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Contents

Notes from the Editors	iv
Dana M. Griggs and Christopher M. Parfitt	
School Principals Supporting Working Conditions Domains in Rural Schools for Student Success	84
Sheila D. Moore, <i>University of Central Florida</i> Larry J. Walker, <i>University of Central Florida</i>	
Coming Together to Take the First Step: Preparing Trauma-Informed Educational Leaders and Teachers	106
Aneta H. Walker, <i>University of West Florida</i> Susan Densmore-James, <i>University of West Florida</i>	
Research-Based Strategies for Leading Successful High-Poverty Rural High Schools	117
William A. Bergeron, <i>University of Alabama</i> Ellen Reames, <i>Auburn University</i> Yvette P. Bynum, <i>University of Alabama</i> Angela Adair, <i>Auburn University</i>	
MiSTERing in the Main Office: Leading Change at Scale	138
Reginald D. Wilkerson, <i>Clemson University</i>	
Using a Framework to Review and Evaluate Educational Technology Resources	155
Geoffrey B. Hawthorne, <i>East Carolina University</i> Daniel A. Novey, <i>East Carolina University</i> Travis Lewis, <i>East Carolina University</i>	

Notes from the Editors

Principals have taken on new roles as they have traversed the pandemic and remote learning. They have had to operate under multiple layers of uncertainty, while oftentimes assuming the blame for circumstances beyond their control. Many principals have found it difficult to leave work, both physically and mentally, at the end of each day.

Appropriately, this issue of the *Southeast Journal on Educational Administration* is designed to provide resources and ideas to help principals restore and improve working conditions in their schools. The prevalent theme found throughout the articles is leadership for rural and/or high poverty schools. While this issue spotlights principals, it is also relevant to those who support principals in all our schools.

A special thank you to all of the peer reviewers who took the time to evaluate and provide feedback to the authors for this issue.

In the first article of this issue of SJEA, Sheila Moore and Larry Walker build the case for the importance of working conditions on student success and teacher recruitment and retention. They examine the role of the leader as related to school working conditions and advise rural school leaders to purposefully develop and maintain them. The authors explore frameworks and characteristics specific to rural education and provide insight to thwarting the issue of losing rural teachers by providing more supportive working conditions.

Authors Aneta Walker and Susan Densmore-James looked at the need to include in their university courses experiences to deepen the understanding and empathy toward children and their families who are living in poverty. After studying poverty simulations for 100 students across disciplines at their university, the researchers reported that educators, both teachers and school leaders, must have a comprehensive understanding of the daily concerns surrounding living in poverty to develop empathetic attitudes toward students and families experiencing poverty and to work towards advocacy for them in their classrooms, schools, and the community. The study was grounded in the Missouri Community Action Network (CAN) Simulation, which requires participants to role-play the lives of a variety of low-income families on a fixed income with children or grandchildren who may have disabilities or medical conditions.

William Bergeron, Ellen Reames, Yvette Bynum, and Angela Adair presented the research-based strategies that leaders in rural schools can effectively use to foster student success. The authors identified the plans, programs, and support systems that were put into place by the rural schools in this study to provide the necessary support to ensure their students received a quality education. This article is part two of a three-part research study. In part one research was conducted to identify the challenges these high-minority and high-poverty rural schools faced, so the school officials could effectively develop a purposeful plan to ensure all students received a quality education. Part three attempted to identify any differences in challenges and solutions that existed between the types of rural schools studied.

Reginald D. Wilkerson sought to understand how the alumni of the Call Me MiSTER program, which for twenty years has worked to increase the number of African American Males as K-8 public teachers, are now moving into the role of school principal. The research focuses on the dispositions, skills, and principles that Call Me MiSTER develop in their teacher candidates that were transmitted to their school leadership roles. The Call Me MiSTER (Mentors Instructing Students Towards Effective Role Models) program that originally sought to diversify the teaching profession to include more African American males in one southeastern state has grown across the United States. Wilkerson used a qualitative phenomenological research design for his study.

In the final article of this issue, Geoffrey Hawthorne, Daniel Novey, and Travis Lewis reported on a mixed-method, action research on technology usage. A school district's use of educational technology, the effectiveness of each product, and the overall product quality were reviewed. The authors advocate for the use of a new structured process of technology review.

As the authors in this issue demonstrated, context matters when it comes to interpreting research. As intended by the editorial review board, the *Southeast Journal of Educational Administration* serves to provide a forum for professors, graduates students, and educational leaders to exchange scholarly ideas and foster practical research.

Sincerely,

Dana M. Griggs Christopher M. Parfitt
Editors, *Southeast Journal of Educational Administration*

School Principals Supporting Working Conditions Domains in Rural Schools for Student Success

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Abstract

Successful schools in the 21st century must have effective principals for sustained student success. School leaders create working conditions, which impact student outcomes and teacher satisfaction. Through this study, we examined school leaders' roles in developing and maintaining working conditions in rural schools and the factors perceived as facilitating and hindering working conditions. Data were collected from the Teacher Empowerment Leading and Learning Survey and a demographic survey. Through the findings from this study, we highlight the principals' role in the working conditions domains of time, instructional leadership, teacher empowerment, professional development, and facilities and resources. Also, principals in rural schools identified lack of technology as a barrier and it can be concluded from the data that most principals in northern Florida rural schools are female and White.

Keywords: rural principal leadership, rural schools, school-working conditions, student achievement

School Principals Supporting Working Conditions Domains in Rural Schools for Student Success

Effective school principals who focus on student success and teacher support create successful schools. Principals ensure that students are meeting academic outcomes, which has major implications for maintaining effective working conditions in schools. School leaders make sure teachers provide expert instruction and meet the needs of students. Administrators have an obligation to create conditions that lead to student success, and this should include realizing teachers have a significant impact on student achievement (Thornton, 2014; Yost, 2012). For teachers to be successful in the classroom, they need working conditions that will improve instruction (Grissom et al., 2011). For example, school leaders support teacher working conditions by advocating for more resources to improve instruction, student achievement, and organizational conditions (Berry, et al., 2009). Other ways school leaders may support teachers include mentoring, induction programs, and professional development activities. Glover (2017) found that school leaders who pay attention to school culture and climate, particularly behavior policies that focus on student learning, and working conditions lead to improved instruction and student achievement.

School principals ensure a school is successful. Principal leadership is believed to be the second most influential academic factor that impacts student performance after classroom instruction (Leithwood, et al., 2004; Lochmiller, et al., 2017; Waldron, et al., 2011). In research dating back to the 1970s, scholars have shown school improvement is linked to effective leadership by the principal (Elliott & Clifford, 2014). A principal's leadership can foster or hinder a school's success based on the support provided to the teachers (Elliott & Clifford, 2014). Without a powerful leader, troubled schools are unlikely to be turned around. The school leader sets the tone for the entire school, including the morale of the teachers, working conditions, and the overall level of professionalism within the school. The focus of a school's mission and the principal's vision should foster a healthy learning environment that provides quality learning for all students. Therefore, issues relating to working conditions have become important to researchers studying how school principals impact instruction and achievement (Berry et al., 2009).

School Working Conditions

School working conditions are often defined as those elements of teachers' workplaces unrelated to their pay or benefits (Johnson, 2006; Ladd, 2011). These working conditions reflect a variety of aspects of schools, including their physical environments; organizational patterns of authority, supervision, and interaction among employees; employees' characteristics, roles, and statuses; the sense of equity and voice among faculty; the strength and supportiveness of the school culture; teachers' opportunities for learning and growth; and educational aspects of schools such as curricula and assessments (Johnson, 1990, 2006). Compared to pay or benefits, policy interventionists tend to favor school working conditions and thus influence teacher delivery (Grissom, 2011).

Also, Hirsch et al. (2007) noted, working conditions can be defined as conditions in schools in the major areas of time, facilities and resources, teacher empowerment, leadership,

and professional development. Factors related to these five domains create a general climate of professional working conditions within a school setting. For example, teachers desire leadership from the school principal, which is one key factor related to positive working conditions. To understand working conditions, school districts are searching for research-based studies to determine exactly what elements best describe working conditions (Carlson, 2014; Hirsch, et al., 2009). In Carlson's (2014) study, working conditions were viewed as administrative leadership and support, school environment, teacher collaboration, work assignment, accountability, and work rewards. Furthermore, Burkhauser (2016) suggested that school working conditions are perceived as administrative support, student behavior, decision-making roles, and parental support.

Understanding working conditions can reveal areas in which schools need to improve. Swanlund (2011) identified working conditions components that fell within the domains of time; facilities and resources; teacher empowerment; leadership; and professional development. Knowing that working conditions and teacher satisfaction are related to student outcomes makes it essential that principals focus on creating and maintaining systems of support for each domain. However, there is a gap in the literature about what school leaders do to support working conditions.

Frameworks for Understanding School Working Conditions

Several major frameworks have defined and characterized the elements of school working conditions. Overall, these frameworks agree on the elements of school working conditions, but group these elements differently, emphasizing different aspects of the working conditions faced by teachers. Johnson (1990), for example, developed a broad model of the workplace based on the accounts of workers in various fields and framed workplaces as having physical, organizational, sociological, political, cultural, psychological, and economic dimensions. The model was revised with a greater focus on school working conditions, such as curricula and assessments expanded the framework into a detailed list of the elements of school-working conditions, including teaching assignments, collaborative work with colleagues, and principal leadership (Johnson, 2006).

Another way of looking at school-working conditions focuses on school climate, which refers to the overall quality of school life (Cohen et al., 2009). School climate research is undergirded in the four characteristics of schools: safety, the relationships within the school, the teaching and learning that take place there, and the external school environment (Cohen et al., 2009). School climate is an approach to school-working conditions that distinctively emphasizes the socio-emotional nature of school life, as well as how collaboration influences the working environments of schools.

Another widely used school-working conditions framework emphasizes the professional community of schools (Kruse et al., 2001). This framework focuses on teacher learning and development and school community support for teachers. According to this framework, professional school communities share five core characteristics: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, focus on student learning, and collaboration

emphasizes the areas that enable teachers' collaborative work as professionals and teacher empowerment (Kruse et al., 1995).

Other views of school-working conditions focus on the conditions necessary for school improvement. Bryk et al. (2010) presented a view of school working conditions that focused on examining the factors that make schools successful. Their framework centers on five organizational subsystems to school improvement: school leadership, parent-community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance (Bryk et al., 2010). These subsystems overlap considerably with other frameworks for school-working conditions, particularly professional capacity, which directly influence teachers' work within schools. Professional capacity refers to "the efficacy of a school's performance feedback and individual professional development programs" and "a staff's capacity to form as a viable collective that shares responsibility for student learning and supports one another in continuous improvement" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 54). In this framework, school principals are seen as catalysts of school improvement to "inspire teachers, parents, school community leaders, and students around a common vision of reform" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 63) and examine ways that school working conditions help or hinder school reform efforts in all school district settings. Schools across the country are extremely diverse and have many different characteristics. The characteristics of the schools are influenced by the community, the school leaders, teachers, and students. Furthermore, with a focus on testing and accountability, urban, rural, and suburban schools are all seeking ways to improve the quality of education for their students. Also, these schools face similar challenges of equity, access, and the achievement gap among students from different ethnic backgrounds. Particularly, White students outperform African American and Latino students in reading and math, and poverty rates are significantly higher for these populations in urban and rural schools.

Bryk et al. (2010) presented a view of school working conditions that focused on improving urban schools and the factors that make them successful. Several studies have highlighted the importance of teacher working conditions amplified by the teacher attrition problems plaguing chronically hard-to-staff urban schools (Kraft et al., 2015; Swanlund, 2011). Furthermore, the research is plentiful on strategies designed to address high-poverty low achieving schools, teacher attrition, and other reform efforts in urban schools (Coloma, 2020). However, there is a gap in the literature on how rural schools address similar challenges as their urban and suburban counterparts.

Rural Schools

Rural is not the same as urban. While both settings share basic common systems and structures, they are indeed different. Challenges within rural communities include limited accessibility to services and amenities (Hanushek, 2007). While both urban and rural communities provide services to their citizens, rural communities have limited choices when it comes to selecting personal services such as medical providers, quality grocery shopping, and entertainment. Some teachers associate these factors with quality of life, thus making it difficult to transition to rural areas (Hayes, 2009). For rural schools to keep their teachers, it is imperative that they can navigate, understand, and enjoy rural communities. For teachers unaccustomed to rural living, this can contribute to challenges. While rural communities across the United States

vary in size, demographics, and resources, they share a common characteristic of an aging population.

Rural schools are important to the vivacity of the communities they serve, and as noted by Hobarat et al. (2009), the relationship between rural schools and communities is intertwined and complex. With over 17% of the student population throughout the nation residing in rural areas, it is difficult to ignore the challenges that plague our rural schools, including teacher retention and attrition, and academic performance (Walker et al., 2019).

After examining recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas, Monk (2007) listed characteristics of rural communities including small size, sparse settlement, distance from population concentrations, and economic reliance on agricultural industries that are increasingly using seasonal and immigrant workers to minimize labor costs. However, teacher turnover is a factor, and identifying new teachers can be challenging for rural schools. Monk (2007) reported rural schools have a lack of highly trained teachers. In addition, as indicated in data from the United States Department of Education's Schools and Staffing Survey (2018), only 45% of high school graduates from rural schools attended four-year colleges immediately after graduating from high school, compared to 49% of urban high school graduates and 52% of suburban high school graduates. Even with the inclusion of two-year college attendance, the survey results indicate that on-time college-going rates of rural high school graduates fell short of their urban and suburban counterparts (Showalter et al., 2017).

Working Conditions in Rural Schools

Hirsch et al. (2007) noted working conditions can be defined as conditions in schools in the major areas of time, facilities and resources, teacher empowerment, leadership, and professional development. Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (2007) reported working conditions are related to contractual obligations as agreed to by the local teachers' association and the local school district, "Surveys of teachers have long shown that working conditions play a major role in decisions to move schools or leave the profession" (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 11). Salary and professional development have been identified as working conditions that have the most impact on the likelihood of teachers staying or leaving rural schools (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Glover, 2017; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2011).

Many challenges exist in combating high teacher attrition rates in rural areas. According to existing research, rural schools are facing difficulty retaining highly qualified teachers (Guha, et al., 2017; Kaden et al., 2016). There is difficulty when schools lose their teachers to migration or retirement; it not only affects staffing problems but also school climate and student achievement (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). This issue is true for rural schools that lack the ability to offer competitive wages, maintain a positive school climate, or provide relevant sustained professional development. Schools that can offer competitive salaries, quality and differentiated professional development, support, and ongoing mentorship for new educators are better able to retain their teachers.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it attempts to identify school leaders' roles in developing and maintaining working conditions in North Florida rural schools. Second, in the study, we attempt to ascertain factors rural school leaders perceive as hindering working conditions. Specifically, in the study, we will focus on unveiling how school leaders in the role of the principal address teacher working conditions in elementary and middle rural schools. There is a gap in the literature supporting the principal's role and the effect their role can have on teachers working conditions in rural schools in North Florida.

Significance of the Study

Through the findings of this study, we will contribute to a deeper understanding of how rural school leaders are maintaining working conditions, which are critical to teacher satisfaction. While several states in the southeastern United States have conducted studies on teacher working conditions (Guha et al., 2017; Kaden et al., 2016; Malloy, 2007), greater insight is needed focusing on the problems rural school principals encountered creating conditions that are conducive to teacher and student success.

The results of this study will provide insight into how rural school principals can influence the building's climate, day-to-day operations, and long-term strategic planning (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Norton & Bird, 2017). Although much of the literature supports the significance of improving working conditions, it is not as focused on how principals respond to teacher working conditions that impact teaching and student outcomes. Therefore, through this study, we will provide insight into how principals assess and address working conditions in their schools.

By acknowledging and understanding the issues of teacher working conditions in rural schools, leaders, policymakers, and change agents who serve these local communities can better develop systems and practices that are designed to improve student performance and keep teachers in our rural schools. Through this study, we will also provide insight into how principals can better understand teachers' need for improved working conditions.

Research Questions

To understand the rural school leader's role in creating and maintaining teacher working conditions in rural schools, two questions guided the study:

1. How do rural school leaders identify their roles in addressing teacher working conditions?
2. What are the factors school leaders in rural school districts perceive as barriers to improving working conditions?

Methodology

A mixed methods approach consisting of a correlational research design and an open-ended qualitative question was employed to investigate the school leaders' role in initiating and

supporting working conditions in rural schools that are most important in creating a positive working and learning environment. This method of research was appropriate to examine the relationships between independent and dependent variables (Creswell, 2012). The Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) survey instrument was used to address research question one: How do rural school leaders identify their roles in addressing teacher working conditions? An open-ended qualitative question was used to address research question two: What are the factors school leaders in rural school districts perceive as barriers to improving working conditions? Lastly, a researcher design demographic survey was used to collect demographic data.

Selection of Participants

The population for this study was school leaders in rural northern Florida schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), rural counties encompass all populations existing outside urban clusters (2,500–50,000 people) or urbanized areas (50,000 or more people); and rural schools are identified as fewer than 600 students. In addition, the site of the study was a school district in a county with a population density of under 10 people per square mile. The Florida Department of Education’s School Accountability Report, Panhandle Educational Consortium, and the North East Florida Educational Consortium were utilized to identify 29 rural school districts that stretched between Escambia and Duval counties. In the State of Florida, 35 school districts out of the 74 are rural schools. For the purpose of this study, 117 rural elementary and middle school principals were identified from the 35 rural school districts identified. There were 51 principals who participated in the research yielding a 44% response rate.

Instruments

This study utilized three tools: a demographic survey by the researcher, the Teacher Empowerment Leading Learning survey (TELL), and an open-ended question developed by the researchers. The Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) survey originated from the Governor’s Teacher Working Conditions Initiative in North Carolina (2002–2009). The TELL survey focuses on the following areas: beginning teacher support time, empowerment, leadership, decision-making, facilities, and resources. Survey responses related were scored using Likert scale ratings ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) *strongly agree* (4), and *don’t know*. A researcher-developed demographic survey was used to capture age, gender identity, ethnicity, and years-of-experience, among the study sample, and an open-ended qualitative question was developed to capture themes and patterns.

Data Collection

Study data were collected by way of the Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) survey, open-ended qualitative questions, and a researcher-designed demographic survey. The TELL Survey was an open survey. Therefore, there was no need to seek permission. Approval to conduct research was acquired through the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Then, using the School Accountability Report, a composited electronic list of all rural schools in northern Florida was utilized. Thereafter, an internet search for each school was completed, and

the e-mail address of each principal was acquired and compiled into a password-protected electronic file. Next, an electronic version of the TELL Survey, demographic survey, and the open-ended question was composited into a single electronic questionnaire to disseminate to identified principals and assistant principals in rural Florida. An e-mail was sent to all identified principals in rural Florida introducing the intent of the research and that a subsequent e-mail would follow within seven days requesting permission to participate in the survey. Each principal was notified that information would be kept confidential according to the IRB policies and procedures and that no self-identifying information would be needed or recorded. Also, each potential participant was notified to close the browser if they declined to participate. Submitting the survey indicated consent for participation in the study. Subsequently, within seven days the survey was disseminated electronically to 117 principals from rural schools in Florida. At the end of the 60-day period, and three attempts to retrieve maximum input, a total of 51 principals completed the survey, yielding a 44% response rate.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine demographic data: age, gender identity, years-of-experience among the study sample. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the data collected from principals. The study was descriptive, investigating the role of principals in initiating and implementing teachers working conditions. Descriptive studies, through their exploratory nature, provide the opportunity to increase the understanding of developments in the field of education. Inferential studies provide analyses that may assist in predicting results across an entire population based upon data gathered from a certain sample (Howell, 2002).

The TELL was used to identify key factors of working conditions as they relate to the school leaders' perceptions of their roles in initiating working conditions. The dependent variables were principal and assistant principal responses, and the independent variables were the key leadership roles: working conditions in the areas of use of time, facilities and resources, empowerment, and professional development.

Qualitative data obtained from the open-ended question were analyzed using the constant comparison method. Patton (2014) referred to two key sources in the organization of data: the questions that were generated during the conceptual phase of the study and analysis, insights, and interpretation that emerged through data collection. Patton (2014) described this procedure as the creative process of discovering patterns, themes, and categories that capture the primary meaning of the data.

Results

Demographic Data

Participants whose ages ranged from 30 to 35 was 7% ($n=4$), ages 36 to 44 was 28% ($n=14$), ages 45 to 55 was 49% ($n=25$), ages 56 to 75 was 16% ($n=8$), and 0 participants for ages 75 and older. Over 92% ($n=47$) of the participants were older than 35 years of age. For this study 64% ($n=33$) of all participants were female, and 36% ($n=18$) were male. Also, 89% ($n=45$) of participants identified as White or Caucasian and 11% ($n=7$) identified as Black or African

American. We can conclude from the data that most principals in northern Florida rural schools are female and White. Furthermore, 23% ($n=12$) of the participants had 1 to 5 years of experience as a principal, 24% ($n=12$) were 6 to 10 years of experience, 30% ($n=15$) of the participants reported 11 to 15 years of experience and lastly, 23% ($n=12$) had more than 15 years of experience as a principal. Demographic data are shown in Figures 1-4.

