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# Homegrown rural school leaders

Dorian Dawn Olsen  
*University of Iowa*

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HOMEGROWN RURAL SCHOOL LEADERS

by

Dorian Dawn Olsen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy  
degree in Educational Policy and Leadership Studies in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Liz Hollingworth

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Dorian Dawn Olsen  
has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in Educational Policy and Leadership Studies at the May 2017 graduation.

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Leslie Locke

To my beautiful, brilliant children, Gabrielle and Robert, who have endured many sacrifices so their mommy could achieve her dream. Your patience, support, and love are what kept me going when I wanted at times to give up. I hope this inspires you to always reach for the stars and know that you can do whatever you put your minds to.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I set the goal when I graduated with my Bachelor's Degree, to receive my Master's and then my PhD degree; however, at that time I envisioned that I would obtain my graduate degrees while still teaching. It wasn't until later in my life that I decided to come back full time and immerse myself in the PhD program as a full-time student, in order to get done faster, and because I knew as a single mom that working full time and working on my PhD while raising two children with significant health needs was going to be a challenge. I wasn't going to allow myself to fail at any of those things, so I decided to take a risk, leave my full time job, and come back to school full-time. Though it involved sacrifices and was a scary decision, it is one I am so thankful I made. This has been a very challenging yet fulfilling journey, and I know that if I would have chosen to work on my PhD part time the journey would have been much different, not as rewarding, and much more of a challenge.

The successful end to this journey would not be possible without the love, encouragement, and unyielding support of family, friends, and faculty along the way. In addition, I want to thank the participants of this study who allowed me into their districts and candidly shared their time and experiences in order for me to complete this research.

I first want to thank my family; my children Ellie and Robbie, my mother and step-father, and my fiancé Seth. There were many times through this journey that I wanted to give up, but seeing my children's faces and knowing that I wanted them all to see me persevere is what kept me going, as well as the hope that my children seeing me graduate will help abolish some of the guilt I felt about the sacrifices they have had to make to allow me to achieve this goal. My mom and step-dad were my rocks during this time,

always there to help with whatever I needed whether that be child care, dog sitting, warm dinners, help with yard work, or just encouraging words, support and prayers when I was feeling frustrated and defeated. My fiancé Seth who came into my life during the last couple years of this journey, and has provided love, support, a new computer when mine crashed during comprehensive exams, and encouragement to help get me through. He brought hope, positivity, and love into my world that also helped propel me to persist. Their understanding, love, and their support is why I am here today.

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## ABSTRACT

Background: Research on rural educational leadership is often overlooked in educational research, specifically within the context of homegrown leaders, or leaders who have been lifelong residents in the districts where they were students, teachers, and now lead as principal. Rural districts face many challenges that differ from urban districts. Looking at how these homegrown leaders use transformational leadership to overcome these challenges can assist principal preparation programs in preparing administrators to lead in rural districts as well as policymakers as they look at policies and funding that impact rural districts.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
- 2) How do these rural principals, identified as transformational leaders, use transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to rural districts?
- 3) Do the principals' prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?

Setting: Research for this study took place in two rural school districts in neighboring Midwestern states. The communities the participants in this study reside in are over 100 miles apart, yet both the school districts and towns share similar characteristics. These districts are housed in farming communities with a population between 1,500 and 1,800 residents. The demographics of both districts are very similar consisting of over 97% white students, with the town's population matching that of the

school. The similarities are also present in the physical description of the school sites and collaboration with neighboring districts. Both of these districts consist of one large building housing all students, and superintendent on the same campus, and share resources such as staff, transportation, and athletic and academic programs with neighboring districts.

**Participants:** The two school principals in this study were chosen due to similar characteristics of being homegrown leaders who both reside in similar rural districts and communities in neighboring states. In addition to having similar contexts, the participants in this study share many similarities as well. Both are male and have lived in the district where they were former students, teachers, and coaches prior to becoming the school principal. In addition, both of the principals in this study were chosen via convenience sampling due to prior experience of the researcher within both of these communities and their qualifications of being homegrown leaders.

**Research Design:** This is a qualitative case study analyzing two cases with two participants.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Data collected for this qualitative case study include multiple interviews with both participants; observations in school and community events; observations at staff, parent, and student meetings; district handbooks and information collected from the district website and state reporting agencies, including demographics, free and reduced lunch status, number of staff, per pupil funding, assessment scores, and school improvement plans. Open and axial coding is used to analyze data. Member checks, triangulation of data, memos, and peer review are used to help ensure validity.

Findings: The findings of this study reveal that being a rural, homegrown, transformational leader is a strength to overcome rural challenges. These principals' prior history and relationships within the district and community, as well as the deep understanding and background knowledge they have of the values and culture of the district and community, allow them an easier time building and maintaining trust and relationships, creating a positive school culture, and enacting change. Additionally, their understanding of the challenges of rural districts based on their prior knowledge as a student and teacher have given them foresight to help them better understand and manage the challenges they encounter specific to rural districts.

Conclusions: This study demonstrates how transformational leadership assists rural principals in managing challenges specific to rural districts. Additionally, it adds to the literature addressing the challenges rural districts encounter from first-hand experiences of two principals who have lived in their respective districts their whole lives. This study provides insight to principal preparation programs, especially those training principals in states with a high percentage of rural districts, regarding how transformational leadership can assist rural principals in managing the challenges they will encounter in a rural district. This study is also beneficial to rural superintendents as they look to hire new principals.

## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examines the leadership practices of two rural public school principals in Midwestern states. The principals are native to the communities where the schools are located. Prior to becoming principals, they attended, taught, and coached at the schools they are now leading. The principals have been identified in using leadership practices of building trust, maintaining positive relationships, building a positive school culture, and using shared decision-making, which are practices of transformational leaders.

This study investigated how the principals use transformational leadership practices in conjunction with their personal ties as they lead their rural schools. The research questions guiding the study were: (1) How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders? (2) How do these rural principals, identified as transformational leaders, use transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to rural districts? and (3) Do the principals' prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?

This study was an in-depth examination of two rural, homegrown, transformational leaders. Through interviews, observations, and data collection, these leaders provided an understanding of what it is like to be a homegrown rural leader, and how they used transformational leadership practices within their districts. Demonstrated is how they used their homegrown leadership not only to deal with the challenges unique to rural districts but also to improve school culture and positively impact the many change initiatives that each principal implemented during his tenure.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative case study of two rural principals in neighboring Midwestern states examines the ways in which the personal histories of rural principals influence their abilities to effect change in their districts using transformational leadership to contend with the unique challenges of rural districts. While research is plentiful regarding the challenges of rural leadership, research is limited regarding homegrown leaders, that is, leaders who were raised in the districts they now lead and who were students and teachers in those districts prior to becoming principals. Similarly, studies that examine how these homegrown leaders manage rural challenges through a transformational lens are also limited.

Transformational leadership is the process by which leaders motivate their followers towards change. Transformational leaders are “change agents” who inspire followers through a shared vision, positive role modeling, empowerment, and building trusting relationships (Northouse, 2015). Researchers have examined how a transformational style of leadership influences school culture, relationships with stakeholders, and decision making (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). However, there is limited research connecting transformational leadership to rural leadership, specifically regarding homegrown leaders—those who have lived in the district in which they were former students, teachers, and coaches prior to taking on the role of principal. Instead, the existing research has used a different theoretical framework or has been conducted in other countries. Schuman (2010) conducted a qualitative case study of four rural principals using an ethical care and social reproduction theory. He used these theories to address

how these principals who were raised in the districts they now lead handled rural challenges. Several studies conducted in Australia addressed how context plays an important role in rural leadership. These authors posited that rural leaders who are from the district they lead as well as understand the community norms and values are better able to lead in rural areas (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Clarke & Wildy, 2004). Likewise, Foster and Goddard (2003) revealed in their research of Canadian principals that principals who were raised in the district they now lead are better equipped to manage the challenges and tensions of rural districts.

Rural educational leaders face unique challenges compared to their peers in urban districts, such as limited resources, personal and professional isolation, fewer qualified staff, and fewer opportunities for professional development and mentoring (Bartling, 2013; Montgomery, 2010). These unique challenges are even more prevalent for those principals who are unfamiliar with a rural setting and do not have an understanding of the community's unique values, culture, and traditions that impact the school culture (Salazar, 2007; Starr & White, 2008).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the rural leadership pipeline in two rural farming communities in the Midwest. Specifically, this study focuses on two rural Midwestern high school principals who are “homegrown”— they have background experience, knowledge, and understanding of the rural communities they serve. In addition, homegrown in this study means that these principals live in and were students, teachers, and now principals in the same district. The lens of transformational leadership (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005)

will be used to connect the concepts of trust and relationships, creating a positive school culture and enacting change. Research indicates that rural leaders face challenges their urban counterparts do not face, and the hypothesis is that the rural leaders in this study will reveal challenges that are unique to rural districts. The research questions guiding this study are:

- 1) How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
- 2) How do these rural principals, identified as transformational leaders, use transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to rural districts?
- 3) Do the principals' prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as such as building trust and relationships, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?

The two Midwest states in this study both have a high percentage of rural districts, as is true of most Midwestern states (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). The two states in this study were chosen only because they are homes to the two participants in this study. Upon questioning the participants to inquire if there were any other homegrown principals in their region, both commented that there were none that they knew of. There were principals in nearby towns who had taught in the district and then became principals, but none to their knowledge who had lived, attended as a student, taught and then became principal in the same district. This finding supports the lack of literature regarding homegrown leadership (Schuman, 2010)

The two Midwestern states in this case study, separated by a river, are homes to both of these principals and the rural districts in which they have lived their whole lives and now lead. This chapter will first discuss the significance of this study and gaps in the current literature. Next, the challenges of rural districts in both states will be reviewed followed by a brief summary of the contexts and participants. The conclusion of this chapter will be a definition of key terms and a summary.

### **Significance**

In general, the topic of rural education is limited (Ayers, 2011; Beesley & Howley & Howley, 2014). A review of the condition of rural education research through a search of journal articles between 1991 and 2003 revealed only 10 of 221 research studies were considered comparative or causal studies and deemed by the authors to be high-quality research (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). In addition, out of 498 total rural education articles reviewed, only 20 pertained specifically to rural education leadership in some context (Arnold et al., 2005).

A search on ProQuest, Google Scholar, and EBSCOHOST for “rural homegrown leaders,” “rural education leadership pipeline,” “rural, homegrown, transformational leaders,” “historical ties of/and school principals,” “historical ties of school administrators,” “homegrown educational leaders,” and “rural transformational leaders” revealed very limited results that related specifically to those topics in the United States. Research studies were analyzed regarding homegrown leaders from Australia (Clarke & Stevens, 2009) and Canada (Foster & Goddard, 2003). The lack of literature on homegrown leaders in rural areas and transformational leadership specific to rural

districts indicates a need in the educational leadership field for additional research on these topics.

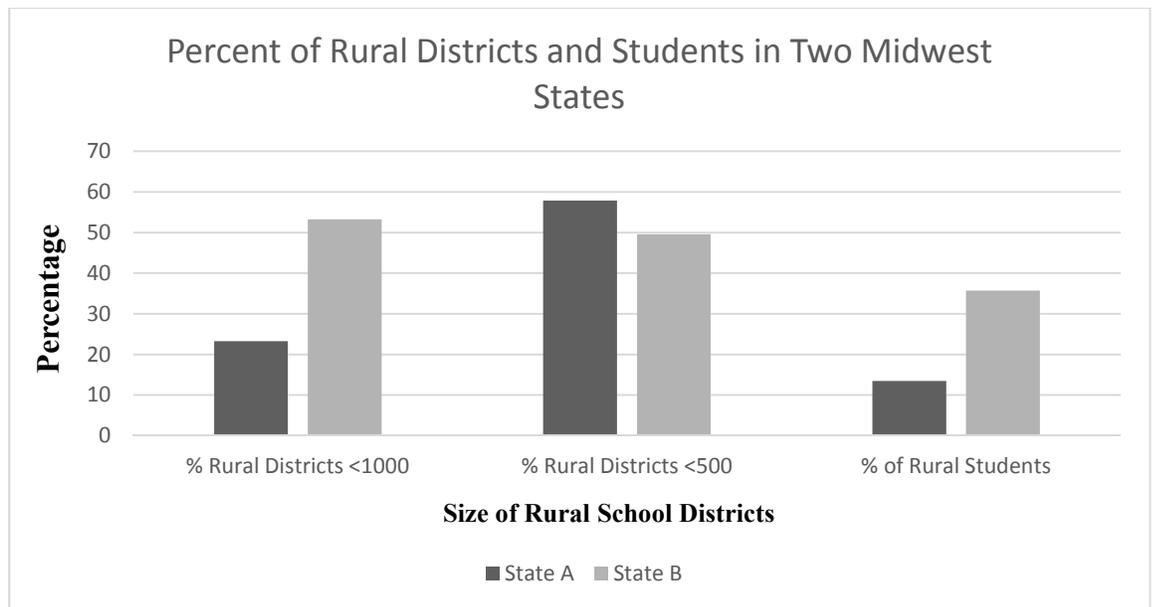
A broader search conducted on “challenges of rural schools,” “rural school principals,” “rural leadership,” “transformational leadership,” and “rural school culture” revealed scholarly research that will be reviewed in Chapter II to analyze transformational leadership theory and the challenges relative to rural districts.

This study will address the gaps in the literature by specifically addressing “rural homegrown leadership” through a transformational leadership lens. Additionally, this research will help to address how rural leaders can use transformational leadership to manage the challenges unique to rural districts. This research will also add to the very limited research on how homegrown rural leaders use their understanding of the community culture and prior relationships to influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust and relationships, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change. This research can also be utilized by rural superintendents as they look to hire new principals and ensure they are receiving professional development regarding how to better understand and handle the complexities unique to their rural communities.

### **Rural Districts’ Challenges**

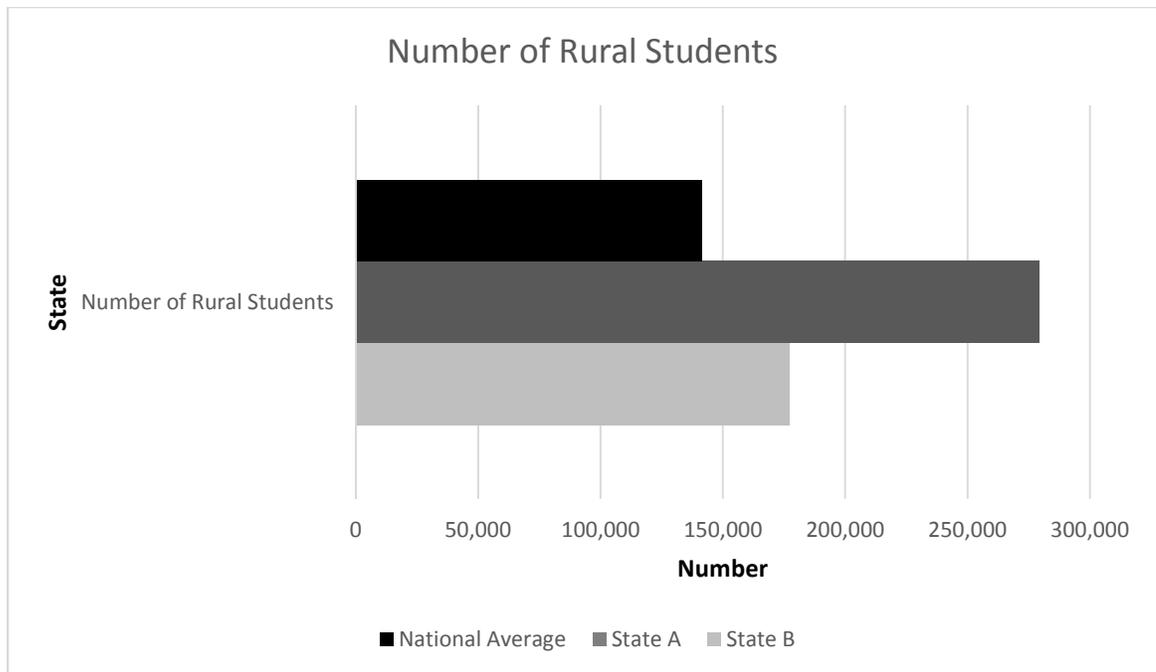
The rural school landscapes in both of these Midwestern states share many similarities and challenges. According to the Association of (State A) Rural and Small Schools (AIRSS), districts in this state are defined as rural if the enrollment of the district is fewer than 750 students. State A has one of the highest populations of rural districts of all 50 states, with a total of 58% of the state’s districts housing fewer than 500 students

(Johnson et al., 2014). In State B, 49.6% of districts have fewer than 500 students (Johnson et al., 2014). (See Figure 1 for a comparative bar graph representing the percentage of rural districts as well as the percentage of rural students in each state.) Figure 2 displays the number of rural students enrolled in both states compared to the U.S. average. State A has more rural students than State B, though its percentage of rural students as indicated in Figure 1 is lower due to the large number of students enrolled in urban areas in State A (Johnson et al., 2014). Though both of these states have a high percentage of rural districts and rural students compared to the national average, the number of rural districts in both states are declining due to consolidation, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.



Note: Adapted from “Why Rural Matters 2013-2014: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States,” by J. Johnson, D. Showalter, R. Klein, and C. Lester, 2014, [http://www.ruraledu.org/user\\_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf](http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf)

*Figure 1.* Percentage of rural districts and students in State A and State B rural schools.



Note: Adapted from “Why Rural Matters 2013-2014: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States,” by J. Johnson, D. Showalter, R. Klein, and C. Lester, 2014, [http://www.ruraledu.org/user\\_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf](http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf)

*Figure 2.* Number of rural students in State A and State B compared to the national average.

One of the challenges both State B and State A face is a decline in the number of rural districts due to consolidation. Consolidation is defined as the merger or reorganization of two or more small, independent school districts to form a larger district (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006). Consolidation occurs in rural districts as a result of decreased student enrollment and funding (Reynolds, 2013). Consolidation follows the assumptions that bigger districts can operate on larger economies of scale, reduce per pupil costs, and offer better instructional opportunities for students (Arnold, 2000). The following paragraphs outline the struggle in both State B and State A regarding consolidation.

Rural school district consolidation in State B is on the rise. For instance, in July of 2014 alone, 14 rural school districts in State B consolidated to seven, and one State B

rural district closed completely (Stegmeir, 2014). State B offers financial incentives to those districts that partner with neighboring districts for whole grade sharing, a practice in which districts share students, staff, and programs. Furthermore, small districts that share a superintendent are offered additional funds (Stegmeir, 2014). These state-offered incentives encourage struggling districts to move towards consolidation (Surface & Theobald, 2014).

State A faces similar consolidation concerns. In 2011/12, the Governor of State A called for mandatory consolidations of small schools in State A, requesting that over 500 school districts consolidate, taking the number of school districts at that time from 868 to 300. The (State A) Department of Education, (State A) Department of School Boards, and the general public opposed this measure, and it did not pass (State A Association of School Boards, 2015). However, a committee was formed called the Classrooms First Commission, which recommended virtual consolidation so that districts could remain separate but share educational and operational expenses ([http://www.isbe.state.\(.A\)us](http://www.isbe.state.(.A)us)). While virtual consolidation may enable some districts to keep their doors open, the declining number of school districts in this state is a trend that lawmakers and school district officials expect to continue in the future (VanTuyle & Reeves, 2014). One reason cited for consolidation, (and another challenge for rural districts) is a decrease in education funding (Bard et al., 2006), which will be examined in the following paragraphs.

School districts in both of these states receive funding from state, local, and /or federal funds, and this amount is determined by factors such as district property values, state aid formulas, and federal education programs (State A Board of Education, 2015;

State B Department of Education, 2016). The majority of school district revenue is received from state funding (Leachman & Mai, 2014). However, each state has the right to determine how funds will be distributed to districts and what the base funding amount will be per pupil (Klipsch, 2011). This base amount is often countered to compensate for the district's property tax rate to ensure equitable education for all students. For example, a school in a community with higher property taxes would receive less money per pupil than a school in a community with a lower property taxes (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2010; Klipsch, 2011). Local taxes, then, help offset the lower state per pupil rate in districts with higher property taxes, while those districts with low property tax values receive less local funding (Leachman & Mai, 2014). Since funding for school districts is based on student enrollment, when enrollment drops so does revenue. However, though enrollment is declining, the cost of utilities, staff, and required programs remains the same creating a financial burden for rural districts (Reynolds, 2013).

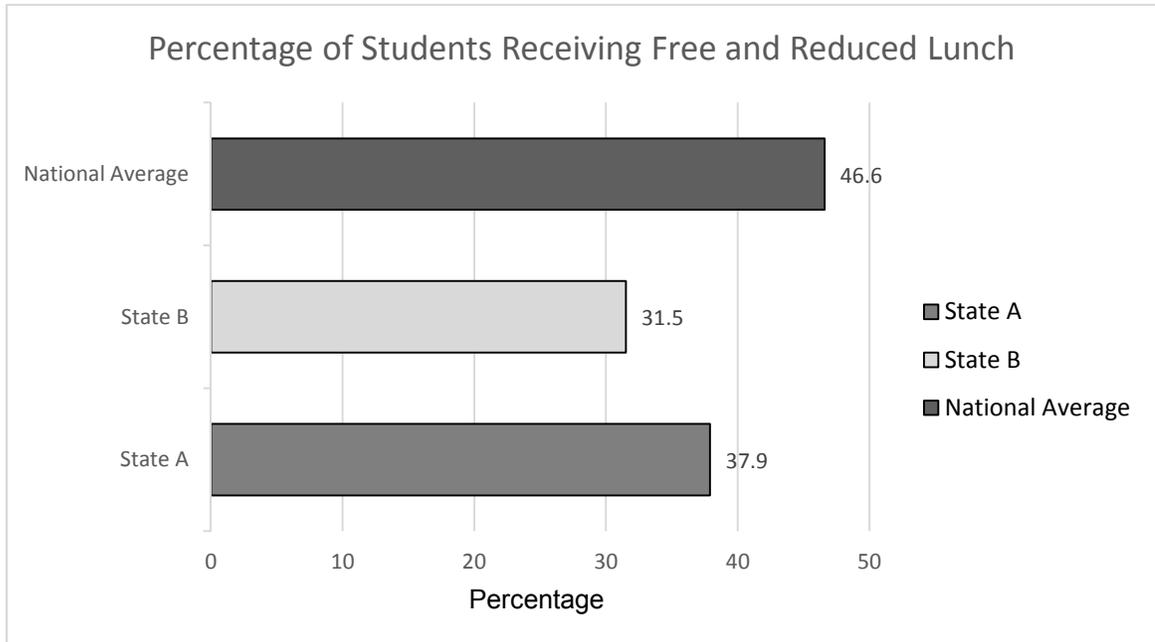
Both State A and State B have faced budget challenges due to per pupil funding. Based on a review of school funding in all 50 states, State B was ranked with a C and State A with an F in terms of providing students with a fair school funding mechanism, which means that “the state finance system ensures equal educational opportunity by providing a sufficient level of funding distributed to districts within the state to account for additional needs generated by student poverty” (Baker et al., 2010, p. 7). State education funding in State A has declined in the last several years, causing financial distress for the entire state in all areas of education (Leachman & Mai, 2014). State A is one of 30 states providing less funding per student in 2015 than prior to the recession in 2007-2008 (Leachman & Mai, 2014).

State B has tried in the past to assist districts with declining enrollment by passing a budget guarantee in 2001 that allowed districts with declining enrollment to tap into property tax funds to keep their budgets from having a negative balance. This law, however, expired in 2014, increasing rural school budget concerns (State B Department of Education, 2015). Moreover, in State B, it is illegal for school districts to have a negative balance, which leads some districts that have run out of other options towards consolidation.

In addition to consolidation and decreasing per pupil funding, poverty is a challenge in the rural districts in both states. The 2016 Federal Poverty Level indicates that a family of four is at 100% poverty level if they make at or below \$24,250 annually (Morduch, 2016). The USDA Rural Development's 2016 Progress Report indicates that the poverty level in rural America is improving. Rural unemployment rates were below 6% in 2015, which are the lowest rates in a 9-year period. Additionally, rural poverty rates have decreased, rural housing values have increased, and rural populations in some areas have stabilized (USDA Rural Development 2016 Progress Report). For rural schools, poverty is measured by the number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch status.

The percentage of students enrolled in the federal free and reduced lunch program has been the primary means to gauge student poverty in education research (Johnson et al., 2014). Free and reduced lunch status is a way for school districts to determine socio-economic status (SES). In State A rural districts, the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch is 37.9%, while in State B it is 31.5%. Both of these states fall below the U.S. average of 46.6% (Johnson et al., 2014). While both of these states'

percentages are lower than the national average, it still means that almost one out of four rural children in State A lives in poverty (Johnson et al., 2014). Figure 3 displays the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch status in both states compared to the national average.



Note: Data retrieved from State A Department of Education, 2015; State B Department of Education, 2015

Figure 3. Percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch in States A and B compared to the national average.

### Participants

A multiple case study of two similar rural, farming school districts in neighboring Midwestern states was chosen for this research. The districts are very similar in size and demographics. The participants chosen for this study are two principals who lead in districts where they were previously students, teachers, and coaches prior to their leadership experience: They are homegrown leaders. Both principals are also residents of

their district. An additional reason for selecting these two principals is my familiarity and background knowledge of the two communities and the participants. I have known one of the principals as well as the district he serves in this study for over 20 years. We took classes together to obtain our administrative endorsement, and Cannonville is where I chose to do my high school clinical. I have known the other participant for 4 years and have had familiarity with his district for the last 2 years. I also personally know teachers, parents, community members, and students in both communities. In addition, both participants agreed to be a part of this study and to share their stories of leading in a rural district. Data collected included observations of professional development, staff meetings, parent meetings, student meetings, observations at other professional meetings and community events, observations of interactions before and after school with students, parents, and at least two semi-structured interviews with each participant.

There are many similarities between the two towns and districts in which these principals work in terms of student demographics, population, and culture. The two principals also share several characteristics. In addition to both being white males, both attended the school they now lead from K-12 grades. They came back to their communities right after college to coach and teach, and then received their master's degrees in Educational Administration and became principals. Both principals also have families with strong community and district ties, and their children attend schools in the district. The two most significant similarities that are pertinent for this study are that these two principals are homegrown leaders from rural school districts. A more detailed description of the participants appears in Chapter III.

