequently limiting their opportunities for special projects and promotions (Marshall et al., 2007).

Factors associated with teacher isolation, and the effects of this isolation has been well documented in literature where teacher isolation and the quality of teacher effectiveness and work experience are often cited (Bartanen, Grissom, & Rogers, (2019); Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Schlechte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). Researchers of principal isolation frame isolation as an outcome reflecting the quality of the principals' work environment and performance by applying the conclusions on teacher isolation to

isolation of school principals (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004; Burnett, 1989; Robbins & Alvey, 2003; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). In a review of literature, Ashton and Duncan (2012), explored the challenges and skills needed to effectively assume a rural leadership position and posits specific tools new rural principals need to be effective. The most pertinent skill or tool to rural principals is dealing with professional isolation and loneliness.

The Role of the Principalship

The responsibilities of a principal are difficult to define, as the duties vary between schools, districts, and states. The fundamental role of a principal is to improve and provide the best possible learning experiences for their students (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). To describe the principal position, DeVita, Richard, Darling-Hammond, and Haycock (2007) observe:

Principals need to be educational visionaries; instructional and curriculum leaders; assessment experts; disciplinarians; community builders; public relations experts; budget analysts; facility managers; special program administrators; and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. They are expected to broker the often-conflicting interests of parents, teachers, students, district officials, unions, and state and federal agencies, and they need to be sensitive to the widening range of student needs. Although that job description sounds overwhelming, at least it signals that the field has begun to give overdue recognition to the indispensable role of and mounting demands on principals (p. i).

The role of the principal continues to evolve. However, the constant throughout history has been the emphasis on student learning. Effective principals are effective instructional leaders, managers shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate conducive to learning, and cultivating leadership in others. Principals improve instruction, manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Studies examining school-related factors have found, in addition to the classroom teachers' influence, the principal shapes the conditions that support teaching and learning. Principal leadership directly influences organizational conditions that support high quality teaching and student outcomes. (Coelli & Green, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). School leadership studies have indicated that the principalship accounts for 25% of school related factors that affect high quality teaching. Researchers have connected principal influence on student achievement in several ways, including hiring of teachers, instructional leadership practices, student discipline, responsibility for building culture, and other influences (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Halliger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, 2011). Hattie has done extensive research to quantify the effects of specific factors influencing student achievement. Hattie states of all the reasons for a teacher to stay in a building is the nature of leadership within the building (Hattie, 2012).

Principal leadership is an important factor in both student achievement and staff retention. Given this important role, concerns about principal turnover have resulted in an increasing body of research on causes and effects of principal turnover. Johnson (2016) noted among the main reasons for principals leaving their jobs is profound isolation.

Beteille, Kalogridis, and Loeb (2012) state that one out of every five principals leaves their school each year. Principal turnover is troubling because of the pivotal role that principals play in student achievement and teacher turnover (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Beteille, Kalogridis, & Loeb, 2012). When a principal leaves a school there is a disruption to culture, information structures, and student outcomes. Literature suggests these leadership changes can take several years for new stable leadership to recover from the change (Coelli & Green, 2012; Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Problem Statement

The principal's job is demanding and very complex. Principals are expected to provide leadership while executing managerial and instructional responsibilities (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Malone & Caddell, 2000; Williams & Welsh, 2017; Wood et al., 2013). Principal turnover has been shown to have a negative effect on student outcomes and rural principal turnover is more prevalent than their urban and suburban counterparts.

Principals are structurally isolated as they are often the only administrator in their building and socially isolated due to the supervisory role over teachers and staff (Barnett, 1989). A rural principal has the same isolating conditions of an urban or suburban principal, but also the geographic isolation from colleagues (Bauer & Silver, 2018). Existing literature and the practices of school districts clearly associate better outcomes with less teacher isolation (Bauer & Silver, 2018; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2009). However, current academic literature on rural principals, isolation, and effects has received less attention (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Simieou, Decman, Grigsby, & Schumacher, 2010). Principal isolation research provides some evidence that some

principals experience a sense of isolation as a result of their position. What is unclear is the extent the rural principal perceives isolation.

Theoretical Rationale

Self-determination theory (SDT). Self-determination theory focuses on three innate needs: the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2018). Autonomy refers to a person having choice and control over their behavior. Competence is a person's ability to perform a task or job well. Relatedness correlates to a person's ability to have connections with others (Appova & Arbaugh, 2017). By having all three of these needs met, intrinsic motivation is increased.

One of the sub theories of self-determination theory, relationships motivation theory (RMT), is the framework for this research to examine the motivations of rural principals and the challenges and benefits of being an isolated leader. Self-determination theory proposes all humans have three basic innate, universal, and cross-cultural psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

The first need of SDT is autonomy, which is defined as the opportunity to be in control of one's behavior, or more precisely, to be the source of one's behavior. Gagné and Deci (2005) reported that managers' support of autonomy in the work place led to "greater satisfaction of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy as well as increased job satisfaction, higher performance evaluations, greater persistence, greater acceptance of organization change, and better psychological adjustment" (Gagné & Deci, p. 345). The second need of SDT is competence, defined as, "a personal judgment about how confident one is that his or her skills will bring about a desired action or outcome"

(Deci & Ryan, 1985, pp. 15-16). The third need of SDT is relatedness. Relatedness means having a connection with others, a sense of belonging, caring for and being cared for, and belonging to a community. Relatedness reflects the need for social interaction or cooperative learning within an activity and supports the premise that social contexts influence motivation and behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Relationship motivation theory framework. Relationships motivation theory (RMT), one of the mini theories of SDT, posits the importance of relationships and relatedness, where there is no full functioning without relationships. RMT theorizes relatedness as the intrinsically satisfying experience of being connected and mattering to another person or group. The first proposition of RMT is that relatedness is a basic psychological need critical for an individual's wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

Relationships motivation theory asserts that people need to experience autonomy and competence within a relationship for the relationship to thrive (Ryan & Deci, 2018). La Guardia et al. (2000) found that satisfaction of autonomy and relatedness contributes independently to positive relationship outcomes, indicating for people to feel optimum health, wellness, and high-quality relationships, all three of these basic psychological needs must be satisfied. When these three basic need satisfactions in adult workers were examined it was found that each was independently associated with variations in wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

RMT, according to Ryan and Deci (2018), is distinctive among relationship theories for considering the importance of multiple basic psychological needs and volitional motivation in adult relationships. The three needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are mutually supportive of each other. When people experience

competence, they tend to feel they have the skills and ability required to get their other needs satisfied. When an individual experiences autonomy, they tend to feel authentic and to communicate with others more freely. Finally, when they experience relatedness, they tend to feel a sense of security and confidence (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

In summary, RMT indicates that when people experience satisfaction of their need for autonomy and competence within relationships, they experience higher quality relationships, a more secure sense of attachment, and greater psychological wellbeing. For rural principals' relatedness may be more difficult to obtain based on their geographic and social isolation from other principals.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of rural principals lived experience. Specifically, to determine in what ways rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation. The perceptions of isolation experienced by rural principals may uncover shared understandings of needs and supports which may help rural principals perform their duties, decrease turnover, and improve their leadership.

Research Questions

The research question for this study was:

In what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation?

Potential Significance of the Study

This study adds to the research literature of rural elementary principals. The significance of this study rests in its contribution to understanding rural elementary

principals' perceptions and lived experiences regarding isolation, and possible themes which surface from the research. There is limited research around the topic of principals and isolation. Many conclusions are drawn from the impact of isolation related to classroom teachers. There is scant research considering the rural principal and perceptions of isolation.

Chapter Summary

Principals are one of the most important factors influencing schools and the importance of principals is reflected in the ESSA federal policy. The topic of professional and social isolation of principals draws conclusions largely from the research conclusions of teacher isolation literature and does not address specifically rural principals. Rural principals are geographically isolated by distance, which creates a duality of isolation, professional and geographical. One in every four public schools in the United States identify as being rural. Over 18% of all public schools in New York state are rural and educating almost 350,000 students (Showalter et al., 2017). Isolation has three basic constructs, emotional isolation, social isolation, and profession isolation. Chronic feelings of social isolation can produce physiological responses comparable to the health risks such as high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity, and can accelerate the aging process (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; House et al., 1988). Literature related to the perceptions of isolation of rural principals is sparse. It is important to identify rural school challenges to understand why rural principals leave their positions, what challenges rural principals face, and perceptions of rural principals relative to isolation so districts know how to support rural principals. This phenomenological qualitative

research study explores the rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceptions of isolation.

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. The first chapter discusses the background related to the research topic. The second chapter will provide a selective review of empirical studies related to the research topic. In Chapter 3, the design of the research methodology and data collection will be illustrated. Chapter 4 includes an in-depth presentation of the data analysis, findings, and a summary of results. Finally, Chapter 5 presents limitations of the study and implications of findings for education, leadership, policy, and future research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Research on school principals is extensive and comprises multiple topics including effects of principals on student achievement, public policy, support of teachers, principal turnover, and topics related to leadership (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Research related to rural principal's experience and perceptions of isolation is very limited.

This review of literature begins with theoretical and empirical findings related to the importance of school principals on schools and students, the rural principalship, and concludes with available research on principal isolation.

The Principalship

School leadership studies have indicated that the principalship accounts for 25% of school related factors that affect high quality teaching (Halliger & Heck, 1998; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Leithwood, 2011). Multiple studies have found there is a direct relationship between the quality of a principal and student achievement (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Leithwood, 2011).

Two quantitative studies using student reading and math assessment to determine principal effect on student's achievement were Dhuey and Smith (2014) and Branch et al. (2012). Dhuey and Smith (2014), measured the effect of individual principals on student achievement in math and reading in British Columbia. Using value-added framework and tracking the same cohort of students who remained in their schools from fourth to seventh grades, Dhuey and Smith estimated that one standard deviation improvement in principal

quality can boost student performance by 0.289 to 0.408 standard deviations in reading and math. Principals at the 75th percentile improved scores by 0.170 to 0.193 relative to the mean principal (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). This demonstrates how important the principal can be to improving student achievement in math and ELA. Branch et al. (2012) used Texas assessment data which they aligned to the principals on record to estimate the importance of principals on student reading and math test score gains. A strength of the sample was the large number of principals and schools that were observed. Between 1995-2001, 7,420 unique principals were observed, yielding 28,147 annual observations of principals. With school fixed effects removed from the analysis, Branch et al. (2012) found principals have a 0.2 standard deviation effect on a years' worth of growth in math and reading.

Federal and state policies hold school leaders, including principals, accountable for student outcomes. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has expanded funding to include professional development for principals and school leaders. Manna (2015), in a report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, found that 5% of ESSA Federal Title II professional development funds for recruiting, training, and preparing principals many districts used the funds to focus principal's professional development on training of new mandates and initiatives. The principals need to be trained in the ESSA mandates and initiatives; however, principals also require professional development in other areas of their professional duties.

How principals reconcile school context with the amount and type of professional development they receive in response to the passage of ESSA was one focus of Williams and Welsh (2017) interviews of educational leaders at state, district, and school levels in

Georgia. Results of the interviews revealed that flexibility in the type of professional development and how professional development is delivered needs to be tailored to the individual situations of principals. Interview responses from principals in high poverty districts reported needing specialized professional development for themselves and the need to invest heavily in professional development for the teachers in their districts. Leaders also revealed that different schools within districts require specialized professional development and as leaders they each need the professional development which fits the unique challenges they face. Analysis revealed there is a discernable inequality among schools and that principals in underserved schools lack time and funding for high quality professional development. The interview respondents believed that the changes have potential to make positive impacts in the underserved schools and the professional development they need.

Miller et al. (2016) sought to examine the causal impact of McREL International's Balanced Leadership Professional Development (BLPD) program on principals' learning, beliefs, and behaviors as well as whether there were differences in the types of outcomes this professional development influenced. The multiyear experimental study of 95 rural elementary principals in Michigan had a treatment and a control group. The treatment group received ongoing training with the BLPD program. Two analyses were completed including providing a pre and a post treatment survey. The treatment of each outcome was assessed through regression analysis.

Findings showed that participants in the BLPD reported substantively significant growth on most of the outcomes targeted by the program. The main areas of impact were principal efficacy in instructional leadership (ES= 0.62), teacher collaboration (ES=

0.58), and differentiated instruction (ES= 0.57). Despite the positive outcomes, the authors state there needs to be further research to determine what types of professional development are needed for principals to become leaders who improve teaching and learning.