Figure 1
Age of Participants

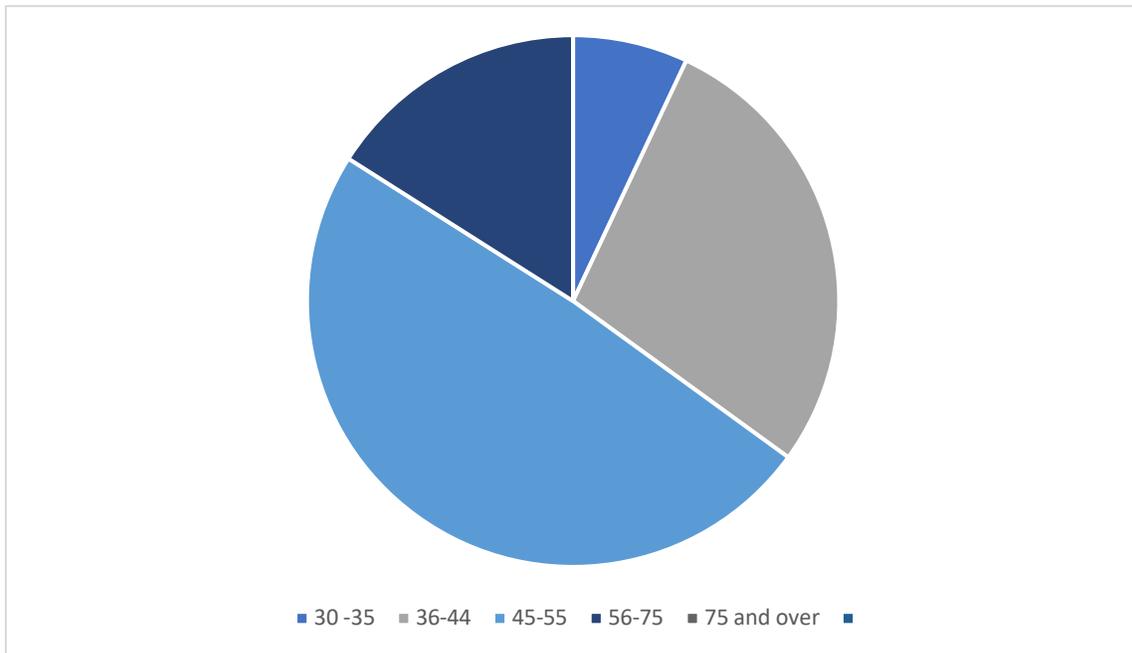


Figure 2
Gender

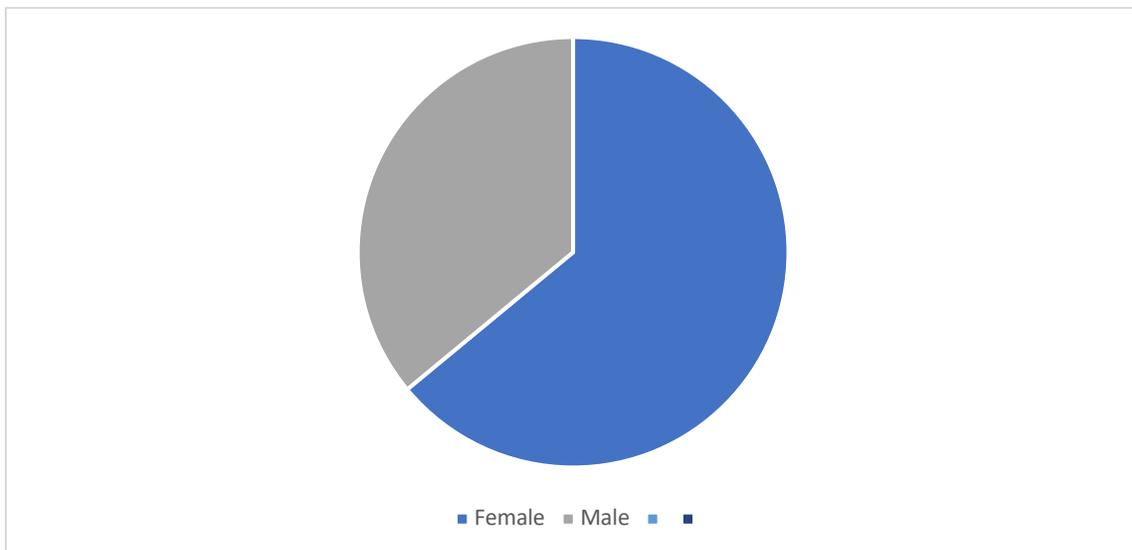


Figure 3
Ethnicity

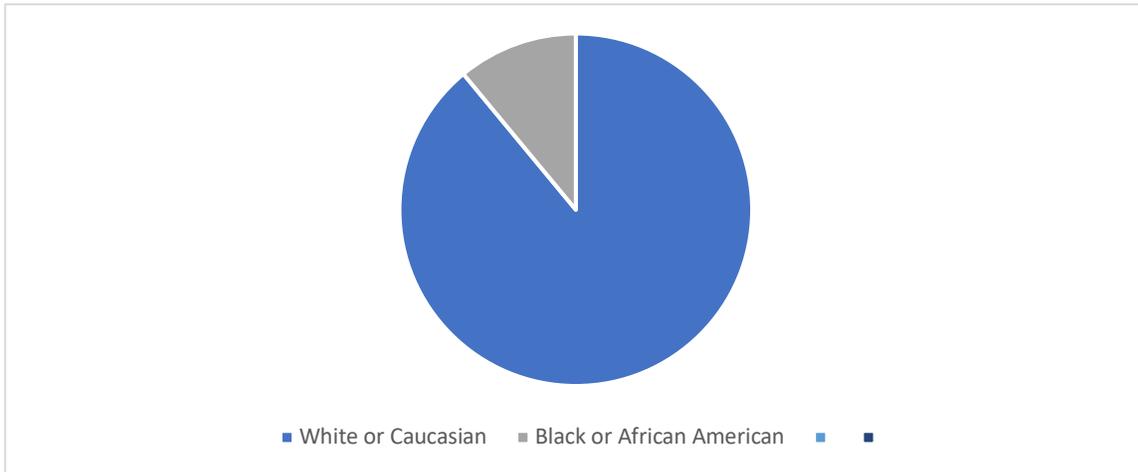
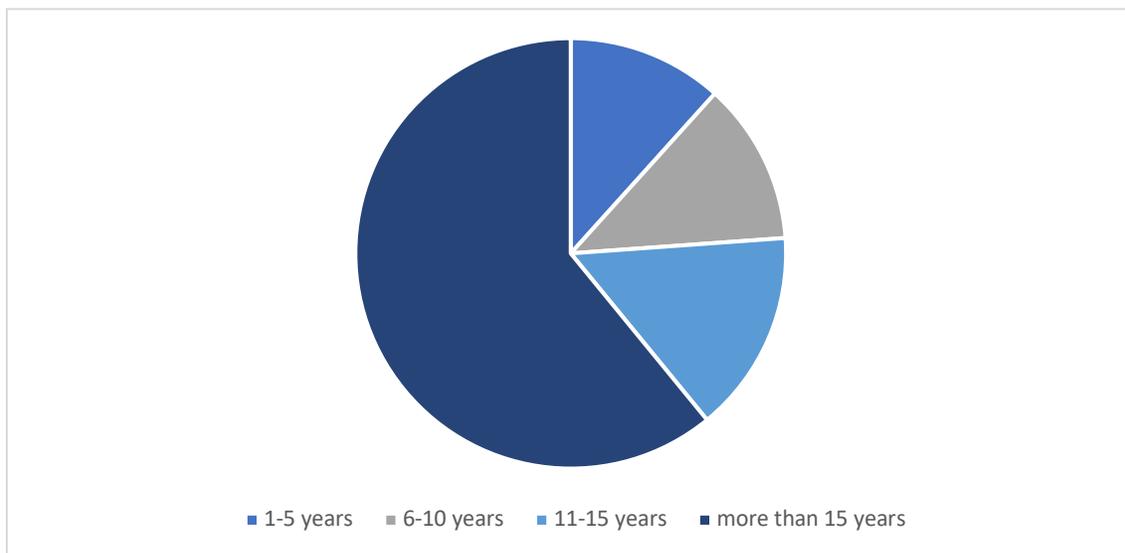


Figure 4
Experience



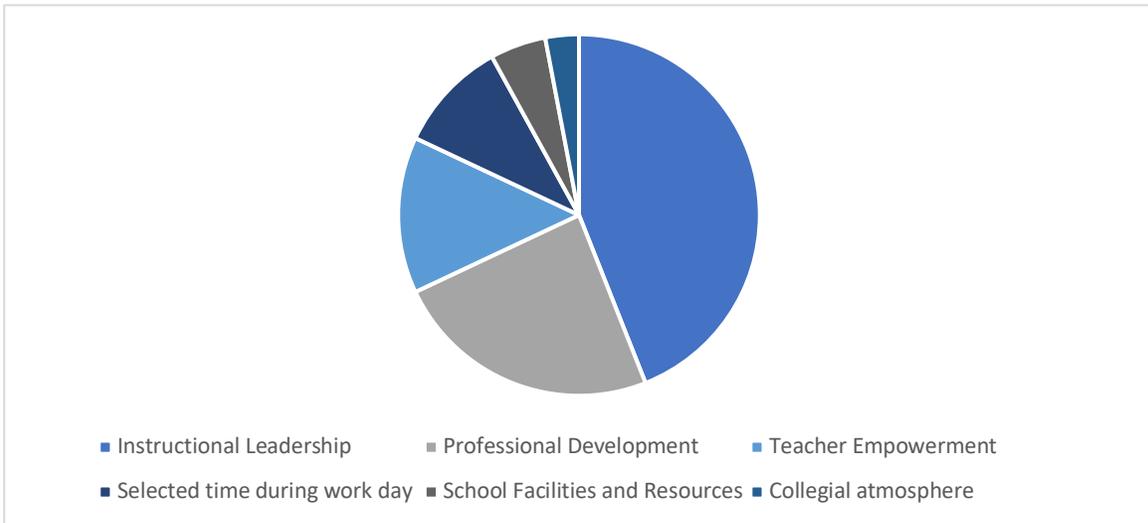
Results of Teacher Empowerment Leading and Learning Survey

The TELL was used to answer research question one: How do rural school leaders identify their roles in addressing teacher working conditions? Principal responses identified key factors of working conditions as they relate to the principal’s role in implementing working conditions in rural north Florida schools. The key leadership factors: working conditions in the areas of use of time, facilities and resources, empowerment, and professional development were explored.

Important Aspects of Working Conditions

As shown in Figure 5, important aspects of working conditions highlight what school principals believe is the most important aspect of working conditions for teachers that promotes student learning. From the data, 10% selected time during the workday, 5% of school facilities and resources, 44% of instructional leadership, 14% of teacher empowerment, 24% of professional development, and 3% of the collegial atmosphere.

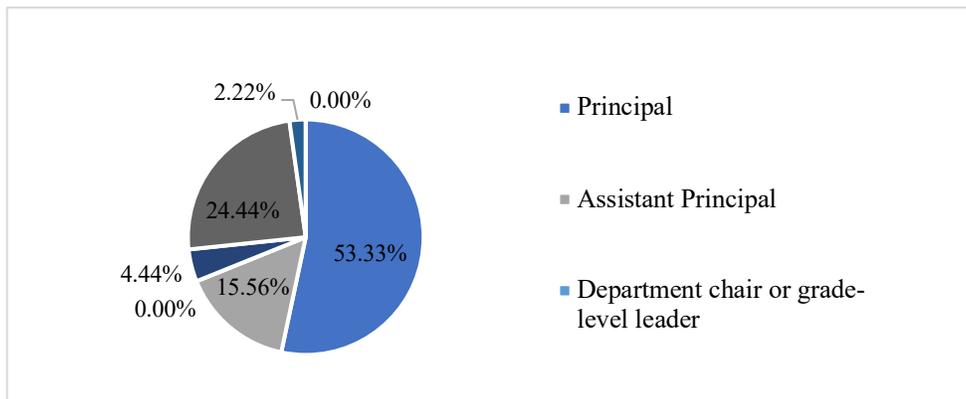
Figure 5
Important Aspect of the Working Conditions



Instructional Leadership

As reflected in Figure 6, the data for the best position that describes the person who is most responsible for providing instructional leadership in the school. Of the participants, 53% said the principal, 16% said the assistant principal, 2% said department chair or grade level chair, 4% selected director of curriculum and instruction, and 2% selected other.

Figure 6
Instructional Leadership Responsibility

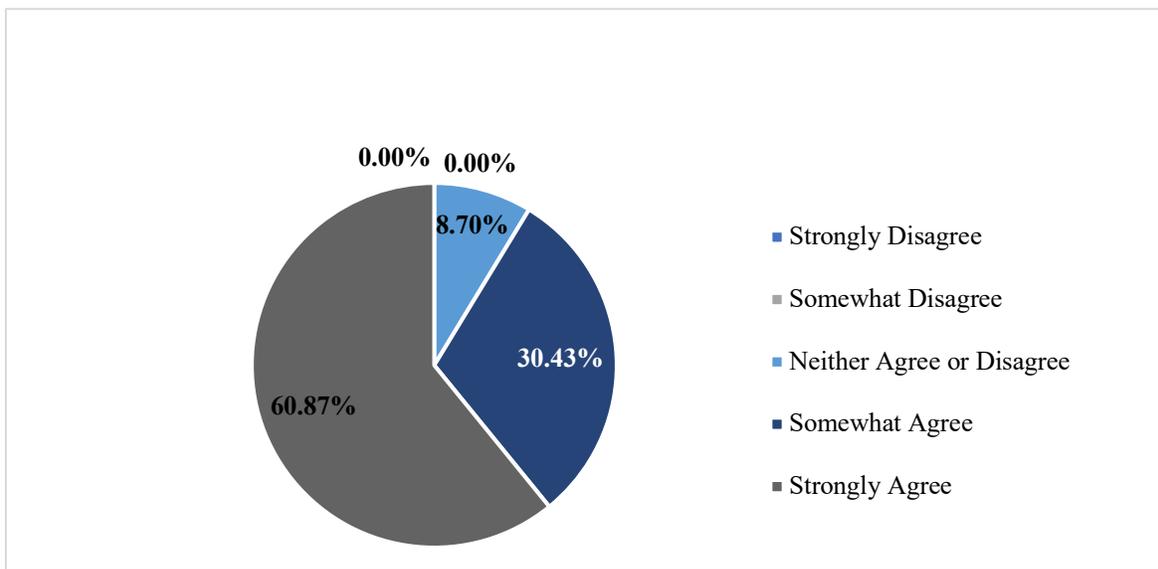


Professional Development

As reflected in Figure 7, the data that describe how strongly participants agree or disagree with the following statements about professional development in their school. Based on the findings, 85% agree enhancing teacher knowledge and skills receives a priority as the most important strategy to improve student achievement, 83% believe teachers in my school are provided opportunities to learn from one another, 82% of teachers in my school have time to plan with their colleagues during the school day, 83% of teachers receive sufficient resources and administrative support is available to allow teachers to take advantage of professional development activities, 87% confirmed professional development activities at my school are based on state or national standards, and 88% of teachers are encouraged to take advantage of professional development opportunities offered by the local school district.

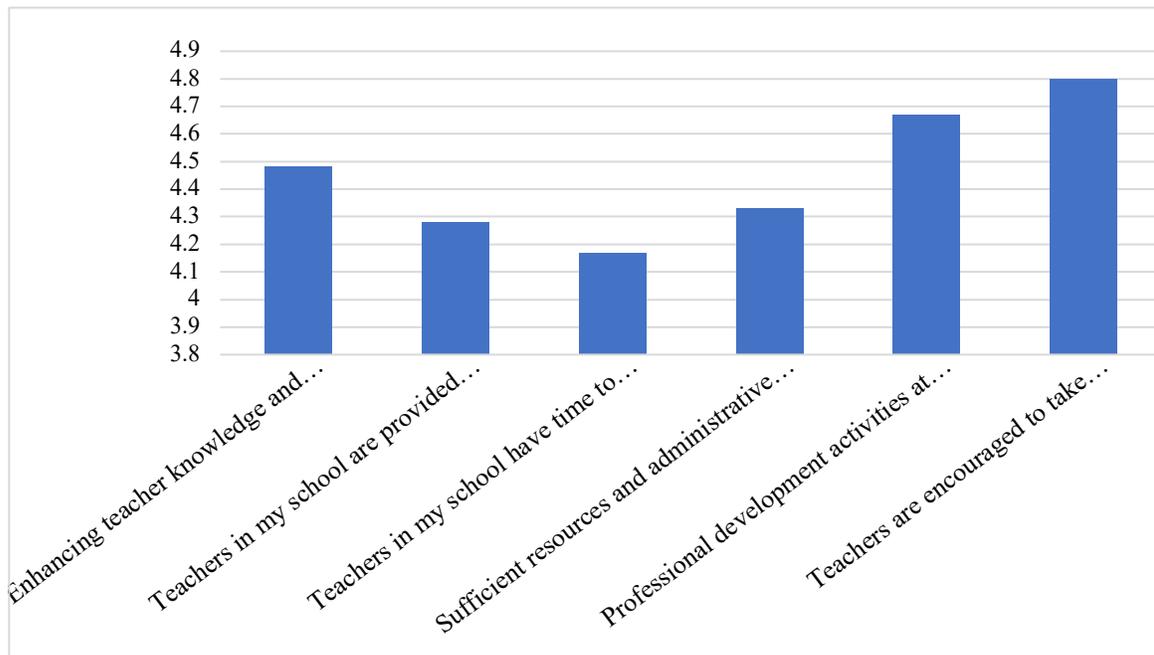
Figure 7

School Professional Development



As displayed in Figure 8, professional development findings and how strongly participants agree or disagree with the following statement: The School Leadership makes a sustained effort to provide quality professional development. Through analysis of the data, strongly disagree of 0%, somewhat disagree of 0%, neither agree or disagree of 9%, somewhat agree of 30%, and strongly agree of 61%.

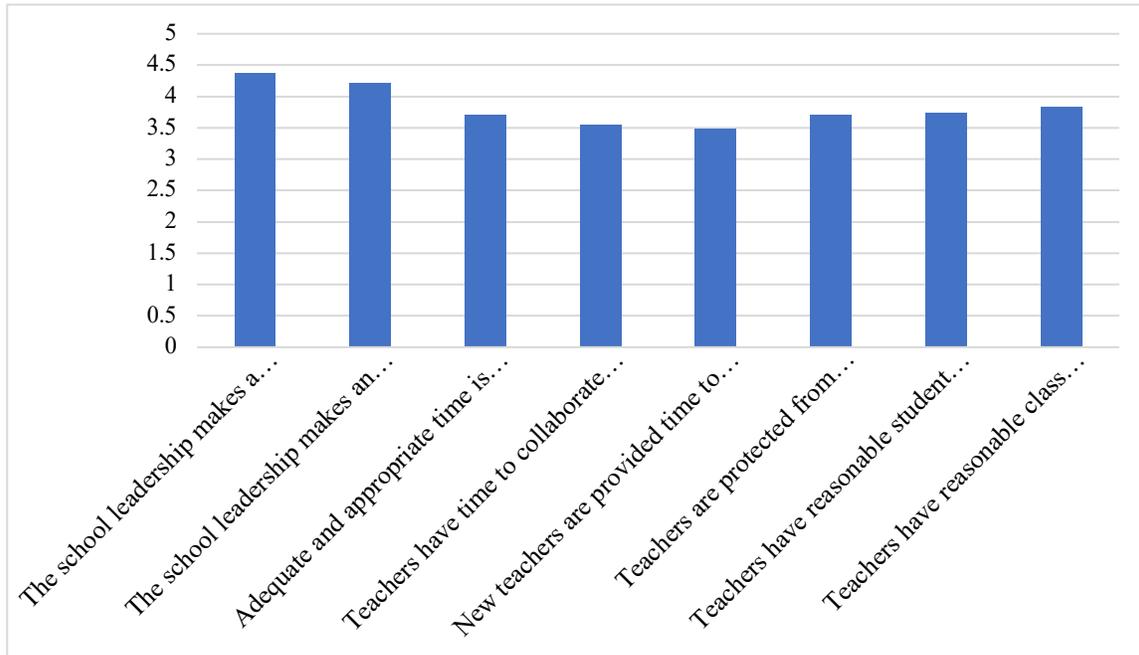
Figure 8
Professional Development Supports



Time

Figure 9 is the average of how strongly participants agree or disagree with the following statements about the use of time in their school. As shown in the data, 85% of the school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about the use of time in my school, 82% of school principals make an effort to reduce routine administrative duties or paperwork that interfere with the job of teaching, 75% have adequate and appropriate time provided for professional development yearly, 70% believe teachers have time to collaborate productively with their colleagues, 70% of new teachers are provided time to work with a mentor both within and outside of the classroom, 75% of teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students. As shown in the data, 75% of teachers have reasonable student loads affording them time to meet the educational needs of all students. Participants selected 75% of teachers to have reasonable class sizes affording them time to meet the educational needs of all students.