## **Definition of Terms**

One criticism of rural educational research is the lack of one single, precise definition of “rural” (Chalker, 2002; Duncan & Stock, 2010). The uniqueness of rural communities and districts creates a challenge for rural researchers to identify one central definition that holds true for all rural communities (Budge, 2006). This study will use the United States Census Bureau’s 2010 definition of rural, which states the area must have open countryside, fewer than 2,500 residents, and not more than 500 people per square mile. Both of the towns/districts in this study meet the criteria of this definition. For this study, the researcher chose the definition of rural described below, which coincides with her background of attending school and living in a rural community and district. The population and population per capita is an important point to consider when looking at rural education because rural districts operate on a much smaller tax base and per capita population (Schuman, 2010). A smaller tax base limits resources such as transportation, accessibility, and financial ability to have smaller class sizes, lower teacher/student ratios, and specialized teachers (Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

A precise definition of “rural” is difficult to find in the available literature, as is the definition of a rural district (Arnold et al., 2005). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), the definition of a “small, rural school” is one that has an overall student population of under 600 students, and the schools are in a county that has a population density of fewer than 10 residents/square mile. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2016) classifies rural into three areas: (a) rural-fringe, (b) rural-distant, and (c) rural-remote. Rural-fringe areas are rural areas that are fewer than 5 miles from an urban area. This does not define the two towns in this study. Rural-distant

is described by NCES as a rural area that is more than five miles but fewer than 25 miles from an urban area. Thus, both of the communities in this study would be classified as rural-distant areas according to this definition. Rural-remote areas are more than 25 miles from an urban area (NCES, 2016).

The rural setting is a key component of this qualitative study, and so more detail is given in describing what definition will be used to frame this study. Additional terms used in this study will be defined below in less detail. While there are other definitions that could apply to the words below, the definitions listed are the ones that will be used for the remainder of this study.

***AEAs.*** Area Education Agencies: Intermediate school districts in State B (State B Department of Education).

***School Culture.*** School culture is defined as the behaviors of the individuals regarding the rituals, relationships, rules, attitudes, beliefs, and values that influence all aspects of how a school operates (Stobaugh, Chandler, & White, 2015).

***Homegrown Leaders.*** A homegrown leader is defined by the author in this study and refers to a leader who has been a student, teacher, and coach and now resides in the same district in the role of principal.

***Rural School District.*** According to the U.S. Department of Education, the definition of a “small, rural school” is one that has an overall student population of under 600 students, and the schools are in a county that has population density of fewer than 10 residents/square mile.

***SES.*** Socio-economic status is the measure of an individual’s or family’s comparative social and economic standing based on education, occupation, and income.

***Transformational Leadership.*** Transformational leadership is the process in which leaders motivate their followers towards change. Transformational leaders are “change agents” who inspire followers through a shared vision, positive role modeling, empowerment, and building trusting relationships (Northouse, 2015).

***Trust.*** Trust is the confident reliance of someone’s competence, honesty, and openness, when one is in a position of vulnerability (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

### **Summary**

Rural principals face the same standards and state and federal policies as their urban and suburban peers; however, they do so with fewer resources and with less support (McNeff, 2014). This study will contribute to the research on rural principals with historical ties to their districts and the impact of those ties on transformational leadership skills or behaviors. This study aims to stress the importance of rural education and rural educational leadership and assist policy makers, principal preparation programs, and rural principals to use the results from this study to improve rural educational leadership. In addition, school district leaders can analyze this research as they look to hire principals in rural districts, especially when considering homegrown candidates.

As limited literature was found specifically regarding “rural transformational leaders” and “homegrown rural leaders,” Chapter II will describe the research literature as it relates to the broader theoretical lens of transformational leadership. Literature will also be reviewed regarding the challenges that rural leaders encounter.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Purpose of Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to examine rural educational leadership by focusing on two principals with personal ties to the communities and districts in which they lead. Specifically, each leader has lived, taught, coached, and then become a principal in the same district, which makes them “homegrown” leaders. Of interest to the specific research is how their personal ties influence their own transformational leadership. In addition, to better understand the experiences of these rural principals, the inherent challenges of rural leadership will be analyzed.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- 1) How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
- 2) How do these rural principals, identified as transformational leaders, use transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to rural districts?
- 3) Do the principals’ prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust and relationships, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change?  
If so, how?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the past and present literature pertinent to the research questions of this study. First, the research supporting the theoretical framework used for this study will be examined, followed by literature pertaining to the research questions. The research questions aim to examine how these principals’ personal histories within their respective communities and districts influence

transformational leadership practices, such as building trust and relationships, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change, and how these principals utilize their transformational leadership style to handle the challenges unique to rural districts.

The first section of the literature review discusses the theoretical framework, transformational leadership. The characteristics of transformational leadership such as trust, school culture, and enacting change are included in this literature review. The next section of this literature review provides an overview of literature that relates to the challenges relevant to rural leaders. These challenges include multiple roles of the administrator, lack of resources, feelings of isolation, challenges to professional development and mentoring, and difficulties in hiring and retaining quality personnel.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study examines how homegrown leaders in rural districts influence trust, build relationships, and promote a positive school culture. While there are many different leadership theories and leadership styles discussed in organizational and educational literature, transformational leadership theory (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Onorato, 2013; Sun & Leithwood, 2012), which aligns with those leadership behaviors, is the theoretical framework for this research study. Transformational leadership focuses on how leaders inspire their followers and work as change agents within their organizations (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Transformational leaders inspire change and motivation by building trust, empowering followers, and also acting as positive role models (Northouse, 2015). These leaders inspire and motivate staff by creating a shared vision, building trusting relationships, and creating and sustaining a

positive culture (Hallinger, 2003). These leaders also possess management skills such as human resource management, providing instructional support, managing the budget, and attending school and community events (Northouse, 2015).

Transformational leaders focus on the processes leaders use to change people (Northouse, 2015). This leadership style also focuses on building capacity not only with school staff but also with community stakeholders (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

Transformational leadership skills are used to help rural leaders understand and overcome the unique challenges the literature suggests are significant to rural districts.

The school culture is directly linked to student and teacher success (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009), and transformational leaders can also be described as cultural leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Northouse, 2015). They create a school culture by using symbols, rituals, and ceremonies to motivate followers, provide a supportive climate, and encourage progress (Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Transformational leaders make a personal connection with their followers that increases motivation and morale (Hallinger, 2003). This study's literature review stresses the importance of rural leaders making personal connections with stakeholders in order to better enable their success and to overcome challenges (Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

Transformational leaders are role models with strong values who motivate followers to act for the good of the cause rather than for their own personal interests (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Rural principals are often role models within their communities and respect and value the community's culture and morals (Freeman & Randolph, 2013), thus aligning with the characteristics and behaviors of transformational leaders. Role models often are charismatic, and the concept of transformational leadership is based on

charismatic leadership theory developed by House (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Transformational leaders are charismatic leaders and serve as role models for the values and morals they believe in, allowing them to influence others (Northouse, 2015). These leaders have high expectations for their followers, but also have the confidence that they will meet those expectations. Followers have confidence and trust in this type of leader, which increases their motivation and sense of value regarding their shared goals or vision (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Rural leaders who have been lifelong residents of the community may feel a push to become transformational leaders or be intuitively guided toward transformational leadership because of their already established community ties and relationships.

There are strengths and limitations to this leadership approach that may apply to rural leadership. One of the strengths of the transformational leadership style is that it is highly researched not only from an educational perspective (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Onorato, 2013) but also from an organizational or business perspective (Bass & Avolio, 1993). In addition, research has shown that this is an effective style of leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Onorato, 2013). This style of leadership is also intuitive for some and embodies the characteristics of what society feels a good leader should be (Northouse, 2015). This style focuses not just on what the leader does or does not do, but on the relationship between the leader and followers and how the leader meets the needs of those followers for the common good. Transformational leadership embraces a moral approach to leadership in order to motivate and inspire others (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

Despite its numerous strengths, there are criticisms of this leadership style. One is that this approach overlaps other approaches, such as situational and transactional leadership, and is hard to measure (Northouse, 2015). Additionally, critics believe this approach is more trait based than other approaches, making it difficult for educational preparation programs to train potential leaders on how to be transformational leaders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Transformational leaders can also have a negative influence on followers if they are not acting authentically or with high moral standards (Northouse, 2015). These strengths and limitations influence rural leaders' abilities to build trust, cultivate relationships, influence decisions, and have an effect on the unique challenges leaders in rural districts face. The following section will examine research relating to the importance of leaders in building trust with stakeholders.

## **Trust**

Trust is the confident reliance of someone's competence, honesty, and openness, when in a position of vulnerability (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Transformational leaders work to build trust with stakeholders (Onorato, 2013). This study aims to discover if homegrown principals have an easier time building trust with teachers and other stakeholders in the district. Schools that have a high level of trust between administration and staff exhibit more collective decision making, an increased chance that reform initiatives are successful, and improved student learning (Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). A study of principals in Canada found that principals felt that mutual trust with stakeholders was an important aspect of their jobs and that maintaining and/or repairing relationships with stakeholders was also of importance (Walker, Kutsyuruba, &

Noonan, 2011). One of these principals elaborated on this importance by stating, “The instrumental role of fostering a culture of trust in schools, and hence the immense responsibilities and challenges that come with the role, lie within the scope of school administrators’ everyday activities” (Walker et al., 2011, p. 472).

Trust is critical for positive relationships and vital for the success of school leaders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). School leaders who are caring, open, respectful, and professional, and who have good communication skills, have an easier time building trust with stakeholders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). This supportive principal behavior is important for building trust in faculty, and that trust is a factor in how principals change the culture and generate teacher buy-in for new initiatives (Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Collaboration and productivity are compromised when trust is not present, which in turn jeopardizes student learning and the possibility for positive growth and change to occur (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

In rural districts, the school is often the main focal point of the community (Budge, 2006). Building trust with the community is also important for the success of a principal. This process does not happen overnight and requires the district leader to be effective in communication; visible in the community; and comfortable with the community’s views, culture, and values (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Therefore, it appears that principals who have been socialized in the community have less work to do in building community trust because they already have built relationships with members of the community (Duncan & Stock, 2010).

The important relationships that principals need to build with community members can be formed by immersing themselves in the community and knowing the

key players and the important issues in the community (Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) stated the importance of knowing the community: “Successful rural principals realize that the school is a symbol of the community’s social wealth, economic prosperity, and overall identity” (p. 3). Building relationships with school and community stakeholders is much more difficult for a principal from outside of the community, suggesting that community ties and history play an integral role in creating and maintaining positive relationships and creating a positive learning culture (Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

### **School Culture**

Culture is broadly defined in organizational literature. For example, Schein (2010) defined culture as shared assumptions learned by a group as they solve problems within the organization. These shared assumptions are then passed down and inherited by new members of the group and become the norm in thinking and relating to those problems. Schein related the culture of a group to a person’s personality or behavior:

Culture to a group is what behavior or personality is to an individual. We can see the behavior and the results, but cannot see the forces underneath that cause certain behavior. Just as personality and character guide our behavior, so does culture define and constrain the members of the group through the shared norms held by the group. (Schein, 2010, p. 14)

However, for the purpose of this study, a definition relating more specifically to school culture will be used. This definition includes behaviors of stakeholders as well as behaviors that influence the operation of the school. School culture is defined as the behaviors of the individuals regarding the rituals, relationships, rules, attitudes, beliefs,

and values that influence all aspects of how a school operates (Stobaugh et al., 2015). School culture is also defined as the visible characteristics such as student and teacher behavior and motivation, cleanliness and upkeep of the building, stakeholder morale, and how the school embraces diversity (Stobaugh et al., 2015).

MacNeil et al. (2009) argued that effective principals understand that the school's culture is an important attribute of a successful school. Transformational leaders, through building trusting relationships, improve school cultures, which in turn influence student achievement (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Onorato, 2013; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). A transformational school leader who has a positive influence on the school culture directly impacts student learning in a positive way by providing conditions in the school environment that support staff development and improve student achievement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). In order to create these positive conditions, school leaders “develop school cultures that embody shared norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes that promote mutual caring and trust among all members” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 5). Transformational leaders create, manage, and influence organizational culture through relationships with their followers (Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) claimed that culture and leadership are intertwined in that leaders are the builders of culture, and cultures, once formed, influence the type of leadership that can take place, and if the culture or parts of the culture become dysfunctional, leaders have the responsibility to change it. School leaders, therefore, must be able to build and maintain a positive culture for optimal student growth and learning to take place.

In order to implement effective change, theorists posit that school leaders must understand the culture of the school (MacNeil et al., 2009; Mette, 2014; Peterson & Deal,

1998). MacNeil et al. (2009) explained the relationships between change and culture by stating, “Real and sustained change is more readily achieved by first changing the culture of the school, rather than by simply changing the structures of the way the school operates and functions” (p. 75). Homegrown leaders have an advantage of knowing the background knowledge and experience with not only the school culture but also the culture of the community. This advantage may be useful as they lead change and also as they work to overcome the challenges unique to rural districts. The following section discusses how transformational leaders enact change.

### **Enacting Change**

Just as transformational leadership takes on an integral role in creating and maintaining a positive culture, transformational leadership also is important with regard to enabling both the leader and stakeholder to work in collaboration during change (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012). Changes in education involve two main aspects: what to change and the process to change it (Fullan, 2007). Fullan (2007) described change as a “complex social process” (p. 39) and stated that “the holy grail of change is to understand under what conditions hordes of people become motivated to change” (p. 40). Transformational leaders encourage stakeholders to embrace change through empowerment and shared decision making (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). The following section discusses literature supporting how shared decision making and empowerment increase teacher buy-in to implement change.

Supportive principal behavior that empowers staff and allows for shared decision making builds trust in faculty, which increases teacher buy-in needed to implement change initiatives (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Reform initiatives geared to increase

student learning are more likely to be implemented in schools where there is a high level of trust and collective decision making (Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). On the other hand, in an environment where there is low trust, effective change will be difficult to sustain (Walker et al., 2011).

Implementing change is a challenge for most principals; however, rural principals who already have established trusting relationships with stakeholders have an easier time garnering support for change (Budge, 2010). This established history with the community enables the rural principal to deal more effectively with tensions that may be encountered among stakeholders, especially when implementing change (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Lock & Oakley, 2012). The research analyzed in this section could be used to help rural leaders understand how the use of transformational leadership to build trusting relationships, generate positive culture, and create change can help them overcome the unique challenges that will be encountered as they step into the role of the rural principal.

### **Literature Review**

Rural districts differ in many ways from their suburban and urban counterparts; however, educational research is often generalized and lacks a rural perspective (Howley & Howley, 2014; Schuman, 2010). Considering that one out of five students attends school in a rural district, there is less research on rural education than on other areas of educational research (Coladarci, 2007). Research on rural education is limited, specifically as it relates to how personal history affects current leadership practices and professional development needs of rural principals. Research related to the challenges of rural districts and rural leadership is more abundant; however, it is often generalized with

urban and suburban district challenges (Schuman, 2010). There is a shortage of empirical research pertinent to rural education, which highlights the importance of this study.

The rural principal not only plays an integral role in the school's day-to-day activities and culture but is also a community leader (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). In rural communities, the school is often the center of community life (Chalker, 2002). Often, community entertainment revolves around the school's sporting, music, or drama events, and the school is often the only place large enough in small towns to hold larger community meetings or events. These strong community ties to the school can be both a benefit and a challenge for district leaders (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Mette, 2014). This will be analyzed in more detail in the following section.

In addition to limited research on rural administrative challenges, there is also limited research available that could provide new rural leaders with best practices on how to overcome contextual challenges (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). New principals who step into a rural district for the first time, especially those without a rural background, may feel overwhelmed with the rural setting and its challenges (Duncan & Stock, 2010). A study of new rural high school principals found that nine of 10 principals left their rural district before 3 years and felt that they never fit into the district (Morford, 2002). Therefore, the body of relevant research shows that the specific challenges of rural principals are different or more pronounced than those of their urban or suburban peers and that having community ties and/or a rural background is a significant factor in the success of rural principals. Both of these ideas will be discussed in the review of literature below.

## **Personal History and Community Ties**

Several researchers have examined the community ties of rural principals and the influence of those ties on their success in small schools. This study focuses on two rural school districts in two Midwestern U.S. states, though most literature on this topic has come from Australia and Canada. In addition to research from the U.S., global research is included in the literature review to explain how this topic can be generalized to a U.S. rural setting.

Recruiting quality principals from outside of the district is often not feasible for rural districts due to lower pay, the financial struggles that rural districts face, and professional isolation (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). Therefore, it makes sense that principals with prior experience with the school community are more likely to be successful in their position, may stay in the position longer, and are better able to build trust with stakeholders in the district (Clarke & Stevens, 2009.) A study by Schuman (2010) looked at four rural principals in central Pennsylvania who he discovered during the data collection all had previous ties to their districts. His results concluded that the personal histories of these principals and ties to the district influenced their leadership in a positive way. Schuman (2010) posited that superintendents favor candidates applying for a rural principal position who have a history either with the rural district to which they are applying or in a similar setting. Similarly, a study by Foster and Goddard (2003) revealed that principals who were raised in the district they came to lead had a better understanding and appreciation of the values and cultures of the community, which in turn helped them deal with discord from community stakeholders.

Principals who have experience in a rural setting, but are not necessarily from those rural communities, have provided advice for peers starting in a rural district (Hurley, 1999). Their advice coincides with Schuman's (2010) results above. Hurley (1999) interviewed 14 rural principals from two different states and asked them for advice for rural principals. A majority of the principals said that it was important for the rural principal to be a part of the community, with one principal stating, "If you are going to be a rural administrator, become part of the community. Trying to be a principal and live elsewhere can be destructive" (Hurley, 1999, p. 154). Similarly, another principal in the study stressed the importance of immersing oneself in community events and getting to know the community and its members. A third principal stressed that being from a rural area and understanding the community is helpful for rural principals. Hurley (1999) supported the hypothesis that rural principals who have lived in the districts that they come to lead have a better understanding of their communities and its members and will thus be more successful in their jobs.

Principals who have personal ties to their districts and those serving rural districts without those roots have revealed that a personal history within the community leads to a more successful experience. In addition, research has posited that principals with community connections are more apt to be hired for a rural principal job: "To attain a principal position in a rural school, it is beneficial to have some type of affiliation with the school community that is seeking a school principal" (Preston et al., 2013, p. 4).

Similarly, Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) studied rural principal selections in Texas and Nebraska and found that superintendents in rural districts had preferences for principal candidates who had the ability to understand the rural community in which they

wished to serve. The superintendents in both states preferred that principal candidates lived in the community and were active participants in the community in which they served (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) concluded that superintendents in this study valued distinctive qualities in a rural principal:

Many superintendents believe that it takes a special individual, one who truly values a small town and can tolerate a high degree of visibility, who demonstrates that he or she wants to be close to the community and to students, and who understands the educational challenges a small district faces. Rural principals need to recognize that change comes slowly in rural areas and that additional help in the form of an assistant principal often is not available. (p. 7)

Principals new to a rural district who did not understand the challenges, culture, and community expectations were less likely to be hired in these two states based on the data in this study than those who were active participants in their community (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009).

In addition, a study by Little and Miller (2001) on rural Kentucky principals concluded that applicants with personal ties to the district had a higher chance of being interviewed and hired for that position than applicants without personal ties. Principals interviewed in Little and Miller's (2001) study revealed that they felt teachers who had personal ties to the district were more likely to stay in the district and understand the community's values and norms. These results were echoed in a study of rural principal candidates by Townsell (2007), who surmised that candidates who understand the culture of a rural community, have rural backgrounds, and value the benefits of a small community are more successful than those without those traits. Their history and

relationships with the community better equip them to deal with tensions with stakeholders, especially when implementing change (Budge, 2006; Lock & Oakley, 2012; Montgomery, 2010; Preston et al., 2013). On the other hand, principals who do not have a history with the community are often looked at with suspicion by community members (Preston et al., 2013).

Rural principals are expected to be an active part of the community, and principals who live and work in the district they lead are expected to be role models (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). A study of 21 rural school principals was conducted by Barley and Beesley (2007), and the results revealed that principals believed they needed to spend time engaged in community activities outside of school hours. The belief of the principals was that their community involvement helped build and maintain trust between the community and school and increased teacher retention.

The high expectations placed on rural principals by board members and community members (Browne-Ferrigno & Knoeppel, 2005) can also be a challenge for rural leaders. The high visibility in the community may make rural leaders feel as though everything they do is critiqued by all stakeholders (Browne-Ferrigno & Knoeppel, 2005). The constant criticism may make the rural principal who lives in the district feel as though he or she has little privacy due to the expectations to live, work, and be a part of the community and its events and organizations (Lock & Oakley, 2012).

In conclusion, the rural principal not only has the expectation of forming trusting relationships with his/her students and staff but is also expected to form strong relationships between the school and community (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Preston et al., 2013). Little and Miller (2001) discussed “community fit perceptions,” which refers to

district leaders placing high importance on how closely the candidate's background meshes with the district and the community's identity and values. Conversely, principals who do not have personal ties to the rural district and are not familiar with the cultural, political, historical, and ethnic components of the district have a more challenging time building trust with the community and stakeholders (Lock, & Oakley, 2012). Principals who are successful at building a strong school-community bond have a greater chance at being successful (Farmer, 2009; Howley & Howley, 2014), which can assist them in managing the challenges unique to rural principals that will be further discussed in the following section.

### **Challenges of Rural Principals**

Research is plentiful concerning new principals; however, research specifically regarding new rural principals is lacking (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). A gap in the literature also exists regarding challenges that rural principals face. While urban and rural principals face similar challenges, some challenges are more prevalent in rural districts (Clarke & Wildy, 2011). In addition, research on new administrators is often relevant only to suburban or urban principals but is still generalized to rural settings (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Freeman & Randolph, 2013).

A challenge specific to the rural educational setting is the low applicant pool for administrative openings (Smith & Riley, 2012; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013). Larger districts receive up to 50% more applicants for an administrator opening than for the same opening in rural districts (Wood et al., 2013). Fewer prospective school leaders apply for rural openings due to reasons that will be discussed in further detail in this review, such as financial challenges, the struggle to hire and retain

teachers, personal and professional isolation, economic instability of the district and community, and the demands of often being the sole administrator (Ayers, 2011; Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Wood et al., 2013). In larger districts, for example, there is middle management to assist in carrying out managerial and instructional leadership duties. However, in a small district, the principal lacks this kind of support and resources, which creates another challenge that dissuades potentially qualified applicants (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). Additional drawbacks to rural principal positions are that these principals work longer hours with lower pay than urban peers, with less power and fewer resources to complete professional tasks (Wood et al., 2013). These challenges not only deter principals from applying to rural districts but also increase the likelihood that rural principals will not remain in their position for longer than a few years (Preston et al., 2013).

In summation, the literature suggests rural principals often face challenges that include managing multiple roles, lack of resources, feelings of isolation, insufficient teacher applicant pool, gender disparities in administrative roles, and providing adequate professional development and mentoring to staff (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Clarke & Wildy 2011). The literature describing these challenges for rural leaders will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

**Multiple roles.** Principals in smaller districts often have to take on multiple responsibilities or roles not expected of principals in larger districts who have assistance with these responsibilities from additional support staff, such as assistant principals, human resource personnel, instructional leaders, department heads, curriculum directors, technology directors, and diversity officers (Clarke et al., 2006). These duties, often

covered by extra personnel in larger districts, are not afforded to rural principals, meaning that in addition to the management and instructional duties, rural principals are also responsible for every other aspect of school performance and management (McNeff, 2014). These multiple responsibilities are not only present in the school but often in the community as well (Schuman, 2010). Some of their additional roles can include teacher, curriculum director, finance officer, human resource director, public relations director, athletic director, and sometimes even superintendent (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Cortez-Jiminez, 2012; White & Corbett, 2014). In a larger district, these duties are spread out among many different people, but in a small district, the sole responsibility often lies on one person's shoulders, which imposes time constraints and stress for a rural leader (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Farmer, 2009).

Rural principals are not compensated for these multiple roles due to the smaller tax base and population of their districts, which create additional stress and time constraints for them (Canales et al., 2008). Compared to their urban/suburban peers, rural administrators overall earn 33% less in yearly salary, yet have more job responsibilities (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In addition to multiple roles, rural principals often have to administer more than one building, or in more than one town (Clarke et al., 2006). Retaining principals in rural districts is a challenge when they are forced to have multiple responsibilities and roles (VanTuyle & Reeves, 2014). Literature regarding the lack of financial and other resources in rural districts will be examined further in the next section.

**Lack of resources.** Due to federal and state funding, school districts of all sizes face financial burdens. While financial challenges are not limited to rural districts, rural

districts have a much smaller tax base than their urban counterparts, which perpetuates the financial struggle (Canales et al., 2008). School funding in rural districts is based on per pupil enrollment and property value. Property value is typically lower in rural areas, and fewer students are enrolled in rural districts than in larger districts, which means smaller districts rely on less funding (Bartling, 2013). In addition, rural districts must comply with the same state and federal initiatives and legislative mandates as their urban counterparts with less funding and fewer resources (Beesley & Clark, 2015). The decreased funding and smaller tax base creates a burden for rural principals when creating budgets for their districts (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). Rural principals often need to be creative and rely on external funding, such as grants and support from community organizations (White & Corbett, 2014).

Community economics also affect rural districts' financial status. The economies in many rural districts are agriculturally based, so when agriculture and natural resources are weak, so is the local economy. Contributing to these economic and social concerns are the lower paying wages that rural workers make and the isolation from larger businesses and markets (Budge, 2006). Increasing global marketization and competition cause many rural industries that often are the mainstays of rural communities to close or move overseas, further influencing the decline and challenges of the rural communities (Starr & White, 2008). The declining rural economy means that rural school leaders have to rely on less funding from the local tax base to run their schools.

Two other issues challenging the financial aspect of rural districts are the lower local tax bases and per pupil funding (Starr & White, 2008). In addition to having smaller tax bases, schools in the two states in this study are funded by the state on a per pupil

basis. When student enrollment is down, so is the money coming into the school, and in small districts with limited resources, the amount per child is crucial to their budget. For example, a district that loses a family with four children will feel more of a financial burden in a smaller district than in a larger district that has more students and more resources. One of the reasons for the smaller tax base in rural districts is the lower median rural family income compared to the median family income in metropolitan areas. In addition, metro areas have a higher percentage of upper management and professional jobs with higher salaries, which further perpetuates the economic disparity between rural and urban areas (Chalker, 2002).

The funding challenges discussed above contribute to additional challenges, such as outdated technology, facilities in need of repair, and limited course offerings for advanced students, which can influence academic achievement (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Sodat, 2010). The challenges of fewer financial resources push rural administrators to rely on creative mechanisms to supplement the budget and fund their schools, such as grants, support from local business, and raising local sales tax (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In addition to financial concerns, rural principals also feel isolated from peers, which is discussed in the following section.

**Feeling of isolation.** Rural districts are often spread out, meaning there is often only one principal for a PK-12 district, or at best one principal for elementary and one for high school (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). In consolidated districts, the principal of the elementary school may be 30 or more miles away from his or her colleagues in the middle or high school, perpetuating feelings of loneliness and isolation (Ashton &

Duncan, 2012). Principal isolation is cited by principals in research as being one of the most stressful challenges of rural leadership (Preston et al., 2013).

Isolation is also a reason principals leave their position. Wood et al. (2013) found geographical isolation is the main reason that rural principals in the Midwest leave their jobs. These feelings of isolation were more prevalent for principals who lived further away from large urban areas (Wood et al., 2013). The authors also discovered that while the distance from urban areas and the social isolation were the reasons for some principals leaving, these same reasons were cited by some principals for staying in their districts (Wood et al., 2013). Wood et al. (2013) discovered that the reason for rural administrators wanting to stay in the rural district was related to the administrator's ties to the area. The distance between districts and colleagues with similar administrative roles not only increases the feelings of isolation, but also prevents the opportunities for peer support, mentoring, and professional development (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Townsell, 2007).

