

Teacher Professional Development Challenges Faced by Rural Superintendents

By

Dr. Lisa A. Cadero-Smith

Edited by

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CHAPTER 1: THE CONTEXT OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES OF SUPERINTENDENTS

Every child in America and around the world is entitled to a high-quality education (Adams & Woods, 2015). The reality is, many rural students do not have access to excellent schooling (Fishman, 2015). As children leave home for school each day in remote areas of the country, rural families depend on local schools to provide the learning experiences necessary to ensure promising futures.

The superintendents, principals, teachers, and staff who work in rural schools take the responsibility of providing a high-quality education seriously. Rural educators strive daily to confront existing challenges and employ strategies for overcoming barriers. The ultimate goal is to ensure every rural student graduates from high school fully prepared for higher education, a desirable career, and a life of prosperity.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the common experiences and perceptions of superintendents responsible for providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. Superintendents are the chief executive officers (CEOs) in school districts and play unique and multifaceted roles in rural settings (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014). In some cases, rural superintendents serve both superintendent and principal roles, assuming district and building-level responsibilities (Smith, 2015). Regardless of the peculiarities of the rural superintendent role in each school district and the direct level of involvement in teacher professional development delivery, the superintendent must ensure a strong training program is in place to induct new teachers to the profession and ensure experienced teachers have access to the latest research-based pedagogical practices (Learning Forward, 2017).

Education researchers and policymakers have queried the following topics related to the research study:

the rural school district context (Doerksen & Wise, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Hansen, 2018; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Roza, 2015), the role of the superintendent (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014), the complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Glover et al., 2016), and strategies for overcoming rural barriers (Battelle for Kids, 2016; Fishman, 2015; National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBE], 2016).

All four areas were limited in scope, and researchers have called for further study in each area (Doerksen & Wise, 2016; Fishman, 2015; Glover et al., 2016; Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014). In addition, there was no research identifying how these topics impact teacher professional development delivery by superintendents in rural school districts and what additional supports may be needed. The researcher sought to fill this gap in the literature and extend knowledge. Providing every rural teacher with effective professional development is critical to ensure the learning success of all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Access to a high-quality, equitable education for rural students should be viewed as a basic human right (Adams & Woods, 2015; Fullan, 2015) and a moral imperative (Fishman, 2015).

The intent of Chapter 1 is to familiarize the reader with this qualitative study. The chapter includes the following sections: Introduction, Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Significance of the Study, Research Question and Subquestions, Theoretical Framework, Definitions of Terms, Assumptions, Scope and Delimitations, Limitations, and Chapter Summary. At the end of Chapter 1, the reader will have a clear understanding of why the study was necessary and how the researcher sought to fill a gap in the literature and extend knowledge.

Background of the Problem

The Common School Movement of the late 19th century and the School Consolidation Movement of the early 20th century played significant roles in shaping rural schools in the United States. The Common School Movement gave rise to the one-room schoolhouse (Zimmerman, 2009), while the School Consolidation Movement closed down a vast number of small schoolhouses; consolidated the schoolhouses into larger, centralized schools; and

shifted power to professional educators (Anderson et al., 2001). Despite the trend toward larger, centralized schools in rural areas, many small schools still exist in rural America today, serving students and families in remote regions of the country (Forner, 2016).

Superintendents hold the highest level of executive and administrative authority in school districts. Superintendents must establish a vision ensuring the learning and achievement of every student and create a district culture conducive to staff professional development (Washington State School Directors' Association [WSSDA], 2014). Unlike urban and suburban counterparts, rural superintendents assume an unusually diverse array of administrative responsibilities (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014), which limits the ability to spend a significant amount of time and energy in any single area of responsibility.

The uniquely multifaceted rural role is due primarily to inadequate fiscal resources (Culbertson & Billig, 2016; Roza, 2015) resulting from lower property tax revenues (Forner, 2016), difficulties passing levy and bond referenda (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014), and fewer state and federal dollars due to diminishing student populations (Forner, 2016; Smith, 2015). Grant funds exist but may carry stipulations which limit usability (Fishman, 2015). Left with inadequate fiscal resources, rural superintendents often do not have the necessary budget capacity to hire the essential administrative team to assume the multiple responsibilities required to run a school district (Hansen, 2018).

Of the rural superintendent's myriad obligations, the most important is to ensure an impactful teacher in every classroom (Forner, 2016). Impactful teachers have a high level of self-efficacy (Cruz, Wilson, & Wang, 2019; Hattie, 2010; Nyangau, 2020; Sahin, Akturk, & Schmidt, 2009), deep content knowledge, and well-developed instructional skills (Davis, Preston, & Sahin, 2009a, 2009b ; Hodgson et al., 2017; Kara, 2020; Marzano, 2017; Weinhandl, Lavicza, Hohenwarter, & Schallert, 2020), deep content knowledge, and well-developed instructional skills (Marzano, 2017) to meet the diverse needs of all students and close learning gaps (Bixler, 2019 ; Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018; Marques & Xavier, 2020; Olagbaju & Popoola, 2020; Omiles et al., 2019; Perdana, Jumadi, & Rosana, 2019; Wallace-Spurgin, 2019; Yang & Baldwin, 2020). To significantly impact student learning, teachers must have access to ongoing, high-quality professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The researcher sought to understand superintendents' common

experiences and perceptions delivering teacher professional development in rural school districts as a strong precursor to ensuring educational equity for all rural students.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study addressed is superintendents face common challenges unique to the rural environment which hinder the delivery of effective teacher professional development in rural school districts (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Glover et al., 2016; Hansen, 2018; Roza, 2015; Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). Little empirical research exists on the topic, which is a current and relevant one. In 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified there are 7,156 rural school districts, 27,264 rural schools, and 9,132,607 rural students in the United States. Forty percent of the nation's schools are located in rural areas (Battelle for Kids, 2016).

Racial and ethnic diversity are increasing in rural America (Howley, Howley, Rhodes, & Yahn, 2014; NASBE, 2016; Preuss et al., 2020). Approximately 27% of rural students are minorities, and many are living in poverty (NASBE, 2016). Family income is lower, and poverty is more pervasive in rural areas (Cromarte, 2017). Rural counties with fewer educated citizens have poorer economic results (Marre, 2017).