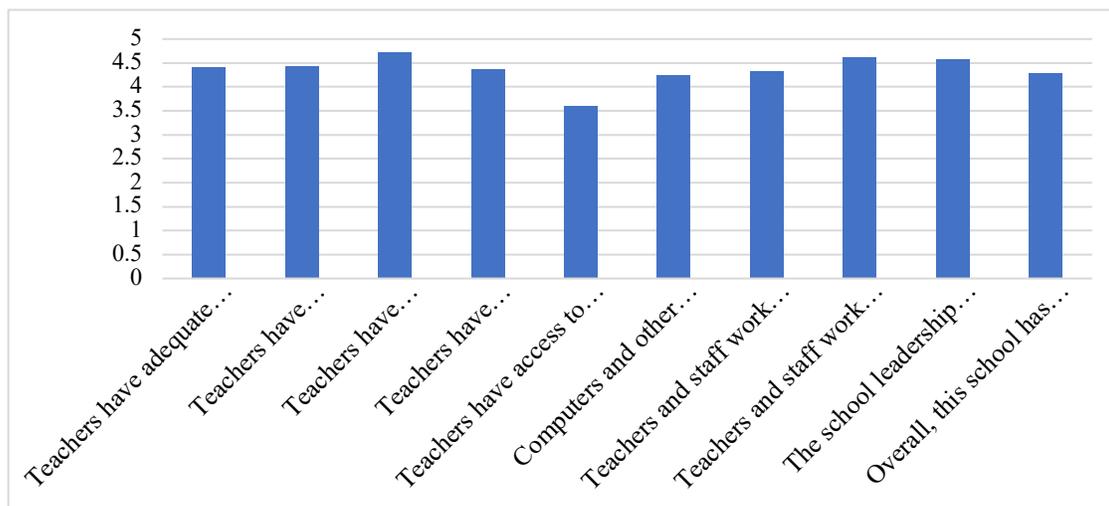
Figure 9
Use of Time



Facilities and Resources

As displayed in Figure 10, the weighted average of how strongly participants agree or disagree with the following statements about their school facilities and resources. From the results, 85% of teachers have adequate professional space to work productively; 85% of teachers have sufficient access to office equipment such as copy machines; 95% of teachers have convenient access to reliable communication technology, including phones, faxes, and email; 85% of teachers have sufficient access to instructional supplies; 70% of teachers have convenient access to reliable communication technology, including phones, faxes, and email; for 80% of teacher computers and other current instructional technology for classrooms are sufficiently available; 85% of teachers and staff work in a school environment that is clean and well maintained; 90% of teachers and staff work in a school environment that is safe; and 80% of overall schools have adequate materials, equipment, classrooms, and other facilities for teachers to do a good job teaching students.

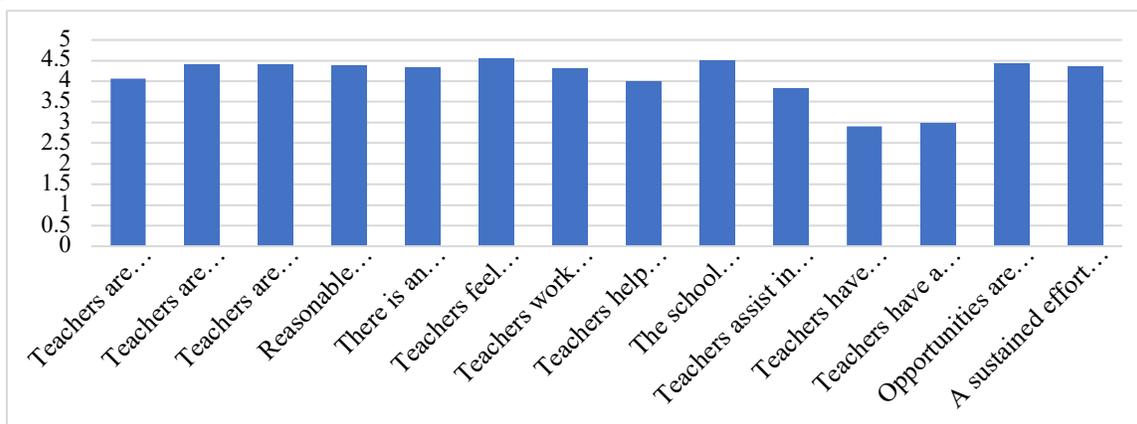
Figure 10
Facilities and Resources



Empowerment

As shown in Figure 11, the weighted average of how strongly participants agree or disagree with the following statements about empowerment in their school. The majority thought 80% of teachers are centrally involved in decision making about important educational issues, 90% of teachers are recognized as educational experts, 90% of teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction and student progress, 88% took educational risk-taking by teachers is encouraged and supported, 85% of teachers work together to improve teaching and learning, 80% of teachers help establish and implement policies for student discipline, 90% of the school leadership consistently enforces rules for student conduct, 75% of teachers consistently enforce rules for student conduct, 57% of teachers have a role in the hiring of new teachers at this school, 60% of teachers have a role in deciding how the school budget will be spent, 90% of teacher said opportunities are available for parents to express their concerns and propose solutions to improve the school, and 85% said a sustained effort is made in my school to empower teachers and parents and other members of the school community.

Figure 11
Empowerment



Results of Open-Ended Question

Five factors emerged in response to the question, “What are the factors school leaders in rural school districts perceive as barriers to improving working conditions?” These factors are as follows: (a) time, (b) professional support, (c) partnerships, (d) geographic isolation, and (e) lack of technology. Ninety-nine percent of the principals identified the lack of technology as a barrier to improving working conditions. They used phrases such as “upgrade of technology to support online professional development,” “technology to support professional development,” and “lack of technology in professional development activities.” Only one principal identified this factor with the phrase “lack of technology to support professional development.” Urban and rural schools face similar challenges, but the effects of those challenges are often more severe in rural communities. With less access to technology for professional development, rural districts often struggle (Klar et al., 2014). A summary of these findings is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Factors and Percentages

Barriers	Principal Responses <i>n</i> = 51
Time	98%
Partnerships	93%
Geographic Isolation	98%
Lack of Technology	99%
Professional Support	90%

Discussion and Conclusion

The first purpose of this investigation we sought to identify school leaders’ roles in developing and maintaining working conditions in rural schools in northern Florida and the factors that rural school leaders perceive as hindering working conditions. In addition, the investigation sought to identify characteristics of school leaders in rural schools in Northern Florida.

Through the study, we revealed principals in rural schools in northern Florida were majority White at 89%, followed by African American at 11%. This is consistent with the 2018 NCES SASS report concluding most principals serving public schools across the nation were White at 78%, followed by African American at 11%. Surprisingly, the characteristic difference among school leader participants was the number of women serving in rural school leadership, which held the majority with 63.83%. Overall, the number of women in school leadership has increased. These results align with national statistics gathered by the 2018 National Center for Education Statistics School and Staffing Survey (SASS), which 54% of all public-school principals were women. Over 77% of the participants were older than 35 years of age and had more than 10 years of experience leading schools.

This study investigated the role of the principal in implementing working conditions in rural schools. The role of the school principal is multifaceted. Wallace (2018) suggested principals who engage in the role of shaping a vision of academic success create hospitable

climates conducive for learning and safety. Additionally, in their roles as instructional leaders, principals work to improve instruction by enabling teachers to teach at their best, thereby helping to improve working conditions thus fostering school improvement. Through the findings from this study, we highlight the principals' role in the working conditions domains of time, instructional leadership, teacher empowerment, professional development, and facilities and resources.

Barriers to Implementing Working Conditions

Rural schools are challenged with the lack of funding and high levels of poverty. Teachers and principals in rural schools often lack access to high-quality, relevant professional development opportunities, as they may be based far away from the location of such events, and the programming may not be relevant to the needs of rural schools. Accordingly, rural teachers can face professional isolation. Furthermore, of the students across the country who do not have a reliable high-speed internet connection, 37% of them live in rural communities. This fact is opposed to 21% in urban communities and 25% in suburban communities (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021) The findings are supported in the literature.

Instructional Leadership

Not surprising, 44% of the principals responded the most important aspect of working conditions is their role in instructional leadership. During this era of accountability and focus on improving schools, principals are being urged to focus efforts on the core business of schooling, teaching, and learning. In short, instructional leadership reflects those actions a principal takes to promote growth in student learning (DeFour, 2002). The instructional leader makes instructional quality the top priority of the school and attempts to bring that vision to realization.

Professional Development

No Child Left Behind changed the landscape on how professional development was delivered to teachers and the principals' role in such an effort. Leithwood and Sun (2012) described the role of principals as facilitators of profession development and "arguably the most central function of educational leadership" (p. 387). This includes effective collaboration. Collaboration is worthwhile. However, it will not succeed if a school's leaders neglect to focus on work and planning (Denton, 2009). In addition, leaders must motivate their teachers and provide ongoing support. Principals are responsible for providing resources and support for teachers to assist them in improving instruction and increasing student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2012). Similar to this research, 85% agree enhancing teacher knowledge and skills receives a priority as the most important strategy to improve student achievement, thus emphasizing the overall success of the school.

Time

Overall, according to the findings, 85% of the leaders agree or strongly agree that it is important that they provide teachers with time to plan with their colleagues during the school day. Also, important to note that 90% of participants reported that it was critical that sufficient

resources and administrative support are available to allow teachers to take advantage of professional development activities. Through the findings of this, we study reveal how the role of school leadership is vital to boosting and monitoring time for teacher collaboration. There is great importance for teachers to have time inside and outside of the classroom to have a meaningful time to collaborate.

Facilities and Resources

From the results, the principals reported 85% of teachers have adequate professional space to work productively, sufficient access to office equipment, sufficient access to instructional supplies, convenient access to reliable communication technology. Surprisingly, 80% of the principals reported teacher computers and other current instructional technology for classrooms are sufficiently available.

Empowerment

Teacher empowerment is defined as investing teachers with rights to participate in determination of school goals and policies and to exercise professional judgment about what and how to teach. As a working condition, empowerment has been linked to student achievement. In this study, principals identified it as a major component of working conditions. The most powerful approach for improving teaching and learning is encouraging the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community (Defour & Mattos, 2013). This means that teacher collaboration and roles in decision making are important. Ingersoll (2012) found that “Schools that delegated more control to teachers had fewer problems among teachers and less conflict between teachers and administrators” (p. 202). Research highlights the importance of leaders protecting teacher time including providing structured times to collaborate (Defour et al., 2013).

Conclusion

As education in the accountability era continues to evolve, rural school principals will be expected to ensure that all learners perform at increasing levels of proficiency. The focus of a school’s mission and the principal’s vision should foster a positive learning environment that provides quality learning for all students. Therefore, issues relating to working conditions have become important to researchers studying how school principals impact instruction and achievement. Many challenges exist in tackling high teacher attrition rates in rural areas. Because school leadership impacts teacher retention, it is vital that school leaders in rural districts understand the relationship between positive working conditions and meeting teacher’s needs. The conditions teachers encounter in schools and classrooms are connected to student achievement and teacher retention.

While improving working conditions begin at the school level, it should not stop there. Understanding working conditions domains of time, instructional leadership, teacher empowerment, professional development, and facilities and resources will be required for rural educational leaders to meet the rigorous demands placed upon them. Rural school principals will

need to balance leadership responsibilities and priorities, while at the same time building staff trust and relationships, to support educational outcomes for all learners.

Local school districts may reflect on the findings of this study to determine how to address teacher working conditions. The study provides superintendents additional insight into how principals could address the added responsibility of working conditions to their current responsibilities as instructional leaders. This study also provides insight into how principals can better understand teacher's needs for improved working conditions. Emphasis should be placed on identifying areas where principals are empowered to make decisions and where they perceive weaknesses exist in designing and implementing data-driven effective school policies. School leaders could create buy-in and awareness by asking superintendents, school boards, law makers, and other administrators and teacher leaders to work collaboratively and improve working conditions.

Although there exists a plethora of research on leadership in urban and suburban school settings, there is a lack of emergent research on leadership specific to rural schools (Starr, 2015). Specifically, the role of principal as instructional leader in rural school settings lacks empirical investigation, including the utilization of leadership strategies used to engage the instructional challenges inherent to the unique rural school environment.

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Coming Together to Take the First Step: Preparing Trauma-Informed Educational Leaders and Teachers

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Abstract

In this article, we present the thoughts of two education professors and findings from a study designed to examine the effects of a poverty simulation toward poverty of college students. As indicated through the results of this study, students held positive attitudes toward individuals struggling with poverty. Through the analysis of focus groups interviews, we identified three overarching themes concerning college students' attitudes about poverty. These were broadly categorized as Process, Responses, and Resources. As supported through the qualitative data, the notion that students had paradigm shifts in their personal thinking and professional behavior in the workforce, empathy around the vicious cycle of poverty, and the extremely hard choices and decisions necessary when experiencing poverty

Keywords: poverty, teacher and leadership preparation, social justice

Coming Together to Take the First Step: Preparing Trauma-Informed Educational Leaders and Teachers

In this conceptual paper, we describe the efforts of two professors within a university to address the growing need to provide teacher and educational leadership candidates with experiences to deepen their understanding of social, emotional, and economic dynamics of children living in poverty. In the field of education, understanding poverty on a deeper level, far beyond just the economics of poverty is critical in achieving systemic changes in views towards children experiencing poverty. Educators must have an encompassing understanding of the issues surrounding living in poverty and develop empathetic attitudes toward students and families experiencing poverty to work towards advocacy to instill greater equitable, inclusive, democratic, and social justice-oriented classrooms and schools. When this teacher education and educational leadership research duo formed a partnership, we never envisioned the world would endure a pandemic thrusting so many into poverty.

The researchers founded their partnership with each other based on common passion for K-12 education and a desire to solve current issues in local schools, which at the time included the extremely high attrition rate for educators. Slowly, we began to realize the value-added to not just examining one side (training teachers or school leaders), but by working in concert, we could best see the “big picture” of education. Throughout many discussions and talking to students, both teachers and educational leaders, who were graduating from our programs, a recurring theme of both teachers and leaders lacking training and a true understanding of the high poverty rate, which has led to educators leaving the field in the state in high numbers (Haynes, 2014). Many productive discussions were centered around issues with content of online courses providing students with limited experiences and sufficient knowledge and skills to address poverty. The major concern was students would graduate unprepared to teach or lead schools, which would require knowledge of trauma-informed strategies, social justice, cultural competence, and equity. There was a strong agreement among professors that faculty members in the educational department needed to provide students with educational tools to assist them in recognizing and understanding the conflicting beliefs, assumptions, and biases they may feel toward children living in poverty.

Literature Review

Bennis (2004) argued that individuals and groups view the world through their unique cultural lens. A person’s cultural lens is formed through experiences and information learned from families, communities, religious institutions, schools, and media. Bennis suggested everyone’s cultural lens shapes their cultural beliefs and values and guides their communication and interactions with the world. Barriers occur when a person’s beliefs and values are tainted by bias, prejudice, and even stereotyping. This barrier leads to a lack of understanding of different cultural and racial groups. As students address their underlying perceptions of differences and diversity, they can move toward new ways of thinking.

The students in higher education have become more and more diverse, with various ethnic and racial groups comprising a significant percentage of the overall enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES], 2009), the diversity of schools in the

U.S. will continue to change and become even more diverse over the next decade. An influx of a greater number of minority students into schools and university systems may very well exacerbate the existing educational issues and inequalities. Cultural competency is a term used to define a set of competencies that form “congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situation” (Cross et al., 1989, p. 7). As professional educators, it is important to take note that the ethnic and cultural shift in school systems is occurring in every corner of the nation.

The demand for interculturally competent graduates has initiated departments in higher education to create opportunities to develop students, knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to work and communicate with others from diverse backgrounds (Paige & Goode, 2009). Recognizing the value of different methods of inquiry, models, theories, and practices, and encourage learning from other cultures is of great importance. Intentional learning experiences such as the poverty simulation are essential to start moving from ethnocentrism to understanding the issues of diversity. Higher education personnel have found it critical to create opportunities that guide the learning process to promote cultural competence in their students. Experiential methods have been increasingly used to support cultural competence development due to the impact on identifying self-awareness, enhancing cultural awareness, and developing cultural empathy.

For many universities, the use of poverty simulations as an experiential learning opportunity has fostered changes in attitudes, behaviors, and developed empathy in their college students (Meaux et al., 2019; Reid & Evanson, 2016; Turk & Colbert, 2018). The Missouri Community Action Network Poverty Simulation© is an experiential learning activity. The simulation allows participants to experience issues related to poverty and then provides time to discuss the potential for change within local communities. The debriefing component lets the participants discuss what happened, reflect on how they experienced personally, and what reactions they saw in others and themselves to learn from the experience. This design creates an awareness of poverty in hopes of inspiring positive change.

Higher education institutions have implemented the use of the simulation in various programs, particularly in social work and nursing. A number of researchers have shown when students participate in the poverty simulation there is a decrease in personal bias and negative stereotyping of individuals living in poverty (Moore et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2014). Other positive outcomes have been improved attitudes towards and understanding those living in poverty, as well as increased empathy for those experiencing poverty (Goelman Rice et al., 2017). In one study, Todd et al. (2011) stated that they found not only were there changes in attitudes and beliefs of the participants but a deeper understanding of the complexities that exist in poverty. Nickols and Nielson (2011) pointed out that students participating in a poverty simulation experienced feeling, such as being “overwhelmed, frustrated, and despondent” (Nickols & Nielsen, 2011, p. 27). These researchers suggested these feelings would be beneficial to trigger the desire to advocate for change. In a study with Bachelor of Science in Nursing students attending the University of Arkansas, researchers showed a statistically significant change in how sensitive and understanding of the circumstances surrounding poverty and the challenges faced by people living therein (Meaux et al., 2019). Themes that emerged from their

work included suggestions that there were many challenges and issues for those living in poverty. Other themes of stress and worry as well as awareness and understanding surfaced as key factors related to poverty. These students also stated the simulation created a sense of understanding in the need for knowledge of community resources.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers collaborated to discuss why the content of our courses was not providing our students with the sufficient knowledge and skills to address the issues faced for families living in high poverty and not teaching them the needed trauma-informed strategies to be successful educators and leaders. Using Bandura's (1971) Social Learning Theory (SLT), it was believed instruction was possibly lacking the direct experience that Bandura found to establish the acquisition of patterns of behavior that are needed to provide students opportunities for growth; the simulation would provide a high-impact practice that allowed for the construct of *observational learning*. By providing multiple ways to change behavior (i.e., knowledge and attitudes) through the simulated environment, *reciprocal determination*, a construct of Bandura's SLT, is emphasized. He posits the importance of the interaction among people, the environment, and their behaviors (Bandura, 1971). After the simulation, the focus groups allowed for discussion about community resources available to graduates upon entering the workforce, which, according to Bandura (1971), would provide students with the *self-efficacy* to perform in the workforce in their service-related jobs. Students were made aware of resources, which provided them with tools needed to perform their work while considering clients' level of economic stability. Bandura (1971) posited providing this type of training allows for a level of *behavioral capability* that educates students to be aware of possible interventions for clients. By allowing students the type of modeling that is afforded through the simulation and experiential learning, it could be the first step in making change to the content in both teacher education and educational leadership courses.

Context of Study

Both researchers attended training by the Missouri Community Action Network (CAN), an organization that is rooted in President Johnson's signing of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 when 19% of the country was considered poor (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Missouri took the first step by assigning each county a Community Action Agency, which provided assistance to low-income individuals (Missouri CAN, n.d.). Like every good idea, that first step led to future improvements in the system, allowing for not only assistance for those in need, but education to first smaller civic groups in 1975 to then a wider audience in 2016 when it became an active nonprofit. Although we had to travel to attend, the reputation preceded CAN as a strong advocate for service that educates through a powerful, life-changing simulation and provides services to help communities reduce poverty.

Through the university news feed, the partners found that the college of nursing was planning a simulation for students and made a call for professors from all disciplines to invite students to be part of a research study. Because we were the only two professors on the campus trained in this approach, we knew this was a fated opportunity to use our newly acquired skills to partner with professors from other disciplines. We did not realize how critical our study would

prove to be, as we were able to conduct the simulation with nearly one hundred students and analyze results before the pandemic broke out, and it has allowed for us to use our results to better prepare for addressing a new normal for our community.

The Missouri CAN simulation requires participants to role-play the lives of a variety of low-income families, such as single parents, senior citizens on a fixed income and raising grandchildren, and families with children who have disabilities. The task of each family is to provide for food, shelter and other basic necessities during four 15-minute “weeks” that are equivalent to a month’s time. Community resources are set up around the room (such as the school, employment agency, medical facility, and social services). The simulation allows participants to first experience issues related to poverty and then provides time to discuss the potential for change within local communities. The simulation is designed to create an awareness of poverty in hopes of inspiring positive change.

Participants

Out of the 100 students who participated in the simulation, all participated in the focus groups. When looking at the makeup of degree programs, the majority were students in the nursing program, yet programs spanned social work, biomedical, physician assistants, criminal justice, health promotion (including pre-service physical education teachers), and general studies. The majority of the students were in the 21-25 age range (43.4%), but ages ranged from 19 to 31 and older. Caucasian students comprised 79.1% of the participants and 14% were African American, 2.3% Asian Pacific, and two who identified as “other.” One aspect of the survey we believed was important was how many of the participants believed they had personal experiences with poverty. Forty-five noted they had experienced being poor, with 19% stated that this experience had been with a client or patient in their studies at the university. Only 10 of the 100 had experience as both a child and adult (0.11%) and three who had experienced it only as a child (0.03%).