Principals who come into their role with little or no mentoring support or professional training relevant to rural challenges have heightened levels of isolation. Renihan and Noonan (2012) described conditions that contribute to this isolation in their research:

Although there are noteworthy exceptions, principals are seldom properly supported in their leadership role by school districts which have previously expected them to do little more than follow orders, oversee staff, keeping the buses running, and contain problems. In these conditions the school leader often feels isolated, overwhelmed, and powerless to accomplish the job. (p. 6)

These feelings of isolation are compounded by the lack of privacy rural principals encounter in the communities they serve (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). Schools and the administration are often the main focus of small communities, which can make rural principals feel that they are always under a spotlight (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Rural principals frequently are “on the job” even on nights and weekends, as a trip to the grocery store or gas station can lead to a discussion from stakeholders about school concerns or events (Preston et al., 2013). A principal in a study by Preston et al. (2013) stated, “Being principal of a rural school is more than just a job; it is a lifestyle that tends to be closely watched by many local community members” (p. 3). Three rural California principals highlighted their perceptions of personal isolation and scrutiny by stating, “Since the schools are highly visible in the community, school leaders were vulnerable and open to intense scrutiny and criticism by community members” (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 15). This loneliness and isolation can be overwhelming to rural leaders and can lead to high turnover (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). The isolation of rural districts is often cited as a reason these districts have a much lower number of applicants for open teaching positions, which will be discussed in the following section.

**Insufficient teacher applicant pool.** Teachers are one of the most important resources for a school district, and rural districts lack incentives to offer prospective teachers (Townsell, 2007). Personal isolation is one of the main reasons teachers cite for not wanting to apply in small districts (Love, 2006; Townsell, 2007). Townsell (2007) found this to be true in her research: “Newly hired teachers report feelings of social, cultural, and professional isolation” (p. 4). Teachers are not incentivized to come to rural

districts that often lack proximity to entertainment and cultural options that larger districts offer (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011).

An additional challenge to rural districts is recruiting and maintaining quality teachers (Preston et al., 2013). Townsell (2007) revealed in her review of the literature that “rural administrators have difficulty finding qualified teachers who fit in with the school and community and who will stay with the job” (p. 3). Rural districts have a lower salary base than their urban/suburban counterparts, which often deters qualified applicants from applying (Versland, 2013). In addition to a lower salary, many small districts’ additional benefits such as health insurance, life insurance, disability, and retirement benefits do not compare to those of larger districts (Townsell, 2007). Hiring qualified staff is difficult for principals if there is a lack of applicants (Kono, 2012). High school specialized subjects, special education, and technology positions are especially hard to fill with qualified candidates in rural districts (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012). Kono (2012) related qualified staff to student achievement by stating, “It is believed that one of the pivotal causes of inadequate school performance is the inability of schools to adequately staff classrooms with qualified teachers” (p. 682). If a district is fortunate enough to hire quality teaching staff, providing professional development for both teachers and administrators is also a barrier for rural districts.

**Staff development and mentoring challenges.** The principal plays a pivotal role in school success (Ayers, 2011; Chance & Segura, 2009; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Principals are expected to improve teaching and learning in their districts through instructional leadership; however, professional development available to principals to support their growth is scarce in rural areas (Wood et al., 2013).

A study conducted by Stewart and Matthews (2015) revealed that rural principals indicated a need for professional development to improve staff and student performance two times more than principals in larger school districts. With the increased expectation on principals as instructional leaders comes an increased need for professional development for school leaders (Spanneut, Tobin, & Ayers, 2012). Principals need continued training to help them to be better instructional leaders and managers; they need to be prepared to make decisions and meet the needs of the communities they serve (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012).

Researchers have suggested that principals are not prepared for the challenges of leading a rural district and do not have access to professional development opportunities after they are practicing principals (Kono, 2012; McNeff, 2014; Preston et al., 2013). Principals from smaller districts have different needs related to staff development than peers from larger districts (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012; Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). Topics such as how to build rural community relationships and financial management of rural districts are just two areas of professional development needs that would be pertinent for rural principals (Browne-Ferrigno & Knoeppel, 2005; Schafft & Jackson Youngblood, 2010). Rural districts also face demographic shifts that rural leaders may not be prepared for, nor have the resources to address, creating an additional needed topic of professional development (Preston et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Cortez-Jiminez (2012), rural California principals were surveyed regarding the professional development support they received from their districts. A significant percentage (81%) of the respondents answered that their districts did not have a professional development or mentoring plan in place to support their professional growth (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012).

Professional development for principals is not the only challenge rural principals encounter; finding a mentor and networking with other principals is also difficult (Bizzell, 2011; Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012). Many new principals have little or no formal support and have to rely on training or informal mentors (Remy, 2009). In a study of school principals, 91% of respondents indicated that having a mentor was an important tool for new leaders (Duncan & Stock, 2010). Similarly, 80% of rural principals from California responded that informal mentors were the most helpful tool to a new administrator (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012). In urban districts, principals are able to find a mentor easily from another school within the district; however, rural principals do not have that capability, as there is often only one school within a rural district (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012). The distance between neighboring districts and the costs of travel create additional challenges for principals in rural districts to find a mentor (Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). Renihan and Noonan (2012) stressed the importance of mentoring for rural principals:

There is a large and growing body of research evidence pointing to the considerable professional payoffs associated with initiating practices of mentorship among school-level administrators within their systems. The provision of the opportunity and time for beginning principals to interact with their more experienced colleagues has considerable potential as a vehicle for developing assessment leadership capacity, particularly among those who are, or will be, working in rural schools. (p. 8)

Mentoring programs are not only beneficial to the individual principal, but are also beneficial to the district, as principals with positive mentoring experiences are more

likely to remain in their district and in the profession (Remy, 2009). Informal mentors can be just as beneficial as formal ones, and Remy (2009) stated that principals who have had either an informal or formal mentoring experience have higher levels of job satisfaction than those with no mentoring experience.

### **Summary**

Principals in rural schools who are transformational leaders may have a better understanding of rural culture and values, and thus be able to better maintain and build relationships with stakeholders (Preston et al., 2013). The literature discussed in this chapter indicates the need for further research in rural education and describes how transformational leadership helps homegrown leaders in rural areas deal with the unique challenges they face. In addition, this literature supports a need for additional research with regard to professional development and mentoring needs of rural principals (Bizzell, 2011; Remy, 2009; Stewart & Matthews, 2015).

The following chapter will explain the qualitative multiple case study design used in this study, including the sources and method.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the research methods used in this study. The purpose and summary of the research approach, including the process of obtaining IRB approval, are discussed first. Following that is a description of the methods of data collection and analysis used to answer the research questions. The inherent limitations of the method and brief descriptions of the following chapters will conclude this chapter.

### **Research Questions**

The phenomenon explored in this case study is the homegrown leadership of two principals working in rural schools in two Midwestern states. The two principals were purposefully chosen as participants because they were identified as transformational leaders.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- 1) How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
- 2) How do these rural principals, identified as transformational leaders, use transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to rural districts?
- 3) Do the principals' prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust, relationships, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?

## **Overall Research Approach**

This study used a qualitative case study design to understand the phenomenon of rural homegrown leadership analyzed through a transformational lens. As stated by Creswell (2013), qualitative study design is an appropriate approach to “explore a problem” (p. 48), and this study aims at exploring how participants use transformational leadership to address rural challenges and how their personal ties to the district assist them in dealing with those challenges. A case study involves studying an issue or problem using the case or cases as an illustration (Yin, 2010). Case studies are designed to allow researchers to explore a real-life phenomenon by observing people in their natural environment and the ways in which the people make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 1998). Case studies can include one, two, or multiple cases examined over a period of time and can utilize a variety of data collection methods (Creswell, 2014). Using a case study approach allows the researcher to gather descriptive data that can give a deeper understanding of a certain theme or phenomenon (Creswell, 2011). In education, case studies have been used to focus on individuals (e.g., students, administrators, and teachers), to serve as a guide to form educational policy, or to “seek to understand specific issues and problems of practice” (Merriam, 1998, p. 23).

A qualitative case study was chosen for this research to provide a more in-depth understanding of the how the participants’ contexts of homegrown leadership relate to the phenomena of using transformational leadership to address rural challenges. Tavallaei and Talib (2010) stated one reason researchers select a qualitative approach is because “qualitative research attempts to understand the participants’ actual contexts or settings which are directly related to the phenomenon” (p. 570). Additionally, a case study

approach will help develop a deeper comprehension of these issues (Tavallaei & Talib, 2010). Consistent with the literature on case study method, this study will collect data from multiple sources: interviews, observations, and existing documents (Yin, 2010) to explore transformational leadership practices of homegrown, rural school leaders. The use of multiple sources of data will help me to have a complete picture of homegrown leadership and how the leaders use transformational leadership skills to build relationships and positive school cultures and to influence trust and decision-making processes. Information from the participants will also be used to respond to the research question regarding the challenges of being a rural principal and the professional development needed to adequately cope with these challenges.

A multiple case study design is chosen over an ethnographic approach for several reasons. While an ethnography also studies the behavior of individuals within their natural setting, it involves the collection of data over a lengthy period of time and on many more occasions than in a case study approach (Wiersma, 2005). Due to time constraints, a case study approach is deemed to be more feasible for this study. It is also an approach that is useful to expand knowledge in a particular field (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) discusses how case studies can impact education stating, “Educational processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about the understanding that in turn can affect and even improve practice” (p. 41). A qualitative case study will help answer the research questions for this study in a timely manner, and allow for multiple data sources to be collected and analyzed to further understand how homegrown leaders handle rural challenges through a transformational lens.

## **Positionality**

Topics pertaining to rural education appeal to me because of my personal and professional background. I grew up in a small, rural farming community and attended the same school from K-12 grade. The district in which I grew up mirrors the two districts in this study in many ways and my children also attend a similar rural district only five miles away from the district where I grew up.

The rural district I grew up in and the two districts in this study are comparable in several ways. The communities in both of these studies are small, rural, farming towns and community life centers around the school and school events. The size and demographics of the communities and school districts are also very similar to the district I attended. I grew up in a school with very low free and reduced lunch status, and little diversity in both students and staff as is the case with the district in this study. The many similarities and the fact that I know people in these towns on a personal level helped me feel comfortable interacting with the participants and helped them feel comfortable with having me in their schools.

Homegrown rural educational leadership piqued my interest even more during my opportunities to work with rural principals and superintendents through my research assistantship and clinical work. The principals with whom I interacted mentioned in a conversation their historical ties within the district impacted their leadership. One of the principals is currently leading a school where she once taught social studies. There were several teachers still there from when she was a teacher and several former students who have come back to teach in their home district. While discussing this phenomenon with her, she mentioned that those previous affiliations with her staff positively influenced her

relationships with them and ability to build trust and a positive school culture. Another principal, a participant of this study, mentioned that being a student, teacher, and coach prior to being an administrator gave him insights and an increased ability to foster relationships with both staff and the community. I am now interested in investigating other ways rural principals' historic ties impact the role of a rural principal, both positively and negatively.

Additionally, through observations and personal knowledge of the principals in this study, I noticed they used a transformational style of leadership, and when asked in an interview, they indicated that they considered themselves to have characteristics of transformational leadership which will be discussed further in chapter four. Therefore, the lens of transformational leadership is the theoretical framework used for this study to discuss how these principals use this leadership style to handle rural challenges.

### **Selection Criteria**

The two school principals in this study were purposely chosen because both homegrown leaders are from very similar small towns and school districts in different states. In addition, they both have a background with the researcher and were willing to share their story and open the doors of their districts for research to complete this study. They reside in similar rural districts and communities in neighboring states and have lived in the district where they were former students, teachers, and coaches prior to becoming the school principal. There were not two similar participants of the same state with such similar characteristic that the researcher was aware of. Both participants exhibited characteristics of transformational leadership and identified themselves with characteristics of transformational leaders. In addition, both of the principals in this study

were chosen via convenience sampling. My familiarity with both of these principals, as well as the districts and communities they reside in was also a factor in their selection for participation in this study.

### **Research Setting**

The principals participating in this research study are from two small, rural farming communities in neighboring Midwestern states. Steve (a pseudonym) is the PK-6 and 7-12 principal in Riverton, State A. Matt (also a pseudonym) serves as the high school principal/athletic director in Cannonville, State B. The context of the rural communities and districts are an important component of rural leadership and will be described first in this section.

The districts have many similarities in demographics and makeup. The two towns are very similar in size, differing by only a few hundred people. Both communities are farming communities where those living in the country make their living primarily through agriculture-related work. Surrounding these towns are fields of corn and soybeans. The population of both of these small towns is over 95% white (United States Census, 2015). There is virtually no racial/ethnic diversity in both of these schools and communities and both of the communities also have low poverty and unemployment rates (Johnson et al., 2014). Table 1 breaks down the demographics of Cannonville's population of 1,832 people and Riverton's population of 1,551, respectively (U.S. Census, 2015). From personal knowledge of both of these communities, the following information is shared to give the reader a better understanding of the two towns in this study. Residents from both communities drive outside of the community to neighboring larger towns for work. There are limited entertainment options within these two towns for

students and community members; however, high school sporting, music, and drama events draw large followings and support in both of these small communities.

Table 1. *Demographics of Cannonville and Riverton 2015*

Race	Riverton Percentage	Cannonville Percentage
White	97.1	97.1
Bi-Racial	1.1	<1
Hispanic	<1	1.1
Asian	<1	<1
American Indian	<1	<1
African-American	<1	<1
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	<1	0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2015) and City Data website

The following are observations of both communities to give the reader a background knowledge of the research setting. There are also several noticeable differences between the two communities. The first difference is that Cannonville has a higher median income than Riverton, which is also higher than the state’s median income (United States Census, 2015). Cannonville’s median household income is \$56,459. Cannonville also has a significantly higher median housing value (\$147,829), which is higher than State B’s value (United States Census, 2015). This is a result of several newer housing developments built within the Cannonville community in the last 10 years. The close proximity to three larger cities makes it an ideal location for couples who have to drive to one of these towns for work, yet still want a small town environment.

Riverton does not have new housing developments and most of the houses are older homes, which contributes to the lower housing value. The median household income is \$46,351. The average price of a house in Riverton is \$70,700 (United States

Census, 2015). The Mississippi River borders one side of Riverton, separating it from its neighboring state. Many of the town's residents utilize the river by either having a cabin near its shore, or for boating, hunting, or fishing. Riverton has fewer gas stations, restaurants, and health facilities than Cannonville. However, Riverton does have more bars and hair salons than Cannonville. Riverton also has one blinking red stoplight at the main interchange in town, where Cannonville has no stoplights. While both towns have a main street running through the center that houses the majority of businesses, many of Riverton's buildings are vacant or in disrepair. Cannonville, on the other hand, has several new businesses on the main street and has revitalized other buildings, such as an old Casey's to the new police department, and the building that used to house the eye doctor has been remodeled to house a church. Cannonville also has several mid-large agricultural or manufacturing facilities located in an industrial park that provides added employment opportunities for the community.

The school districts of these two towns are similar, as well. These schools are both classified as rural districts according to the U.S. Department of Education's definition of rural. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), the definition of a "small rural school" is one that has an overall student population of under 600 and is in a county that has a population density of fewer than 10 residents per square mile. The physical space of both districts is similar in that both school districts house all their students within one building on one campus, as opposed to having a separate building or campus for elementary, junior high, and high school (Site visits of districts, 2016). These districts, like the communities they serve, have similar demographics with student populations that are over 95% white (State A Department of Education 2016; State B

Interactive Report Card, 2016). Both districts also have a low population of free and reduced lunch status and a low number of special education students (State A Department of Education 2016; State B Interactive Report Card, 2016). The demographics of the staff at these schools are also very similar, mirroring the student body and town’s lack of diversity. Class sizes at these schools are also similar, with an average class size of 13 students in Riverton and 14 students in Cannonville (State A Department of Education 2016; State B Interactive Report Card, 2016). Table 2 displays Riverton’s and Cannonville’s student demographics.

Table 2. *Student Demographics of Riverton and Cannonville Community School Districts (2015-16)*

Description	Riverton Percentage	Cannonville Percentage
<i>Race</i>		
White	95.3	95.4
Bi-Racial	3.3	1.9
Hispanic	<1	2.3
Asian	1.2	1
African American	<1	<1
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0
<i>Other</i>		
Enrollment	489	547
Free and Reduced Lunch	24.8	27.7
ELL	0	0
Special Education	12.6	9.23

Source: State Interactive Report Card; State Department of Education

There are also differences between the two districts. For example, Riverton School District consolidates with a neighboring town from 7-12 grade, with Riverton’s students going to the neighboring town in junior high and the high school students coming to Riverton in high school. This means that Riverton does not house any 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, which contributes to the apparent smaller size of the student population compared to the number of students in Cannonville. However, if the number

of Cannonville's junior high enrollment is taken out of the total number of students in the district, the number would be close to Riverton's current enrollment. Cannonville does not consolidate with another district per se, except for a neighboring town that closed the junior high and high school, and those students can choose to come to Cannonville or another neighboring district.

Another difference between these two districts is that Riverton has had a significantly greater financial struggle than Cannonville. Riverton struggles financially as a result of the state's reduced education budget over the last several years, low tax base, and stable or declining student enrollment (Principal interview, May 2016). As a result, Riverton has had to cut several positions within the last few years, including the elementary counselor, art, music teacher, and elementary secretary positions (Principal interview, 2016). These positions are still offered by the Cannonville district. Additionally, Cannonville offers additional curriculum options that Riverton does not. For example, Cannonville students who wish to take advantage of the business and vocational-ag courses are provided with the transportation to a neighboring town to receive those credits. Cannonville also has a 1:1 technology program in place, where each student in 2<sup>nd</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade has his or her own iPad, and teachers utilize technological strategies in their classroom instruction (School site visits, 2016). This differs from Riverton, which lacks the financial capability to upgrade their current technology infrastructure to a 1:1 situation for students (School site visits, 2016).

The districts in this study have similar administrative structures based on my observations and background knowledge of these two districts. They both have one superintendent, who also works in the PK-12 grade building. However, Cannonville has

an elementary principal to assist with the administrative duties, while Steve is the sole principal in Riverton. Due to budget cuts, Riverton eliminated staff in their elementary office last year and has only one secretary responsible for the entire district. Cannonville, on the other hand, has two secretaries in addition to three other central office clerical support workers. The lack of clerical support in Riverton means that Steve has additional duties such as entering attendance and grades for students.

The demographics of the teaching staff in Riverton and Cannonville mirror the student demographics and are displayed in Table 3. The average teaching salary is also similar in both districts. Riverton's average teaching salary is \$41, 218 (State A Interactive Report Card, 2016), while Cannonville's average teaching salary is \$44,790 (Johnson et al., 2014). The consolidation of Riverton with a neighboring district results in a smaller number of students as well as teachers. Riverton has a total of 35 teachers, PK-6, and 9-12, while Cannonville employs 51 teachers PK-12<sup>th</sup> grade (State B Department of Education, 2016).

Table 3. *Teacher Demographics of Riverton and Cannonville (2015-16)*

Description	Riverton Percentage	Cannonville Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	22	25
Female	78	75
<i>Race</i>		
White	95	100
Bi-racial	0	0
Hispanic	0	0
Asian	3	0
American Indian	<1	0
African American	1	0
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	<1	0

Source: State A Interactive Report Card (2016); State B State Department of Education

### **Participants**

Just as the communities and school districts share similarities, so do the two principals in this case study. Matt is the principal of Cannonville High School. He graduated from the district in 1997 and went to a private college where he majored in education. While in college, he coached football and basketball in Cannonville. He was hired as a junior high math teacher right after college. He taught junior high math and high school math in addition to coaching basketball in the district for 9 years before becoming principal. He has been the principal for 5 years and now also has the dual role of athletic director. He earned his master's in administration and is now working on his Ph.D.

Steve is the principal in Riverton School District. He graduated from Riverton in 1993 and went to a private university to play basketball. He majored in physical education and received his coaching endorsement. He was hired in the district immediately after college as the elementary PE teacher and driver's education instructor.

While in his role as teacher, the elementary principal at the time encouraged him to get his administrative degree, so he received his master's degree in education administration. When the principal of the elementary moved to the superintendent position, Steve moved into the elementary principal position after teaching for 10 years. After serving as the elementary principal, he served as the high school principal and athletic director. Recent budget cuts eliminated the elementary principal position, and, as a result, Steve is now the PK-12 principal. However, during the interviews, he disclosed that they are in the process of hiring a part-time elementary principal/PE teacher for the 2016-17 school year. While this has the potential to alleviate Steve's duties as elementary principal, he stated he will have to add the duties of athletic director. Therefore, for the 2016-17 school year, he will serve as the high school principal and athletic director.

A key characteristic shared by these two principals, and a reason why they were purposefully chosen for this study, is their strong personal connection to the districts they now lead. Both Matt and Steve attended school K-12<sup>th</sup> grade in the school districts where they now work. In addition, both men came back to their districts after college to teach and coach while working on their master's degree or administrative endorsement during their teaching tenure. Their families have been anchored in the respective communities for many years, and Matt and Steve are also living and raising their families in the same communities where they were raised. These principals are also active members of community organizations such as the Lions Club and Junior Achievement. Both men also volunteer time outside of their principal jobs to coach their children in youth sports.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative researchers need to ensure that ethical considerations are carefully adhered to. Three major issues should be addressed with ethical considerations: participants, research, and the researcher (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In addition, the researcher should ensure accuracy and credibility, disclose biases, and understand limitations (Yin, 2012).

To address ethical considerations related to the participants, garnering informed consent, protecting them from harm, maintaining confidentiality, and obtaining formal approval for the research through IRB are important steps in the research process (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2012). The participants in this study gave both verbal and written consent via a signed formal consent letter agreeing to participate. In addition to asking for permission, the consent letter informs participants of the purpose and methods of the study, describes the rights of the participants, and describes ways to ensure confidentiality (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Confidentiality for participants is also maintained by providing pseudonyms for the towns, school districts, and principals in this study. Furthermore, the researcher is the only one with access to the recorded and transcribed interview data.

## **Trustworthiness of the Study**

A limitation to qualitative case studies is the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator, as they are the primary source of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). The researcher needs to be cognizant of the representation and interpretation of data and disclose personal biases relevant to the research. Trustworthiness and credibility are important aspects of qualitative research. Qualitative research methodologists have

elaborated several ways to increase trustworthiness in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2010). Techniques such as building rapport with participants (Baxter & Jack, 2008), conducting member checking (Yin, 2010), conducting peer review (Merriam, 1998), memos, and triangulating data (Yin, 2010) can be used to help ensure accuracy (Silverman, 2016). The researcher's plans to address trustworthiness and credibility through such techniques are discussed further in the following paragraphs.

Researchers can first build rapport and trust with participants through prolonged or repeated observations and interactions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this study, the researcher knew the participants and had already established rapport and trust through previous interactions. Furthermore, multiple observations in different settings were part of the data collection methods in this study.

Trustworthiness can also be established through member checking (Yin, 2010). Member checking occurred as both participants received the full transcripts of their interviews. Participants had the opportunity to "clarify the interpretation and contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556). Both participants responded that they did not have any additional information to add and that they had no comments or concerns regarding the transcripts. Peer review of the data analysis was also employed (Merriam, 1998). Peer review consisted of having a peer look at identified codes and challenge the researcher's interpretations of the data.

Another way in which trustworthiness is addressed is through triangulation. Triangulation refers to how multiple sources of evidence lead to the same conclusion, which adds strength not only to the validity, but also to the reliability of a study (Yin, 2010). Additionally, researchers can triangulate data sources to ensure multiple

perspectives are explored (Merriam, 1998). In this case study, multiple sources of data were used, such as interviews, repeated observations, and document analysis, and similarities and differences amongst data sources were analyzed (Yin, 2010).

Memo writing is another way to establish trustworthiness through checking personal biases (Yin, 2010) and reflecting on the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Yin (2010) explained how memos help with this process: “Continually acknowledging the unwanted biases imposed by your own values when you are analyzing your data help with rigor” (p. 177). Memo writing was utilized during observations, during the interview process, transcription, and during the data analysis phase. “Good memos can preserve what at first appear to be ‘half-baked’ ideas that later may become invaluable” (Yin, 2010, p. 186). Memos were also kept during reflection after interviews, observations, and peer debriefing.

One of the most important factors in determining trustworthiness is to determine credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Credibility is another way to mean that the research is believable (Strauss, 1998). Strauss (1998) defined criteria for determining the credibility of a qualitative research study. Those criteria include having enough detailed description that readers are able to feel as if they were in the setting, showing evidence on how the data were collected and analyzed so that readers can determine how the researcher came up with conclusions, and having one or more comparison groups so that findings are based on more than one instance (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The researcher addresses the criteria of credibility by providing rich and detailed descriptions of cases. The second criteria is covered by providing explanations and evidence of what data were collected and how they were collected. Lastly, this research is a study of two cases, thus a

comparative group is established and findings are based on more than one case or instance.

### **Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures**

Proper IRB protocol was followed through the University of Iowa International Review Board. IRB approved the study (see Appendix C), which included at least two separate interviews of both principals, observations at school meetings, observations of interactions with students, parents, and staff, and collecting other artifacts such as district handbooks and city and district demographics.

The first step in data collection is choosing a site. The two sites and participants were chosen due to their accessibility, their willingness to be a part of this project, and the ability each had to assist in exploring the study's research questions (Creswell, 2011). The small number of participants in qualitative research enables the researcher to obtain rich, descriptive information and gain a deeper understanding of the main concept of study (Creswell, 2014). Purposeful sampling was used in this study in that the site and participants were intentionally selected because they had direct experience as homegrown leaders, which was the topic of study (Creswell, 2011; Wiersma, 2005). Furthermore, the participants were from two neighboring states and worked in schools with similar size communities and demographics. The similarities of the principals, districts, and communities allowed for a more thorough cross analysis between the two cases. In addition, two cases with similarities, instead of a single case study, added support to the research questions by providing additional data.

In a case study, the data are collected over time, meaning data are not all collected during one observation or interview (Yin, 2010). To fully understand the two cases

chosen for this study, a variety of data were collected. The data included field notes from observations of parent, student, and staff meetings; observations of informal interactions at community events and in the hallway before or after school; and two separate interviews with each principal. District handbooks and district background information collected through public documents and district web pages were included in the data collection. Multiple sources of data are unique to case studies and are a strength in a case study approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) because they contribute to the credibility in qualitative research (Yin, 2012). The following table describes the data sources and the research questions that the data assisted in answering.

