WHEN THE FACULTY FEELS LIKE FAMILY: THE ROLE OF
THE PRINCIPAL-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP IN
RURAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

by

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A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The research focus of the scholarly delivery is the principal-teacher relationship in rural schools during times of mandated school improvement. The first scholarly deliverable is a case study that can be used for teaching doctoral or master's candidates in the field of educational leadership. The title of this article is "When a Teacher Chooses Non-Compliance: Harnessing the Power of the Principal-Teacher Relationship". This case study uses the story of a new rural school principal's conflict with one of her teachers to highlight the importance of building trust and using effective communication to strengthen the principal-teacher relationship. The final scholarly deliverable is an empirical article titled "When Faculty Feels Like Family: The Role of the Principal-Teacher Relationship in Rural School Improvement". This article details how two rural Texas principals used positive relationships to garner academic growth on their campuses.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS
Letter of Approval

May 25, 2023

Dr. Bigham:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #**2023.04.024** for your study titled, **"The Role of the Principal-Teacher Relationship in Rual School Improvement"**, meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Use of Human Subjects in Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **May 24, 2023**

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A Continuing Review form along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a Close out form must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR, unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR, potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an Amendment form to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.
8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include

the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB##-##-## Approved: ##/##/#### Expiration Date: ##/##/####.

9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an Amendment/Continuation/Close out form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Dr. Angela Spaulding
Vice President of Research and Compliance

Acknowledgements

First, I must acknowledge my family, without whom I never would have completed this degree. To Richard, thank you for all the dinners cooked, all the wine delivered to my office, and all the evenings spent alone in bed while I finished up "one more thing". I only wish I were half as smart and beautiful as you think I am. To J.D., Nate, Jake, and AmyAnn, the four of you have always been the reason that I do everything that I do. You make me proud each and every day, and I pray that you know how much you all mean to me. To Landon, Carter, Campbell, Dean, and Baby Girl, you may, in fact, call me Dr. Gran. To the Campbell Clan, a girl could never hope for a better cheerleading squad than this family. Mom, thank you for being my road trip companion and constant encourager. Dad, it's okay if you cry. I'm crying too. I love you all and hope you know that you were all my guiding force over these past few years.

Next, I must thank Dr. Bigham. I am so proud of the work that you are doing at WTAMU, and I only hope that I can contribute even half as much to rural Texas education as you have. Dr. Nix, thank you for your wisdom and correction through this process, and for always sharing your knowledge in a way that makes it accessible. Rock on! Thank you to Dr. Hindman for always putting a smiling face next to your edits on my silly typos. Guidance from the three of you has undoubtedly made me a better educator.

Finally, thank you to all Texas teachers and principals for doing what you do and for investing in the future of our state. This work is hard, but it's worthwhile.

Table of Contents

When a Teacher Chooses Non-Compliance: Harnessing the Power of the Principal-Teacher Relationship

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Abstract

This case study benefits individuals preparing for leadership roles in public schools including those who will be the sole instructional leader on their campus and those involved in school improvement efforts. The principal of a rural elementary school is challenged by a teacher who refuses to follow directives pertaining to classroom instruction. This principal supports the teacher through numerous personal issues while maintaining high instructional expectations. Future school leaders will learn the difference between supervision and evaluation, the importance of developing relationships built on trust, and will learn how to harness the power of reflective listening as an instructional leader.

Keywords: principal-teacher relationships, reflective listening, supervisor versus evaluator

When a Teacher Chooses Non-Compliance: Harnessing the Power of the Principal-Teacher Relationship

When a school gains a new principal, the transition can come with uncertainty for all parties. Parents and students wonder how this might impact instruction, the superintendent and school board hope that they made the right choice, and the new principal likely feels nervous and uncertain about how well their ideas will be received by all stakeholders. For teachers and school staff, however, this transition likely brings anxiety about how the change will impact day to day responsibilities and the school culture. This anxiety likely is heightened when the school in question is low-performing and the new principal is tasked with mandated school improvement. In this situation, the status quo will not be maintained. The principal who takes on the role of academic leader of an underperforming school must introduce measures designed to improve student performance.

The following case takes place in Texas. In 2017, because of changes required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Texas implemented an A-F rating system for schools (Carney, 2022). Since that time, district and campus ratings have been determined through a complex algorithm that takes annual standardized test scores, college and career readiness, special population indicators, and student growth into account. The ratings are based off a calculated score that corresponds to a letter grade. Any score between 90 and 99 is an A, a score between 80 and 89 is a B, a score between 70 and 79 is a C, a score between 60 and 69 is a D and anything less than a 60 is an F. Campuses earning a rating below 70 are required to go through rigorous school improvement efforts designed to improve the school's academic measures in the

subsequent testing session. School leaders work to improve outcomes for students through increased instructional oversight, strict campus mandates, and research-based improvement strategies; and are required to regularly report their efforts and progress to the state education agency. Subsequent years of sub-par ratings may garner further intervention from the state, and eventually the state educational agency might take increasingly more invasive actions to motivate schools to improve campus ratings including an eventual state agency takeover of the local school district.

The school in this case earned an F rating due to overall poor performance in multiple areas in 2019. Because of the COVID pandemic in 2020, the state suspended testing. Testing resumed in 2021, but no ratings were given. Based on a score analysis of the spring testing session that year, the school would have maintained its F rating. The new principal took over the campus in fall of 2021. For two years before the new principal arrived, teachers and students had worked fruitlessly to improve ratings. In the fall of 2021, the atmosphere at the school was one of defeat and failure.

For rural schools like the one in this case study, there is an added element of lone instructional leadership. There were no assistant principals or instructional coaches in this district. While the superintendent was aware of the situation, she was not involved in instructional decisions at the campus level and depended on support from the regional service center to improve the campus rating. This created a situation of intense pressure that caused the previous principal to lead the campus in a way that increased anxiety through intense data review sessions, frequent write-ups, and blame placed on teachers for low scores.

The problem of practice driving this case study is centered on the relationship between a new principal and teachers at a low-performing rural campus where the climate is one of frustration and defeat. What can a principal do to earn teachers' trust while still maintaining high expectations and instituting rigorous non-negotiables?

Case Study

Organizational Setting

This case takes place in a rural elementary school in West Texas. The campus has a new principal and most of the teachers have been with the district for several years. This campus is considered a low-performing campus, having earned an F academic rating from the state education agency.

Case Narrative

The characters in the case study are Elyda Williams, the new campus principal, and Brooke Clifford, a fifth-grade language arts teacher who has been with the district for four years. Elyda Williams was excited about her first principal position at a rural West Texas elementary school. She was not new to education. In her seventeen-year career before becoming principal she had been a classroom teacher at both the elementary and secondary levels, a girls' athletics coach, an instructional coach, a STEAM academy coordinator, a department chair, and an assistant principal. In her interview for this position, Mrs. Williams highlighted her success as a classroom teacher and in previous leadership roles as well as her high expectations for students, teachers, and herself. Because she knew that the campus had received an "F" rating from the state accountability rating system based on their most recent State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness or STAAR scores, Mrs. Williams also emphasized her experience

working on the leadership team at a previous campus that had been through the school improvement cycle based on a low campus rating. As the interview conversation turned toward school improvement efforts, Mrs. Williams explained what actions she was willing to take in order to promote effective classroom instruction. Because she was cognizant of staffing challenges at rural schools, her responses relied heavily on coaching ineffective teachers and maintaining high academic standards for all classrooms. This portion of the interview was met with positive feedback from the interview committee, including the superintendent, and Elyda credited her emphasis on instructional leadership as a mitigating factor in being awarded the position.

As soon as she signed her contract, Mrs. Williams got to work planning the actions that she believed would move the school from an "F" to a "C" campus. Because of legislation related to the COVID pandemic, the school's ratings from the 2018-2019 school year were brought forward to the current academic year, but the school did have STAAR data from the most recent round of state testing in the spring of 2021. Under the leadership of the previous principal, the teachers had already done some work with the school improvement specialist from the regional service center, but the improvements seen in the 2021 scores were not enough to reach the campus goals of improving the campus academic rating and moving off the state's improvement-required list. Elyda studied the scores and learned as much about individual and group performance as she could during the summer. In addition, she worked closely with the school improvement specialist who offered guidance and support in her improvement efforts.

Elyda created a list of non-negotiables for teachers that included detailed weekly lesson plans. The required lesson plans included daily content objectives, opening and

closing tasks, formative assessments, and emphasized the lesson cycle. She mandated strict adherence to the district-adopted curriculum sequencing tool including the use of the unit performance assessments and unit tests. Her improvement plan utilized careful data tracking for students and classes through the district-adopted assessment management system. She implemented weekly grade-level professional development committees (PLCs) where she led the teachers through professional development and data desegregation and after-school PLCs every other week where she or a guest presenter delivered focused professional development on best practices and instructional strategies. Finally, Elyda was in classrooms as often as she could be, and she instituted learning walks where teachers could visit other teachers' classrooms in order to improve their own practices and gain insight into what was going on throughout the school.

Overall, Elyda's efforts were met with enthusiasm from teachers who were excited by her energy. They embraced the challenging work of bringing increased expectations into their classrooms. Elyda provided thoughtful and thorough feedback after each classroom visit, and she found this was a great way to coach teachers and discuss their teaching as their *craft*, something that was a new concept for many of the teachers. She provided the same level of feedback to teachers upon reviewing weekly lesson plans. Again, most teachers were open to feedback and there were many lively discussions on the improvements they were seeing in student work.