If rural barriers (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Glover et al., 2016; Hansen, 2018; Roza, 2015; Showalter et al., 2017) impacting the delivery of effective teacher professional development are not addressed in both systemic and context-specific ways, a significant group of students in the United States will remain at risk of not receiving a high-quality education leading to personal fulfillment, social and civic engagement, and economic prosperity (Battelle for Kids, 2016; NASBE, 2016). Rural superintendents have a critical voice on the research topic which is currently absent from the empirical literature. The study queried the rural superintendent perspective to understand the essence of teacher professional development delivery in rural environments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the common experiences and perceptions of superintendents responsible for providing teacher professional development in rural school

districts. The study was conducted in three rural, remote school district settings and a regional educational service district (ESD) facility, all located in Western Washington state. Rural, remote school districts are public school settings located “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and . . . more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (Washington State Education Research and Data Center [ERDC], 2010, p. 2). These districts represent the most extreme rural environments, located the farthest from metropolitan areas. ESDs are administrative entities responsible for supporting school districts within defined geographical boundaries in Washington state (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [OSPI], 2017). Washington state has a total of nine ESDs, five in Western Washington.

The study privileged superintendent voice as a means of revealing the phenomenon of teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. The study population included four superintendents who were currently employed in rural, remote districts. The superintendents were purposefully selected (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to explore the study topic.

If the negative consequences of fiscal and human resource deficits and geographic isolation are not overcome in rural school districts, ensuring a high-quality education for all rural students is in jeopardy (Battelle for Kids, 2016; NASBE, 2016). Rural teachers require access to effective professional development to deliver impactful instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Forner, 2016). Rural superintendents face significant challenges providing effective teacher professional development (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Glover et al., 2016; Hansen, 2018; Howley et al., 2014; Marre, 2017; Showalter et al., 2017). Strategies exist which may be implemented in rural environments to overcome barriers (Battelle for Kids, 2016; Fishman, 2015; NASBE, 2016). Little empirical research exists on the impact these challenges and strategies have on teacher professional development delivery by superintendents in rural school districts (Glover et al., 2016) or what additional supports may be desired. Further study was needed.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because the research serves as a starting point to generate future knowledge and develop theory related to the study phenomenon. Gaining a deeper understanding of superintendents’ experiences delivering teacher professional development,

including challenges, strategies, and desired supports, may inform the work of rural administrators, professional development consultants, policymakers, regulatory agencies, and rural organizations. The findings may also lead to policy changes, shifts in rural school district resource allocation, and changes in rural teacher professional development delivery to ensure the educational equity of all rural students.

Developing teacher efficacy (Hattie, 2010) and instructional skills (Marzano, 2017) in rural contexts is critical if students are to gain access to the quality education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) needed and deserved. Marre (2017) identified the rural–urban gap in college completion is increasing. Hertz and Farrigan (2016) posited initiatives to decrease opportunity gaps and increase college access for low-income families in rural regions may reduce poverty. Receiving a quality education should be viewed as a basic human right for all rural students in the United States (Adams & Woods, 2015). The goal will be realized only when rural teachers have access to structured professional learning activities which result in changes in teacher practice and improvements in student learning outcomes. Investing in guaranteed and viable learning systems for teachers in rural regions of the country provides a strong opportunity to revitalize rural America (Battelle for Kids, 2016).

Research Question and Subquestions

The key research question and subquestions addressed in the study were as follows:

Research Question: What are superintendents' common experiences providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion One: What are superintendents' common challenges providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Two: How do superintendents overcome common challenges to provide teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Three: How can federal, state, and regional policymakers and service providers support superintendents to overcome common challenges and deliver effective teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism, manifested through a transcendental phenomenological lens, was the theoretical framework used to guide the study. *Social constructivism* is a worldview positing knowledge is generated through interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Thomas, Menon, Boruff, Rodriguez, & Ahmed, 2014). Transcendental phenomenology is a social constructivist approach to inquiry concerned with people's experiences and interpretations of the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenological research seeks to understand the common meanings multiple individuals apply to a shared study topic to understand the universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The theoretical framework was chosen to honor the subjects' direct and personalized experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) delivering teacher professional development in rural school districts. Data were gathered through semistructured interviews, and participant voice was privileged. The theoretical framework allowed the researcher to examine the topic rigorously and without presupposition (Moustakas, 1994). Interview data were horizontalized and grouped into clusters of meaning to create a composite textural and structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A more thorough explanation of the theoretical framework is provided in Chapter 2.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions of key terms apply to the study. Concise descriptions are provided. An urban-centric classification system is also offered to create context for the type of rural school district selected for inclusion in the research.

Effective teacher professional development (effective teacher training): “Structured professional learning [which] results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. v).

Equity in education: The allocation of resources to students to redress disadvantages experienced as a result of personal and social differences (Masters, 2018).

Geographic isolation: The significant distances of some rural school districts from urbanized areas and urban clusters (Glover et al., 2016).

High levels of student learning: One year's learning growth in a year's time toward course or grade-level standards (Hattie, 2010), including the closure of learning gaps for students who require additional support (Buffum et al., 2018).

High-quality education: The provision of a complete educational program to ensure students make one year's learning growth in a year's time on course or grade-level learning standards (Hattie, 2010), including the closure of learning gaps for students who require additional support (Buffum et al., 2018).

Inadequate funding of rural school districts (inadequate fiscal resources): The financial deficits commonly experienced by rural school districts resulting from one or a combination of the following factors: limited property tax revenues generated by low-density populations (Forner, 2016), difficulties passing levy and bond referenda (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014), and diminishing student populations generating limited federal and state dollars to effectively resource schools (Forner, 2016; Smith, 2015).

Inadequate resources of rural school districts: The combination of incomplete funding and limited human capital common in rural school districts (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Glover et al., 2016; Hansen, 2018).

Limited human capital: The lack of administrative-level personnel to support the superintendent (Hansen, 2018), difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015), and challenges securing substitute teachers to ensure contracted teachers are able to participate in professional development activities (Glover et al., 2016).

Moral imperative: The value and commitment held by educational stakeholders to serve all students and maintain high expectations for every student's learning to close opportunity and achievement gaps between student groups (Fullan, 2015).

Opportunity gap: The disparity in access to quality schools and resources experienced by students (Schott Foundation for Public Education, n.d.), which impacts the ability to achieve course or grade-level learning standards.

Rural school districts: An urban-centric classification system used by the NCES to divide regions in the United States into *suburban*, *town*, and *rural* locales. Rural locales are further divided into the following three subcategories:

Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster;

Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster; and

Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. (NCES, 2006, p. 1)

The Washington ERDC developed a simplified version of the NCES urban-centric classification system. Locales designated *remote* in the NCES system are referred to as *rural*, *remote* in the ERDC system and provided with a locale code of 43. The superintendents selected for participation in the research study worked in rural, remote school districts in Western Washington state with a locale code of 43 (ERDC, 2010).

Superintendent: The CEO in a public school district responsible for providing visionary, instructional, and ethical leadership and engaging in inclusive and sociopolitical processes to ensure the learning and achievement of each student (WSSDA, 2014).