Table 4

*Summary of Data Sources*

Research Question	Data Source			
	Interviews with Principals	Observations of school functions	Analysis of District Handbooks	Review of Demographics Data
How do these principals identify themselves as educational leaders?	✓			
How do these rural principals use this transformational leadership style to deal with challenges unique to rural districts?	✓	✓	✓	✓
How does the personal history of a rural principal affect his ability to be a transformational leader?	✓	✓		

## **Observations**

In qualitative research, observation is one of the main data collection tools (Creswell, 2011). The observer uses all senses to gather verbal and non-verbal communication and information about the environment, activities, and interactions (Creswell, 2014). Observations can be collected from a nonparticipant/observer or participant/observer. Creswell (2014) described the role of participant/observer as one in which the researcher is not a part of the group being studied and takes field notes without direct involvement in the activity or with the people involved in the activity. Wiersma (2005) defined participant-observer by stating, “A participant-observer attempts to generate the data from the perspective of the individuals being studied” (Wiersma, 2005, p. 253). I was not a part of the group being studied and did not talk at any of the meetings. I sat in the back of the room and quietly took notes, trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible (Yin, 2012). Staff development and professional development meetings were attended on multiple occasions over a period of time to observe participants in their natural setting. Additionally, participants were observed as they participated in school and community events, such as sporting events, Lions Club fundraiser, spaghetti supper, interactions with parents and students before and after school, parent meetings, and Athletic Booster meetings.

Field notes were collected during observations of meetings, as well as during observations of the principals’ daily experiences and interactions with teachers, students, parents, or other key stakeholders. During observations at staff meetings, I listened and looked for interactions and behavior between the principal and staff pertaining to specific parts of the research question: “How does the personal history of a rural principal affect his ability to be a transformational leader?” Specifically, attention and focus during

observations were given to signs, symbols, non-verbal, and verbal communications (Yin, 2012) that provided insight into how the principals related or responded to staff regarding building relationship and school culture and making decisions. In addition, attention was given to any reference to the participant's past experiences in the district. I looked for similar themes (Yin, 2012) during these observations and attempted to observe at least 10 hours or more during the observation period at each school. Detailed field notes were recorded in a notebook or on my computer during observations.

Confidentiality was of importance during the entire research process, including during data collection (Creswell, 2014). Field notes from observations were kept in a secure location during transportation to and from sites and during data analysis and interpretation. They were then stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office. Information transferred to a computer was stored on a password-protected computer and, to maintain anonymity, identifying information was removed prior to peer debriefing.

### **Interviews**

In qualitative research, some, if not all, of the data are often collected through interviews with participants (Merriam, 1998). The main purpose of an interview is to find out what is on someone else's mind and to gather information that is not observable (Strauss, 1998; Yin, 2010). As stated by Merriam (1998), "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that cannot be replicated" (p. 72). Interviews can range from a very structured form, such as replicating a written survey, to a more open-ended and informal conversation. A semi-structured or more open-ended format allows the researcher to be able to generate

questions based on responses and allows the participants to elaborate more freely on their thoughts and perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interview questions “are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and fewer structured questions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). The interviews in this study were semi-structured. The semi-structured approach allowed for the principals to expand more on their thoughts and allowed me as the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on their responses.

### **Data Collection Period**

Principals were interviewed at least twice during the data collection period of this study. These interview questions focused on answering the research questions and exploring further findings from observations. Two separate interview protocols (see Appendices A and B) assisted in gathering data to answer the research questions. The first interview protocol focused on the principal’s background and history with the district and included questions relating to the participant’s reflection on how his background influences his leadership practices. The information gleaned from this interview helped in determining how a principal’s history with his district affected his leadership practices regarding building relationships, trust, school culture, and making decisions. The first interview also asked participants to reflect on their leadership style in order to address the research question of how they identify themselves as leaders. The second interview protocol focuses on the concepts of building relationships with staff, school culture, and decision making. In addition, the second interview asked the participants to ponder the challenges they perceive in their role as rural principals, as well as the professional development needs that would better assist them to lead their rural districts.

Recorded interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions were stored in a password-protected computer in a locked office. To assist with the accuracy of the interview responses, a summary of the transcribed interviews was shared with the participants for member checking purposes to help assure validity. The transcriptions were then be coded, and the codes were used for data analysis and interpretation. The procedures for data analysis will be described in the next section.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis allows a researcher to explain, interpret, and better understand his/her data by finding meaningful themes and patterns across all types of data collected (Yin, 2010). The purpose of data collection is to provide structure and order and to create meaningful data analysis. The description of the data results helps tell the story of the data and enables the researcher to draw conclusions about the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)

Case study analysis involves providing a detailed description of the setting and the cases being examined (Creswell, 2013). Yin (2010) stated that the researcher should look for the answer to three questions when analyzing data: “What are the distinctive features of your study?, How does the collected data relate to the original research questions?, Are there new insights that have emerged?” (p. 183). During the analysis process, interview transcriptions, field notes, and the documents collected were coded. Coding procedures are described in this section.

Coding is the first step in data analysis and is the transition between the data collection and the analysis of those data (Saldaña, 2015). Charmaz (2006) defined coding as “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes,

and accounts for each piece of data” (p. 43). Qualitative codes separate data into smaller words or short phrases that are then renamed and used to summarize, reduce, or condense data (Saldaña, 2015) and to develop ideas for interpretation (Charmaz, 2006). There are several different ways to code (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Miles et al., 2013), and as each qualitative study is different, so will be the coding techniques used (Creswell, 2014).

For the purpose of this study, I conducted multiple rounds of coding, reassembling the categories until saturation had been reached and no new information emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The process of pre-coding, first, and second cycle coding as described by Saldaña (2015) was utilized for the data analysis. The process is described below.

Prior to first cycle coding, pre-coding (Saldaña, 2015) was utilized for this study. Pre-coding involves highlighting and making memos in field notes, during document collection and during transcription, any phrases or quotes that could be used for further coding (Saldaña, 2015). During observations, pre-coding was done by making notes off to the side and highlighting information that pertained to the research questions and the theoretical lens of transformational leadership. While transcribing interviews I typed notes in the margins of initial ideas or concepts that appeared repeatedly or related to the research questions.

After the data were collected, and in the case of interviews, transcribed, first-order coding took place. First order or open coding refers to creating initial categories or themes (Yin, 2012). First order coding “includes up to 25 different approaches, each one with a particular function or purpose. You do not need to stick with just one approach, but can mix and match approaches as needed” (Miles et al., 2013, p. 74). Descriptive

coding was the method of first order coding used where data were labeled with short words or phrases (Miles et al., 2013). This preliminary coding was used to assist the researcher in developing descriptive codes during the first cycle of coding. The labels of the descriptive coding process were indexed and sorted into categories that were utilized during the second cycle of coding (Miles et al., 2013) Some methodologists suggest creating codes that will directly answer the research question. For example, Saldaña (2015) stated, “A provisional list of codes can be determined beforehand to harmonize with your study’s conceptual framework or paradigm and to enable an analysis that directly answers your research questions and goals” (p. 49). During observations and transcription, I notated instances or quotes off to the side that pertained to the research questions. For example, if during a staff meeting the principal referenced how things were done when he was a teacher or student in the district, I would highlight that and put a note off to the side to indicate that it tied into the homegrown phenomena of the research question.

The goal of second cycle coding as described by Saldaña (2015) was “to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes” (p. 149). Second cycle coding is described as “advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through first cycle methods” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 149). The second cycle of coding consisted of axial coding, which is a way to describe the dimensions of a category and how the categories and sub-categories are related (Saldaña, 2015). Coding for both the first and second cycle was conducted by hand. The codes were color coded with highlighters and then organized into similar themes or

categories and sub-categories (Creswell, 2014). See (Appendix D) for a table of pertinent codes developed.

Yin (2010) stressed the importance of the researcher examining personal bias during the coding process. This was done by constantly asking questions as to why and how I saw similarities or differences emerge and looking for alternative explanations to the themes found. In addition, peer debriefing and memo writing during the coding process were utilized (Miles et al., 2013) to help minimize personal bias.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. A case study can oversimplify results and lead the reader to draw false conclusions (Lincoln, 1985). This potential risk may be addressed by using rich descriptions of the cases, which allows readers to make their own decisions about what is applicable (or not) to their contexts. The results cannot be generalized to all rural homegrown, transformational principals because the small number of participants limits application of the results of the study to the larger rural principal population. Because the researcher served as the data gathering instrument for this study, the applicability of the results is limited. In this case, the researcher brings a level of subjectivity to the interpretation process and limits broad generalizations being drawn from the results (Merriam, 1998). In addition, while there are advantages to the researcher being the primary mode of data collection and analysis, it relies on the researcher's integrity and ethics, which is difficult to prove (Merriam, 1998). To ensure accuracy, member checking and peer review were utilized. Another way this can be addressed is for the researcher to attend to his/her biases so the reader understands them and how they could affect the results (Wiersma, 2005).

Interpretation of the data by the researcher can be influenced by biases and beliefs the researcher brings to the study. As noted earlier, this researcher grew up and now lives in a small town and has a personal connection with the two participants and the school districts and communities involved in the study. I made sure I kept an open mind when analyzing and interpreting data and kept my biases in check through member checking, peer debriefing, and memo writing (Silverman, 2016; Yin, 2010) .

### **Preview of Following Chapters**

The following chapter will discuss the results of the study using the multiple sources of data collected. The data analysis and interpretation will be further described to provide a clear description of the results, specifically how they answered the research questions. The fifth and last chapter will discuss the implications of this research and provide a summary of the research and findings, as well as their pertinence to the field of educational leadership and policy.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Introduction

Matt and Steve (pseudonyms) were principals in small school districts located in small, rural, farming communities in the Midwest. Matt, the principal at Cannonville, and Steve, the principal at Riverton, shared similar characteristics. Prior to becoming a principal, both men held previous roles within their districts.

Both of the principals, Matt and Steve, fit the definition used in Chapter I of a homegrown leader. That is, both were students in their districts from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and had taught, coached, and lived in the school districts where they were administrators at the time of the study. In addition, both principals had strong family ties within the community and school, as well as fulfilled the role of parent to children attending the district. Both principals led their districts through various transformations, whether those changes were imposed from state or federal levels or resulted from new curriculum or internal decisions. During my observations, I was able to monitor several new initiatives that were in the beginning stages, as well as some initiatives that were further along in the implementation process.

Transformation occurs in both large and small schools. I noted throughout the observation period and through interview responses that transformation or change not only was a large part of both school districts, but also was a continual process as both schools worked to implement new initiatives and ideas to improve teacher and student learning. Some of these changes were internally imposed; that is, the staff, school board, or principal decided that a new idea or initiative should be implemented for school wide or student improvement. Other changes were mandated externally by state or federal

legislation that the school districts were forced to adhere to despite sometimes not having the resources to implement them. During the observation period at both schools, many new initiatives were introduced and discussed at staff meetings. I was able to see first-hand how these ideas were shared with staff, how these principals garnered staff buy-in, and how far the implementations had come by the end of the school year. During the interviews, both Matt and Steve talked about past changes within their districts and schools that both of them had navigated as principal. As will be described in this chapter, change occurred in both rural districts, and the principals discussed the difficulties associated with these changes, the leadership characteristics and practices they used to help address these transformations, and how their prior knowledge and history within their districts helped or hindered these changes.

This chapter is organized by research question, with data from interviews, observations, and district documents to support the findings for each research question. The first research question explored will be how these two principals have identified themselves as educational leaders. Following will be a discussion on if and how these principals used transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to a rural district. Lastly, Matt and Steve have used personal history and connections to influence transformational leadership practices such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change. In addition, this section will highlight the specific changes these principals have contended with and how they handled those.

### **Principals' Self-Perception as Leaders**

Matt and Steve were asked, "How do you identify yourself as an educational leader?" Both participants were identified as having transformational leadership qualities

through multiple observations and interactions from the researcher. Matt and Steve both described their leadership style using qualities or characteristics related to transformational leadership. Though neither principal used the words “transformational leadership” to describe their leadership style, they described how they place a high value on building trust and positive relationships with stakeholders in order to assist with making decisions and to implement the many changes in their respective districts. These principals also stressed the importance of involving and empowering stakeholders when making decisions, which are all aspects of transformational leadership as discussed in the literature review.

Steve and Matt both emphasized the importance of building relationships and trust with stakeholders, which are characteristics of a transformational leader. Steve said, “I feel like I am definitely a relationship and trust type of leader. I think building relationship with staff especially in education is the key to success” (Interview, May 2016). Matt echoed the importance of relationships as well:

My leadership style is definitely more relationship-focused. Building that positive relationship first is always my goal. I think we can get more accomplished if we have that trusting positive relationship established first before taking on any new adventure. I think they know they can trust me, and at the end I am not going to do anything that is not best for the kids or best for the school. (Interview, April 2016)

Steve believed that building positive relationships with staff not only builds trust but also helps maintain those relationships when difficult conversations need to be had. He stated:

I believe in the philosophy of filling their buckets with positive things and being as big a help as I can so that when we do have to have tough talks I have had enough positive interaction with them that it makes those times easier. I also go out of my way in situations where staff need me to have their back. I promise them at the beginning of every year that I will be their biggest advocate with all the stakeholders involved with our school as long as they don't do something that

I cannot defend. This helps when situations come up that they have made mistakes and we have to deal with them. (Interview, May 2016)

Steve and Matt both also commented on the importance of empowering staff to share input in decision making, which is also a characteristic described in the literature review of transformational leaders. Matt made sure he received as much input from staff as possible regarding decisions: “I try to get as much input from staff as I can. I mean if they were going to buy into it, they needed to provide their input. And, we have a lot of conversations. So we just have a lot of honest discussions” (Interview, April 2016). Matt continued to discuss how his transparency and honesty with staff in connection with empowering staff builds trust:

I tell them what I am thinking, why I am thinking that way, and I ask their input. I kind of let them feel involved in the process and let them have the power when they need to have the power and give them support. I think when you involve them and say this is what I am thinking and why I am thinking this way, instead of saying here is the rule, go do it, I think it helps build that trust. (Interview, April 2016)

Matt also talked about the importance of building those relationships with students:

They know how I treat people and I tell it how it is. I mean not in a bad way, I tell them what I am thinking, why I am thinking that way, and I ask their input. You can build that relationship and rapport quickly when you are honest and transparent with students and treat them like adults. (Interview, April 2016)

Steve believed it is also important to support and allow staff and students to share input in decision making. Steve stated in an interview, “I try to include the staff and students on any decision that directly affects them. I think it is important with big changes, that stakeholders are always involved, and feel that their input is valued” (Interview, May 2016). During two of the teacher leadership meetings I attended in Riverton, students were invited to share their input regarding a new initiative for the high

school. Steve mentioned during an interview how he involves students in decision making:

You have been to a couple of our meetings, we are trying to do that more with students now too. If we are going to give rewards to students, we need to know what students want. We as adults, and we find as parents, what we think they might like is not necessarily what they like. So I think the more you can involve stakeholders the better. (Interview, May 2016)

The leadership qualities these principals self-identified with align with transformational leadership practices such as building trust, maintaining positive relationships and school culture, and engaging in collaborative decision making when enacting change.

The following section addresses the research question: How does being a homegrown leader influence transformational leadership practices such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting changes within their district? There will be a detailed description of several of the changes each principal has dealt with during their tenure as principal in order to address what leadership skills they used in order to implement those changes. It was discovered that both leaders placed a high value on trust, positive relationships, and collaborative decision making in order to positively influence the culture of their schools and help enact change. They discussed how their previous relationships with community members and staff helped them in building trust and relationships.

### **The Influence of Being Homegrown in Transformational Leadership Changes in Cannonville**

The Cannonville School District experienced multiple changes during Matt's tenure as principal. These transformations were brought about by both internal and external initiatives or policies. Internal changes included requiring community service for

all high schoolers, peer tutoring, standard-based grading, performing instructional rounds, less grading on homework, standards of excellence for staff and students, and district staff buying local for needed supplies. These internal changes were implemented as a result of internal conversations with stakeholders. Externally imposed changes included restructuring the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and the implementation of the Teacher Leader Compensation (TLC) grant. Matt entered into his position during one of the most tumultuous changes the district had encountered. This turmoil will be outlined in the following paragraphs because it played an important role in the transition from teacher to principal for Matt and created an additional barrier for Matt as he worked to implement other needed changes in the high school.

Matt assumed his role as high school principal during a challenging time in Cannonville that had affected staff and community culture and morale. The previous principal Matt worked under while teaching high school had walked out of the district in September the year prior to his assignment to an administrative role. The superintendent had recommended the former principal's termination, and the school board supported that decision. The principal claimed the termination was without just cause and the charges were not supported. The case went to litigation before an administrative law judge, who ruled in favor of the principal, and finally to the Supreme Court of the state, which ruled that the district reinstate this principal's position. This decision divided not only the staff at the school but also the community, as some sided with the former principal and some with the school administration that terminated the employment. Matt applied for the high school principal position after the previous principal was terminated, but the position was given to an administrator from a similar size district who had high school administrative

experience. However, this principal left after the first year, as did the superintendent. When Matt applied again, he was offered the high school principal position. During this time, the district was in litigation for the case of the termination of the former principal. During Matt's first year as principal, after the Supreme Court ordered the district to reinstate the former principal's job, Matt had to step down as the high school principal in order to allow the former administrator to regain her position as principal. Matt kept an administrative role, but he moved to another part of the building. He described this time as very challenging and the culture of the school as "very unhealthy" (Interview, February 2016). The former principal ended up settling with the district and resigned from the high school principal position in January of that year, allowing Matt to resume his role as high school principal.

According to Matt, the turmoil with the previous principal helped propel him towards the administrative role. He stated that while he always knew he wanted to be a teacher, he did not enter teaching with the end goal to be a principal, and not until he began teaching in the high school did he see the need for changes. In my initial interview with Matt, he described the negative culture of the high school when he moved there from the middle school to teach math and the changes he thought that needed to be made to improve the school:

When I moved to the high school, things were not good culture wise. I mean the staff was good, but we didn't have the leadership I thought we needed. When I looked at all the courses it was the same courses being offered as when I graduated from here 10 years ago. There were no changes being made. There was a lot of stagnant. There wasn't growth and the kids were not showing growth the way they should and those things just kind of drove me to think, ok, maybe I can do this. (Interview, February 2016)

He also commented that other teachers looked to him in a leadership role during the end of the former principal's tenure and the transition to a new principal:

Then we had the big fall out where (the former principal) was walked out, and a lot of people leaned on me. We had three or four new teachers who 4 weeks into their career, their principal was gone, so I kind of helped guide them and I felt that when I was in the middle school, between (a teacher) and myself, we did a lot of the discipline, teachers came to us for this or that. (Interview, February 2016)

Though he applied for the principal job the first year after the former principal left, he described how the timing of being offered the position the second year was a better fit:

So I applied for the principal job after that year, and I don't know how many people they interviewed but I know it was between me and another candidate. And, from what I had been told, it was a really tough decision, a lot of teachers wanted me in the job, but they hired someone with more experience, which was probably a good thing when I look back at because of the situation. I felt bad for him, because he didn't know what the situation really was. That was one thing I talked about in the interview, I mean I knew every dirty little secret and knew what it was going to be like. But that year of separation probably helped me out more just because some of the timings of the other things. (Interview, February 2016)

Though Matt stated that it was a challenge to build trust and staff morale after this incident, he indicated in interviews and was observed to have rebuilt trust and morale and positively implemented several initiatives. Steve did not have this additional burden to overcome when he took over as principal; however, he had the unique challenge discussed later in this chapter of having both of the previous principals take over as superintendent. The changes experienced in Riverton will be discussed in the following paragraph, followed by how these principals used transformational leadership practices such as building trust, relationships, a positive school culture, and collaborative decision making to implement change.

## **Changes in Riverton**

Steve also led his district through transformation imposed by both state and district policies. Steve discussed how he led his district through some of these changes and, like Matt, stressed the importance of building trusting relationships and including input from stakeholders. He also reflected on the challenges of having his predecessor still in the district in the superintendent role during the implementation of some of the changes. During interviews, Steve discussed a few of the changes that occurred within his first years in an administration role, and during the observation period other initiatives were discussed and in the process of being implemented or being planned for implementation in the future. Initiatives detailed included changes in special education programming, The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) in the high school, Response to Intervention (RTI), and the implementation of a new teacher evaluation program.

One of the first major changes Steve had to make involved changing the way the special education program was administered in the district. This change transpired as a result of both his observations during walk-throughs and an audit from the state regarding the district's special education program, which determined that the district was not in compliance with inclusion regulations. In addition to modifying the program, he had to change the way a veteran special education teacher handled the program and had to address the beliefs of his teachers about inclusion for special education students.

During his first semester as elementary principal, Steve noticed that students eligible for Title I services and special education students were being pulled for remedial

reading and math help during reading and math general education instruction in their classrooms. He mentioned that the teachers believed that this was the best time for them to receive that instruction and discussed in an interview how he overcame the resistance from the teachers. He stated, “I was like you have to trust me. I gave the analogy to shooting free throws at basketball practice, do you pull a kid from practicing free throws at practice to work on dribbling? No, you want them to have that extra practice” (Interview, May 2016). He continued the discussion stating that he believed that the teachers felt it was easier to teach without those students in the room: “It was easier to send with Mrs. Smith to do it, because then you could teach your lesson, you didn't have to differentiate at all, you could teach what you had to the status quo” (Interview, May 2016). He used data at the end of the year to show the teachers that the students grew more in math and reading by staying in the room during those instructional times and being pulled out during another time. He stated, “Once they saw the data, the results were that the students did better receiving that classroom instruction” (Interview, May 2016). Steve also commented that the use of data to drive instruction was not something they were used to, so being able to examine and make sense of the data helped them understand the decision:

There wasn't a lot of data decision making going on before me, so when we started you know implementing RTI and benchmarking assessments, and really looking at the assessments to see what was going on, they could see, ok, it does make sense. (Interview, May 2016)

Steve helped teachers overcome this resistance by encouraging them to trust the decision and then using that data to support why the change was best for the students.

Steve also was in the process of implementing PBIS in the high school during the observation period. I was able to observe this process, including how he introduced the

program to staff, incorporated their ideas, and also asked for and included student input. He first introduced the approach to staff at a high school staff meeting. He discussed a new piece of legislation, Senate Bill 100, that would be in effect in the fall that placed stricter guidelines on districts regarding discipline, specifically in expelling students. He told staff, “We all need to be aware of this law... it will affect how we discipline, especially low SES and minority children. We have to take all means possible before kicking a student out” (Observation, staff meeting, April 2016). He maintained that implementing PBIS would help fulfill one of the requirements of this law and encourage positive behavior by rewarding those kids who achieve behavioral success. He stated, “If we have PBIS, we then automatically have something in place that falls in line with both the law and RTI ” (Observation, staff meeting, April 2016). He asked for teacher input at this meeting and then followed up with those suggestions at a Building Leadership Team (BLT) meeting with the leadership team. It was at that meeting that Steve suggested inviting student representatives to give their input. At the following BLT meeting, student representatives were invited to share their input. This change was to be in effect for the 2016-17 school year, and by the end of the year, a plan was in place to roll out this new policy in the fall.

Teacher evaluations would also be changing in Riverton due to new legislation in this state requiring teacher evaluations to be tied to student performance. Riverton would be implementing the Danielson Model to evaluate teachers. This was discussed first at BLT meetings with staff, where several concerns were addressed that specifically related to the student performance piece. Staff concerns were listened to, and Steve and the BLT team worked on a plan to introduce this change to staff. They discussed what they would

need in terms of professional development to get started. He listened to their fears, allowed them to be a part of the process, and provided support to help facilitate this change.

### **It's All About Trust and Relationships**

Steve and Matt were homegrown leaders who had strong connections not only within their respective schools but also within their communities. These prior connections and personal history were described by both leaders as both a challenge and a benefit in their leadership roles. It was evident, not only through their interview responses but also in my observations, that building and maintaining trust and positive relationships was of high value in practicing their profession and was used as a vehicle to help enact change.

Matt and Steve both believed that their prior connections and history within the community and district had made it easier to build positive, trusting relationships with stakeholders. Both principals cited that this prior knowledge of students and families and background within the community helped them in their administrative role regarding trust and positive relationships.

Matt not only elaborated in his interview how he believed strongly in building connections, but I observed Matt, at both school events and community events, engaging with students, parents, and community members. Matt believed that his prior connections also helped him maintain trust within the community. When Matt was asked what the benefits and challenges were to being a homegrown leader, he stated:

I think the obvious benefits are um, just getting the community behind me. But, I think that could be a disadvantage depending on the person. It helped that when I started teaching here, most of the parents had my grandma and they loved my grandma, so that helped that my grandma was one of those mothering elementary teachers that everyone loved. They knew my name. It wasn't like I was a big athletic star by any stretch. I mean I played on the football team and I started, but

I didn't hardly play in basketball. And, in track, it's not like we are this big track powerhouse school. But, it helped, people knew me. And, my uncle being around the community. I mean our name is known in this small town. (Interview, February 2016)

The local Casey's was the gathering spot for a group of retired men to have coffee every morning, and I saw Matt sitting down with these men and talking to them on a Saturday morning. He described his coffee talks in one of his interviews: "When I go to Casey's, there is always the crew there in the morning drinking coffee, and I will sit down and talk to them for a few minutes. They may not even have a kid in the school, but that's how you build connections and trust" (Interview, February 2016). He also discussed how he made a point to talk to parents at extra-curricular events and how he felt being visible and putting yourself out there builds relationships and trust. He stated, "I just make sure I am out and about and visible, and talking to people. I think that has been the downfall of other administrators, is that they go and sit in the stands at events and don't talk to people and build those relationships" (Interview, February 2016).

In addition to using his homegrown ties to build relationships with community members, Matt also described how his previous connections with the staff at the school helped build trust and relationships with staff. He described how when he started teaching in the middle school right out of high school, all of the staff were the same teachers he had as a student: "When I got the job in the middle school, everyone there I had had as a student. They had all been my teachers. Um, and within the 7 years I was in the junior high, I would say within 5 years it almost all turned over from retirements" (Interview, January 2016). When he moved to a high school teaching position after only 7 years in the district, he was number three in seniority due to retirements, and when he took over the role of high school principal, there was one teacher left who had taught Matt when he

was in high school. He stated that this prior knowledge helped him during his first year of teaching in that he knew more about the district than his mentor did who was not from the district: “I knew more of the teachers, and the kids and their families than he did from living here or because the teachers were my teachers when I went here” (Interview, February 2016). His second year of teaching, he was paired with a teacher who was his former teacher and track coach and whom he looked up to:

We had a lot of fun, because we had a prior relationship and we were very similar with our teaching styles and with our beliefs and just with everything we did. I mean, I emulated a lot of what he did... because I thought he was a great teacher. (Interview, February 2016)

His previous relationships with teachers helped him as he began his teaching career, and he felt that his prior knowledge of the district and the community also helped him in his transition to the role of principal. He discussed how several of the teachers already leaned on him either for discipline or in a mentoring type role, even though he was not a mentor, and so they already viewed him as a leader when he took over. He explained:

A lot of people leaned on me. We had three or four new teachers who 4 weeks into their career, their principal was gone, so I kind of helped, guide them and I felt that when I was in the middle school, between (another veteran teacher) and myself, we did a lot of the discipline, teachers came to us for this or that. (Interview, February 2016)

He also stated that knowing the district and the situation helped because he knew exactly what he was walking into: “I talked about in the interview, I mean I knew every dirty little secret and knew what it was going to be like” (Interview, February 2016). Matt was asked if those relationships with teachers changed when he became an administrator, and he stated:

I don't think it did. I think it maybe, should have a little bit, but that is just not my personality. I have never been on a power trip, and I have been more about building the relationships with people as a teacher and as an administrator than I

was about anything else than who is in charge. Now, when push comes to shove and I have to go tell someone something, there is a little more weight to that, but I think the few teachers that are left that I taught with, I kind of came up to the high school being that teacher leader because I knew there wasn't any more leadership left in the high school between the administration and all the retirements. (Interview, February 2016)

Matt's previous connections with staff helped him better transition into his role as administrator and also enabled him to maintain positive relationships and trust with staff.