Methods

The design of the mixed-methods study was a quasi-experimental with student attitudes toward poverty being the independent variable. The dependent variable was captured using the Short Form of the Attitude Toward Poverty Scale developed by Yun and Weaver (2010). This scale contains 21 statements rated on a four-point Likert-scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Higher scores indicate attitudes that are [more/less] favorable towards poverty. The simulation served as the intervention. No control group or random assignment was used. Three questions were included that asked about participants, the participant’s personal experiences with poverty, and one open-ended question also included in which participants were asked to define poverty in their own words.

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The open-text item in which students were asked to define poverty was analyzed using thematic analysis. The descriptive statistics were used to identify the percentage of participants who had been directly impacted by poverty and the nature of their relationship with poverty. Paired-sample t-tests were

used to compare the 21 Likert-type scale items on pre- and post-surveys. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

Through this study, we explored paradigm shifts in attitudes of college students concerning poverty a quantitative approach was necessary to gather and correlate the data; however, quantitative data alone would not provide information to conceptualize a fully robust analysis of a phenomenon. Therefore, a qualitative measure was incorporated through the use of focus groups. The qualitative analysis was conducted through an open-ended post discussion with recorded responses of the 10 focus groups. The participants in the poverty simulation focus group were asked several questions around the poverty simulation. The analysis of participant reactions to focus group discussions were analyzed and coded for reactions and changes in perceptions presented in the data. These results related to depth of conversation, breadth of conversation, adherence to topic, participant interaction, disclosure of personal information, and reactions to the simulation.

Findings

Although the pre- and post-data related to perceptions of poverty was important to gather to ascertain how perceptions changed following the simulation, as educators, we found the qualitative data derived from the focus groups provided the greatest insight due to the depth of responses. The seven questions addressed the students' perceptions of poverty before and after the simulation and the impact the simulation had on the students as individuals and future professionals. Additionally, we asked students about their familiarity with university resources available to assist students who are in need.

While analyzing data, there were three categories used to sort responses: **Process** (students' experiences with understanding poverty), **Responses** (students' responses to initiate community change), and **Resources** (students' personal knowledge about community and university resources or lack thereof). When analyzing these data, it was found that there were many comments made about the stress and frustration of the simulation. Some key examples from the students related to their perceptions included: (a) "I have a newfound perspective of how stressful poverty is;" (b) "It is just knowing and being sensitive to the situation;" (c) "A lot more factors go into poverty, more than I originally thought. Like my husband didn't have a job he got laid off and says I'm the breadwinner. I made like a little over \$1,300 a month and that wasn't even enough to cover my necessary bills, but on top of that we had a death in the family that we had to pay an additional \$200 in bills and then when I went to cash my first check there was a \$500 bill in the bank that I didn't even know about so it's these small things that pile up;" (d) "Even though it's a simulation, you have that experience and on a very small level it brings poverty to a new awareness and understanding;" and (e) "If you're living in poverty or below that poverty line, you're eligible for services, but it's just you need more money than just to buy food and food is normally the last to pay but is needed most. It's like, you know, in our situation it was, do we pay the mortgage? We will have a house or do you pay the utility so that when we get back in our house, we'll have power, what do you do? Where do you draw the line by paying mortgage, I would not be evicted. But, I'm not gonna have water and I'm not gonna have power, and I'm not, you know, not gonna have gas for heat. I will have a roof over my head. It's the hard choices that you have to make." These responses demonstrated the substantial impact the

simulation had on students from all fields of study. Only one out of the over 400 responses was negative and related to completing the simulation for a course activity.

Several other candidate statements in the focus group discussion highlighted the notion of the cycle of poverty and lack of resources: (a) “I feel like once you're in poverty like there's no way out.” Another noted the powerful impact of the poverty simulation, (b) “I didn't know what to expect, what this was going to be like or what I envisioned. A lot of you guys are just talking to some of us, but I really liked that we were able to participate, and I think just overall the biggest thing it did for me was just open my eyes. I come across these two people, like every day, you know, I drive by them.” Additionally, (c) “I mean, every profession, no matter where you are, poverty is something that's going to affect you.” As well as (d) “I mean just knowing what poverty is makes you more well-rounded and understanding of someone else's situation.”

Additionally, the simulation exposed the weakness of a system to provide or clearly advertise help by providing resources. Students often stated how difficult it was to obtain the various resources and realizing it may not be the sole fault of the individual. Several students noted this in these comments: (a) “They're probably not doing good and they're being lazy, they're not working, but I think it's important to kind of distance yourself from the biases and just kind look at the individual and they're presenting problems, whether it's healthcare related or not, and then try to treat them in the best way possible and not regarding their financial status or what's happening outside of the hospital or whatever the situation is;” (b) “It made me understand what my clients are going through. So, when they miss their appointments, I don't get frustrated because I know there's such a barrier there with everything;” and (c) “I'm gonna work with college students on college campuses, so I think it will help me understand some of their backgrounds, maybe their motivations for things, or when they're not showing up for work because their car broke down, and they literally didn't have the money to fix it. So just having that mindset and being graceful with the situations that they are dealing with.” The simulation provided the modeling needed for these students to not only live, albeit briefly, in poverty but to reflect on these changes in their perspectives.

What was the most surprising to us (yet promising) were the number of comments made in the “Responses” category totaling 205, which was approximately half of all responses. Key examples included: (a) “...understanding is the first step in bettering our system;” (b) “... it helped develop an understanding and you're willing to do whatever you can to help;” (c) “...there needs to be some kind of review board for the criminal justice system for youth when a case comes up and this review board of specialists have expertise that actually pertains to the situation and the development of the child. For example, when juveniles go to court and they are being sent to prison... that person has a law degree, not a child development degree which is what I realized during this simulation. Maybe the trouble started because they were hungry or stressed and were pushed off as being disruptive;” and (d) “It seems we need to create a document of resources in our community to pass on to people that I come in contact with in my job. What can I do? I only know the resources from my profession. This needs to be a team effort.”

Conclusions

When reflecting on these data, what was found was a profound epiphany of our students of the fragility of the interconnectedness of our students entering the workforce in a variety of jobs. The realization that each of their disciplines could make a difference in providing a more comprehensive support system for those living in poverty was magical to witness, and quite honestly, one that had not been considered. Being teacher educators, the focus was strictly on what we can provide for our students. Never could we imagine a group of one hundred students would see how this lack of interconnectedness was creating issues for those in poverty, and then also talk about ways they can come together to better provide support for those living in poverty.

Our own perspectives on this have drastically shifted, and we believe we must advocate for the best interests of our students and place the issues of poverty and associated trauma at the forefront of our educational discussions as opposed to placing these issues on the periphery. We do not have all the answers, but the results of our study motivate us to reframe educational paradigms that influence how we view students in poverty. We have always known school leaders and teachers are uniquely positioned to support students who are impacted emotionally and physically by the exposure to poverty. These reasons and the responses from our first simulation suggest that not just teachers and educational leaders need context specific training in poverty, it is all who impact future graduates. Providing it for more than our discipline allows for not only the first step in a paradigm shift related to the understanding of how poverty and related trauma impacts our students, but it allows for a sort of community “think tank” consisting of empathetic, diverse individuals in the workforce. By actually experiencing and having the opportunity to respond to situations in a poverty simulation, this modeling that Bandura (1974) claimed led to change indeed occurs. This change is conducive to encouraging the community to come together to impact change. As usually is the case, what we, the teachers, often learn is far more powerful than what they learn from us. We learned that this issue of poverty is one that cannot be viewed from one disciplinary lens. This will truly shape how we teach our future students about poverty and will provide them with opportunities to connect with others in different fields to truly understand and work towards a transformed perspective which will inspire community change. With the looming destruction to our economy from the pandemic that is imminent, this first step has been critical, as our graduates will be leading the way to collaboratively work to solve a poverty issue unlike most of us have ever seen.

Through the results of the study, we suggest there remains much to be done in preparing our students to enter the field of education as teachers and school leaders. Participation in the poverty simulation was effective in increasing the knowledge and understanding regarding the challenges of living in poverty. The experiential nature of the simulation allowed students to increase their understanding of the daily lives of individuals in poverty in a way that provided an in-depth, lived learning experience. Students’ having the opportunity to experience the barriers in real life in real time allowed them to develop or change their perspectives reinforced by their own experiences, which contributed to an increased understanding.

Although this study represents a small portion of university students who have experienced the poverty simulation as a high-impact practice and academic tool, it does provide positive implications and progress steps for educational planning, content development, and

improved practices. Several emergent ideas for curriculum additions to our core teacher and educational leadership program content to be considered are (a) elements of social and emotional, and trauma-informed content; (b) elements of equity and social justice topics; (c) elements of engaging community involvement and advocating change; and (d) elements of cultural competence, diversity, and inclusiveness. Continued efforts to engage teachers and school leaders to address perceptions and biases about poverty related issues and how they affect school learning environments will be advantageous to the development of holistic curricula. Future teachers and aspiring school leaders need guidance and preparation to combat poverty related issues found in the majority of schools today. Additionally, poverty-related training is critical component in achieving educational equity and increasing levels of empathy, compassion, and knowledge of cultural diversity within the current educational landscape schools are navigating.

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Research-Based Strategies for Leading Successful High-Poverty Rural High Schools

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Abstract

In this article, we present the research-based strategies for leading successful high-poverty rural high schools in Alabama. The purpose of this research was to identify reasons these high-poverty, high-minority rural high schools are successful in obtaining a high level of student learning and achievement with a student population that typically underperforms in comparison to their counterparts from the urban and suburban schools and from other rural schools. This article is an exploratory, qualitative, multi-case study, and it differs from most studies on the topic of overcoming the achievement gap in that the focus was on the perceptions of key stakeholders and not the programs, policies, curriculum, or leadership styles. Through this study, we point to ways leaders in rural schools can effectively foster student success. We believe that the findings provide a glimpse into the reasons for the high-achieving nature and their ability to narrow the achievement gap of these rural schools in Alabama.

Keywords: rural schools, achievement gap, high-achieving minority schools, high-poverty, differentiated professional development

Research-Based Strategies for Leading Successful High-Poverty Rural High Schools

The modern era of accountability has “shined a very bright light” on the achievement gap between middle-class white students and minority and low-income students in the United States. There are those who suggest that it is imperative that governmental officials, researchers, and the general public recognize that part of this achievement gap is grounded in social and cultural causes which should be addressed (Carey, 2013; Carter, 2012). Although the social and cultural elements within which a child exists can influence his or her capacity to achieve in school, there are schools in which children from high-poverty backgrounds are achieving appropriately (Carey, 2014). There are also researchers who identified strategies and procedures these schools employ that foster this success. However, most of this research has been done in urban and suburban schools. Through this research study, we examined the issue in rural settings, an under-researched area.

Purpose and Objectives

While many of the issues facing rural schools and their potential solutions are similar to those of the suburban/urban counterparts, the circumstances encountered by rural schools are significantly different and therefore the solutions require an innovative and unique approach. There is a general perception about rural communities and schools in many high-poverty, high-minority rural communities and a prevailing attitude of apathy and failure in both the community and school (Wilcox et al., 2014). The rural stereotype, societal challenges, and the persistent lack of resources have left the rural communities and parents with a feeling of outright abandonment (Maxwell et al., 2010). The solutions to fixing the unique problems in rural schools necessitate individualized school responses. This article is part two of a three-part research study. In part one research was conducted to identify the challenges these high-minority and high-poverty rural schools faced, believing that if the school officials did not know the nature and extent of the challenges, they could not effectively develop a plan to ensure all students received a quality education. In part two of the study, we sought to identify what plans, programs, and support systems were put in place by these schools to provide the necessary support to ensure their students received a quality education. In part three of this study, we attempted to identify what, if any, differences in challenges and solutions existed between each type of rural school, fringe, distant, and remote.

Review of the Literature

Existing research appears to provide a clear road map to what it takes to create high-achieving schools: (a) high-quality teachers and administrators, (b) professional development, (c) high self-efficacy for all, (d) collaboration, (e) a culture of high expectations for all, (f) inclusion of community and parents, (g) and stressing the importance of schooling (Chance & Sequra, 2009). While it is true that these elements may be of importance in all schools, the research conducted on school success is typically focused, designed, and tested in suburban/urban schools with their large populations and very minimal research about school policies or issues unique to rural schools has been conducted. In fact, it is estimated that only about 6% of all educational research is conducted in a rural-school setting (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). Rural schools often are the center of community life in their local communities.

The Rural School and Community Trust (2001) found that rural schools tend to have smaller classes, which enables teachers to spend a greater amount of time with their students, learning their academic strengths and weakness. Along with developing a greater understanding of the students' academic needs, teachers and school staff have the ability to create a deeper understanding of the student's non-academic needs and family life. This deeper understanding of the whole student enables the rural-school faculty and staff to meet the needs of each student (Johnson et al., 2002). However, rural schools also face a myriad of challenges not typically faced in their suburban and urban counterparts.

Rural schools tend to be hampered by a resource poor environment and a weak tax-base that make it difficult for them to compete with the wealthier urban/suburban schools in compensation for teachers, administrators, and staff, which in turn, results in a high turnover rate. This high turnover rate means that these rural schools have, in general, less experienced teachers/administrators educating students than urban/suburban schools. Rural school also tend to have high levels of persistent, intergenerational poverty (Johnson et al., 2014), increasing diversity in their student populations in terms of poverty and minority populations (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009) and transient populations, the transient nature of rural population results in a significant interruption of the education of their children and result in a lower level of achievement for the student (Johnson et al., 2014).

Although there are some elements in rural communities that support schools and their purposes, rural school officials face an "uphill battle" in providing a high-quality education for their students and there is evidence that, in many settings, they may be failing to prepare rural students for a productive and successful future in the increasingly diverse and global economy. Gibbs (2000) reports that urban/suburban students are more likely to take calculus (93% to 64%) and physics (64% to 34%) than are rural students. Rural students tend to have fewer career opportunities, limited ability or chance of attending college or a post-secondary trade school (Hardré, 2007). Additionally, rural students are less likely to have access to advance placement and college credit courses or take calculus than peers (Irvin et al., 2012). A Government Accounting Office Report recommended that the United States Department of Education provide targeted assistance to rural schools that will help them meet the unique challenges they face (Arnold, 2005).

The decision makers often ignore or leave out the input of rural schools during the discourse about education issues and reform in the United States (Williams & King, 2002). Often the solutions to educational problems are approached in a one-size-fits-all, and this approach does not work with rural schools due their diversity and differing needs (Starr & White, 2008). Many scholars make the assumption that they know what the "best practices" are and that they are the same everywhere (Howley, 2001). The United States Department of Education continues, "...Talking about rural communities as small cities..." (Arnold, 2005, p. 3), using this philosophy rural schools are forced to implement policies and reforms that were developed for suburban/urban schools. The generalizability of studies conducted in suburban/urban schools to rural schools is difficult (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008). The United States Department of Education tends to fund programs designed to help rural schools solve issues that are unique to rural schools that in reality are appropriate to solving issues and problems at suburban/urban schools, as well (Arnold, 2005).

Finally, a critical, but often overlooked element of high-performing high schools is a well-prepared student starting with the elementary school (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). There is a prevailing belief that rural students are not as well-prepared as the suburban/urban counterparts (Gibbs, 2000). The key challenge for rural high schools is to maintain the benefits of being a small rural community while improving the student's education and abilities to compete for high-tech, high-skill employment or college admission (Gibbs, 2000).

Methods

An exploratory, qualitative, multi-case study method was used. Case-study format was chosen because the researchers were interested in developing a better understanding of the real-life settings or situations (Yin, 2014) of learning and achievement in Alabama's rural high schools.

A three-step criterion-sampling process (Patton, 2001) was used to select the schools for this study. We selected rural schools identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), with at least 65% of minority students and 65% of students on free-or-reduced lunch. We then eliminated schools failing to meet 100% of their Annual Yearly Progress goals. These criteria resulted in a pool of 12 schools. Once IRB approval was granted, the school leadership personnel were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Individuals in six schools were contacted, before three of them, one in each rural type category, agreed to participate, one from each type of rural school: fringe, remote, and distant was selected.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection was primarily achieved using a semi-structured interview protocol. A review of the school's website and the local phone directory were used to identify key stakeholders. Individuals were selected for participation based on their position or knowledge of the school. Twenty-nine individuals including teachers, administrators, school staff, parents, and community members were interviewed. Data were analyzed using an iterative process, (Creswell 2013). A standard of 40% of the respondents would have to identify a topic for it to be included in the themes and categories. We identified four themes about why the participant schools have been successful in improving student learning.

Findings

During the course of this research project, the researchers identified four recurring themes from the perceptions of key stakeholders about why the participant schools have been successful in improving student learning and achievement in spite of the significant challenges these schools face in their effort to provide a quality education. Of importance to note that although these themes and the factors they represent are interrelated, they are presented as separate and distinct for purposes of discussion. Although the researchers did not specifically ask respondents to identify the most and least important factors in fostering student success, the percentage of individuals identifying each factor is included in the findings and the discussion. The themes, elements, and the percent of responses for each of them is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Student-Focused Educators

Perceptions and Sub-themes			
Student Focused Educators (68%)	Curriculum Delivery (61%)	School Based Strategies (52%)	Administrative Leadership (44%)
Concern for Students (77%)	Programs and Processes (80%)	Teaching Approach (55%)	Collaboration (41%)
Commitment to Student Success (60%)	Community and Parental Involvement (60%)	School Expectations (46%)	Shared Leadership (51%)
	Professional Development (44%)	Instructional Focus (59%)	Approachable Leadership (41%)

Student-Focused Educators

The first theme was student-focused educators. The theme contained two elements: concern for students and a commitment to student success. Each theme and element will be discussed in a delineated section.

Concern for Students

Concern for students revolves around a holistic vision for the students and 77% of the participants identified this as a critical factor. This concern for the students goes beyond academics and includes helping the students develop the skills necessary to be successful in life after graduating from high school. Seventy-seven percent of the individuals interviewed identified the concern school personnel had for students as essential for their success. The level of support and caring attitude was obvious to many of the key stakeholders, "... I know our schools provide every opportunity they can for students but they can't be there 24/7 for them unfortunately. While I do know some teachers try to be, they get attached to them and love them..." (Ryan, Community Stakeholder of Ridge High School). Many of the participants interviewed for this research had the belief that teaching was more than just about conveying knowledge and sticking to the Alabama course of study; it was about developing the caring relationship with the students. One teacher stated it this way:

...our philosophy is not giving all the material things just giving yourself. I told them that's the most valuable thing you can give is yourself. (Shauna, Ridge High School)

The concept of concern for the students goes beyond just the academics and their achievement; it is about helping the students develop the skills necessary to be successful in life after graduating from high school. In referring to student needs, another faculty member said that these students attending are just seeking someone who is "...willing to listen" (Tim, Ridge High School). Participants indicated their role is more than just teaching the students assigned. The role is about meeting the needs of the students, "...we have to know what's important and we have to make time, when it comes to our kids we have to make time." (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School).

Commitment to Student Success

There were several facets of being committed to student success and 60% of the participants identified this as a vital factor in student and school success. Reaching the students attending these participant schools has required a drastic shift in providing educational services to students who, for the most part, do not have the supportive home environment that was conducive to ensuring high student learning and achievement. Across the board, teachers are identified as the key factor in achieving and maintaining high levels of student learning and achievement, “I would have to say that the reason for the success is because the faculty ... They would instill in our kids to always do their best. Lettin' them know that whatever you're trying to achieve you can” (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School).

Many of the parents interviewed believed the success of both the school and their particular students was the direct responsibility of the teachers. As Linda stated, “investment level of the teachers...they cared and wanted students to succeed” (Linda, parent of Next Door High School) and another added, “...it deals with caring about the students and wanting them to get all the knowledge they need. Not letting kids slide...” (Julie, Ridge High School). Reaching the students attending these participant schools has required a drastic shift in providing educational services to students who, for the most part, do not have the supportive home environment that is conducive to ensuring high levels of student learning and achievement. One principal stated it very eloquently:

It's more [about] student engagement, getting them involved. Allowing the teachers to expand their knowledge and use whatever it takes to get the kid where he needs to be. We can't just continue to go in a structured line. ... We've got to reach them where they are. (Tim, Ridge High School)

The faculty and staff of the participant schools have “a genuine and sincere concern for the student to be successful” (Kathy, stakeholder of Next Door High School).

Curriculum Delivery

The second theme was curriculum delivery. Curriculum delivery is divided into two elements: programs and processes, and professional development.

Programs and Processes

Eighty percent of the individuals interviewed identified Programs and Processes, making it the most often cited factor in student success. In many of these high-poverty and high-minority communities, schools created incentive programs, focused on individual student academic needs, and mentoring programs to foster individual development and confidence building. Most of these programs are conducted during the normal school day in consideration of the difficulties students have staying after school hours.

These participant school developed incentive programs to ensure the students were “...excited to come to school...” (Heather, Buddy High School). Teachers shared, students knew that the incentive programs rewarded them for doing the right thing, whether it was academics, behavior, or achievement and they appreciated the programs. Shauna believed that “...we feel a

sense of accomplishment together because we celebrate the kids and they celebrate with us...” (Shauna, Ridge High School). However, incentive programs are only one type of innovative programs to support and foster student success.

Each of the schools offered a variety of credit recovery and tutoring type programs to help the struggling students. As stated by one of the participants, the purpose of these programs, “...we’ve had kids that have come in who are behind and that we’ve not been able to let these kids catch up...” (Ian, Next Door High School). These programs increased the number of students participating and reduced the hardship on the parents.