Teacher: A person employed in a public school position for which a professional education certificate is required and whose primary duty is the daily educational instruction of students (Definitions, 2009).

Assumptions

The qualitative data derived from the study were values-laden and based on participants' experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three assumptions were necessary to conduct the study:

First was the assumption the open-ended questions asked during the interview process would accurately query the phenomenon of rural teacher professional development delivery by superintendents. The assumption was reasonable because the questions were directly aligned to the study's purpose, research question, and subquestions.

Second was the assumption the study participants had a basic working knowledge of the rural school district environment, rural superintendent roles and responsibilities, and teacher professional development delivery. The assumption was reasonable because participants selected for the study were superintendents employed in rural school districts.

Finally was the assumption the study participants would provide honest answers to the open-ended questions. The assumption was reasonable because, prior to the study being conducted, participants were informed of the procedures to ensure confidentiality through the use of numbers (Superintendent One, Superintendent Two, etc.), the school districts' common urban-centric locale code of 43, rigorous data management processes, and comprehensive security procedures.

Scope and Delimitations

Four superintendents from Western Washington school districts with the urban-centric locale code of 43 were selected for participation in the study. Locale code 43 represents the most extreme school district environment in the rural schools continuum (ERDC, 2010). All four districts were small in size and remotely located. The districts were chosen to highlight the greatest potential challenges to effective professional development implementation based on the distance from urban clusters and urbanized areas.

In-depth interviews were conducted with superintendents in November and December 2018. A transcendental phenomenological method adapted by Moustakas (1994) was utilized to analyze the data. The structured methodological approach was intended to minimize researcher bias and increase trustworthiness of study results. Thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences were included in the study's Results section to provide readers with rich information to make informed decisions regarding transferability of results.

Limitations

This qualitative research study was phenomenological in nature and limited to the verbal reflections offered by four rural, remote school district superintendents purposefully selected (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in Western Washington state. Data quality was dependent on the honest and accurate reporting of superintendents' lived experiences and perceptions. Transferability was subject to the selection of research participants who accurately represented rural superintendent voice on the study topic. Transferability was further subject to the researcher's skill in carefully analyzing the data and providing thick descriptions of the subjects' lived experiences and perceptions. Accuracy and thoroughness were necessary for readers to determine transferability of research findings beyond the boundaries of the study.

Study dependability was limited by the attention to detail applied during the audit trail and member-checking processes executed during the study. The researcher previously worked in a rural, remote school district in Western Washington state and is currently employed in a role which requires implementation of teacher professional development. Bias, based on the researcher's professional experiences, could impact how the study was designed and how the data were analyzed. The researcher employed a phenomenological bracketing procedure called *epoché* (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to mitigate potential for bias.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the research study, described the problem explored in the study, and identified the specific purpose of the research. The theoretical framework was provided, and the parameters of the study were defined. Finally, the significance of the study was posited as educational equity for all rural students (Adams & Woods, 2015). Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive discussion of the empirical literature reviewed for the study. Previous

research on the rural school district context, the multifaceted and time-intensive role of the rural superintendent, the complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development, and strategies for overcoming challenges is presented.

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CHAPTER 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES OF SUPERINTENDENTS

The literature review examined the rural school district context; the multifaceted and time-intensive role of the rural superintendent; the complex, resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development; and strategies for overcoming barriers. Researchers have studied the history of rural outmigration (Forner, 2016; Tieken, 2014) and school consolidation in the United States (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006; Forner, 2016; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Tieken, 2014) and the present-day topics of inadequate fiscal resources (Roza, 2015), limited human capital (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015), and geographic isolation (Glover et al., 2016). In addition, innovative solutions to these issues have been proposed (Fishman, 2015; Smith, 2015).

On the topic of the superintendent role, researchers have examined the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent (Henrikson, 2018) and the multifaceted and time-intensive nature of the rural superintendent role (Howley et al., 2014). On the issue of teacher professional development, researchers have defined *effective teacher professional development* (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015; Learning Forward, 2017) and examined various facets of rural teacher professional development (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Barrett, Cowen, Toma, & Troske, 2015; Glover et al., 2016; Hunt-Barron, Tracy, Howell, & Kaminski, 2015; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Finally, researchers and policymakers have called for the educational equity of all rural students (Fishman, 2015) and the adoption of a growth mindset where rural school districts are concerned (Battelle for Kids, 2016; NASBE, 2016).

Overall, rural education has generated far less scholarly interest than suburban and urban contexts (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014). At the time of the literature review, little research existed on rural teacher professional development by superintendents. The situation

represented a significant gap in the literature because superintendents are the educational leaders responsible, either directly or indirectly, for delivering teacher professional development in rural school districts. Due to limited funding (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014), rural superintendents often work without an administrative team or have only a small team (Hansen, 2018) to share the myriad responsibilities required to manage and lead a rural school district, including professional development planning and delivery. The lack of administrative support superintendents experience limits available time and requires superintendents to function as generalists, assuming multiple administrative roles (Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, & Hupfeld, 2014).

Despite the inadequate resources and remote locations of rural school districts, teacher professional development must remain a priority. Rural teachers require effective professional development to deliver the impactful instruction students need and deserve (Althaus, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lin, Cheng, & Wu, 2015). Rural students require access to a quality education to ensure entry to promising colleges and careers (Adams & Woods, 2015).

Literature Search Strategy

The primary library databases and search engines used to perform the literature review included EBSCO Discovery Service through the American College of Education, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The key search terms and combinations of search terms employed to locate peer-reviewed articles and reports were *rural*, *superintendent*, *rural superintendent*, *professional development*, *teacher professional development*, *rural teacher professional development*, *effective teacher professional development*, *teacher education*, *rural history*, *rural America*, *rural United States*, *rural education*, *rural schools*, *rural poverty*, *common schools*, *one-room schoolhouse*, and *Horace Mann*. Research from seminal rural education scholars was utilized for the History section of the review. Peer-reviewed research and credible reports from 2014 to 2018 were prioritized throughout the literature review.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding the study was informed by an aligned set of philosophical assumptions. Ontologically, reality was viewed as multiple and based on study participants'

lived experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epistemologically, knowledge was constructed as a socially negotiated process (Shabani, 2016) developed collaboratively between researcher and study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Axiologically, values played a role in the study, with the researcher identifying personal values and potential biases related to the study topic through the epoché process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Methodologically, the research was inductive in nature, derived from interviews and presented in narrative form (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Social constructivism, manifested through a transcendental phenomenological lens, was the theoretical framework used to guide the study. The model of inquiry seeks to understand participants' views on a study topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to generate a composite view of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher describes the subjects' perspectives to generate overall patterns of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The transcendental phenomenological component of the theoretical framework informed the specific nature of the knowledge generated. Composite textural and structural descriptions of teacher professional development delivery were constructed based on the experiences and perceptions reported by superintendents. A textural-structural synthesis was then created to offer a holistic account of teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. The overall goal of the approach was to reduce the study phenomenon to the universal essence.