Early in the year, Mrs. Williams noticed that her fifth-grade language arts teacher, Brooke Clifford, was not submitting lesson plans in the correct format. She was using lesson plans downloaded from a textbook website that did not include the non-negotiables that Elyda had clearly explained. When Elyda asked her about it, the teacher

broke down in tears and explained how things at home were currently interfering with her ability to focus on work. Her teenaged son was going through a hard time, and he had expressed suicidal ideations. Elyda, sympathetic to Brooke's situation and wanting to support and maintain a positive relationship with her, told the teacher that while this crisis was looming at home, she could do the alternate lesson plans. Elyda did maintain that Brooke must follow the established scope and sequence and she must still give the required unit tests. Brooke thanked her and told her that she would do better once things at home improved.

As the school year progressed, Elyda was in classrooms every day. She focused on observable instructional strategies and student activities during walkthroughs. Without exception, when she visited Brooke's classroom, she found the teacher sitting at her desk. Most often, the students were on their computers on a program that the district had purchased as a supplemental intervention. Elyda had clearly explained to teachers that the program was not for full class use and that students should use it only while teachers pulled accelerated instruction groups. Once when she made an announced walk-through in Brooke's classroom, the students were round-robin reading a low-level text from the projector. When Elyda walked in, Brooke, who had been sitting at her desk, stood and started walking amongst the students asking knowledge-level questions that seemed to be composed on the fly. This instructional activity did not reflect Brooke's lesson plan. There was no evidence in subsequent walkthroughs that Brooke was using high-yield instructional strategies. In her feedback to Brooke, Elyda suggested using random questioning tools, close and choral reading, think-pair-share, and several other research-based instructional strategies, but to Elyda's knowledge Brooke did not adjust

her instruction based on this feedback. Elyda was becoming frustrated and worried that the students were not getting the instruction that they needed to progress and to help improve the school's academic rating.

While she was sympathetic with Brooke's home situation, as the campus academic leader Elyda knew that she had to do something to improve instruction for her fifth-grade students. She considered a formal write-up and improvement plan, but in an effort to exhaust every option before that drastic step, Elyda invited Brooke into her office for a formal meeting. In this meeting, Elyda explained that the instruction in Brooke's classroom was not meeting her expectations. She recapped the situation: although Brooke had been allowed to adjust her lesson plans while things were hard at home, she was still expected to deliver quality instruction. Walkthrough observations showed that she was using too much group computer time and too many worksheets. In addition, Brooke's certificate had lapsed during the COVID pandemic, and she had made no effort to schedule the exam necessary to reinstate her certificate in the ensuing months. During this meeting Brooke's demeanor confused Elyda. She sat in the chair, nodding and smiling, and offered no explanation or rebuttal to Elyda's statements. When Elyda asked if she had anything to say, Brooke said "no", smiled, and left the office. Because of what Elyda interpreted as discordant behavior, she sent a follow-up email to Brooke in which she recapped the conversation and detailed next steps for the teacher to take. This was not a formal write-up, but Elyda considered it a formal reprimand, so she copied the superintendent and the school improvement specialist on the email.

This email upset Brooke. She considered herself a successful teacher and was shocked at the tone of the reprimand. In addition, she felt threatened by the way that the

superintendent was included in the conversation. She thought that the new principal respected her and she had shown grace previously by allowing her to adjust her lesson plans when her son was going through his rough patch. In addition, things were not going well at home for a different reason now. Her grandmother who had raised Brooke since childhood was dying. The doctor had not offered much hope and she was actually bringing her home from the nursing facility that weekend so she could spend her final weeks in the comfort of her family. Brooke knew that Mrs. Williams had high expectations, but her most recent unit test scores were good. She felt that she was being unfairly targeted since her teaching style was different than the style that Mrs. Williams emphasized. Brooke felt that her scores and time in the profession should allow her to have some autonomy in her instructional choices. She emailed Mrs. Williams and the superintendent back and asked to meet with them the following day.

The next day Elyda and Brooke met in Elyda's office. Elyda spoke to the superintendent before the scheduled meeting, and they decided that the best course of action would be to only include the superintendent if necessary. In that meeting, Brooke brought her most recent test data which showed strong scores from students. She advocated for herself as a teacher and she argued that the district spent a lot of money on the computer program in question, so she should use it with fidelity. She explained the situation with her grandmother and said that she was doing the best that she could at that moment. Elyda comforted her about the impending loss she was facing, and she praised her for the positive test data. She did not back down on reminding Brooke that the best research-based instruction was delivered by a teacher. She reiterated her desire for Brooke to reduce the number of worksheets being used in the classroom and to include

more interactive, high yield strategies every day. Brooke finished the meeting by saying that she felt that Elyda wanted her to teach in "Mrs. Williams' style" when her "Ms. Clifton style" was what she felt most comfortable with. The meeting resulted in Mrs. Williams agreeing to honor the different style that Ms. Clifton is more comfortable with while Ms. Clifton agreed to use more direct teaching and fewer worksheets and computer minutes.

While Elyda did feel that the meeting helped to mend her relationship with Brooke somewhat, she still felt that the teacher was not doing what was best for students. During the meeting she had felt attacked and convicted that she might be trying to push her own style on teachers, but afterwards she realized that she was requiring research-based, high-impact strategies. Elyda was still concerned that the instruction in Brooke's classroom was not what the students needed in order to bring the school's ratings up to an acceptable level. In addition, Elyda remained confused and taken aback by Brooke's blatant disregard for directives. It almost seemed to Elyda that Brooke was trying to be released. Finally, Brooke had still made no attempt to take the test that would re-instate her certificate. They had agreed with the superintendent that Brooke would have through the end of the year to pass the test, but yet there had been no attempt, and they were now in October.

The next week Brooke's grandmother passed away and she was out several days for the funeral. Elyda sent her condolences and gave her even more grace in completing lesson plans. She offered to help Brooke prepare for her absence, but Brooke said she had her plans created already. During her absence there were worksheets left and Elyda was concerned that the students were going to fall even further behind.

After sharing her concerns with the school improvement specialist, Elyda has decided that the data will speak for itself. There is an upcoming interim assessment, and she will use that data to inform any further action she takes concerning Brooke and her classroom instruction. She will continue to use coaching strategies such as frequent walkthroughs, specific feedback, and guidance on lesson plans with Brooke, and she will make further decisions as the interim data becomes available. While her main focus is this year, Elyda is also keeping careful documentation to support any change of placement decisions that she believes she will likely need to make at the end of the year. Brooke continues to work through her grief as she encourages her students to get their required minutes in the computer program. She still leans heavily on worksheets in her instruction.

Teaching Notes

Positive relationships are important in schools; that is true not only with students and parents, but for the administrator-teacher relationship as well. School administrators must consider their approach with teachers, particularly in rural and small schools where the school principal serves as the entire instructional team. Provided in the following section is the literature that describes barriers that can impact the principal-teacher relationship as well as strategies that can strengthen those relationships and provide for a more effective coaching model. Principals must establish the difference between supervision and evaluation, they must work to develop relationships built on trust, and they must practice reflective listening when working with teachers in all capacities. The material presented in the following review of pertinent literature supports the use of this

case study by providing background knowledge that will be utilized when working with the discussion questions and when conducting the learning activities.

Supervision vs. Evaluation

In the years since No Child Left Behind was instituted in 2002 and Race to the Top in 2012, teacher evaluation systems have become more rigorous, and data driven. In Texas, for instance, the Texas Evaluation and Support System, or T-TESS, is a much more rigorous evaluation system than the Professional Development Appraisal System, or PDAS, that it replaced (Oileras-Ortiz, 2017). As such, teachers struggle to accept supervision, or coaching feedback, from a principal without fear that it will impact the evaluation of their job performance (Mette et al., 2017). Often in education the terms "supervisor" and "evaluator" are used interchangeably (Mette, et al. 2017, Neumerski et al., 2018, & Stark et al., 2017). Specifically, supervision refers to "supportive feedback to improve instruction" and evaluation means "assessment of ability" (Mette et al., 2017, p. 710). While evaluation is necessary and mandated at the federal level, data-driven often using a rubric, and can impact a teacher's job retention and possibly pay incentives, supervision is a way for administrators or other instructional leaders to promote growth and professional development among teachers.

While it seems that teachers would welcome the guidance and feedback that supervision can provide, this is not always the case. Teachers can feel threatened by poor evaluation when principals act in a supervisory role. Neumerski et al. (2018) found that principals expressed concern that their supervision efforts would be interpreted as related to teacher evaluation. In that study some principals reported that they are no longer welcomed into classrooms by teachers and they are missing out on joining in on activities

they previously enjoyed with students because teachers are fearful of negatively impacted evaluations. A new Jersey case became litigious when teachers interpreted supervision by principals as being cloaked data-gathering opportunities effecting annual evaluations (Hazi, 1996). In that case study Hazi also described the very real threat of tension that can occur between principals and teachers when supervision is interpreted as evaluation. This tension was found in Mette et al.'s 2017 study that points out the increased chance of tension when the supervisor is also the teacher's evaluator. In the case of principals who serve dual roles as both supervisor and evaluator, it is important that they explicitly define each role and explain to teachers that these are two separate roles and will be carried out separately.

Relationships Built on Trust

Though challenging, it is possible for a principal to be both a successful supervisor and an effective evaluator of teacher performance. For this to happen principals must be intentional about building trust-based relationships that value teacher feedback (Mette et al., 2017). In a 2012 study Price found that the principal-teacher relationship has the power of impacting not only the overall job satisfaction of both parties, but also the teacher's commitment to the school and the job. Teachers are more likely to respond to supervisory feedback when they have a positive relationship with the principal (Donahue & Vogel, 2018), reporting that they will change their classroom instructional practices in response to this coaching. Teacher job satisfaction is also improved by principals who encourage participation, are flexible, who share leadership, and who are supportive (Cansoy, 2019), all traits of positive relationships. Another key indicator of strong relationships between principals and teachers is shared expectations.

When the principal shares his or her expectations clearly with teachers, teachers are more likely to respond favorably (Price, 2012).