A final program that was implemented in many schools involved mentoring students. The idea that many of the students in these participating school were in need of mentoring was pervasive. The common thread in all three schools of these mentoring programs is the idea of developing their self-esteem. The goals of these mentoring programs stressed that the students could overcome any obstacle in their way and to use the resources they had to ensure they were successful, “...no matter what you can make it.”

The leaders of these schools are actively seeking to increase the number of their staff and faculty that believe in the holistic view of educating the students “...we’ve been trying to bring more faculty and staff in that embody the whole student, not just the academic side” (Leslie, Next Door High School). The impact of these mentoring efforts is the realization by many students that the staff and faculty have a genuine concern, “...somebody is watching me. Somebody cares about me...” (Jackie, Buddy High School).

Community and Parental Involvement

Sixty percent of the individuals interviewed identified important contributions of both the community and parents in the high level of student learning and achievement. The benefit of living in a small rural community was recognized as a key component in this contribution. Matthew, a teacher from Ridge High School stated, “Our kids feel really supported by the community...”. In the communities surrounding the participant schools there are community groups such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters that have had an impact on the lives of the students, “The Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs that we’ve implemented over the past couple of years...have improved grades by like a grade...” (Ryan Community Stakeholder of Next Door High School). One of the participant schools was being supported by several fraternity and sorority auxiliary organizations who were involved with the high school students. Shauna stated, “...this is a community based school where a lot of parents get involved and they’re concerned about what’s going on with the kids” (Shauna, Ridge High School).

A final supportive factor, related to community support is the familiarity many of the staff and faculty had with the students’ families. One teacher stated, “We know their parents, we know their grandparents, we know just about everything about that child” (Jackie, Buddy High School). These participant schools have an in-depth knowledge of their students’ families that enable them better to support the students’ needs, “It’s just like a family like I said. It’s the only school in the area, sisters and brothers and mothers we’re here, their children and their grandchildren and then when their children have children they’ll come” (Heather, Buddy High

School). This connection with their students provides these participant schools an ability to connect with the students in a way that few suburban or urban school can and is recognized as a factor in student and school success.

Professional Development

While only 44% of the stakeholders identified professional development as playing a role in ensuring a high level of student achievement, the professional development offered appears to have been differentiated, allowing staff and faculty the opportunity to attend professional development that meets their professional needs. The required professional development mandated by the participant schools and the school systems seemed to be diverse, almost like a “cafeteria style buffet,” allowing staff and faculty the opportunity to attend professional development that met their professional needs. One faculty member stated, “...they do a very, I think, excellent job, because we have a lot of options to choose from to fit what our individual needs are...” (Joseph, Ridge High School). This sentiment was echoed by another stakeholder from Next Door High School, “...They keep us afloat as far as they invest in the PD necessary so that we can teach at a high level...” (Leslie, Next Door High School). These successful school leaders enabled their staff and faculty the access to professional development that matched their individual and school needs. The stakeholders indicated that the most valuable professional development provided not only a classroom-learning component but also what amounted to a coaching session. Teachers agreed that the most effective professional development was “...tweaked to match our population” (Leslie, Next Door High School) and included “...doing turnaround training and letting them see one of their peers actually go up there and do that” (Ian, Next Door High School).

Of importance to note that the participating stakeholders discussed not only the professional development provided by the school and school system, but also the professional development activities they participated in outside of those required. A stakeholder from Ridge High School, Michelle, believed that because of the combination of the required professional development and the individual professional learning there was new culture developing. The central commonality across these schools is a culture of learning amongst the staff and faculty enabling them to remain current and relevant in their teaching craft.

School-Based Strategies

The third theme was school-based strategies. This theme was organized into three elements: teaching approach, school expectations, and instructional focus.

Teaching Approach

Fifty-five percent of the respondents shared that the way content is taught was instrumental in student success. Teaching approaches include innovation; meeting the students “where they are” and moving them forward. Further, the stakeholders indicate that when they try new methods that may not be as successful, and there are no negative consequences from the school leaders.

A key to reaching these students requires the staff and faculty of these participant schools to be innovative in their approach to providing a quality education. One stakeholder stated, "We have a free hand to implement anything that we feel will enhance the learning process. ...improvise, improve, bring in new ideas, attend workshops to give us more knowledge...how to encourage the kids...." (Michelle, Ridge High School)

The stakeholders from all three-participant schools indicate that when they are innovative and trying new ideas and methods that may not be as successful as anticipated or they outright fail, there are no negative consequences from the school leaders, "I would say that I think that our administration is pretty forgiving when you're trying. I think they're a lot less forgiving when you're not trying" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). In addition to being innovative, many of the stakeholders discussed teaching styles of the classroom teachers as an important ingredient in student learning and achievement.

The stakeholders discussed at great length how they worked to reach their students where they were and move them forward from that point. One stakeholder explained, "...I try to find some way that I can relate to that child" (Leslie, Next Door High School). These stakeholders believe that they had to discover where their students were academically first than work from that point forward toward a goal of bringing them up closer to grade level. The staff and faculty of these participant schools have a strong belief that an important part of their job is ensuring their students get what it takes to be successful. A Chrissy stated, "I try to let them know the relevance of what we're learning. "This has significance." I think teachers have to do that. It has to be relevant. I think all of that helps them..." (Chrissy, Next Door High School). The stakeholders interviewed discussed, at length, the importance of connecting the content to the lived lives of their students.

School Expectations

Forty-six percent of the stakeholders interviewed expressed the importance of establishing high expectations for students, both in the classroom and throughout the school. In one of the school's *Continuous Improvement Plans (CIP)*, a key statement established the importance of high expectations, "Excellence is an expectation in everything we do at Ridge High School. Ridge High School's Mission Statement reflects the commitment to excellence..." (Ridge High School CIP). The culture of high expectations premediates the entire school. Teachers express their belief in not only establishing high expectations and "let(ting) them [the students] know my expectations" (Kathy, Next Door High School). Many of these teachers believe that the failure to have high expectations is detrimental to their students. Joseph explained, "...even though they're from poor homes, he still expects you as a teacher and the kids to achieve the standard. We're not going to cut any slack" (Joseph, Ridge High School). A community stakeholder believes that the schools are encouraging students and teachers to try. One stakeholder stated that he believes the schools were "just raising the expectations." Another stakeholder reported, "I would have to say that the reason for the success is because the faculty.... They would instill in our kids to always do their best. Lettin' them know that whatever you're trying to achieve you can" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School).

Instructional Focus

Forty-six percent of those interviewed believe that their school had a strong and consistent instructional focus. A common commitment of all the participant schools was a strong and consistent instructional focus. The stakeholders discussed how the school faculty used many different data sources to identify strengths and weaknesses of not only student learning and achievement, but also in the school's programs and teaching. In all, 46% of those interviewed identified the instructional focus as a key reason for the level of student learning and achievement. This instructional focus included leadership conducting "walkthroughs," leaders and teachers analyzing data to identify strengths and weaknesses, protecting instructional time, and being student centered.

The stakeholders discussed the use of data in making instructional decisions within their classrooms, "We identify what is causing the students not to reach that benchmark. Then once we identify it, we correct it by remediation, repeating the things that they're not doing well on" (Michelle, Ridge High School), or as Chrissy observed, "...he (the principal) is trying to identify where the holes are, so that we can plug the holes" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). While analyzing data was an important part of the instructional focus, the monitoring of classroom teaching and learning through walkthroughs, a "...walk-through is a brief, non-evaluative classroom observation and feedback by an administrator...walk-throughs can provide both principal and teacher with valuable information about the status of the school's instructional program (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2007), The vast majority of the educators interviewed and the schools continuous improvement plans and accreditation reports identify the walk-through program is a key to maintaining this instructional focus. Part of the walk-through program includes teachers receiving feedback, "...Feedback is given on instructional strategies and research-based tools that can be used to support and increase student success" (Next Door High School Accreditation Report). The feedback is perceived as being critical in ensuring that student learning and achievement improves. As one teacher stated, "We try to take our evaluations, our walk-throughs and try to use those as how we want to attain or get better academically. We try to use our data from all of our assessments and different tests" (Leslie, Next Door High School).

Administrative Leadership

The final theme was administrative leadership. There were three elements: shared leadership, collaboration, and being approachable.

Shared Leadership

A key trait of the school leaders in all three schools, according to 51% of the stakeholders interviewed was the use of a shared leadership style. This sharing style not only included the staff and faculty, but the parents, community stakeholders, and at times the students themselves. A review of the data indicated individuals from all key stakeholder groups believed they had a "real voice" in the decision making. One parent stated, "... he really [has an] open the door for people to come in and talk and share their opinion. He make[s] the community feel like they have a voice within the school..." (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School). A key to creating

this climate of shared leadership is making the stakeholders feel welcome, as Dawn stated, “He [the principal] involves you in everything. Like I said I'm at the school all the time and he welcomes you, encourages involvement I mean in everything. It's like he has an open door” (Dawn, Parent Next Door High School). The principals also acknowledge the importance of creating a climate of shared-leadership, He talked about the need “...to bring those people [stakeholders] in ... (to) "sit down, discuss this, (ask) "what can we do to make this better? Give me some ideas, what are your thoughts on this?” (Ian, Next Door High School). Finally, this concept of shared leadership is often extended to the students in the participant schools.

A teacher from Ridge High School explained, “...He also asks for the students input certain things and certain classes ... He asks for feedback from the parents in the community at PTA meeting every month” (Michelle, Ridge High School).

The belief in the opportunity to participate in decision making was not as universally accepted by the staff and faculty as it was by the parents and communities. However, there is a great deal of evidence that shared leadership was the norm in the participant schools. The majority of the principals interviewed believed that they faithfully practiced shared decision making. As suggested in the data that the schools have a culture of shared decision making. The shared decision-making appears to increase teacher buy-in and creates an attitude of “We're in this thing together and we got to work together” (Tim, Ridge High School).

Collaboration

A second leadership theme that emerged was the high degree of collaboration practiced within these participant schools, 41% of the stakeholders interviewed believe that collaboration was important in the level of student learning. The primary focus of this collaboration was between the staff and faculty of the schools for the purpose of improving student learning and achievement, as a problem-solving method. Collaboration enabled better instructional decision making in terms of dealing with specific students and curricular choices. Joseph stated it this way, “We as educators, we talk to each other a lot and collaborate and we just try to have some different times to where we can make sure we're giving them [the students] that positive input that they need” (Joseph, Ridge High School). Jackie believes that “...what is working to help improve achievement is you have to have teamwork among your faculty and staff” (Jackie, Buddy High School). One stakeholder believed that the key benefit of collaboration was the belief that, “...we have the same purpose... we work together because all of us want the same thing: The student success... “(Julie, Ridge High School). Collaboration is also used as a problem-solving method.

These successful participant schools also use collaboration as a problem-solving method. One teacher from Buddy High School remarked, “Once we communicate with each other and find out what's the best way to do it” (Jackie, Buddy High School) they can then formulate a corrective action plan. Another teacher explained, “...collaboration piece is pretty good. Teachers, they talk amongst themselves about different things... what they're doing in their classrooms. If a particular student is having some sort of problem in their classroom...” (Kathy, Next Door High School). Leslie explained that her school collaborated a lot and Chrissy added that collaboration really helped with improving teaching and learning. Collaboration was

identified as a useful tool for the staff and faculty and enabled better instructional decision making.

Approachable Leadership

Forty-one percent of the stakeholders believed their school leadership as open, accessible, and approachable and they view this approachability as a key factor in the high level of teaching, learning, and achievement. The members of the school leadership teams of these schools are strong believers in the importance of being approachable to their staff, faculty, and other stakeholders.

Many of the stakeholders interviewed believed that their principals had created a family atmosphere, "...he has that atmosphere of family and they know they can talk to him and when you in an environment where you feel that people care about you, then you strive..." (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School). For the stakeholders interviewed, this family climate was important for the school's level of success, and it often extended outside the school building. One teacher stated, "...he's always made it very clear that anyone can come to him with any concerns and, like I say, it's not like you have to come and schedule an appointment with him. If you find him in the Dollar Store or in a laundromat, he's always made himself available, wherever he is. As long as it's within reason" (Kathy, Parent Next Door High School).

In general, the stakeholders viewed their school leaders as open, accessible, and approachable and they view this approachability as a key factor in the high level of teaching, learning, and achievement. The school leadership teams of these participant schools were strong believers in the importance of being approachable to their staff, faculty, and other stakeholders. Tim viewed his approachability as a sign of respect, "...guess you might say, a sense of respect to that fact that hey I'm here for you but still I may be over you, but I'm still here. I'm part of this that we're here for the kids" (Tim, Ridge High School). The participating school leadership teams believed that their open door or approachability was also a great conflict resolution format. It was believed that an open and frank discussion could be used to resolve issues and make better decisions. Ian stated,

I have an open door to allow them to come in and talk to me at any time. I've called them in when I even feel like they don't agree with something. I'll say "Okay, let's sit down and we can talk it out here. Tell me how do you feel about it. Be honest (Ian, Next Door High School).

The participating schools' leadership teams were considered approachable, and they used their approachability as an asset to improve teaching, learning, and student achievement.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this research was to collect the perceptions of all the key stakeholders of the three participating schools, to identify the reasons these high-poverty, high-minority rural high schools were being successful in obtaining a high level of student learning and achievement with a student population that typically underperforms in comparison to their counterparts from the urban and suburban schools and from other rural schools. Due to the nature of qualitative research, the ability to generalize these findings is difficult. In spite of the limited population and

the small sample size, the researchers did collect a lot of thick and rich data from stakeholders of each school. We believe that the findings provide a glimpse into the reasons for the high-achieving nature and their ability to narrow the achievement gap of these high-poverty and high-minority rural schools in Alabama, which should be of value to practitioners and researchers.

Student-Centered Educators

There are researchers who indicate the potential to make drastic improvements in student learning and achievement include changing the climate of the school to ensure the school has a supportive learning environment that guides and supports the students (Wilcox et al., 2014). The research also recommends increasing rigor and establishing high academic expectations, (Blackburn, 2018). The perceptions of 68% of the participants interviewed for this project verified this research. As indicated in the findings that in their schools, student focused educators were perceived of as being very important in fostering student success. Seventy-seven percent of them shared thoughts that emphasized the importance of the concern these professionals had for students and that they had a commitment to their students' success that included setting high expectations for them, but also providing support to help them achieve their goals.

Many of the staff and faculty held the attitude that teaching is more than just conveying knowledge, facts, and figures; it is about viewing their students holistically. These professionals focused on not only helping the students succeed academically and building their self-esteem, but also advocating for the students.

These high-achieving schools were mentoring their students, creating an attitude that they may not have all the resources that other schools do but they could still be successful. The participant schools are ensuring their students have the positive attitude that they can be successful despite where they come from and where they attend school.

There are many implications for practice that “flow” from these findings. First, while it is essential that administrators seek teachers who have high skill levels and good academic backgrounds, as suggest in these findings that it is also vital that teachers in these schools have empathy for their students, have a deep concern for their welfare and are willing to reach out to the students in any way possible to help ensure their success. They must also be willing to set high expectations and hold students to those expectations in a caring way. Those preparing teachers should consider these elements of their personality, incorporate the importance of demonstrating a concern for students into the curriculum, and assure that preservice teachers are placed with other teachers who demonstrate these characteristics. Those school officials in rural settings who are working with the type of student population examined should engage in conversations about this issue. Additionally, school leaders should engage teachers in professional development activities that foster their capacity to operate in this manner.

Curriculum Delivery

The single most often noted factor identified in fostering student success, mentioned by 80% of the respondents were the program and practices put into place to meet student needs and foster their learning. The development of these programs included fostering parental and

community involvement in the process. Success also was dependent upon effective professional development.

These findings are consistent with the literature in which changing instructional practices as the route to improving student learning and achievement was identified (Brown & White, 2014), and with the importance of professional development in fostering high quality teaching and student learning. Staff and faculty operated in an environment that encouraged innovation and risk taking in determining teaching strategies and methods. The ability to be innovative and take risks was imperative in these resource poor schools and communities that were competing with the local private schools for support from the local business communities. Innovation and risk taking took many different courses and included not only teaching strategies and methods but in professional development and encouraging community and parental participation.

Professional development is a key part of improving teaching, student learning, and achievement. However, for professional development to be effective it must be high quality, locally relevant, and research based, (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009) and differentiated to the needs, circumstances, and experiences levels of the participants (Kein & Riordan, 2009). Of importance to note that all of these schools had the required professional development mandated by their central offices, but they reported that the most effective professional development were activities tailored to their specific needs and students.

In these high-poverty areas parental involvement tends to be lacking for several reasons, low parental educational level, working long hours to support the family and a number of other family issues, (Rosenberg et al., 2014). Based on the data developed during this study, many of the community stakeholders expressed an interest in making their local school better and a willingness to participate in quality discussions and decision making for improving student learning, achievement, and employability; however, the school needs to extend the invitation. Many of the community stakeholders held a mistaken opinion of the status and condition of the schools, until they became involved in the planning and decision-making process. Then, they developed a deeper understanding of the needs of the school. Additionally, the schools benefited from the participation of the community stakeholders in that they developed a better understanding of the skills and knowledge their students needed to increase their employability with the local community businesses and industry.

The principals in all three-participating schools were long-term or lifelong residents of the communities in which their schools were located. The parents reported that they were approachable and accessible. These leaders were willing to listen to parental concerns and to allow genuine parental input into the decision-making process. Finally, these rural school had a history with many of their students' extended families, for generations these families have been attending these schools and the students' parents were, more likely than not, taught by the same teachers or they attended school with their child's teacher. This level knowledge, understanding, and contact with school staff and faculty is an important "ingredient" in what is making these school successful. A final implication of these findings is that the leaders in these schools stressed the need to meet student needs and provided flexibility for teachers to adapt their materials and teacher approaches to meet student needs, even if they might fail. However, doing so requires that teacher have the skills to implement innovative programs and the models to

follow. To involve parents and the community in this process, school personnel must be willing to reach out to parents and the community, recognize the realities within which they and their children live and design programs and processes that will engage them in the school, in fostering their students' learning and in supporting the school as a whole.

School-Based Strategies

Wallach (2010) found that the critical factor to ensure improved student achievement and outcomes was the quality of the student/teacher relationships. The research indicates that schools provide students with an environment that encourages students and teachers to develop an understanding of the needs of each student and develop a strong almost family type relationship with their students, parents, and the community (Armstead et al., 2010). The advantage of this type of student/teacher relationship is the ability of the teacher to know the strengths and weaknesses of their students, to individualize student learning, and adopt teaching methods/strategies that best meet the needs of their students.

The predominate philosophy of the staff and faculty at the participant schools was to meet their student where they were and move them forward academically, while making the class relevant to the students. Additionally, the stakeholders believed that the students' success was also the result of the core belief of many of the school's staff and faculty that a substantial part of their job was to ensure the whole child was addressed in their classroom not just the academic needs to ensure they were successful outside of school and after they graduated. The most successful schools have a culture of high expectations, and they demand everyone, staff, faculty, and students to work hard in reaching this high level of expectations (Collinson, 2010). Finally, this culture of high expectations must be communicated to the students and their parents, (Chance & Sequira, 2009). This culture of high expectations extends into the classroom, many of the teachers held the belief that a failure to have high expectations was detrimental for the students, and it amounts to a "life sentence" for low-skill and low-paying jobs for the students. Many of the stakeholders stressed the importance of teaching the students that despite their current circumstances they could be successful and "break the mold."

Shouse (1995) identified instructional practices as a key ingredient to improving student learning and achievement. As indicated in the existing research, the need for a wide variety of instructional needs to include, individual instruction, and constructivist methods (Stronge et al., 2011). A key factor in the success of the students attending the participant schools was the instructional focus of the staff and faculty of the schools. The current "buzzword" in education is data-driven instruction. These school officials take data analysis to a new level, not only are they examining student weaknesses, but also strengths and weaknesses of school programs and teaching. Analyzing the all the data to identify the aspects in which teachers are the strongest, with what population and grade level. The key was placing teachers and students together using data to identify the greatest potential for success. The philosophy is using data to inform their instructional decisions. A critical aspect of maintaining this instructional focus is a quality walk-through program.

All three participating schools developed a monitoring program that included walk-throughs and feedback to teachers. As was evident from the data that these school conducted

walk-throughs constantly to monitor the classrooms, instruction, and student learning and achievement. This monitoring included feedback to the faculty concerning their performance in the classroom. The feedback often included both positive feedback and suggestions to improve their effectiveness. The most effective feedback came when the faculty was asked how they thought they were doing, this required them to self-evaluate and reflect on their teaching while allowing the administrator some insight into the teacher's perspective.

One of the implications of these findings are that the teachers and leaders in these schools must believe in their students and view them as people of value. They must be willing to try new approaches to teaching and learning based on student needs. Additionally, these new approaches require the schools to be innovative in their search for methods and strategies while avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach to solving the achievement gap issue. The need for administrators, staff, and faculty to understand the importance of data to inform their instructional decisions is critical. The ability to read, interpret, and use data is an important skill for all educators. A final key to creating a high achieving school is the monitoring of instruction, student learning and achievement, "inspect what you expect," is a valuable tool in creating a high-achieving school.