Social constructivism, manifested through a transcendental phenomenological lens, operationalized the study's purpose by offering a model by which to explore the common challenges, strategies, and desired supports of superintendents responsible for providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. Little empirical research exists on the topic. Creating a comprehensive description of superintendents' experiences and perceptions may serve as a starting point to generate future research and develop theory on effective teacher professional development delivery in rural settings.

Research Literature Review

The concept map for the literature review was anchored in three topics situated within the study's purpose statement. The first topic was the rural school district context. The topic was

characterized by three subtopics: inadequate fiscal resources, limited human capital, and geographic isolation.

The second topic was the role of the superintendent. The topic focused on the importance of the superintendent position and the multifaceted and time-intensive nature of the rural superintendent role. The third topic was the complex and resource-intensive nature of teacher professional development. The topic explored the components of research-based teacher professional development specifically designed to translate to instructional practice and student learning. The researcher further explored strategies for overcoming barriers in rural environments for the literature review.

Concept Map

Topic 1: Rural school districts. The first topic examined the historical and contextual realities of rural school districts. This strand of the literature provided the necessary background to understand the evolution of rural school districts in the United States (Forner, 2016; Tieken, 2014; Tyack & Hansot, 1982) and the modern-day obstacles and promising practices which exist in rural schools today. The section supported the study by identifying how inadequate fiscal resources (Roza, 2015), limited human capital (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015), and geographic isolation (Glover et al., 2016) negatively impact rural school districts. The section also identified how these barriers may be overcome (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015; Fishman, 2015, Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Hill, 2015; Roza, 2015; Rural Education and Technology Consensus Panel [RTP], 2015).

Topic 2: The superintendent. The second topic defined the position of the school district superintendent and explored the unique role of the rural superintendent. This strand of the literature provided a description of the superintendent's executive responsibilities (Henrikson, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Lashway, Cohn, Gore, & Sharratt, 2013; WSSDA, 2014) and summarized the multifaceted and time-intensive nature of the rural superintendent role (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Doerksen & Wise, 2016; Howley et al., 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). The section supported the study by highlighting the importance of the superintendent position in the school district and the challenges superintendents face in rural environments.

Topic 3: Teacher professional development. The third topic defined effective teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; ESSA, 2015; Learning Forward, 2017), examined the link between professional development and student learning (Akturk & Saka Ozturk, 2019; Althausser, 2015; Avsar Erumit, Fouad, & Akerson, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Demirer & Sahin, 2013; Edwards, 2020; Hill, Bicer, & Capraro, 2017; Hoffer, 2020; Jung, Zhang, & Chiang, 2019; Lin et al., 2015; Pambayun et al., 2019), and queried multiple aspects of rural teacher professional development (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Barrett et al., 2015; de la Garza, 2016; Glover et al., 2016; Hartman, 2017; Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Maheady, Magiera, & Simmons, 2016; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Mukeredzi, 2016). This strand of the literature clarified the essential components of research-based teacher training required to impact instructional practice. The section supported the study by showing effective teacher professional development is complex and resource-intensive to deliver.

Educational equity for rural students. This section of the literature review identified the significant number of students in the United States who attend rural schools (NASBE, 2016), the serious resource deficits and challenges rural school districts and communities face (Fishman, 2015; Marre, 2017; Showalter et al., 2017), and the changing landscape of rural America resulting from outmigration (Howley et al., 2014) and increasing ethnic diversity in rural regions (Battelle for Kids, 2016). The strand consolidated the pressing barriers which must be overcome to meet the needs of all rural students. The section supported the study by underscoring the urgency of providing rural students with a quality education and teachers with the professional development required to ensure impactful instruction in all rural classrooms.

Adopting a rural education growth mindset. This section of the literature review presented the findings from two current reports by Battelle for Kids (2016) and the NASBE (2016). The existing challenges and solutions for fostering innovation in rural schools were identified. Collaborative approaches, technological strategies, funding flexibility, and systemic approaches to building capacity were identified. The section supported the study by offering viable solutions which may have implications for the delivery of effective teacher professional development in rural school districts.

Rural School Districts

A brief history of rural schooling. Two important events in the history of American public schooling had a profound impact on modern-day rural school districts: the Common School Movement of the late 1800s and the School Consolidation Movement of the early 1900s (Anderson et al., 2001). The Common School Movement gave rise to the diffusely scattered, locally controlled, one-room schoolhouses which proliferated the far reaches of rural America by the end of the 19th century (Forner, 2016; Holcomb, 1994; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The School Consolidation Movement, a result of industrialization and calls for educational reform, initiated widespread rural school closures, diminished local control over schooling, and placed professional educators firmly in charge of the curriculum and pedagogical practices employed in rural schools (Anderson et al., 2001).

Common School Movement. The American Common School Movement, promoting a free, quality education for all, gained significant momentum in the late 19th century (Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Walling, 2017). Common schools educated both boys and girls, were funded by state and local tax dollars, and were controlled by locally elected citizen boards (Anderson et al., 2001). Horace Mann, the father of the Common School Movement, believed, like Thomas Jefferson, public schooling was essential to ensure an informed and thriving democracy (Fife, 2016). An impressive lawyer and Whig legislator, Mann was elected secretary to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837 (Fife, 2016; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Mann viewed public education as the great human equalizer and asserted merit, not birth, should determine the course of one's life (Rice, 2015; Walling, 2017).

One-room schoolhouse. The Common School Movement gave birth to the one-room schoolhouse concept, which spread throughout rural America by the late 1800s (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Rural schools were managed by locally elected, community member boards responsible for providing financial support, selecting teachers, establishing the curriculum, and determining the instructional practices to be employed (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Typical rural school boards maintained the following requirements for the schools: deliver a quality, basic education in the areas of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Holcomb, 1994); maintain low property taxes; and uphold the community's values and social norms (Forner, 2016).

In more affluent regions of the country, schoolhouses were well equipped with learning materials such as blackboards, globes, and dictionaries (Tieken, 2014). In many rural areas, however, schools were overcrowded, poorly resourced, and in disrepair because local communities and school boards sought to avoid the tax increases required for schoolhouse maintenance and improvement (Clark, 2014). The quality of instruction varied widely among rural schools and consisted primarily of rote memorization as the predominant pedagogical strategy (Tieken, 2014). Basic literacy and numeracy skills were the focal points (Holcomb, 1994). Teachers taught a wide range of students of varying abilities and focused on preparing students to live successfully in rural communities (Forner, 2016; Tieken, 2014).