Key to building these relationships is a foundation of trust. Teachers are sometimes hesitant to take the advice or guidance of their principal because they don't trust in their abilities as instructional leaders (Oileras-Ortiz, 2017). That trust must extend from trust in the principal to trust in the organization. The school principal is in a position to develop organizational trust by establishing an emotional connection and a strong sense of goals for the school (Sezer & Uzun, 2020). Shared goals and expectations can lead to improved organizational outcomes which leads to improved individual teacher outcomes (Price, 2012). Cansoy (2019) asserts that this trust will come from mutual communication, help and support, the use of justice and equality, and the creation of a shared vision of the school.

Finally, in order to maintain quality interactions with teachers, principals must demonstrate a high level of Social-emotional Educational Leadership, or SEEL (Sezer & Uzan, 2020). Leaders must carefully consider not only their personal social-emotional skills, but how they express those skills through their leadership. These include high self-awareness, personal and social competence, social awareness, relationship management, self-control, transparency, ability to adapt, achievement, initiative, and optimism (Sezer & Uzan, 2020). This is a lot to ask of any leader, but due to the fact that teaching is a very personal and often emotional profession, it is imperative that school leaders work from a place of high SEEL in order to maintain trustful relationships with teachers. Oileras-Ortiz (2017) stated it best when she said "without relational trust between teachers and administrators, it will be difficult to establish instructional supervision that is effective

and impacts the teachers' practices" (p. 41). Clearly the goal of supervision is enhanced instruction - trust is the key to making it happen.

Reflective Listening

While there is a formal feedback and reflection piece built into many current evaluation systems, including the T-TESS, this piece is often underused or skipped altogether in practice. Principals cite lack of time to complete the entire cycle as the main reason that this critical step is omitted (Oileras-Ortiz, 2017). Stark et al. (2017) found that this piece is important in creating a supervisor- teacher relationship that works when the supervisor is also the evaluator. Their research found that the key is allowing the teacher to decide what direction coaching conversations should take. Principals should use a nondirective style, encouraging visualization, and focusing on solutions instead of diving too deeply into what they may see as problems in the classroom. By taking this approach, they assert, principals are creating an environment where teachers are comfortable talking about the realities of their classrooms, promoting "critical self-reflection in their teachers" (p. 217). A recent study found that by using a reflective interview process allowing teachers to guide the post-observation piece principals can nurture the supervisor-teacher relationship and help develop shared thinking, reflection, and collaboration (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021). Administrators must change their expectations of these conversations, but by allowing the teachers to lead the process the principal "will not sound as punitive or corrective" (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021, p.70).

Principals who are willing to embrace the win-win situation that comes from sharing power with teachers (Xia & Shen, 2020) are more likely to have teachers who willingly identify areas where they need or would benefit from professional growth.

Teachers are more likely to embrace professional learning opportunities when they are committed, optimistic, and are able to participate collaboratively with their peers (Er, 2021). Reflective conversation facilitated correctly by the principal will reveal areas where teachers desire growth and where the right professional development will be embraced by the teacher, leading to improved classroom instruction.

In the following section, the literature presented above is used to guide instructional leadership candidates through discussion questions aimed at helping to identify the root of the problem that Mrs. Williams faced, the issues that caused tension between Ms. Clifford and Mrs. Williams, and future steps that Mrs. Williams should take to create a collaborative relationship with teachers. Following the discussion questions is a set of practical activities designed to assist leadership candidates in considering ways to ensure quality relationships with teachers.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider Mrs. Williams' actions as a new principal at her campus. Focus on one specific action that reinforces her role as a supervisor and one that reinforces her role as an evaluator. Describe those actions and how they could be interpreted by her staff as she builds relationships with them.

   Instructor Tip: Guide candidates as they compare the two roles using the Mette definition of each role. As an incoming principal, Mrs. Williams was in a position to establish her purpose and goals with the teaching staff. How effectively did she establish the dual role of supervisor and evaluator through her actions?

2. Consider the changes and "non-negotiables" that Mrs. Williams instituted involving lesson plans. The previous principal had tried to institute similar

17

changes, but her efforts fell flat. Overall, Mrs. Williams was successful in getting teachers to comply with her directives. What do you think Mrs. Williams did to ensure compliance with her non-negotiables?

Instructor Tip: Guide candidates to reevaluate the literature on relationship building but encourage conjecture as well. This is a time for discussion on how to present expectations to a new staff in a way that invites compliance and receptiveness.

3. The previous campus principal used regular teacher write-ups and disciplinary measures as part of her leadership style with teachers. She would often include notes from coaching sessions in teachers' yearly evaluations. How might this have contributed to Ms. Clifton's confusion over Mrs. Williams' intentions in her actions?

Instructor Tip: Guide candidates to review the difference between evaluation and supervision. Instruct them to determine why the predecessor might use coaching notes as part of the annual evaluation and how Mrs. Williams can avoid that in her tenure as principal of the campus.

4. Reflect on the conversations that Mrs. Williams and Ms. Clifton had where Ms. Clifton shared intimate details of her life with the leader. What does this tell you about the relational capacity between the two women? Do you believe that Mrs. Williams reacted appropriately to these conversations? Why or why not? What can Mrs. Williams do in future interactions to build their relationship while still guiding interactions towards meeting instructional goals?

Instructor Tip: Refer candidates back to the Reflective Listening section to provide guidance for Mrs. Williams.

5. One of the issues addressed in this case study relates to the refusal of the teacher to comply with the administrator's non-negotiables. Why does Mrs. Williams back off on her non-negotiables in this case? Was this the correct choice? What long-term effects could this have on the relationship between Mrs. Williams and her faculty?

6. Mrs. Williams and Ms. Clifton both reached out to the superintendent in order to keep her in the loop. The superintendent felt that this is an instructional issue that should be handled by the campus principal. At what point should a district leader step into a situation like this one? What would that intervention look like in this case?

Instructor Tip: Consider how the terms "supervisor" and "evaluator" work at the district level? How would this intervention impact Mrs. Williams' long-term relationships with her staff?

7. The emotional needs of teachers are at an all-time high. What can administrators do to support teachers in time of family hardship or grief? Do you think Mrs. Williams' responses to Ms. Clifton's personal situations were appropriate? Explain why you feel as you do.

Relationship-Building Instructional Activities:

1. Often new administrators are tasked with creating a 30-60-90 day entry plan. Considering information from the case study about the school, create a 30-60-90 day entry plan for Mrs. Williams to assist her transition into her new role. Have it begin in June. Detail the steps that she will take, resources needed, how she will communicate with stakeholders, and the precise timeline for each step. Pay particular attention to relationship building and how the principal will establish expectations for supervision and evaluation.

2. Mrs. Williams wants to institute Reflective Listening as a way to build instructional capacity on campus. How should she go about this? Create a list of guidelines for Mrs. Williams to use as she begins to have reflective conversations with teachers. Include next steps for her to take as she continues the coaching conversations to support teachers in their instructional growth.

3. An issue raised in Ms. Clifton's story is the need for support services for teachers and faculty in times of personal trauma. You and a partner from this class are tasked with writing a grant for better support of school staff in times of need. Your grant will need to have research-based explanations of this need, an innovative and research-backed plan for providing the support for staff members facing trauma, and an implementation timeline for using the anticipated award. You will submit a 3 to 5 page grant proposal to your instructor. You will create a 5–8-minute presentation that you will present "shark tank" style to the grant committee (your classmates).

4. Mette et al. (2017) used the framework of wicked problems in their article describing the intersection between supervision and evaluation. They define wicked problems as ones that "have no definitive formulation or solution, no correct or wrong answers, and no finite amount of solutions" (p. 711). Using this definition, identify a wicked problem plaguing rural education. With a group of three to five classmates dissect your wicked problem. Develop a list of contributing factors and root causes for this problem. Next, brainstorm solutions to the identified wicked problem. Look closely at your contributing factors and consider how they might be addressed in different educational environments. Remember that there is not a single solution. If your problem is easily solved, it is not "wicked" enough. After brainstorming and recording your ideas, each member will write a 5-page solution paper. First describe your problem, identify root causes, and detail a possible solution or solutions. Use peer-reviewed research to help describe your problem and support your solution. In the conclusion of your paper include next steps, potential policy changes needed, and research gaps in the area of the problem.

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When the Faculty Feels Like Family: The Role of the Principal-Teacher Relationship in Rural School Improvement

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Abstract

When Texas students do not perform at the expected level on state standardized assessments, schools face intense scrutiny from the state education agency. This study examines the impact that two principals had on their rural campuses in moving their schools from an F rating to an A rating in only a few short years. Within this case study method using interviews and the analysis of Campus Improvement Plans, data were identified through thematic analysis that showed a causal relationship between principals who maintain a supportive and trustworthy relationship with teachers and successful school improvement efforts. Additional causal factors included a commitment to the community on the part of the principal and the presence of a family-type atmosphere on campus. Open communication, collaboration, and teacher leadership were also factors that may contribute to school improvement. Professional development as assigned by the principal was not an identified causal mechanism for improved school ratings.

Keywords: Texas elementary schools, rural education, school improvement, principal-teacher relationships, supportive principal, open communication in leadership

When the Faculty Feels Like Family: The Role of the Principal-Teacher

Relationship in Rural School Improvement

School improvement at the campus level has been widely researched, particularly in the era of state- and federally- mandated initiatives requiring schools to maintain accountability for student achievement (Andreoli et al., 2019; Foster, 2005; Nehez & Blossing, 2022; Scott & McMurrer, 2015; Shipway & Chaseling, 2021; Stosich et al., 2018; Wilcox, 2022). Most school leaders recognize the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed in 2002, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as a turning point where policymakers began to require nation-wide reform of America's public schools (Woodside-Jiron & Gehsmann, 2009). Since this historic reform initiative, public schools have been constantly trying to earn or maintain acceptable ratings or levels of achievement as shown through state standardized test scores and other accountability measures (Scott & McMurrer, 2015). In Texas, student achievement, as demonstrated through standardized test scores, determines campus academic ratings. Public and charter school campuses that earn low ratings face state-level interventions and sanctions. If a school's low ratings do not improve in subsequent years the Texas Education Agency (TEA) may ultimately remove decision-making authority from the local education agency as happened to Houstin ISD in 2023 (Jones II, 2023). For this reason, principals of schools with low ratings must find solutions to low student achievement through school improvement and reform initiatives.