Matt also felt building relationships and trust with students was easier because he was a homegrown leader. He explained:

I think it helps building that rapport with kids. A couple of the kids I had to start were younger siblings of kids in my class or that I went to high school with, so that was awkward a little bit, but helped with building those relationships. (Interview, February 2016)

At a freshman orientation meeting in the spring, Matt talked about his time in high school in Cannonville to students and parents. Most of the parents in the room knew him, and they laughed as he shared those stories, as some were in his class in high school. He used personal stories of his involvement in high school to establish a connection with the parents and students, but also gave them insight into why they should be involved. He told the students, "Get involved, high school is an experience. Get involved, don't sacrifice experience for grades, meet people. No one leaves high school regretting they did too much" (Freshman Orientation, May 2016). However, he also reminded students of behavior expectations, reminding them that they will make mistakes: "You know you made a mistake, our job is to counsel you on not to do it again." He also told them to own their mistakes: "There are consequences for your actions. You cheated on a test, you got caught, you got an F. I don't want to hear excuses, or yea, but..." (Parent Orientation, May 2016). He ended the meeting by telling the students and parents what a great place

Cannonville was to attend when he was in high school, and how many opportunities they too will have in high school, and concluded with the advice, “Make goals and remember the choices you make now, good or bad, will affect those goals down the road. Make the best decisions you can, you have the rest of your life to do all those other things. This is a very small window of your life, don’t mess it up” (Parent Orientation, May 2016).

Steve also placed a heavy emphasis on building trust and relationships. Steve mentioned that his previous history with the teachers helped him build trust as an administrator: “I knew all of them, a few of them were my teachers, so they already knew and trusted me” (Interview, February 2016). He discussed how though he had that trust and relationship already built as a teacher, he wanted to make sure they could also trust him in an administrator role, so one of the first things he did when taking over as elementary principal was to ask the superintendent who left that role, “I need to build trust and build relationships with these people as the building administrator, so what can I do? And she allowed me to do a few things that helped with that” (Interview, February 2016). Steve mentioned that when he started as elementary principal, a lot of the teachers were there when he was a student, and that dynamic helped make the transition from teacher to principal less of a challenge. He explained, “The dynamic was different for me I think because a lot of the teachers were teachers I had as a student and then worked with, and now I am now their supervisor” (Interview, April 2016.) He also explained how he approached the staff that he used to teach alongside of when he transitioned to the role of principal:

Fortunately for me that staff that were still here when I was in school when I started (as principal), were the really good staff members, that were like we understand. And maybe wrong or right, I did come in and say, I am not here to be like I am above you all, I am here to help you all be the best you can be and if

there is any way I can do that, that's what I need to do. Obviously, there are going to be times when I have to make decisions that might not be popular, but I am making them because I think that is what is best for the kids. And, I didn't have a lot of pushback.

Steve discussed that continuing to provide support to his teachers helped maintain that trust: “Having my teachers’ backs when need be is really crucial for keeping their trust” (Meeting following observation, April 2016). Steve believed in building up his staff: “I believe in the philosophy of filling their buckets with positive things and being as big a help as I can so that when we do have to have tough talks I have had enough positive interaction with them that it makes those times easier” (Interview, May 2016).

Observations of Steve not only in the school setting but also during community events, such as a local fundraiser, showed him interacting with staff, students, and community members in a friendly manner, often sharing laughter and good humor. Observations demonstrated not only a good rapport with students, but also with staff and community members. Steve’s background knowledge of the community members helped him know who the key players would be for and against proposed changes. He told me during a meeting after an observation that knowing how people are going to react had helped him. He stated, “I am more approachable I think because I am from here and they know me” (Interview, April 2016).

Steve also encouraged change by suggesting what he felt needed fixing and asking for staff input. He and his staff had built the trust to share ideas openly. He suggested at the last Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting of the year that improvements could be made to their PLC model, stating, “We are doing some good things, but we aren’t doing them correctly and I want to fix that” (Observation, PLC meeting, May 2016). He told the staff he was going to a leadership training on PLCs in

the summer to get some suggestions and asked for their input on what they would like changed. Their suggestions included more focused, more about instruction, more professional development (PD) regarding PBIS, more PD in general, better follow through in sharing PLC topics with staff (Observation notes, May 2016). He tied in relevant research related to PLCs and told teachers that he would bring back ideas from his training and add to their suggestions; at the beginning of the year they would work on a plan to address the changes to improve PLCs.

Steve, like Matt, felt that knowing the families was a benefit when dealing with students. He discussed it more in the terms of discipline and stated that he knew the parents and how they would react, so that helped when making phone calls regarding discipline. He felt that although that could be a benefit, it could also be a challenge and could lead to preconceived notions. When asked what the benefits and challenges were to being a homegrown leader in relation to building relationships with students, he stated:

Everyone knows you so that does become an advantage, but the other side is, you know everybody and everybody knows you. So that is the same answer to me to both questions. You know, I know every family and how they were when they were kids for the most part. And, sometimes you get that preconceived notion, so that is not good, but most of the time it is a benefit to knowing the families and helps build that trust with students and parents. (Interview, February 2016)

Steve showed students that he trusted them by including their input in important decisions. At a meeting for graduation planning, Steve listened to students' input prior to discussing what the expectations were for the graduation events. He shared a funny story with students from when he was in high school there and how the ceremony was different. Steve used his prior connections within the community to help build relationships and trust, though he mentioned more negative aspects than Matt of having those homegrown ties. He stated that it is both a benefit and a challenge to be a

homegrown leader: “The positives are everybody knows you and the negatives are everybody knows you” (Interview, February 2016).

### **School Culture**

The school culture of these districts is one aspect that was different. Matt’s beginning role as an administrator was a little different than Steve’s because he became principal in the district at a time when the district had just undergone tremendous turmoil, there had been a high percentage of turnover, and staff morale and school culture were at a low point. Steve, however, mentioned in his interview that the culture at his school had never really been poor. The changes that were discussed in the previous section that teachers struggled with did not do long-term damage to the culture. However, Steve did mention that he felt the culture in the elementary school was different than that of the high school, and in his interviews discussed why that was the case. Matt described the challenges encountered when taking over a negative school culture and ways he had tried to rebuild that culture. Steve discussed in his interview ways he maintained the culture and continued to build it. The following paragraphs will discuss how Steve and Matt felt about the cultures of their respective schools and also what they believed contributed to those cultures.

Riverton School District had a low staff turnover rate and positive staff dynamics, which were a couple of the reasons Steve cited as contributing to the positive school culture. This paragraph will explore how Steve interpreted staff dynamics to play a role in the school culture. Steve stated, “We have a positive school culture, I believe, and they rally around each other” (Interview, May 2016). He went on to explain, “I contribute that to the fact that we have excellent staff and a low turnover rate, and the staff just get along

really well” (Interview, May 2016). Steve also believed that the fact that a majority of the teachers were from Riverton and/or had been teaching in the district for a long time contributed to the culture:

I think because we are small enough, everyone knows each other, and they are able to help each other. We do have a lot of people from here and understand what we are about which helps. (Interview, May 2016)

Steve also believed that the size of the district contributed to the school culture because teachers had the ability to see each other, have lunch together, and talk to each other every day. He stated, “In a large district, you don’t get to see everyone every day and I think that helps build culture” (Interview, May 2016). Steve also believed, however, that there can be a negative side to staff interacting every day if there is someone who is toxic and trying to tear the culture apart: “Sometimes that can be a detriment because if you are in a big school you don’t have to be around them all the time” (Interview, May 2016).

Not only did the dynamics of the staff contribute to the culture, Steve also considered them to contribute to maintaining a positive staff morale. I observed several staff meetings in addition to PLC meetings, and at those meetings, Steve always asked for staff input, listened to concerns and suggestions, and was open about his views on topics discussed (Observation notes, January and February 2016). At an elementary staff meeting while discussing how to celebrate the completion of PARCC testing, Steve allowed staff input by stating, “We can do whatever it is you come up with. If you want to get a group together in the next couple of weeks let me know. Get some ideas together and run them by me” (Observation notes, January 2016). Another observation note pointed to Steve’s comfort level in meetings and how Steve sat in the middle of the room at staff meetings and not up front (Observation notes, February 2016). Additionally,

observation notes from interactions with staff both at meetings and informally in the hallway documented how he greeted staff when he walked by them and also that he had fun with them by joking with them or laughing at jokes at meetings or in the hallway (Observation notes, February 2016, May 2016, November 2016).

Steve created fun events not only for his staff, but also for his students and the community. Each year on the last day of PARCC testing, the school celebrated with fun activities outside or in the gym. At several of the staff meetings I observed, the teachers and Steve worked together to plan and organize this activity, and also incorporated student feedback. Additionally, as a PBIS reward in the elementary in the spring, students' names were drawn from each grade level to attend a field trip to a neighboring city. The field trip included pizza, arcade games, and go-carts. I was present the day the students were selected, and after the secretary called the students' names, they came down to the office to meet Steve, who wrote down their names and the name of their friend they chose to take with them. He joked and laughed with the students and knew all of the students' names (Observation notes, May 2016). For example, a little girl came to the window and said her name, and Steve said, "Your name is trouble, it always has been and always will be," and the little girl laughed. Another girl came up and he said, "You won, are you excited honey? Who are you taking with you?" (Observation notes, May 2016). I was also present at a summer event in which the students in Grades K-6 were invited to attend a St. Louis Cardinals' game and sing in between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> innings. The community was offered tickets at a discounted price to support the students. Though Steve mentioned in an interview that this event was stressful because of all of the people that were present and that he had to organize and group all the children together in such a

big place, the event went smoothly. Steve worked with the music teacher and several teachers who were present to ensure that the children were where they needed to be on time and returned back to their parents in the stand after the event. The event drew a large crowd from Riverton, who appeared to enjoy not only the children's singing but also the ball game (Observation, July 2016). Steve also provided a breakfast every month for staff to bring them together and "show them I appreciate them" (Interview, February 2016).

In addition to staff dynamics influencing school culture, Steve discussed how he himself contributed to the positive culture of learning in the school. The above paragraph discussed the culture among staff; however, Steve felt that the culture among students was also positive. Through the PBIS initiative, Steve planned to continue working on building a positive school culture for students:

I feel the culture with our students is also positive. However, I am planning on doing some things next year to further improve that by focusing on the positive. You know so the principal isn't just the guy kids come into when they are in trouble, it's let's start rewarding these kids and show them we appreciate the choices they made, and I think when you focus on that, it makes a huge difference. (Interview, May 2016)

Steve allowed students to attend PBIS planning meetings and share their input. He believed that not only did this help with buy-in, but it also built culture by showing the students that their opinions are valued and will be listened to (Interview, May 2016).

Steve was observed interacting with students before and after school at several of the observations at Riverton. He greeted students, joked with them, and gave them reminders. He would also direct them if needed. At an elementary recess, he talked to several boys firmly who were messing around in line, and in the hallway after school, he raised his voice at two boys who were going out the wrong doors after school. At the staff meeting in which students attended to share their input, he had a good rapport with them

shown by how he listened, interacted with them, joked with them, and then thanked them for their time and input at the end.

Matt took over as administrator at a time when there was turmoil in the high school. He was aware that when he took over as an administrator, he had to work to rebuild the culture. Matt stated, “When I started, things had just fallen apart, there was a lot of morale to rebuild, and we were in a holding pattern for about 2 years before we could focus on pushing through any educational changes I wanted to make” (Interview, April 2016). He continued to state that he believed that was behind them now, and “the staff has enough stability, and I think they are ready to move in some educationally focused ways” (Interview, May 2016). Matt was asked how he helped rebuild that morale and he explained:

They know they can trust me, and at the end I am not going to do anything that is not best for the kids or best for the school. They trust that the decisions I make are based on those two things and that is the focus, and they didn’t have that before. So, I think that is how I contribute to the culture. (Interview, April 2016)

The value of trust and building relationships enabled both of these principals to enact change, which will be discussed in the following section. This trust and morale that Matt built was evident at a meeting at the end of the year when Matt made the announcement that he was leaving the district to pursue another administrative position. I observed that meeting, and many of the students and staff were in tears. Several of the staff members had to leave the room visibly upset.

### **Enacting Change**

The trust and relationships that Steve and Matt worked hard to build discussed in the previous section assisted with enacting change in their small districts. In addition, both of these principals felt that involving stakeholders in key decisions, not only was

important for buy-in, but also helped to maintain the trusting relationships and school culture. This section will detail how these principals involved stakeholders in decision making when enacting change, how they handled resistance to change, and how they pushed through that resistance to improve their respective schools and enable change to occur.

Matt showed that he valued stakeholder input by stating, “I don’t just want to dictate. I mean if they were going to buy into it, they need to provide their input” (Interview, April 2016). In addition to ensuring he listened to stakeholder input, he also made sure he explained his thoughts and challenged stakeholders by playing devil’s advocate: “I try to get out there all the things I see one way or the other. Then I will play the devil’s advocate” (Interview, April 2016). He believed it was important to allow them the time to learn about the change and experiment with it: “It’s all about making it a first order change instead of a second order change and how you let them learn about it and experiment with it” (Interview, April 2016). As described earlier, building trust was a key value Matt believed in and was incorporated into how he handled resistance;

I kind of let them feel involved in the process and let them have the power when they need to have the power and give them support. I think when you involve them and say this is what I am thinking and why I am thinking this way, instead of saying here is the rule, go do it, I think it helps build that trust. (Interview, April 2016)

Field notes from a staff meeting also demonstrated how Matt allowed input and then played devil’s advocate so that his teachers could get into a deeper discussion and were enabled to see other sides of the issues. Notes from a January staff meeting reflected a discussion on how to best improve student performance. First, Matt asked teachers to discuss ideas among themselves and then heard everyone’s ideas. He played devil’s

advocate by asking questions; proposing counter arguments led the staff to a deeper discussion and enabled them to see other sides of the issue (Field note observation, staff meeting, January 2016).

In my journal entries regarding my observations, I made a comment after a staff meeting in April regarding how Matt included stakeholders: “He always asks for teacher input, and then listens to suggestions/debate/concerns” (Researcher journal entry, April 2016). He made sure that teachers felt safe sharing ideas, and I observed him at several different meetings reminding staff to not share what was discussed in staff meetings. At one meeting, he reminded staff, “What we say in here stays in here” (High school staff meeting, March 2016), and at another staff meeting he stated, “When we discuss something in here, I expect it to stay in here. Students can’t hear something from different people. We need to have one message and one voice” (Staff meeting, January 2016). Matt not only allowed for stakeholder input but also helped staff to feel comfortable sharing among their peers.

Steve also placed value on including stakeholders in decision making and using his previous relationships and trust with his staff to help facilitate change. Steve discussed during interviews how he incorporated change in his rural district, and I observed him at staff meetings facilitating change by allowing input and through discussions. At an elementary staff meeting in which teachers were planning fun activities to celebrate the ending of PARCC assessments, Steve let staff brainstorm ideas out loud and then said, “We can do whatever it is you come up with. If you want to get a group together in the next couple of weeks let me know. Get some ideas together and run them by me” (Field notes, staff meeting, February 2016). Steve followed up with staff at

the next meeting regarding those ideas, and a plan was put into place using their ideas for the end of assessment celebration. Journal notes reflected my observations from staff meetings regarding Steve including staff input: “Steve allows teachers to have an open discussion. It is obvious there is a comfort level as teachers openly share suggestions, comments, and concerns. Steve gives his input and then asks for and listens to teacher’s feedback” (Researcher journal entry, April 2016).

A state-imposed initiative that Riverton was in the second year of implementing was the PARCC testing. The 2015-16 school year was the second year of PARCC testing for the district. At a January staff meeting, the counselor discussed state-mandated changes to PARCC testing from the previous year, which included assessment dates that had to occur after 75-90% of the school year was complete, meaning that the earliest the assessment could be given was March 7<sup>th</sup>. Additionally, he mentioned that there would be fewer units and shorter test times, which would be reduced 60 minutes for math and 30 minutes for English Language Arts (ELA) (Observation notes, Elementary School Staff Meeting, January 2016). Steve brought up to teachers that last year it took a long time to get scores back, and when they did, they were not very good. He asked teachers to consider giving practice assessments this year. Teachers brought up concerns about the assessment by stating that the test was too long, it was not aligned with the curriculum, and it took so long to get the results back that they were not able to use them to change instruction. Steve listened to the teachers’ concerns and stated, “There were a lot of complaints from everyone that took PARCC last year, and that is why they made some changes. I agree with you, 90 minutes is a long time for a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader to be taking a test” (Observation, elementary staff meeting, January 2016). Several teachers mentioned that

they did not want to start on a Monday, to which Steve responded that it was okay to start on Tuesday as long as everyone agreed. He asked if anyone disagreed and no one objected. One teacher asked him if he had read through the test items. She said, “They are boring, too advanced and too long.” Steve answered, “Yeah, I have. I can see why kids get bored. It’s unfortunate, but all we can do is give it our best shot.” At another staff meeting in February when concerns with the length of the PARCC testing and how it was misaligned with the curriculum were mentioned by staff, Steve said:

This is something we will continue to work through, this is our second year, and I think once we get the infrastructure to do it online it will help and this year was a little better, and hopefully next year will be even better. In a new implementation it takes a few years to work the kinks out, and in this case it is a state-mandated test, we have to do it.

Steve heard the teachers’ concerns and conveyed hope that it would get better, but reminded them that it was a state-mandated implementation and they would have to abide by it.

During my observation time, I was able to see Steve work with high school staff and students on the implementation of PBIS in the high school. Several meetings were spent gathering staff and student input to begin implementation for the 2016-17 school year. PBIS was already in place at the elementary level; however, in order to meet state requirements on a new state law regarding behavior, the district needed a proactive plan in place to address both the proposed legislation and RTI. Steve felt PBIS was the answer to both of those issues. Student and staff input were included as they planned for this implementation.

Steve discussed with his staff a new law, Senate Bill 100, that would take effect in September 2017. At a staff meeting, he explained the law and why implementing PBIS would help meet the requirements of the new law. He stated to his staff:

Senate Bill 100 will take effect in September. We all need to be aware of it, it will affect us all. It will affect how we discipline minority students and low SES. We have to take all means possible before we kick a kid out. We need to be really good at documenting. There will be professional development on this bill this summer. With this law we need something in place. PBIS gives out expectations and I will statements. If we have PBIS, we then automatically have something in place that falls in line with both this new law and RTI. (High School BLT meeting, April 2016)

After Steve explained why PBIS was important, he asked for staff input on what rewards would work. Teachers brainstormed ideas such as a monthly breakfast with teachers, open campus for lunch, open study hall, a game study hall, and rewarding students with perfect attendance with not having to take semester tests. Steve listened and wrote down their suggestions and said that he knew principals of high schools that were successfully implementing PBIS who were willing to share ideas with him (Staff meeting, April 2016). The teachers and Steve decided that they needed student input to help determine rewards. Steve told the teachers at this meeting, “I think we need to get a group of students in here to help us with the rewards. We need to hear from them what is going to work, and what isn’t” (Field notes, high school BLT meeting, February 2016). Student representatives from each grade were at the next meeting providing their input into what they felt would be good motivators and why some of the teachers’ ideas would not work (BLT meeting, May 2016). Steve told the staff and students, “We need buy-in from everyone. We need to think about what is going to motivate students do what they need to do” (BLT meeting, May 2016). He stated the importance of following through: “If we put the carrot out there, we have to make sure we follow through” (BLT meeting, May

2016). Change also brings about resistance. Matt and Steve both handled resistance from stakeholders, which is described in the following paragraphs.

### **Handling Resisters**

One challenge of being a homegrown leader, or any leader, is that change is not easy for everyone, especially in a small town in which there are homegrown teachers who have lived and taught in the district from the beginning of their careers to retirement, and from a board and/or community members who do not see a need for change or are fearful of change. Steve and Matt both faced resistance from stakeholders in regard to implementation of initiatives, hiring new staff, or just proposing change within the district. Resistance came from staff, their board, parents, and community members. One key strategy both participants used was to include those stakeholders who were their resisters and to make sure they felt that their voices were heard. These strategies will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

Steve perceived that externally imposed changes were easier to implement than those that were internally imposed:

Sometimes you are fortunate enough that a decision is made because the state has decided it. I mean those are the easy ones. But, it is when you are trying to make change that you think would be a good idea but doesn't have to be done, but you think it is the best thing that can sometimes be hard. (Interview, February 2016)

Steve initiated changes by including stakeholders' input. He also incorporated this strategy with resisters. He stated that he tried to include the teachers who were resistant by allowing them to be on the committee and share their ideas:

We always have a mix of the ones who will let me do whatever I want and the ones who will buck it. And, I let those that don't like the idea or change be on the team and make it their idea. Kind of guide people and talk about things that pump them up about it, and say this is how this would be good, and you would be great at it and tell them we have to sell it to the staff. (Interview, February 2016)

At a staff meeting discussing the new teacher evaluation system, one teacher in particular was very upset about the state's new requirement that part of the teacher evaluation system needed to be tied to student achievement. Steve listened to her concerns and invited her to be a part of the committee that helped plan the professional development to train all the teachers on the new model.

Steve discussed how sometimes his biggest pushback came from a few community members, and since he knew everyone in town, he knew who had a history of resistance to anything that had to do with the school. He worked to improve the relationships of those people with the school by including them in the process. He described how he included them in the process to make them feel that they were important and that their opinion was heard:

I have involved stakeholders that are resistant or opposed to what I am going to do, but by involving them, sometimes that will shift them. We have done that with two of our referendums. We have two or three people in town that we knew are the biggest naysayers, no matter what it is that has to do with the school it seems, and we try to pull them in to try to allow them to feel like 1) they have some input, and 2) kind of pat them on the back and tell them, hey you are an important person, we want to talk to you and get your thoughts, and know what you think personally of this. (Interview, May 2016)

He used the analogy in the interview about keeping your friends close and your enemies closer by stating, "It's like keep your enemies the closest. And, a lot of times then they end up not being your enemies" (Interview, May 2016). He stated that usually these people also are the ones who talk the most in the town and if those who are resisting opinions can be shifted, that can shift the momentum. However, sometimes if certain people in the community say it is a good idea, then everyone else will know it is a bad idea, so it can work both ways:

Then there are others though that we know were anti for things that we have done, and we thought it was the greatest thing on earth, we hoped they kept saying how they didn't like it, because people would know because they didn't like it, it was probably a great idea. Because anyone that hears them say it, they are going to do the opposite. (Interview, May 2016)

Steve used his knowledge of the community and stakeholders to help shift momentum and ideas when important decisions needed to be made. It was knowing the community well and the key players within the community that allowed him to bring those people in to be a part of the process, and hopefully change their opinion from a negative one to a positive one.

Steve was observed in meetings listening to teachers' concerns. Previously, when discussing the PARCC assessment initiative, many teachers voiced concerns regarding the assessment. Steve took the time to listen to those concerns and addressed them. During discussion in a high school staff meeting regarding open campus as a reward for PBIS, he listened to teachers' concerns regarding students leaving campus and also shared his own concerns. He invited students in to gather their input on what they felt would be effective rewards. Steve also provided encouragement to staff as they struggled with new initiatives. During discussion at a staff meeting regarding the new teacher evaluation system, there were a lot of concerns, and you could feel the tension in the room during the discussion. Steve said to his staff, "I know it sounds scary, but it isn't as scary as it sounds. We will need to have changes, and the more we can talk through them the easier it will go" (Staff meeting, April 2016). Steve explained that all of his decisions are made based on what is best for the kids, and if there is big resistance, he asks himself if it is really worth the fight:

It's always tough when you have big resistance, and I haven't had one where there is. You need to think about going in if there is going to be big resistance, you

need to ask yourself, is that a fight worth fighting? Is it best for kids, is where I get most decisions, is it best for kids. And some decisions are tough that have to be made, but if it is best for kids, then you do it. (Interview, February 2016)

Steve demonstrated through both his answers to interview questions and observations that he handled resistance by ensuring stakeholders the decisions made are what is best for the students, by being an active listener, and by involving all stakeholders including those who are in opposition to the proposed change.

Steve mentioned in an interview a challenge to implementing change in his district that Matt did not mention, and that is the difficulty in making changes when your boss is the former administrator. It is difficult to change policies or make needed changes for school improvement, particularly when the previous administrator who may have implemented some of the policies or procedures that need to be changed is now your boss. Steve mentioned that challenge as both of the superintendents during his tenure of principal were the previous administrators in Riverton. He stated that it was hard when the previous administrator did not do something the staff wanted, and now you were doing it. He stated, “You don’t want to make them look bad. It’s a tricky situation” (Interview, May 2016). He stated that he handled it by telling the superintendent he needed to make some changes to build that trust and “she allowed me to do some things that the teachers have wanted” (Interview, May 2016). He stated, however, that he made sure he told the teachers that those changes would not have been possible without the former principal/now superintendent’s help. The following paragraph outlines how Matt handled resistance to change.

I attended many high school staff meetings as well as professional development sessions at Cannonville, and there was one staff member who always was the naysayer at

every meeting. This person always had a negative comment to say regarding any new idea that was brought up by Matt or another staff member. Field notes from a high school staff meeting reflect how Matt handled this person. The field notes state, “Matt let him talk for a few minutes, then politely shut him off” (Field notes, high school staff meeting, March 2016). Matt knew that everyone was not going to agree with every decision, but he said he handled those who play devil’s advocate and those who disagree with the following philosophy:

We just agree to disagree and move on. We try to get a decision that everyone can live with. They don’t have to like it, but they have to be able to live with it. I think that is the biggest thing. If we have some sort of policy that someone just can’t live with, then we either really need to look at the policy or we need to look at the teacher, and I haven’t come across that yet. (Interview, April 2016)

Matt was also transparent about explaining his decisions, which he also felt helped when there was challenge to change. He explained:

I think that it is just transparency. I don’t ever make a decision without letting them know why I made the decision. They may not know all of the circumstances, and they may not have all the details, because there may be some things I can’t tell them. But they have enough to get there and understand, and again I haven’t had a decision yet where people absolutely hate it. They may not like it, but they understand why we had to do what we had to do. (Interview, April 2016)

School leaders can handle change in many different ways, but the two principals in this study placed an emphasis on shared decision making and utilizing their trust and relationships with stakeholders to help ensure that change went as smoothly as possible.

