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Rural Principals on the Move: Why They Leave

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the personal, institutional, and environmental factors that influenced a principal's decision to leave his or her school. Respondents included six elementary principals in rural Minnesota who left their positions within the past year. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes. Transferability and credibility were enhanced through the participation of the researcher in a bracketing interview to identify potential biases, independent coding by an outside analyst of the bracketing and regular interviews, and repeated checks with respondents about transcriptions, codes, and themes. Themes were codes that occurred in at least four of the six interviews and included Career Opportunities, Family Needs, Community Expectations, Workload, Lack of Professional Support, Superintendent and School Board Decisions: General Decisions or Relationship, and Superintendent and School Board Decisions: Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations. The factors relating to superintendent and school board were not present in existing literature in the United States and could be explored in future research, as could various geographic, school-level, and school-type contexts.

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your work. You serve selflessly, under incredibly challenging conditions and with infrequent appreciation, and you do it because you care about kids. Thank you.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Introduction to the Problem

It is a hot day in late August. Inside the cafeteria, teachers begin to gather. It is their first staff meeting of the year, and soon they will meet their new principal. Quiet conversations are punctuated by loud greetings and laughter with old friends, but behind the smiles runs a tension of uncertainty about their new leader. What will she be like? What will she expect of them? Will she help them succeed, or will she hinder their progress?

Unfortunately, these unanswered questions are not new for the teachers of this mid-sized rural Minnesota school. They have experienced yearly administrative turnover for the past five years. Every August, a new principal comes in with new initiatives, different ways of responding to discipline, and varied ideas about curriculum, instruction, and professionalism. Every June, that principal leaves.

Although the above scenario portrays a fictitious school, it illustrates the reality faced in many rural contexts. Rural schools often face challenges in attracting and retaining high-quality school administrators (Pijanowski, Hewitt, & Brady, 2009; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). Compounding those challenges is the reality that when principals leave rural schools, the consequences impact a wide range of areas, perhaps more areas than in other settings. Rural principals assume multiple and diverse roles, from assessment leader to parent advocate to instructional specialist (Preston et al., 2013). Because leadership stability is critical in advancing meaningful educational change (Hargreaves, 2005; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), all of the multiple areas led by a rural principal are interrupted when he or she leaves.

Several studies (DeAngelis & White, 2011; Morford, 2002; Partlow & Ridenour, 2008) have found that principal turnover in rural contexts occurs more frequently than in suburban or

urban contexts. In a quantitative study of Ohio elementary school principals, Partlow and Ridenour (2008) observed that 60% of rural schools had only one or two principals over a seven-year period, compared with 80.8% of suburban schools. Morford (2002) affirmed the high frequency of rural turnover, finding that only two out of 10 rural administrators were still at their school after two years (Morford, 2002). In a multi-year study of Illinois principals, DeAngelis and White (2011) also discovered higher rates of turnover among rural principals. Between 2000 and 2008, the average turnover rate for rural Illinois principals was 23.3%, while the average turnover rate for Chicago principals was 18.3%.

Statement of the Problem

Impact of principal turnover. During an era of increased attention to school leadership, principal turnover is a concern. The National Center for Education Statistics conducted a survey of principals and found that more than 20% of principals left their positions in 2011-2012 school year (Goldring & Taie, 2014). These results were consistent with the only other nationwide survey of principals, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in the 2007-2008 school year (Battle, 2010), and they are higher than teacher turnover rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Several studies (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Brockmeier, Starr, Green, Pate, & Leech, 2013; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013) have linked frequent leadership turnover with decreased student achievement. In a study of Texas principals, Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) discovered that shorter principal tenure was associated with lower levels of student achievement. Principals with six or more years at a school accounted for 39% of high-achieving schools. Principals with one year of experience at their school accounted for only 16% of high-achieving schools.

Brockmeier, Starr, Green, Pate, and Leech (2013) noted similar correlations when studying elementary principals from Georgia. They defined principal stability as the number of principals within a school over the past 10 years. In analyzing reading and math scores, they discovered the following: "In all instances, schools with one or two principals over the 10 year period scored significantly higher than schools with four or more principals over the 10 year period" (p. 55).

Mascall and Leithwood (2010) also defined turnover rates as the number of principals in a given school over 10 years. Principal turnover was significant at the .05 level when correlated negatively with school culture. In turn, school culture was highly significant at the .01 level when correlated positively with student achievement. That is, as principal turnover increased, school culture decreased. When school culture decreased, so did student achievement.

Miller (2013) had similar findings when studying principals in North Carolina over a 12-year period. Schools with zero principal transitions had an increased mean score of .02 on statewide reading and math exams, while schools with three or more principal transitions had a decreased mean score of .05. Miller affirmed previous research when she noted, "Student test scores are substantially lower at schools with new principals" (p. 64).

The frequency of principal turnover. Although teacher turnover has been the subject of plentiful research, principal turnover rates are actually higher than teacher turnover rates. In 2012-2013, 22% of principals left their schools. During the same year, only 15.7% of teachers left their schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Moreover, principal turnover rates are increasing. Between 1987 and 2001, the principal turnover rate in Illinois was 14% (Ringel, Gates, Chung, Brown, & Ghosh-Dastidar, 2004). In a follow-up study conducted in Illinois between the years 2000 and 2008, the principal turnover

rate had increased to 20.9% (DeAngelis & White, 2011). Also of interest are the places to which those principals moved. Between 1987 and 2001, 20% of principals who left their schools exited the Illinois Public Schools system entirely (Ringel et al., 2004). Between 2000 and 2008, 40% of those principals exited the Illinois Public Schools system (DeAngelis & White, 2011), indicating either increasing retirements or an increasing desire to move to positions outside of public education.

The frequency of principal turnover in the United States has been highlighted in recent years in popular media. News organizations from Massachusetts (Tuoti & Sanna, 2016) to Texas (Hacker, 2015) to Alaska (Kraegel, 2016) have noted the high turnover rates of principals in their school systems. In fact, having recognized the challenges associated with frequent principal turnover, some states have started reporting annual principal turnover rates (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016). In addition, some larger school systems have started exploring ways to retain principals, as evidenced by the publication from the Chicago Public Education Fund (2015) entitled, "Chicago's Fight to Keep Top Principals: 2015 Leadership Report."

The rural context. The Center for Rural Strategies (2013) summarized the importance of rural America when it stated, "An inclusive, prospering, and sustainable rural America improves prospects for us all" (National Rural Assembly section, para. 1). A centerpiece of thriving rural communities is their school (Halsey & Drummond, 2014).

Rural schools have been a focus of educators for many years. An analysis of one of the early meetings of the Annual Rural and Small Schools conference (Horn & Davis, 1985) showed that rural schools of decades past faced similar challenges as do rural schools today, including the challenge of educator attrition. The crisis of recruiting and retaining education personnel in rural settings continues to be seen in the modern media, specific even to Minnesota. For at least

the past decade, educational researchers have warned of the declining educational workforce in Minnesota (Haar & Robicheau, 2007). More recently, this was demonstrated in a 2014 article entitled "Rural Minnesota Needs Teachers" (Galles, 2014). A report sponsored by Wilder Research about rural Minnesota schools clarified the need for teachers in rural Minnesota when it noted, "Minnesota, like most of the nation, does not have an overall teacher shortage, but rather a problem with the distribution of teachers across subject and geographic area" (Broton, Mueller, Schultz, & Gaona, 2009, p. 24). Although there are enough teachers to fill all vacant teaching positions, not enough of those teachers apply to rural settings.

Similar to the challenges with teacher recruitment, rural school districts face particular hardships in attracting and retaining administrators. This problem has been in existence for at least a decade, illustrated in the report entitled "Recruiting and Retaining Rural Administrators" (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002). One study showed that small schools received an average of 6.8 applicants for principal positions, while large schools received an average of 14.6 applicants per position (Pijanowski et al., 2009, p. 91). Another study of 10 new rural high school principals indicated that the majority of them entered schools in which yearly or biyearly principal turnover patterns preceded them (Morford, 2002). In fact, the challenges of rural schools in attracting and retaining administrators have become such common knowledge to have resulted in the regular adoption of "grow your own" leadership programs in rural contexts, the success of which have been varied (Versland, 2013).

Interestingly, the problem of principal turnover in rural contexts is a phenomenon that crosses cultural lines. Australia has produced the most literature about school leadership in rural contexts (Ewington et al., 2008; Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Starr & White, 2008). One such study found that, of 131 principals, the average tenure of principals in a small rural school was

2.44 years, compared with an average tenure of 4.6 years for principals in other schools (Ewington et al., 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the personal, institutional, and environmental factors that influenced a principal's decision to leave his or her school. Respondents included elementary principals in rural Minnesota who left their positions within the past year.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the question, "Why do elementary principals in rural Minnesota leave their schools?" Specifically, three categories of factors were considered.

1. How did personal factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota?
2. How did institutional factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota school?
3. How did environmental factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota?

Significance of this Study

Research significance. The reasons for principal turnover have only recently begun to surface as a research endeavor, and researchers have described this topic as being in its "infancy" (Farley-Ripple, Solano, & McDuffie, 2012; Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng, 2010). For example, an educational database search for peer-reviewed research published during or after 2010 using the terms *principal** and *turnover* or *longevity* or *retention* produced 97 results, but only 15 of those were remotely related to principal turnover. The majority of the other results were related to teacher turnover.

Emerging research in the area of principal turnover, particularly in the United States, is overwhelmingly quantitative and limited to variables within existing state databases (Baker, Punswick, & Belt, 2010; Battle, 2010; Branch et al., 2013; Gates et al., 2006; Papa, 2007; Tekleselassie & Villarreal III, 2011). Thus, current research tends to analyze those personal, institutional, or environmental characteristics that have been presumed to be significant by those who collect information for state databases. Personal characteristics often include gender, age, experience, and education. Institutional characteristics often include school size and student achievement, and environmental characteristics often include poverty rate.

In addition to the limitation of pre-determined variables, existing research about principal turnover is limited in its specificity to a particular geographic area. Although this study was also limited in geographic scope, it probed a previously unexplored population—rural principals in Minnesota. The continued pursuit of principal turnover research in new geographic contexts will add to current understandings about school leadership stability.

Papa (2007) conducted one of the early large-scale quantitative studies about principal retention. He used a multivariate analysis to examine salary, school characteristics, and principal characteristics as determining factors for principal retention. While discussing the results of his research, he indicated a need for a qualitative accompaniment to his quantitative empirical framework when he noted, "Much can be learned from a qualitative analysis of principal retention that is based on the same sample of principals used by an empirical model" (pp. 287-288). Although his words were specific to his framework, they highlighted a need for a qualitative perspective about the issue of principal retention and turnover. In fact, Papa declared that he was conducting such research, but no record of such research has since been published from him.

Within the limited current qualitative studies about principal turnover, one study in the United States also emphasized a need for further qualitative research, particularly the need for principals to have a voice in the conversation. After speaking extensively with principals from Delaware and synthesizing their conversations, the researchers declared, "Our findings highlight the need for the education community to pay greater attention to the voices of administrators...Great insight is gained by giving them a voice" (Farley-Ripple, Raffel, & Welch, 2012, p. 808).

This study added a qualitative voice to the conversation about why principals leave their schools and explored a variety of factors that prompted a principal to depart.

Practical significance. Many stakeholders have an interest in promoting stable school leadership in rural Minnesota. Superintendents and school boards in rural contexts have a vested interest in the factors that lead to principal turnover because frequent turnover is associated with lower student achievement and poor school culture (Branch et al., 2013; Brockmeier et al., 2013; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013). Without an understanding of why principals leave, rural school districts cannot intentionally create systems that will encourage effective principals to stay.

Taxpayers in rural communities benefit from leadership stability, because the cost of replacing a principal is high. Recent estimates of the cost of principal turnover are as high as $75,000 when including considerations for recruiting, hiring, and mentoring (School Leaders Network, 2014). In rural contexts that have access to fewer sources of revenue (Huang, 1999), that cost is especially burdensome.

Finally, the sheer number of children in rural settings demands consideration of the issue of rural principal turnover. Across the United States, 25.2% of children attend a rural school. In

Minnesota, the rate is slightly higher, with almost one third of Minnesota's children attending school in a rural setting (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a). Without specific attention to the factors that result in principal departure in rural settings, a large portion of Minnesota's children are at risk of the negative effects associated with frequent leadership turnover. Ultimately, the significance of this study is rooted in the lives of those children.

Definitions

Rural is difficult to define. Historically, it has meant *not urban*, but it has been measured through a variety of indicators, including population, population per square mile, distance from urban centers, and amount of industry. This study utilized definitions from the United States Census. Every school in Minnesota has been assigned a census-defined locale code. This study limited itself to schools whose locale codes from 2012-2013, the most current locale codes available, included the following:

- Code 41 = Rural, Fringe
    - 5 or less miles from an urban center
    - 2.5 or less miles from an urban cluster
- Code 42 = Rural, Distant
    - Between 5 and 25 miles from an urban center
    - Between 2.5 and 10 miles from an urban cluster
- Code 43 = Rural, Remote
    - More than 25 miles from an urban center
    - More than 10 miles from an urban cluster (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

Turnover is also important to define. Farley-Ripple, Solano, and McDuffie (2012) acknowledged the varied ways researchers have defined *turnover,* which is often interchanged with *mobility* or *attrition,* and they advocated for clarification regarding role and place. For the purpose of this study, turnover is limited by role to principals, not assistant principals or central office administrators, and by place to public schools in rural Minnesota. Turnover is not limited by the position to which the principal moved. Principals could have moved to another position within or outside of their previous school district to a position as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, central office administrator, or other role. Principals could also have moved to a position outside of public education or to no position at all.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter two reviews literature relevant to this study, beginning with literature related to the impact of a school principal, continuing with literature about the conceptual framework and reasons for principal turnover, and ending with literature about the methodology and research tool. Chapter three describes the research procedures and methods. Findings are presented in chapter four, and chapter five discusses the implications of those findings and provide suggestions for additional research.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review begins with a discussion of the impact of a principal on school performance, which is necessary in establishing context and significance. Next follows an analysis of existing theories about principal turnover and an explanation of the conceptual framework for this study. The majority of the literature review details existing understandings about the many factors that might influence a principal's decision to leave his or her school. Because of the scarcity of literature about the reasons for principal turnover in rural contexts, research from all contexts is presented for consideration, with a focus on rural contexts when possible. Finally, the literature review closes with a focus on multisite case studies and semi-structured interviews.