There is no agreed-upon formula for improving schools; often there are competing ideas about what schools should do to improve student outcomes. School administrators and teachers find themselves at odds with outside interests such as state

regulations and parent expectations (Nehez & Blossing, 2022). Overarching themes in the recent literature on school improvement include the need for increased teacher collaboration and more intentional professional development (Chance & Segura, 2009; Foster, 2005; Scott & McMurrer, 2015; Stosich et al., 2018; Wilcox, 2022). Mullen and Jones (2008) found that leadership distributed among multiple people and situations supported school improvement efforts. Other studies found teacher leadership and collective efficacy to be keys to school improvement (Andreoli et al., 2019; Cemaloglu & Savas, 2018; Foster, 2005; Ramberg, 2014; Sceto & Yan-Ni, 2018; Shipway & Chaseling, 2021). School leaders facing mandated academic improvement at the campus level may potentially use these findings to improve student outcomes.

Rural schools face unique challenges when tasked with school improvement (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Hargreaves & Cox, 2015; Jones, 2009; Scott & McMurrer, 2015; Wallin & Reimer, 2008; Wargo et al., 2021; Wilcox, 2018). Teachers in rural schools are often inadequately prepared to teach upper-level classes, assigned to teach classes outside their field, and may face challenges when seeking professional development due to the geographic isolation of their rural school districts (Moker et al., 2021). In addition, some rural school leaders, particularly those responsible for traditionally underperforming populations, have limited understanding of the need to engage the entire rural community in school improvement efforts (Mette & Stanoch, 2016). Finally, small rural schools often face a lack of resources causing a situation where a lone administrator is tasked with improving student outcomes with limited opportunities for administrative collaboration (Andreoli et al., 2019; Gawlik, 2014; Jones, 2009).

Texas School Accountability System

In 2017, as a result of changes required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Texas implemented an A-F rating system for schools (Carney, 2022). School ratings are determined through a complex algorithm that takes annual standardized test scores, college and career readiness, special population indicators, and student growth into account. The ratings are based off of a calculated score that corresponds to a letter grade. Any score between 90 and 99 is an A, a score between 80 and 89 is a B, a score between 70 and 79 is a C, a score between 60 and 69 is a D and anything less than a 60 is an F. During the 2021-2022 school year, any score below 70 was classified as a "hidden domain" rating, but numerical scores were still available. Campuses that earned a rating below 70 were required to go through rigorous school improvement efforts designed to improve the school's academic measures in the subsequent testing session. Campuses must improve outcomes for students through increased instructional oversight, strict campus mandates, and research-based improvement strategies, and must regularly report their efforts and progress to the state education agency. Subsequent years of sub-par ratings garner further intervention from the state, and eventually the state educational agency can take increasingly more invasive actions to motivate schools to improve campus ratings including an eventual state agency takeover of the local school district. This process is particularly difficult for schools because standards do not stay the same year to year. Schools are tasked with hitting a moving target of school achievement. Although many schools are required to engage in the school improvement process each year, all are not successful in their improvement efforts.

Problem of Practice

When schools earn unacceptable scores, administrators and teachers face pressures from internal and external stakeholders to increase student outcomes through school improvement efforts (Nehez & Blossing, 2022). Because Texas academic ratings are a combination of measures including standardized test scores, college and career readiness appraisals, special population performance, and student growth, poor academic school ratings can be attributed to several individual or a combination of factors. Even when a school improvement team can accurately identify root causes for poor student performance, they may not know how to effectively address those issues and bring about reform. For the rural school principal who may lack specialized school improvement resources, the challenge of improving a school's academic rating can seem insurmountable (Scott & McMurrer, 2015). The problem identified for this study is that rural school principals tasked with required school improvement have limited guidance, resources, and examples to follow as they work to increase academic ratings.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify specific actions and behaviors attributed to rural school leaders who were successful in improving ratings on their campuses. A particular area of examination is the role of the principal-teacher relationship in school improvement. The study focused on schools that achieved significant improvement over a short period of time. A case study model was used for in-depth examination of rural campuses that have successfully improved ratings. In the age of increased school accountability, school improvement is a priority for campuses and districts that earn poor ratings. This study's results provide actionable steps and guidance for rural principals

facing school improvement with an emphasis on the role of the principal-teacher relationship.

Research Question

Much existing literature on school improvement attributes the success of improvement efforts on actions and attitudes of school administrators (Chance & Segura, 2009; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Nehez & Blossing, 2022; Spillane & Kenney, 2012; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018; Xaba & Mofokeng, 2021), but there is a lack of emphasis on rural administrators in this literature. Studies have shown the importance of the principal-teacher relationship to the success of school improvement efforts (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Hopfenbeck et al., 2015; Lambert, 2007; Murley et al., 2008), so how can rural principals leverage relationships to counteract the lack of resources that larger schools have in school improvement efforts? The research question analyzed in this study was: What impact does the principal-teacher relationship, as perceived by the principal, have on school improvement efforts in rural Texas schools that are required to improve their academic ratings from an F by the state educational agency?
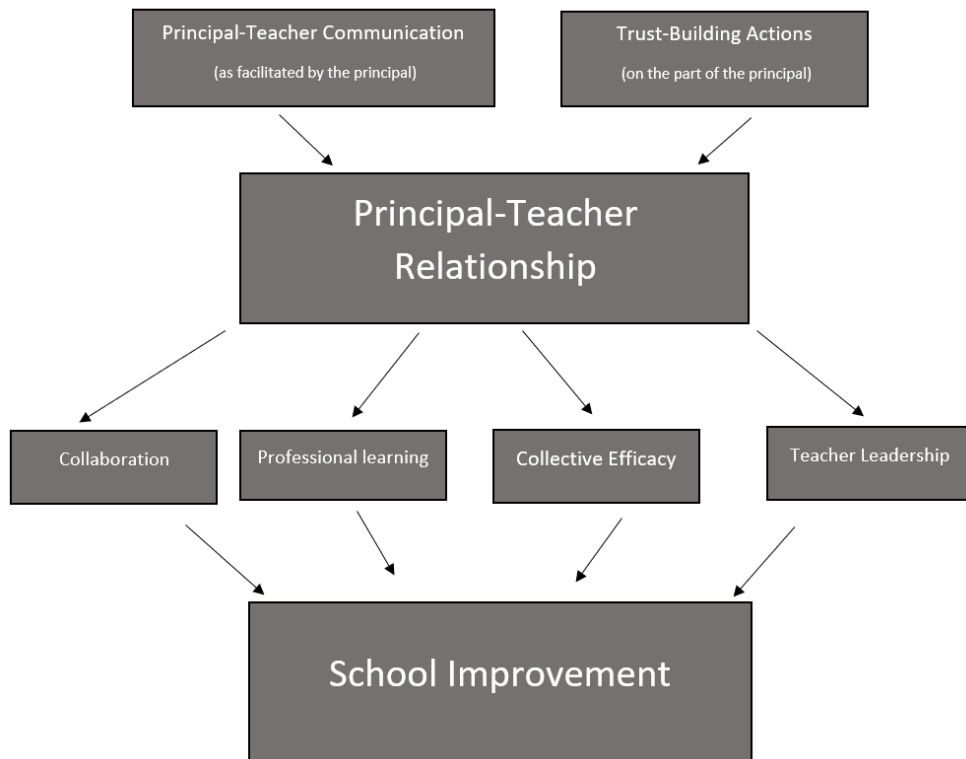
Conceptual Framework

This study evaluated factors that contributed to school improvement as facilitated by the campus principal. While additional factors including individual teacher efficacy beliefs, and teacher practice contribute to school improvement success (Stosich et al., 2018), these are outside the scope of this study. Research has shown the connection among collaboration, professional learning, teacher leadership, and collective efficacy and their impact on school improvement (Balan et al., 2011; Foster, 2005; Karagiorgi et al., 2018; Ramberg, 2014). Principals impact the quality of relationships with teachers by

their behaviors and actions that support communication and build trust. The conceptual

framework demonstrated in Figure 1 shows the relationship among these elements in the

realm of school improvement.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study Showing the Connection Between the Principal-

Teacher Relationship and School Improvement

Literature Review

There is a robust body of recent literature available concerning the problem of

school improvement. As shown above, the conceptual framework for this study was

constructed using common themes and findings from existing literature. Explanations of

each main theme identified in the framework are listed categorically below. This review

of literature was conducted through the lens of a public-school principal to best address the research question.

School Improvement

School improvement is identified as the starting point for this review. Working backwards from the end goal of improved school ratings provides a wide vantage point from which to view the individual elements previously found to play a part in school improvement efforts.

Collaboration. In their report on community schools, Maier et al. (2017) explained that collaboration in schools creates the necessary conditions for improved student achievement. In their limited review of existing literature on collaboration in education, Griffiths et al. (2021) found that the idea of educational collaboration requires an extensive definition. They contended that the building blocks of collaboration must be understood including relationship-building through open communication, trust, and mutual respect; shared values and beliefs through shared goals and a mutual understanding; and active engagement through shared responsibility and active participation leading to shared decision-making and effective implementation. Slater (2004) noted that participation must be voluntary. Productive collaboration is internally driven, goal-oriented, structured, and focused on student achievement (Chance & Segura, 2009; Karagiorgi, 2018; Maier, et al., 2017; Slater, 2004) and may provide social capital for participants (Wolf et al., 2000). In a climate where teachers are credited for their professionalism and ownership of their practice, there is an increased need for effective teacher collaboration (Slater, 2004). One study where teachers engaged in action research to improve student outcomes found that teachers in a collaborative setting were able to

plan, make decisions, implement plans, and evaluate results in a structured process aimed at problem-solving relevant school problems (Karagiorgi et al., 2018). In this action research setting, leaders who engaged in the process acknowledged the value not only for teachers, but also for school leaders and students. In fact, Maier et al. (2017) contended that the best collaborative situation for schools involves the input of all stakeholders: teachers, leaders, students, parents, and community members.