Administrative Leadership

As clearly indicated in the research that the school's leadership has a significant impact on student learning and achievement through programs, such as, participatory decision making, collaboration, professional development, innovation, and mentoring (Brown et al., 2011). The more active the school leadership is in using shared decision making the higher the level of student achievement, (Leithwood et al., 2008). All three of the schools participating in this study were implementing these strategies, to varying degrees, successfully. One of the interesting findings of this research was the extension of shared decision making into the classrooms to include the students. This pervasive shared decision-making philosophy has increased all key stakeholder buy-in and has created an attitude of "we are all in this together" resulting in greater student learning and achievement. The successful school leaders allow the free flow of information and allow a free debate within their schools, (Leithwood et al., 2008). The stakeholders all agreed that a critical aspect of these successful schools was the approachability of the school's leaders, especially its principal. The ability of anyone to be comfortable talking to the school's principal to address a concern, without fear of reprisal was an important factor in the students learning and achievement. In addition to the stakeholders believing the principal and other school leaders were approachable the schools principals also believed it was important to create an atmosphere conducive to open, frank, and respectful discussion to improve the teaching, student learning, and achievement within their schools. The shared decision making and approachability of the leadership team lead to a climate of collaborations within the schools.

The existing research indicated a key trait of successful schools is a high level of collaboration amongst the staff and faculty, (Chance & Sequra, 2009). The spirit of collaboration must extend past the staff and faculty to include the students, their parents, and other key stakeholders (Finnigan & Daly, 2012). This high level of collaboration extends to decision making and problem solving (Wilcox et al., 2014). A direct result of the participant schools' leaders' belief in shared decision making is a high level of collaboration between the staff and faculty within these schools. This collaboration stems from the decision-making process, the

staff and faculty clearly use the decision-making process to identify areas of concern and determine, as a group, the best solutions to solve their problems.

Some of the implications of these findings are, using collaboration, as a problem-solving method, to identify issues, formulate a corrective course of action, and to ensure there is a feedback loop ensuring their solution worked is an essential part of creating a successful school. Shared decision making and approachability of the school leadership team is indispensable in the creation of a positive and supportive culture within the school. Finally, shared decision making must be authentic; stakeholders know when their participation in shared decision making is nothing more than a “smoke screen.”

Implications and Significance

Through this study, we point to a number of ways in which leaders in rural schools can effectively foster student success. Collaborative and shared leadership, noted in other studies appears to be very important. However, it appears that assuring that the school had high levels of concern for students and that it provided varied types of instruction were strategic issues in fostering success. The focus of academics in schools must include not only the students but the staff and faculty as well. This study is important because much of the research conducted high quality schools in which children from high-poverty, high-minority backgrounds succeed had been at urban/suburban elementary and middle schools, and it is estimated that only about 6% of all educational research is conducted in rural areas (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008). This fact was a significant shortcoming, in the traditional southern area of the United States was home to about 23% of all rural school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

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MiSTERing in the Main Office: Leading Change at Scale

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Abstract

The Call Me MiSTER program, founded in 2000, with the purpose of increasing the number of African American Males in K-8 public elementary school classrooms has continuously worked to diversify the teaching profession since its inception. With more than 200 MiSTER alumni amongst its ranks, these educators have relentlessly pursued classroom success in an effort to provide all students a fair and equitable educational experience. Through this study, I sought to understand how these once successful teachers transfer the skills and principles of the Call Me MiSTER program into the administrative realm of education. The author highlights the perspectives of MiSTERs as they reflect upon (a) the specific dispositions MiSTERs feel enable them to achieve success as an educator and (b) how MiSTERs transmit these dispositions across the entirety of a school campus as a principal. This study has implications for educational leadership preparation programs as they seek to infuse components such as continuous improvement; equity and cultural responsiveness; instructional leadership and community engagement into their programs.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, African American Males, teaching, diversity

MiSTERing in the Main Office: Leading Change at Scale

The year 2020 brought a great deal of sadness to the world. While 2020 held a full-blown pandemic (COVID-19), numerous episodes of civil unrest followed by the senseless murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others to count, and the accompanying widespread social distancing of the United States, America weathered a great deal of despair during the year. However, the year 2020 was also a year of celebration in some cases. The United States saw its first African American, Asian American, *and* female elected as vice president, Crayola launched “Colors of the World” crayons, and Keedron Bryant emphatically stated a mantra for all African American males when he stated, “I Just Wanna Live.” Perhaps indirectly impacting these sad and celebratory events the year 2020 also saw the 20th Anniversary of the Call Me MiSTER program.

Call Me MiSTER

The Call Me MiSTER (MiSTER is an acronym for Mentors Instructing Students Towards Effective Role models) program, founded as an innovative, alternative teacher preparation program, was initially formed by the collaboration of four South Carolina institutions: Clemson University, Benedict College, Claflin University, and Morris College (Call Me Mister Program, 2002; Jones et al., 2019; Norton, 2005) Initially, the Call Me MiSTER (CMM) program was conceived to diversify the teaching population in ONE southeastern state in the United States. Armed with a goal of adding 200 African American males to the elementary teaching corps in the state (CMM Program, 2002), the success of the program and the overwhelming need for teachers, but especially African American male teachers, led to the proliferation of the program beyond the initial four partner institutions. The CMM program has since blossomed to include over 32 colleges and universities across the United States (Clemson University, n.d.).

The CMM program is predicated upon a “Grow Your Own” model of teacher preparation. “Grow Your Own” teacher preparation programs focus on recruiting prospective teachers that possess strong community ties; ties that increase the likelihood of prospective teacher success upon entering the workforce and strengthen their potential of remaining in the teaching profession (Gist, 2019; Gist et al., 2019). CMM, founded in 2000, focuses on ushering African American males into the teaching profession by training participants to serve as K-8 public elementary and middle school teachers. CMM program graduates give back to the profession by serving in predominately low-performing (according to state standards), high-poverty schools. While the number of African American males entering the teaching profession remains scant, as approximately 2% of the United States’ teachers are African American males (Walker et al., 2019), the program, which boasts a strong retention rate of over 85% of MiSTERS matriculating into the profession remaining in the profession (R. Jones, personal communication, July 9, 2019). Consequently, as a result of these consistently robust figures, the CMM program diligently works to diversify the teaching profession.

Cohort members begin their journey in the CMM program by being immersed in a unique living and learning community on their campus. Via pre-arranged residence hall assignments, MiSTERS live together as room, suite, and/or floormates allowing cohort members to learn with *and* from other cohort members while receiving varying levels of academic, emotional, and

cultural support. Using the framework provided by the living and learning community, the CMM program couples a fervent indoctrination of the program's core tenets: ambassadorship, brother's keeper, personal growth, teacher efficacy, and servant leadership with university and state teacher preparation standards. By implementing the "CMM way" the CMM program has played a vital role in diversifying the American teacher workforce by introducing truly transformational educators into the profession.

But what becomes of MiSTER graduates? Since the initial class of CMM graduated in 2004, there have been over 240 fully certified MiSTERS serving in K-8 public school classrooms (Jones et al., 2019). These MiSTERS have enjoyed tremendous success from being hailed as leaders in their classrooms and school buildings to receiving either school-level or district-level Teacher of the Year awards, with some even moving on to serve as faculty at the collegiate level. But it is a special category of MiSTERS that this study seeks to explore MiSTERS who moved from the classroom into the administrative ranks. Through this study, I sought to examine how the CMM program impacted the MiSTERS who moved from the classroom to the main office.

While numerous MiSTERS served as assistant principals (29 currently serve in this capacity) at the time of this study; this study only focuses on MiSTERS serving as principals. Clearly, both an assistant principal and a principal are positions of leadership in American public schools. However, it is equally clear that the roles, responsibilities, pressures, and demands on building-level principals are greater. In addition, while assistant principals can suggest a school's direction, the principal is expected to set the direction or course of progress of a school (Houchen et al., 2018; Militello et al., 2015; Shore & Walshaw, 2018). Therefore, I sought to examine MiSTERS who are employed as principals at the time of the study because I sought to understand how MiSTERS who are principals use their CMM training to "set the course" for their schools. The intention of this article is not to only identify the essential components of the highly successful CMM program but also to facilitate a discussion amongst the MiSTERS concerning the elements that make a MiSTER successful in their classrooms and to determine if it is possible to transfer CMM elements into a whole-school format.

To conduct this study, five of the total seven identified (71%) African American males who are graduates of the CMM Program, who currently serve as building-level principals agreed to participate in this study. The data analysis that results from this study holds the potential to impact positively practices of educational leadership professionals as in striving to prepare future school leaders to meet the varied needs of all students in K-12 settings and it may strengthen the preparation educational leadership students receive as they are trained to lead America's increasingly diverse schools.

Study Methodology

A qualitative methodology was employed for this study as it provides for depth and flexibility in participant responses. This flexibility afforded the researcher the opportunity to probe participant responses to obtain a deeper understanding of those responses. Qualitative research allows for a close examination of an issue in need of exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this study, I sought to identify how the skills, tenets, and principles gained from the largely successful CMM program, instilled into the MiSTERS, transfer from teachers of

individual classrooms to an entire school as a whole. Phenomenological research was the specific research design employed, as it describes the meaning of the lived experiences (a phenomena) of several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers who focus on phenomenology center their research on what commonalities all participants share relative to the phenomena being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In conducting this study, the stories of the MiSTERs who moved into administration were collected by way of their answers to open-ended questions during multiple interview sessions during the 2019–2020 academic year. Each MiSTER was interviewed a minimum of three hours each before member checking ensued. Data were analyzed and triangulated to identify trends and themes. By triangulating the data collected, the validity of participant responses was further strengthened adding to the reliability of the participant responses.

This study was conducted by first interviewing administrative staff members of the CMM program. Emanating from the interviews with CMM staff members, data on the CMM program was obtained, along with the number of MiSTERs who have completed the program and successfully moved into the teaching profession, and some of the accolades and accomplishments of the program's graduates. Also, resulting from these interviews was a list of MiSTERs who currently serve as assistant principals and principals. Each of these data aided the researcher in employing purposive sampling as a research technique. By applying purposeful sampling, the researcher utilized the knowledge gained from interviews with program leadership to purposely select MiSTERs who met the criteria needed for the sample set. From this data, seven MiSTERs were identified (all from a state in the southeastern United States), from this initial sample, five agreed to participate in this study.

Each MiSTER who agreed to participate was personally contacted to set up a time for a face-to-face interview (pre-COVID-19). Data were collected from these face-to-face interviews. During the pre-COVID-19 period, face-to-face visits were held on the respective campuses of each MiSTER. These visits allowed the researcher to observe the study participant in their element as they interacted with students and staff members in real-time. Once schools were closed due to the pandemic, face-to-face interviews moved to an online video conferencing platform. All MiSTER principals eagerly participated in the interview process and were open and forthcoming in sharing their journey from the classroom to the main office and of the impact CMM had upon their lives. From these initial interviews (which were recorded by audio recorder or by video conferencing technology) transcription was completed and data were coded, which allowed several themes to emerge. These themes were used to drive subsequent interviews, which were all conducted via the online video conferencing platform due to COVID-19.

After all rounds of data collection were completed and the process of data analysis was underway; to promote data trustworthiness, member checking was employed. In the process of member checking, study participants were afforded the opportunity to provide feedback and clarity to their earlier interview responses. In addition, the researcher asked clarifying questions to probe for greater detail to obtain a deeper understanding of participant responses.

A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture participant voice by offering a space for these leaders, who each had intimate knowledge of the CMM program, the opportunity to share their thoughts on the CMM program, and how the program had affected their leadership.

By virtue of the rich, thick, descriptive narratives provided by the study participants, insight was gained into the intersection between CMM and educational leadership and how the tenets of the CMM program may enhance the development of educational leadership.

This qualitative study is bounded by limitations, which impacted the results. For example, the sample size of five principals, while more than the majority of the principals available from the CMM program, remains a small number. In addition, each of the respondents are from the southeastern United States rendering this study regional in nature. Furthermore, it should be noted that data collection was impacted by COVID-19. To explain, data collection spanned a period before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. This fact resulted in some of the participant interviews being conducted via a face-to-face format (prior to March 2020) and some other interviews being conducted virtually by electronic platforms such as Zoom (post March 2020). While these limitations bound this study; these limitations also provide an opportunity to explore and expand these findings for future studies.

Table 1

MiSTER Study Participants

MiSTER	Years of Leadership Experience
Matthew	1 year
Louis	3 years
Ben	3 years
Caleb	2 years
Deone	1 year

Table 1 provides an overview of the MiSTERS participating in the study. Pseudonyms are used for all participants to protect their identities.

African American principals make up approximately 10% of the current United States K-12 public school workforce; a figure that has held steady for almost 20 years (USDOE, 2016). In the southeastern state in the United States in which this study was conducted, the population of African Americans statewide registers at approximately 27% while the number of African American male principals falls just short of the national average registering at 9.4%. As the American student population becomes increasingly diverse, it is imperative that the field of education work just as hard (if not harder) to diversify the educational profession. In the year 2000, the CMM program boldly proclaimed that they intended “to recruit, train, certify, and secure employment for 200 Black males as elementary teachers” (in one state in the southeastern United States) (Smiles, 2002). As we stand here at the 20th Anniversary of the CMM program, it has done so; but the efforts of the CMM program have also led to a diversification of the principal pipeline (intended or unintended). From the vantage point of this diversification that this study unfolds, seeking to uncover if the principles and tenets of the CMM program can be promulgated to a whole-school format. If so, the highly successful CMM program holds the potential to affect education positively to a much greater degree and the benefits could be immeasurable.

Emergent Themes

According to Jones et al. (2019) CMM graduates are grounded in “the following tenets: ambassadorship, brother’s keeper, personal growth, teacher efficacy, and servant leadership” (p. 59). The authors defined these core tenets as follows:

Ambassadorship – the ability to articulate and represent the mission and vision of CMM.

Brother’s Keeper – the ability to respect and empower individuals while leveraging the collective strength of the overall group to advance all concerned.

Personal Growth – refers to the process of self-improvement that each participant undergoes as he matriculates through the CMM process. However, that process does not end with the MiSTERs graduation. MiSTERs are demanded to become life-long learners and the CMM program helps to facilitate this expectation.

Teacher Efficacy – All MiSTERs must meet the same traditional standards and benchmarks of other teacher education candidates. However, beyond the traditional curriculum, MiSTERs receive extensive training via its Living and Learning Community, guest speakers, practicums, and whole-group and personal meetings to facilitate additional growth and development.

Servant Leadership – Servant leaders sacrifice personal wants for the group’s needs and commit to a level of stewardship for one’s community that embodies this principle.

(Jones et al., 2019)

Against the programmatic backdrop of the CMM program’s tenets that the key themes of program participants are uncovered. The major emergent themes from this study are that:

- MiSTERs believed that if their schools were to succeed it was up to them to make it happen;
- MiSTERs had a deep connection to their schools and their community, and these relationships were highly valued;
- MiSTERs believed that continuous learning was key to their development as a leader and to the growth of their schools;
- MiSTERs believed that mentoring students (and staff) were essential to moving their schools forward; and
- MiSTERs all highly valued the power and responsibility of CMM experience.

These emergent themes are briefly discussed below and, where appropriate, quotes from study participants are offered to provide greater context.

Servant Leadership – “Don’t be a Hypocrite”

Servant Leadership is framed by the CMM program as sacrificing personal wants for the group’s needs and committing to a level of stewardship for one’s community that embodies this principle (Jones et al., 2019). As Epstein (2013) posited, “Everyone knows that family and community involvement is important for student success in school. There is a big gap, however, between knowing and doing” (p. 115). CMM alumni approach this unique partnership of family, school and community engagement with an incessant desire to create a successful pathway for

student success grounded in one of the program’s core tenets” servant leadership. Deone referenced this premise saying “the calling that we have on us (MiSTERs) we all know this is something that is bigger than you and all of us collectively. This is a higher calling, and we can’t fail.” This calling of consistently eliciting improved levels of student success is rooted in the notion that these leaders feel because they succeeded; then they must reach back and ensure that others succeed; for their success means nothing without the success of others. Ben stated a similar sentiment noting, “I just want to help my people. I am deeply invested and rooted in my community. This is something that my wife, my family, everyone knows about me”. Giving back to the community and putting their community and their school first is a defining hallmark that each of the MiSTER principals referenced. But this ideal of fervently pursuing student success is much more than being highly engaged in the community. Rivera-McCutchen (2021) draws upon her earlier work (2019) and that of Camille Wilson (2016) in stating, “critical care in school leadership is described as going beyond traditional conceptions of care relating to trust and relationship building and is grounded in confronting and dismantling historically inequitable systems in education” (p. 261). Rivera-McCutchen’s ideal of critical care in school leadership rests upon the notion of servant leadership as embodied in the CMM program. Louis meshes the ideals of critical care in school leadership, valuing his school community and servant leadership stating:

I don’t mind putting my school and community first. I look at it [putting the school and community first] as an investment and not so much as a stock investment but I guess you could. But I look at it more like an investment much like MiSTER invested in me. I will tell anybody...MiSTER saved me. It saved me! So, if I can invest in any kid it’s kinda like that movie Pay It Forward and I’m all for that.

Caleb furthered this notion of servant leadership by saying, “It should be everyone’s calling, a part of their moral compass to give back, to put others ahead of self. While you cannot legislate doing it, I try to model it the best I can because MiSTER was modeled for me so I try to model the behaviors I would like to see others adopt in my actions.” Matthew extended the notion of servant leadership by saying, “when I was starting MiSTER, I had a professor tell me that for a servant leader to benefit more than the people they serve makes the leader a hypocrite. And I would not want to be called a hypocrite. And I live by this ideal to this very day.” By employing an almost fervent belief in servant leadership each of the leaders in the study openly and freely give of themselves to their schools and the school community. In essence, these leaders are seen as pillars in their community and figures of importance. These leaders build and leverage relationships in an effort to elevate both their schools and communities as they work to lead their communities to improvement; recognizing that the work that they do “is bigger than just you.”

Our Valued Connection – “The Ties that Bind”

Study participants all had a *deep and undying kinship to their schools; a connection if you will*. As Louis stated, “all of us except for Matthew are products of the communities’ that reared us, and we lead schools in the communities’ that reared us.” This close affinity to both the schools and the communities they served was fostered at an early age. Deone affirmed this stating, “I have been in many different districts, as both a teacher and a school leader. But the attraction to home was always there because they know me here. They know my work ethic.”

But coupled with this close attachment to their communities and schools there was an accompanying desire to improve home. Caleb posited:

being from here, I feel like I have an idea of what it takes to make it out and go to college. And our kids need skills established early, foundational skills, so leading them from the elementary age I have a better chance of instilling what they need to get out and be successful in life. In education, you gotta play the long game and that's what I do for my kids, because by bettering their life chances, I better my community's chances. I once read if it is going to be, it is up to me and I believe that, and I share it with my staff.

These leaders believed and assumed a position that Lomotey (1993) describes as a “compassion for and understanding of all students and the communities in which they live” (p. 396). Lomotey (1993) described principals such as these represented in this study when he said, “these principals are not only concerned with the students’ progress from grade to grade; they are also concerned with the individual life chances of their students” (p. 396). The connections that these leaders have reflected a sense of pride in their role and responsibilities. These MiSTERS felt as reflected by Matthew, “called to serve” and felt a duty-bound obligation to give back to those who had given so much to them.

Continuous Learning – “It Benefits All”

Another theme that emerged in this study is that participants believed in *continuous learning*. Although initially restricted to a single state in the southeast United States, the CMM program has expanded to more than 32 colleges and universities across the United States and attracts a wide variety of participants. Some MiSTERS come into the program as the best their high schools have to offer and some young men, due to a variety of circumstances, may have limited educational options but show potential for greatness. MiSTER according to Louis, “turned a lump of coal into a diamond” or as stated by Ben, “I was rough around the edges growing up and MiSTER changed the trajectory of my life” or even as Louis later said “MiSTER saved me. Plain and simple...MiSTER saved me.” In either case, equally as important as the other themes identified thus far in this study, participants felt that the learnings they were exposed to via the CMM program greatly impacted their lives and drove their desire to learn today. Matthew noted:

I could talk all day about the social and emotional growth I gained from MiSTER, but I think was also positively impacted me were the books that we read and discussed. In high school I had never read *The Miseducation of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson. But it changed my whole paradigm on education, and it definitely influences what I do with my students and staff. As a matter of fact, I just used *The Miseducation of the Negro* last week in some staff development we had at my school. And I got that as a student. Today I am working on some Bettina Love - *We Want to Do More Than Survive* and I'm going to use that too. But in order to help my students and my teachers I need to stay abreast of literature that can help me to help them.

Caleb shared similar sentiments stating:

When I got into MiSTER, I read a lot and learned a lot and then we would discuss stuff (readings) back in our dorms. It was continuous learning. And I appreciate what we learned and how we digested it. Just like MiSTERS never stop growing as a teacher you

should never stop growing. I use those same principles now; I demand that my staff read books and be educated. I openly push a ‘never stop growing’ agenda. If we do that as staff, then we can assuredly expect it from our students. But look at the converse, if we do not continuously learn, how can we honestly expect our children to? We simply have to model continuous learning WITH them and FOR them.

When reflecting on the concept of continuous learning Deone posited: My family thinks that I am a career student (laughs) I have so many degrees and I have been in school so long with this doctorate. But for me it’s ok. MiSTER took a love for learning, a passion, a fire if you will, that was already inside of me and turned it into an inferno. I crave learning and I go back and share what I learn about or read in my doctoral classes with my staff so it’s like they are getting a degree to...just without all of the papers and stuff. But I see my learning as a way of growing my staff so the more I learn the more that they have the opportunity to learn.