Some of the literature comes from cultures and countries beyond the United States. Australia is particularly notable in their contribution to research about principal turnover in rural schools (Ewington et al., 2008; Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Lock, Budgen, Lunay, & Oakley, 2012; Starr & White, 2008). Although differences in culture and geography should be considered, there are the notable similarities between literature from other countries and literature from the United States. Indeed, as one Australian researcher noted, "This article focuses on the principalship in small rural schools in Victoria, Australia…However, while this article focuses on the Australian context, we believe that globalizing policy practices may create resonances elsewhere in the world" (Starr & White, 2008, p. 1).

Impact of the School Leader

Hallinger and Heck (1998) were early researchers in the field of school leadership and student achievement. They studied the impact of school leadership on student achievement from 1980 to 1995, a time when school accountability was on the rise. Through a meta-analysis of

forty existing empirical studies, they found that principals had a small but statistically significant impact on student achievement.

This impact was not through direct effect. Studies that attempted to link directly between leadership behaviors and student outcomes without controlling for other factors found varied results, to the point that Hallinger and Heck (1998) declared direct-effect studies to "have limited utility for investigating the effects of principal leadership" (p. 166). At the time of their research, the majority of existing studies about principal leadership and student achievement were direct-effect studies.

Hallinger and Heck (1998) instead preferred the use of a mediated-effects framework. These studies produced more consistent results as they considered the principal's impact on variables such as school culture through vision, mission, and goal-setting, which in turn impacted student achievement.

Several years later, in a meta-analysis for The Wallace Foundation, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) found similar results. The greatest impact of an educational leader was again through indirect means, such as creating a culture of high expectations through goal-setting. When combining direct and indirect actions, school leaders accounted for almost 25% of the student learning impact. These factors produced results significant enough for the researchers to declare, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 11).

When Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) conducted a follow-up study six years later, they reconfirmed correlations between high-performing schools and specific actions of principals. They explained this correlation as indicative of the synergy

needed to create school change; although multiple small initiatives might have small effects, an educational leader is uniquely positioned to coordinate those initiatives across the entire organization under a common vision with common goals. They also noted that a school leader's actions were particularly important in the context of struggling schools when they wrote, "There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader" (p. 5).

A final landmark meta-analysis about leadership behavior and student achievement was conducted by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005). In harmony with previous research, they found school leadership to have a statistically significant impact on student performance. They detailed 21 distinct leadership behaviors that had a positive impact on student success through a correlation of .25. To illustrate, they provided the example of an average principal in an average school being able to increase student achievement in his school from the 50th to the 60th percentile by increasing his leadership ability one standard deviation.

In light of the impact of school leadership, principal turnover is important. Rapid leadership turnover undermines school culture and can instill in staff members a "wait it out" mentality when presented with positive school improvement initiatives (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh, & Horner, 2014). This mindset of staff members was clearly displayed in an interview conducted by Macmillan (2000):

> *Interviewer:* If you have such rapid changeover of principals, how does the staff react? Does the staff actually say, "Oh, hohum, you know, we'll just wait it out two years and this guy will just disappear?"
>
> *Teacher:* Oh yeah, definitely! (pp. 55-56)

Conceptual Framework

Supply and demand theory. The theoretical framework behind principal turnover is still emerging. Teacher turnover research, which is more plentiful than principal turnover research, has often drawn from the economic labor market theory of supply and demand. However, in their meta-analysis of teacher turnover research, Borman and Dowling (2008) recognized the limits of this approach. Whereas typical supply and demand theory considers the balance between available positions and available workers, Borman and Dowling noted that many teachers experienced a variety of perceived rewards that might prompt them to persist in an otherwise undesirable work situation. Furthermore, those perceived rewards changed over the career life of the teacher; veteran teachers might have persisted in their positions because of higher salary and a long-term investment in the culture of the school, whereas novice teachers might have left because they had not experienced such rewards. Borman and Dowling emphasized the importance of considering work conditions and school organizational characteristics when studying teacher turnover. Therefore, simple labor market theory does not adequately describe the full range of factors that influence an educator's decision to leave or stay at her school.

Career theory. In 1992, Crow presented a study entitled, "The Principalship as a Career: In Need of a Theory." Both before and since that time, several frameworks for school leader career theory have emerged, but none have risen to the level of a standard theory through which all principal career decisions are analyzed.

Career stage theory. Some research on administrator career behavior is based upon a career stages perspective. Through a meta-analysis, Hart (1991) identified three stages, according to the work of the principal in each stage. In the stage entitled *Encounter,*

Anticipation, Confrontation, the task of the principal was to learn about the organization. This progressed to *Adjustment, Accommodation, Clarity*, when the task of the principal was to fit in. During the final stage, *Stabilization, Role Management, Location*, the task of the principal was to produce outcomes.

A study of first-time high school principals in the United States (Parkay, Currie, & Rhodes, 1992) presented similar career stages. Within the first three years of a principal's career, principals progressed from survival to professional actualization. In a later study in Great Britain (Day & Bakioglu, 1996), researchers identified four career stages of school leaders, adding a more negative element to the final stage: *initiation*, *development*, *autonomy*, and *disenchantment*. Initiation included learning and adjusting personal ideas to those of the organization; Development involved making positive changes within the school and within the headteacher; Autonomy was marked by tension between environmental forces and the goals of the school or headteacher; and Disenchantment was evidenced by declining enthusiasm and confidence as the end of the headteacher's career drew closer.

Researchers (Reeves, Mahony, & Moos, 1997) who studied headteachers in Denmark, England, and Scotland distinguished a larger number of stages than had previous researchers. In contrast to research that focused on principal tasks or behaviors as indicators of each stage, they delineated stages according to both task and timeline. Their stages were as follows:

1. The Warm-Up (pre-entry)
2. Entry (0-6 months)
3. Digging the Foundations (6-12 months)
4. Taking Action (1-2 years)
5. Getting above Floor Level (2-3 years)

6. The Crunch (2-5 years)
7. At the Summit (4-10 years)
8. Time for a Change (5-10+ years)

A later longitudinal study of headteachers in Great Britain also differentiated stages according to timeline (Earley & Weindling, 2007). Their seven stages were similar in content to the eight stages described by Reeves, Mahony, and Moos (1997). A summary of the stages identified by Earley and Weindling, along with a comparison of stages suggested in other research, is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

A Comparison of School Leader Career Stage Theories

Hart, 1991	Parkay, Currie, & Rhodes, 1992	Day & Bakioglu, 1996	Reeves, Mahony, & Moos, 1997	Earley & Weindling, 2006
• Encounter, Anticipation, Confrontation • Adjustment, Accommodation, Clarity • Stabilization, Role Management, Location	• Survival • Control • Stability • Educational Leadership • Professional Actualization	• Initiation • Development • Autonomy • Disenchantment	• The Warm-Up (pre-entry) • Entry (0-6 months) • Digging the Foundations (6-12 months) • Taking Action (1-2 years) • Getting above Floor Level (2-3 years) • The Crunch (2-5 years) • At the Summit (4-10 years) • Time for a Change (5-10+ years)	• Stage 0: Preparation prior to headship • Stage 1: Entry and encounter (months 0-3) • Stage 2: Taking hold (months 3-12) • Stage 3: Reshaping (year 2) • Stage 4: Refinement (years 3-4) • Stage 5: Consolidation (years 5-7) • Stage 6: Plateau (years 8+)

Career theory as a reciprocal concept. Career stage theories can be limited by a linear view of the principal's career decisions (Hart, 1991). In contrast to career stage perspectives, some research has focused on internal and external factors that influence a principal's career decisions. These researchers view the career decisions of principals as influenced by a variety of factors that might or might not be bound by a timeline or discrete stage.

One of the early researchers in principal career theory was Greenfield (1983). More than 30 years ago, he began studying the career decisions of educators through a qualitative lens. Drawing from the work of Schein (1978), Greenfield relied heavily upon the assumption that the career decisions of educators were based upon the "interplay among self, work, and nonwork elements" (p. 9). He argued that it was the complex interplay of these factors, not the isolated existence of these factors, which led to career decisions and work behavior. Greenfield referred to this as acknowledgement of the total "lifespace" of an educator (p. 19).

In Crow's (1992) study that suggested a need for a principal career theory, he indicated a preference for combining objective and subjective factors as considerations for why and when principals change positions. Objective factors included items similar to those considered in career stage theory, such as directionality of position and timeline. However, subjective factors included a variety of other considerations. Some subjective factors were job duties, job satisfaction, role identity, principal characteristics, school characteristics, and incentives and disincentives as perceived by the principal. Crow's objective and subjective factors correlate loosely to the self and work elements noted by Greenfield (1983).

Stevenson (2006) also noted the importance of external and internal realities that influenced the career decisions of school leaders, particularly the multifaceted pressures exerted upon principals. These pressures included a pressure for productivity in relation to human

capital, a pressure for social cohesion in an environment of diversity, and a pressure for inclusion in a culture of social isolation. He also accounted for the tensions experienced by school leaders, particularly the tensions of accountability, limited resources, uncertainty, and job complexity. He envisioned a reciprocal framework design in which pressures and tensions from all sides influenced an educator's career decisions at any time throughout the career. Stevenson's visual depiction of tensions and pressures was similar to the visual depiction in Greenfield's (1983) work, in which factors from many angles influenced a principal's career path.

Farley-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch (2012) proposed a similar framework of "pushes" and "pulls" (p. 801). Pushes were factors within the system that encouraged an administrator to leave, and they were primarily negative. Pulls were factors outside of the system that encouraged an administrator to leave, as in being "pulled away" from their current school, and they were primarily positive. Factors were categorized as personal, behavior, or environmental and included items such as family relationships, working relationships, and career opportunities.

Concept map. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 is a visual representation of the factors associated with departure decisions. The factors are classified into three categories that are based upon but not limited to those proposed by Greenfield (1983) and Farley-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch. (2012). Personal factors are within the control or realm of influence of the principal, and they include family needs and career aspirations. Institutional factors are within the control or realm of influence of the school, and they include diversity of roles, school academic performance, and salary. Environmental factors include those outside of the control of either the principal or the school district. They include community expectations, isolation, legislative mandates, and school poverty rate.

As noted by Greenfield (1983), the interplay among these factors is important. The arrows between factors represent a situation in which factors influence each other in powerful ways that would not be accomplished separately. For instance, if the environmental factor of high expectations for community involvement results in the principal being away from home many nights each week, that could impact the personal factor of family needs.

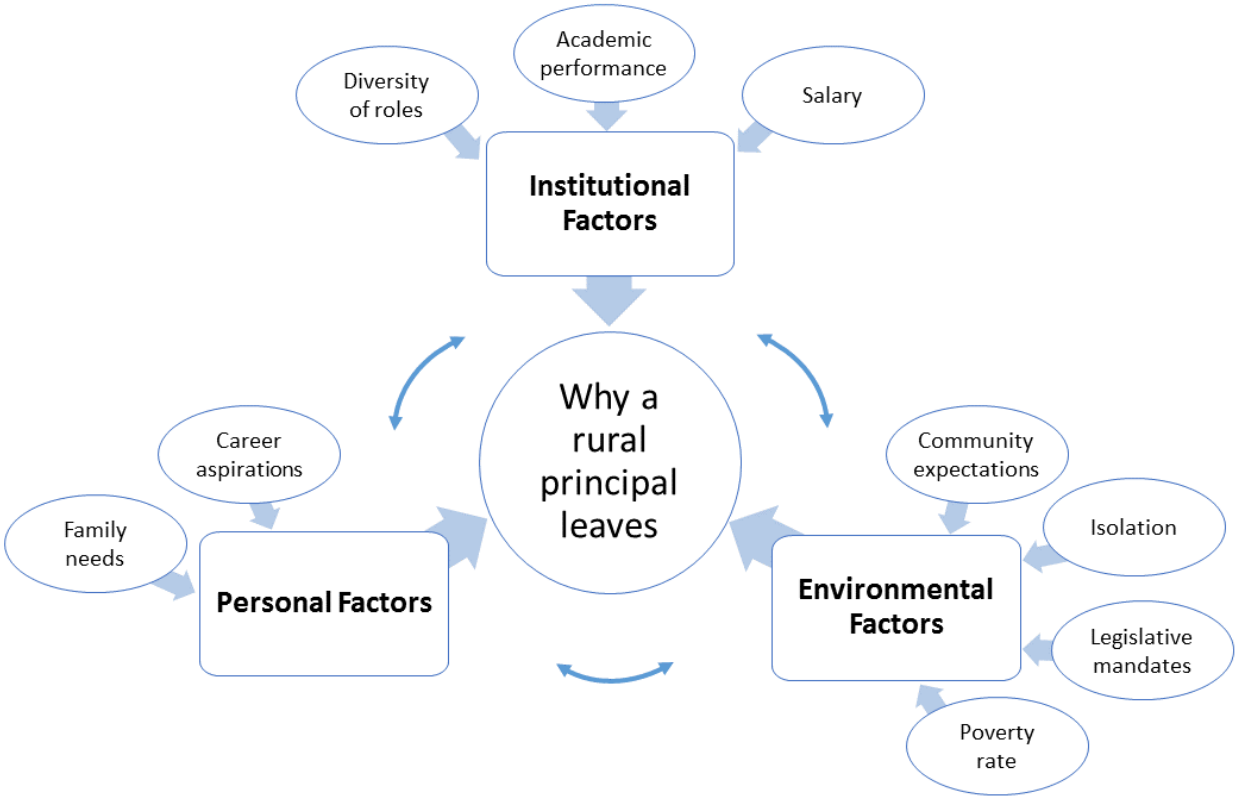

Figure 1. Initial concept map: Why a rural principal leaves. This figure illustrates the interplay of various factors that might impact a rural principal's decision to leave his or her school.

Personal Factors Related to Turnover

Several studies (Baker et al., 2010; Battle, 2010; Gates et al., 2006; Papa, 2007; Tekleselassie & Villarreal III, 2011) have been conducted that attempted to link demographic variables with higher or lower rates of turnover. Some of those studies have presented

conflicting evidence regarding demographic factors and principal turnover. For instance, Gates et al. (2006) studied principals in Illinois and Colorado during the years 1987-1988 and 2000-2001 using a multinomial logit model, and they found that female principals were slightly more likely to leave. In contrast, Tekleselassie and Villarreal III (2011), who used a logistics regression model to conduct the first large-scale study of principals from across the United States from 2003 to 2004, found that female principals were more likely to stay. Sun and Ni (2016) also found that female principals were more likely to stay. This conflicting evidence from demographic variables leads to a consideration of other personal factors that might be related to turnover.