Professional Learning. The success of a school's professional development program has been identified as a factor influencing school improvement efforts (Chance & Segura, 2009; Foster, 2005; Scott & McMurrer, 2015; Stosich et al., 2018; Wilcox, 2022). Not only do teachers and administrators need ongoing and effective professional development to keep instruction meaningful and connected to professional practice (Er, 2021), but curriculum and instructional designers also draw relevance and motivation from this type of learning (Shaneh & Cho, 2015). At the campus level, principals generally determine the effectiveness of the professional development program, influencing the most success through developing an organized system (Balan et al., 2011) that maintains strong connections to instructional practice and a developmental approach to school improvement (Stosich et al., 2015). Rosenberg et al. (2015) reported that some school improvement grants emphasize the importance of embedding opportunities for professional learning into the school day through professional learning committees (PLCs). Other possibilities for collaborative learning using professional learning networks (PLNs), that occur when multiple districts collaborate to provide professional development to teachers (Prenger et al., 2020). In their systematic study of the effectiveness of these PLNs, Prenger et al. (2020) found that structured and guided

activities related to instructional practice, shared goals and concrete outcomes, a collective focus on student learning, active participation, reflective dialogue, leadership and facilitation, and stakeholder support were necessary for success. Teacher commitment, optimism, and engagement are indicators of a teacher's willingness to improve professional practices through professional learning (Er, 2021). Mullen and Jones (2008) found that professional development is more successful when it is perpetuated through shared decision-making in a way that is democratic and includes accountability.

While teacher interaction is important through both professional development and informal PLCs (Gawlick, 2014), the campus instructional leader also needs explicit training to effectively lead such learning opportunities to inspire the best results (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021). Given the right conditions and participants, James and Augustin (2018) found that action research on the part of teachers is an effective way to enhance professional learning on a school campus. While ideas like this deserve consideration, for most schools a tried-and-true professional development system that focuses on curriculum, instruction, and classroom management (Balan et al., 2011) is the best direction to take. In their review of instructional improvement through professional development, Balan et al. identified three systems: Instructional Process Model (IPM), a twelve-step circular model; Professional Development Pathways Model (PDPM), a 4-step flexible model; and Professional Development for Instructional Improvement (PDI) that focuses on the interrelationship between empowerment through capacity building and an effective learning environment. Each of these systems included the core tenets of curriculum and instruction, assessment, learning theories, classroom management,

motivation, collaboration, and problem-solving to promote effective professional learning. The authors emphasized that

> to be effective, PD activities require a systematic plan and a commitment from policy makers, educational leaders, and teachers to follow through. The most meaningful PD occurs over time, deals with specific issues, and elevates teaching to a scholarly practice. (Balan et al., 2011, p. 13)

Campus administrators are responsible for ensuring that teachers are provided access to quality, meaningful professional development to improve student outcomes.

Collective Teacher Efficacy. When principals encounter mandated school reform, it can be a catalyst for shared growth within the school community (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017). It is important for school leaders to work with teachers in making sense of policies, developing shared understandings of mandates, deciphering the potential impact on instructional practices, and collectively communicating the resulting impact on actions and behaviors (Gawlik, 2014). Donohoo (2018) examined existing literature on collective teacher efficacy (CTE). Donohoo described CTE as a feeling that together the teacher and administration can overcome challenges and meet student needs. He found that CTE may lead to deeper implementation of school improvement strategies, enhanced emphasis on academic pursuits within a school, and overall positive results for teachers including improved commitment to students and the profession, higher job satisfaction, less burnout, and better attitudes towards professional development. Students benefit from CTE through improved relationships, higher graduation rates, and teachers with more positive attitudes towards special needs populations (Donohoo, 2018). Versland and Erickson (2017) found that the following factors contributed to CTE:

knowledge and competencies of the individuals involved, group structure, group leadership, and how the group members interacted together. They also asserted that experiences like relationship building and fidelity to instructional initiatives contribute to CTE and that principal self-efficacy influences CTE through maintaining an instructional focus, developing teacher leaders, and leading by example. School leaders who want to increase CTE should set directives and manage the instructional program to increase group competence (Liu, 2021).

Another way to build CTE is through great conversations. This practice helps organizations identify gaps in theory and practice and can promote learning and growth among those who participate by capitalizing on the value of reflection on practice and helping faculty groups to deepen rigor and bring better collaboration to school reform (Bana, 2010). Intentional community building creates an increased sense of CTE as principal and staff work together to reach shared goals through collaboration leading to improved instruction (Miller et al., 2016).

Teacher Leadership. CTE has been linked positively to the development of teacher leaders. School leaders may empower teachers to lead through involvement in curriculum development, the facilitation of professional development, and curriculum-based decision-making (Sceto & Yan-Ni Cheng, 2018). Cemaloglu and Savas (2018) found that teachers with positive attitudes about leadership roles are excited to contribute to the campus in a leadership capacity. When school leaders and teacher leaders are competent, school success outcomes are improved (Foster, 2005) as learning and leading are not isolated events (Andreoli et al., 2019). Campus leaders can empower teachers with knowledge and leadership skills throughout the school improvement process through

effective professional development and support while working to improve student outcomes (Ramberg, 2014). School administrators concerned about the long-term success of the school should provide opportunities and training to emerging teacher leaders. Sustainable leadership in schools is key to improved student outcomes and should be distributed so that it does not fall solely on the shoulders of the principal (Clark & Stevens, 2009). Some principals might be leery about sharing leadership with teachers, but Xia and Shen (2020) found that principals who share leadership with teachers create a win-win situation where the high level of influence exhibited by the principal is mirrored by the teachers in leadership positions. Encouraging teacher leadership contributes to the ongoing success of the school, even after a principal moves on to another campus (Clarke & Stevens, 2009).

Principal-Teacher Relationship

The relationship between a school's principal and its teachers may be pivotal to campus culture and climate. Additionally, this relationship has been shown to impact the ability of teacher-leaders to develop (Sceto & Yan-Ni Cheng, 2018). Atmospheres where principals are described as genuine and open, where teacher participation is encouraged, and where routine tasks are minimized promote stronger commitment to the school community and student success (Xaba & Mofokeng, 2021). Two areas where principals can intentionally improve relationships with teachers is through fostering trust and improving communication.

Trust. According to Flood and Angelle (2017), teacher leadership is dependent upon both collective efficacy and trust. Accountability and trust may be seen as opposing forces in the school setting because close monitoring and sanctions are imposed on

schools that fail to meet appropriate measures when, in actuality, accountability is built

on the trust that another person or entity will do what is expected of them (Ehren et al.,

2020). For an administrator to be effective as an instructional leader, teachers must trust

their ability in that capacity (Olieras-Ortiz, 2017). Kwan (2016) found a positive

relationship between instructional leadership and student outcomes, but only in high and

moderate-trust schools. Teachers also need to trust that principals understand

instructional practices deeply enough to provide meaningful feedback (Bukko et al.,

2021). Principals may develop and nurture trust between teachers as they work towards

shared institutional goals (Mette et al., 2017), but that does require that principals

acknowledge existing conflict, prioritize relationships, and empower teachers (Leis &

Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). Flood and Angelle (2017) described the components that create

trust as a perception of integrity, care, and concern along with a belief that

communication is open, honest, and accurate. They also found that the atmosphere of an

organization may be grounded in trust or mistrust. If principals trust teachers in shared

decision-making, the teachers will return that trust toward the principal. The onus is on

the principal, however. Principals must invest in the emotional management of their

interactions with teachers to improve the trust relationship between faculty and

administration (Berkovich, 2018). In addition to personal trust, organizational trust is also

nurtured by the principal and may contribute to an emotional connection that may build a

strong sense of organizational goals and improved teacher performance (Sezer & Uzun,

2020). While tension during times of school improvement may hamper trust within

schools (Wettlaufer & Sider, 2019), the bottom line is that for change in the form of

reforms or school improvement to work in the school setting, there must be relational trust (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016).

Principal-Teacher Communication. The ways and means by which a principal communicates with his or her staff may impact the quality of principal-teacher relationships. A principal should begin by communicating a strong vision for the school. Cansoy (2019) stressed the importance of the principal not only creating and sharing a vision, but also using open communication to help and support teachers with justice, equity, and honesty to share tasks and improve skills within the organization. Communication on the part of the principal is a means of "harmonizing the knowledge about goals" and addressing "new ways and means of reaching these goals" (Botez, 2018). In his study that examined the ways principal communication may contribute to school improvement, Arlestig (2007) asserted that varied modes of communication that support one another are required for successful communication to happen. According to Cansoy, communication is a way for the principal to encourage different perspectives and interpretations within the school. He warned, though, that the existing structure and culture of a school may limit communication efforts on the part of the principal and that it will take more than the principal being visible to teachers to improve communication. This means that there must be intentionality and structure in place to support improved communication. A strategy that has shown to maintain positive communication between administrators and teachers is the use of purposeful, reflective, and direct communication practices when discussing instructional improvements (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021; Stark et al., 2017). Principals should avoid authoritative and directive conversations, opting instead to use an inquiry-based strategy where teachers are guided into discovering

instructional improvements that they will need to make. Then the team plans and decides how the principal may support the teacher's growth (Stark et al., 2017). Damore and Rieckhoff (2021) described a similar system where teachers were more likely to take ownership of their individual classroom practices through reflective honing of their instructional skills. By having teachers lead discussions on classroom instruction and best practices, principals may frame their relationships as one of supportive mentor as opposed to critical evaluator.