Principal leadership types have been studied in relationship to professional development needs, leadership trainings, and preparatory programs that develop principals and school leaders. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) meta-analyzed 27 studies that examined the impact of transformational, instructional, and other forms of leadership on student outcomes. The analysis revealed five sets of leadership practices, referred to as dimensions, which indicated positive student outcomes. Principals participating in professional development was the fourth dimension to improve student outcomes.

Transformational leadership was described as how leaders engage with their staff, which inspired staff to new levels of commitment, moral purpose, and levels of energy. This transformed the organization by developing new capacities to work collaboratively to overcome challenges and reach goals. Instructional leadership was described as leaders who focus on the learning climate to be free of disruption with a system of clear instructional objectives, and high teacher expectations for students.

Findings indicated the impact of instructional leadership on student outcomes is three to four times greater than transformational leadership. The analysis found 17 effect sizes in six studies on instructional leadership with an average effect size of 0.84 standard deviations. Robinson et al. (2008) concluded the empirical evidence supports leaders who are actively involved as instructional leaders in their school as a source of instructional

advice results in positive student outcomes. These instructional leaders are involved with professional development and seen as leading learners. Leaders who are perceived as instructional resources, according to the authors, gain respect from their staff members and are viewed by staff as instructional experts. The authors suggest additional research on the specific qualities and processes of teacher professional development, which specifically impact student learning. Leaders need to have professional development in these areas to both understand these qualities and provide support to their teachers.

Like Robinson et al. (2008), Kim (2018) studied principal leadership practices, however Kim concentrated on how principals experience learning in relation to leadership development and how this influences their leadership practices. Kim's research analysis of examining field notes, transcripts, and memos identified six themes in leadership learning: disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and changes in self-awareness, practices, perceptions of others, and worldviews. The participants in this study reported their transformational learning was greatest when they had opportunities to work with others. Kim concluded that leadership development is ongoing, and it is critical that interactive relations where reflection and problem solving are utilized help school leaders grow in their leadership. Limitations to Kim's work includes the participants are only in one state. Though the participants varied in age, experience, and gender there was no delineation of whether the participants were from rural, suburban, or urban districts.

In a non-experimental descriptive study Wallace (2014) compared professional development practices in low achieving rural and high achieving urban high schools in Kentucky. The survey consisted of 31 items using a 5-point Likert scale created by the

researcher on five characteristics of effective professional development identified by Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989), and was completed by 71 teachers from high performing urban schools and 72 teachers from low performing schools in Kentucky. The five characteristics were: activities conducted in schools are linked to school-wide improvement; teachers are actively involved in the planning, setting, goals and selection of professional development activities; differentiated activities are offered; support and resources are provided on an ongoing basis; and training is ongoing with feedback and on request support.

Vogel (2018) conducted a qualitative study of 50 principals in a Rocky Mountain state using an open-ended survey. The survey explored the elements of the principal's responsibilities they identified as part of their leadership roles. The study examined the principals' narrative responses regarding how the principals defined instructional leadership through the lens of their own job responsibilities and how they gained knowledge and skills they felt qualified them to be instructional leaders. Vogel defined instructional leadership as a collaborative process between principals and other staff members, including teachers, to promote a positive learning environment and manage the instructional program.

Vogel (2018) allowed participants to explain in detail their understanding of instructional leadership and how they feel prepared to be an instructional leader. More than half of the participants (52%) identified professional development they have participated in as developing their leadership capacity. Professional development was noted as the second most important means of acquiring skills to make them qualified to supervise and evaluate teachers.

The participants did not find their experiences in their preparatory programs as helpful to be instructional leaders. The study suggests more research is needed to identify which professional development experiences principals find helpful to prepare them for being instructional leaders (Vogel, 2018). If leaders leave their principal preparatory programs with the perception of not being prepared for the job responsibilities of a principal, this supports the need for ongoing professional development of principals.

Rural Principalship

Rural principals often have a wider variety of responsibilities and roles as rural schools lack funding and/or enrollment to justify an assistant principal or other administrative support. Research specific to the rural principal is important because according to Brennan (2016), the U.S. Census Bureau reports that more than one in four public schools in the United States is rural which equates to over 18% of all students attending public schools in the United States.

Parson, Hunter, and Kallio (2016) used qualitative thematic analysis of data collected from open ended surveys presented to 73 North Dakota principals as well as data collected from focus groups of North Dakota principals attending a summer conference, to understand the nature of rural principals' roles in public education including their experiences, challenges, and opportunities. Survey and focus group question topics included job responsibilities, time management, challenges, training, and professional development.

Survey findings noted that the majority, 25 of 42, rural principals have multiple roles and responsibilities in comparison to non-rural principals. Rural principals reported they execute these roles in greater isolation as there is no staff to share the responsibilities

with. Seventy-two percent of the participants indicated spending most of their time on discipline, more than any other indicator. Parson et al. (2016) suggest isolated rural principals require ongoing and specialized professional development to focus their time on instructional leadership and find opportunities to collaborate with other principals. Limitations to the study included the differences in rurality and school size. Where rural districts have diverse differences when compared between each other in both the extent of being rural and the size of their individual buildings.

An electronic survey of rural Utah principals' readiness to meet new policy requirements and educational leadership standards, Stewart and Matthews (2015), found a difference between rural and non-rural principals' responses to different professional development structures. The self-perception survey included 19 demographic questions and 14 scaled response questions, using a 7-point Likert scale. Findings included that rural principals found higher education courses useful (4.62) compared to non-rural principals (3.77). There was a statistically significant difference between rural (3.82) and non-rural principals (5.05) view of leadership academies usefulness in providing professional development. In addition, the amount of time small and medium rural school principals spent collaborating was significantly different. Small school rural principals indicated they spent approximately 2 hours less time collaborating with teachers and 1 hour less collaborating with other principals than did the medium school principals weekly. Time collaborating with other principals for small school principals was $M=0.77$ and medium school principals collaborated with other principals more ($M=1.57$).

Limitations to Stewart and Matthews study was the lack of diversity among the participants. Most respondents were male (62%) and all were Caucasian (100%) and all

were from the state of Utah. Replicating the study with diverse participants in other states would provide additional insight into the unique needs of the rural principal.

Leadership stability in rural areas is lower than in urban or suburban areas. DeAngelis and White (2011) tracked 7,075 principals in the state of Illinois from 2001 through 2008 tracking principal turnover and student achievement. The study included urban, rural, and suburban principals noting whether the principals stayed in the same school, moved into another district, or left public schools completely. A notable finding was that DeAngelis and White (2011) reported that rural principals in Illinois were 24% more likely than suburban principals to change positions in their same district.

Hansen, in a qualitative research study, explored factors which influence rural principals leaving their positions. Included in the environmental factors was professional isolation (Hansen, 2018). Hansen interviewed six Minnesota rural elementary principals who recently left their positions to determine which factors influenced their leaving. Two-thirds of the participants stated environmental factors of geographic and social isolation impacted their decision to leave. All participants noted workload and lack of professional support contributed to the reasons for leaving. One of the emergent themes which Hansen remarked was worth mentioning was the relationships rural principals had with superintendents and boards of education. Principals who left their positions stated part of the reason for leaving was the lack of support from the superintendent or boards of education. Hansen stated that this particular theme was worth noting as literature on the topic of superintendent-principal relationships was not previously mentioned as a reason for leaving.

Isolation

School principals' responsibilities include leading work to improve student achievement, ensuring safety, and facilitating systems for a school building to function. Although surrounded by people all day, the principalship can be considered isolated from peers, the individuals they lead, and in rural settings isolated geographically. There is limited empirical studies, either qualitative or quantitative, exploring isolation and principals.

In a qualitative study of headteachers in the United Kingdom, Mercer (1996), found two key reasons for professional isolation of headteachers. First, the nature of the position of headteacher where decisions made by the headteacher were his or her sole responsibility and second, the perceptions of faculty associated with the headteachers role and responsibilities. The survey results highlighted if something went wrong in the school, the headteacher was ultimately responsible no matter the cause of the issue, which resulted in a sense of isolation and for some a state of loneliness.

Dussault and Thibodeau (1997) studied the relationship between professional isolation and the school principal's performance at work. The study consisted of a postal survey completed by 109 suburban principals in the province of Quebec. The principals attributed the cause of their professional isolation to external and uncontrollable events. The findings included that professional isolation negatively correlated to the leadership responsibilities of the principalship than to other activities and correlated directly with work performance ($r = -.27, p = .005$). The authors concluded isolation may affect the decision-making process of principals and the topic of principal isolation needs additional study.

A survey of 293 primary school principals in New Zealand conducted by Cubitt and Burt (2002) examined the relationships between leadership style, loneliness, and stress. The survey consisted of four parts: part one demographic information, part two UCLA Loneliness scale developed by Russell (1996) which the researchers referred to as a measure of professional isolation, part three a leadership questionnaire consisting of 34 leadership statements using a Likert scale 1 to 5, and part four using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). Part four consisted of 67 statements of job stressors where participants rated each statement using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Section four rated stressors in five areas: organizational change, principals' relationships with staff, work overload, dealing with students, and school management.

Cubitt and Burt's (2002) study examined the relationship in leadership styles of primary principals in New Zealand to loneliness and occupational stress. The groups of principals were sorted into six primary principal classifications. The first classification was principals who have their principal duties and teach, another was principals who were the only administrator in their building (sole-charge) and did not teach, a third non-teaching classification was principals who had other administrators in the building and did not teach. The remaining three classifications were related to the style of leadership, which were calculated from the leadership questionnaire which classified principals as either people-oriented, task-oriented, or a mixed-oriented style of leadership.

Cross-group comparison in the principal classifications, teaching, non-teaching, sole-charge, resulted in a significant difference of loneliness in sole-charge principals compared to teaching and non-teaching, $F(2, 290) = 3.26, p < .05$. Sole charge mean 37.1

with a standard deviation of 9.7 compared to the teaching mean 42.8 with a standard deviation of 8.3 and teaching mean 43.9 with a standard deviation of 8.9. The principals with sole-charge classification reported significantly more loneliness or professional isolation than the others. There was no significant difference reported with leadership orientation. This result implies that primary principals in New Zealand without teaching duties and being the only administrator in their building are lonelier than their teaching and non-teaching peers (Cubitt & Burt, 2002).

Bauer and Brazer's (2013) study of first year principals in Louisiana tested the extent isolation has on job satisfaction of first year principals in relation to five independent factors of: coaching, role ambiguity, role overload, role conflict, and social support. Regression coefficients showed that isolation emerged as a statistically significant predictor, suggesting that lower degrees of perceived isolation produce greater levels of satisfaction. Of the five independent factors, social support had the largest effect on isolation ($r = -.52$). Coaching ($r = .17$) and role ambiguity ($r = .22$) had a medium to small correlation to isolation. Bauer and Brazer define social support in their study as the extent to which new principals experience guidance, have opportunities in place to encourage a sense of connectedness, and receive resources from other professionals. This support can come from formal or informal networks. The importance of social support to reduce isolation included opportunities to learn and collaborate with other principals. Findings also included that stronger networks and meaningful support from central office will likely reduce the isolation reported by new principals. Further studies on isolation of principals has on the quality of their work was suggested.

Bauer and Brazer's (2018) study incorporating new data and new research questions around principal isolation was replicated examining whether isolation was mediator in the relationship between factors, including social support, known to affect work experience of principals (Bauer, Silver, & Schwartz, 2017). The UCLA Loneliness Scale which measures perceptions of isolation in a work setting and the Social Provisions Scale was used to measure six social provisions considered social support. Bauer et al. (2017) posit principals' sense of isolation is less a structural reality but has more to do with the principal's sense of feeling alone at work. The study showed through regression analysis of independent variables and isolation that the variables of role ambiguity ($\beta = 0.15$) and role overload ($\beta = 0.25$) were statistically significant predictors of principal's sense of isolation. The variable of social support ($\beta = -0.42$) was the most powerful predictor of a principal's sense of isolation where the more social support the principals felt the less isolation they perceived in their role.