Family needs. Educational leaders in any context must balance a variety of job demands with the needs of their families. In a qualitative study of 62 new principals in Texas, a common theme arose involving guilt over not being present at family events or milestones (Shoho & Barnett, 2010). In fact, older new principals in the study expressed amazement that their younger counterparts were able to balance the needs of their children, spouses, and work. The researchers emphasized this disconnect between work and family when they declared, "It became readily apparent that being single and having no kids made it easier for new principals to fully engage in their job" (p. 578).

This tension between work and home can be amplified for principals in rural contexts, which often require long work hours. This was clarified in a study by Ewington et al. (2008). In a mixed-methods exploration of 131 principals in Australia that compared small-school principals in rural contexts to other principals, small-school principals in rural contexts worked an average of 58.56 hours per week, the highest average of any group in the study. One principal explained how this was detrimental to his or her family by saying, "To do this has required 50-60

hour weeks, much to the disappointment of my supportive young family" (Ewington et al., 2008, p. 551).

Research from Starr and White (2008) affirmed that rural principals sacrifice family time to respond to the wide-ranging needs of their schools, and they described these increased work hours as "work intensification" when comparing the expectations of rural principals to those in other contexts (p. 10). They interviewed 76 rural principals, conducted observations, and compiled surveys. In defense of their assertion that "workload pressures also steal time from family life" (p. 4), they shared a comment from one principal who said, "I…work every night of the week. You work most Sundays…You can't take a day off" (p. 4).

In a study of rural high school principals in the United States, one respondent questioned his decision to work at a rural school because of the demands it placed upon him and his family. He said, "I really believe that at a bigger school I really wouldn't have to do everything that I have to do here. Then maybe there would be some time for family and me" (Morford, 2002, p. 12).

Career aspirations. The Shoho and Barnett (2010) study of 62 new principals indicated that new principals did not intend to stay in the principalship beyond five to 10 years. Specifically, new principals desired a central office administrative position, particularly curriculum director or personnel director. Some also expressed interest in higher education or positions outside of education. Even though respondents were new principals who had never before experienced the role of principal, they were already anticipating an early exit from their role. They seemed to view the principalship as a stepping stone.

In a qualitative study involving 426 principals who had served in rural settings in Australia, some of the highest ranked categories for the reasons they assumed a rural

principalship were labeled *career* and *promotion*. Illustrative statements for those categories included "wanted my own substantive principalship—would have gone anywhere to achieve this" (Halsey & Drummond, 2014, p. 71) and "to step up to another position" (Halsey & Drummond, 2014, p. 71). In another qualitative study about rural educational leaders in Australia, one respondent described her awareness of increased leadership opportunities in a rural context when she said, "If you want to climb the ladder, get further up in your work, than [sic] this is the place to do it" (Graham, Paterson, & Miller, 2008, p. 5). These principals, too, seemed to view a rural principalship as a career entry point or stepping stone.

This tendency to abandon the rural principalship in favor of a different position was the source of intense emotion for some respondents (Halsey & Drummond, 2014). One respondent had seen so many rural principals leave his school that he decided to become a rural principal. He explained his reasons for doing so in this way:

> I have a passion and commitment to rural education and I too often see rural schools without sustained contributions from leaders. They are a whistle stop for ambitious people who often practice seagull leadership. Fly in, squawk a lot, put crap about and fly away quickly…Leadership of country schools should be about the needs of the community and their young people and not the needs of the upwardly mobile professional (Halsey & Drummond, 2014, p. 71).

Institutional Factors Related to Turnover

Many factors that influence principal departure decisions are outside of the control of the principal and reside at the school level. These factors include school academic performance, diversity of roles, and salary (Akiba & Reichardt, 2004; Branch et al., 2013; DeAngelis & White,

2011; Loeb et al., 2010; Morford, 2002; Papa, 2007; Pijanowski & Brady, 2009; Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008; Tekleselassie & Villarreal III, 2011).

School academic performance. Low-achieving schools have been linked to higher principal turnover rates. Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) studied 7,420 Texas principals between the years 1995 and 2001. The number of new principals leading low-achieving schools was approximately 40% higher than the number of new principals leading high achieving schools. For principals with six or more years of tenure at their school, the statistics were reversed and magnified. The number of stable principals, defined as those who had been in the same school for all six years of the study, was approximately 50% higher in high achieving schools than in low-achieving schools.

DeAngelis and White (2011) tracked the career paths of 7,075 Illinois principals from 2000 to 2008. They found that 80.3% of schools in the highest-performing quartile on a state assessment retained their principal, while only 73.5% of schools in the lowest quartile retained their principal. Annual Yearly Progress status, an annual designation otherwise known as AYP that is given to schools based on standardized assessment data, was also correlated with principal turnover. Schools that made AYP had an average turnover rate of 20.9%, while schools that did not make AYP had an average turnover rate of 24.7%.

Similar trends were affirmed by Loeb, Kalogrides, and Horng (2010) in their Miami schools study, in which the lowest-achieving schools had principals with an average tenure of 2.2 years while the highest-achieving schools had principals with an average tenure of 3.6 years. In addition, when principals were surveyed about the qualities they most prefer in a school, the lowest-ranked factor out of 15 options was *A "failing" school in need of reform*. The

researchers suggested this preference resulted in principal requests for transfers away from low-achieving schools to high-achieving schools.

Diversity of roles. Rural principals assume a variety of roles within their districts. Preston et al. (2013) expounded upon this reality in their meta-analysis regarding the challenges faced by principals in rural settings. Their work spanned the United States, Canada, and Australia between the years 2003 and 2013. They discovered several themes in their qualitative document analysis, one of which was that rural principals must assume a multitude of roles with little administrative support. For instance, whereas larger districts have resources or personnel to help with discipline, curriculum, or human resources management, the rural principal has no one with whom to share or delegate those tasks. Preston et al. (2013) summarized this well when they wrote, "As compared to urban principals, rural principals metaphorically wear many more dynamic hats" (Diverse Roles and Retention of Principals section, para. 1).

Role diversity was also a source of frustration for rural principals interviewed by Starr and White (2008), who referred to role diversity as "escalating role multiplicity" (p. 3) or "role plurality" (p. 6). A common theme arose during interviews of principals struggling to find time for instruction, leadership, and the administrative tasks required by legislation. The researchers concluded, "Role complexity, the multi-directional and multi-focused demands, and the worries they create are difficult challenges" (p. 6).

Additional research clarifies the nature of those roles for rural principals in the United States. In a qualitative, semi-structured interview study of 10 rural high school principals, eight of them expressed worry about unreasonable workload due to wide-ranging responsibilities (Morford, 2002). The varying roles of those 10 principals included "instructional leader, dean of students, personnel director, head of custodial staff, curriculum director, personal counselor,

head of the secretarial staff, transportation director, cafeteria director, athletic director, and public relations director" (p. 10). Likewise, in a qualitative study in which rural superintendents were interviewed about hiring principals, one superintendent said that rural principals "will have to do things that aren't in the principal's job description…cut the lawns, plant flowers, help with the district banquet, help out with graduation…all in the same day!" (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009, p. 6).

Salary. Higher salary was associated with lower rates of principal turnover in several studies (Akiba & Reichardt, 2004; Papa, 2007; Tekleselassie & Villarreal III, 2011). Akiba and Reichardt (2004) studied 714 elementary principals and assistant principals in Colorado between 1999 and 2001. Using the results of multiple logistic regression analysis, salary difference between the old and new positions was significant at the .05 level in determining whether or not female principals would leave. For male principals the significance factor was .10, which the researchers also found to be important.

New York State principals hired between 1991 and 1997 were the participants in a multivariate analysis study conducted by Papa (2007). The mean starting salary for principals who stayed in their school was $84,700, and the ending salary in that same school was $88,300. This contrasted with the mean salaries for principals who left their schools for a position in another district. For those principals, their starting salary was $77,800, and the salary in their new school was $87,100, which represented a gain of almost $10,000. Thus, turnover was fiscally advantageous to principals whose original schools offered low salaries.

Using estimated coefficients, Papa (2007) also attempted to predict the ability of salary to retain principals. The mean salary for principals in his study who transferred to schools outside of their district was $84,000. Schools that compensated principals at a rate one standard

deviation below the mean, or $68,000, had a 76.3% likelihood of retaining their principal. Schools that compensated principals at one standard deviation above the mean, or $100,000, had a 97.5% likelihood of retaining their principal.

Tekleselassie and Villarreal III (2011) used nationwide data from the United States 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey to conduct a three-level generalized multilevel model study of factors associated with principal turnover. Salary was highly significant at the .005 level for determining a principal's departure intentions. For every $10,000 salary increase, principals reduced their departure intentions by a factor of .88 times, even when accounting for other variables.

Salary was also viewed by superintendents as a powerful way to attract potential principal candidates to their schools. In an Arkansas survey, superintendents' perceptions were that *raise the level of compensation to match the responsibilities of the position* was the best way to attract good principal candidates, scoring 4.2 out of 5 points (Pijanowski et al., 2009).

No nationwide data exists about the salary rates of rural principals compared to principals in other groups. However, rural teachers earn significantly less than their counterparts, with an average salary of $52,812 compared to $66,313 for suburban teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012b).

Environmental Factors Related to Turnover

In addition to school-level factors beyond the control of the principal, outside pressures can contribute to a principal's decision to leave his or her school. Macbeath (2009) credited environmental factors such as legislative changes with the reluctance of many people to enter the school administration profession, even once they have received the credentials to do so.

Macbeath described this reluctance as a "wish to remain as bridesmaids but never the bride" (p. 407).

School poverty rate. In their study of Miami schools, Loeb, Kalogrides, and Horng (2010) used a multivariate approach to analyze principal turnover between 2003 and 2009. In studying 552 principals over the six-year period of the study, they found that schools with the highest poverty levels, measured by the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, was highly significant at the .01 level when correlated negatively with *Years principal current school*. As poverty increased, principal longevity decreased.

Similarly, Gates et al. (2006), who used a multinomial logit modeling approach for principals in North Carolina, found statistically significant levels of correlation between low county wealth rank and high principal turnover, although the effect size was small.

In their study of Illinois principals, DeAngelis and White (2011) also found school poverty rate to be linked with principal turnover. Principals tended to move to schools with lower proportions of low-income students. This was especially true for principals in Chicago who moved to a school outside of their original school district. Those principals moved from schools with an average low-income rate of 87.5% to schools with an average low-income rate of 42.9%, a difference that was statistically significant at the .01 level.

Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) provided an interesting exploration between principal effectiveness as measured by student achievement gains, principal tenure as measured by persistence beyond the third year, and school poverty rate. High-poverty schools were at greater risk of losing high-quality principals. Of high quality principals, 76% remained in low-poverty schools remained after the third year. Only 67% of high-quality principals in high-poverty schools remained after the third year.

Community expectations. The research of Preston et al. (2013) investigated the theme of high community expectations as a challenge to rural leadership. They noted that parent and community expectations of a rural principal were "exceedingly high" (Personal History and Community Focus section, para. 2), and the actions and lifestyle of a rural principal were highly scrutinized by community members.

This expectation, like other aspects of rural school leadership, crosses cultural lines. In a study of rural principals in Australia, lack of privacy was one of the most common themes of dislikes about the rural principalship. Principals described themselves as "very public property" (Lock et al., 2012, p. 70) and "being on call to the community 24 hours a day" (Lock et al., 2012, p. 70).

In another Australian study (Ewington et al., 2008), small-school principals rated the following statement as an average of 4.23 on a 5-point scale, which was statistically significant at the .05 level: *I experience tensions between the need to be present at my school and the need to participate outside school* (p. 557). Principals from larger schools ranked that statement much lower, with an average of 3.67. One of the principals in the study described this frustration by indicating that there was "lack of support in the community and parents rely on the school to provide support for issues unrelated to the role of the school" (p. 552).

Isolation. While all principals might experience occasional feelings of professional isolation, rural principals experience it as a daily reality (Lock et al., 2012). They are usually the only principal in their school and sometimes their entire district. In their interviews with principals in rural Australia, Lock et al. (2012) found that one of the reasons people considered leaving the rural principalship was professional isolation. Principals expressed that while they

attempted to shield their staff members from negative experiences or stress, the principals did not have anyone who offered the same protection or support to them.

A similar theme arose during the work of Graham et al. (2008), who participated in the Bush Tracks research project and presented their findings at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. As the research team interviewed educational leaders in rural Australia, one of the challenges discussed by respondents was personal and professional isolation "which elicited feelings of vulnerability and of high accountability" (p. 7). Because rural principals had no one with whom to share their responsibilities, they bore the full weight of any crisis, need, or initiative.

In addition to professional isolation, geographic isolation is a challenge faced by rural administrators. In a survey of Midwestern rural superintendents, Wood, Finch, and Mirecki (2013) found geographic isolation to be among the top-rated challenges to the recruitment and retention of rural principals. On the open-ended comment portion of the survey, superintendents provided data that confirmed this rating, using phrases such as *location remote* when asked to discuss challenges to the retention of rural principals (Challenges to Retention section, para. 3). This was especially true for rural districts that were not near an urban area.

A rural principal interviewed by Morford (2002) summarized the isolation well when she said, "In a rural community you are out there, and you are on your own!" (p. 6)

Legislative mandates. All educators experience the tension of implementing new educational mandates that alter their practice. In rural contexts, legislative changes can be even more difficult for leaders to navigate. For instance, recent school accountability measures that emphasize standardized test scores can conflict dramatically with the historically-rooted values of rural communities that thrive on cultural traditions, social capital, and being surrounded with

people of like views (Preston et al., 2013). Simply put, stakeholders in rural contexts might not be as willing to accept the importance of standardized test scores because success on those tests often translates into an exodus from rural settings (Blanton & Harmon, 2005).