The MiSTER principals in this study realized the benefits of continuous learning. They recognized the benefits for not only themselves personally but also for the staff and students they serve. Using their continuous learning opportunities to benefit their staff members was best noted by Ben. Ben spoke of the importance of providing opportunities for the continuous learning of his staff members as an outgrowth of his own personal learning experiences. He recalled a conversation that he recently held with one of his teachers, “I can’t continue to sit here and let you [the teacher] do damage to our kids.” This impassioned plea encapsulates the passion that these men have to make a positive change in the educational system as a whole and in the lives of the children they are charged to lead.

Mentoring – “Show ‘em the Way”

The intense attraction to their schools and communities was also reflected in the establishment of personal formal and informal relationships these MiSTERs established with the children in their charge. To explain, *mentoring* students was often mentioned in interviews by the MiSTERs who were interviewed. Whether their schools had formal programs where students were assigned a mentor or these leaders took it upon themselves to mentor individual students, these leaders felt it was a moral obligation to perform mentoring tasks for students. Louis proudly exclaimed that:

it is my duty to take what MiSTER ([I.E, the Call Me MiSTER program]) gave me and give it to the kids. MiSTER helped me, explained to me how to be a Black man in this society; how to speak; how to build relationships with people. In essence, MiSTER taught me how to become a man.

Ben concurred saying that “MiSTER gave me an example of what a Black male leader looked like.” From this vantage point, the MiSTER principals believed mentoring was their way of giving back not only to the community, or to the student, but to the very program that metaphorically birthed them into manhood. And it was that “rite of passage” these leaders sought to pass on to those they mentored. MiSTER principals offered numerous examples of forms of mentorship they provided to their students, citing activities ranging from tutoring to visiting community sporting events, going into the ‘hood (neighborhoods where the students live), field trips, or just providing a listening ear or a strong shoulder to lean on. In any case the leaders

made it clear to both the student(s) and the student's family that the MiSTER was a resource to help and support the mentee. The twin notions of a strong community connection and a call to serve by mentoring closely aligned to another theme that emerged from participant interviews, the theme of servant leadership.

The Power and the Responsibility of the Call Me MiSTER Experience

Each of the MiSTER principals also referenced the importance, the power, the life-changing influence if you will of the CMM experience. Using phrases such as, “saved my life,” “smoothed off my rough edges,” or “explained to me how to be a Black man in this society” definitely strike an emotional chord. However, when these men spoke of the CMM experience, these “feelings” were just a minor part (albeit an important one) of what they meant when they spoke of the CMM experience. On multiple occasions over the course of our interviews, MiSTERS spoke of the expectations MiSTERS hold of themselves and of other MiSTERS. To explain, Ben stated, “we hold ourselves to high standards. We have high levels of expectations. We have high levels of accountability.” Ben continued by saying “We have to perform as MiSTERS. If we fail, another MiSTER may not get a chance”. Deone echoes similar sentiments stating,

there is some healthy pressure being a MiSTER because you don't want to be the one who 'drops the baton.' There are a lot of MiSTER alums out in the educational community being successful and achieving great things. So, you don't want to let the other brothers down.

Deone also provides some balance to his contention of “healthy pressure” positing that the pressure is balanced out because of the immense support MiSTERS receive from both their cohort members as well as from alumni of the CMM program (brother's keeper).

CMM members embrace the notion of continuous support to one another. This ideal is embedded in the MiSTERS from their undergraduate days. Whether it be by virtue of the living and learning environment or the pervasive mentoring that occurs with upperclassmen showing underclassmen the proverbial CMM ropes; the idea of reaching back to move forward is rooted in the Call Me MiSTER experience. This ingrained form of thought and practice, planted from one's inception into the program and nurtured for four years of an undergraduate experience becomes part and parcel of a MiSTER's collegiate experience and is also transferred into a MiSTER's professional career. This core tenet, a brother's keeper, helps to ensure that MiSTERS, no matter where they are employed, always receive ample support, and leads MiSTERS never to feel alone.

Louis framed his perspective of the CMM experience saying “MiSTER teaches you success. It teaches you to be on time, be organized, to listen, to learn, to continue to grow, to help others, servant leadership.” Caleb added, “the MiSTER experience empowers you to save the community. If not us, then who?” The CMM program instills a culture of greatness and of excellence within its MiSTERS along with a fervent, infectious, almost fanatical belief that they can accomplish these exceptionally lofty goals. These “high levels of expectation” for themselves individually and collectively also extend to their school staffs (who often times are not MiSTERS), who most likely have not been indoctrinated in a MiSTERS mentality nor equipped with the skills necessary to make these goals come to fruition.

MiSTERizing a School

MiSTERizing (a phrase coined by the researcher based upon this study) is the process of transferring, dispersing, and instilling the tenets of the CMM program across a school campus. While there are numerous examples of MiSTERS experiencing individual success in the classroom (with many receiving school-level and district-level recognition), tackling a whole school is a monumental task. School change on any level, MiSTER or not, is a massive task. Numerous educational scholars (Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Loucks-Horsley & Roody, 1990; Williams et al., 2008) posited Fullan's contention that changing an institution as complex as a school necessitates a minimum three-to-five-year time frame (Fullan, 2001). This three-to-five-year period is especially problematic when contemporary authors suggest that the average tenure for principals nationally is four years in duration (Levin & Bradley, 2019). As such, many principals are often not afforded the time necessary to implement a change agenda. This notion, coupled with the realization that many schools which African American principals lead are in dire need of change, only serves further to threaten the prospect of MiSTERizing a school campus. However, undaunted, these MiSTERS persevered and advanced their change agendas in their schools.

In examining the salient themes (connectivity, mentoring, Servant Leadership, continuous learning, and the MiSTER experience) advanced by the MiSTERS as important in their professional development, I asked how they employed those themes in their quest to MiSTERize their campuses. Matthew stated:

that is an interesting term you have right there 'MiSTERize' the school. I have never really thought of it that way. Right now, my school is kind of challenging and we are in the process of establishing order, protocols, and procedures for operation within the staff. But one thing that MiSTER did for me was MiSTER kept the 'why' in front of us. The 'why' is intertwined within each MiSTERS story and it is grounded in extreme perseverance and the overcoming of obstacles. If I can get all of my teachers to see the 'why' and to feel, to embody, the concept of perseverance and overcoming obstacles; I will be well on my way to MiSTERizing my school as you say.

Probing further into Matthew's response, I asked if MiSTERizing a staff that had not received the "traditional" MiSTER experience was problematic. Matthew said, "while the MiSTER experience is the best thing to ever happen to me personally, many of the elements of the MiSTER program are just elements of good teaching and more importantly of basic human decency." Louis echoed similar sentiments, "helping your staff care about students should be a low hanging fruit sort of enterprise; but sometimes it is a challenge and people just realize that maybe this school is not the right place for them, and they move on professionally." In short, both Matthew and Louis espouse a belief that other MiSTERS shared via their interviews that, "you have to care about our kids." Matthew noted, "Caring about and believing in our kids is the number one proposition. I can help a teacher with content; but it's much more difficult to help someone have heart. Teachers have to want the best for every student in your school and they have to fight endlessly to achieve that." Ben reflected this notion by stating, "the difference between a MiSTER and a normal teacher is not only do we believe it (that we can accomplish the best for our students) we are relentless in the pursuit of this goal."

Exploring this idea of MiSTERizing a school further, MiSTERS were asked how to get teachers to the point of caring about students, and of relentlessly pursuing student excellence.

Caleb responded:

You have to keep the students first in everything that you do. Every data conversation, every grade level meeting, every subject area meeting should be all about the student. You have to encourage and create opportunities for teachers to truly get to know each and every student. Behind each student is a story, a powerful story, that once you uncover that story you can reach and then teach that student. And all of this takes time, but I encourage my teachers to use that time and I build that time in our day to do it. Personally, I also model this process with my teachers, and they see me model it with our students. I saw all of these principles employed in the CMM program and I have brought them to my school.

Matthew responded that to MiSTERize one must be vulnerable stating, You have to be vulnerable to your kids (students) and your staff. Being vulnerable shows people that you are in the situation with them. I mean right there with them and that means a lot to people. That helps build connections, build relationships, authentic relationships which are at the core of leadership.

Delving deeper into the notion of MiSTERizing his school, Matthew shared, I use the power of storytelling to take the principles I have learned in CMM to share ideas, to illustrate, to drive home a point if you will, to explain who we are as a school and where we are going.

While these building-level leaders were able to share how they MiSTERize their schools, they were equally transparent in sharing their struggles with MiSTERizing their schools. Louis adamantly shared:

As a classroom teacher, I achieved a great deal of success. But I also admit that I also felt a sense of pain as well watching failure all around me while my class was very successful. The success of my class did not mean anything to me because it was 30-40 percent proficiency across the hall! I mean I could control my class and what happened in my class; but I could not control what happened in the other classes on my grade level. There are times today, as a principal I experience that same feeling. The feeling where it is hard to control what is going on in a teacher's classroom, especially if I see something being done ineffectively. I mean I model lessons for my teachers. But I have 50 plus teachers in this building. If I tried to teach a model lesson in each classroom, I would never get the rest of my work done.

Deone echoed a similar feeling stating, I have a good deal of ancillary staff at my school, and I have to depend on coaches and interventionists, etc. along with teachers to move my students (academically). And the more people between myself and the teacher is both a good thing and a bad thing. It is good because we need the help in the school but bad because sometimes, I need to get one-on-one with the teacher and time or the responsibility of the job may not allow me. So, I wind up needing the additional personnel.

Ben noted a similar belief as Deone and Louis stating, “Change is an everyday struggle. As a classroom teacher I could get my 20 – 25 students to do, but as a principal. I walk in and get it quiet, and I can you a couple of minutes. But soon, I’m going to leave, and you have to get your own respect.” The establishment of effective relationships which lead to improved instruction is but one of the principles MiSTER principals seek to utilize in their schools as they seek to MiSTERize their campuses.

Each MiSTER espoused efforts to maximize staff connectivity to the student population and some MiSTERS even expanded this aspect of connectivity to the school community as well. MiSTER leaders also spoke passionately of their fervent practice of mentoring staff and students in their school and provided examples of their doing so with the staff and students in an effort to model the practice for teachers to then employ. The MiSTERS in this study felt a genuine connection to their school and attempted to personify the concept of servant leadership by giving freely of themselves to their teachers, their students, and their school community. This notion was best characterized by Deone who stated, “my school family, my work family *is* my family. We are all one and the same...family.”

Several of the MiSTERS who participated in this study are currently pursuing advanced degrees and symbolize this *the* notion of continuous learning. They enthusiastically talk of taking the sum of the learnings of their graduate programs and attempting to utilize them in their respective schools. They also referenced the “pay it forward” aspect of the CMM program when they mentioned encouraging their staff members to also pursue advanced degrees as well. Each of these themes reflects the learnings of the CMM program from the perspective of the participants. While the CMM program has several core tenets, as Deone said during our interview “MiSTER is different. MiSTER is not cookie cutter.” In summary, while each MiSTER brings different backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences into the program...these differences when meshed with the core tenets of the program help to create powerful, passionate, driven educators who hold themselves and others to high expectations to create exceptional educational opportunities for the students and staff members they serve.

Conclusions and Future Implications

The CMM program was initially conceived to usher African American males into the teaching profession. Ultimately, the combination of the program’s successful teachings and the individual drive of some MiSTERS to excel professionally led several MiSTERS into administration. While the research landscape dedicated to African American males and educational leadership is not the most vast; contemporary work by Bass (2020), Smith (2021), and Wilkerson and Peck (2021) joins influential works penned by scholars like Lomotey (1993), Brown (2005), Gooden (2005), and Tillman (2004) to name a few, to frame and illuminate a picture of educational leadership from an African American perspective. These scholars have elucidated a variety of characteristics they observed from their research on African American school leaders. Terms such as caring leaders, protectors, defenders, community-centric, etc. all serve, in part, to describe African American school leaders. These same terms are also extended to the MiSTERS (African American male principals) who form the core of this study. These terms melded with the themes identified by the MiSTERS represented in this study. MiSTERS in this study have a deep connection to their schools, their staff members, and most importantly

their students. These leaders also believe that mentoring (provided to both staff and students) and relationships were especially valued. They also feel a call to personify servant leadership; seeing servant leadership as a calling—tantamount to the calling most often referenced in being “called” to the ministry. The MiSTERs in this study also feel an obligation to operate as continuous learners as a form of professional development for them personally and for their schools as well. Each of these themes combines to create what participants described as “The Call Me MiSTER Experience,” and these leaders take these themes with them to the “Main Office” in an effort to MiSTERize their schools.

While the intention of this work was not to gauge the success of these leaders, instead this study examines how a MiSTERs’ personal experiences have helped them become strong school leaders and how they deploy the learnings from CMM across their school campuses. Therefore, a future area of study may be to evaluate the impact these MiSTERs have upon their schools. Looking at quantitative measures such as student academic performance growth or teacher satisfaction/teacher working conditions surveys may yield greater insight into the impact these leaders are having upon their schools. Additionally, those interested in organizational change may see the benefit in extending this study to examine the change process occurring in the schools that MiSTERs lead. In addition, further study on MiSTERs in leadership will also be beneficial as additional MiSTERs move into administrative roles in an effort to see if the themes noted in this work are transferable or if they change as students change and as the field of education changes.

Also, additional areas of study may portend to positively impact educational leadership programs holistically. To explain, while educational leadership programs continue to infuse National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) building-level standards into coursework; many of the principles CMM espouses dovetail directly into the NELP standards. Educational components such as continuous improvement; equity and cultural responsiveness; along with instructional leadership and community engagement are infused into the CMM program. MiSTERs receive essential training in these components via the CMM educational enhancement program, which augments the traditional teacher preparation program components that MiSTERs receive. In essence, MiSTERs receive a “double dose” of educational preparation (the traditional programmatic coursework AND the CMM educational enhancement program) which accelerate their growth and development as educational professionals. The merging of the NELP components and the CMM principles and the potential benefits MiSTERs receive may be of benefit to educational preparation programs and in need of further study.

Lastly, as a part of the CMM experience, program participants across the nation meet each summer in an experience that resembles a religious revival experience. This educational summit called the annual summer Leadership Institute brings CMM participants, CMM leadership, and invited guests to hear influential and sometimes historical speakers in the area of education. As I think of future extensions of this work, it would be to convene, either as a part of Leadership Institute or at a separate date and time a conference for African American Male principals. This conference would be a time for African American male principals (and those aspiring to become principals) to gather and discuss issues of key importance to this specific subset of the educational population.

Often over the course of research on African American males in school leadership, these leaders lament the lack of opportunities to gather and discuss amongst themselves the unique issues they face and share how they cope with the difficulties of the principalship in a safe space of their peers. This space would create a veritable support system for these leaders to contribute to and draw from. The creation of this gathering may help increase the number of African American males moving into administration. The CMM program gets African American males into the profession and works to keep them in the educational field; however, the educational leadership community can do more, must do more to develop further our leadership pipeline.

Recent research from the Wallace Foundation reaffirmed what many engaged in educational leadership already knew—(a) that principals have a substantial impact on student learning outcomes and (b) the principalship is not keeping up with the rapidly diversifying student population (Grissom et al., 2021). “It is on the shoulders” of these findings that the educational leadership community must aggressively respond. Twenty years ago, those instrumental in the founding of CMM also recognized a need for determined and persistent efforts to diversify the teaching corps in America. Twenty years later this effort has born a successful movement that has not only diversified the teaching profession but has also contributed to diversifying the administrative pipeline. As recent studies have also shown, schools that have an African American principal have a positive effect on both African American teachers and students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019). MiSTERS who are principals endeavor to have a positive impact on the schools, staff, and students they serve. These MiSTER leaders fervently work to transfer the tenets of the CMM program, a program they fanatically believe in, throughout their schools in a quest to improve the lives of all they serve. The success that these men have found, has for 20 years, dramatically altered the educational landscape by interjecting energy, emotion, passion, and a pedagogy grounded in high expectations and caring into classrooms across the country. As these men age and grow in their profession, they have turned their attention to taking their place in the “main office” and they have taken their CMM principles with them. The men who participated in this study further the examination of African Americans and educational leadership; they were trailblazers when they embarked in the CMM program, and they remain trailblazers in the field of educational leadership. My hope is that this study furthers the knowledge of the CMM program, of MiSTERS who are in educational leadership, and of how to improve principal preparation as a whole as we work to create schools in which all students have the educational opportunities they so richly deserve. This is our country’s moral imperative, and these MiSTERS are up to the task as referenced by Caleb who stated, “we are just built for this.” Maybe, just maybe they are “just built” to transform education and schools, staff members, and students, and Main Offices will be better for it.

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Using a Framework to Review and Evaluate Educational Technology Resources

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Abstract

School district personnel have an overwhelming number of resources available to them as they seek to grow student success and achievement. A review of the educational technology resources a district is using, their effect, and the equitable distribution of these resources define this problem of practice. This mixed-method, action research addressed a district's use of educational technology product resources to supplement classroom instruction. The collection of current district usage data, the intervention of district curriculum leadership, and the identification of an actionable rubric for measuring educational technology product resources were among the first action steps. Following a four-week review of product resources in use and the amount of instructional time spent work began on a review of selected products to determine overall product quality. During the product resource review stage of work by the researchers and district instructional coaches, a rubric was used to evaluate current educational technology products. The final stage of the work evaluated the effectiveness of each educational technology product. Once completed, through the study results we showed a significant gap between product use and an awareness of those same resources. Additionally, through the study findings, we produced resource quality grading to support a new structured process of review and resource vetting.

Keywords: educational technology, effectiveness of technology, education technology resources

Using a Framework to Review and Evaluate Educational Technology Resources

The purpose of this study was to identify educational technology resources and to determine their impact on instruction and equitable delivery throughout low socio-economic schools. In a qualitative sense, through the study, we gathered information from practical stakeholders within low socio-economic schools in a low wealth district to learn what resources are available and used within their schools, the quality of the products used, and the rationale for their original purchases. Additionally, in this study, we collected testimonies from school-level instructional coaches who monitor the use of current product resources. Quantitatively, through the study, we measured the equitable distribution of product resources to low socio-economic schools, as well as the volume and frequency of instructional education technology resources used throughout the district. The purpose of this study was to guide district and school leaders to purchase educational technology effectively and “level the equity playing field” through the evaluation of currently used products, the provision of a library of approved quality products, and an established framework for the adoption of new and inventive product resources in years to come.

A Review of Educational Technology, Quality, and Effectiveness

As the use of educational technology has progressed through the past century, so has the complexity of its integration, impact on pedagogy, and focus on student outcomes. What began as the use of a few simple instructional tools has become a significant shift in the pedagogical approach (Hattie, 2008; Hew & Brush, 2007). This pedagogical change has led to the development of infrastructure to support the increase in the need for access to both connectivity and learning tools. In recent years, the focus has evolved beyond basic access to effectiveness and student learning. The evolution is the result of shifts in the use of instruction time from traditional instruction to the increased number of educational technology resources. The current challenge has become more related to evaluating educational technology products and determining their value.

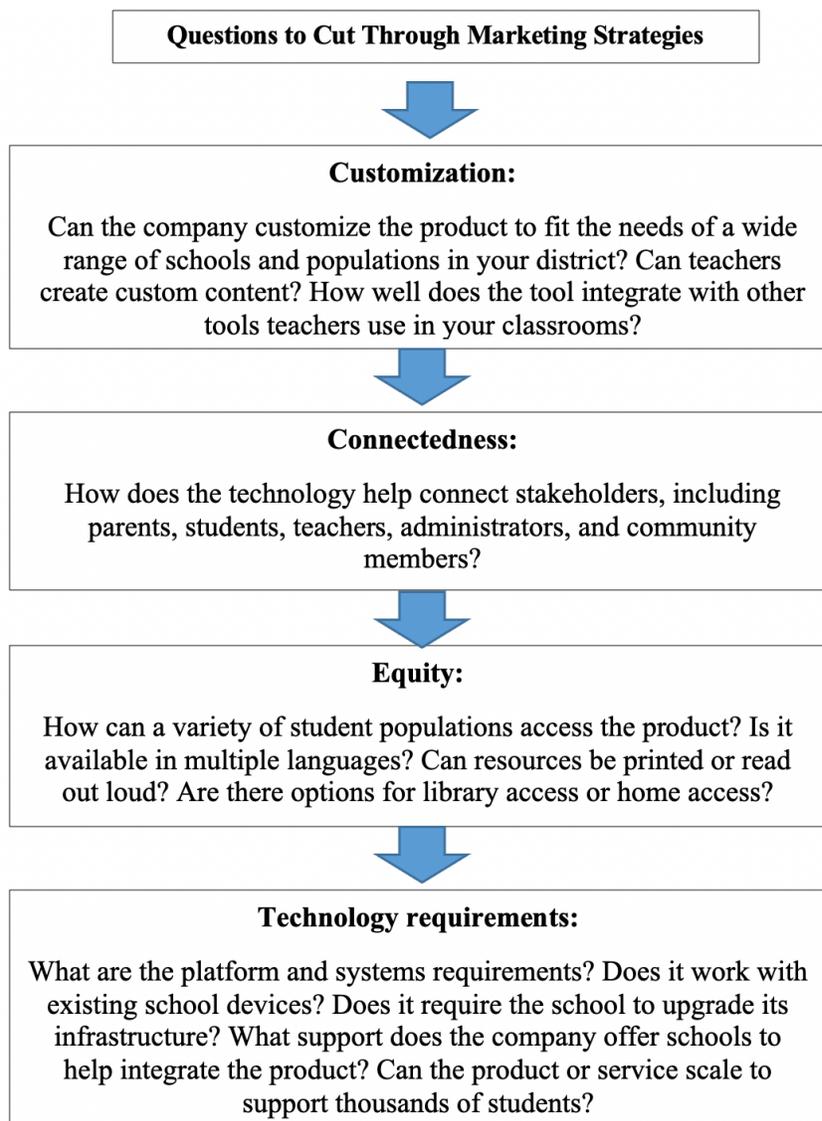
In an evolving market of for-profit companies creating competing products within the marketplace, school officials are left to make determinations of quality with little more than a “sales pitch” to guide them. A process must now be established to focus on determining which educational technology tools warrant the instructional time and how they should properly be integrated to target student needs. Many educators believe that to select an educational technology product for school or student use, first, they must identify the need for a product (Lindl, 2017). The Omaha, Nebraska Public School District has been highlighted for developing a process by which educational technology products are approved or denied. This process decreased the wait time on a decision by months (Lindl, 2017).