Using qualitative narrative data, Kelchtermans, Piot, and Ballet (2011) conducted an analysis of Flemish primary schools in Belgium where they found two emerging themes in the principal's experience. First, struggling between conflicting loyalties which resulted in the struggle between belonging and loneliness and secondly, the principals felt a desire to be part of a team, however their structural position as leader created a structural loneliness or isolation preventing the principals from having direct peers within their immediate organization. The authors found that the principal's motivation to attend professional development opportunities outside their organization was more for a chance to interact with other principals rather than the content of the professional development (Kelchtermans et al., 2011).

Williams (2012) completed an integrated review on rural professional isolation literature related to rural nurses specific to professional isolation, rural health care, but excluding articles specific to disease or disease management. Twenty research and six non-research-based articles were included in the review. Williams concluded that rural professional isolation included being distanced from an aspect of the profession, either from other practitioners, from peers, technology, or large medical centers. Rural professional development included an absence of some element to fulfill the professional role. Limitations to the study include limited research specific to rural health care and the vast definitions in literature of professional isolation.

Chapter Summary

The body of research on the principalship is largely void of the challenges, benefits, and experiences of the rural principal. The responsibilities of principals as instructional leaders and the impact on student outcomes has found that leaders who are perceived as instructional resources gain respect from their staff members and are viewed by staff as instructional experts. The role of principal can be perceived as isolating and have a negative effect on work performance.

The literature shows that geographically isolated rural principals require ongoing and specialized professional development to focus their time on instructional leadership and find opportunities to collaborate with other principals. Among factors influencing rural principals leaving their positions was professional isolation. Social support, stronger networks, and meaningful support from central office likely reduce the isolation.

Principals, whether urban, suburban, or rural are structurally isolated from other administrators as they are often the only administrator in their building and there can be a

psychological isolation based on the supervisory role over teachers and staff. However, a rural principal has not only the same isolating conditions of all principals, but also the geographic isolation from colleagues. Literature on rural principals and the effects of isolation is scarce, however, principal isolation research provides some evidence that some principals experience a sense of isolation as a result of their profession. What is unclear is the extent the rural principal perceives isolation.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The nature of a principal's working conditions such as distance between schools or other districts reduces the opportunities for interacting with other principals. The National Staff Development Council (2001) emphasizes the importance of opportunities for principals to collaboratively exchange ideas both between districts and within their districts. The small size of rural districts paired with geographic distance from collaborative opportunities creates a duality of isolation, professional and geographical, for rural principals. Johnson (2016) noted among the main reasons for principals leaving their jobs is profound isolation.

Isolation can have negative psychological effects including feelings of loneliness, despair, and depression. Studies have established that prolonged feelings of isolation have physiological responses equivalent to having high blood pressure, obesity, or smoking (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015). According to Dussault and Thibodeau (1997) professional isolation can slow professional development and contribute toward the tendency to oppose change.

Existing literature and the practices of school districts clearly associate better outcomes with less teacher isolation. Multiple researchers have concluded that systems of collaboration, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), reduces teacher isolation and improve student achievement (Bauer & Silver, 2018; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2009). However, current academic literature on collaborative structures for

rural principals and isolation has received less attention (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Simieou et al., 2010).

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation. This study posed the question: In what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation? The following sections detail the study's design, procedures, data analysis, and methods proposed for the study.

Transcendental Phenomenology

A transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research was the focus of this study. This was an appropriate design to answer the research question around isolation of rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York as a qualitative method of inquiry. A phenomenological approach allows an investigation into how participants perceive and experience the phenomenon of isolation through the perspective of their personal experience (Creswell, 2007; Portney & Watkins, 2000; van Manen, 1990).

A transcendental phenomenology focuses the study around rich, textural, and structural descriptions, and the essence of the study (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology is useful for describing the phenomenon using the participants' perceptions, experiences, and voice related to rural principal isolation. While ethnography is used to identify shared patterns of a cultural group, it is not appropriate for this study since culture is not the focus of this research. A case study approach allows the development of detailed depiction and case analysis of a single or multiple case; however, this method does not focus on the lived experience.

Transcendental phenomenology has less focus on the researcher's interpretations and more on the description of the experiences of the participants. According to Creswell (2012), the textural descriptions examine the participants' experiences, the structural descriptions build through how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

Transcendental phenomenological reduction is the best suited methodologically for this study to get a textural-structural synthesis and essence of the experience since the focus of the study is the principals' lived experiences and not the researcher's interpretation of the experiences. To focus on the principals' perception and utilize a true transcendental approach within a phenomenological design, presuppositions were bracketed and acknowledged in a reflexive journal. A reflexive journal is a type of diary kept during the research process where methodological decisions, the reasons for them, and reflection upon what is happening related to the researchers own values and interests are documented (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Context

The New York State Education Department (2019) defines a rural school as having fewer than 50 students per square mile or fewer than 100 students per square mile and an enrollment of less than 2,500 (New York State Education Department, 2019). New York State has over 400 school districts meeting this definition. Western and Central New York State has over 100 elementary schools which fit the definition of rural as defined by the New York State Education Department. To be considered an "elementary school" for this study principals are responsible for a school building containing at least one grade lower than sixth and no grade higher than ninth, except those classified as a middle school (New York State Education Department, 2019). The

elementary schools identified as rural which lie within Western and Central New York were the potential schools included in the study.

Research Participants

Qualitative research employs the technique of purposeful sampling, when a researcher is looking to investigate a phenomenon as it compares to what is considered typical for members of a population, in the selection of participants. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach in which researchers aim to develop new understandings of human lived experience, relying on first person accounts generally obtained through participant interviews. Phenomenological studies are intended to collect a depth of understanding with a primary emphasis on saturation of obtaining a comprehensive understanding until no new substantive information is acquired. Purposeful sampling is a technique commonly used in phenomenological research for identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015).

Rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York are the focus participants in this research study. Creswell (2007) cites as a challenge of phenomenological research is the careful selection of participants as individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question. This sample of participants, rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York, were selected for several reasons. Western and Central New York have rural areas with elementary schools of similar sizes, selecting rural principals in Western and Central New York will provides a shared understanding of regional perceptions, and finally the lack of research done in the United States on this group of participants relevant to the research questions.

Participants were identified through the New York State Education Department website which has the functionality to filter school districts by rural, suburban, and urban. For the purpose of this study only rural elementary principals who had at least 2 years' experience in their current position and no other administrator assigned to their building were considered for this study. The participants were contacted via email to determine initial interest in participating in the research study and to confirm the principal met the set criteria. To increase the opportunity for more participants, snowball sampling, where research participants recruit other participants for a study, was also utilized (Giorgi, 2012).

Giorgi (2012) recommends at least three participants are needed for a study, the reasoning being this number provides enough variation to describe the essence of an experience. Creswell (2012) suggests for phenomenological research to conduct long interviews with up to 10 people. O'Reilly and Parker (2012) suggest collecting enough depth of information related to the lived experiences related to the specific phenomena rather than a fixed number of participants. In this study enough data related specifically to the research question to achieve a depth of analysis was attained with five participants.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The overall research design included semi-structured interviews of a purposeful sample of five rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York. The use of interviewing was selected to provide participants' perceptions to understand the "why," "how," and "what" of the phenomenon of isolation (Creswell, 2007).

Participants only received a brief introduction to the topic of the research prior to the interview. This ensured that the interview responses were not previously researched

by the participants. The phenomenological interviewing included the experiences of the participants as a rural principal. Interview questions were piloted with three elementary principals who were not included in the study.

To thoroughly explore the participants, the interviewer asked participants to reconstruct rather than remember their experiences. The researcher followed up at times, without interrupting, asking questions to clarify while limiting one's own interaction (Seidman, 2006). Follow-up interviews were conducted once the transcriptions were completed and reviewed by the researcher. Follow-up interviews were conducted to address any gaps in the data such as misunderstandings, missing information, or unclear information. The data are then analyzed further until the meaning is entirely clear (Giorgi, 1985).

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research design of conducting interviews one-on-one with each participant for 45 to 60 minutes. A high-quality video conferencing platform, Zoom, was used to conduct and record interviews. Interviews were also recorded using a handheld digital recorder with the capacity to record and convert to an MP3 format. The recorded Zoom and MP3 interviews were transcribed through a web-based transcription site, Describe.

The interview protocol included four sections: an introduction, opening question, body of the interview, and a closing. Prior to the interview the principals were provided a copy of a letter of consent and confidentiality. At the beginning of the interview the participants were reminded that the interview would not include any identifying information and would be kept confidential. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning

each interview as “participant” with a numerical identification. For example. “Participant 1” when referring to the individual. All interview materials are stored in the researcher’s home in a locked filing cabinet and will remain there for 3 years after the successful defense of the dissertation. The computer used in the recording of transcripts and other research materials is password protected.

The interviews were recorded in their entirety to ensure all aspects of the participants were included in the transcription. Each interview transcription was checked at least three times to ensure the verbatim responses were recorded. A copy of the transcript for their own interview was provided to each participant allowing for member checking to ensure the of the accuracy of the data collected. This step supports the accuracy of the data collected and therefore contributes to trustworthiness (Xerri, 2018). All five participants had no changes to their transcriptions, however each in some form had commented on additional experiences they wanted to add. These follow-up interview remarks were added to the transcribed interviews.

Analysis of the data followed the transcendental phenomenological goal to illuminate the essence of the phenomenon through horizontalization, thematic analysis, imaginative variation, and intuitive integration as described by Moustakas (1994). The first step in the analysis was the process of horizontalization, where specific statements were identified in the transcripts which provided information about the experiences of the participants and all statements had equal value. The process of horizontalization included reading and rereading the transcribed interviews. Through multiple readings, the researcher highlighted significant statements from the interview. These significant

statements were collected from the transcripts and organized in a table format so the reader could identify the range of perceptions about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

During the multiple readings of the transcriptions, notes were recorded in the margin of each transcript and a line was used to indicate when meaning changed in a participant's description of their lived experience was inserted. These notes and specific participant words were transferred to an electronic chart. When the researcher read each interview transcript, the recording of the interview was simultaneously played. This step brought the researcher back once again to the interview experience as well as the personality of each participant.

Finally, the act of phenomenological reduction of the data of experiences to the invariant constituents, also called the meaning units or horizons was done (Moustakas, 1994). The first step in the phenomenological reduction process recommended by Moustakas (1994) is horizontalization of the data. Participants statements were recorded in a spreadsheet without giving any statements more value than any others. For example, participants explaining relationships with their superintendent received the same value or importance as relationships with staff members. Moustakas recommends that in order to complete horizontalization, the researcher needs to consider each comment as having equal value (Moustakas, 1994). This step is related to the process of bracketing requiring the researcher maintain an open mind when examining each statement. Statements that were lifted out of the transcript and recorded in the electronic chart were then referred to in this study as the horizons or invariant constituents.

Each participant's horizons were examined by the researcher to ensure that there were no overlapping or repetitive statements. Any repetitive statements were eliminated.

Moustakas (1994) recommended that the researcher consider two questions when recording horizons: 1) “Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?” and 2) “Is it possible to abstract and label it?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) The horizons fitting these conditions then became known as the invariant constituents, or meaning units, of the experience for each of the participants. Utilizing this approach, as well as the process of epoche, ensured that the participants’ descriptions rather than the researcher’s perceptions were considered throughout the data analysis process (Turley, Monroe, & King, 2016). To organize the data analysis and coding process an electronic chart was created where each code was represented in a column and associated descriptive essences were displayed underneath to create a book of codes. This qualitative analysis established six large or meta-themes. Accordingly, the development of the six themes was influential in recognizing perceptions that are considered essential to understanding the phenomenon of rural principals’ perceptions of isolation.

Next thematic analysis was conducted by grouping the identified significant statements into themes or meaning units. After the thematic analysis, a description of “what” was experienced in textural descriptions, and “how” it was experienced in structural descriptions, the process known as imaginative variation was conducted. Imaginative variation is a stage intended to illuminate the structures of experience more distinctively and is best described as a mental experiment. Elements of the experience are imaginatively revised in order to view the phenomenon of rural principals’ perceptions of isolation from varying perspectives (Turley et al., 2016). This process of imaginative variation resulted in critical descriptions of the phenomenon. Finally, the textual and

structural descriptions of the experiences were synthesized into a description of the phenomenon through the process described by Moustakas (1994) as “intuitive integration.” This description becomes the structure of the ultimate “essence” which captures the meaning credited to the experience. The essence of the phenomena was assigned descriptive codes. The codes were created in a table format with a definition of the code and associated descriptive essences to create a book of codes. The code book was subjected to review by a doctoral candidate peer, and the researcher’s dissertation committee.