Legislative mandates are uniformly applied to all contexts, without consideration for the lack of resources in rural locations. Starr and White (2008) summarized this when they wrote,

> Standardized compliance requirements issued at the federal, state, or district levels involve the same responses from all schools irrespective of size or location. Principals of larger schools have greater capacity to delegate and share management tasks, but this is a luxury not afforded to their small rural counterparts (p. 3).

Thus, many rural principals must shoulder alone the increasing requirements of school reform legislation.

Although not directly related to turnover, a study by Reames, Kochan, and Zhu (2014) indicated that the most important reason principals in Alabama chose to retire was "external mandates from state, national, or other" (p. 52). This result was markedly different from a similar survey conducted 15 years previously, in which the top reason for retirement was to take another position. Similarly, a study of teacher leaders who refused to become principals indicated that their top reason for eschewing the principalship was "testing/accountability pressures too great" (Hewitt, Denny, & Pijanowski, 2011, p. 17).

Multisite Case Studies

Case studies are a detailed investigation of bounded system. Yin (2014), who has published extensively on the use of case studies in research, noted the increasing use of case studies in recent years. An analysis of published books since 1980 showed that the term *case*

study has steadily increased while the terms *survey research*, *experimental designs*, and *random assignment* have declined or plateaued in usage.

Multisite case studies collect and analyze data from two or more cases. They can also be referred to as multicase studies, multiple case studies, cross-case studies, comparative case studies, or collective case studies (Merriam, 2009). Multisite case studies provide data from several perspectives, thereby strengthening the ability of the reader to apply the findings to their own context. The greater the number of cases in a study, the "more compelling an interpretation is likely to be" (Merriam, 2009, p. 49).

Multisite case studies began to emerge in educational research in the 1970s with the intent to influence educational policy and provide detailed descriptions of educational realities (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Seashore Louis, 1982). One of the first federally-funded educational multisite case studies was the Rural Experimental Schools Study, in which 10 schools were studied in-depth for three years. The results provided rich descriptions of the change process in rural schools (Herriott & Firestone, 1983).

Since that time, multisite case studies have increased in usage. In fact, case studies are becoming so common that some researchers are concerned that case study research, in its attempt to inform policy, has departed from its original intention of highlighting the particular and has instead resorted to seeking the common (Simons, 1996).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a research tool that can be used during multisite case studies. Semi-structured interviews are a balance between highly structured interviews, in which the wording and order of questions is predetermined, and unstructured interviews, in which questions are open-ended and exploratory. Semi-structured interviews utilize an interview guide

of research questions that can be used flexibly as the situation warrants (Merriam, 2009). A semi-structured process is helpful in that it allows the researcher to re-word questions in the face of misunderstanding, pursue additional questioning about a topic that has not been discussed in depth, or explore information that arises spontaneously during the interview (Patten, 2014).

By nature of the interview process, semi-structured interviews provide data about a respondent's perception of reality, not necessarily reality itself. For instance, no matter how many respondents say the wall is green, the wall might actually be blue (Diefenbach, 2009). Patten (2014) acknowledged this distinction when she wrote, "To many quantitative empiricists, *perception* is important but may not be as important as reality. To most qualitative researchers, however, objective factual reality is not as interesting or informative as participants' perceptions" (p. 165).

The focus on perception instead of observed reality does not weaken the data provided by interviews. On the contrary, semi-structured interviews seek respondent perspectives because "the qualitative research tradition produces an interpretation of reality that is useful in understanding the human condition" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 27). Simply put, whether or not perceptions align with observed reality, human perceptions influence behavior.

Chapter III: Procedures and Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the personal, institutional, and environmental factors that influenced a principal's decision to leave his or her school. In contrast to some of the current quantitative research on principal turnover that relies on a series of isolated variables, this study sought to acknowledge principals as complex individuals who made decisions to leave a school after much thought and based upon a variety of interwoven factors.

This chapter is divided into 11 sections: Research Method and Design, Research Questions, Researcher Positionality, Setting, Respondent Selection, Instrumentation and Measures, Field Tests, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Limitations and Delimitations, and Ethical Considerations.

Research Method and Design

This research stemmed from a pragmatic framework. Pragmatic research focuses on real-world practice, solutions to problems, and consequences of actions (Creswell, 2014). Pragmatic researchers draw from a variety of approaches to fit the needs of their current research.

In the spirit of pragmatism, this study imparted itself to a case study design. Case studies are deep analyses of bounded systems. Merriam (2009) suggested that a system is bounded if there is a finite number of people who could be interviewed; unbounded systems, in contrast, have no practical or theoretical limits. In the context of this study, the number of rural Minnesota principals who left their school in the past year was finite.

Case studies are also appropriate for this research because they fit well with practical problems, like rural principal turnover. Due to the in-depth nature of case studies, they provide

rich information that can induce new discoveries or provide confirmation of previous understandings about real-world problems (Merriam, 2009).

This research was further defined by what Merriam (2009) referred to as a *multisite case study*. Instead of exploring a single case, which would be one rural principal's experience, this study explored six cases. The collective information from all cases was combined, analyzed for themes and patterns, and presented as thick descriptions of human experience.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the question, "Why do elementary principals in rural Minnesota leave their schools?" Secondary questions included the following:

1. How did personal factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota?
2. How did institutional factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota?
3. How did environmental factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota?

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality is an integral part of the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2014). As an acting principal in a rural Minnesota school, the researcher had a vested interest in understanding the factors that influence the career transitions of colleagues. The researcher had also experienced firsthand the challenges that rapid leadership turnover can present to schools, having worked as a teacher in high-poverty schools in which rapid principal turnover was considered normal and having accepted a principal position in which the previous six years were marked by a new principal each year.

In this study, the researcher was mindful of researcher positionality by engaging in *epoche,* which is an intentional effort to refrain from judgment (Merriam, 2009). Other researchers refer to this as *bracketing*, or attempting to approach the case as though the researcher does not have any prior knowledge and is studying this concept for the first time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Setting

The setting for this study was public elementary schools in rural Minnesota. As such, the researcher traveled to rural Minnesota school districts or a neutral setting requested by the respondent. Some interviews occurred during the annual conference of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association, held every February. All interviews were face-to-face.

This setting was purposefully selected because rural Minnesota is a context that has not been studied in existing research about principal turnover and because of the unique challenges associated with school leadership in a rural setting. This study adds to the current body of knowledge by providing perspective from a unique geographic location.

Respondent Selection

The sample included elementary principals in rural Minnesota who left their position within the past year. Elementary principals were defined as those who served in schools with students ages birth to Grade 6, since Grade 7 is when students become eligible for official athletics through the Minnesota State High School League. Given the broad scope of responsibilities of many rural principals, some school leaders served additional duties or grade levels. A list of potential respondents was secured through the Minnesota Elementary School

Principals' Association; a letter of permission from the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association is included in Appendix A.

This study utilized stratified purposive sampling, which is a sampling strategy often used in qualitative research (Orcher, 2014). From the total sample of all elementary principals in Minnesota, respondents met the following criteria: They willingly left a principal position within the previous 12 months, and their previous school was classified with a rural census locale code.

The researcher collected data from a varied sample by starting with the largest pool possible and carefully selecting respondents. The initial list received from the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association contained 839 names. This list was narrowed to 163 names when limited to those who answered affirmatively or left blank the following question, which is included on the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association annual membership form, "Have you or will you change schools for the upcoming year?"

The list was further reduced to 130 by eliminating the names of those who served in administrative positions other than principal. For each of those 130 names, the researcher determined the accompanying school district's census code using the National Center for Education Statistics most recent list of codes. By limiting the list to those principals who left a school that had a census locale code of 41, 42, or 43, the final list of potential respondents was 33. The target number of respondents was six.

The first goal in sample selection process was to represent various geographic regions of the state, as defined by the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (Minnesota Association of School Administrators, 2015). Of the six respondents, two came from Regions 1-3 in the southern part of the state, two came from Regions 4-6 in the central part of the state, and two came from Regions 7-8 in the northern part of the state.

The second goal in the sample selection process was to represent the principal demographic characteristic of gender. Of the two respondents in each region, one was male and one was female. Gender was chosen as a criteria in sample selection because of its presence in existing research about school leader careers.

Once the sample was divided into geographic regions and gender, a random number generation program was used to select one person from each category (male-northern, female-northern, male-central, female-central, male-southern, female-southern).

Instrumentation and Measures

This study utilized a semi-structured interview approach that allowed flexibility in wording of questions and flow of the interview (Merriam, 2009). Interviews began with the following introductory protocol, taken directly from Shaw (M. Shaw, personal communication, July 15, 2015):

- Introduce the researcher and sponsoring university
- Verify informed consent
- Review research goals
- Remind respondent of the reason for their selection
- Estimate length of time for the interview
- Assure confidentiality
- Request permission to record.

Field Tests

Interview questions were field-tested with three educational professionals who were current professors of education at a university, and one of whom was also an acting superintendent of schools. Questions were sent to these individuals via e-mail, and they

provided multiple rounds of feedback about number of questions, wording of questions, and potential questions to add or delete. Questions were re-drafted three times in this process. For instance, the question, "What do you know about the reasons other principals left a rural school?" was discarded in favor of a more direct question.

The final draft of questions was field-tested in a mock interview process with two acting principals who were not respondents in the study. The purpose of these field tests was to gauge potential length of the interview and to ensure that interview questions produced information pertinent to the research objectives.

Not all of the questions produced helpful information. One of the original questions was, "How would you compare the job of a rural principal today versus 20 years ago?" Principals who participated in the field test responded with information about changing from managers to instructional leaders, but that change is true for principals in any context, not just rural settings. That question was eliminated. In contrast, the theme of isolation spontaneously arose during field tests, resulting in the reinstatement of an interview question from the original list that asked how rural principals connect with people outside of the rural community.

The number of questions was intentional. The original list of questions, which was lengthy, was shortened in the interest of keeping interviews to a manageable time frame. In an attempt to limit the interview to an hour, questions were limited to two per research objective, with an additional three questions to open and close the interview. Field tests indicated that it took approximately 40 minutes to answer all the questions.

The order of questions was also intentional, although flexibility in the order of questions was allowed during the interview process. The interview began by discussing institutional factors, which were less connected to the principal and safer to discuss. The most challenging

questions were in the middle of the interview, when the principal explored personal factors that might have led to his or her departure. Special care was taken during this portion of the interview to remain nonjudgmental and respectful (Merriam, 2009). The interview ended with another set of more comfortable questions, this time focused on environmental factors.

Interview questions for each research objective are listed in Table 2 and are also included in Appendix B. After the initial interviews with respondents, two questions were modified based on feedback. These questions are noted in italics in Table 2. The question, "What was your family's perception of your work as a rural principal?" was changed to, "How was your family impacted by your work as a rural principal?" This change eliminated conversations about family pride regarding the nobility of the education profession and redirected responses to the potential connection between family needs and a principal's departure decision. The question, "If I were to give you a magic wand and you could have changed anything about your rural school, what would it be?" sometimes produced responses about the school that did not really impact a principal's decision to leave, including a principal's personal reflections about his or her own performance. That question was changed to or coupled with, "What would your rural school have had to do to get you to stay?"

Table 2

Interview Questions

Research Objective	Subcategory or Theme	Question
Opening		• Tell me a little about why you left your previous school.
Explore institutional factors that led to a principal's departure decision	School academic performance, workload, and salary	• How would you describe your workload at your rural school? (duties, roles, hours per week) • How would you describe the salary and benefits package at your rural school?
Explore personal factors that led to a principal's departure decision	Family needs and career aspirations	• What first motivated you to become a principal at a rural school? Has that reality changed? If so, how? • What was your family's perception of your work as a rural principal? *How was your family impacted by your work as a rural principal?*
Explore environmental factors that led to a principal's departure decision	School poverty rate, community expectations, isolation, legislative mandates, and increased job complexity	• What were the community's expectations of you? (visibility at events, involvement in civic organizations, go-to person for problems of any kind) • How did you connect, both personally and professionally, with people outside of your rural community?
Closing		• If I were to give you a magic wand and you could have changed anything about your rural school, what would it be? *What would your rural school have had to do to get you to stay?* • Do you have anything to add that I did not ask?

Data Collection

Potential respondents were contacted by phone according to the phone number listed on their school websites. The conversation followed the phone script that is included in Appendix C. Respondents were informed of purpose of the study and their position to provide unique information that could be helpful to other rural principals or school districts. Confidentiality was

assured and the process for protecting respondents was explained, including the utilization of a confidential transcription service, the deletion of any personally identifiable information, and the storage of data on a password-protected computer.

If the researcher was not able to speak directly to the principal, a voice message was left, and a copy of the phone script was sent to the respondent through e-mail. All respondents responded promptly and affirmatively. The informed consent letter, included in Appendix D, was e-mailed to all respondents and collected before the interview began.

Interviews took place at a location convenient to and comfortable for the respondent. A natural connecting place was the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association conference in February 2016. For respondents who did not attend the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association conference, the researcher drove to conduct the interview at a location of their choice.

As soon as possible after each interview, the researcher wrote a memo to record initial impressions of any emerging relationships or patterns in relation to the research questions. From these memos, patterns began to give rise to additional questions, including questions about school board relationships, a topic which spontaneously arose during the first two interviews, and potential analogies or metaphors. For instance, several respondents used the word "layers" when describing the interplay of factors that influenced their decision to leave their school. After hearing that word several times, the researcher asked future respondents if "layers" adequately described the way factors interacted in their decision-making process or if there was a better description.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed from recordings through a confidential online transcription service. Because of the ability of the respondent to choose an interview location, one of the six interviews had significant background noise and was unable to be transcribed by the online service. The researcher personally transcribed that interview through a detailed process, requiring at least one hour of work for every ten minutes of audio, and immediately submitted both the audio recording and written transcript to the respondent to review for accuracy.

Once all interviews were transcribed, the researcher read through the transcripts in their entirety and compared them with the recordings to ensure accuracy. Due to the specific nature of education-related language, several changes were made to the transcripts regarding education acronyms. Other edits were things such as changing "rolled up a teacher evaluation" to "wrote up a teacher evaluation" or changing "fast practice" to "past practice" when discussing the way things had always been done in a school.

The researcher also removed any personally identifiable information, including place and people names. In addition, in order to fully protect the privacy of respondents, the researcher altered any specific information about family. For instance, if a respondent described in detail the illness of a family member that prompted a desire to move closer to home, all specifics about the name of the illness, the location of treatment, and the relationship of the family member to the respondent were replaced with the general description *illness of family member*. After all transcripts had been reviewed for accuracy and protected against the provision of personally identifiable information, all respondents received a copy of the transcript and recording to check for accuracy. No respondents noted any discrepancies or changes.