### **Transformational Leadership in Contending with Challenges**

Steve and Matt discussed several challenges described in Chapter II, such as multiple roles with fewer supports, loneliness of a rural principal role, recruiting qualified staff, and a lack of mentoring programs. Data from observation notes and interviews were used to address how these principals used transformational leadership practices of building trust and maintaining positive relationships to overcome these challenges.

Matt and Steve both discussed how their longevity in the community as well as their personal connections and history with the stakeholders enabled them to build relationships and trust, garnered buy-in for change, and created a positive school culture. However, in addition to using his homegrown status to help with change initiatives, Steve also talked about how sometimes change in a small district is a challenge as well. The following section will describe the benefits of being a homegrown leader using evidence from interviews and observations, followed by a section describing the challenges experienced by these two principals in regard to being a homegrown leader.

### **Multiple Roles and Fewer Supports**

Principals in rural districts have multiple roles. For example, in addition to being a principal, they often have unofficial roles, including maintenance director, curriculum coordinator, and human resource person. Additionally, they often have to take on teaching or secretarial duties. In addition to some of these unspoken roles that just go along with the duties of a rural principal, Matt and Steve both had the challenge unique to rural districts of having multiple administrative roles. In addition to being the high school principal, Matt was also the athletic director (AD) who took over this role after the AD left for another district last year. Steve had dual roles since starting as an administrator in the district. These principals talked about the challenge of having dual roles; in addition, observation notes demonstrate how these principals performed these roles within their day-to-day activities.

Steve's first administrative role was as elementary principal and athletic director. Two years previously, the superintendent resigned in August, and the high school principal moved into the superintendent role. As a result, Steve became the principal of

both the elementary and the high school building. In the 2016-17 school year, a part-time elementary principal/part-time PE teacher was hired, but instead of relieving Steve of some of his duties, he was assigned an additional responsibility of being the athletic director.

Steve was put into the administrative role of Dean of Students for one semester prior to becoming elementary principal. This role was put in place due to the elementary principal at the time having to take over the superintendent role while also maintaining the position of elementary principal. Steve explained, “I became the Dean of Students in the middle of the year, like at semester because the superintendent who was also the elementary principal at the time, was stretched, so she did all the evaluations, but I handled most of the discipline unless it was a suspension or something” (Interview, March 2016).

Steve assumed the role of elementary principal and athletic director for several years. However, he was given the role of principal of both schools 3 years ago when the superintendent submitted his resignation in August and the high school principal took over that role. This was not the same superintendent described above that was the elementary principal when Steve was a teacher. The previously mentioned superintendent, who was Steve’s first supervisor, resigned and was replaced by the person Steve is discussing in his quote below. Steve explained his frustration in this decision in his interview when talking about the complexities of having multiple roles:

Two years ago, on August 8th, is when our superintendent came and told us he was leaving, so that was 2 weeks before school started. He then recommended to the board that Jim became the superintendent and that I became elementary and high school principal. And that was one of those things that frustrated me, because if you are hiring Jim (pseudonym) to be the superintendent, do that and then get Jim’s opinion on what he wants. Because, this guy is leaving so what

does he care if he throws me into this position. And, he threw Jim into a position where the finances were way worse than what we realized. (Interview, March 2016)

The board decided that instead of hiring a new high school principal, Steve would take over administrative duties of PK-12 students. Steve mentioned in his interview that he was not given the choice to take on the additional role of high school principal:

When I became the principal of both buildings on August 8th or 10th whatever it was, I mean I didn't really have a choice, I was told I was going to do both roles, and what was I going to say? No I wasn't doing it? If you do that, you might as well sign your resignation papers. (Interview, March 2016)

Steve also expressed frustration that principals in larger districts not only have more support, but they also receive more pay:

In a bigger school you might have an assistant principal, which then you can bounce ideas off of. I mean between you and me, I have looked at some other jobs, and I looked at one, not that many more kids than here, and they have a principal, an assistant principal/AD, two secretaries, a personal secretary, two technology directors. It is just unbelievable, and they want to pay me more. I mean what am I doing here? I mean I know why I am here, but it is frustrating to do it all on your own and get paid fewer than what someone in a bigger district or similar district gets paid who has more help. (Interview, March 2016)

In addition to the dual principal and AD roles, Steve discussed at our initial meeting in January 2016 how the district had to cut the elementary secretary, and the person they hired and trained for the job quit right before school started. This resulted in Steve having to enter attendance and grades for the elementary school until after Christmas break when he was able to hire and train an additional clerical person to do that task.

During my observation time in this district, in addition to day-to-day activities such as greeting and dismissing students, leading student meetings, handling parent and teacher concerns, student discipline, and other day-to-day duties, Steve was also observed leading both elementary and high school staff meetings and professional development.

Though Steve did not have an elementary principal, assistant principal, or other supports that an administrator in a larger district has, he had a supportive team he could rely on consisting of the superintendent, a veteran teacher, and the guidance counselor, who had been there for 42 years. He described this in an interview when discussing how he handled having multiple roles: “The guidance counselor has been here for 42 years, and even though he was the high school guidance counselor, I leaned on him a lot when I was the elementary principal, he was here when I was a student here. He knows me well and I trust him” (Interview, March 2016). He stated that he, the superintendent, and the guidance counselor all worked well as a team: “So, like I said we are small enough, there are only three of us. (the guidance counselor) isn't administration but we confide in him with everything. We are all kinda a team” (Interview, March 2016). During an observation in April 2016, a teacher came in with a threatening note from a student, and Steve called in both the superintendent and the guidance counselor to consult on how to handle it. The guidance counselor was present at all of the building leadership (BLT) meetings and would lead some of them if Steve was running late due to an issue in the office or a phone call. He surrounded himself with a team of people he trusted to help him; he stated, “It’s important to build a team I can trust” (Interview, April 2016). Though he had a big job of being the PK-12 principal, in the many observations, he never seemed stressed or hurried, and was engaged and present not only in meetings, but also when talking with parents, students, staff, or community members both in formal and informal settings. Steve, again, focused on his previous relationships like that with the guidance counselor and trusted those relationships to help him overcome the challenge of handling additional roles.

Unlike Steve, who had dual roles during his entire time in an administrative role, Matt had been the athletic director/high school principal for 2 years. The AD, who was also a high school special education coordinator/teacher, left to go to a larger district, and instead of hiring someone to fulfill that role, it was handed to Matt. In addition to attending high school staff meetings, I also attended six PK-12 professional development/staff meetings and athletic booster meetings that Matt supervised in his role as AD. Of the three administrators in the district, including the elementary/middle school principal, the superintendent, and Matt, Matt was the administrator leading those meetings. The elementary principal rarely spoke, and if she did it was to reaffirm what Matt had already said, and the superintendent was present at only one of those meetings. Matt was observed during my observations doing more than his role of high school principal/AD. Additionally, Matt was also often called upon to handle middle school discipline when the elementary principal was not in her office, maintaining building and grounds, leading the TLC initiative, and leading the elementary and middle school staff through discussions of State B Assessments. It was noted during an observation that during one meeting with Matt, a middle school teacher called him down to his room for a student discipline problem (Field notes, March 2016), and at another observation an elementary teacher stopped in the hallway to discuss the TLC program (Field notes, April 2016). These dual roles kept Matt busy, and he was also working on his Ph.D.; however, Matt communicated with his staff at the start of every high school staff meeting. Matt would let the staff know his schedule including when he would be out of the building and what meetings he had during that week. In addition to letting them know when he had meetings, he would be transparent with staff about issues discussed at school board,

booster meetings, district principal, or athletic director meetings that pertained to them or might be of interest to them. When Matt was asked how he juggled the multiple roles, he stated:

Balancing them is the hardest part. You have to get used to working in that high pressure game because we don't have the resources to do otherwise. And some of the problem is I have taken on too much stuff probably. You lean on who you need to lean on. (Interview, April 2016)

Balancing the multiple roles was even more difficult without supports and resources that are not available in small districts, which will be described in the following paragraph.

In addition to the multiple roles, these principals did not have the support systems and personnel in place that larger districts provide to administrators. Matt explained that this means you become the person everyone goes to for an answer, without a supportive network and resources to help find those answers. Matt elaborated:

You probably have to establish yourself a little quicker in a rural district just because in a bigger district you would have some help. You would have a dean of students, an assistant principal, someone that has seen it and done it, and you get a little more time. You are not the go-to person. There are resources there to assist you as a new principal in a larger district that in a smaller district you just don't have. I mean here, you're it. If someone is going to come to you for an answer, you have to know the answer, there is not a lot of places to go get them. You are kind of the end all, be all. (Interview, April 2016)

Matt believed, though, that being a homegrown leader made it easier for him: "I think being in the district so long made that piece easy for me. I just knew where everything was. I think it helped a lot being from here" (Interview, April, 2016). Having multiple roles with either only one or no other principals in the district or other administrative staff to go to for support can lead to a lonely profession, which both of these principals elaborated as an additional challenge.

### **It's Lonely at the Top**

Matt described that though his homegrown attribute of knowing everyone helped with his leadership roles, he described that he could be lonely: “In a small district, you are on an island a lot and it gets to be hard” (Interview, April 2016). I had an opportunity to attend a conference principal meeting with Matt. This meeting was attended by 13 principals of the high schools in the conference, of which 11 were male and two were female. They tried to meet monthly to discuss different topics of interest or describe initiatives that they were all dealing with. Since Matt did not have any high school principals in the district to turn to or other administrative personnel like those in larger districts, I asked if those meetings helped with the feeling of professional isolation. Matt responded by saying, “Yea, that helps a lot. We email something out and within two days you get 13 answers so that does help. But, it is kind of a lonely world sometimes and you just have to get used to it” (Interview, April 2016). He stated that in order to help with the professional support, he “surrounds himself with people he trusts” (Interview, April 2016).

Steve also addressed the feeling of professional isolation by stating, “I think, something that they talk about a lot in some of my MA classes is how lonely it is at the top, and it can be for sure” (Interview, February 2016). He also mentioned he can call other nearby principals for support, but “it’s not the same” (Interview, February 2016) as having an assistant principal or other administrators or support in the district. As mentioned previously, Steve felt he had a supportive team of the guidance counselor and superintendent that he could lean on.

In addition to not having any support in a rural district, neither of these principals had a strong mentoring program during their initial years, and they discussed that not only is finding professional development sometimes a challenge during the school year, leaving the building to attend those opportunities is the greatest challenge, which can add to the loneliness experienced in this role. Steve mentioned in an interview that he “really didn’t have a mentoring program” (Interview, February 2016) when he started. If he needed something, he would call a nearby principal or rely on advice from the support team he trusted of the superintendent and guidance counselor. Matt did have a mentor; however, he mentioned he was from a district over a half hour away and they only met twice throughout his first year and not again after that.

Both principals also discussed the difficulty in finding professional development opportunities. Matt stated, “It is hard to find that PD as an administrator” (Interview, April 2017). Matt also discussed how when he first started as principal, he would attend a leadership academy at the AEA; however, he was always called back to the district because of an issue, and it became more of a hassle to leave. He commented on the challenge of attending professional development during the school day: “It is kind of that catch 22, you need it and you need to go, but as soon as you go, you need to be back in the district” (Interview, April 2016). The superintendent did not like him or the elementary principal to be out of the building, and he had to be gone two days a month for athletic director meetings and conference principal meetings, and being out of the building any more than that was not an option. Matt stated that the best way for him to grow professionally was to take classes to further his education: “The biggest way to get what I needed to be honest was to come back to school. I mean, that is really probably the

best thing is to start taking classes at that next level to help think through things” (Interview, April 2016). Steve stated that he does not really attend professional development through the year, but like Matt, does attend the state principal conference in the summer. Steve said he grows professionally by “reading a lot of books” (Interview, February 2016).

### **Hiring Qualified Staff**

One of the challenges cited in literature in a rural district is hiring and retaining qualified staff. Literature analyzed in Chapter II cited several reasons young new teachers are not inclined to settle in a small district, such as lower pay, less opportunity for advancement, fewer resources, and fewer lifestyle options in the community. Regarding pay, both of these schools paid lower salaries than larger districts according to district financial reports found on the website and the State Department of Education. The starting salary in Riverton was \$ 25,793.00 (Riverton webpage, financial report), while the starting salary in Cannonville was \$36,585 (State Department of Education). The salary of the highest paid teacher in Riverton was \$58, 975 (Riverton district website, financial report), while the salary of the highest paid teacher in Cannonville was \$66,898 (State Department of Education website). A majority of both Riverton and Cannonville staff were veteran teachers who started their careers in these districts, now lived in the districts, and had children attending school in the districts. The staff with the most longevity at both of these schools were either from the respective communities and/or had children attending schools in the district, while the staff that resigned or moved on were not from the districts and did not live in the districts. However, both principals had the challenge of hiring and retaining newly qualified staff.

Steve had to fill several vacancies in the high school and would have to fill two in the elementary, one of whom was a teacher who taught him when he attended school here and whose children attended Riverton. He discussed that, though they did not have a lot of turnover, sometimes it was nice to get fresh ideas; however, it was hard to find qualified staff who wanted to stay in Riverton, especially if “they are young and not from here” (Interview, February 2016). He talked about how they had a new high school language arts teacher who “is just dynamite; we have higher scores in PARCC in language arts since she started than most schools around here” (Interview, February 2016). He discussed that when she first started, he wanted to try to introduce her to a single guy he knew from Riverton to help ensure she would stay around but “she found a boyfriend 2 hours away, so that’s not good. I am sure she won’t be here long” (Interview, February 2016). Steve talked about how he wanted to start a program called Future Teachers of Riverton to help get students interested in teaching and in coming back there to teach:

We have peer tutors that help in the elementary and once they do and like it they decide they want to go into teaching. And, if we could even expand that and have a future teachers of America type program here where we could work it all the way up, maybe we could pull some back here to teach. (Interview, February 2016)

While Steve talked about the difficulty finding teachers to stay in Riverton, the school board preferred that new teachers were local. The school board, he stated, preferred hiring teachers from Riverton, and when he did not do so, he received some pushback from the board:

I have gotten beat up by the board a few times because I have hired somebody that was not from here. You know, I hired someone that they ended up leaving in a couple of years, but she was awesome, and I think those 2 years were worth it. But, I didn't hire the local boy that was going to help coach football, and the board didn't like that. (Interview, February 2016)

To further elaborate, he explained that the board requested that instead of just Steve and the superintendent sitting in on the interviews, there be a committee, so Steve said he had a committee in place, and the person they chose was not the person the board wanted for the job. “Here’s the deal, she ranked one with the committee and he ranked four with my staff” (Interview, February 2016). Steve explained how he defended this decision with the board and supported the decision of the teachers who were on the committee:

So, I said to my board, ”So, you made me have a committee, which is fine, but then they rank this person four. Are we hiring a teacher or a coach? I picked who the committee that you wanted me to have, chose as their number one candidate. I don't give a shit about the football program.” Not that I don't, but that is not what I was hiring for. (Interview, February 2016)

The next paragraph discusses how new staff can bring new ideas and how he supported staff who wanted to bring about change.

New teachers can bring about much needed change, though this change can come with resistance. Steve discussed how a new high school teacher was hired last year to replace the math teacher who had taught in the district for 40 years. The new teacher wanted to change the curriculum and get new textbooks. Steve said, “It was needed change, the textbooks were so old” (Meeting notes, February 2016). He stated:

She started changing things, and when the kids have had another teacher that didn't change anything for 40 years, and then you have someone come in and change things, there were some growing pains. I mean a lot of the parents had the previous teacher, so they didn't understand why this new teacher was doing things differently. (Interview, 2016)

He continued to discuss how this teacher taught remedial math at a small 4-year university previously, so she knew what math skills students needed going into college.

In the following quote, he discussed how he supported her decision to change the curriculum and how he addressed it to the board:

This is a lady who prior to being here was teaching at [a local four-year university], and was teaching remedial math. So she has seen what kids are not getting in high school and is trying to change that. We have a math book, and I told our board this the other night, we have a math book that she is teaching out of, that the name in it, the first kid, was a 1984 grad. I think it helped them see that we needed a new curriculum. (Interview, February 2016)

Steve handled the problem of hiring staff by hiring he thought was the best fit for the job, even if it went against the status quo of hiring someone local. He also made sure he supported his new teachers. He stated at a meeting after a staff development that his staff knew that: “I make sure they know they have my support, and I tell them, I will go to bat for you as long as you don’t do something that I can’t defend” (Field notes from meeting, February, 2016).

Matt also dealt with turnover and hiring new teachers; the turmoil the district went through with the previous administrator caused a high turnover rate. Due to people resigning, and also to the reduction of nine staff members to reduce the budget in order to pay for the district’s legal fees, the turnover caused issues with staff morale (Notes from interview, April 2016). Matt stated:

We have had a lot of turnover, but I think we have a lot of other stuff behind us now, and I think we have enough stability, and I think they are ready to move in some educationally focused ways. When I started we were going to make this huge push into standards based grading, then [the previous administrator] got their job back and things all fell apart for a while, and things went into a holding pattern for almost two years. Then after the settlement, and we reduced our staff by 9.5 staff, we had a lot of morale to build back up. (Interview, April 2016)

Matt had hired several new teachers, and when asked how he builds the morale with new staff, he stated, “I think a lot of it is reputation and rapport. I don’t think I have hired anyone I can’t get along with. It is just personality. They know how I treat people and I tell it how it is” (Interview, April 2016). In the high school, many of the new teachers

were not from Cannonville, and Matt believed that helped with the culture but hindered the feel of small town closeness:

I think we have been lucky enough that it helps at the high school is that they are so far removed. We don't have a lot of our high school teachers that live in town like our middle and elementary school teachers and hang out together. We have had teachers in the past that had gotten really close and then the negativity spread between three of them. I mean that is how it would hinder, is when you anger one you anger the mob, but we have been lucky enough that it is few and far between. We also at the high school have a wide range of family levels and experiences. It is not like at our elementary where they all came in about the same time and a lot of them have kids the same age and that are in the same grade together. It is a different culture in the high school which I think has helped, but they don't have that small rural feel like the elementary or middle school I think because of it.  
(Interview, April 2016)

Matt and Steve discussed similar rural challenges. In addition, being a homegrown leader also presented challenges in their rural districts and will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Homegrown Challenges**

In addition to the challenges of leading in a rural district, this study also revealed that these administrators faced challenges associated with leading in the same district in which they lived, had taught, and were parents. These challenges included having difficult conversations, lack of privacy, high visibility, loss of relationships, and separating the roles of parent/principal. The following paragraphs will detail these challenges from Matt's and Steve's perspectives; although knowing the stakeholders may help in dealing with certain challenges, in other ways, knowing stakeholders creates additional burdens.

### **Difficult Conversations**

A school principal often has to have difficult conversations with parents, staff, and community members; however, this is even more of a challenge when it is someone

you have known your whole life or it is a friend or family member. Steve stated, “One of the biggest challenges for me, because I have been here all my life, is you know having to deal with people your whole life in situations that maybe aren’t that comfortable” (Interview, February 2016). Matt and Steve discussed how this is even more of a challenge when you have known the people your whole life and it has resulted in loss of relationships for both principals, specifically to parents. Steve stated that whether it be calling a parent regarding discipline or an unpaid lunch balance or outstanding registration fees, it becomes difficult sometimes:

You know I have people that have known me all of my life, grew up with me as a kid, when I was teaching would stop and talk to me every time they saw me, now they won't talk to me because as an administrator I have had to do things that they don't agree with. They have known me since I was a kid, and you know there have been some relationships that have gone away because of that. But it is what it is, and I knew coming into this job, that there would be people, if a decision was made that wasn't for them, they might not maybe be friendly to me anymore. But, I kind of feel like if that is how they are going to be, then I don't need to associate with them anyway. (Interview, February 2016)

Steve discussed a situation in which a parent was giving Steve’s daughter horse riding lessons; however, her child was having issues in school, and Steve ended up referring him to an Emotional Disturbed Special Education Placement at a neighboring school. This created conflict, and the parent would no longer allow Steve’s child to take horse riding lessons there; he described how difficult that was to explain to his daughter.

Steve described the difficulty in knowing people, particularly when he had to initiate conversations about student discipline. At the same time, he felt that knowing the families had helped him in having difficult conversations. He encouraged staff to let him make difficult phone calls because of his connections and prior knowledge of the district’s families. He stated:

It helps knowing the families and people in the community, because I know how parents are going to react typically if I call them over something like this, because I know them personally. It helps to know how they are going to react going into it, which is why I tell the teachers to let me make the phone calls. (Interview, April 2016)

During an observation at the end of the school day, as Steve was standing in the hall saying goodbye to students, a parent and student came up to him and the parent thanked him for calling her to let her know about her daughter's grades that were failing in a couple of subjects. Steve said to her, "No problem, we are in this together and need to work together." He then looked at the student and said, "We will get there won't we?"

Similarly, Matt described that having close connections with parents in the district can be a challenge in regard to student discipline. Matt discussed how calling a friend to report his or her child was in trouble is not easy to do, stating, "I had to discipline a kid a while ago, and I am close with his parents, so I just had to say, 'I am calling you now as a principal not as a friend'" (Interview, February 2016). He went on to say that the line between friend/principal "becomes more and more blurred the more engrained you are in the community" (Interview April 2016). Matt stated multiple times in his interview that having those connections can also help make difficult conversations easier: "Having those previous relationships, though, can make it easier when having to have those difficult conversations, because you have that trust and rapport built up" (Interview, February 2016). It appeared that knowing the parents of the students in the district was both a benefit and a challenge for these principals in regard to having difficult conversations.

## **Lack of Privacy and Personal Space**

Living in a small town means the odds are higher that you will run into someone you know while out in the community. To most, this may not be a challenge, but to a rural principal, it becomes a challenge when doing simple tasks like going to the grocery store or gas station becomes a forum to discuss school. These principals did not have the separation or boundaries from their work and personal lives that principals have who do not live in their own district. Steve explained: “The other thing too about living here is that we are in such a small town, that I can’t go anywhere without people stopping me about school. People just don’t have those boundaries” (Interview, May 2016). Steve stated that even going to Wal-Mart in a neighboring town did not provide that separation:

I can’t go to Wal-Mart, I mean, it isn’t a huge deal, but like I will stop and talk to them like if we are in Wal-Mart and my family will go on and then I am not with them. People don’t understand that, but it is part of it. And I think most administrators deal with it somewhat, but when it is a small community and everyone knows you, it makes it a little harder. I am more approachable I think because I am from here and they know me.

Steve further stated his frustration about being approached at his son’s basketball games, and how he had to tell parents to just call him on Monday:

I can't go anywhere without someone wanting to talk school. And, they walk up, and I am at the point now, where I say, you know, you will have to call me on Monday, I am here at my son's 3 on 3 tournament, and he’s getting ready to play over there, and you want to know why Johnny got picked on the bus. (Interview, February 2016)

Knowing everyone in the community you lead can be a benefit and a challenge, as Steve stated: “I think the answer to the positive and the negative of being in your home town and growing up there is that the positives are everybody knows you and the negatives are everybody knows you” (Interview, February 2016).

Matt shared similar thoughts regarding this challenge. He described how he could not go to the local grocery store without having to stop and talk to people, which concerned his wife, who wondered why it was taking him so long to run to the store for a gallon of milk:

My wife gets mad at me when I run up to the (grocery store) for a gallon of milk and I am not back for over a half hour. She is just like what's going on? And, it's because people stop me and want to talk school all of the time. (Interview, February 2016)

Matt went on to say, "It is just the reality of it, it is hard to go places without someone asking about school, or questioning a decision, or wanting to know something" (Interview, February 2016).

### **Parent or Principal?**

Steve and Matt both had children attending the districts in which they were principals. Steve had an elementary student and a middle school student, and Matt had a daughter in elementary school. An additional challenge these homegrown leaders encountered was the complexity of being both a parent and an administrator and the intertwining of those roles. These administrators talked about several different tensions in this regard. The dual roles of supervisor of their children's teacher and that of parent, as well as the dual role of parent and principal, created a challenge for these administrators.

Matt described the complexity of the dual role of parent and principal by stating, "My hat just doesn't ever come off. Never" (Interview, April 2016). Despite that his daughter is who he described as a teacher pleaser, he pointed out that since he became administrator there is a difference in parent-teacher conferences: "I have noticed with parent-teacher conferences. Teachers look scared and nervous to talk to me, because I am the principal" (Interview, February 2016). Teachers perceived Matt as overstepping his

bounds when he asked tough questions at parent-teacher conferences, where perhaps they would not with a parent who was not their boss. However, he made the point in the quote below that it is easy for teachers to talk about parents who are not knowledgeable about education versus having a conversation with a parent who does not ask questions:

I will ask those hard questions, and sometimes they just look at me. And, I am like, I am not trying to barge in, and overstep my bounds, and I am not questioning what you are doing. But, to them it sounds like I am attacking what they are doing, so I am careful with the questions I ask. Because if I say it the wrong way, they feel like I am attacking them, and I just really want to know what's going on. I think just being in the field allows us to ask questions that put teachers on edge. It's easy talking to the parent that isn't knowledgeable, and just sits there, takes it and says thanks. But, it is hard to talk to a parent that is knowledgeable and asks those tough questions. (Interview, February 2016)

He described his fears for when his children get into high school and may get into trouble and the challenge in handling that. He discussed how difficult it could be disciplining your child in a small town and not coming across as treating her differently because he is her dad:

I don't know how I would handle that situation when she gets older. I mean, let's say she gets caught drinking, not by the police, because that's clean, but by us, it's a small town, people are going to talk and then you have that perception of is he treating her differently because she is his daughter. It's a tough, tough, tough line to hold. (Interview, February 2016)

For Matt, this seemed to be the dual role that was the most challenging to balance, as he stated, "You are not afforded the luxury of being a parent in this role. It sucks, but that is the reality" (Interview, February 2016).

This complexity of the role of parent and principal also came into play with both principals with discipline of either their own children, their friends, or children of their friends. Steve discussed how if he happens to walk by in the hall and sees his son's name on the board, or that he is staying in from recess because he got into trouble, he will stop

and talk to his son about it. His son's teacher told him that was not fair for him to do because she would not call other parents for that, and it was not fair to his son when other children's parents are not notified for minor infractions. Steve described his conversation with his son's teacher and how he felt about it:

I have one teacher that really tells me, "You shouldn't get on your kids because they sat in at recess, if the teacher wasn't going to call another parent for something, you would have never known it if you weren't here, so you shouldn't get on your kids for something you know about because you are here, if the teacher wasn't going to tell you. They sat in at recess and paid their dues." I cry foul a little bit and say, there are advantages and disadvantages to me being in this role, and if I walk by and see them in trouble for something, I am not going to ignore it. I am going to address it, I can't help that. (Interview, February 2016)

Matt discussed an incident in which two students spit on his child and said inappropriate things. The teacher brought the children to him, instead of to the elementary principal, to discipline. Matt responded to the teacher:

I said, "Look, this can't happen." I had to tell the teacher, "This needs to go to the elementary principal." It isn't like she was out of the building; she just wasn't in the office. The teacher said, "Well it's your daughter, I thought you would want to know." I told her I appreciated that, but it is a challenge that I don't want to be in. (Interview, February 2016).