Since I am a rural elementary principal in Western and Central New York researching other rural principals in Western and Central New York, I needed to be aware of my own personal experiences and how my experiences may impact my analysis of the interview data. My interest and development of the research question was based on my own perception of professional isolation as a rural principal. This study was developed out of my own personal inquiry whether other elementary principals in a rural district have a sense of isolation. To reflect on my own identity, perspectives, and assumptions a reflexive journal was employed. Prior to the first interview I bracketed out my personal experiences with the phenomenon, by employing the notion of *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). Reflexive journaling, according to Creswell (2007), is an opportunity for the researcher to be conscious of biases, experiences, and values brought to the research study. Rather than the researcher attempting to control their values, the intention is to consciously acknowledge those values. Keeping a reflexive journal is a strategy whereby the researcher uses their journal to examine personal assumptions, bias, and to clarify their individual belief systems. During the journaling process the researcher may talk

about themselves, their assumptions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). Reflexive practice such as this aims to make visible to the reader the constructed nature of research outcomes, a construction that comes from the choices and decisions the researcher takes during the process of researching.

Reflexive journaling was conducted before and after each interview as well as during the analysis of data.

Credibility, Transferability, and Dependability of Qualitative Research

Qualitative designs, unlike quantitative studies, are not meant to produce results which are statistically valid and reliable, rather qualitative designs are discussed in terms of the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the instrumentation and results of the study (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative rigor of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were addressed as follows: using participant voices, member checking, external audit, explanation of researcher bias, and using rich descriptions.

Sufficient extracts of participants voices were used through direct quotes or in vivo coding. Member checking was accomplished by participants reviewing their transcript to provide feedback regarding accuracy. The principles of dependability were accomplished through an external audit which was conducted by asking another doctoral student as a trusted and qualified third party, to review and ask questions regarding the methods, data analysis procedures, and whether the findings accurately represent the data. The data analysis, emerging themes and codes were also reviewed by the researcher's dissertation committee. Dependability was increased and researcher bias was addressed throughout the data collection and analysis by bracketing biases through reflexive

journaling. The researcher noted and then suspended biases by looking at these beliefs from various angles. The beliefs either were verified as true to the essence of the phenomenon of rural principal isolation or a belief to exclude. Rich descriptions were used by providing a detailed account of the participants' experiences where patterns and themes were set into context.

Summary

This phenomenological study used a transcendental approach. A transcendental-phenomenological study seeks to describe the experiences of participants who have shared a common experience or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenology approach utilizes the notion of epoche, or the idea that the researcher will examine the phenomenon while setting aside preconceived understandings and judgements of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The proposed study of life experiences of rural elementary principals and their perception of isolation, conducting a transcendental phenomenological method best fits the study. The basis of a transcendental phenomenological interview is to understand the experience of participants and meaning they make from that experience will drive the research and best fit the research question: In what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation?

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the perceived experiences of rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York and isolation. By using a transcendental phenomenology approach, it was possible to expose the essence of the phenomenon. The essence can be described as what is real about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The methodology for this study was a

phenomenological approach as the research question is around the lived experiences of elementary principals in a rural district.

Participants in the study were selected using a purposeful sample in the spring of 2020. Using an interview protocol of open-ended questions during one-on-one interviews where the essences of the lived experiences of rural principal isolation as understood by the participants was collected. The recorded interviews were transcribed through a web-based transcription service, read, and reviewed by the researcher at least three times, and the individual participants reviewed their own interview. The experiences of the different participants were analyzed and compared to identify the shared essences after the review of the participants. Coding using the transcendental phenomenological approach described by Moustakas (1994), described in the data analysis section, was conducted.

Chapter 4: Results

Research Question

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation by answering the primary research question: In what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation? It is important to identify rural school challenges to understand why rural principals leave their positions, what challenges rural principals face, and perceptions of rural principals relative to isolation so district leadership will know how to support rural principals. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews of five rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York. This chapter provides an overview of findings and organizes them according to themes relative to the understanding of the research question. The research findings are presented and connected with transcendental phenomenological philosophy.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data analysis followed the transcendental phenomenological objective to illuminate the essence of the phenomenon of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation through horizontalization, thematic analysis, imaginative variation, and intuitive integration as described by Moustakas (1994). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews of five rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York. A combination of initial coding, also known as open coding, with in vivo coding was utilized. In vivo coding uses the terms, phrases, and actual words participants

use. A second round of coding was employed through pattern coding. In pattern coding the researcher develops meta-codes that distinguish similarly coded data by grouping them to generate major themes (Saldana, 2012). These generated themes provided information to answer the research question: In what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation?

Recorded interviews were listened to while reading the transcriptions three times each to check for accuracy of the transcription and to become immersed in the participants lived experiences. Repeatedly listening to each of the participants interviews aided in developing a deep understanding of the participants individual lived experiences and perceptions of rural elementary principal isolation. Listening to the participants' voices facilitated an awareness of tone changes and why a participant might have paused at a particular point in the interview. For example, Participant 2, P2, discussed being isolated for decision making as the sole elementary principal and administrator in the building and then paused with a change in tone of voice to state that the superintendent adds to the isolation and placed the participant on administrative leave last spring.

When reading the participants' transcripts, the researcher engaged in the phenomenological process of bracketing, or epoche, by suspending judgements to focus on the participants experience. As a rural elementary principal, the researcher recognized that bracketing one's own experience allowed for separation of the researcher's experiences as a rural elementary principal from each of the participants experiences. To accomplish the suspension of judgement the researcher kept a reflexive journal to write down personal reactions to participants experiences. For example, as a rural principal, the researcher had the experience of inconsistent regional principal meetings hosted by the

regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services known as BOCES. As participants mentioned their own experiences with regional BOCES principal meetings the researcher wrote notes in the reflexive journal to examine any personal experiences. This was especially important as the researcher has the experience and background of the participants. During the data analysis the researcher’s personal horizon or personal experience regarding infrequent BOCES principal meetings could not be bracketed, therefore, reflexive journaling was employed. The researcher at times would use an audio memo device which was then transcribed using the Describe application and included in the reflexive journal. By saying out loud the researcher’s experience the researcher could move onto the task at hand of analyzing the perceptions and experiences of the research participants.

The essence of the phenomena was assigned descriptive codes through initial coding, also known as open coding. To enhance the initial coding the process of in vivo coding was also utilized by using the verbatim words of participants, which between the two coding processes resulted in 25 codes, see Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Codes

Geographic isolation	Decision making
Distance from resources	Relationships
Distance from others	Lack of trust
Only principal	Lot of stress
Lack of support	Administrative turnover
Lack of network	Wear many hats
Lack of communication	Steeped in the past
Considered an outsider	Vast experiences
Social isolation	Flexibility
Can make changes	Relationship with superintendent
Very difficult to connect	Instructional leader
Feel I’m in a silo	Don’t belong here
No one to turn to	

For the next step of the phenomenological reduction process, the codes were synthesized into six themes:

- Distance divides
- Power of networks
- Outsider syndrome
- Relationships are the foundation
- Wearing many hats
- Building know how

One table for each participant, Table 4.2 through Table 4.6, provide examples of participants invariant-constituents, or horizons, for each theme. This step in the data analysis process clearly illustrated the participants' individual experiences. The code book including Tables 4.2 through 4.6 were subjected to review by a doctoral candidate peer, the researchers committee chair, and committee member.

To present each of the individual participants experience of being a rural elementary principal and their perceptions of isolation, textural descriptions for each of the participants utilizing the participant's own words and statements were written. In a transcendental phenomenological study, the textural descriptions provide the "what" of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). After the thematic analysis, a description of "what" was experienced in textural descriptions, and "how" it was experienced in structural descriptions, the process known as imaginative variation was conducted. Imaginative variation is a step intended to clarify the structures of experience more specifically. Characteristics of the experience are imaginatively revised in order to view the phenomenon of rural principals' perceptions of isolation from varying perspectives

(Turley et al., 2016). This process of imaginative variation resulted in critical descriptions of the phenomenon of rural elementary principals' sense of isolation. Finally, all of the textual and structural descriptions of the experiences were synthesized into a description of the phenomenon through the process described by Moustakas (1994) as "intuitive integration." This description becomes the structure of the ultimate "essence" which captures the meaning credited to the experience of isolation and the perceptions of rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York.

Table 4.2

Invariant Constituents of Principal Isolation of Participant 1 (P1)

Theme	Invariant constituents
Distance divides	<p>“I would say being isolated [geographically] is the biggest thing.”</p> <p>“I cannot name all the districts in our BOCES because there’s such a distance from here, it’s a trip.”</p> <p>“Sports, you know we go all over. It’s an hour and a half away, but that is who we are running against, so you go. Sectionals, that is over two hours away. But guess what? That is where sectionals are.”</p> <p>“I don’t know where the schools are that are two hours away.”</p> <p>“Since they’ve [staff] have never worked in another district to see what it looks like they assume what’s supposed to happen.”</p>
Power in networks	<p>“Professional development within the district. We have no direction with it.”</p> <p>“I was stunned when I moved to this BOCES and there were no meetings. I was like hey, when are we going to meet? We didn’t have our first meeting until February.”</p> <p>“So obviously monthly meetings, it wouldn’t work for us. Well do enough people care about it. That is one of the most isolating pieces.”</p>
Outsider syndrome	<p>“I don’t have any support from a team. When we have administrative meetings all the problems in the district are our fault.”</p> <p>“I try to have the support of my team [administrators] and I’m working on that.”</p>
Relationships are the foundation	<p>“I can actually build relationships with, a lot of relationships, with students and staff.”</p> <p>“I’ve got my own principals’ group. Friends I text from bigger districts.” “Like you guys have layers and somebody else is making these decisions. Tell me what those decisions are.”</p> <p>“We have a superintendent who fired the high school principal and we don’t know why.”</p>
Building know-how	<p>“I don’t feel like I am doing anything wrong, but that doesn’t mean much.”</p> <p>“Our director of curriculum is a former Home Ec. teacher. She doesn’t know reading. So, she reaches out to me.”</p> <p>“For the education plan we had to put together for the state, I am the one who put that together.”</p>
Wearing many hats	<p>“Staffing. If I don’t have the enrollment at one grade, I move the teacher to another. I just do it. Lots of flexibility. It has to be that way.”</p> <p>“I have to keep eight slots of special ed open and then it is lower, so I make the decisions for moving staff.”</p>

Table 4.3

Invariant Constituents of Principal Isolation of Participant 2 (P2)

Theme	Invariant constituents
Distance divides	<p>“We are 170 square miles, so we have small municipalities within the district. There are other small districts around us. “We don’t turn and talk with the other principals. It feels like a competition.”</p> <p>“We meet once every three months for BOCES principal meetings.”</p>
Power in networks	<p>“One of the biggest challenges I face is being the only administrator. I find it one of the biggest challenges just being solo here.”</p> <p>“We are on the run a lot, I don’t have time to talk with other principals.”</p> <p>“I can’t really bounce a lot of ideas off of anybody here in the building because they’re not living the world that I’m living.”</p> <p>“Since I’ve been here, there’s not a go to person. I don’t have that person I can go to and that makes me feel isolated a lot.”</p> <p>“I think we see a lot of stress with these positions. So, you turn to food. You turn to those things that bring you comfort. I was eating. I was consuming some alcohol at times.”</p>
Outsider syndrome	<p>“Realized quickly that if you were not born and raised here, you are an outsider.”</p> <p>“We [family] don’t get invited to things.”</p> <p>“If you’re not from here, you don’t belong here. That’s one of the challenges that I faced, just feeling isolated. For me I turned to food and gained back the weight I lost before.”</p> <p>“Believe me, I was eating. I was consuming a lot of alcohol.”</p>
Relationships are the foundation	<p>“There was a teacher who was related to a board member and there was a problem. The board member told me to get on their side or basically we are going to get you out of here. “</p> <p>“There’s not really a go to person. That makes me feel isolated a lot.”</p> <p>“I still talk to the former superintendent, that helps a lot.”</p>
Building know-how	<p>“The curriculum director is a high school guy; he doesn’t know elementary. I think they lean on you. I feel valuable when that happens.”</p> <p>“We are instructing here. I’ve always prided myself on being an instructional leader.”</p>
Wearing many hats	<p>“We’ve been granted a lot to make our own decisions.”</p> <p>“We’ve been given some autonomy with the things that we do in the community, that’s really nice.”</p>