Once the accuracy of all transcripts was verified, the researcher read through all transcripts two times to gather a sense of the entirety of the data set. These readings were meant to orient the researcher to the data and reaffirm alignment between the data and the research questions.

The researcher then began reading transcripts for the purpose of building and informing the coding system. This initial coding process is sometimes referred to as *open coding*, during which the researcher makes notes next to any unit of information that might be helpful in answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009). During the initial open coding readings of transcripts, the researcher highlighted any information that seemed to be a reason the principal left his or her school. Then the researcher read through all transcripts two more times and began to label highlighted areas with initial codes. The names of initial codes were drawn from the concept map or the respondents' own language.

During this process, the researcher would sometimes find an additional statement that should be highlighted or, upon further reflection, one that was originally highlighted but should not have been. This most often happened when respondents discussed the admirable qualities of their new school, which sometimes led to discussions about difficulties in their previous school but sometimes did not. When in doubt, the researcher determined whether or not a statement should be highlighted by asking the question, "Is this really a reason the respondent left his or her school?"

The initial code list had 17 codes. The next step in the coding process was to group codes together, sometimes referred to as *analytical coding*. While open coding is descriptive in nature, analytical coding requires more reflection and interpretation. Analytical coding was an iterative process that required multiple analyses of each transcript so as to narrow the initial list

of codes, refine the code names to reflect accurately the content of each category, and arrive at codes that occurred across multiple transcripts (Merriam, 2009).

During the analytical coding process, each transcript was read at least four times. The researcher created a code book, which included the name and definition of each code, and received feedback from an independent analyst about alignment between the final codes and the research question. The final list included 12 codes.

After the researcher finalized codes, all interviews were also coded by an independent analyst to promote credibility and transferability. The independent analyst reviewed the code book, practiced coding the bracketing interview, and independently coded all six interviews. The researcher and independent analyst met in person and had phone conversations several times during this process to ensure thorough understanding of all codes and potential situations in which to use them. After multiple conversations, one of which included the addition of a new code, the coding agreement between researcher and independent analyst was 95.6%. The list of codes used by the researcher and independent analyst is presented in Appendix E.

Once all data was coded, the researcher analyzed codes across all interviews to identify themes. A code was determined to be a theme if it occurred in four of the six interviews. This analysis produced seven themes, which are described in detail in the next chapter.

To promote transferability and credibility, the researcher contacted respondents to verify the accuracy of codes used in their interview. Respondents were also invited to provide feedback on the definitions of codes and potential themes. No respondent requested any changes to the codes, code definitions, or themes.

Throughout the data analysis process, an audit trail was maintained. After each interaction with the data, the researcher logged the date and a summary of the work. This summary included but was not be limited to coding categories and how they changed.

Limitations and Delimitations

The purpose of this study was not to present widely generalizable findings. Instead, the researcher intended to share the experiences of rural Minnesota principals so as to add their voices to the collective conversation about principal turnover. As such, limitations for this study include information about which readers should be aware as they determine application of findings.

One area of limitation was the sample, which was limited to principals whom the researcher could locate through data gathered by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association. It was also limited to elementary principals, which was a practical limitation because of the presence of a single researcher. A larger research team could broaden the scope of this research to other levels of school leadership. Finally, the sample was limited in that it only included elementary principals who left a rural Minnesota school within the past year. Although additional data would be available from principals who left a rural setting more than a year ago, the sample was limited to recent experiences in the hope of minimizing any distortion of memory due to the passage of time.

Some respondents could have experienced self-reporting bias, which is a limitation inherent in all research. This could have, for instance, concealed if the principal's departure was viewed as a positive or negative event from the perspective of the school district. The researcher attempted to mitigate this limitation by ensuring confidentiality and explaining the care taken to avoid the inadvertent provision of identifiers, and respondents seemed comfortable sharing

potentially negative information. An example of this was Henry's interview. When the researcher asked Henry for one thing he could have changed about his previous school, he did not share information about the school. He responded with self-reflection about his own performance and said, "I drove a wedge, I think, unintentionally." These honest and potentially self-incriminating responses indicated that respondents were willing to share even negative information as openly as possible.

Time constraints of interviews were a necessary reality that might have limited the exploration of certain topics. Field tests that resulted in a concise list of only the most essential questions helped overcome this limitation, and most principals did not have any additional information at the end of the interview when asked, "Is there anything else I didn't ask or that you would like to add?"

Finally, as noted by Hallinger and Heck (1998), any analysis of the principalship is an attempt to study something that is continuously shifting. The current focus on education in legislation and popular media results in a constant changing of the roles, responsibilities, and experiences of educational leaders. While the information in this study is current as of the time of writing, future changes in national climate or legislative culture could dramatically impact the reasons that rural principals choose to leave their schools. This study was a snapshot of a limited point in time and provides valuable insights into the current conditions surrounding the departure decisions of rural principals, but its applicability in a future time of altered climate should be cautiously considered.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research brings with it a unique set of ethical considerations (Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness of data, respondent protection, and awareness of researcher positionality were priorities in this study.

Trustworthiness of data. The goal of this research was not to present universally generalizable findings, which would have necessitated a focus on validity and reliability. As a qualitative study, it instead promoted trustworthiness of data through transferability and credibility. This allows readers to decide if and how to apply their learning from this study into their own contexts. Transferability and credibility were enhanced through the following methods:

- Member checks (all respondents read and responded to initial findings)
- Researcher self-reflection (self-disclosed personal biases and attempted to mitigate them)
- Audit trail (maintained accurate and detailed notes about processes) (Merriam, 2009).

Respondent protection. Another aspect of ethical qualitative research is respondent protection. In a study with small sample sizes and specific populations, special attention must be given to the provision of too much demographic information that could allow indirect identity of respondents.

While this study was not able to assure anonymity, it did assure confidentiality. Digital audio recordings were transcribed by a confidential transcription service, and audio files will be destroyed upon the completion of the study.

Confidentiality was also assured regarding the written transcriptions of each interview. Each respondent was assigned a pseudonym. Transcripts were named and saved according to

that pseudonym, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts, with special attention given to place or people descriptors that could inadvertently identify the respondent. Transcripts were stored on a password-protected laptop to which only the researcher had access. Names of respondents or any other identifying information were not visible during any data analysis process.

Awareness of researcher positionality. One criticism of qualitative research is that the researcher's conscious and unconscious biases influence the study (Diefenbach, 2009). Although one could argue that the same is true for other forms of research, there is nonetheless merit in the ability of a researcher to identify to the fullest extent possible any biases that might impact the research process or findings. As an acting principal in a rural Minnesota school, the researcher came to this study with several assumptions. To increase personal awareness of those assumptions, the researcher engaged in a self-reflection exercise that resulted in the following considerations.

First, education systems are a critical component of societies, regardless of how formalized or not those systems might be. Because of the role of education systems in preparing citizens to contribute to a prospering society, members of that society would do well to understand the factors that influence the successes or struggles of their education system.

Second, principals, like all people, have valuable stories to tell. In seeking a strong education system, the greater community can benefit from an enhanced understanding of principals' perceived experiences of their work. The same is true regarding the perceived experiences of teachers, students, and parents.

A final assumption of the researcher was that a variety of factors contribute to the departure decisions of principals, and some of those factors might have not yet been sufficiently explored in existing research.

Bracketing interview. In addition to self-reflection, the researcher increased awareness of potential bias by engaging in a bracketing interview prior to interviewing respondents. Bracketing interviews are those in which the researcher is asked the same questions that will be asked of respondents (deMarrais, 2004). The interview was transcribed and coded, similar to the process that was used during the data analysis process of the larger study, and the researcher reflected upon the resulting themes as potential sources of bias. The codes used with highest frequency in the bracketing interview were Workload and Community Expectations.

The bracketing interview was conducted by an acting education and research professional. This individual, having an awareness of the researcher's potential biases, also reviewed the study's findings to check that the researcher's positionality did not influence the results in an unfair way. In addition, the independent analyst who coded all interviews used the bracketing interview to calibrate the coding process, which made the independent analyst aware of potential researcher biases. The high level of inter-rater reliability between the researcher and independent analyst indicate that the researcher's potential biases did not unduly influence the data analysis process.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the personal, institutional, and environmental factors that influenced a principal's decision to leave his or her school. Respondents included elementary principals in rural Minnesota who left their school within the past year. Respondents participated in face-to-face interviews at a location of their choice and engaged in several opportunities for feedback about the data collection and analysis process.

Discussion of the Sample

One criteria for respondents was that they left their rural school within the past year. All respondents left their rural school during the summer of 2015, and interviews occurred in January and February of 2016. Respondents had been in their new position for approximately seven months at the time of the interview. New positions were varied and included the following: principal of a town school (three respondents), principal of a city school, assistant principal of a city school, and superintendent of a rural school. *City*, *town*, and *rural* were defined by the most recent census locale codes of the new districts as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics; the National Center for Education Statistics locale definitions are listed in Appendix F. No respondents took a new position as a principal of another rural school.

Due to the relatively small sample and the need to protect the identity of respondents, limited demographic information was collected, but the researcher maintained detailed notes about interview dates, times, and locations. A summary of demographic information and interview information is included in Table 3, sorted according to date of the interview.

Table 3

Data Collection Overview

Respondent pseudonym	Gender	Minnesota region	Interview date	Interview duration	Interview location
Henry	M	southern	1-21-16	75 minutes	school
Gayle	F	central	1-26-16	90 minutes	restaurant
Sebastian	M	northern	2-3-16	35 minutes	principals' conference
Renee	F	northern	2-4-16	40 minutes	principals' conference
Olivia	F	southern	2-5-16	70 minutes	restaurant
Neil	M	central	2-5-16	55 minutes	restaurant

Introduction to Themes

The researcher entered data in a software program called MAXQDA for the purpose of sorting data according to various criteria and creating visual representations of the data.

The first task of the analysis process was to identify themes. Themes were codes that occurred in at least four of the six interviews. Figure 2 shows all codes and their presence for various respondents. A square indicates the code was used for that respondent at least one time during the interview.

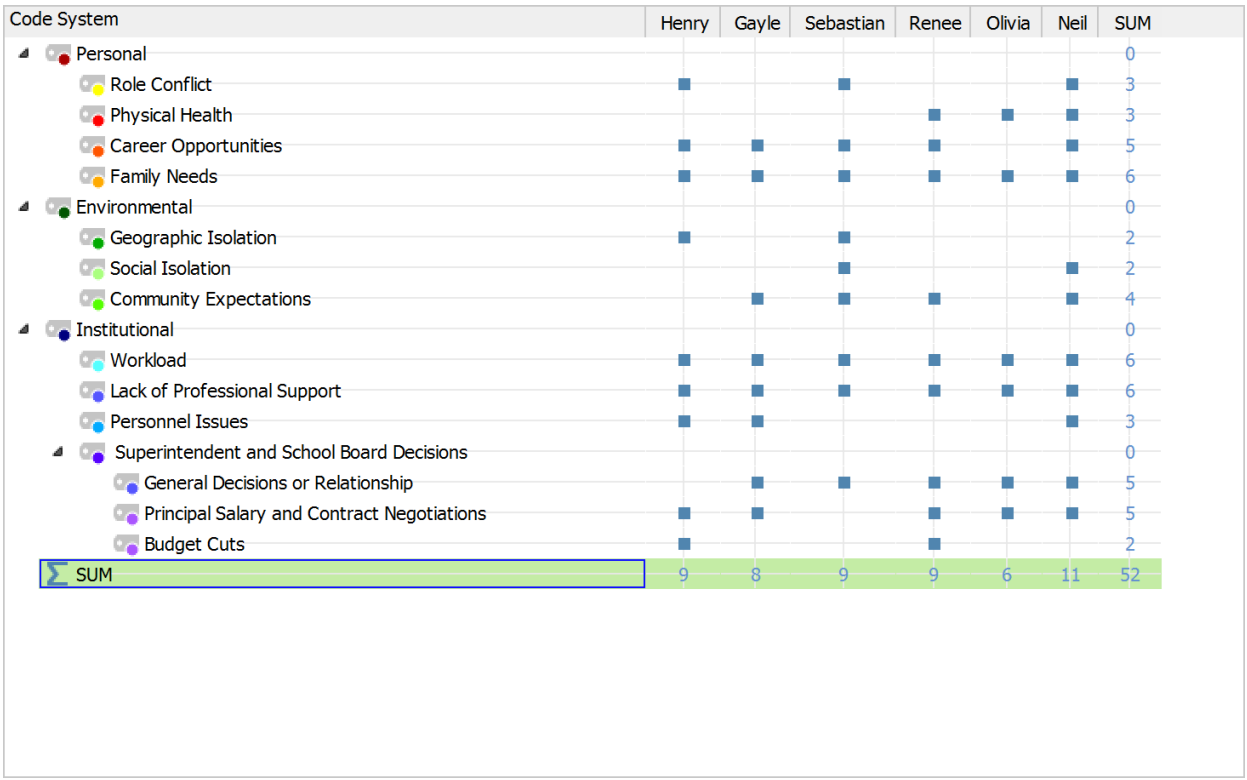

Figure 2. Codes used for each respondent. Codes were the potential reasons that an elementary principal in rural Minnesota left his or her school. Squares indicate the code was used for that respondent at least one time during the interview.

There were seven themes. Under the heading Personal Factors, the themes were Career Opportunities and Family Needs. Under the heading Environmental Factors, the theme was Community Expectations. The majority of themes were under the heading Institutional Factors. These included Workload and Lack of Professional Support, which were closely related in content. Other themes were subcategories of Superintendent and School Board Decisions, and they were General Decisions or Relationship and Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations. A summary of themes and their categories is provided in Table 4. Each theme is described in detail later in this chapter.