In Figure 1, Lindl (2017) provided questions that should be asked prior to making any educational technology product purchasing decision. He also discussed how products should be filtered, pointing to the process used in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, School District, wherein it is first determined whether a product is interactive or adaptive. Lindl explained the distinction between interactive and adaptive products as software interaction versus adapting traditional worksheet content into digitized versions. For example, teachers use

interactive software to engage students and create stimulating learning opportunities. Conversely, teachers who utilize adaptive products substitute a worksheet delivered in a digital form instead of a paper copy thereby limiting the possibility of a stimulating learning opportunity. Lindl (2017) continued by listing further filtering steps to measure a product as engagement, depth of learning, and accessibility for students and educators. In conclusion, though, he also advised that schools need to (a) implement methodically, (b) pilot products, and (c) collaborate with vendors to achieve results both parties want. Finally, Lindl (2017) stated that there is no substitute for quality instruction.

Figure 1

Questions to Cut Through Marketing Strategies (Lindl, 2017)



Delgado et al. (2015) noted that although there appears to be a limited amount of research on the effectiveness of technology use in classrooms, the body of work on the effectiveness of technology is growing. He highlighted the fact that opposing views of the technology impact on

achievement exist, but that there is no disputing the fact that students have the opportunity to access technology and learning material beyond their school buildings to a greater extent. Through this study, we answered three important questions concerning the effectiveness of K-12 technology use. First, how are schools using the technology they have invested in? Second, how are schools and districts using investments to support the integration of educational technology resources, and third, put simply, how effective is the use of educational technology (Delgado et al., 2015)?

Regarding the first question, Delgado et al. (2015) found that most systems investing in educational technology are using that investment to deliver content in three primary ways. Depending on the needs of the students and resources of a specific school, the content was either web-facilitated, blended, or delivered completely online. In response to the second question, in general, the United States government continues to increase investment in educational technology in K-12 education nationally. Delgado et al. (2015) noted that the U.S. government increased overall K-12 education funding by \$93 billion (about \$290 per person in the U.S.) from 2010 to 2013. During the same period, educational technology investment also increased from .5% to .7% of the total investment. This rise in educational technology investment has led to a dramatic increase in device access and, in turn, a significant increase in for-profit educational technology companies. These companies have reported combined revenue of \$2.4 billion (about \$7 per person in the U.S.) in 2013, which is an increase of more than 6.4% in revenues since 2010. In response to the third question, Delgado et al. (2015) observed only modest effect-size impact from the increases in educational technology use. Specifically, in the findings, only computer-based instruction demonstrated more than a positive .2 effect-size change (2015). Delgado et al. (2015) suggest that having a large volume of tools available is significant, but limitations remain.

Hew and Brush (2007) highlighted several principal factors to improve the effectiveness of educational technology in classrooms. One important strategy was to pace integration appropriately, as integrating resources in one or two subject areas at a time ensure access and adequacy of tools.

Delgado et al. (2015) addressed the second question by noting the need for understanding as it applies to investment. Delgado et al. (2015) again cited the earlier work of Hew and Brush (2007) as they stated the critical role of investment in educational technology and the understanding of a school district that this investment goes far beyond the acquisition of classroom devices.

Finally, measurement of an individual tool's effectiveness is dependent on the identification of a quantifiable and distinct dimension of a construct (Crisp & Bonk, 2018). Crisp and Bonk (2018) proposed that there is a need for feedback that works in concert to identify effective learner-centered instruction. They argued that because feedback is central to evaluation within any discipline; therefore, the application of feedback must be applied to the effectiveness of educational technology tools. Due to its centrality, Crisp and Bonk (2018) also argued that feedback is potentially a better indicator of quality than other constructs. They listed the six dimensions of learner-centered feedback as namely, timeliness, frequency, distribution, source individualization, and content of the feedback. Applying these dimensions would arguably

provide a greater comprehensive evaluation of an educational technology resource and its effectiveness and add to traditional approaches of evaluation. Fallon and Forrest (2011) examined a comparison of classroom response systems with handheld response cards to help determine the benefits of digital resources over traditional approaches. Educators in recent years made claims of wide-ranging benefits being derived from the use of digital classroom response systems. Response systems create anonymity, promote metacognition, and increase engagement through a gaming approach to instruction and assessment. Additionally, Fallon and Forrest (2011) found that there were empirical reports of the enhancement of learning using blue tooth clickers, which are used to record digital student responses. However, further investigation led Fallon and Forrest (2011) to the conclusion that traditional resources, such as handheld response cards, produced similar student outcomes in assessment data similar to that of blue tooth clickers. Specifically, Fallon and Forrest (2011) found from the comparison that digital response systems did not produce widespread improvements in assessment data, feelings of hope, or reduced anxiety as compared with more traditional approaches. Adding to this challenge, Cheung and Slavin (2013) stated the industry may not always communicate the complete story regarding educational technology products. Educational technology product developers use a strategy called cherry-picking as they demonstrate and promote product results. Vendors employ the cherry-picking strategy in an effort to emphasize specific findings, which support their cause and purposes.

In an evolving market of for-profit companies creating competing products within the marketplace, schools are left to make determinations of quality with little more than a sales pitch to guide them. The work ahead must now focus on determining which educational technology tools warrant the instructional time and how they should properly be integrated to meet targeted student needs.

Research Study Questions

The following research questions emerged because of the contextual literature:

1. How did the implementation of a rubric to evaluate educational technology product resources influence the perception of current product quality throughout the district?
2. What are the most significant criteria to include in a rubric for evaluating the quality of educational technology?
3. What could be done to monitor the equitable provision and use of subscription-based educational technology product resources in its Title I schools?

Methodology

In this study, the value of currently used educational technology products throughout a small rural school district was measured. In doing so, using these value data, we analyzed the appropriateness of use within instruction in 12 district elementary and middle schools within the small rural district at the center of this study. Additionally, the value of an educational technology product rubric was considered. Both quantitative and qualitative forms of data were collected through this study. The collection of quantitative data, once reviewed, then led to the sequential collection and review of qualitative data points. The hope was that through this approach, a more comprehensive understanding of this research would be completed. This study

was most clearly described as an explanatory sequential mixed-method design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). First, quantitative research was completed, data results were analyzed, which then led to further qualitative research and data analysis. This study is considered sequential due to one form of research following the other.

The study is grounded in action research as outlined by Mills (2003) as a systematic inquiry conducted by teacher-scholar practitioners. Mills (2003) added that action research empowers educators to gather information within their teaching contexts to gain insights and improve practice and learning. Johnson (2005) further remarked:

In an action research project, you are not trying to prove anything. You are not comparing one thing to another to determine the best possible thing. Also, there are no experimental or control groups, independent or dependent variables, or hypotheses to be supported. The goal is simply to understand. As an action scholarly practitioner, you are creating a series of snapshots in various forms and in various places to help us understand exactly what is going on. (p. 24)

Sagor (2000) added that a control group was not needed. Rather, qualitative research usually involves the use of interview transcripts, observation notes, and journals that reveal meaning.

The Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) Cycle was used to guide the improvement process for this action research study. Langley et al. (2009) referred to the PDSA Cycle as providing a model for improvement.

The methodology of this mixed-method action research study was to apply the PDSA action cycle to identify educational technology strengths, weaknesses, and overall quality. Quantitative and qualitative data were both utilized to examine whether the goals of this study were achieved. Three action cycles using the PDSA model were completed to collect and complete both the quantitative and qualitative data collection portions of this study. Using the Learn Platform Chrome extension, product rubric, survey questions, and four interviews, all data were collected, secured, and analyzed. To conclude the study, four teachers who act as technology instructional coaches were interviewed to establish rubric perception.

Participants

Experts in curriculum with a high-level understanding of quality classroom instruction practices and strategies were chosen as participants for the study. All 14 potential participants were veteran educators with more than 10 years of teaching experience. Additionally, all 14 potential instructional coach participants were introduced to the product rubric and evaluation platform prior to study participation. To gain school-specific perspective for resources being used, 12 schools' principals were also selected to participate in this study, as well. These 12 principals represent decision-making and budgetary authority over educational technology products being introduced and maintained within their buildings and classrooms. The principals aided in the capture of current district practices and procedure for the identification and purchase of education technology resources. In addition to the participants selected for this study, the application of a Chrome extension was used to measure educational technology products in use

in the 12 Title I schools in the district. As highlighted in Table 1, the level of experience for the instructional coach participants in the study is shown. Instructional coaches' teaching experience ranged from 11 to 32 years, with an average of almost 20 years per coach.

Table 1
Instructional Coach Demographics

Coach	Level	Content Area Supported	Years of Experience
Coach 1	Elementary	All	14
Coach 2	Elementary	All	32
Coach 3	Elementary	All	18
Coach 4	Elementary	All	15
Coach 5	Elementary	All	23
Coach 6	Elementary	All	24
Coach 7	Elementary	All	20
Coach 8	Elementary	All	19
Coach 9	Elementary	Math	25
Coach 10	Elementary	English-Language Arts	15
Coach 11	K-12	Science	19
Coach 12	K-12	All	26
Coach 13	Middle	Math	11
Coach 14	Middle	English-Language Arts	15

Findings

As shown in Table 2, the use of more than 2,800 education technology product resources during the 2019–2020 school year within the identified Central North Carolina K-8 schools. Further, more than 99% of those products have yet to be reviewed or evaluated formally by the district. Those 2,800 products accessed as part of instruction during the 2019–2020 school year impacted the instruction of more than 7,400 students.

Table 2
Chrome Extension Product Use Breakdown (2019–2020)

District	Educators	Students	Products	Unapproved Products
Central NC School District	1,790	7,461	2,800	99.46%

In Table 3, listed are the seven most widely used paid subscription resources throughout the Central North Carolina school district. All seven of the products listed were used by at least 100 teachers during the 2019–2020 school year within the district to supplement instruction. With three of the purchased products, more than 25% of students from within the district were shown to have accessed the product during the school year. A minimum of three study participants graded all seven of the product resources identified in Table 3 using the Learn Platform rubric as a B product or higher.

Table 3*Chrome Extension Paid Subscription Product Resource Usage*

Product Resources	Educator Usage	Student Usage	Product Grade
Acheive3000	529	3,149	B
Vocabulary.com	248	2,278	A-
Reflex Math	249	2,681	A-
Smarty Ants	282	627	B+
BrainPop	191	793	A-
Newsela	143	909	A-
Raz-Kids	108	152	A-

As recorded in Table 4, the most commonly accessed education technology product resources across the Central North Carolina District during the 2019–2020 school year. This list demonstrates the high level of instructional interaction students and staff have with Google suite products. One additional and clearly demonstrated fact is the high level of product usage throughout the Central North Carolina District in support of assessments. Half of the most commonly used education technology products in the Central North Carolina District, as identified by the Chrome extension, were products used to assess student learning in one form or another.

Table 4*10 Most Commonly Used Education Technology Product Resources (2019–2020)*

Product Name	Educators	Students
Google Docs	1,223	6,504
Google Drive	1,147	6,319
Google Slides	1,111	6,175
Google Forms	988	5,830
Google Classroom	950	5,689
Quizizz	774	5,574
Google Sites	958	5,360
Kahoot	769	5,504
Quizlet	701	5,337
Schoolnet	730	5,148

In Table 5, the top 10 most common educational technology resources are again listed by order of use. In this table, product resources are listed with educator grades provided from internal instructional coach grading and through the Learn Platform rubric. Only one of the most common products in use within the identified Central North Carolina school district during the 2019–2020 school year received a grade of less than A-. Grades were achieved using a minimum of three grades from at least three different individuals.

Table 5*10 Most Commonly Used Education Technology Product Resource Grades*

Product Name	Educator Grade
Google Docs	A
Google Drive	A
Google Slides	A
Google Forms	A-
Google Classroom	A-
Quizizz	A-
Google Sites	A
Kahoot	A-
Quizlet	A-
Schoolnet	B-

Rubric Criteria

In Table 6, illustrated are responses extracted from four instructional coach interviews. Identified within the table are criteria from within the Learn Platform rubric specifically mentioned or implied as priority considerations when determining educational technology products to endorse and support within instruction. Variations in responses were found to exist depending on the type of educational technology product graded with the Learn Platform rubric. The most common response centered around the impact on teaching and efficiency, and effectiveness. All four coaches either directly or indirectly referenced this rubric criterion as an important condition when evaluating product resources.

Table 6
Most Important Rubric Criteria (2019–2020)

Coach	Ease of Use and Navigation	Comprehensiveness and Effectiveness of Features	Comprehensiveness and Accuracy of Content	Technical Merit	Alignment with Learning Objectives and Standards	Impact on Student Learning	Impact on Teaching Efficiency and Effectiveness	Recommend
Coach 1	X				X		X	
Coach 2		X	X				X	X
Coach 3		X	X			X	X	
Coach 4			X		X	X	X	X

Confirmed Opinions

The rubric used to measure resources' quality was used by the researchers to confirm previously held assumptions of products evaluated. The use of the grading rubric helped substantiate the strengths and merits of the products previously in use in classrooms. Coach 4 specifically stated that one product they evaluated and felt was strong already, the rubric made them feel even better about. Similarly, Coach 2 reported the rubric confirmed a product evaluated provided further confidence in providing an endorsement to classroom teachers, saying, "It's still going to be a tool that I use, and I'm going to promote to others."

Resource Selection

One theme that developed from principal surveys impacting equity was the manner in which principals select, approve, and ultimately purchase educational technology product resources for their buildings. In the survey, the Central North Carolina school district elementary and middle school principals were asked to share the products which they purchased for their schools. Principal responses varied greatly on this question. From the survey responses provided by the principals, the most common process was to have School Improvement Teams making the decisions via committee. As reasons for adoption and purchase of resources, Principals 3, 4, 5, and 6 cited school-improvement teams or simply teachers declaring needs or asking for product resources they liked or with which they were familiar. These similar yet random approaches point to a deeper inequity within instructional resources between district schools. Using this practice may subject students to utilizing resources recommended by a teacher or teachers who were not as qualified to evaluate the resource as other teachers were. When determining an equitable provision of resources that will impact instruction, Reich (2019) believed the first step toward achieving digital equity is to lead educators toward a clear understanding of equitable teaching practices in general. Riech's findings suggest there may need to be a more basic and foundational approach to core instruction in the Central North Carolina District before greater equity in education technology resources can be achieved.

Inconsistent Resources

In addition to the decision-making process used to make education technology resource purchases, principals were also asked to simply list educational technology product resources they have endorsed for use within instruction in their buildings. The answers provided by the elementary and middle school principals were filled with overlapping lists of product resources that frequently did not match. An appropriate comparison to examine this resource provision contrast was demonstrated in the responses from Principal 1 and that of Principal 2. Their lists of provided resource products were vastly different. Principal 1 simply noted that their school chooses not to approve or use any school-identified subscription education technology resources. In contrast, Principal 2 listed six education technology resources they purchase to support various instructional purposes.

Summary of Findings

Throughout the review of the data collected, my previously held beliefs were confirmed and evidence supporting the need for further study was uncovered. Clearly supported in the findings was an unbridled use of education technology resources in the Central North Carolina school district at the center of this study. Specifically, the findings demonstrate support for further work to strengthen instruction, improve equity, and measure the impact of resources as it relates to the use of education technology in schools. Education technology is having a significant impact on teaching and learning. These findings point to the need for additional and targeted research to support the integration of these resources with consistency and fidelity to ensure student growth and instructional success.

Implications for Practice and Future Studies

The underlying assumption asserted through this study was that by using or developing a systematic approach to review and evaluate educational technology resources, school district personnel could identify, purchase, and provide high-quality products with equity throughout the system. In recent years, public schools have been overwhelmed by an educational technology market that has been growing exponentially. In the United States alone, the education technology industry has grown to more than \$55 billion annually. Within the industry over 10 years ago, United States' K-12 schools spent more than \$20 billion on educational technology (Johnson, 2011). According to a "Market Analysis Report" (Education Technology Market Size Report, 2020–2027, n.d.) published by Grand View Research, the overall education technology industry has grown to more than \$89 billion in 2020.

During the past few decades, educational technology has evolved to a point in which it has become a substantial tool for information delivery within the classroom. In addition, educational technology has given rise to companies that continually develop products, platforms, and resources that have promised to simplify instruction, improve student outcomes, and engage learners in ways traditional instruction techniques cannot (Crisp & Bonk, 2018). Educational technology as pedagogy is a modern form of teaching that is art, science, and delivery system. Contemporary frameworks such as the Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge framework (TPACK) seek to define the process by which education technologies can be integrated successfully within the instructional environment (Koehler, 2012). Similarly, Dr. Ruben Puentedura's (2013) Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition model grew in its popularity as a resource framework to establish the proper blending of educational technology resources within traditional instruction practices.

The emergence and growth of educational technology within schools and classrooms was reflected in the Central North Carolina school district usage data measured over the past year and during this study. The *LearnPlatform* Chrome Extension used to measure educational technology resources uncovered 1,790 educators, and 7,461 students had accessed 2,800 different product resources during the 2019-2020 school year. From those 2,800 product resources found 99.46% of those were never formally approved by the Central North Carolina school district.

However, it is more than simply discovering a new product resource and applying it within instruction. When teachers use educational technology most effectively, they are providing students multiple opportunities such as problem-solving, drill and practice, tutorials, programming, and word processing (Hattie, 2008). Additionally, Hattie (2008) highlighted that web-based instruction commonly neglects instruction fundamentals such as timely feedback and interaction. The average effect of web-based instruction was lower than other forms of computer-based instruction, with an effect size of ($d = 0.24$) (Hattie, 2008). An effect size of .24 according to Hattie (2008) can be translated as having only a small positive impact on student achievement. An interview response from one of the instructional coaches supported this finding when the coach remarked about the *LearnPlatform* rubric's ability to provide a level and consistent measure by which similar product resources could be compared to one another. Prior to the use of a rubric, coaches would make decisions regarding quality based on personal experience with a product resource or the shared experience of another educator. Never before did they have an equitable and consistent means of evaluating like product resources to determine the best fit for their school's academic needs.

Product quality is at the center of this study for each resource evaluated. Weeding through the overwhelming number of products in the marketplace and evaluating them beyond a vendor sales pitch is paramount to the strong instructional application of education technology resources. The identification of a rubric such as the one used for this study is fundamental to establishing a value for each resource. The *LearnPlatform* rubric used during this study was effective for generating a graded evaluation of each product. During this study, the scholarly practitioner observed the applied grades trended almost exclusively toward the grades of A and B. No product resource was graded as an F during this study. Another key observation noted was that products evaluated by the instructional coaches were products they already had used and formed opinions of through prior experiences. Consequently, grades given to evaluated products tended to be inflated.

In their evaluation of products purchased to support classroom instruction in their schools, the 12 principals surveyed in the small rural district during this study identified only one substantial criterion, alignment to standards, as a rationale for purchase. Principals in the Central North Carolina district, prior to this study, focused on only one of the eight separate criteria used within the *LearnPlatform* rubric. During the study, instructional coaches used the *LearnPlatform* rubric and found two of the eight criteria to be more important than the others as they evaluated and graded product resources. Instructional coaches noted in interview responses that both the *Impact on Teaching Efficiency and Effectiveness*, as well as the *Comprehensiveness and Accuracy of Content* as the most important rubric criteria of the eight used.

The criteria used in the *LearnPlatform* rubric were limited by their general language and allowed for too much ambiguity in responses and perception. Though the application of the rubric was helpful in breaking down resources to a degree, rubric criteria must have greater specificity to strengthen evaluation. Additionally, in underlying ways, criteria importance appeared to be influenced by the role of the reviewer.

The continued use of a tool to monitor resource usage is needed to provide continued monitoring. If diligent and consistent monitoring of product resource use is eliminated, the

introduction of new and unevaluated resources will certainly find their way back into classroom instruction. Additionally, the equitable provision of product resources is reliant upon the process of product usage monitoring and product evaluation. The further development of a product library to house and inform schools of recommendations and approved resources will encourage an equitable product playing field for schools to access.

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