Table 4.4

Invariant Constituents of Principal Isolation of Participant 3 (P3)

Theme	Invariant constituents
Distance divides	<p>“We are so far from anywhere. That they [staff] are starving for PD and best instructional practices, pretty behind the times.”</p> <p>“Geographically isolated from resources and other schools. When you have two teachers per grade level it is hard to have collegiality.”</p> <p>“There is the geographic isolation. We cover over 86 square miles and there are dirt roads that are literally one lane that say seasonal. Children don’t come to school seasonally. People choose to live in those isolated areas.”</p> <p>“I found it interesting that people choose to be very isolated themselves.”</p> <p>“So, we are isolated from resources. One of the biggest emotional drains on me is wanting to help people and not to have readily available resources.”</p> <p>“This is a huge geographic area.”</p>
Power in networks	<p>“As a principal there is a kind of helplessness I would describe as isolation because you don’t know who to reach out to get help. In a small district, there is only one of each administrator.”</p> <p>“Even though I had some connections to other principals in rural schools, nobody would understand the specific issues at my school.”</p> <p>“There is no professional development for principals like me out there. Unless you do grassroots, you are truly out there by yourself.”</p> <p>“There are BOCES meetings sometimes, but you cannot really build those connections and relationships when we barely meet once a month.”</p> <p>“The BOCES ListServ is good to read, but I don’t feel comfortable putting a question out there.”</p>
Outsider syndrome	<p>“Very much this idea that you (participant) didn’t choose to live here. You didn’t choose to move here. Funny how people have that mindset and bias.”</p> <p>“People know everybody for generations in many cases. But when people move here, there isn’t acceptance.”</p>
Relationships are the foundation	<p>“The community is very strong, the families are very supportive of school, but I am not going to stay and retire from here.”</p> <p>“Challenge for me is saying I understand this is the way you’ve always done it. Very veteran staff and close knit and not open to outsider and ideas.”</p> <p>“A lot of community relationships and especially relationships with kids. I love that.”</p> <p>“If it weren’t for those trusted relationships I built in another district, I don’t know what I would do.”</p>
Building know-how	<p>“I feel so adrift. I doubted myself and my skill set to figure something out.”</p> <p>“There is a feeling that you don’t want people to think my gosh what is her problem. You need to balance professional reputation.”</p> <p>“Thank goodness I have all the years of teaching experience. Instructionally I don’t feel isolated.”</p>
Wearing many hats	<p>“You wear every hat there is. It gives you lots of experiences and opportunities.”</p> <p>“As a principal you still have the superintendent, but it’s like your own classroom, you get to see your effect and change culture.”</p>

Table 4.5

Invariant Constituents of Principal Isolation of Participant 4 (P4)

Theme	Invariant constituents
Distance divides	<p>“One of the biggest things I’ve encountered is serious mental health, social and emotional stuff and distance from support.”</p>
Power in networks	<p>“Geographically we are so spread out to connect.” [with other school leaders].</p> <p>“Absolutely isolated. Basically, losing a half day. You’ve lost all work that day, it’s not going to go away.” [BOCES principal meetings].</p> <p>“Based on my experience, there are people I can reach out to and say Hey I know you started to do such and such, but what about this?”</p> <p>“We have our BOCES meeting this year. In the past they’ve attempted to have regular principal meetings. I like to go because I want to know what the greatest and latest is.”</p>
Outsider syndrome	<p>“[BOCES meetings] used to be more of a high school thing and now we’re seeing more elementary people attending. The districts send one or both of their principals when they actually get to the meeting, one comes back to the district.”</p> <p>“I am the first principal, or administrator, hired outside the district in 44 years.”</p> <p>“One of the things I am struggling with is they [HS principal and superintendent] have been here for a long time. They know the culture inside and out. They know every single person. I am the outsider.”</p>
Relationships are the foundation	<p>“I believe it has been a struggle [working with HS principal]. She has amazing ideas and we executed a variety of things, but in January we were lost.”</p> <p>“The staff knew we [HS principal and participant] were struggling.”</p> <p>“Families, no one is afraid to reach out and call me if they need something.”</p> <p>“Some of the people that I’ve had the opportunity to meet, to sit down with grandparents and have conversations with parents. I don’t know if that happens in bigger districts.”</p> <p>“The first week and a half we were off [pandemic quarantine] I actually sent an individual sent a handwritten card to every single-family pre-K through five.”</p> <p>“[aides and TA’s] They’re here because they want to be here, and most volunteer after their hours are done.”</p> <p>“A true community schools.”</p>
Building know-how	<p>“I have 22 years’ experience. I have now worked officially in three different school districts.” “I have been around the block.”</p> <p>“One of the things I am struggling with is they [superintendent and other principal] have both been here for a very long time. They know the culture inside and out. The superintendent was a teacher her, a coach, athletic director, principal and now superintendent.”</p>
Wearing many hats	<p>“When I ask, why we do it that way? The answer is that’s the way we’ve always done it.”</p> <p>“We [HS principal and participant] still have our days when we do our own thing.”</p> <p>“You’re doing everything you need to do.”</p> <p>“I don’t know what they are doing in bigger districts, they’re probably too busy organizing papers, organizing assessments, and organizing instruction.”</p> <p>“I manage the after-school club.”</p>

Table 4.6

Invariant Constituents of Principal Isolation of Participant 5 (P5)

Theme	Invariant constituents
Distance divides	<p>“Where we are still challenged and where I would love to work with neighboring districts is for our cognitively impaired students. We can’t make a program for one or two students.”</p> <p>“We have students riding the bus for over an hour.”</p> <p>“Enrollment is always a challenge. We always worry whether we have the financial support. We have to be incredibly creative.”</p> <p>“Our kids are outside all the time. Sometimes if they are not in school, we know they are out in the woods. One day a week they are just gone.”</p>
Power in networks	<p>“The biggest isolation I feel is being the only elementary principal. I’m one of two principals in the district.”</p> <p>“The regional BOCES meetings are so important, but we only have a few all year.”</p> <p>“It can be so isolating because there is so much in a small district you have to do yourself. There is no narrow focus on anything.”</p> <p>“Sometimes there are things that come across the BOCES Listserv that are not relevant to me, or maybe I don’t have an answer to, but I read each one.”</p> <p>“Even though the principal’s group didn’t meet much last year I knew who to reach out to, that helps.”</p>
Outsider syndrome	<p>“I feel isolation from the people I work with, the staff, because they don’t really understand what I am going through, the hats I wear.”</p> <p>“I’ll talk to a colleague in another district and they say oh you are the principal and the homeless liaison, really?”</p> <p>“I wonder to myself; don’t these people understand the broadness of the role that you need to do in a rural district?”</p> <p>“I feel like I’m in a silo. As much as I love the staff, I can’t talk to them.”</p>
Relationships are the foundation	<p>“For me, it’s relationships. That’s what defines the district, it is just the culture.”</p> <p>“The biggest opportunity is for the connections we have with families. We know our families because we are so small.”</p> <p>“My support system is the administrative team. We are very close. We built up trust.”</p> <p>“Our superintendent too is a huge support to us.”</p> <p>“Relationships are the foundation for me.”</p>
Building know-how	<p>“We started our own self-contained class. It was awesome that I could build it from my end. It was very positive, and we are very proud of the program. My special ed background it was a perfect fit for me.”</p> <p>“If you can provide quality programming in a safe environment so far away from everything, and we really are, that’s where they need to be.”</p>
Wearing many hats	<p>“We can provide high quality programming by just building it.”</p> <p>“Every year I have to build a different master schedule and move staff around. I just do it.”</p>

Summary of Results

Qualitative phenomenological studies seek to identify and examine phenomena, in a natural setting, from individuals who have firsthand knowledge. In transcendental phenomenological studies, the goal is to clarify the essence of the phenomena without personal bias (Henriques, 2014; Merriam, 2014; Patton, 2016). This study sought to answer the primary research question: in what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation? Analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews established themes among the five participants. The development of these themes was influential in recognizing perceptions that are considered essential to understanding the phenomenon of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation. The themes were: distance divides, power of networks, outsider syndrome, relationships are the foundation, wearing many hats, and building know how. The themes and the participants invariant-constituents were used to develop critical descriptions of the phenomenon.

An individual textural description of each theme was constructed for each participant as suggested by transcendental phenomenological analysis. A composite textural description was written through synthesizing all five participants individual textural descriptions of the theme. The composite textural description of each theme follows. Finally, the composite description of all themes represents the essences of the phenomenon of rural elementary principals' in Western and Central New York perceptions of isolation.

Theme 1: Distanced divide. The first theme, distanced divide, supports the notion that rural school leaders are isolated by distance or geographically isolated from

other schools, resources, and from peer networks. Pratt (2018) defined rural schools by stating, “Rural schooling should not be defined by zip codes or researchers’ terms. It is a matter of perspective and understanding. It is defined by how long it takes people to drive to a store or a landmark on the map.” All the participants perceived that there is a distance which divides, or a geographic isolation which is unique to a rural elementary principal. This concept of distance divide was quantified by two participants by sharing the specific square mileage of their district. P3 stated “There is the geographic isolation. We cover over 86 square miles and there are dirt roads that are literally one lane that say seasonal. Children don’t come to school seasonally. People choose to live in those isolated areas.” P2 stated “We are 170 square miles, so we have small municipalities within the district.” Participants who didn’t share the specific square miles of the district described the distance and remoteness in other ways. “We have students who ride the bus for over an hour.” describes the size and remoteness of P5’s district. It is noteworthy that two participants actually stated the square miles of their districts. Both stating the fact as if the square miles of the district bring more emphasis on the perception of ruralness and evoking a sense of being geographically distanced or isolated.

Participants discussed the theme of distance divides in terms of distance from resources as a common experience. Resources for students such as mental health providers, resources for staff for high quality professional development and collegial conversations, and resources for the principal as far as networks. The lack of community medical resources, especially for mental health issues, was discussed in detail by two participants. One participant, P3, gave an example of personally using a district car and driving a student to an outside mental health provider because there were no providers

nearby or in the school and the parent had no access to a vehicle. “So, we are isolated from resources. One of the biggest emotional drains on me is wanting to help people and not have readily available resources.” The distance to what the participants considered necessary mental health resources was viewed as one of the biggest concerns of a rural principal and something that is urgently needed. P4 shared, “One of the biggest things I’ve encountered is serious mental health, social and emotional stuff and distance from support.”

Consistent among all participants’ perceptions of a distance divide included being geographically distanced from professional development resources for staff. Three participants had each mentioned their district’s curriculum directors lack of elementary experience to support the elementary staff. The common experience was that each of the curriculum directors were referred to as “home-grown” where the individuals were teachers in their rural districts and then moved into administration. The curriculum directors’ backgrounds were either in a specific high school subject area, such as home and careers, or spent as a teacher in the high school. One participant, P5, highlighted that the curriculum director did not know the science of teaching reading and therefore never had professional development for elementary teachers on instructional practices and strategies to teach reading. The participants held a common perception that the curriculum directors not only did not understand elementary education, but they also did not have the expertise to support instructional practices and professional development for rural teachers. One participant was a former curriculum director at a suburban school and shared that he is given full autonomy to direct professional development in his building because the curriculum director, as a former home and careers teacher, doesn’t know

what to provide for staff in an elementary building. Each participant discussed their own goal and significant importance of being an instructional leader, but not able to support their staff enough in improving and learning about new instructional practices. One participant articulated the concept well, “My perception is that they [staff] are starving for PD and best practices instruction. They are pretty behind the times.” She added later in the interview “They are very much steeped in this is how we’ve always done it. This is a huge challenge for me to be an instructional leader.” Two participants highlighted the distance as a contributing factor to staff not having opportunities to keep up to date on instructional practices. P1 stated “Since they [staff] have never worked in another district to see what it looks like they assume what’s supposed to happen.” P2 stated “When you have two teachers per grade level it is hard to have collegiality. We are so far away from anywhere. That they [staff] are starving for PD and best instructional practices. Pretty behind the times.” When referring to the distance to network with other principals the following highlights the perceptions: P1 stated “I cannot name all the districts in our BOCES because there’s such a distance from here, it’s a trip.” P4 stated “Geographically we are so spread out to connect.” Finally, distance from principal or peer networks, specifically the monthly area principal meetings sponsored by the regional BOCES, was consistently mentioned by each participant. The participants felt that they had to make a difficult decision whether to attend the meetings based on the distance from their district and the time away from being in the building.