Table 4

Themes: Why Elementary Principals Leave their Rural Minnesota Schools

Personal Factors	Environmental Factors	Institutional Factors
Career Opportunities	Community Expectations	Workload
Family Needs		Lack of Professional Support
		Superintendent and School Board Decisions: General Decisions or Relationship
		Superintendent and School Board Decisions: Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations

Personal Factors

Personal factors were those that were within the realm of control of the principal. Potential personal factors were defined in the code book in the following manner:

- Role Conflict: This code was used when a respondent talked about the internal tension he or she experienced when functioning as a principal, parent, taxpayer, churchgoer, consumer, or other role among the same group of people.
- Physical Health: This code was used when a respondent talked about the negative impact of his or her work on his or her physical health.
- Career Opportunity: This code was used when a respondent talked about the reason for seeking employment elsewhere as a sudden opportunity or when a respondent talked about the reason he or she entered the rural principalship was a need to get experience.
- Family Needs: This code was used when a respondent talked about family needs or preferences. These needs could have included desire to be closer to extended family,

desire to be closer to extended family due to illness in the family, desire to have a better opportunity for their children, or desire to be in a better location for a spouse's career.

Of the four potential codes, two emerged as themes by appearing in at least four of the six interviews. These themes were Career Opportunity and Family Needs.

Theme 1: Career opportunity. The theme of Career Opportunity appeared in five of the six interviews. Sometimes principals expressed that they were willing to move to a rural school in order to get first-time principal experience. Gayle affirmed this when she described how she had wanted to become a principal from early in her teaching career. She interviewed for principal positions in "every corner of the state", and her rural district was the "best opportunity that presented itself." Sebastian explained it by saying, "I kind of knew that to get my foot in, I was going to need to go somewhere…to get that experience." However, none of the principals said it was easy to leave their rural school, even if they accepted the rural principal position, in part, to get experience. Sebastian said of his departure decision, "It was a very, very tough – it was a tougher decision than you would think. Ultimately, you give time and you build relationships, and even though it's a [short amount of time], you connect with kids, you connect with staff, and then you leave."

Other principals described promotion possibilities. One respondent applied for the superintendent position in his district. When he did not receive the promotion, he began looking for a superintendent position elsewhere.

Sometimes principals were not actively seeking a new position, but an event or interaction prompted them to consider a career change. In Renee's situation, an attractive career opportunity presented itself. She said,

> Then I got a phone call. Sometimes things happen in life and you just are like, "Oh." It kind of shocks you a little bit and gets you out of what you're doing, your path that you're currently on. I got a phone call from a parent in [new location] who said, "Did you know that [new location] is hiring, and I think you should apply," and I went, "Oh?"

Likewise, Henry described his career change as something he did not actively seek until encouraged to do so by a colleague:

> One of the people that questioned me one day said, "You could be happier in a different place. Have you ever thought of looking?" So once that seed got planted, then there was almost a trickle-down effect where then someone who was working in this district said, "Hey, there's an opening," and then it felt like, "Okay." Then once I started looking, then this door opened.

Summary of the Career Opportunities theme. Some principals entered the rural principalship on the understanding that it was a necessary step to accrue administrative experience. They did not necessarily intend to stay in the rural principalship for a specific period of time. Some principals were encouraged to apply for other positions by a colleague or parent, and still others sought new positions that allowed them to secure a promotion.

Theme 2: Family needs. The theme of Family Needs occurred across all transcripts. This theme was not limited to female respondents, as some might have imagined, nor was it limited to respondents with young children or ailing parents. It appeared that family needs consistently influenced the departure decisions of principals, regardless of phase of life, family structure, or gender of the respondent.

Respondents talked about how a move to a new district might benefit their family in a variety of ways. They wanted to be near a larger city that had more fine arts or academic

enrichment opportunities for their children, or they wanted to be near a larger city that had more career options for their spouse. They discussed a desire to move closer to home so that children could be closer to grandparents or so that the respondent could help care for a family member during a time of extended illness.

Almost all respondents described how the demands of their rural school limited their family time. Henry observed, "I'd say it was incredibly hard for [my family] to the point now where my kids ask, 'Will you keep playing with us?'" Gayle also mentioned the impact of the rural principalship on her children. She said, "I have [children] and definitely heard from them. They acted differently in weeks where I had a lot of evening meetings and I wasn't around much. I'm able to help with homework now. I was never able to do that."

Olivia, a respondent who did not have young children at home at the time of her departure decision, described the impact on her family when she said,

> So sometimes you end up being short with your family because you're stressed and tired and spread so thin in your workplace. And that's hard. And then you have to take a step back and say, "It's not their fault. It's not worth it."

Summary of the Family Needs theme. The theme of Family Needs encompassed the needs of many people, including the respondent's spouse, children, and extended family. Needs were varied depending on the life circumstances of the respondent and ranged from illness to spouse's career to children's opportunities. A consistent family need across several respondents was the lack of energy or time for family because of the high demands of their rural principalship, and several respondents described how their family dynamics had improved since their move to a new position.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors were outside of the control of either the principal or the school district. Three codes appeared in the code book as environmental factors, and they were defined as follows:

- Geographic Isolation: This code was used when a respondent talked about geographic difficulties, such as driving long distances.
- Social Isolation: This code was used when a respondent talked about social circles and friendships.
- Community Expectations: This code was used when a respondent talked about the community's expectations of the respondent in terms of access to the respondent, visibility of the respondent, or involvement of the respondent in community events. It was also used for community decisions that caused difficulty for the respondent.

The only code from this category that emerged as a theme was Community Expectations.

Theme 3: Community expectations. Community Expectations appeared as a code in four of the six interviews. Specifically, community expectations regarded access to the principal. When Renee was asked about community expectations, she replied, "Oh my, they wanted to have like a direct line to me. The school board members would come in and visit with me all the time." When she compared the rural principalship to her new position, she said of her previous school, "They wanted to see me a lot, which is very different now where I'm at where I don't see school board members a whole lot and I don't have people coming in and expecting me to be at basketball games."

Similarly, Neil noted the expectation of visibility at athletic and other events. He said, "But you do feel that pressure, got to show up, got to get my face out there." One respondent

described how he sometimes joked with people that you show up at athletic events, walk around so people can see you, and leave early. The impression was that community expectations for visibility were burdensome at times, and principals sought ways to reconcile those expectations with the need to be at home with family.

At other times, respondents discussed community negativity toward the school in general. For Sebastian, this negativity occurred around the topic of consolidation, which can be a highly emotional decision in rural communities whose identity is closely linked to the school (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006). His district was small, as are many rural districts, and had partnered with a neighboring district for athletic teams. The athletic pairing led to heated discussions of full consolidation, to which Sebastian said, "Okay, to be honest, as the year went on, that stuff started to build up, and the community got a little more negative towards the school."

For Gayle, community negativity toward the school centered on the topic of constructing a new facility. In rural districts in Minnesota, new facilities impact the taxpayer heavily, which results in the difficult passage of school bond referendums (Nolan & Minnesota Rural Education Association, 2016). Like many school districts in rural Minnesota, Gayle's district attempted and failed to pass a bond referendum. Gayle said,

> We added four classrooms and all that growth was moving into our high school, and we were not prepared for it. Our community was not supporting building projects. Building projects like pole sheds were considered with real consideration rather than a brick and mortar formal addition to a functioning school building.

Summary of the Community Expectations theme. Some communities expected unrestricted access to the principal at all times, and others expected the principal to be present at

all events. Still other communities became negative toward the school because of difficult decisions regarding consolidation or referendums, which resulted in an uncomfortable work environment for the principal.

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors were within the control or realm of influence of the school. This category had the most coded segments, as illustrated in Figure 3, and the most resulting themes.

Code System	Henry	Gayle	Sebastian	Renee	Olivia	Neil	SUM
Personal	17	9	7	9	2	9	53
Environmental	2	2	4	1		9	18
Institutional	22	23	13	11	26	53	148
SUM	41	34	24	21	28	71	219

Figure 3. Number of codes per category. Categories included personal, environmental, and institutional factors that impacted an elementary principal's decision to leave his or her school in rural Minnesota.

The codes categorized as Institutional Factors were defined in the code book as follows:

- Workload: This code was used when a respondent talked about job duties, often referred to as "hats", and number of hours per week he or she worked.
- Lack of Professional Support: This code was used when a respondent talked about lack of support personnel (assistant principal, special education director, secretary, etc.). This code was also used when a respondent talked about principal colleagues, sometimes called job-alikes, including lack of colleagues with whom to discuss their work, frustration that colleagues did not carry their fair share of the burden, and disappointment that a colleague was looking for a job. Finally, this code was used when a respondent talked about lack of personal professional development.

- Personnel Issues: This code was used when a respondent talked about conflict with staff members and staff members not doing their jobs. It was also used when a respondent talked about the teachers' union.
- Superintendent and School Board Decisions:
    - General Decisions or Relationship: This code was used when a respondent talked about relationships with or decisions made by the superintendent or school board. It also included discussions about the general functioning of the school board and discussions about the respondent feeling appreciated or unappreciated by the superintendent and school board.
    - Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations: This code was used when a respondent talked about salary, benefits, or the contract negotiations process.
    - Budget Cuts: This code was used when a respondent talked about district budget cuts that might have resulted in elimination of an administrative position or changes to administrative duties.

Four themes emerged from this category by appearing in at least four of the six interviews. Themes were Workload, Lack of Professional Support, Superintendent and School Board Decisions: General Decisions or Relationship, and Superintendent and School Board Decisions: Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations.

The themes of Workload and Lack of Professional Support were closely interwoven during the interviews. Figure 4 demonstrates how often codes occurred in close proximity. Larger squares indicate a larger number of times the codes appeared within one paragraph of

each other. The intersections between Workload and Lack of Professional Support have the largest squares, indicating that they occurred near each other more frequently than any other codes.

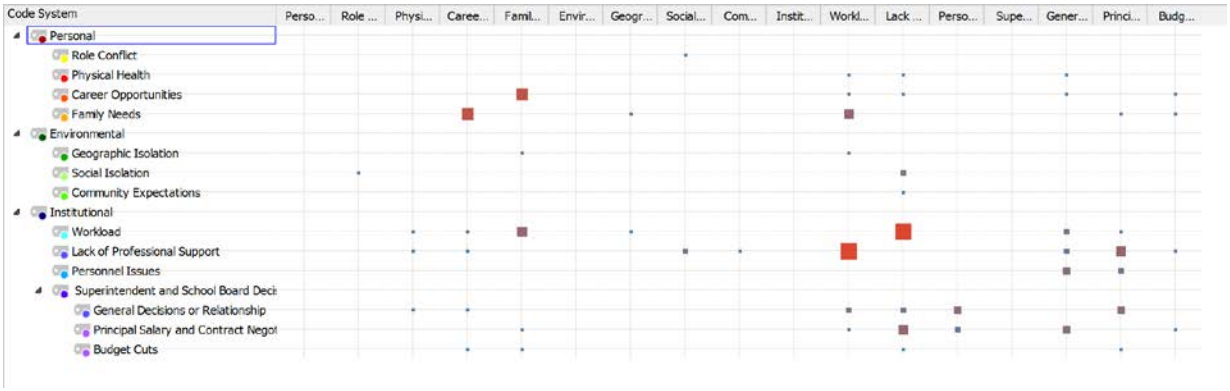

Figure 4. Codes that occurred within one paragraph of each other. Larger squares indicate more frequent occurrences of close proximity.

Theme 4: Workload. Both Workload and Lack of Professional Support appeared in all six transcripts. For the principals who provided an estimate on number of hours worked per week, answers ranged from 60 to 70 hours. When Henry was asked to describe his workload, he said, "It was on me all the time, so it was in our life, enmeshed in everything, and constant, constant, constant, constant." Neil described it as, "You can work as hard as you want…You can never go home."

Olivia expressed a pressure she felt to perform well in order to provide children in a rural community the same quality of experiences that children in other communities received. She said,

> When you're alone and you're trying to do things by yourself, you just keep giving yourself more work…And then with trying to be that innovative leader and trying to provide the children in the rural community the same opportunities that are provided in

> larger, more affluential [sic] communities. And not giving them any less of an education or experience.

Sebastian said that the typical clause in principals' job descriptions that reads "other duties as assigned" is much less burdensome in his new position than it was in his rural district. He said of his rural school, "You have to do the same amount of roles, trainings and things, as a school district that has 30,000 kids."

Some of the "other duties as assigned" roles that respondents described were Curriculum Director, District Assessment Coordinator, Title I and II Coordinator, Preschool Director, Special Education Director, Staff Development Director, Human Resources Manager, Support Staff Supervisor, Transportation Director, Technology Director, Counselor, Athletic or Activities Director, Dean of Students, School Improvement Coordinator, Instructional Coach, Response to Intervention Coordinator, Professional Learning Community Leader, and Teacher Evaluator. Olivia summarized it well when she said, "You name it, you end up doing it." Renee echoed that sentiment when she suggested, "Just say I was everything."

Respondents often described the frustration of having numerous roles. Sebastian expressed that frustration by saying, "When you have all these roles, you kind of focus on just managing." Olivia noted a similar frustration with her multiple roles when she said,

> So basically everything is a mile wide and an inch deep. So you feel like you're a jack of all trades and master of nothing. As a person who wants to do well I was constantly pushing myself to be innovative, be on the cutting edge, work with everybody on those things.

Of interest was the recognition, often too late, of some districts that their principals were overworked. Gayle noted that, after she and her colleague left their rural school, the district decided to move from a two-principal model to a three-principal model because of the workload.

Summary of the Workload theme. Principals described a multitude of roles and responsibilities. They worked long hours and put pressure on themselves to perform well for the sake of the students in their building. They expressed frustration that their many roles prevented them from doing their work to the level of excellence they desired.

Theme 5: Lack of professional support. Similar to Workload, Lack of Professional Support was a theme that arose in all six interviews. In terms of supports the respondents wished to have had, some expressed a desire to have had a competent secretary, because the principal ended up doing secretarial work. Olivia, when asked for one thing she could have changed about her rural school, said that she wished for an assistant principal. Renee contrasted the lack of professional support in her rural district with her current district when she said, "The amount of stress in work that I had to do in [previous location], not having supports was very challenging. Now where I'm at, they have so many people."

The support personnel available in the new positions of respondents fulfilled many of the roles listed in the previous section. For instance, respondents reported having a full-time Special Education Director or Dean of Students in their new school. Furthermore, respondents identified additional support personnel that were available in their new schools, such as Success Coach, Assistant Principal, Associate Principal, Innovation Teams, Technical Support Teams, Content Specialists, and Behavior Specialists. Respondents did not know how helpful those additional supports were until they began their new positions. In some cases, respondents did not know the support positions existed until they began their new position.