Rural schools served important communal, civic, and religious roles in sparsely populated regions, overcoming the isolation of geographic remoteness (Zimmerman, 2009). The local schoolhouse provided a sense of identity and functioned as the social center of the community (Fuller, 1982; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Kantor & Lowe, 2004; Tieken, 2014). Families enjoyed a wide variety of entertainment, and festivals, parties, and political functions were common activities in the schoolhouse (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The schoolhouse also served as a place of worship on Sundays, with the teacher providing catechism for students (Zimmerman, 2009).

The great urban migration and School Consolidation Movement. Industrialization in the late 1800s caused a significant shift in American public education (Bard et al., 2006; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Steam power, electricity, and more effective machinery led to rapid and pervasive economic growth (Tieken, 2014). Rural citizens (Forner, 2016) as well as eastern and southern European immigrants (Tieken, 2014) began moving to metropolitan areas in large numbers to pursue higher wages and more reliable employment in manufacturing plants (Forner, 2016). This confluence of events placed a strong burden on the metropolitan areas to find new ways to meet the educational needs of a growing and diverse student population (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

While the urban United States experienced rapid expansion during industrialization, rural America languished (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The family farm was replaced by large-scale commercial farms staffed primarily by immigrant tenant workers (Tieken, 2014). The demographic shifts within rural communities, the loss of the American family farm, and the

new educational theories, influenced by the efficiencies of industrialization, caused reformers to call for significant changes in rural schooling (Tieken, 2014).

The Committee of Twelve's *Report on Rural Schools*, written by a group of well-respected educators appointed by the National Council of Education in 1895, strongly advocated for school consolidation in rural America (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The report, lauded nationwide, detailed the superiority of large, centralized schools over small, rural schools to deliver a quality education to students (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Successive reports followed, including one commissioned by President Roosevelt in 1909, called the *Report of the Country Life Commission* (Tieken, 2014). The primary calls to action running through all the reports of the time period were consolidation of small, rural schools to ensure greater efficiency, superintendent oversight of newly formed rural school districts, professionally trained teachers placed in all classrooms, and a consistent curriculum delivered to students (Tieken, 2014).

The wave of changes resulting from the Committee of Twelve's report and the subsequent developments were deeply felt in rural America (Forner, 2016). Thousands of small, rural school districts across the United States were absorbed in the school consolidation process, which was further hastened by transportation improvements and construction of new roads (Bard et al., 2006). The power base of public schooling shifted away from local communities and became the purview of professional educators (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Local school board autonomy diminished sharply, including loss of control over the school's curriculum and daily proceedings (Forner, 2016). Rural citizens resented the move to centralized schooling because the citizens no longer had control over the children's education and were required to pay taxes to support larger schools responsible for educating students whose families did not live in the local community (Forner, 2016).

Challenges of rural schools and communities. The great urban migration resulting from American industrialization, followed by the School Consolidation Movement of the 1920s, led to increasing rates of economic decline, outmigration, and human poverty in rural communities (Forner, 2016). These three factors created significant challenges for present-day rural superintendents in the areas of inadequate fiscal resources (Roza, 2015), limited human capital (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015), and geographic isolation (Glover et al., 2016).

These challenges may have an impact on superintendent delivery of teacher professional development in rural school districts.

Inadequate fiscal resources. Rural school districts frequently experience insufficient funding (Culbertson & Billig, 2016) due to low-density populations generating decreased property tax revenues (Forner, 2016). Difficulties passing levy and bond referenda (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014) are also common. Diminishing student populations further result in fewer federal and state dollars to staff and resource schools (Forner, 2016; Smith, 2015).

Federal grants are available to states to offset costs in rural school districts, but each grant presents challenges. Fishman (2015) explained federal grants offer meager allocations, are too categorical to be used effectively, and require too much time for understaffed rural school districts to complete. Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) described three prominent federal public school grants and the unique challenges associated with each: (a) the Race to the Top school reform grants issued under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act; (b) the School Improvement Grants, also issued under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act; and (c) the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) program, authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and further amended in 2001 under the No Child Left Behind Act. The REAP grant was reissued under the ESSA of 2015, and improvements were made based on feedback from rural educators (Schmidt, Caspary, & Jonas, 2016).

Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) noted states with high rural populations were less likely to apply for Race to the Top grants because the reforms included initiatives such as charter schools and complex teacher evaluation systems, which rural school districts were unable to implement based on limited capacity and scalability. School Improvement Grants were also problematic because urban schools were 4 times more likely to receive these grants, and access to high levels of human capital (e.g., hiring new staff, implementing charter schools, conducting school closures) were assumed (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). The two most prominent programs associated with the REAP grant, which were designed to support rural districts facing personnel and resource limitations (the Small, Rural School Achievement program and the Rural and Low-Income School program), include requirements which render many rural schools ineligible for funding (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).

Despite the grant-related concerns referenced by Gagnon and Mattingly (2015), Schmidt et al. (2016) found states are largely satisfied with the REAP program. The researchers suggested changes in three key areas: (a) improved eligibility and award timelines, (b) clearer guidance outlining the appropriate use of funds, and (c) revised criteria to determine eligibility. Schmidt et al. also found states make REAP grants available to districts based on student enrollment or average daily attendance, not on a competitive basis. Finally, REAP grant funds are primarily used by states to improve or expand access to technology (Schmidt et al., 2016).

Poverty is a pervasive and undeniable problem in rural America (Cromarte, 2017). Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) and Howley et al. (2014) reminded readers, however, rural communities are diverse in nature. While the majority of rural communities experience high rates of poverty, the profile does not fit all rural schools and communities. Overall, statistics show students in poverty have been entering rural schools at increasingly higher rates (Marre, 2017) and are more likely to have knowledge and skill gaps requiring specialized curriculum and additional resources (Culbertson & Billig, 2016).

The environment of fiscal scarcity (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014) has left few remaining resources for teacher professional development in rural school districts. Students with significant learning gaps and social-emotional challenges need highly trained teachers (Althaus, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2015). Superintendents must ensure teachers have the professional development required to address students' diverse learning needs (Althaus, 2015; Behrman, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2015) and ensure college and career readiness.

Limited human capital. All schools in the United States seek to provide students with an education which supports the pursuit of meaningful life goals (Adams & Woods, 2015). The objective is to ensure every child has access to a skilled teacher (Adams & Woods, 2015). Quality teachers require ongoing and effective professional development (Althaus, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Letwinsky & Cavender, 2018; Lin et al., 2015) to implement impactful instructional practices in the classroom.