Theme 2: Power in networks. The second theme which emerged was the concept of power in networks. Each participant viewed networks as essential necessities of an elementary principal, however each had perceptions of isolation from collaborative

networks. This lack of networking created a sense of professional isolation or a sense of isolation from professional peers and the feeling there is “no one to go to” to discuss and share professional concerns and ideas. The participants perceptions of networks varied depending on whether the participant had sought out their own networks or utilized professionals from previous roles or jobs in other districts.

Being the only administrator in the building and the structural division as a result of being in the supervisory role contributed to the perceptions of professional isolation for P2.

One of the biggest challenges I face is being the only administrator. I find it one of the biggest challenges just being solo here. I really can't bounce ideas off anybody here in the building because they're not living the world that I'm living. Since I've been here, there's not a go to person. I don't have that person I can go to and that makes me feel isolated a lot.

P5 said “The biggest isolation I feel is being the only elementary principal. I'm one of two principals in the district. It can be so isolating because there is so much in a small district you have to do yourself. There is no narrow focus on anything.” P3 described professional isolation as a kind of helplessness “As a principal there is a kind of helplessness I would describe as isolation because you don't know who to reach out to get help. In a small district there is only one of each administrator.” P3 addressed the monthly regional networking opportunities provided by the regional BOCES, “There are BOCES meetings sometimes, but you cannot really build those relationships when we barely meet once a month.” P4 agreed that the BOCES meetings are valued, but the

distance paired with infrequent meetings adds to the feeling of isolation from a peer network. P4 stated

Absolutely isolated. Basically, losing a half day. You've lost all that work that day and it's not going to go away. We have our BOCES meeting this year. In the past they've attempted to have regular principal meetings, but they never were consistently held. I like to go because I want to know what the greatest and latest is.

P5 remarked, regarding monthly regional BOCES meetings, "The regional BOCES meetings are so important, but we only have a few all year. Even though the principal's group didn't meet much last year I knew who to reach out to, that helps." Two participants mentioned the "Listserv" which is an email group organized by regional BOCES for elementary principals. A principal can ask a question or share information with all elementary principals in the region through this service. P3 and P5 referred to the ListServ as a network resource

The BOCES ListServ is a good read, but I don't feel comfortable putting things out there. Sometimes there are things that come across the BOCES ListServ that are not relevant to me, or maybe I don't have an answer to, but I read each one.

Overall, all the rural elementary principals' value and crave networking with other elementary principals. Two participants found their own ways to belong to networks. P1 joined a social media provider, Voxer, and a Voxer elementary principal group. He explained that the group shares ideas, sometimes as simple as "setting up a cafeteria" but no matter what the topic it gives him ideas he would never had come up with on his own. He also uses the Voxer group to ask questions. Besides Voxer, P1 is on the border of two

regional BOCES groups. He doesn't "officially belong" to one regional BOCES, but he created connections with a large suburban district. This large suburban district has, according to P1, "layers of administrators and five elementary principals" who have done the work that would take me weeks to accomplish. Networking with them saves me time and there were many eyes and voices involved in their decision making." P3 formerly was a Director of Special Education Services and maintains those connections as a rural elementary principal and asked that group to help her connect to their elementary principals. She explained she felt a "sense of helplessness I would describe as isolation because you don't know who to reach out to for help. I felt so adrift, so I connected the three of us and asked if we could meet once a month." These participants understand the power of networks and created their own to compensate for the absence or poor network opportunities.

Theme 3: Outsider syndrome. The third theme that emerged was the perceptions of being an outsider and social isolation. Nicholson (2012) defines social isolation as "a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts and they are deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships." Each participant had described experiences of social isolation, especially the concept of their role as an administrator being a barrier to social opportunities within their buildings, districts, and community. The sense of being outsider "inside" your own building and/or the sense of being an outsider if you were not "home-grown" weighed on the participants.

The concept of being an outsider was prevalent for three participants. The experience was especially highlighted by P2 describing turning to food and alcohol due to being considered an outsider.

If you're not from here, you don't belong here. That's one of the challenges that I faced, just feeling isolated. For me, I turned to food and gained back the weight I lost before. Believe me, I was eating. I was consuming a lot of alcohol.

P2 continued to explain that his family also were socially isolated, "We don't get invited to things. The kids didn't get invited to anything. That was hard, that they were considered outsiders." The participant and his family sold their house in the district and moved to a neighboring district based on the perception of socially being isolated as members of the community where he was a principal. P3 also detailed experiences of social isolation because she didn't move to live in the district when she was hired as principal.

Very much this idea that you didn't choose to live here. You didn't choose to move here. Funny how people have that mindset and bias. People know everybody for generations in many cases, but when people move here, there isn't any acceptance.

P3 began her discussion by stating she plans to leave the district and not stay. P4 explained that she was the first administrator hired outside the district in 44 years and is seen as an outsider. As an outsider staff and other administrators consistently ask why she is doing something the way she does, she feels a lack of trust in decision making from staff and administrators. There is a sense of not belonging or outsider syndrome of rural principals who didn't grow up in the district and "move-up" through the ranks.

The sense of being an outsider bleeds into the structural hierarchy of administrator over seeing staff. The administrator has no confidant and being the “only administrator” in the building leads to a social isolation from all the adults in the building. This isolating factor is further highlighted by the responsibilities of being a principal. P5 shared her experience.

I feel like I’m in a silo. As much as I love the staff, I can’t talk to them. They [staff] don’t understand what I have to deal with every day. I don’t think people understand the broadness of the role that you need to in a rural district.

P2 explained that even though he was “close” to the school psychologist, there were things he could not share or talk about. The supervisory role of being the only administrator created a perception of being an outsider in one’s own building.

Theme 4: Relationships are the foundation. Each participant commented on how in a rural school the principal can know and build relationships with staff, families, and students. The participants overwhelmingly stated that the relationship building aspect of being a rural principal was the most important part of what they do as building leaders. Most participants made some reference to their relationship with the superintendent of their district, whether positive or a challenge.

The participants talked about relationships with students, staff, and families. P1 stated “I can actually build relationships with, a lot of relationships, with students and staff. It’s a great little district I believe in with a lot of great people.” P2 mentioned the relationships with students is why we (educators) are in this and that despite some of the more challenging aspects there are opportunities for relationship building with students. P3 said “A lot of community relationships and especially relationships with kids. I love

that.” P4 said “Some of the people that I’ve had the opportunity to meet, to sit down with grandparents and have conversations with parents. I don’t know if that happens in bigger districts.” The participants focused most positively on the student and family relationships they had. Each had a sense of pride in giving examples of knowing each child by name, knowing the families well, and knowing their staff members and knowing details of their staff members personal lives. The participants had a sense of the relationships in rural elementary schools to know all children and their families intimately as a benefit specific to being in a rural district.

Relationships with their superintendent came into the conversation with three participants in this study. A positive and supportive relationship with the superintendent was reported by P5. “Our superintendent is a huge support to us. When we talk about relationships, that is what defines our district is that culture.” Where P1 had a very different experience “We have a superintendent who fired the high school principal and we don’t know why.” P1 described the hiring of an outside coach to meet with him monthly, however why the coach was hired was a mystery and he commented that the coach had the superintendent’s ear. P1 also described that during administrative meetings the elementary school was blamed for things that were not going well with students in the other buildings, implying that the elementary building was ultimately responsible. P2 was hired by a superintendent who retired and was replaced with someone who had been a teacher and high school principal in the district. P2 had been put on administrative leave twice by the new superintendent. Each time the reasons were unfounded, and the participant had legal counsel prepared for litigation if this were to happen again. This participant also had a board member and union president threaten “if you don’t get on our

side, we are going to get you out of here.” P2 did share that relationships he had with students, families, and the core staff in his building were positive and what he focused on most. Being the only administrator hired outside her district in the past 44 years created a different relationship for P4 with the rest of the administrative team and confusion over boundaries. The superintendent had recently retired but stayed on as business manager and the assistant superintendent moved into the superintendent role. She explains,

One of the things I am struggling with the superintendent was a teacher here, coach, athletic director, principal, high school principal, elementary principal, assistant superintendent, and now superintendent. There are so many things he does that other superintendents don't do because he did them before. If it's elementary issue it comes to me, but he's touching it all right.

She also had the experience of not building a positive relationship with the high school principal who also formerly taught in the district before moving to administration. “We were struggling to evolve. So much so that the staff noticed and asked Why do they hate children? We still have our days when we do our thing, but it is getting better.”

Each participant had an upbeat and positive tone when speaking about student relationships. During the interviews there was a sense of joy when talking about kids and their parents. The relationships with staff were also mostly positive, however as explained in distance divide the staff were seen as needing updated professional development and principals each saw themselves in the instructional leader relationship role with the staff.

Theme 5: Building know-how. Whether the principal felt competent in their know-how in their own leadership and skills emerged throughout the interviews. The

building of know-how was closely linked to the theme of professional isolation; however, it was distinctly its own theme as participants described their own strengths and a certain satisfaction in not just using their skillset, but knowing their skillset can make a positive difference.

All participants indicated that they saw being an instructional leader as an important aspect of being a rural principal. They each talked about their ability to either coach or provide professional development to their staff and the sense of importance personally to accomplish this, even though there may be some obstacles. P2 highlighted the challenge of being an instructional leader and the only administrator in the building. “I’ve always prided myself on being an instructional leader, but not really having the opportunity to really lead instructionally. I’m always motivating people to get to the end goal, but there’s a lot of times you don’t get a day from the time we’re here 5a.m. to 5p.m.” Participants also shared frustration at having the skillset and wanting to lead instructionally, but the staff had an opposing mind-set or a sense of “this is how we have always done it.” This was voiced by P1, a former curriculum director in a nearby suburban district when talking about his ability to share best practices in reading instruction, “They are certainly a different mindset about reading instruction and what AIS looked like. Basically, they want to label about half the class. And since they never worked in another district to see what it looks like they assume it just is supposed to look this way.” He went on to explain he craves the connection to other principals to reaffirm his own abilities since they are questioned so much by the staff. P3 noted her excitement to be an instructional leader and make a positive impact for students and share research-based instructional practices, however she explains her enthusiasm was met with distrust

and confusion to why a change was necessary, “I want to roll my sleeves up, get excited and move my building. A challenge I wasn’t anticipating was hearing, ‘This is how we have always done it. This is how we are going to do it because that is how we have always done it.’” P4 pointed out that she has been in education for over 22 years and being a rural principal as instructional leader has been the most frustrating. She shared “I ask a lot of questions because I want to know why things are done a certain way. So, initially when I would ask, ‘Why do we do that?’ I got from them, ‘That’s the way we do it. That’s the way we’ve always done it. Sorry.’” The culture of the district P5 leads in has a more open mindset to the principal being the instructional leader. P5 believes this has to do with the superintendent and his leadership and the culture in the whole district. She points out that she saw a need for a program and as a former director of special education she was trusted to build the program and do what needed to be done. The program was successful and became a model for surrounding districts. She explained, “the superintendent asked me ‘If you could build this, what would you need?’ It was very positive. You know we are really proud of those programs.”

Each of the principals felt that building know-how in their districts was a natural extension of what their responsibilities were and more importantly what they had the skill set and personal know-how to do. Their feeling of competence supported their motivation to keep trying to make changes and to change mindsets.