Other professional support difficulties arose because of principal colleagues. These difficulties were due to both negative and positive relationships with colleagues. Negative relationships resulted in a feeling of being unsupported. Henry talked about how he wanted to form a bargaining unit but his colleague did not, which impacted Henry's ability to negotiate his contract. Positive relationships resulted in fear of a colleague leaving. Gayle and her colleague left the district at the same time, and knowing that her colleague was looking for a job made it easier for her to look for one, too. Sebastian experienced a similar situation. Finally, some respondents experienced lack of professional support because the only other administrative colleague was their superintendent, who was also their supervisor, which meant the respondent had no job-alike person in the district with whom to share their thoughts or experiences.

Summary of the Lack of Professional Support theme. Principals noted a distinct difference between their previous and current positions regarding support personnel. In their new positions, other support personnel handle many issues that the respondent handled in his or her rural school. In addition, in their new positions, principals had more support because of a larger group of administrative colleagues.

Theme 6: Superintendent and school board: General decisions or relationship. Special note should be taken of the final two themes in this category, both of which were related to the superintendent or school board. Themes connected to superintendent or school board do not appear in existing literature about principal turnover, but they were present, in some form, across all respondents in this study.

The theme of Superintendent and School Board: General Decisions or Relationship occurred in five of the six interviews. In two interviews, it was the first thing that came to mind for respondents when asked a general question about why they left their school. Gayle said at

the beginning of her interview, “I left my previous school because of primarily the school board dynamics and the dysfunction within that group that really made it more difficult for me to do my work well.” She described that dysfunction by saying, “There was contention within the school board and disagreement within the school board constantly. There was rarely a vote that was unanimous on any topic, including paying the bills.” She also mentioned power struggles and micromanagement “that made it difficult to carry out those strong initiatives that we needed to for our kids.”

Olivia also discussed the superintendent and school board as her immediate answer to the question about why she left her school. She said, “I was looking for a school that had stronger leadership, that was progressive, supported administration…” Like Gayle, Olivia described micromanagement as a source of frustration. She said, “When I first started, the school board was more about policy, making decisions. But as we went through the years, the board was given more managerial decision-making items by the superintendent. Thus, they started micromanaging.” She later described that micromanagement as overruling the activity of administration on discipline, scheduling, or athletics.

Some principals expressed frustration at the level of principal involvement with school board work. Gayle noted, “We sat at the board table. We were very much in that small rural school a part of that school board work more so than I think in other bigger districts.” Other principals expressed frustration that the school board was not willing to pursue what was best for students, like consolidation. Still others were frustrated at the lack of superintendent or school board support for difficult personnel decisions. Neil, when discussing a difficult personnel decision, said, “I didn't feel the superintendent stood behind me strong enough either…He didn't want to ruffle any feathers because he needed a nice letter of recommendation.”

Several principals described a lack of clear vision as a source of frustration. Sebastian said, "There wasn't a clear vision from the top that we followed under." Olivia also noted this difficulty when she said,

> There wasn't that clear vision that was constantly looked at. I mean, it was kind of a flash in the pan. Here's a mission statement, here's our vision, here's our plan, and then there was no follow through on it.

Similarly, several principals describe a lack of inspiring direction as a source of frustration. Sebastian said that he wished he had a leader who would have "engaged and motivated me to look past all the duties." Neil, when discussing a superintendent change, said, "All of the sudden to have someone, your direct boss, who no longer kind of has that passion, that wants it to be the best."

Lack of appreciation was a common thread across many interviews. Neil called the relationship between the principal and superintendent "one of the most critical pieces" and noted, "Anybody's going to work harder when their boss appreciates what they do, pats them on the back."

Sometimes this lack of appreciation was experienced because of micromanaging. Sebastian said, "Do I think they appreciated me and valued me? Yes, but it wasn't like hey, we want to turn this over to you, it was more like left in limbo."

Sometimes this lack of appreciation was due to disparate workload between principals. Neil, when asked what would have kept him in his rural school, said, "Being appreciated for the amount of work you do. The board, in my – this sounds petty, but you work your tail off and your colleague over in the high school is doing squat…And you're treated the same, you know."

Sometimes this lack of appreciation was due to disparate workload between the principal and superintendent. Olivia said, "And then you see your boss leaving the office on time every day, empty-handed, with nothing. And that's frustrating." Olivia, when describing the pressure of raising test scores, said she was "feeling no support from the superintendent. And having to lead the charge on that, lead the direction on that, along with everything else that you're doing. And then not being appreciated for that."

Summary of the Superintendent and School Board: General Decisions or Relationship theme. This theme encompassed a broad range of phenomena. Principals described school board dysfunction, micromanagement, lack of clear vision, lack of inspiring direction, lack of appreciation, and imbalanced workloads between principals or between the principal and superintendent.

Theme 7: Superintendent and school board: Principal salary and contract negotiations. This theme appeared in five of six interviews. One of the challenges of contract negotiations in a rural district is the potential lack of a bargaining unit. Another challenge is the necessity of negotiating directly with the superintendent, with whom principals had a close working relationship, or school board. Henry described it this way, "There was also not being in a bargaining unit, and negotiations were quite challenging to negotiate with your boss and have your boss be the go-between." Henry said the difficult negotiations process made him feel that he was not valued.

Olivia echoed his sentiments when she said, "And I think one of the most difficult things in a small school district like that is you're negotiating all by yourself. You don't have a group of people to negotiate with and to talk about things." She also said, in line with Henry's feeling

of being not valued, “And being in a room with three board members all by yourself is not easy. They like to push you around, and you don’t have a team to support you.”

Further complicating the negotiating process is the lack of principal training about how to conduct negotiations, so principals spend considerable time researching other contracts or contacting area principals to gather negotiations advice. Olivia described the time it took her to gather contracts, meet with other principals when it was convenient for them, and analyze what contract language was really worth the battle. All of that took time and energy that was required in addition to the high workload of these rural principals.

Heavy workload coupled with disproportionately low salary were also a source of frustration. Olivia said, “And you still have all the work of a principal in any other district, plus more, because of all the different hats you’re wearing, but you’re not compensated for it. So that was difficult.” Gayle said that even though her salary was comparable to the area, it was not comparable to the workload in terms of number of students. She said, “When I started looking at my output and the value of that output, [salary] did make a difference [in my decision to leave].”

This lack of appreciation as demonstrated through salary was highlighted when principals told their superintendent that they were going to seek a different position. Renee, who received a large salary increase by moving schools, described the situation this way:

> I did tell them I had an interview and it kind of scared [the superintendent] a little bit, but he goes, "Well, if they offer you a job, come back to us and tell us what they're offering you because maybe the board will negotiate with you and give you a higher salary."

Olivia, when asked for one thing her district would have had to do to get her to stay, said, “Well, I think they would have needed to provide me with a fair salary.” Neil had a similar comment, “Yeah, it would have been salary. Otherwise, I loved it.”

Summary of the Superintendent and School Board: Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations theme. Several principals did not feel fairly compensated for the amount of work they did. The contract negotiations process in a rural district was often difficult, and principals were forced to expend time and energy to advocate for themselves within an already demanding position.

Concept Map

A revised concept map is presented in Figure 5. It stems from the word "layers" that was spontaneously used by several respondents to describe the many factors that impacted their departure decision. The word "layers" was also used when respondents were asked to describe the threshold level of a departure decision. Respondents indicated that a variety of factors finally built up enough that they felt compelled to leave. One single event did not prompt their decision, nor was their decision the result of a career trajectory model based on years of service or career stage. For all respondents, the layers built at different rates and in different ways. Layers could repeat, occur in any order, or not appear at all for certain respondents.

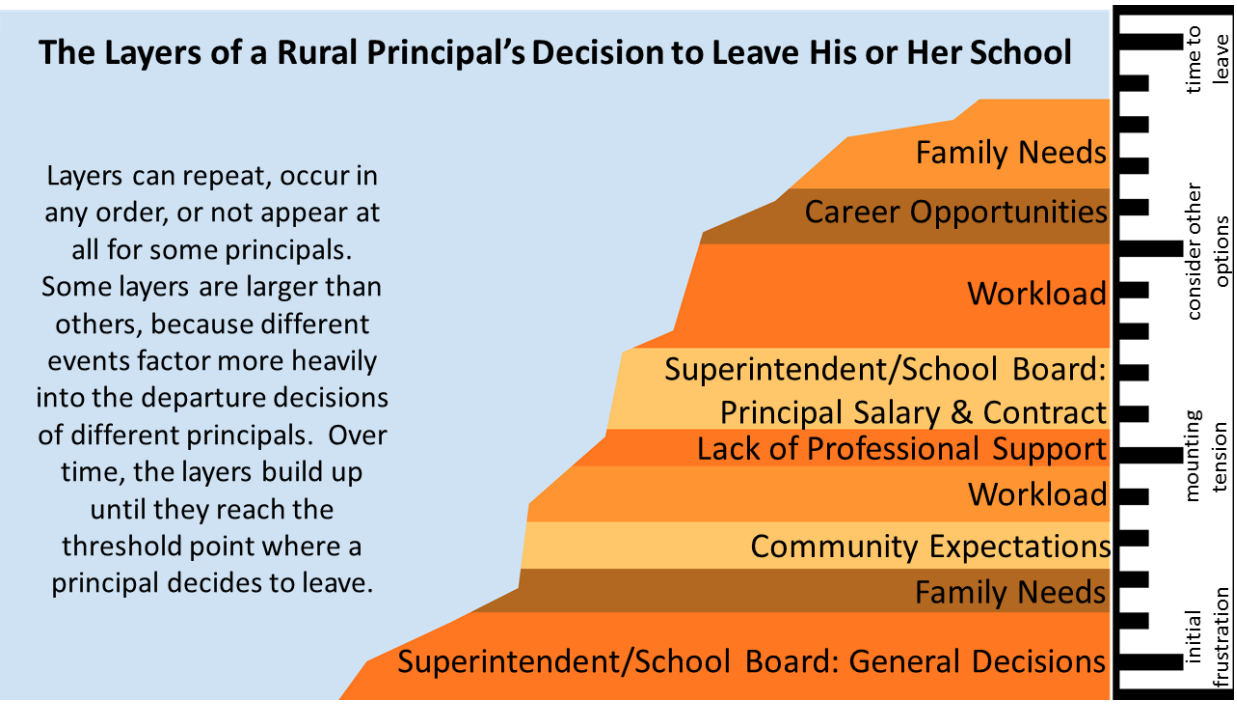

Figure 5. Revised concept map: The layers of a rural principal's decision to leave his or her school.

Unlike the conceptual framework presented in the literature review in which potential factors were sorted into buckets of personal, institutional, and environmental factors, the categorization of factors was not present in the minds of principals when they considered a departure decision. Instead, they viewed each factor, regardless of category, as a separate layer that eventually built up enough for them to leave. This conceptual framework agrees with Greenfield (1983) that it is not isolated factors but the interplay of factors that is important. However, it was not an interplay of equal give and take. Instead, it was an interplay of persistent compounding, in which a single event or series of events could cause separate layers to build quickly upon one another until the threshold point was reached. An example of this could have been a negative contract negotiations experience. This would have added the layer of Superintendent and School Board: Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations, but on top of that

could have been layered Family Needs, Workload, and the lack of appreciation that is encompassed in Superintendent and School Board: General Decisions or Relationship.

Chapter V: Discussion

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the personal, institutional, and environmental factors that influenced a principal's decision to leave his or her school. Respondents included elementary principals in rural Minnesota who left their position within the previous year.

Six respondents participated in this study. All respondents were interviewed face-to-face at a location of their choice, and interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes. After multiple iterations of coding and feedback from all respondents and an independent analyst, seven themes emerged.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the question, "Why do elementary principals in rural Minnesota leave their schools?" Specifically, three categories of factors were considered.

1. How did personal factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota?
2. How did environmental factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota school?
3. How did institutional factors influence a principal's decision to leave his or her elementary school in rural Minnesota?

At least one theme arose in each category. The themes under Personal Factors were Career Opportunity and Family Needs. The theme under Environmental Factors was Community Expectations. The themes under Institutional Factors were Workload, Lack of Professional Support, Superintendent and School Board: General Decisions or Relationship, and Superintendent and School Board: Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations.

Conclusions

Principals arrive at departure decisions through a myriad of interconnected experiences and compounding factors. None of the respondents in this study followed a path that was identical to another. They all reached their threshold point after a compilation of various factors that were unique in their intensity, duration, and chronology.

Although career stage theories can be helpful, they did not hold true in this study. Principals did not progress through predictable career stages that resulted in their eventual departure. In fact, one respondent had only been in his position for a year before he decided to leave.

Similar to the career theories described by Greenfield (1983), Stevenson (2006), Crow (2007), and Farley-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch (2012) this study found that various internal and external factors impacted a principal's career decisions. However, unlike previous career theories, this study, in honor of the language of respondents, presented the metaphor of compounding factors as layers that built to a threshold level. Once the principal reached that threshold level, he or she decided to leave.

Even though each principal's journey was unique, several themes occurred repeatedly. Some of these themes were surprising, especially the ones related to superintendent and school board. Other themes were not surprising but occurred for all six respondents, and those themes also deserve special attention.

The principal's relationship with the superintendent and school board is crucial. The researcher did not intend to ask any questions about the superintendent and school board because those factors did not appear in existing literature about the reasons principals leave their schools. However, the majority of respondents provided extensive information about how the

actions of the superintendent or school board impacted their decision to leave. For two respondents, superintendent and school board actions were their immediate responses to the first interview question, "Tell me a little bit about why you left your previous school."

There are multiple potential reasons for the lack of these themes in existing literature. First, the majority of research in the United States about principal turnover is quantitative. It often uses data from existing state databases, and state databases do not collect information about the relational complexities between a principal and superintendent or school board. This is one of the benefits of qualitative research in that it can uncover new possibilities.

A second reason for differences between this study and others regarding the themes of superintendent and school board could be this study's focus on the rural context. Principals in rural settings often interact directly with the superintendent and school board on a regular basis. This can present relational challenges. For some of the respondents in this study, their only other colleague was their superintendent, which meant the only colleague to whom they could express frustration or difficulty was also their boss.

As principals described the difficulties they experienced with their superintendent or school board, discussions often centered on lack of appreciation or salary and contract negotiations.