      Relationships. Wolf et al. (2000) called the role of relationships crucial in education, providing the same weight to the relationships between the people who share a commitment to the curriculum, the principals and teachers, as they did to other stakeholders such as parents and students. Lambert (2007) found that student achievement was more likely when there was a relationship based on a shared vision among parents, teachers, and school leaders. This impact was enhanced when that relationship led to coherence, broad involvement, collaboration, collective practice, and collective responsibility on the part of all players. Effective principals know that relationship building and maintaining is vital to school success, particularly during periods of school reform (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017). Relationship building may be a challenge, however, for principals who wish to leverage positive relationships in the school environment. At times the challenge comes from teachers. There is a real push on the part of teachers to maintain autonomy during school improvement. For this reason, school leaders must acknowledge teachers' needs for autonomy and their professionalism as they create policy to maintain positive relationships (Spillane & Kenney, 2012). Xaba and Mofokeng (2021) discovered that genuine relationship building on the part of the

principal includes creating a supportive environment, encouraging teacher participation and contributions, and reducing requirements of menial tasks like routine paperwork. While it seems like creating positive relationships with teachers would be a given for principals, Hopfenbeck et al. (2015) found that struggle and tensions usually exist between teachers and leaders when it comes to the need for trust and accountability, two elements required for positive relationships. They also found that these tensions may be relieved when reforms and improvement processes are instituted from the bottom up, creating higher levels of teacher agency. Wasonga and Fisher (2018) reported that trust and relationships could be negatively impacted when social structures of power, domination, and oppression were deeply rooted in a school, inevitably leading to deficits in student achievement. The principal-teacher relationship impacts each party's commitment to the school and the job, the level of job satisfaction, and the attitudes of teachers (Price, 2012). During periods of school improvement, principals should aim to develop collaborative relationships with teachers that may prove valuable in achieving positive student outcomes (Murley et al., 2008).

Method

Research Design

One way to identify causal explanations for the principal's impact on increased school ratings is to closely study schools that have achieved significant success in improving academic ratings over a short period of time. This qualitative study used a case study research (CSR) design, allowing for an in-depth examination of schools. Each school, or case, fit the established research criteria and provided insight into patterns and themes that helped to answer the research question (Patten & Newhart, 2018). According

41

to Yin (2003) case study research should be used when contextual conditions exist. This study addressed conditions that existed in rural Texas schools that fit within a specific context, namely schools that went from an F academic rating in 2019 to an A academic rating in 2022.

Participants

The population in this study included all rural Texas schools that earned an F academic rating in 2019 and improved their rating to an A in 2022. While the TEA promised to assign school ratings annually, there were no ratings assigned in 2020 or 2021 due to COVID-19 exemptions. According to the TEA, a rural school district is defined as one with an enrollment between 300 and the median enrollment of the state with an enrollment growth rate over the last five years of less than 2% or by enrollment of less than 300 students. By this definition there were 464 rural public school districts in Texas during the 2021-2022 school year. These rural school districts were comprised of a combined 893 campuses representing various grade bands. Campuses were a combination of elementary schools, primary schools, intermediate schools, middle schools, junior high schools, high schools, K-5 schools, K-6 schools, K-8 schools, K-12 schools, secondary schools (6th through 12th grades or 8th through 12th grades), and alternative campuses. Of those 893 campuses, 35 earned an F academic rating for the 2018-2019 school year. Of those 35 campuses, *only three* earned an A the next rated year, the 2021-2022 school year. The three schools were elementary schools located in different regions of Texas. Due to the small number of qualifying schools, the population identified for this case study included all three of these campuses. Because of the uniqueness of this phenomenon, this study fit Yin's (2003) rationale for a relatively small

number of cases. After an exhaustive effort due to a relocation on the part of the subject, the researcher was unable to contact one of the principals, so only two schools were included in this study. Both participating principals were interviewed, and from these interviews, themes and commonalities were identified and analyzed.

Researcher

The researcher is a rural Texas public elementary school principal and doctoral candidate with a professional history of working in schools where improvement was required based on Texas' accountability measures. The inspiration for this study came on the heels of the researcher's success in leading her campus in improving their rating from an F to a B between 2019 and 2022. In this instance, credit for the improved rating is greatly attributed to the relationships built between the researcher and her staff. Prior to successfully leading her own campus through the school improvement process, the researcher was a teacher at a campus where there had been no improvement in school ratings for over five years. During this time, the researcher was a teacher-leader and worked closely with campus and district administration to develop plans for improvement at the campus level. Although the campus improvement team, led by campus and district administrators, created in-depth plans for improvement, very minimal gains were achieved. The researcher recognized a lack of motivation in her fellow teachers and a lack of support from her administrators that she attributed to this failure to make progress. These observations from her own experience inspired the researcher's commitment to focus on relationships when she became the principal of a campus facing school improvement.

Data Collection

Data collection was facilitated through interviews using a semi-structured interview style. The researcher used her commonality with the principals of the included campuses to elicit their participation by capitalizing on their excitement in sharing their success stories with other rural school principals. Recruitment was conducted through telephone contact using numbers collected from district websites following the telephone script located in Appendix A. As a method of triangulation of data to increase trustworthiness (O'Kane, et al., 2019), an examination of each school's Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) was included as part of the data collection.

The interviews began with a set of pre-determined questions allowing the researcher to gather the information necessary to identify themes in the data. Allowing interviews to progress and develop naturally beyond a prepared set of initial questions provided opportunities for discovery of insights that might have been overlooked in rigidly conducted interviews. The interview protocol (Appendix B) included questions designed to reveal actions and behaviors that the principal used to facilitate effective communication and build trust with campus teachers. Interview questions also addressed the principals' actions related to providing opportunities for professional learning, collaboration, collective efficacy, and teacher leadership during the time of rapid school improvement. Probing questions were included to allow for elaboration on factors that had not previously been considered by the researcher.

Each of the interviews were conducted in single sittings at participant-campuses and were recorded by the researcher. Interviewer observations were noted including general impressions of the campus, observed interactions with teachers and other staff

that occurred during the time of the interview, and additional observations outside of interview responses.

CIPs were evaluated to show campus school improvement efforts. Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 11.251 requires that a "district improvement plan and improvement plans for each campus are developed, reviewed, and revised annually for the purpose of improving the performance of all students." These plans included actions recommended by site-based improvement teams intended to provide a well-developed map of actions to be taken by campus leadership to result in campus improvement. CIPs were posted on district webpages which allowed for easy access by the researcher and were analyzed for common themes and descriptions of action steps that were reflected through responses collected during the principal interviews. Using these types of data in a case study was beneficial because they are stable, unobtrusive, and may be repeatedly referenced; however, there is a potential for author's bias (Yin, 2003). Including the CIPs in the data set aligned with Yin's first principle of data collection, namely using multiple sources of evidence to ensure the accuracy of data.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher on her personal computer using Microsoft Word software. Schools were assigned a number, and the principals were identified as Principal 1 and Principal 2. Interview transcriptions, CIPs, and researcher observational notes were first coded according to thematic-analysis principles as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) using the ATLAS.ti program. Themes were identified by comparing responses from both participant principals using analysis of

words or phrases indicating the nature of relationships between participant principals and their instructional staff.

Using the conceptual framework as a thematic analysis guide, particular attention was assigned to responses related to principal-teacher communication, trust-building actions on the part of the principal, campus-wide collaboration, professional learning, teacher leadership, and collective efficacy as facilitated by the principal. Upon completion of the manual coding and thematic analysis, the data corpus was analyzed using a beta version of artificial intelligence (AI) which aided coding through the ATLAS.ti program. While the results of this analysis were not used to identify themes, they were used as a calibration tool to highlight potential researcher bias. Because of the limited data set available, a second coding was conducted using thematic analysis as described by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) using experiential, inferential, and dispositional themes. Wiltshire and Ronkainen's approach is nested in a critical realism layers ontology which aims to uncover hidden causal mechanisms. Adding this additional analytical phase to the research further allowed this study to be classified as a multimethod case study. Identified themes were compared to the research question resulting in causal explanations for improvement in the two participant schools.

Findings

Thematic Principles

In the first analysis, 16 pertinent codes were identified as shown in Table 1. These codes were developed from the two interviews and the three CIPs. These documents, developed with varying levels of fidelity in different districts, were included in the first analysis because it could be reasonably assumed that schools identified for mandated

school improvement, as the three subject schools were, would use proven practices including a full needs assessment and stakeholder input to develop their plans. The decision to include the CIPs was also a result of the lack of a principal interview from school #3. By including the CIPs in this initial coding, data from this campus was considered in the final conclusions.

These codes provided data related to the research question and corresponded with concepts identified in the study's conceptual framework. Each of the code groups contained a subset of codes thematically determined to create the group. As shown in Table 1, the largest code group was the one titled "Leadership Attributes". This code group was made up of individual codes that collectively defined the leaders in this study. These attributes were adaptability, appreciation, community investment, community involvement, compliments to teachers, consideration to teachers, consistency, creativity, documentation, efficiency, follow through, goals, high expectations, humility, improvement mindset, knowledge of students, experience, leadership style, mentorship, monitoring, motivation, openness, positive attitude, purposeful actions, resilience, responses to challenges, routine, school history, systems, teachers' principal, time in leadership, time management, and time teaching.