Theme 6: Wearing many hats. All of the participants emphasized the notion of having a great deal of autonomy in their roles. Participants talked about the many roles and responsibilities they have as rural principals, stating they “wear many hats.” Along with wearing many hats the participants talked positively about having autonomy. P1 said

“Staffing. If I don’t have the enrollment at one grade, I move the teacher to another. I just do it. Lots of flexibility. It has to be that way.” P2 stated “We’ve been granted a lot to make our own decisions.” P3 noted “You wear every hat there is. It gives you lots of experiences and opportunities. As a principal you still have the superintendent, but it’s like your own classroom, you get to see your effect and change culture.” Having responsibilities that might traditionally belong to an assistant principal or an aide are second nature to P4. “A lot of what we’re doing is managing the day to day. Getting them (students) to school, feed them breakfast, lunch, helping with homework. I manage afterschool club when the last bus leaves at 4:45p.m. You just do it all.” P5 shared she also does what needs to be done: “We can provide high quality programming by just building it. Every year I have to build a different master schedule and move staff around. I just do it.”

The participants saw the flexibility and wearing of many hats as a positive for being trusted to make the decisions for their building and to gain experiences through the many roles they take on. In urban and suburban school districts are there more layers of decision making and people assigned to the various levels of decision making, in a rural district the elementary principal has much more autonomy in not just management of a building, but staffing, curriculum, and programing. P5 described in detail the autonomy of creating a special education program in the building to prevent students with high behavior needs attending a specialized school where children would be riding a bus for almost two hours each way. The participant had complete autonomy over program creation, staffing, and curriculum. P5 shared how her autonomy and success building this program provided a model for surrounding rural districts which visited and used the

program as a template for creating their own programs. “We started going out and doing PD [professional development] for districts and helping them set up and answering questions like ‘How do you keep these kids in your own district?’” Overall, the wearing of many hats gave a sense of autonomy and was accepted as just what a rural elementary principal does as part of their job duties.

Chapter Summary

The six culminating themes from these rural elementary principals’ perceptions of isolation were: distance divides, power of networks, outsider syndrome, relationships are the foundation, wearing many hats, and building know how. The general essence drawn from these themes suggest rural elementary principals in Central and Western New York have similar experiences of isolation.

Rural principals are considered rural due the definition which includes the geographic size and make-up of the district. The concept of distance from resources, other districts, and other principals is part of being a rural elementary principal which is also seen almost as a badge of honor. The distance creates a natural isolating factor which contributes to the motivation of the principals to be part of a network. The distance from networks and inconsistency of regional group meetings through BOCES is frustrating and causes a professional isolation. Rural principals create their own networks to ease the perceptions of professional isolation and making decisions in a silo. For the principals who did not teach in their current district there is a sense of being an outsider which carry with it challenges such as being socially isolated from the other adults in their building and for some socially isolated from the adults in the community.

Relationships are important to the rural elementary principal. Relationships with students is seen as a priority and a benefit of the position, relationships with parents and staff members is highly valued. The principal's individual relationship with their superintendent is an important one and can have impact on the isolation the principal feels in their role and in the district. Even though the rural principal values the student relationships as most important it appears that the relationship between the principal and the superintendent has the most effect on the principal's sense of isolation.

Rural principals view themselves as competent instructional leaders but have the challenge of deeply rooted beliefs by staff members and moving staff to more current and research-based practices. Finally, rural elementary principals have diverse roles and responsibilities compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. The many and varied roles, at times, prevent the principals from participating in their own professional development and participating in local networking opportunities.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation by answering the one research question: In what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation? It is important to identify rural school challenges to understand why rural principals leave their positions, what challenges rural principals face, and perceptions of rural principals relative to isolation so districts know how to support rural principals. This study was viewed through the lens of relationship motivation theory (RMT), a sub theory of self-determination theory (SDT), which posits that relatedness need is intrinsic and inclines people to seek out and maintain relationships with others and that there are factors which can undermine and detract from a sense of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Face to face interviews with five rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York were conducted, analyzed, and findings presented.

Implications of Findings

Seen through the lens of relationships motivation theory, RMT, which considers the importance of multiple basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness which Deci and Ryan (2018) posit are mutually supportive of each other, rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York highly value relationships. Due to isolating factors of distance, supervisory role over all the adults in their building,

and their lack of time to be away from their building responsibilities, rural principals lack sufficient professional relationships and networks to counter the perceptions of isolation.

Relationships motivation theory focuses on the relatedness or importance of relationships combined with autonomy and competence. The rural elementary principals' sense of competence was described in the theme of building know-how. When rural elementary principals have opportunities to form relationships and network with other principals, their sense of competence was positively impacted. This relationship makes sense, as I connect and learn from others, my own skills and sense of competence as a leader and principal will grow. Likewise, the relationships affect autonomy, which was identified in the theme wearing many hats. The rural elementary principals had autonomy to change schedules, create programs, and make decisions without constantly checking with district level administration. When the relationships were positive, the principals made these decisions with confidence. When the relationships were not positive the sense of autonomy and many roles wasn't as positive a perception. Finally, the themes of relationship and networking both correlate to the relatedness of relationship motivation theory. Positive relationships and having networks were seen as not just desirable, but a need. This need is exactly what Deci and Ryan (2018) posit in their theory of relationship motivation theory.

The rural elementary principals in this study reported that the distance from resources did give them a sense of isolation, however the greater sense of isolation came from social isolation and lack of networking with elementary school principal peers. Much like Bauer et al. (2017) research that rural principals' sense of isolation is less a structural reality but has more to do with the principal's sense of feeling alone at work.

New Zealand primary principals in Cubitt and Burt's 2002 study of primary principals without an assistant principal and not in the dual role of principal and teacher experienced professional isolation and stressors from role overload and a sense of being socially isolated at work. In this study, similarly to Cubitt and Burt's, the rural principals reported a lack of high-quality professional development for themselves, inconsistent opportunities to collaborate with other elementary principals in their region, and all the principals described the concept of multiple roles which are not understood by staff. One principal described in detail the stress he contributed directly to his role, specifically the social isolation he experienced.

One of the emergent themes Hansen's (2018) study of rural principal turnover included the principal's relationship with their superintendent, especially the lack of support. The relationship with the superintendent was mentioned by each principal and deserves attention in future research. Only one principal in the study directly indicated she was planning to leave the role and indicated part of the reason for not staying was her current superintendent's vision did not match her own. The principal who experienced being put on administrative leave twice by his superintendent, although he experienced a great deal of stress and isolation socially and professionally, stated he planned to retire from his current district. The reason he stated he was staying was the anomaly of his district's compensation was equivalent to area suburban and urban administrators. One participant specifically mentioned the high level of support she felt from her superintendent, she was the only participant who shared a positive and collaborative relationship with their superintendent. Although the importance of relationships emerged from this study, there were no interview questions directly related to the relationship

between the rural principal and their superintendent, this naturally came into their descriptions of lived experiences. A study of rural principals and their relationship with their superintendent may reveal whether this specific relationship dynamic directly contributes to the level of isolation perceived by the rural principal.

Dussault and Thibodeau (1997) observed in their study of professional isolation of school principals that one of the commonly cited explanations of difficult work conditions by principals is the lack of development informal networks. This was overwhelming the experiences of the participants in this study. Each remarked about the lack of networking and a strong desire to connect with other principals. So much so that two participants specifically explained how they are creating their own informal networks.

Williams and Welsh (2017) interviewed educational leaders at state, district, and school levels in Georgia revealing that flexibility in the type of professional development and how professional development is delivered needs to be tailored to the individual situations of principals. Professional development opportunities for the rural elementary principals, other infrequently offered and attended regional BOCES meetings, was not mentioned by the participants. There were mentions of the poorly prepared directors of curriculum and the participants role of providing professional development, but nothing regarding what the participants thought they needed for their professional growth. This leaves an open question of where do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York get high quality professional development?

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that highlight opportunities for future research. First this study had a small sample size of five rural elementary principals from Western or Central New York. Although this is an appropriate size for a transcendental phenomenological research study such as this, there may be fluctuations of generated themes if more rural principals in Western or Central New York participated.

Second, all the participants in the study experienced a sense of outsider syndrome or social isolation. Each of the participants had been classroom teachers or had administrative positions in other districts prior to taking their current rural elementary position. This was not intentional in the study. The participants only had to have 2 years' experience in their current role to be eligible for the study. In retrospect, a question of whether the participants had moved up into the position of administrator within their own district should have been asked with consideration of comparing the perceptions between rural elementary principals who did or did not move up in the same district. Whether a rural elementary principal who taught in the same district where they became the principal is worthy of future research. The concept of outsider syndrome is worthy of further examination based on the participants in this study were teachers outside the district where they were hired as principals.

Finally, this study was designed, and the literature review was conducted prior to the coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic, and the interviews were conducted only 2 weeks after the school districts in Western and Central New York moved to virtual learning. Even though the participants barely mentioned the pandemic by each asking at the beginning of the interview if they were to refer to "prior to COVID-19," their responses may have been influenced by the change and activities related to the pandemic. The

pandemic also affected the manner in which interviews were conducted. Interviews could not be done in-person, albeit still face-to-face, Zoom meetings do not allow a phenomenological researcher to experience being in the presence of the participant to note postures, facial expressions, and other experiences of being with the participant during the interview.

Recommendations

The results of this transcendental phenomenological study of the perceptions of rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York and isolation brought to light some recommendations for principals, school leadership, policy development, and future researchers.

Networking. Fullan (2001) calls for principals to create learning communities and collaborative cultures for teachers. However, in most cases collaborative opportunities are for the teachers and not for building principals. For rural elementary principals in this study, networking through regional BOCES meetings was important to combat professional isolation. The meetings, according to all participants, are inconsistently held and the distance from their school building creates a difficult choice of being away from the building to attend. To combat this lack of networking, district superintendents, as executive leaders, need to not only encourage, but insist their elementary principals attend regional BOCES meetings. As the most executive leader in a region, BOCES superintendents should coordinate with their professional development staff and district superintendents to determine what topics principals need additional development in and have scheduled meetings. To accomplish this, the district superintendents need to have support within the elementary building while the principals

are away from their building, as several participants mentioned the time out of the building prevents them from attending meetings. Principals have the professional responsibility to advocate for their own professional development as well as becoming members of networking communities. As executive leaders, rural elementary principals need to self-reflect on what areas of professional development and professional support they need to grow as a leader. Whether this is reaching out through the regional BOCES Listserv asking if others are interesting in becoming a network or finding professional networks elsewhere. As far as attending the BOCES monthly regional meetings, since the COVID-19 pandemic this March, rural principals have used Zoom and other web-based live video platforms to collaborate. This is a viable option for meetings which could save the driving time and also increase the frequency of meetings. In-person would be the most ideal opportunity for collaboration, however virtual collaboration may be the first step to building relationships in each region.

Health and isolation. Isolation can have negative health and wellness effects including feelings of loneliness, despair, and depression as well as be responsible for unhealthy habits. One of the participants was very open and honest regarding turning to food and alcohol directly because of his isolation socially from the adults in the building. As the only administrator in the building and the social construct of being the supervisor of the adults the participant turned to food and alcohol. This same participant explained that his own children who attended the district where he was an elementary principal had no invitations to social events and struggled to make friends themselves. So much so that the family moved to the next district over. It is recommended that rural elementary principals understand prior to taking their positions the impact this can have on their

family. Living in the same district may sound appealing to a rural principal, but the scrutiny of living in a rural community may have a negative impact on the family and the principal. It is suggested that during the administrative training provided by universities there needs to be an opportunity for rural principals to share some of the benefits and experiences so new administrators are fully aware of what the lifestyle of a rural principal is or could be. The old adage, “knowledge is power,” fits when making a career decision. This is true for the rural district too. Rural districts do not want the traditionally high rate of principal turnover. If administrators applying for these roles enter the interview process aware of the pros and cons well ahead of accepting a position, this may increase the length of time administrators stay in these positions.

Curriculum directors experience. Three participants mentioned the lack of experience the district curriculum director had with elementary teaching, specifically knowledge of the science of teaching reading. Since teaching reading is universally considered one of the most important roles an elementary teacher has districts should be providing professional development to administrative staff around the strategies, instructional practices, and current science of teaching reading. Whether a director of curriculum is a former high school teacher or elementary teacher their responsibility to relevant and current practices in a rural district which is isolated from current science and practice should be a priority. Rural elementary principals highlighted how they saw themselves as instructional leaders, providing professional development on best instructional practices is a part of the rural elementary principal’s role. When taking on the role of rural elementary principal, individuals need to make a commitment to their own professional development and staying abreast of current research in instructional

practices, they cannot assume the director of curriculum will have the knowledge and skillset to provide such professional development.