Two human capital-related issues which negatively impact rural school districts are the lack of administrative support for superintendents (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Hansen, 2018;

NASBE, 2016; Smith, 2015; Yettick et al., 2014; Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014) and teacher recruitment and retention challenges (Culbertson & Billig, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Rural superintendents who are administratively understaffed may not have the time and expertise necessary to implement a professional development program designed to meet the needs of new and experienced teachers. A high-quality teacher training plan must take into account the learning needs of all teachers and provide ongoing opportunities for professional collaboration, mentorship, and practice between trainings (Learning Forward, 2017).

High teacher turnover, common in rural school districts, may require superintendents to spend a disproportionate amount of time on induction-related professional development activities (e.g., instructional framework, teacher evaluation, curriculum trainings). Onboarding is critical to increase new teacher efficacy (Adams & Woods, 2015; Althausen, 2015). However, continuous induction work may leave superintendents with less time (Hansen, 2018; NASBE, 2016) and fewer resources (Culbertson & Billig, 2016) to implement other forms of professional development (e.g., opportunities for experienced teachers to deepen content knowledge and pedagogical skills through collaboration, coaching, in-service opportunities). Furthermore, teacher recruitment and retention challenges may create school environments in which a disproportionately higher number of rural students are taught by inexperienced teachers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).

Geographic isolation. Geographic isolation presents another layer of complexity for rural superintendents (Culbertson & Billig, 2016; Glover et al., 2016; Smith, 2015). Barriers include high travel costs to attend trainings in metropolitan areas, difficulties hiring professional development consultants, and challenges securing substitutes to cover classrooms while teachers participate in training activities (Glover et al., 2016; Yettick et al., 2014). Geographic isolation further hinders teacher collaboration (Hargreaves, Parsley, & Cox, 2015; Kotok & Kryst, 2017; NASBE, 2016).

Rethinking rural school districts. While rural school districts experience inadequate fiscal resources (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014), limited human capital (Adams & Woods, 2015), and geographic isolation (Kotok & Kryst, 2017), researchers and policymakers have proposed viable solutions to overcome challenges. Fishman (2015) called on policymakers to think differently about the rural landscape, reducing barriers and encouraging local innovation. Solutions addressing these challenges are as follows.

Strategies to address inadequate fiscal resources. Bailey and Zumeta (2015) advised state education agencies work with rural school districts to ensure all federal funding opportunities are fully maximized. Smith (2015) suggested state agencies should gather information on budget constraints faced by rural schools and create policies to ensure adequate funding of basic education and implementation of state and federal initiatives. Hill (2015) suggested offering financial incentives to rural districts for sharing facilities, personnel, student course offerings, and teacher training. Hill further encouraged states allow districts to pay teachers beyond full-time to serve in unique roles which may otherwise go unfilled.

Roza (2015) noted, while rural districts, on average, show an overall lower return on investment when comparing student learning outcomes to per-pupil expenditures, some are outliers, achieving exceptionally high rates of return. Roza hypothesized the outlier districts may be capitalizing on local ingenuity, acting with greater agility when implementing reform efforts, and maximizing school and community strengths. Roza encouraged policymakers and rural administrators to study the practices of these outlier districts to gain greater insight into the practices.

Strategies to address limited human capital. To address the lack of administrative support for superintendents in rural school districts, Fishman (2015) called on state agencies to reduce the burden of compliance reporting. Hill (2015) suggested collaborating with state lawmakers and federal policymakers to combine programs and seek changes and waivers. The RTP (2015) highlighted the importance of implementing digital data input, analysis, and retrieval systems to reduce time and address human resource deficits in rural school districts.

To address teacher recruitment and retention challenges in rural areas, Bailey and Zumeta (2015) suggested state agencies provide alternative routes to teacher licensure for difficult-to-fill positions, offer e-mentoring services to increase teacher support and retention, and ensure rural school districts have access to digital service delivery models for special populations. Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) proposed Grow Your Own (GYO) initiatives and financial incentives as effective approaches for recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas.

Strategies to address geographic isolation. Smith (2015) advised rural districts engage in collaborative efforts with other rural districts to offset costs, such as pooling resources to hire professional development providers. Hill (2015) called for rural superintendents' voices to be

raised at the state capitol. Due to the isolated locations and small sizes of many rural school districts, attracting legislators to rural communities can be difficult (Hill, 2015). Hill further advised state education agencies provide a fund for rural leaders to use for travel purposes, reducing isolation and increasing professional empowerment.

Isolation and lack of awareness contribute to rural superintendents not fully utilizing the flexibility available (Hill, 2015). Superintendents may have difficulty discerning legal requirements from locally determined procedures. Providing rural superintendents with dedicated personnel at the state level to answer questions on a case-by-case basis was identified as a desired resource (Hill, 2015).

The Superintendent

Roles and responsibilities. The superintendent is the CEO of the school district. In collaboration with the board of directors, the superintendent establishes the vision and mission for the district and maintains the central focus on student learning and achievement (WSSDA, 2014). The WSSDA outlines the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent as well as the licensing and educational requirements. The framework is described in the document *Certificated Superintendent Position Description* and identifies six essential functions and responsibilities of the superintendent role: visionary leadership, instructional leadership, effective management, inclusive practice, ethical leadership, and sociopolitical context (WSSDA, 2014).

Visionary leadership involves establishing a vision to support the learning and achievement of every student; *instructional leadership* consists of creating a district culture conducive to student achievement and staff professional development; *effective management* refers to operating the district and administering resources to ensure a humane learning environment for all students; *inclusive practice* means engaging all stakeholders (e.g., families, the community) in mobilizing resources to support the learning agenda; *ethical leadership* involves acting with integrity; and *sociopolitical context* references the need for superintendents to influence and respond to the wider political and social context to drive the student learning agenda (WSSDA, 2014).

In Washington state, superintendents are required to hold a master's degree, and a superintendent credential is preferred (WSSDA, 2014). The *Certificated Superintendent Position Description* aligns with the *Washington Standards-Based Superintendent Evaluation*. The document describes the cyclical nature of the superintendent evaluation, consisting of a beginning-of-year goal-setting process, midyear and end-of-year performance reviews, and evidence-gathering processes for superintendents to demonstrate competency in the essential functions and responsibilities associated with the position. The evaluation document further provides information to support both the superintendent and board of directors in all facets of the evaluation process (Lashway et al., 2013).

Each essential function and responsibility listed in the *Certificated Superintendent Position Description* begins with the words “The superintendent is an educational leader who improves learning and achievement for each student” (WSSDA, 2014, p. 1). The language signifies WSSDA's strong position stating student learning is the superintendent's most important goal. According to Lashway et al. (2013), the point was further emphasized in the *Washington Standards-Based Superintendent Evaluation*, which states superintendent evaluation standards should be focused on the promotion of student learning.