Table 1

Pertinent Codes Identified and Shown by Distribution Among Study Documents

Codes	Interviews		CIPs			
	Principal 1	Principal 2	School 1	School 2	School 3	Totals
Achievement	17	6	12	6	31	72
Challenges	29	13	9	3	11	65
Collaboration	19	32	11	5	14	81
Communication	7	15	10	8	28	68
Family Atmosphere	29	4	1	0	4	38
Improvement	7	6	10	1	8	32
Leadership Attributes	84	35	10	3	20	152
Observations	2	1	0	1	7	11
Prof. Development	7	11	12	13	22	65
Relationships	29	32	1	0	15	77
Parental Relationships	1	8	11	2	18	40
School Improvement	10	1	0	0	0	11
Special Populations	4	0	1	5	27	37
Support Systems	25	17	9	1	12	64
Teacher Feelings	15	7	2	0	0	24
Teacher Leadership	6	6	1	0	0	13
Totals	291	194	100	48	217	850

When asked about principal-teacher communication, both principals interviewed repeatedly talked about their open-door policy and both shared efforts to regularly connect with teachers in person and through email. Principal #2 discussed using a regular newsletter to communicate with teachers and parents, and Principal #1 shared a *Monday Message* with her teachers. Campus CIPs include statements about the importance of communication and the methods of communication utilized district wide. When discussing the results of a teacher survey conducted by the district, Principal #1 stated that "I would say they'd say that it is very open. I am very direct. I get in trouble for that. Very frank. Some people can't handle that."

Both principals who were interviewed for this study taught in the same school where they now serve as principal. When discussing her background in the district, Principal #1 stated:

This is my fourth year. I've just finished my fourth year as principal, and I was assistant principal for four years before that. And then I taught for twenty. So, um, I'm not very authoritative at all. My door is always open. Literally. We are a big family I would say, but my leadership style is "whatever you need, I will help you whatever you need.

Likewise Principal #2, who has been in her district for over 20 years had the following to say about the expectations of her from the teaching staff:

My biggest thing as being a leader is that everybody already knew me, everybody already wanted me in that role, and so it was an easy transition. We all were already on the same page, so that was a plus coming in as a leadership role. And so they all knew what we wanted – I heard them for several years, I knew what they wanted I kinda had the inside scoop so we were already on a team playing field.

A careful reading of the CIPs revealed phrases related to teacher collaboration including "dedicated educators who plan together", "collaborate across grade levels", and "work as a unified team". When asked about collective teacher efficacy, principals described working as a team to make educational decisions for students and "bouncing ideas off of each other."

Participant principals were questioned about teacher leadership. Principal #1 described advocating for her teacher leaders to become a part of the district leadership

team but concedes that the logistics of that present a challenge. Principal #2 encourages teachers in her district to seek their principal's certification and provides mentoring to anyone who is working towards leadership certifications. She also described creating a role for one of her teacher leaders.

> This year I have another one that I do the same thing with….we've never had a curriculum director, so I've kinda like, given her that to try and build that and to put her in charge of that. That way I can build her resume too.

Data was analyzed in relation to the role of professional development in school improvement at these campuses. Analyzed CIPs described how "staff is involved with the planning for professional development activities", the district will "provide high quality staff development for instructional intervention", and "teachers attend training specific to their grade level and subject areas", but those statements conflicted with principal responses. In the interviews both principals explained that their teachers did not participate in significant professional development activities outside of curriculum training. Principal #2 stated that "They are welcome to go to the service center, but a lot of them do choose to stay here just so they don't have to drive, and we can get so much done here." When asked about professional development, principal #1 simply stated "we did not do enough."

Experiential, Inferential, and Dispositional Themes

A second examination of the data was conducted using thematic analysis as described by Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021). This analysis was conducted using only the transcripts from the two interviews due to potential validity issues with the CIPs as previously addressed. Using common experiential themes from the two interviews as the

support, inferential themes were developed that resulted in one dispositional theme that

served as an explanatory statement. Statements from the interviews produced the

experiential themes shown in the table below.

Table 2

*Experiential Themes Common to Both Principal Interviews*

Beliefs Expressed by Participant 1	Agreement by Participant 2
Open Door Policy	Also Expressed
High Expectations for Teachers	Also Expressed
Principal Supports Teachers	Also Expressed
Higher Expectations for Students	Also Expressed
Teachers Feel Open to Approach the Principal	Also Expressed
Approachable Principal	Also Expressed
Higher Standards During School Improvement	Also Expressed
Stable Relationship During School Improvement	Also Expressed
Open Relationship with Teachers	Also Expressed
Principal is the Voice of the Teachers	Also Expressed
Fosters Trust with Teachers	Also Expressed
Small Community Creates a Need for Solidarity	Also Expressed
Creates Leadership Opportunities for Teachers	Also Expressed
Teachers Work Collaboratively	Also Expressed
Teachers Communicate Effectively	Also Expressed
Lack of Professional Development	Also Expressed

From these experiential themes, one overarching dispositional theme was identified as

shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Explanatory Statements Developed from Experiential, Inferential, and Dispositional

Themes that Emerged from the Principal Interviews
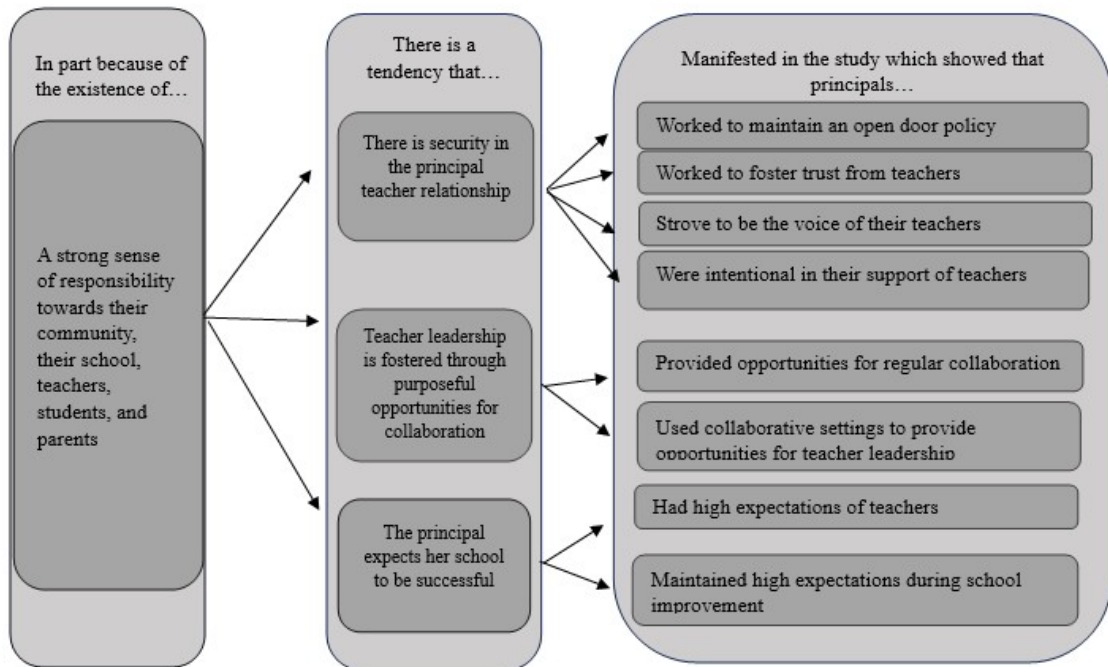
Discussion

Summary

This case study highlighted two rural Texas school principals who led their campuses from an F academic rating in 2019 to an A academic rating in 2022. These principals were chosen to participate in this study because they represented two of the three rural schools in the state that were able to claim that accomplishment. While the original intention of the study was to include the third principal, the researcher was unable to contact her due to a change of position. The case study consisted of the principal interviews and a review of each campus's most recent CIP.

During the interviews the prevailing focus was the principal-teacher relationship. Both principals used terms like family and friends to describe their teaching staff and both also referred to keeping an open-door policy, supporting their teachers, and working alongside them during the time they were in school improvement. In addition, both principals grew up in and spent most of their teaching careers in the rural school districts where they are now principals. The principals cited community connections and family ties as reasons that they work so diligently in their current roles.

Conclusions

Several findings of importance to rural school principals came to light in this study. While the population group included only principals who have led their school through mandated school improvement, conclusions highlighted here are relevant to any principal who wishes to lead a successful campus. This discussion follows the format of the conceptual framework including additional findings and observations that were not anticipated. It concludes with an updated conceptual framework that reflects the results of the study.

Openness and transparency were important factors in the principals' success. Repeated references to open-door policies and frank conversations highlighted this as a major theme in the study. Similarly, both principals spoke at length about the trust that they believed teachers had in them and their leadership. It was clear through statements made by the principals that they did not have to work to earn their teachers' trust. Instead, the trusting relationship was a reward for the years they spent working alongside their staff.

Collaboration and teacher collective efficacy were also contributing factors in the improved ratings. All three CIPs and both interviews included evidence that supported the importance of collaboration on these campuses. Teachers on the participant campuses were provided with opportunities to grow as leaders, demonstrating the importance of teacher leadership to the participating principals. Both principals seemed to understand the importance of growing leaders from the inside of the organization to increase CTE. This is likely because they both entered their leadership roles in this way.

One concept from the guiding framework that showed some mixed results was the area of professional development. Campus CIPs included detailed professional development plans, but in the interviews both principals downplayed the impact of professional development on campus improvement. Instead of requiring professional development designed to improve instructional practices, these principals wanted teachers to spend their professional learning time evaluating data and collaborating with fellow teachers.

The research question for this study was "What impact does the principal-teacher relationship, as perceived by the principal, have on school improvement efforts in rural Texas schools that are required to improve their academic ratings from an F to an A by the state educational agency?" Based on the CIPs alone, it was almost impossible to determine this relationship, so this portion of the discussion is limited to data collected in the two interviews.