Social media as network. One principal had mentioned creating his own network virtually to collaborate with the much larger education community through Twitter and Voxer. This participant explained that both social media venues allowed him to ask questions and get varying answers which expanded his thinking on the topic posed. Social media has hashtags, online principal groups, and niche groups such as rural elementary groups principals can join. The opportunity to collaborate beyond one's region may support the lack of local collaboration and create a sense of belonging for rural elementary principals who might have a sense of isolation. In fact, social media and online connections may just bring a level playing field to all principals as a common experience. Rural principals should be taking advantage of the results of the virtual and online experiences and recommendations and join social media networks. The rural principals may find that their experience as isolated leaders correspond to the perceptions their urban and suburban principals have felt since being forced into virtual leadership.

Federal, state, and local policies. Federal, state, and local policies can address the needs of the rural elementary principal. ESSA, as the reauthorization of earlier federal education policies, is meant to provide funding local districts and states may not have to direct to specific areas of education. Federal education policies prior to ESSA focused on supporting teacher preparation programs and the quality of teaching to improve student outcomes. This is the first time a federal program has included support for the development of principals (Williams & Welsh, 2017; Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017). School leadership is explicitly acknowledged as a valid target of educational-

improvement activities across the titles in ESSA; in many areas of the act where school leadership is not explicitly called out, states and districts could still choose to support leadership-focused activities in pursuit of school improvement objectives (Williams & Welsh, 2017).

Local and state funding for developing principals has been limited or focusing on updating leadership on initiatives which can then be shared with teachers (Williams & Welsh, 2017). To meet the same level of focus as ESSA on leadership and principals, states and local agencies need additional funding as well as an agreement that there is a need for this training (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017; Williams & Welsh, 2017). The federal government providing funding through Title I and Title II funds, there is less burden on state and local agencies to divert funds from their own funds for leadership improvement. As a social justice issue, ESSA addresses social inequalities, such as rural poverty, which leave the most challenged schools with the least prepared leaders. ESSA may have the ability to lend support through training of leadership to support the most neglected student populations (Williams and Welsh 2017).

Recommendations for future research. The researcher utilized a reflexive journal during the research process and analytic process. As the researcher is also a rural elementary principal in Western or Central New York, the journal was an opportunity to bracket out personal reflections and experiences of own perceptions of isolation. During the reflexive journaling, the researcher found connections to the participants which were bracketed out. Using the transcendental phenomenological analysis was appropriate to the study for exactly this reason. Future researchers who are rural principals should consider using this approach, however researchers who do not fit the description required

for participants in this study might consider a different phenomenological approach. A quantitative approach, using surveys and other qualitative measures are recommended also to further explore this very important topic.

Further research is needed to explore how social media connections can support school leadership and practice of rural elementary principals. The research might consider how key ideas are shared and the impact on principal practice, permeation into staff practice, and finally connections to student outcomes. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic forced all students to be taught virtually in March of 2020 and leaders to lead virtually, there is evidence that virtual social connectedness is a new reality for urban, suburban, and rural principals.

Finally, research should be conducted regarding the relationships of rural elementary principals and their superintendents. Each participant in this study mentioned their relationship with their superintendent and how this impacted their own sense of isolation. Whether the perception of relationships with their superintendent is unique to rural elementary principals or all elementary principals could be an important topic for current and future superintendents to be aware of.

Conclusions

A rural elementary principal's job is demanding and very complex as they are expected to provide leadership while executing a wide variety of managerial and instructional responsibilities. A rural principal has the same isolating conditions of an urban or suburban principal, but also the geographic isolation due to being rural. Literature related to the perceptions of isolation of rural principals is sparse. The topic of professional and social isolation of principals draws conclusions largely from the

research of teacher isolation literature and does not address specifically rural principals. It is important to identify rural school challenges to understand why rural principals leave their positions, what challenges rural principals face, and perceptions of rural principals relative to isolation so districts know how to support rural principals, policies can reflect the needs of rural principals, and rural principals as executive leaders can improve their own practices. This phenomenological qualitative research study explored the rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceptions of isolation by answering one research question: in what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation?

This phenomenological study used a transcendental approach. A transcendental-phenomenological study seeks to describe the experiences of participants who have shared a common experience or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenology approach utilizes the notion of epoche, or the idea that the researcher will examine the phenomenon while setting aside preconceived understandings and judgements of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). By using a transcendental phenomenology approach, it was possible to expose the essence of the phenomenon of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation. Participants in the study were selected using a purposeful sample in the spring of 2020. Using an interview protocol of open-ended questions during one-on-one interviews where the essences of the lived experiences of rural principal isolation as understood by the participants was collected. Coding and analysis using the transcendental phenomenological approach described by Moustakas (1994) was conducted which resulted in themes among the five participants. The development of these themes was influential in recognizing perceptions that are

considered essential to understanding the phenomenon of rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation. The themes were: distance divides, power of networks, outsider syndrome, relationships are the foundation, wearing many hats, and building know how. The themes and the participants invariant-constituents were used to develop critical descriptions of the phenomenon.

An individual textural description of each theme was constructed for each participant as suggested by transcendental phenomenological analysis. A composite textural description was written through synthesizing all five participants individual textural descriptions of the theme. Finally, the composite description of all themes represents the essences of the phenomenon of rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceptions of isolation.

This study found that rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York do experience a sense of isolation due to being distanced from resources, being the only administrator in their building, and isolated from peer networks. However, the principals highly value the relationships they build with students, staff, and families. When they are unable to be part of scheduled regional networking opportunities, such as BOCES principal meetings, some principals were motivated to create their own networks. An unexpected finding was the relationship between the rural principal and their superintendent impacted the principal's sense of isolation and further research into the relationship of rural superintendents and their elementary principals was strongly recommended.

The responsibilities of principals as instructional leaders and the impact on student outcomes has found that leaders who are perceived as instructional resources gain

respect from their staff members and are viewed by staff as instructional experts. The rural principals in this study considered their most important job was to be an instructional leader, however staff were often opposed to the changes in instructional practice the principal was suggesting. There was a sense of “we have always done it that way” reported by the principals as the reason staff were resistant to change.

Recommendations included building strong peer networks for the rural elementary principal to collaborate with and help prevent decision making in a silo. Networks can be formal such as regional BOCES principal meetings or less formal such as Twitter and Voxer groups. Further recommendations including taking advantage of federal policy, ESSA, which for the first time includes specific funding for principal professional development and growth. Often this funding is used to train principals in mandates, rather than instructional and leadership practices.

It was suggested that two areas of further research should be considered. First, the relationship of the rural elementary principal and the superintendent garners research based on the perceptions reported by this group of principals. It appears these principals had feelings of isolation which were partly dependent on their relationship and support of their superintendent. The second area of research is whether principals who taught in the district prior to becoming an administrator have the same perception of being an outsider than those who came from other districts.

Finally, the researcher used the lens of Deci and Ryan’s (2018) relationship motivation theory, RMT, to explore the perceptions of isolation as a rural elementary principal in Western and Central New York. Using RMT highlighted the areas of autonomy, relatedness, and competence with an emphasis on the relatedness. The

principals in this study contributed most of their isolation when it came to relationships, rather the lack of relationships. For example, relationships with students was highly valued and considered the bigger purpose of the principal. Where the relationships with superintendents and staff members created a sense of social isolation and the lack of peer interactions created a sense of professional isolation. The concept of relationships being a human need and that rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York feel a void in relationships daily and for long working hours is a concern for their own physical and mental health. This study highlights the need for more research and solutions to alleviate these voids.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol and Questions

Introduction of Study

- Clarify my role as researcher
- Provide overview of IRB protocols and policies
- Frame purpose of the study
- Obtain signatures

Research Questions:

- In what way do rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation?

Interview Questions

This interview is being conducted to gain an understanding of the rural elementary principals' perceptions of isolation. The interview questions are meant to get an understanding of your lived experiences. The questions that will be asked during the interview follow.

Leadership:

How did you come into your current position?

Why do you stay?

Prompt: community, relationships, needed, belonging

Rural:

What are the challenges you face?

What are opportunities?

Prompt: community, resources, capacity, distance, resources

Isolation:

Have you experienced feelings of isolation as a principal?

Please describe?

Prompt: lonely, sad, emotionally, physically, mentally, professionally

In what way is isolation related to being a rural principal?

Prompt: distance, travel, collaboration, communication

How do you address isolation?

What strategies/supports helped you over-come those challenges?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B

Email Transcript for Potential Participants

Dear [*insert name*],

My name is Bonnie Cazer and I am a doctoral candidate in the Doctoral of Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about rural elementary principal's perceptions of isolation. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a rural elementary principal with at least two years' experience in Western or Central New York. I obtained your contact information from [*describe source*].

If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in a one-on-one interview using a high-quality video conferencing platform, such as Zoom or GoToMeeting, at a date and time of your convenience. The interview will be between 45 and 60 minutes long. I will be using an audio recording device to capture our conversation.

This is completely voluntary. You can choose to participate in the study or not. If you would like to participate or have any questions regarding this study, please contact me at either blc09185@sjfc.edu or (585) 474-7075.

Thank you for your consideration,

Bonnie Cazer

Appendix C

Statement of Informed Consent



St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

A Phenomenological Study of Rural Elementary Principals in Western and Central New York Perceptions of Isolation

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

You are being asked to be in a research study of rural elementary principals and their perceptions of isolation. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.

- The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of rural elementary principals lived experience of isolation. Specifically, to determine in what ways rural elementary principals in Western and Central New York perceive isolation.
- Approximately 3 to 10 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for a doctoral dissertation in the St. John Fisher College Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for approximately one hour for a one-on-one interview.
- If you choose to participate, you will be contacted by email to schedule an interview at a time and date that is convenient for you. You will engage in a one-on-one interview that will last approximately one hour via a high-quality video conferencing platform such as Zoom or GoToMeeting.
- There may be risk or discomfort you feel as a result of study procedures. The interview questions include recalling any incidences of isolation or loneliness, which may cause emotional distress.
- Your participation in this study may help inform professional development for school leaders, principal preparatory programs, and other school employees. This research could also be used to develop a school or district level wellness program.

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):

You are being asked to be in a research study of rural elementary principal's perceptions of isolation. This study is being conducted at a mutually agreed upon date and time for each participant using a high-quality video conferencing platform such as Zoom or GoToMeeting. This study is being conducted by Bonnie Cazer, supervised by Dr. Theresa Pulos and committee member Dr. Katharine Rumrill-Teece in the Doctorate of Executive Leadership program at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are an elementary rural principal in Western or Central New York with at least two years' experience. Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

Schedule a one-on-one interview with the researcher at a date and time that is convenient to you. For an on-line interview using Zoom or GoToMeeting. This interview will take approximately one hour.

Interviews will take place between April 2020 and May 2020.

Audio recording will be used, you will have the choice to agree to the recording at the end of this form. Recording and transcription is required for participation in this study.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will not receive compensation/incentive.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included. Neither names nor any other identifying information will be presented in the written analysis of the interviews. Written transcriptions will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home for 3 years after the successful defense of the dissertation and then shredded. The electronic format of interview sessions will be password protected and stored on an external hard drive in the researcher's home which will be locked in cabinet. The external drive will be erased 3 years after the successful defense of the dissertation.

The researcher will have access to the recording of the interviews. Any identifying information will be kept anonymous and solely for the purpose of including demographic information of participants in the study. All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding, and/or deleting after 3 years.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John Fisher College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:

The researchers conducting this study is Bonnie Cazer. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher at (585) 474-7075 or email blc09185@SJFC.edu. The researcher’s advisor is Dr. Theresa Pulos, tpulos@sjfc.edu

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu.

Because participation in this study has potential to cause emotional distress, please seek out appropriate healthcare or an appropriate mental health agency.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date:

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date:

Retain this section only if applicable:

I agree to be audio recorded/ transcribed _____ Yes _____ No If no, I understand that the researcher will [explain alternative to audio recording, if any. If no alternative, state this clearly].

I agree to be video recorded/ transcribed _____ Yes _____ No If I do not wish to be videotaped, I will inform the researcher, who will instead [explain alternative to video recording, if any. If no alternative, state this clearly].

Signature: _____ Date:

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date:

Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.