In regard to discipline, Steve discussed the challenge of disciplining students in his daughter's grade, which he felt led to retaliation on her. He explained:

With my daughter here this last year in sixth grade, it was kind of a rough class, and she kind of took a beating because I had to go in and crack the whip and deal with that class as a whole, and she got to hear about it and was shunned some. She handles it pretty well though. But, that's the biggest thing. (Interview, May 2016)

The above section describes challenges both Steve and Matt faced related to being homegrown leaders.

## **Conclusion**

The observations and interviews with both of these leaders detailed their lives as rural homegrown leaders and the benefits and challenges of leading in the districts they had known and lived in their whole lives. Additionally, both of these leaders identified themselves with transformational leadership qualities, and those qualities were portrayed in their interactions and observations with stakeholders, as well as in their descriptions of how they overcame challenges. For both of these principals, the value of building trust and positive relationships was a key focus to enact change and encourage buy-in. They also both valued shared decision making and enabled stakeholders to have input in decision making in order to facilitate change in their districts.

## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Background of Study**

This chapter provides a summary of my research study and discusses implications for practicing administrators, school district administration, principal preparation programs, and educational policy. It concludes with recommendations for future research and my personal thoughts regarding this study.

The purpose of this study was to understand if being a transformational, homegrown leader helped or hindered two principals in dealing with the unique challenges present in their rural districts, and if being a homegrown leader influenced certain transformational leadership characteristics and practices. The research questions guiding this study were:

- 1) How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
- 2) How do these rural principals, identified as transformational leaders, use transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to rural districts?
- 3) Do the principals' prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?

A multi-case qualitative case study was chosen to answer these questions in order to allow me to collect multiple sources of data (Yin, 2012) and spend the time necessary to observe and interview the participants. Gathering the perspectives of the participants and understanding the context was necessary to answer the research questions (Tavallaei & Talib, 2010). A qualitative research approach supported the value of the participants'

perspectives. It was from these perspectives that data were drawn and themes became apparent (Patton, 2002).

Rural leadership is an interest of mine because I grew up in a small district, my children attend a small district, and I have applied for principal positions in small, rural districts. During my research assistantship, I was working with a principal who taught for 20 years in the district prior to becoming the elementary principal, and she mentioned how she felt that the ties and relationships she had with the teachers helped her when enacting change. This piqued my interest in exploring if and how principals who had ties to their districts and lived in their districts had an easier time implementing change due to their previous relationships. I searched for literature on this topic, and while I found several relevant pieces related to homegrown teachers, there was very limited literature related to homegrown leadership specifically in the way I was looking at it, which was that the principal had been a student, taught, and lived in the same district he/she was the current leader. I had done a practicum with one of the participants in this study, and he fit the criteria of a homegrown leader. I asked him if he knew of any other principals in the conference who would fit those criteria, but he did not. I then thought of a principal I knew from a different state who also fit these criteria and who was from a very similar district and town. I felt this was important to help rule out any outlying factors. These two principals agreed to be in my study, and I discovered during the research that in addition to sharing the similarities of being homegrown transformational leaders, they also shared similar views on leadership and rural challenges as well as similar personal characteristics.

The theoretical framework I chose for this study was transformational leadership. After talking to these principals, working indirectly with one of them, knowing staff from both districts, and spending hours observing them, it occurred to me that these principals engaged in many of the leadership practices embodied in transformational leadership. This theory also fit nicely with my focus on the way in which being a homegrown leader impacts transformational leadership practices such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change. In addition, during my literature review, and also from previous experiences in small districts, I recognized that rural districts had unique challenges; therefore, I wanted to explore what these principals perceived to be challenges in their districts, and if being a transformational, homegrown leader helped these principals deal with those challenges.

I knew the participants and the districts and communities well, which helped me as the researcher and Matt and Steve as the participants feel more comfortable during my observations and interviews. When I approached Matt about being a participant in this study, he mentioned that since the staff all knew me and trusted me, he felt they would not find it intrusive for me to observe at meetings. My familiarity also made it more comfortable for me to be their shadow during the observation period and to ask them questions relevant to my research. Their willingness to be a part of this research and to let me into their schools to observe as well as their candid responses allowed me to gather rich, detailed data that were used to answer the research questions posed above. The findings related to those questions will be discussed in the following section.

## **Discussion of Findings**

Three research questions guided this study. The findings of this research will be summarized and arranged according to my research questions, in the order they are listed above.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked, “How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?” This research question addressed how these two principals identified themselves as leaders, but I will first give a brief review of the definition of transformational leadership chosen for this study. Transformational leadership has been widely researched in all areas of leadership; however, for the purpose of this study, I used research specific to educational leadership, such as Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2005) model of transformational leadership. This model proposes the following main facets of transformational leadership: empowering participation in school decisions, creating and maintaining positive relationships, providing support to staff, having high expectations, and modeling core values. This type of leadership encourages stakeholders to make improvements in their practices through participating in the decision-making process (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Transformational leaders promote professional learning for followers by providing supportive environments in which followers’ differences and needs are valued (Avolio et al., 1999). The connection between trust and transformational leadership is also an important factor in this model (Childers, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Childers (2009) stated, “A transformational leader demonstrates behavioral integrity, which allows for the development of trust with followers” (p. 1). Trust is positively related to teacher empowerment and shared decision making (Tschannen-

Moran, 2014). Both participants placed a heavy emphasis on building trust and relationships, involving stakeholders in decision-making, and providing support to staff.

To address the first research question, these principals were asked in an interview, “How would you describe yourself as an educational leader?” Although neither principal used the words “transformational leader,” they both described their leadership approach as relationship-focused with a heavy emphasis on trust and collaborative decision making. They used the key terms discussed above when describing themselves as leaders.

Matt described his leadership style as follows:

My leadership style is definitely more relationship-focused. Heading into the position in (Cannonville), there was a large need to build a positive culture with the staff and get them to trust the administration. The same goes with students. Building that positive relationship first is always my goal. I think we can get more accomplished if we have that trusting positive relationship established first before taking on any new adventure. (Interview, April 2016)

Matt added that “I have tried to hone my skills on empowering others to lead” (Interview, April 2016). Steve also discussed how he focused on building trust and relationships:

I feel like I am definitely a relationship and trust type of leader. I think building relationship with staff especially in education is the key to success. I try to provide my staff with all they need to make them successful in the classroom. I have done several things this year to try and build relationships now that I am doing one building. We have started providing breakfast at each of our Friday morning meetings and also buy lunch once a month. We have people cover for duties at lunch so that we can all be present. We have had some good discussions and I feel like it is good for team building. I believe in the philosophy of filling their buckets with positive things and being as big a help as I can so that when we do have to have tough talks I have had enough positive interaction with them that it makes those times easier. I also go out of my way in situations where staff need me to have their back. I promise them at the beginning of every year that I will be their biggest advocate with all the stakeholders involved with our school as long as they don't do something that I cannot defend. This helps when situations come up that they have made mistakes and we have to deal with them. (Interview, April 2016)

Steve continued to talk about how he built trust and why that is important:

I think the biggest way to build trust is to communicate well. I think the times when I have lost some trust is when I'm not doing an effective job at telling people what they need to know. Also, doing what you say you're going to do is very important. I have to be careful when I say I'm going to do something that I make sure I do it. Sometimes we don't think that all the way through and make promises we cannot keep. This is really important for students. Also as I mentioned, having my teachers' backs when need be is really crucial for keeping their trust. (Interview, May 2016)

Matt also stressed that the importance of relationships with parents and community

members helps build that connection between the community and school:

I talk with parents at games, events and in the community is when I talk about school with them. And, then it's mostly generalities, they ask questions. Community members--like Saturday mornings after I work out I will go to Casey's; there is the old guys in there drinking coffee so I will sit in there and talk with them a little bit. Just getting out and letting people know who you are, it does not have to be about talking about school events, but just being out there and being connected. (Interview, April 2016)

The above responses indicate that both principals placed a high value on building trust and relationships, collaborative decision making, and providing support to teachers, which are embodied in the transformational leadership practices mentioned above. In addition to the interviews, formal and informal observations also revealed these practices through their interactions with stakeholders, both in their school settings and within the communities where they lived. These principals were highly regarded within their schools and communities. This was demonstrated as teachers and parents from both communities, upon learning what I was researching, would comment, "Oh, you will learn so much from him," "He is such a good principal," "He has done a lot to bring a positive light back to our district," "I remember having him as a teacher, I am so happy he is the principal now."

Observations of these principals in practice as well as in their self-perceptions as leaders reflected that they did indeed place a heavy emphasis on utilizing

transformational leadership practices described in the literature review in Chapter II. Missing from the literature is the tie between the transformational leadership practices these leaders employed and being a homegrown rural leader. Also missing from existing literature is how being a transformational leader and a homegrown leader impact the challenges unique to rural districts.

Findings from Research Questions 2 and 3 support the connection between transformational leadership and homegrown leadership, which could impact theory. Utilizing transformational leadership practices takes on a different perspective for a homegrown leader who already has previous ties, relationships, and trust with stakeholders compared with a principal who has to work harder to establish those facets of transformational leadership. For the principals in this study, it does appear to be the case that their previous ties with the district and their already established trust and relationships with stakeholders made it easier for them to be transformational leaders, which also helped them enact change within their districts. As Hartnett (2015) explained, “The transformational effect of leadership may not simply be a result of employing a particular leadership practice, but in the combination of practices yielding a synergistic result” (p. 158). Instead of looking at one model of leadership, in the case of rural, homegrown principals, we could instead look at how the combination of the practices of being both a transformational leader and homegrown leader, or what I will describe as homegrown leadership, influences change in rural schools. Looking at how the combination of both of these practices influences results (Hartnett, 2015) can help yield a deeper understanding of rural, homegrown leadership and the impacts of leadership on rural schools.

## Research Question 2

The second research question asked, “How do these rural principals, identified as transformational leaders, use transformational leadership to contend with challenges unique to rural districts?” and will be discussed in this section.

The two rural leaders in this study identified challenges cited in literature, as well as additional challenges that were not addressed in the literature review. Matt’s and Steve’s transformational leadership practices were helpful in handling some of the unique challenges rural district leaders encounter; however, some other challenges presented more of a burden and were harder to contend with. Matt’s and Steve’s emphasis on leadership practices of promoting positive, supportive relationships, trust, and collaborative decision making assisted these principals in handling the following challenges discussed in Chapter IV: handling multiple roles, hiring and supporting new staff, and having difficult conversations.

**“You surround yourself with people you trust.”** Both principals’ experiences as well as research on educational leadership revealed that principals in rural districts often have multiple roles and do not have the supportive administrative staff of their colleagues in larger districts (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008). Steve’s and Matt’s multiple roles have been explored previously in this dissertation, and those roles are a challenge that both participants described as lonely and sometimes frustrating. Matt related being in a small district to being on an island: “You are on an island a lot and it gets to be hard” (Interview, April 2016).

The participants handled multiple roles similarly by relying on supportive staff in their respective districts: for Matt, the elementary teacher and the BLT team, and for

Steve, the superintendent and the guidance counselor who had been in the district since before Steve was a student there. Steve also relied on his BLT team to help make decisions and provide support. Both participants were asked how they handle the multiple roles, and Steve's reply focused on trust:

You surround yourself with people you can trust. I rely a lot on our guidance counselor who has been here 42 years. He helped me out when I first started as an elementary principal and I still go to him for advice. I also talk to the superintendent. The three of us are a good team. (Interview, February 2016)

Matt also relied on those around him to help with the challenge of what he described as "taking on too much" (Interview, April 2016). He explained that he "leans on who you need to lean on" (Interview, April 2016). Both of these principals had a strong BLT team in place that also assisted them with sharing some of those leadership duties such as rewriting the handbook, being a sounding board for new ideas, analyzing data, relaying information with staff, and gathering staff feedback. The trust these leaders had and placed in those around them helped them with handling the multiple roles as did their practice of allowing their support team to help with shared decision making.

**"I haven't hired anyone I don't get along with."** Rural districts have fewer teacher applicants than larger districts as well as higher teacher turnover rates (McNeff, 2014; Montgomery, 2010; Preston et al., 2013). This was true of both Riverton and Cannonville. Cannonville experienced higher turnover than Riverton, and Matt hired almost half of the current high school staff since he became high school principal. Of the staff he had hired, only three left to take positions in other districts either closer to their homes or for career advancement. He attributed the teacher attrition during his time as principal to the fact that "I haven't hired anyone I don't get along with" (Interview, April 2016). He also stated that his teachers know he supported them and encouraged them to

be a part of the school and the decisions being made. Matt was open and honest with teachers, and he recognized that may have influenced their desire to stay in the district.

Matt and Steve both discussed the challenges of keeping young teachers in their small districts. Matt related it to his own experience when he first started as a teacher and did not live in the district, but drove to work every day from a larger city 25 minutes away. He stated, “I mean when I first got out of school I didn’t want to live in (Cannonville). There isn’t anything to do. I mean if you are young, and dating, there just aren’t a lot of options here for things to do” (Interview, February 2016). While a small community may be a great place to raise a family, it may not be an enticing place for young, single teachers to live. Steve also discussed keeping good teachers in the area. He talked about how he hired a new high school language arts teacher who was “excellent” and raised the assessment scores of the students higher than other neighboring districts. He commented, though, that she was “young” and “not from here” and he was concerned she would not stay. He even commented that he was hoping she would date someone locally to increase the chances she would stay in the area, but instead, “she found a boyfriend in (a town a couple hours away) so she probably won’t be around much longer” (Interview, February 2016).

Steve did not have the turnover Matt experienced; however, he had to hire a few new teachers. His struggles came with differing views from the school board on who was the most qualified candidate. He commented on an instance in which the school board requested he have a committee; he formed a committee, and they chose the candidate who was not from Riverton and did not have a coaching endorsement. The board, however, wanted to hire a local teacher who could also coach football. Steve supported

the decision of the committee to the school board, telling them, “You made me have a committee, I had a committee and this was our number one choice. Do you want me to go back to that committee and tell them their opinion doesn’t matter?” (Interview, February 2016). Steve also believed that his support of his staff helped with retaining teachers: “I tell staff at the beginning of every year that I will always have their back” (Interview, February 2016). Steve and Matt chose the best candidates for the positions, made sure they would be a good fit within the school, and provided the support they needed to be successful, all transformational leadership practices that helped them manage the challenge of hiring and retaining quality teachers in a small district.

**“You have to build those relationships.”** Principals often have to make difficult decisions and have difficult conversations. For a rural homegrown principal, having previous relationships and trust with stakeholders assists in this challenge (Schuman, 2010). This study also revealed that Steve’s and Matt’s previous connections helped them when having difficult conversations. Matt commented on the importance of building relationships with stakeholders, and he then described how those relationships helped him in handling difficult conversations:

You have to build those relationships. There are so many opportunities to build those relationships. I mean if you think about it, every single second you have an opportunity to build a relationship. And, if you don’t take advantage of that, and don’t even talk to them, you miss that opportunity, and now you are building the negative side of it. (Interview, April 2016)

Matt expanded on that connection between positive relationships, trust, and difficult conversations: “They (stakeholders) know me, they trust me, and know I am not going to do anything that isn’t in the best interest of the students. That helps a lot when I have to have those difficult conversations” (Interview, April 2016). Steve also made the

connection between supporting his teachers and difficult conversations: “I believe in the philosophy of filling their buckets with positive things and being as big a help as I can so that when we do have to have tough talks I have had enough positive interaction with them that it makes those times easier” (Interview, October 2016).

Transformational leaders have high expectations for followers (Childers, 2009), which can also help when having difficult conversations regarding discipline. Matt explained that when teachers and students know and understand the expectations, it makes it easier to have those conversations when the expectations are not met: “I make sure students know the expectations, they know what I expect of them, and we have policies in place, which makes it easier when I have to discipline them. The same is true for teachers.” Matt told students at a freshman orientation that though it is okay to make mistakes (“We all make mistakes, that is how we learn”), and staff would be there to help them through those mistakes, students must take responsibility and accept the consequences for their mistakes. He told students, “I don’t want to hear excuses. Accept responsibility for your actions and learn from them” (Freshman Orientation, May 2016). Steve also relied on his expectations of students and policies in place when dealing with discipline in addition to the benefit of knowing the parents. He wanted to work on rewarding students who were following the rules and believed that the new PBIS initiative would help with student behavior because it “not only reinforces behavior expectations, but also rewards those students who are following them.” Steve also stated that knowing parents “makes it easier for him to know how they are going to respond” if he has to call them with a concern. He told his teachers to let him make those difficult

phone calls, because “I know all of the parents, and that helps me understand how they are going to respond and what they are going to say” (Interview, February 2016).

Steve also commented that there can also be a negative side to knowing everybody: “The positive to living in and being a principal in a small district is everyone knows you, and the negative is everyone knows you. The answer is one and the same to me” (Interview, February 2016). For example, while he believed knowing and understanding how parents will respond made it easier to make those difficult phone calls to parents, at the same time, knowing the parents and their background could sometimes lead to a preconceived idea of the student, which as Steve stated, “isn’t really fair to the student” (Interview, February 2016). Steve described more challenges to being a rural homegrown leader than Matt did. However, they both highlighted similar challenges that their transformational leadership practices did not seem to help them overcome.

Challenges that transformational leadership practices did not address were the loneliness of the rural principal and the lack of professional development and formal mentoring. Other challenges were more specific to the qualities of being a homegrown rural leader and included lack of privacy, loss of relationships, and the dual role of parent and principal. Matt and Steve discussed these challenges in their interviews with a greater amount of frustration than the challenges listed above, additionally making both principals question their place in these small districts.

**“People stop me and want to talk school all of the time.”** This study examined both the benefits and challenges of being a homegrown leader. One challenge addressed by research on principals in rural districts is the lack of privacy and personal space and the struggle to keep separate their professional and personal lives (Lock & Oakley, 2012;

Schuman, 2010). Specifically, both principals indicated their frustration with their lack of privacy, personal space, and inability for stakeholders to separate their roles as principals/community members. Both principals described frustration with not being able to do simple tasks in the community without being stopped about school. Their comments from interviews cited in Chapter IV, such as “I can’t go anywhere without people stopping me about school”; “It is just the reality of it, it is hard to go places without someone asking about school, or questioning a decision, or wanting to know something”; “You are under a microscope when you are in town”; and “People stop me and want to talk school all of the time,” indicate the frustration of the lack of privacy and personal space that being a homegrown leader entails. Neither principal shared ways that transformational leadership practices helped with this challenge. In fact, it seems that having those positive relationships and trust with stakeholders, in addition to being from the community where everyone knows you, made this challenge more prevalent.

**“You aren’t afforded the luxury of being a parent and principal.”** Matt and Steve both had children attending schools in the districts in which they led and discussed the difficulty in disentangling the roles of principal and parent in regard to disciplining their own children, children of their friends, or classmates of their children. Matt had to discipline children of his close friends and stated how that was a difficult phone call to make. Steve too had to discipline students of former classmates, friends, or teachers, and although he claimed that knowing stakeholders in his community could help with difficult conversations in regard to student discipline, it cost him some relationships: “You know I grew up and went to school with some people who used to say hi and talk to me all the time, but now that I am an administrator and have had to discipline their child,

they won't even look at me" (Interview, April 2016). Even though he was not in charge of the elementary school, Matt's child's teacher brought children to him to be disciplined who had said inappropriate things to his daughter because the teacher "thought I would want to handle it since it was my daughter."

Steve felt that leading in the same school as his children was sometimes both a challenge and a benefit. Steve's oldest child was in junior high, and he described how he felt his daughter was being picked on because he had to discipline some of the students in her grade. He felt that these students were retaliating against him by taking it out on her. He stated that though she "handles it well," it was still hard. A perceived benefit for Steve is that he could not only catch his own kids being good and give them hugs in the hall and see them every day, but also being in the same school as his children allowed him to know when they committed minor infractions that he otherwise would not know about. For instance, he described how if he walked by his son's classroom and observed his son's name on the board for having to miss recess time, he would stop in and say something to his son. His son's teacher told Steve that it was not fair, because it was a minor infraction, and if he were not the principal, Steve would not know about it. Steve felt like that was a benefit for him in this role, though possibly not a benefit for his son or his son's teacher.

**"It is hard to find that PD as an administrator."** While both of these principals and school districts recognized the importance and need to provide ongoing professional development, mentoring, and support to their teachers, such as the TLC implementation in Cannonville and the new evaluation system in Riverton, those same opportunities were not afforded to them as principals. Research supports that in order for principals to be

successful, they must have a mentoring program and ongoing professional development (Remy, 2009; Spanneut et al., 2012) and that for rural principals, PD is important to help them navigate through rural leadership challenges (Bizzell, 2011; McNeff, 2014; Salazar, 2007; Stewart & Matthews, 2015).

Steve and Matt provided ongoing professional development for their teachers as noted in the many observations and as discussed in interviews; however, both found that obtaining professional development for themselves was a challenge. The participants explained this challenge with comments such as, “You have to find the PD on your own, because it is hard to find that PD as an administrator”; “The superintendent doesn’t want us out of the building more than 2 days a month”; and “Every time I left the building an issue would arise and I would get called back.” Matt recognized the need for professional development while recognizing the challenges of getting there: “It is kind of that catch 22, you need it and you need to go, but as soon as you go, you need to be back in the district” (Interview, April 2016).

In addition to not being afforded the opportunity for professional development, mentoring for these principals was minimal or non-existent. Steve not only did not have a mentoring program for his teachers, but he also did not have a mentor at all when he assumed the role of principal: “We don’t really have a set mentoring program, and maybe we should? I was supposed to have one when I was a principal, and didn’t.” Cannonville, through implementation of the new TLC initiative, was working towards improving their teacher mentoring program, and although Matt did have a professional mentor when he started, he only met with him twice in a 2-year period. Matt stated that the mentoring “wasn’t that helpful” and the biggest way he “got what he needed” was to go back to

further his education. Steve “surrounds himself with a team he can trust.” Both principals relied on the informal support of other rural principals for advice and support. Steve called nearby rural principals, and Matt stated that monthly meetings with conference high school principals were “one of the biggest supports” because “if you have a question, within a day or two, you have 13 different responses.”

**“Sometimes I ask myself, ‘What am I doing here?’**” One finding not expected or revealed in the literature was how these rural challenges and those challenges specific to being a homegrown leader can not only lead to frustration for rural principals, but also contribute to the inclination to leave their hometown to look for a position elsewhere. Not until I was coding the interviews was this theme revealed, as I had not made notes on it during the interviews because it did not directly relate to my research questions. However, coding revealed that both of these principals either hinted at or actually spoke of applying for another job. Matt alluded to his thoughts on looking elsewhere in his interview:

I don’t know. Um. The plan was always, always, always, always to start and finish here. And, now, I don’t know. I don’t know. And, it is nothing here, it’s, I have been really torn in the last year, of really what I am looking at, is Do I want to see how far I can take (Cannonville)? Or, Do I want to see how far I can take myself? And, I don’t think that can be one in the same. I just don’t. It is nothing against (Cannonville). I love (Cannonville), I have been here my whole life. But, it is a small 1-A school and it is going to have its limitations on what my career aspirations are going to be. So, I don’t know. Somedays, I think yeah I am going to stick it out here. I could be the principal for another 25 years or hopefully move up to the superintendency. But then I start looking at that path, and I think ok, I was a teacher for 10 years, could be a principal for about 7, and move toward that superintendency and then what? I mean 20 years as a superintendent is a long tenure in one district. It’s not that I am opposed to that, but when I am thinking of my professional growth it stagnates that a little bit. (Interview, February 2016)

Steve discussed in an interview how he actually had applied for another job:

I have looked at some other jobs, and I looked at one, not that many more kids than here, and they have a principal, an assistant principal/AD, two secretaries, a personal secretary, two technology directors. It is just unbelievable, and they want to pay me more. I mean what am doing here? I mean I know why I am here, but it is frustrating to do it all on your own and get paid less than what someone in a bigger district or similar district gets paid who has more help. (Interview, February 2016)

Although Steve decided not to move the 2.5 hours away to another district with more pay and more support, Matt did decide to take that opportunity to further his professional growth. At the end of the year, he put in his resignation to move to a similar sized district as Cannonville, 2.5 hours away, moving away from the district he had grown up in, taught in, and led in.

Matt did not let me in on the news prior to his announcement to staff and students, which he did the day he accepted the position. He stated to me later that he did not want everyone in Cannonville to find out via social media as the other district was going to post it in their local paper, so the news was unexpected for stakeholders. Matt reported that the meeting with staff and students in which he announced his resignation, was emotional from all sides. Students and teachers left the auditorium in tears, and Matt also became emotional sharing the news; the surprise on the faces of staff and students was widespread, and the comments from hundreds of staff, former students, parents, and community members on his Facebook post announcing his resignation indicated not only shock at this unexpected news but also the admiration, respect, and love his stakeholders had for him.

This research suggests that leading in a rural district with unique challenges, less pay, fewer supports, and fewer opportunities for professional growth leads rural homegrown principals eventually to search for other jobs (Browne-Ferrigno & Knoeppel,

2005); however, research also indicates that leaders who have personal ties with the district they lead are more likely to remain in that position (Schuman, 2010). The fact that both of these principals were not only looking for jobs, but looking at jobs that would entail them moving away from their hometowns, was a surprising finding, and Matt's accepting another job was very unexpected. This finding, as well as the other findings mentioned above, leads to implications as well as recommendations for future research, which will be addressed in the implications section of this chapter.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asked, "Do the principals' prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?"

The limited research that is available on homegrown leaders cites the advantage of not only knowing the history and background of their districts but also having in-depth knowledge and established relationships with key stakeholders that help with building trust and maintaining relationships (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Schuman, 2010). In a case study of rural principals in the Appalachian region, Schuman (2010) uncovered in his findings that his participants were all from the district they now led, they left to teach and/or lead in other districts before coming back, but shared the connection of the principals in this study of having been a student in the district. His research revealed that context matters: "This close relationship and understanding of the context in which they work allows the principals a level of insight that seems to aid in their ability to lead" (Schuman, 2010, p. 321). Matt and Steve discussed how being a homegrown leader,

which includes already established relationships and trust with stakeholders and in-depth knowledge of the background of the district and community, positively influenced how they enacted change and built the culture of the school.

**“People know how much I care.”** Both participants commented that their longevity in the community and established relationships with teachers, parents, and students helped them build trust. Effective transformational leaders have garnered the trust of their followers (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), and both of these principals had that trust. Matt connected his longevity in the district to the respect and trust he had from stakeholders:

People know how much I care here, and I don't know how I built that over the years, I think it just kind of happened from being a student here, being a coach here, being a teacher here, being at all the events, being here all the time. The time helped. I had 10 years of that before becoming a principal. (Interview, April 2016)

Steve also made the connection between his homegrown ties and trust with comments such as “They know they can trust me,” and “They have known me my whole life and know and understand that I am only going to do what's best for the kids” (Interviews, February and May 2016).