Honig and Rainey (2015) also identified student learning and achievement as the superintendent's most important goal. Honig and Rainey called on superintendents to position districts for high impact by putting the following design components in place: clear definitions for effective teaching and principal and teacher leadership, principal supervisors who possess the necessary knowledge and skills to support principal leadership growth, and all central office staff members focused on deeper learning. Honig and Rainey defined *deeper learning* as a combination of core content knowledge, critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, effective communication, and the ability to successfully navigate life. When all district departments engage in performance alignment focused on deeper learning for all students, learning and achievement will increase (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

Henrikson (2018) identified the importance of effective superintendent–board relations in all facets of the superintendent role, including the evaluation process. The evaluation process provides school boards with a framework to hold superintendents accountable for established goals (Henrikson, 2018). Likewise, the evaluation process should provide actionable feedback to superintendents to encourage professional growth (Henrikson, 2018). In

Henrikson's view, the *Washington Standards-Based Superintendent Evaluation* is a tool which effectively achieves both objectives.

Superintendents are responsible for addressing the sociopolitical realm impacting student learning and achievement in school districts. Thompson and Jocius (2017) offered collective impact models as a strategy for superintendents and others to engage sociopolitically on behalf of students. Collective impact models involve bringing together diverse stakeholders to achieve common goals (Thompson & Jocius, 2017). An example may include superintendents convening with local business, civic, nonprofit, and faith leaders (Thompson & Jocius, 2017) to address the comprehensive social-emotional needs of children. By establishing clear goals and performance indicators (Thompson & Jocius, 2017), services such as after-school programs and medical care may be provided to support student learning and well-being through the combined efforts of multiple stakeholders.

The rural superintendent. Some view the rural superintendent role as undertheorized, with the frameworks guiding empirical research in need of expansion. McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) described the two dominant empirical views of the rural superintendent's relationship with the community as "*insider/outsider*" (p. 1) and "*place-conscious*" (p. 1) paradigms. While these models have appropriate applications in the rural superintendent research, drawing solely on these two frameworks to interrogate the rural superintendent role may cause researchers to miss the complexities of rural spaces and relationships. McHenry-Sorber and Budge argued for rural communities to be viewed as "*factional*" (p. 12) and "*diverse*" (p. 12). The rural superintendent's job is to acknowledge and work effectively with the shifting community divisions within rural communities to achieve mutual goals (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018).

New rural superintendents require support and collaboration not only from school boards and communities but also from more experienced superintendent mentors. Rural school districts and communities are complex in nature, and new superintendents benefit greatly from ongoing mentorship by experienced superintendents familiar with the rural educational landscape (Augustine-Shaw, 2015). Augustine-Shaw (2015) described the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute model designed to provide guidance for new superintendents with induction and mentoring services. Through the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute, rural superintendents participated in ongoing capacity building activities, including regional

networking activities, state-level meetings, and aligned professional development (Augustine-Shaw, 2015).

When seeking high levels of student learning and achievement, superintendents are advised to create coherence in rural school districts through the application of effective organizational practices. Doerksen and Wise (2016) examined the systemic practices of four high-achieving, rural school districts in the San Joaquin Valley of California characterized by significant student poverty rates and diverse student populations. The researchers found the following six organizational practices in place at all four rural school districts: (a) a robust district culture with commonly held beliefs; (b) a strong emphasis on teacher instruction and student learning; (c) effective alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (d) ongoing data monitoring and data-based decision making; (e) collaborative communities of practice; and (f) effective instructional leadership. Doerksen and Wise further identified five factors impacting each district's internal coherence and the unique application of these organizational practices: (a) leadership through effective tone setting; (b) clear goals and defined autonomy; (c) systems and structures for data monitoring, collaboration, and interventions; (d) recruiting, retaining, and supporting staff to uphold the district culture; and (e) a vision of high expectations for students supported by all stakeholders. Based on the research, Doerksen and Wise suggested rural superintendents establish and communicate a strong district vision; develop a culture of learning; enact systems to monitor student learning; engage in frequent data conversations; apply a backward design model to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment; create professional learning communities (PLCs) and monitor effectiveness; and recruit and retain teachers who support the district's vision and beliefs.

Howley et al. (2014) described three unique challenges rural superintendents face: ongoing school and district consolidation, increasing ethnic diversity in previously all-White rural communities, and the leasing of school district lands to conduct hydraulic fracturing in the upper Great Plains, the South, Appalachia, and the Rocky Mountain regions of the United States. These three dilemmas are related to the ongoing resource deficits experienced by rural school districts (Howley et al., 2014). Howley et al. encouraged rural superintendents to consider the impact of school consolidation on rural communities and families as well as the consequences of conforming to a national learning agenda not intended for rural schools. Rural superintendents were also encouraged to use formal inventories and reflective

processes to examine how schools may be enhancing or avoiding the topics of race, class, and culture in rural environments (Howley et al., 2014). To address the issue of resource extraction in rural communities, superintendents were advised to engage in sociopolitical activities in collaboration with community members to resist the agendas of state and industry in removing resources from school district lands (Howley et al., 2014).

Teacher Professional Development

Defining effective teacher professional development. Research has shown teacher professional development does not consistently translate to strong student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The situation is problematic because students depend on teachers to provide rigorous and impactful instruction to address students' individual learning needs. A quality education for all students will be achieved only when teachers have access to effective professional development which is incorporated into instructional practice.

The ESSA of 2015, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, provided an updated, research-based definition for *teacher professional development*. *Effective teacher professional development* was defined as training which is sustained over a period of time, intensive, collaborative, job embedded, data driven, and classroom centered (ESSA, 2015). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) further identified seven components of effective teacher professional development based on 35 studies showing a positive link between teacher professional development, instructional practices, and student learning. These features are significantly aligned with the definition of *effective teacher professional development* described in ESSA. Darling-Hammond et al. posited effective professional development (a) is “content-focused” (p. v), “incorporates active learning” (p. v), “supports collaboration” (p. v), “uses models of effective practice” (p. v), “provides coaching and expert support” (p. vi), “offers feedback and reflection” (p. v), and “is of sustained duration” (p. vi). Finally, Learning Forward (2017), the U.S. professional association for educator training, described five research-based conditions necessary to foster a system of learning in every school. These conditions provide an impactful framework to generate effective professional development policies and implement powerful practices: shared vision, the use of data to set goals and advance student learning, aligned resources, ongoing leadership development, and sustainable training through effective change management (Learning Forward, 2017).