Lack of appreciation. Rural principals do not always feel appreciated for the enormous amounts of work they are expected to accomplish. Imbalanced workloads created feelings of frustration and discouragement. Respondents rarely expressed a situation in which they felt valued or respected for their work, service, dedication, or commitment.

Principal salary and contract negotiations. Unlike larger districts in which principals bargain using the power and resources of a professional association, principals in rural districts

often bargain alone or in a unit of two people. This means that principals in rural districts are often seated at the negotiating table with board members or the superintendent, and discussions can become personal and painful. Closely linked with the importance of showing appreciation as described above, principals expressed frustration at their extreme workload and the accompanying lack of compensation.

Respondents indicated that a higher salary would have had a mitigating effect on the compounding effects of other layers or factors; it would have made other undesirable factors more bearable. Some respondents believed that a higher salary would have resulted in their staying in their rural position.

The rural principal's workload is disproportionately heavy. All of the respondents in this study described their high workload and lack of professional support. The list of roles they fulfilled was robust and was far greater than the roles required of principals in larger districts, as evidenced by respondents' comparisons between their rural and new districts. Although some of these roles arose from increased legislative requirements, the issue did not seem to be the legislative mandate but the district's implementation of the mandate. No respondents were critical of the state or federal government.

Respondents were expected to have expertise in a broad scope of areas, and they put pressure on themselves to perform well for the sake of their students in the face of seemingly impossible demands. The scope of their duties prevented them from performing in certain areas with the excellence they desired. The situation seemed created to produce mediocrity or frustration.

Family is important. Principals do not exist for the sole purpose of performing a career role. They are people with families, and their families have very real needs. Trying to separate

the family life of a rural principal from career decisions is detrimental to a full understanding of principal career paths.

Awareness of the stress created for families of rural principals is important. Family needs in a rural setting are often amplified because of the family's prominence in the community. One respondent discussed how his wife experienced stress from attempting to determine how people in their rural community expected her to behave and respond. Another respondent described how, in an attempt to preserve family time when so many evening events were required, his wife would pack up their three young children many nights and bring them to the athletic event he was supervising, which created stress, additional work, and lost sleep for the family. Others experienced tension because their spouses' or children's opportunities were limited in their rural setting. All of these stressors added one more layer to the mass of factors that eventually led to a principal's departure decision.

Implications

The stability of principals impacts student achievement (Branch et al., 2013; Brockmeier et al., 2013; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013). Because of the high turnover rate for principals (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), the challenges of recruitment of principals in rural settings (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Pijanowski et al., 2009), and the large number of children in rural contexts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a), rural school districts would benefit from understanding the factors that lead to a principal's departure.

Implications for rural school districts. Of good news to rural districts is that the majority of themes in this study were under the heading of Institutional Factors, which are within the realm of control of the school district. The rural school district has significant influence over

some of the factors that lead to a principal's departure decision, which indicates that rural schools can change some of their practices in an effort to get principals to stay.

In rural elementary schools in Minnesota, the superintendent and school board impacted principals' departure decisions to a great degree. This impact was multifaceted and pervasive enough to require the creation of three codes to adequately describe the impact of superintendent and school board decisions on rural principals.

Appreciation. People in rural settings, more so than in the new settings of respondents, seemed to take for granted the willingness of principals to fulfill a variety of challenging roles. Superintendents and school boards have the opportunity to lead the way in highlighting and honoring the work of these rural principals. They can advocate for principals in public forums or at school board meetings; they can praise the good work of their principals to staff, students, and families; they can support the decisions of their principals; and they can ensure workload equity among all members of their administrative team.

Salary and contract negotiations. Although rural districts have unique financial constraints, superintendents and school boards can seek creative ways to compensate their principals. Compensation could be in the form of salary, reduction of duties, or benefits that cost the district nothing, such as increased vacation time.

Of equal importance is the contract negotiations process. Superintendents and school boards should be aware of the high levels of stress associated with contract negotiations in a rural setting. They are in a unique position to mitigate that stress by being transparent, fair, and reasonable. One respondent said that her district used the excuse, "We're just this small community" as a reason not to provide a larger salary that was comparable to the area. Such excuses were disingenuous when the superintendent and teachers earned salaries that were

comparable to the area or when the superintendent and teachers earned higher percentage raises each year than did principals.

Workload and lack of professional support. Some of the "hats" worn by rural principals are unavoidable. However, some "hats" could be shared more evenly among the administrative team or the school community in general. For instance, in rural districts in which enrollment fluctuates with each graduating class, gaps in the master schedule that provide an extra planning period for a teacher could be used as compensation for that teacher who then assumes duties related to assessment, athletics, or discipline. Similarly, districts could consider paying a period of overload to a teacher who assumes additional duties. Although this would incur some cost to the district, it would be far less expensive than adding administrative positions.

In addition, some respondents discussed the quality of their support personnel, particularly in their offices. Competent secretaries are important. Rural school districts sometimes retain less competent personnel because those staff members are connected to the district through a long history of work and family. As a result, clerical work is added to the principal's workload in an effort to maintain community peace and relationships. Regardless of years of experience, if a support staff member is not performing and thus creating additional secretarial work for the principal, the superintendent and school board can support the seeking of a better qualified candidate. Although this will require difficult conversations with the secretary, it will help promote the stability of the principal position, which impacts student achievement. Instead, what seemed to happen in the respondents' experiences was the sacrifice of the principal for the sake of the secretary.

Implications for future research. This study adds a small number of voices to the collective conversation about the departure decisions of principals. Many more voices are

needed to provide a full picture of the administrative transitions that occur within school systems. A larger team could explore different geographic contexts, different school levels (middle school and high school), and different school locales (urban, suburban, and town).

This study highlights the needs for more qualitative research about principal turnover in the United States. The prevalence of quantitative studies has, perhaps, caused researchers to miss some of the most compelling factors that impact a principal's decision to leave his or her school. If researchers allow principals to explain in their own words why they choose to leave, additional factors might become apparent, as did the emergence of the role of the superintendent and school board in this study.

Understanding the reasons principals leave is important; understanding the reasons they stay is also important. Additional qualitative research should explore the experiences of those principals who have stayed in their position for a reasonable length of time. Brockmeier et al. (2013) and Mascall and Leithwood (2010) defined longevity as 10 years, and Branch et al. (2013) studied principals who stayed in their position for at least six years. Seashore Louis et al. (2010) asserted that principals need to stay at least five years to build the level of trust required for meaningful change. These parameters might provide a starting point for determining the criteria for respondents who could be classified as "stayers".

Concluding Comments

The rural principalship is a demanding and challenging position. It is also one of tremendous hope and possibility. The stability of rural principals can promote positive educational outcomes for a significant portion of children in Minnesota and beyond. Listening to the voices of rural principals provides precious insight into the complexities of their work. Careful listeners will find the information needed to promote positive change at the local, state,

national, and international levels for the success of rural principals, teachers, students, families, and communities.

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Appendix A: Letter of Permission for Access to Potential Respondents

MINNESOTA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION

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Mark French, President
Jon Millerhagen, Executive Director
Roger J. Aronson, Legal and Legislative Counsel

October 22, 2015

To Whom It May Concern:

Since its incorporation in 1950, the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association has grown into a collaborative, member-based association that supports 850 elementary and middle level principals in the ever-changing role of the principal. As part of its process of support and advocacy, MESPA maintains a record of elementary and middle level principals throughout the state.

For the purpose of dissertation research about rural principal turnover, Cindy Hansen has requested and will receive access to a list of K-8 Minnesota principals who left their position within the past year. If the principal moved to another Minnesota school, the list will also include the name of the school to which the principal moved.

I would be happy to answer any questions. Please contact me using the information below.

Thank you,

Rosie Mitchell

Rosie Mitchell
Membership Manager
rmitchel@mespa.net
651.999.7314
800.642.6807 (Minn only)

MESPA Mission: The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association is dedicated to promoting and improving education for children and youth, strengthening the role as educational leader for elementary and middle school principals, and collaborating with partners in education to assist in achieving these goals.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Potential Interview Questions

Research Objective	Subcategory or Theme	Question
Opening		• Tell me a little about why you left your previous school.
Explore institutional factors that led to a principal's departure decision	School academic performance, workload, and salary	• How would you describe your workload at your rural school? (duties, roles, hours per week) • How would you describe the salary and benefits package at your rural school?
Explore personal factors that led to a principal's departure decision	Family needs and career aspirations	• What first motivated you to become a principal at a rural school? Has that reality changed? If so, how? • What was your family's perception of your work as a rural principal? *How was your family impacted by your work as a rural principal?*
Explore environmental factors that led to a principal's departure decision	School poverty rate, community expectations, isolation, legislative mandates, and increased job complexity	• What were the community's expectations of you? (visibility at events, involvement in civic organizations, go-to person for problems of any kind) • How did you connect, both personally and professionally, with people outside of your rural community?
Closing		• If I were to give you a magic wand and you could have changed anything about your rural school, what would it be? *What would your rural school have had to do to get you to stay?* • Do you have anything to add that I did not ask?

Appendix C: Invitation Phone Script

My name is Cindy Hansen, and I am a doctoral student at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. I am also an elementary principal at a rural Minnesota school. You are invited to participate in a study about the reasons elementary principals leave their rural Minnesota schools.

You were selected as a possible participant because you willingly left your rural Minnesota school within the past year. You are uniquely positioned to provide valuable information about the reasons behind the career decisions of rural Minnesota school leaders.

If you decide to participate, we will schedule a face-to-face interview at a location of your choice. The interview should take an hour or less and will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes. You will receive a copy of the transcription to check it for accuracy. In addition, I will contact you following the interview to ensure that I am representing your ideas accurately in the study.

Confidentiality is highly valued in this study. All participant names and identifiers will be deleted from transcripts, and transcripts will be identifiable only by a number. Transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer to which only I have access. No one will be identifiable in any written reports or publications.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without affecting your relationship with Bethel University, and your information will be destroyed. There are no risks for participating in this study, nor will there be any compensation for participation.

If you are willing to participate, I will send you an informed consent letter to sign, and we will schedule a time and place for our interview. Thank you for your consideration!

Appendix D: Informed Consent Letter

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH WITH HUMANS

You are invited to participate in a study about elementary principal turnover in rural Minnesota. I hope to learn about the reasons that elementary principals leave their rural Minnesota schools. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an elementary principal who willingly left his or her rural Minnesota school within the past year.

This research is being conducted by Cindy Hansen, an elementary principal in a rural Minnesota school and doctoral student at Bethel University in Minnesota. The research is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. There are no monetary incentives for participation.

If you decide to participate, I will contact you to set up one face-to-face interview that is expected to last no longer than an hour. I will contact you sometime after the interview to share the interview transcript, discuss emerging themes, and check with you to see if my understanding was correct.

There are no anticipated discomforts other than the possible discomforts that may be associated with being interviewed and recorded for transcription purposes. The estimated total time for the actual interview and subsequent check-in(s) is two hours altogether. All identifiable information will be withheld and there are no risks expected. Possible benefits to participating may be additional time for reflecting on current practice.

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified to you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable, and only aggregate data will be presented. The interview transcript will be stored on a password-protected computer to which only I have access, and interview transcripts will then be used for data analysis purposes.

Your decision to participate will not affect your future relations with Bethel or myself in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting such relationships.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans. If you have any questions about the research and/or research participants' rights or wish to report a research-related injury, please call Cindy Hansen (217) 828-2211 or my Bethel Faculty Advisor, Dr. Tracy Reimer (651) 635-8502. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____ _____

Signature Date

_____

Signature of Investigator

Appendix E: Code Definitions

Personal Factors:

- Role Conflict: This code is used when a respondent talks about the internal tension he or she experiences when functioning as a principal, parent, taxpayer, churchgoer, consumer, or other role among the same group of people.
- Physical Health: This code is used when a respondent talks about the negative impact of his or her work on his or her physical health.
- Career Opportunity: This code is used when a respondent talks about the reason for seeking employment elsewhere as a sudden opportunity or when a respondent talks about the reason he or she entered the rural principalship was a need to get experience.
- Family Needs: This code is used when a respondent talks about family needs or preferences. These needs could include desire to be closer to extended family, desire to be closer to extended family due to illness in the family, desire to have a better opportunity for their children, or desire to be in a better location for a spouse's career.

Environmental Factors:

- Geographic Isolation: This code is used when a respondent talks about geographic difficulties, such as driving long distances.
- Social Isolation: This code is used when a respondent talks about social circles and friendships.
- Community Expectations: This code is used when a respondent talks about the community's expectations of the respondent in terms of access to the respondent, visibility of the respondent, or involvement of the respondent in community events. It is also used for community decisions that cause difficulty for the respondent.

Institutional Factors:

- Workload: This code is used when a respondent talks about job duties, often referred to as "hats", and number of hours per week he or she works.
- Lack of Professional Support: This code is used when a respondent talks about lack of support personnel (assistant principal, special education director, secretary, etc.). This code is also used when a respondent talks about principal colleagues, sometimes called job-alikes, including lack of colleagues with whom to discuss their work, frustration that colleagues do not carry their fair share of the burden, and disappointment that a colleague was looking for a job. Finally, this code is used when a respondent talks about lack of personal professional development.
- Personnel Issues: This code is used when a respondent talks about conflict with staff members and staff members not doing their jobs. It is also used when a respondent talks about the teachers' union.
- Superintendent and School Board Decisions:
    - General Decisions or Relationship: This code is used when a respondent talks about relationships with or decisions made by the superintendent or school board. It also includes discussions about the general functioning of the school board and discussions about the respondent feeling appreciated or unappreciated by the superintendent or school board.
    - Budget Cuts: This code is used when a respondent talks about district budget cuts that might have resulted in elimination of an administrative position or changes to administrative duties.

- Principal Salary and Contract Negotiations: This code is used when a respondent talks about salary, benefits, or the contract negotiations process.

Appendix F: National Center of Education Statistics Locale Code Definitions

- 11 = City, Large: Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.
- 12 = City, Midsize: Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- 13 = City, Small: Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.
- 21 = Suburb, Large: Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more.
- 22 = Suburb, Midsize: Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- 23 = Suburb, Small: Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000.
- 31 = Town, Fringe: Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area.
- 32 = Town, Distant: Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.
- 33 = Town, Remote: Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.
- 41 = Rural, Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
- 42 = Rural, Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
- 43 = Rural, Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2008)