Steve and Matt both were students in their districts from K-12 grade, which meant that they not only taught alongside some of their former teachers, but they also then became their principals. They both discussed how their previous relationships and mutual trust assisted not only with their transition from teacher to principal but also the maintaining of positive relationships. Matt stated:

I think since so many of the teachers were here when I started teaching they knew me. I mean I was the quiet, studious kid in high school and they knew what they were getting. I think that helped build that relationship. (Interview, April 2016)

Steve also discussed that when he took over as Dean of Students for a semester prior to becoming principal because the acting principal at the time was transitioning to the superintendent role, his transition was aided by the fact that “the teachers all knew me, some of them were my teachers when I went here and they understood” (Interview, February 2016). Steve also made sure his teachers knew they were supported: “Having my teachers’ backs when need be is really crucial for keeping their trust” (Meeting following observation, April 2016). This knowledge of the teachers was evident at observations of interactions between both principals and their respective staffs. There was an obvious comfort level, trust, and respect evident between staff and principal in both cases. Observations of the principals in their communities revealed the same findings. It was evident that teachers felt comfortable sharing their insights and suggestions regarding decisions, and did so at almost every meeting. Though these principals encouraged input and feedback, teachers shared their thoughts even without prompting, indicating they felt comfortable, respected, and valued (Sutherland & Yoshida, 2015).

**“I think it helped a lot being from here.”** School leaders also build culture through shared rituals, norms, values and beliefs, and celebrations (Hinde, 2004; MacNeil et al., 2009; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Matt and Steve and their staff had a shared value of trust and the belief that shared decision making is important. Steve worked to build positive culture in his school by creating times for staff to get together, such as providing lunch for staff once a month and making sure recess duties were covered so all staff could eat at the same time. Riverton also had school-wide celebrations to celebrate the end of a long testing week and a picnic at the end of the year. The district also had an annual event in the summer in which the elementary students from Riverton sang at a Cardinals game.

Observations at pep rallies showed Matt bringing staff and students together; for example, during homecoming week every year, there was a basketball game between staff and students. Matt provided a staff breakfast at the beginning of the year to bring the staff together and a BBQ at the end of the year. These shared values, beliefs, and rituals helped build a positive culture.

Steve's and Matt's strong relationships with stakeholders and established trust impacted the culture of their schools. The difference for these principals was that when Matt started as high school principal, he entered the district at a very tumultuous time and into a very negative culture, while Steve did not have to rebuild the culture of the school like Matt did. Schein (2010) claimed that culture and leadership are intertwined, and if the culture or parts of the culture become dysfunctional, leaders have the responsibility to change it. Matt described how after he took over, it took a couple years to rebuild the culture. I asked him how he worked to rebuild the culture and morale, and he replied, "It helped a lot that I was from here," stating that the administrator who was initially hired to replace the former principal who was fired from the position did not know the staff, the community, or the "ins and outs" of the district. Matt commented that the negativity and mistrust made it hard for teachers to "trust someone new" and for the new principal, who was not from the community, to understand how to turn around the negativity. Because Matt "knew every dirty little secret and what it was going to be like" (Interview, February 2016), he knew what he was walking into. He also stated that he was looked up to by teachers as a leader prior to taking over as a principal, and his previous connections in the district helped to rebuild the trust and culture with staff: "I think it helped being from here" (Interview, February 2016). Matt also stated:

I think they know they can trust me, and at the end I am not going to do anything that is not best for the kids or best for the school. They trust that the decisions I make are based on those two things and that is the focus, and they didn't have that before. So, I think that is how I contribute to the culture. (Interview, April 2016)

The value Matt placed on trust and building relationships helped him in building a positive culture.

Though Steve did not have to rebuild a negative culture, he discussed that taking over as principal when the former principal became superintendent created its own challenge in building positive culture, but he stated that knowing the teachers and having that trust helped with his transition: "I knew all of them, a few of them were my teachers, so they already knew and trusted me" (Interview, February 2016). He talked about how he went to the former principal, now the superintendent, and asked her to allow him to make some small changes teachers really wanted that she had not allowed as a principal in order to build that trust with the teachers. She did allow him to make those changes, and he made sure that teachers knew he could not have made those changes without the groundwork laid by the former principal and her current support. He connected being able to make those changes with building the culture and making it easier down the road to implement change. MacNeil et al. (2009) posited that in order for any positive change to occur, school leaders need to understand the current culture and be able to positively influence culture for change to be effective. Matt and Steve both understood the culture of their respective schools upon taking over their administrative roles and worked to either maintain the culture in Steve's case or to rebuild it in Matt's case.

**"If they are going to buy into it, they need to have input."** In order for change to occur, there needs to be a high level of trust and collaborative decision making between the leader and stakeholders (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). In addition, having an

established connection with the stakeholders enables the rural leader to be able to better garner support for change and handle tensions that arise (Budge, 2010; Simon & Helen, 2004). The previous connections and established trust with stakeholders enabled Matt and Steve to have an easier time garnering buy-in and support as they enacted change, in addition to how they influenced resisters.

A theme that emerged in both interviews and observations from both sites was the empowerment Steve and Matt gave to their teachers in shared decision making. Collaborative decision making was a part of new initiatives at both of these schools. Stakeholder input was listened to, valued, and included. At staff meetings, professional development sessions, and BLT meetings, these principals were observed asking for teacher and student input, which also included asking questions to promote deeper thinking such as, “What would you like this to look like?”; “What do you think?”; “What are your biggest fears, let’s start with those”; and “Get together and talk about it, and get back to me with your suggestions” (Observation field notes, 2016).

Teachers who feel trusted, valued, and empowered in the decision-making process more easily initiate and accept change (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Matt and Steve allowed themselves to be vulnerable as leaders by putting their trust in their teachers to collaborate in decision making, which in turn positively influenced how teachers reacted to new and different changes. Matt commented in a meeting with me how he felt the biggest mistake new administrators make is coming in and telling staff how something is going to be done instead of letting staff have input and feedback into the process. He commented, “If they (staff) are going to buy into change, they need to have input” (Interview, February, 2016). He allowed staff to have that input by “having a lot of

honest discussions” (Interview, February 2016). Matt and Steve not only encouraged input from staff and students, but also from those who were resisting change.

**“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”** Change brings about resistance, and both of these principals handled resistance by allowing the resisters to have input and to be a part of the process. Steve stated that one way he handled resisters was by making them part of the process. He invited them in to share their concerns and suggestions, which “makes them feel important.” He commented that often times by including them, listening to them, and making them part of the process, their opinions could be changed. He stated the importance of knowing who your resisters are so you can work to change their perspective: “You know it’s kind of like, keep your friends close and your enemies closer” (Interview, February 2016). Matt also encouraged input from resisters, stating that “I let them be heard” (Interview, April 2016). Matt also described the shared belief about decision making he has with stakeholders: “We try to get a decision that everyone can live with. They don’t have to like it, but they have to be able to live with it. I think that is the biggest thing” (Interview, April 2016); this helped in that not everyone was going to like every decision, but as long as everyone could agree to live with it, that is what mattered. If they couldn’t live with it, then we “either need to look at the policy or the teacher,” but he commented that it had never had to come to that.

### **Implications and Recommendations For Future Research**

The implications of these findings focus on aspiring or current rural, homegrown school principals, district administration, and principal preparation programs. As Preston et al. (2013) indicated, “In order to promote effective leadership policies, practices, and programs within rural contexts, educational stakeholders need to understand the unique

situation faced by the rural principal” (Preston et al., 2013, p. 1). First, the implications will be discussed, followed by recommendations for further research, and last a conclusion of the study.

### **Implications for School Administrators**

The two principals in this study did not start their teaching careers with the intent of becoming a principal; it is something that evolved later in their teaching careers for different reasons, which supports that school administrators are drawn to their profession for a variety of reasons (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Freeman & Randolph, 2013). Perhaps, like Steve, they were encouraged by a supervisor to obtain their master’s degree in administration or their administrative license. Or, perhaps like Matt, they never intended when they started teaching to become an administrator, but the lack of administrative support and the absence of leadership in the high school propelled him to pursue a leadership role. Whatever the reason, principals in small, rural districts should understand the benefits and challenges that come along not only with rural leadership but also with being a homegrown leader. Knowing and understanding the challenges they may encounter during their principalship will help them as they navigate their new role.

### **Implications for School Districts**

This study’s findings have revealed several ways that rural districts can support their new principals, homegrown or not. Districts can ensure principals have a mentoring program as well as support for professional development. Additionally, rural districts can support hiring practices that allow for better recruitment of new teachers. Lastly, this research confirms that there are both challenges and benefits to being a homegrown leader. Regarding the benefits, perhaps rural districts can incorporate a rural educational

leadership pipeline by promoting incentives for leadership opportunities for teachers who wish to get their leadership endorsement. One of the challenges this program could offset would be to help principals manage their multiple roles. These suggestions detailed in the following paragraphs would assist in the success of rural homegrown principals, which would carry over to the school district.

Homegrown leadership does have benefits in that homegrown leaders have an easier time building relationships and trust, which in turn positively influences change (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Schuman, 2010). As stated earlier, teachers who have the leadership skills and training could be utilized to help alleviate some of multiple roles of the principal that both literature and this research concur are a big challenge for rural principals. When or if the district principal does resign, these teachers would be better equipped to step into their role as a homegrown leader.

In order for professional growth to happen, districts need to recognize that “effective professional development that addresses the unique needs of rural school leaders can build essential leadership capacity that supports school success” (Salazar, 2007, p. 1). These findings illustrate that rural principals are not afforded the same opportunities for professional development as their staff. Both Steve and Matt commented that finding professional development as an administrator is difficult for reasons that include lack of availability, limits by the superintendent on how often they can be out of the building, and the issues that arise when they are out of the building. Rural superintendents and school boards need to place a value on professional development and support for principals by giving them the resources, time away from the district, and support necessary for them to grow professionally.

## **Implications for Principal Preparation Programs**

Principal preparation programs often leave out the rural context when preparing educational leaders, as Schuman (2010) explained: “Most academic institutions, however, do not specifically prepare students for rural service, but they do often focus on preparing principals for an urban or suburban context” (p. 319). My own personal experience confirms this finding as I recently received my administrative certification from a principal preparation program, and though many of the school districts surrounding the university were considered rural and many of my classmates were from rural districts, the topics of rural leadership, challenges associated with rural districts, and how new principals can navigate through these challenges were not part of the curriculum. There are many unique challenges that rural districts face (McNeff, 2014; Salazar, 2007), and in order for principals to be prepared to address these challenges, they first must have an understanding of challenges they may encounter when taking over in a rural district, and then be provided guidance on how to overcome those challenges. Matt felt that his primary mode of professional development came from his graduate school studies: “The biggest way to get what I needed to be honest was to come back to school” (Interview, April, 2016). If the “biggest way” to achieve that professional growth is to go back to school, the graduate programs need to address the needs of all principals, including rural principals.

This study described the benefits and challenges of being a homegrown leader, which also is not something that was a topic in my principal preparation program. Perhaps if rural leaders understood that having an in-depth understanding of the district and all of its key players and being imbedded in the district could improve

transformational leadership practices, such as trust, positive relationships, collaborative decision making, providing support and professional growth, and positively influencing change and culture, and if they understood the challenges of rural leadership, rural principals would achieve greater success and more principals would be drawn to rural districts. In addition, homegrown teachers who decide to achieve an administrative degree may be more apt to stay in their districts if they are properly trained on how leading in a rural district differs from leading in a larger or urban district. Principal preparation programs are in a unique position, especially those programs that are in primarily rural states, to prepare future educational leaders to better serve in rural districts.

If colleges and universities do not see rural schools as having unique needs and challenges, then it makes sense that they also don't recognize the need to train principals going into those rural districts on how to navigate those challenges. Meier & Edington (1983) suggested recommendations for teacher preparation programs to better prepare teachers for rural districts, and their suggestions can also be utilized by principal preparation programs as suggestions to better prepare rural school leaders. Meier & Edington, recommending the following suggestions:

- 1) Require that colleges and universities, as well as graduate school of education, provide special training specifically training teachers to serve in rural schools.
- 2) Provide additional in-service training and professional development opportunities for rural teachers and administrators.
- 3) Increase collaboration between Universities and rural schools
- 4) Universities and colleges need to respond to rural needs and provide more field experience in rural schools
- 5) Build curriculum expertise for rural schools in order to enable them to provide additional curricular offerings for their students
- 6) Create off campus centers to allow for more field experience opportunities in rural districts, as well as in-service training (Meier & Edington, 1983, p. 6).

The recommendations listed above could be applied to principal preparation programs today in order to build a foundation to better train principals to be successful in rural districts. In summary;

If colleges and universities will assess rural needs, provide special training or programs, collaborate with rural communities and other institutions, insure institutional responsiveness to rural concerns, and create off campus centers to train at least part of the time on school sites, they will have built the foundation for successful teacher (or principal) rural preparation (Meier & Edington, 1983, p. 6).

In better preparing rural principals, principal preparation programs could also help expand the research arena in rural contexts. As noted earlier in this study, research in general on rural education is limited. Schuman (2010) found the limited current research on rural leadership in general to be a challenge:

This lack of a rural focus is compounded by the lack of people conducting research in the rural context. This challenge regarding the lack of existing rural research suggests that more work needs to be done to fully understand the impact of the rural context and to prepare leaders for the challenges that it presents. (p. 319)

As more research is done in the rural context, the challenges of leading in a rural district will be better understood and additional connections can be made to rural leadership, such as that of homegrown leadership in a rural context that this study has explored. Higher education institutes have the potential to increase understanding of rural schools by providing additional research and collecting data in those districts to better understand successful classroom practices, the different community relationships in rural areas, and the difference in student attitudes and goals of rural students (Meier & Edington, 1983). A broader scope of educational leadership research in rural schools will assist principal preparation programs in training pre-service principals to be better prepared to lead successfully in rural districts.

## **Implications for Research in Educational Policy, Leadership, and Administration**

As noted earlier in this chapter, additional research is needed in the area of rural leadership. This research applies to a specific realm of rural leadership, specifically principals who embrace homegrown leadership; that is, they embrace transformational leadership practices that coincide with the benefits of being homegrown to help facilitate change. Of interest would be a comparative study comparing the results of this study with a case study of rural transformational leaders who are not homegrown to see if the findings are similar. Additionally, a quantitative approach could be taken on a broader view of rural principals to conceptualize how rural principals view themselves as leaders and what leadership style most rural leaders, homegrown or not, most relate to. This information would help not only principal preparation programs as they work to better train principals to lead in rural schools but also school districts as they seek to understand the leadership needed to contend with the rural challenges and support positive change within their district.

## **Conclusion**

This study was an in-depth examination of two rural, homegrown, transformational leaders. Through interviews, observations, and data collection, these leaders provided an understanding of what it is like to be a homegrown rural leader, and how they used transformational leadership practices within their districts. Demonstrated is how they used their homegrown leadership not only to deal with the challenges unique to rural districts but also to improve school culture and positively impact the many change initiatives that each principal implemented during his tenure. This research revealed that there are both benefits and challenges to being a homegrown leader, and

sometimes those are one and the same, as Steve alluded to: “I am from here, I grew up here, and I choose to be here. If things aren't good, then I shouldn't be here. There are good and bad.”

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## Appendix A

### RURAL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

#### ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

#### FIRST INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOCUSING ON ADMINISTRATOR BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE IN DISTRICT:

**Introduction:** I want to make sure I have the most accurate information from you, and recording helps with that. May I record our conversation? The purpose of this interview is to gather information from you about your background and previous experience in this district. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about this. Do you have any questions?

#### General Questions:

- 1) Tell me about your experience as a student in this district. (Prompting questions can include: What year did you graduate? How many people were in your class? Did you attend here K-12? If, not, what grade did you move here or begin attending school here?)
- 2) Did your parents attend this district? Were your parents or any other family members employed by the district at any time?
- 3) Did you enjoy school growing up?
- 4) When you were a student, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- 5) What activities did you participate in while in junior high/high school?
- 6) What or who had an influence on your decision to make a career in education?

#### Questions Regarding Teaching/Coaching:

- 7) What do you remember about the teachers/principal while you were a student here?
- 8) Were any of those teachers still teachers in the district when you began teaching in the district? If so, what was that experience like, being colleagues with people who used to teach you? Do you feel that having that prior experience with them as a student had a positive or negative impact on your relationship as colleagues? Were any of them role models to you growing up? Were any of them mentors to you when you became a teacher?
- 9) Tell me about the administration when you were a teacher/coach. Were the same people here in those roles as when you were a student?
- 10) Do you feel like you were supported by your principal when you were a new teacher? How about later in your career, or in your choice to become an administrator?
- 11) Tell me about your mentoring experience as a new teacher in this district. Since you were already familiar with this district, what new information did you glean about your district from a teacher perspective? What do you feel could have been improved, looking back, on your experience as a new teacher in regard to mentoring/professional development or support from your administrator?
- 12) What made you want to come back to this district to teach here?

- 13) Did you teach/coach at a district previous to coming here?
- 14) Where did you attend college? What was your major/minor? What advanced degrees do you have and where did you obtain those?
- 15) Did you coach in this district? What sports?
- 16) Tell me about some of your positive and negative experiences coaching and teaching in this district.

Questions Regarding Administrative Experience:

- 17) Where did you get your administrative endorsement or degree in Education Administration?
- 18) Tell me about your decision to become an administrator: Was that something you had always wanted to do when you got your teaching degree, or something you were asked to do, or you realized you wanted to do after you had been teaching for a few years?
- 19) How long have you been an administrator in this district?
- 20) Do you plan on retiring here or moving on elsewhere?
- 21) Did you aspire to be an administrator in this district? Or, were you an administrator first elsewhere and then came back here when there was an opening?
- 22) What was it like to be in an administrative position to people you were previously friends and/or colleagues with? Did it change or challenge any of those relationships? If so, how?
- 23) What do you feel are the benefits/challenges to having the background and knowledge from being an administrator in the district you grew up in and taught and coached in?
- 24) Do you have children in this district? If so what are the benefits/challenges to working in the district where your children go to school? Is it a challenge to be in the role of a parent and the principal?
- 25) Have you had the experience where you didn't agree with a teacher or coach regarding an incident with your child? How did you handle that?
- 26) What are the benefits/challenges to teaching/coaching and being a principal to children of your friends and/or family?
- 27) What are the benefits/challenges to teaching/coaching/ and being a principal in the same district?
- 28) How would you describe your leadership style?
- 29) Is there anything else you wish to add regarding your background/history regarding your experience living and working in this district?

## **Appendix B**

### RURAL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP PIPELINE ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

#### SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOCUSING ON STAFF/COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

**Introduction:** I want to make sure I have the most accurate information from you, and recording helps with that. May I record our conversation? The purpose of this interview is to gather information from you on how you build trust, school culture, and make decisions in your district. Questions will also focus on the challenges of working in a rural district, and what professional development needs you feel would better equip you to serve in this role. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about this. Do you have any questions?

Questions regarding:

#### **1) Communication**

- a. General
  - i. How do you communicate with staff?
  - ii. How does the staff communicate with you?
  - iii. What are some of the topics/concerns staff communicates with you about?
  - iv. How do you participate in the community?
  - v. How do you communicate with other stakeholders such as the board, community, and parents?
  - vi. How do you feel stakeholders would rate your communication with them?
  
- b. Decision-making
  - i. How do you include staff and other stakeholders in the decision-making process?
  - ii. Has that changed over your tenure as principal? If so, how?
  - iii. What types of decisions are good for staff members to make? For you to make?
  - iv. What if you do not agree with a staff decision/input? How do you handle that?
  - v. What happens if the staff does not agree with your decisions/directions?
  - vi. How do you handle it when other stakeholders, such as the board, community members or parents do not agree with a decision you make?

#### **2) School Culture**

- a. Could you please talk about the school culture in your building? To what do you attribute the current school culture?

- b. Describe the culture when you first started as a principal—was it a positive or negative culture? Was it the same or different from when you taught? What were the challenges of entering into this culture in a new role as an administrator?
- c. Does the current culture need to change? Be maintained? Why?
- d. What do you do to promote a positive school culture?
- e. In a rural district, where everyone knows everyone and often are social outside of school, does that help or hinder the school culture and atmosphere.

### **3) Building Relationships**

- a. What type of relationships did you have with staff when you were a teacher/coach? How did those relationships change when you became the principal?
- b. How would you describe your relationship with the students? Since this is a small community, I can assume you know most of their parents and their background, how do you think that helps or hinders your role as administrator?
- c. How do you build a positive relationship with students?
- d. Tell me about your relationships with other constituents? How do you build positive relationships with staff? With community members? With administration?
- e. What's your philosophy on discipline, how do you handle discipline issues with students? What about with teachers? Have you ever had to discipline a student or teacher you had outside connections with (e.g., family member, friend etc.).
- f. How do you deal with conflict? For example: unhappy parents, community members, board members and staff? Or, people who don't agree with a decision you make, don't like the way something is going in the school, want change to happen?
- g. What are some of the ways being a principal in a small rural district is beneficial to building relationships with constituents? What are ways it is a challenge?

### **4) Staff Development/Mentoring**

- a. When you first started as a principal, what type of mentoring did you have, if any?
- b. Who did you lean on or go to when you needed advice or needed questions answered?
- c. How do you think starting out in a rural district as a principal is different than starting out in a larger district? What would be any challenges or benefits to being in a larger district as a new principal?
- d. Do you feel that your training to become a principal adequately equipped you with the knowledge of some of the different challenges that may occur in a small district? For example: having dual roles, budget issues, hiring concerns...
- e. Do you have different roles other than principal? Such as AD, Curriculum Director, etc? How do you balance those roles and what if any professional development or training do you need or have for those?
- f. What staff development needs do you feel you need or a rural principal would need?
- g. What are your areas of strength and weakness? How to you grow professionally? What are your future goals?

## **Appendix C**

### **IRB APPROVAL**

FOR IRB USE ONLY

APPROVED BY: IRB-02

IRB ID #: 201601739

APPROVAL DATE: 02/05/16

EXPIRATION DATE: N/A

We invite you to participate in a research study being conducted by investigators from The University of Iowa. The purpose of the study is a case study researching rural principals in Iowa and Illinois whom have personal ties and background with the districts they are now principals in. The aim of this study is to look at how principals who have attended, taught and coached in the same district they are now principals in impact trust, decision making and school culture. In addition, this research study aims to address the needs rural principals have regarding professional development and/or mentoring.

If you agree to participate, we would like you to allow the Principal Investigator to observe you facilitate staff meetings and professional development as well as other meetings or situations that you and the PI deem appropriate, such as assemblies, board meetings etc. This study will also involve at least two semi-structured interviews conducted by the PI, which will not last more than an hour. You are free to skip any questions that you prefer not to answer. This study is anticipated to last January-May, 2016.

We will keep the information you provide confidential. All observation notes and interview transcriptions will be kept in a secure location. The only people with access to this information will be the PI and her advisor. If we write a report about this study we will do so in such a way that you cannot be identified.

Taking part in this research study is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this study, you may opt out by letting your PI know you no longer wish to participate.

If you have questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact the Human Subjects Office, 105 Hardin Library for the Health Sciences, 600 Newton Rd, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242-1098, (319) 335-6564, or e-mail [irb@uiowa.edu](mailto:irb@uiowa.edu).

Thank you very much for your consideration of this research study.

## Appendix D

### DESCRIPTION OF CODES

<b>CODES</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>	<b>THEME</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION</b>
Building Trust	<p>“Doing what I say I am going to do”</p> <p>“Always have their back”</p> <p>Transparency in communication</p>	Transformational Leadership	How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
Building Relationships	<p>“Fill their buckets with positive”</p> <p>“They know I will always be here for them”</p> <p>Interactions with stakeholders</p>	Transformational Leadership	How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
Collaborative Decision Making	<p>Asking for teacher input/suggestions</p> <p>“I make sure their voices are heard, and listen to their suggestions”</p>	Transformational Leadership	How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?
Impacting Change	<p>Asking for stakeholder input,</p> <p>Using data to support change,</p> <p>Trust and positive relationships</p> <p>“If they are going to buy-in to change, they need to have input”</p>	Transformational Leadership	How do these participants identify themselves as educational leaders?

Hiring the right fit	<p>“I don’t hire anyone I don’t get along with”</p> <p>Interview team consisting of teachers, and other staff</p>	Handling Rural Challenges	How do these rural principals identified as transformational leaders use transformational leadership for challenges unique to rural districts?
Surround Yourself with People You can Trust	<p>“I have a good BLT team, and I run everything by them”</p> <p>“ I rely on the people I can trust”</p>	Handling Rural Challenges	How do these rural principals identified as transformational leaders use transformational leadership for challenges unique to rural districts?
Lack of privacy	<p>“I can’t go to the grocery store without someone stopping and talking to me about school”</p> <p>“Everyone knows you, and you know everybody”</p>	Rural Challenge	How do these rural principals identified as transformational leaders use transformational leadership for challenges unique to rural districts?
Dual Role of Parent/Principal	<p>“you aren’t afforded the luxury of being a parent”</p> <p>“Teachers are uncomfortable with me at parent teacher conferences”</p> <p>Kids giving principals children a hard time because he had disciplined them</p>	Rural Challenge	How do these rural principals identified as transformational leaders use transformational leadership for challenges unique to rural districts?
Discontentment	<p>Sometimes I ask myself what am I doing here?</p> <p>Both have looked for other jobs</p>	Challenges of being Homegrown	How do these rural principals identified as transformational leaders use transformational leadership for challenges unique to rural districts?

<p>Homegrown Leader</p>	<p>Lives in district</p> <p>Attended district as a student K-12 grade</p> <p>Taught in district</p> <p>History with stakeholders</p> <p>Previous relationships with stakeholders</p> <p>Deep understanding and knowledge of the community</p> <p>“The benefit is you know everybody, and the challenge is you know everyone”</p>	<p>Homegrown Leadership Characteristics</p>	<p>Do the principals’ prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?</p>
<p>Positive History and Relationships with Stakeholders</p>	<p>“People know how much I care”</p> <p>“They have known me my whole life and know they can trust me”</p> <p>“It helped being from here”</p>	<p>Previous relationships impact trust, positive school culture and change</p>	<p>Do the principals’ prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational leadership practices, such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?</p>
<p>Enacting Change through Collaborative Decision Making</p>	<p>Asking for stakeholder input</p> <p>“What would you like this to look like?”</p>	<p>How previous relationships impact change</p>	<p>Do the principals’ prior experience and personal history within a school district influence transformational</p>

	<p>“What do you think?”</p> <p>“I know who is going to resist change in the community and I make them part of the process”</p> <p>“Let them have a voice”</p> <p>“I let them have input and power when they need to and let them know I support them”</p> <p>“They know and trust I am only going to do what is in the best interest of the students”</p>		<p>leadership practices, such as building trust, maintaining a positive school culture, and enacting change? If so, how?</p>
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