 In both interviews it was clear that these principals valued their staff and maintained strong relationships with them. They both described their staff as family and related stories demonstrating how they and their staff were there for each other during

times of personal hardship or illness. Much of this family atmosphere should be attributed to the fact that these principals grew up in and spent most of their careers in these districts. The family-like atmosphere was also observed by the researcher during interactions between the principals and their teachers that took place during the interviews. During both sessions, which happened during the respective campus's summer break, teachers came into the office and the interviews were paused while the principals chatted with teachers, students, and parents in a congenial and friendly way.

An unanticipated factor that became clear through the experiential, inferential, and dispositional theme analysis was high expectations as a guiding force in the school improvement process. In addition, these high expectations are directly related to the responsibility that the principals felt towards their entire school and local community. Both leaders were found to be committed to their communities resulting in high expectations for success and a desire to make their campuses great.

Rural School Improvement Model

Based on the conclusions drawn in this study, the original conceptual framework was revised. Collaboration and collective efficacy were combined in the framework. This was because the interviews revealed that collective efficacy was developed through collaborative settings. Professional development was removed as a factor that contributed to school improvement. While this was a term used extensively in the CIPs, interview data revealed that the principals avoided traditional professional development, opting instead to use professional learning time as collaboration time. Professional development was replaced by high expectations due in part to the identification of this as a factor in the success of these schools.

Figure 3

Rural School Improvement Model
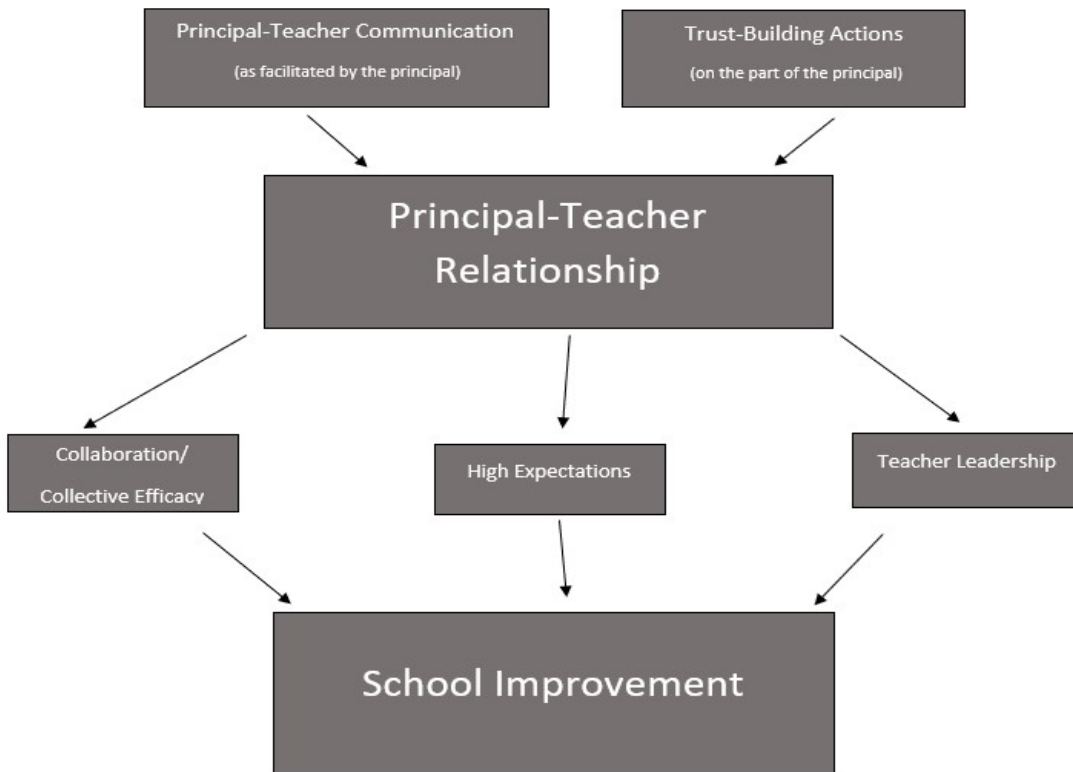
Limitations

An obvious limitation to this study was the exclusion of the third qualifying principal. With an understanding that this principal left the position that she held during the time of school improvement, it was likely that she was not as committed to the community as the other two principals. Factoring her responses to the interview questions into the study may have led to different conclusions. Without being able to interview this principal, there were likely causal relationships that went unexamined.

Another limitation is the lack of information on the fidelity with which the CIPs were developed. While these documents are required by all schools in Texas, there is

generally little consistency in the creation of these documents and many schools will only go through the entire process every few years, deciding to simply revamp the plans most years with changed dates. This was observed in one of the documents that had obvious incorrect dates. Unfortunately, this is particularly a problem in rural school districts where personnel capital is limited and those in the position to write these plans are often overwhelmed with responsibilities. In districts where this happens, the CIP becomes a document of compliance instead of a robust plan for campus improvement.

Implications

The implications of this study, while specific to rural schools, may potentially be translated to suburban or urban schools. Based on the cases studied here, principals who have supportive relationships with their teachers are likely to be successful in school improvement efforts. Principals who have a strong sense of commitment to the community that they serve will likely develop positive relationships and will lead successful campuses. In the rural setting the community is the entire town, but in a suburban or urban setting the term community would refer to the neighborhood where the school is located. Finally, the high expectations that these principals have for their teachers and campuses may serve as a driving factor for future success.

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Consent will be obtained via telephone upon initial contact and agreement by the subject to participate in the research study. This document will be emailed to each participant for signatures before the interview session. The signed consent form will be reviewed with the interviewee prior to the interview.

Good (morning, afternoon), my name is Danella Wheeler, and I am the principal of Bovina Elementary School, a rural school in the far southwestern corner of the Texas Panhandle. I serve about 200 students in grades pre-k through 5th grade on my campus. I am also a doctoral candidate at West Texas A&M University, and that that is the reason for my call.

At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, I began my principalship at Bovina. When I took over as principal, the school was an F rated campus. This year when ratings were released, we learned that Bovina Elementary had earned a B rating. I'm proud of the work that we did as a campus, however most of my teachers and district administrators credit my principalship with the improved rating. This became the inspiration for my doctoral research study. I am examining the role of the school principal in school improvement in rural schools.

You are being asked to participate in this research because you are **one of only three** rural school principals in the state of Texas to lead your campus in the outstanding achievement of going from an F academic rating in 2019 to an A academic rating in 2022. Your participation will add to the limited body of literature addressing school improvement at rural school campuses, and it could potentially make a difference in how rural school leaders, particularly those in Texas, approach school improvement efforts in the future. You may choose to participate if you would like to share your experiences in leading your school in this achievement with your fellow rural school leaders You may choose not to participate if you determine that the time involved would create an undesired burden on you or your campus or if you do not wish to share your expertise with your rural school principal peers.

If you agree to participate, the interviewer will visit your campus to conduct a simi-structured interview that should last no more than 30 to 45 minutes. You will be able to stop or pause the interview at any time.

While you will receive no direct compensation for your participation, the data collected in the interview will be synthesized with that of other participants to provide guidance to your fellow rural principals. This research is unique and your inclusion as one of only three subjects meeting the parameters of the study makes your participation **highly coveted**.

This research contains no element of experimental procedures. There are no risks involved in participation that exceed the risks you encounter in your daily life. The only effort or donation required on your part is the time necessary to complete the interview. At any time consent can be withdrawn by simply telling the interviewer that you would like to stop.

All efforts will be made to maintain your confidentiality and that of your school. Each interviewee will be assigned a number, "Principal 1", Principal 2", or "Principal 3" in all written documents connected to this study. Any school district, campus, staff member, student, parent, or community member mentioned by name in your interview will be replaced with "school district named," "campus named", "staff member named", "student named", "parent named", or "community member named" as appropriate. All records including your signed informed consent, notes from interview sessions, transcripts, and any potentially identifying documents will be maintained in a lockbox in the interviewer's home and will be destroyed by shredding or reformatting of USB files after three years.

Rights and Whom to Contact for Answers to Questions/Concerns

For any answers to questions or concerns about this research or research participants' rights, you may contact:

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I have read the information above concerning this research study. I understand that I may contact Dr. Gary Bigham or Danella Wheeler with any concerns I have about this study before agreeing to participate. The study has been approved by the West Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board.

Your signature below signifies your consent to participate. A copy of this informed consent will be provided to you upon request.

Printed name: _____

Signature:_____Date:_____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

The interview will be conducted in a private area at the home campuses of study subjects. The interview will be semi-structured in nature. The following questions/prompts will be posed to each interviewee.

- Describe the organizational structure of your campus, particularly in terms of campus leadership.

- Tell me about your leadership style.

- Describe the transformation of your school as you moved from an F-rated campus to an A-rated campus.
  - Explain the different types of relationships you have with teachers and the impact those relationships might have had on the process.
  - Describe the written and verbal communication you have with teachers.

- How do you think teachers might describe their relationship with you? Describe how their perceptions might have changed during your time in school improvement.

- Describe the importance of a collaborative environment on the types of relationships that you try to build with teachers.

- Tell me about trust on your campus. How do you build and foster trust with your teachers?

- Explain what collaboration looks like on your campus. How do you facilitate collaboration on your campus?

- Describe opportunities that teachers on your campus have to act in a leadership capacity.

- Donohoo (2018) described collective teacher efficacy as a feeling that together the teacher and administration can overcome challenges and meet student needs.

  - How would you describe teacher collective efficacy on your campus?

  - How have you developed teacher collective efficacy within your instructional staff?

- Explain your philosophy of professional development.

  - How do you meet the needs for professional growth in your teachers?

  - What role did professional development play in your improved rating?

- What other factors do you credit with your school's improved ratings other than what we have already discussed here?

Additional probing questions will be used to promote elaboration when necessary. Examples of these probing questions include:

- How did you accomplish that?

- Describe difficulties you faced in that process.

- What else could have contributed to this?

- What else can you add to better help me understand?