Rural teacher professional development: *Comparison of rural and nonrural teacher professional development needs in schools.* Glover et al. (2016) identified professional development needs of rural and nonrural teachers are more similar than dissimilar. Teachers in both groups reported spending roughly the same amount of time participating in professional development, providing and receiving feedback, collaborating with colleagues, and engaging in experiences of similar quality (Glover et al., 2016). Rural and nonrural teachers also prefer professional development activities which are directly related to individual teaching assignments, well planned, and include access to instructional technology training (Wallace, 2014). These studies served as strong reminders to rural superintendents indicating, while the unique features of rural school districts must be attended to through specialized training, the key tenets of quality professional development transcend geography and school size.

Rural teacher professional development models. Smith (2015) proposed region-based professional development and the promotion of teacher leadership as two strong collaborative strategies to increase instructional growth. Barrett et al. (2015) examined whether content-based professional development positively impacts student achievement scores in rural settings over time. The researchers observed gains the first year following the training, but the gains did not persist into the second and third years.

De la Garza (2016) studied the value of rural teacher mentorships, noting teachers welcomed these professional collaborations and viewed mentorships as useful in developing instructional practices. Hartman (2017) described the multifaceted nature of successful rural teacher partnerships, characterizing a successful collaboration as follows: the mentor and mentee share the same vision for the collaboration, positive outcomes are identified as a result of the pairing, and the mentor and mentee wish to continue the relationship. Partnerships were further enhanced when the mentor and mentee had common life experiences, compatible personalities, empathy, respect, persistence, trust, and a willingness to change instructional practices (Hartman, 2017). Trust, particularly in the form of confidentiality, was deemed to be critical in rural teacher partnerships due to the interconnectedness of the school staff with the community and the potential for gossip (Hartman, 2017). Kelly and Cherkowski (2015) found rural teachers valued partnerships in the form of PLCs. PLCs were generally viewed by teachers as positive professional

experiences and deemed to be effective in changing teachers' beliefs and instructional practices (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015).

Maheady et al. (2016) examined three dimensions of university–rural school partnerships: evidence-based practices, honoring practitioners' professional wisdom, and instructional coaching. Findings showed teachers valued university partnerships; preferred professional development activities which were directly applicable to teaching roles; and desired additional training on the continued use of evidence-based practices, data collection, and exposure to new teacher evaluation tools (Maheady et al., 2016). Teachers further requested innovative professional development delivery formats (e.g., online training opportunities, communities of practice), increased visibility of university partners in the schools, and opportunities to engage in collaborative teams with university personnel (Maheady et al., 2016). The coaching component of the study showed teachers and university–school partners focused on meaningful problems of practice, implemented evidence-based classroom strategies, and effectively measured student learning outcomes of teaching techniques (Maheady et al., 2016). These qualitative studies demonstrated the need for rural superintendents to structure professional development activities based on teachers' needs and interests and monitor implementation to ensure translation to practice.

New teacher professional development needs in rural environments. New teachers have a unique set of learning needs in rural environments. Geographic isolation, lack of amenities, and poverty are a few of the challenges new teachers face (Azano & Stewart, 2016). University preparation programs play an important role in preparing new teachers to be successful in rural settings by providing rural practicum experiences and targeted training to align with the realities of rural teaching (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Mukeredzi, 2016). Teachers new to rural environments need to learn how to work on small staffs, manage multiage classrooms, and teach multiple subject areas, among other required skills (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015).

Appalachian-born, first-year teachers provided valuable insights into the needs of preservice rural teachers. Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) interviewed five first-year teachers who returned to Appalachia after completing a university preparation program. The researchers found teachers who were community-oriented, viewed rural spaces positively, and desired to live locally were able to connect effectively with students, colleagues, and community

members. Moffa and McHenry-Sorber hypothesized teachers with a communitarian orientation may also benefit from GYO teaching programs. Participants indicated (a) no teacher preparation program could have adequately prepared the participants for the diverse Appalachian environment encountered or the emotional challenges faced, (b) some of the professional development received was unhelpful, and (c) some participants experienced a lack of support in the first year of teaching (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018).

The Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) study may imply a benefit to extending university training programs into the first year of teaching to increase retention. Furthermore, universities should avoid perpetuating a singular, deficit view of rural environments, offering a more sophisticated and nuanced view (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Rural superintendents were further advised to consider the unique learning needs of new rural teachers and expand the university training teachers receive (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018).

Technology as a medium for teacher professional development in rural schools. Online professional development provides rural teachers and students with access to quality courses and reduces travel and facility costs. The RTP (2015) identified two examples of popular teacher professional development platforms, including the TeachLive program, which uses avatars to help teachers develop instructional practices, and LEARN NC, which delivers required state trainings in districts lacking the internal capacity to offer these courses. Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) described Maine's online communities of practice developed for teachers in remote, rural, and high-poverty school districts.

Multiple viable online learning options exist for teachers. The RTP (2015) proposed three models to support teacher professional development and student learning in rural school districts: virtual learning, blended learning, and virtual professional networks. Virtual learning may be used to offer students and teachers online courses and student credit recovery (RTP, 2015). Blended learning, a combination of online and face-to-face learning, offers scheduling flexibility, reduced transportation costs, and expanded opportunities for collaboration and independent work (Hebebcı & Usta, 2015; RTP, 2015). Virtual professional networks are another strategy which shows great promise. Teachers utilize virtual networks to seek professional advice, collaborate with a wider professional community, and engage with fellow educators from the same or different settings (RTP, 2015).

ConnectedEducators.org is one example of a virtual professional network; another is the Wabash Valley Education Center located in Lafayette, Indiana (RTP, 2015).

Technology can be a powerful medium for teacher professional development and student learning in remote areas. Sanabria, Chavez, and Zermeno (2016) explored the benefits and challenges of integrating a virtual learning environment in a rural Colombian high school. Recommendations included training teachers in the use of information communication technologies, developing infrastructure and computer labs to facilitate learning, and providing curriculum guides for teachers (Sanabria et al., 2016). Hunt-Barron et al. (2015) implemented digital tools as a strategy for enhancing collaboration and professional development. Results showed teachers used the digital tools primarily to download instructional materials rather than to engage in professional collaboration activities (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). Both the Sanabria et al. and Hunt-Barron et al. studies showed integrating technology into rural school environments without adequate support is ineffective. These studies provided strong guidance for school district superintendents who are considering the use of technology as a medium for teacher professional development in rural school districts.

Educational Equity for Rural Students

Approximately 12 million students in the United States are enrolled in rural schools, representing one fourth of the overall student population (NASBE, 2016). Unfortunately, rural students face significant challenges. Twenty-five percent of rural students in the United States live in poverty, and 48 out of 50 counties with the highest childhood poverty rates are designated as *rural* (Fishman, 2015). Showalter et al. (2017) explained policymakers often overlook rural issues such as poverty due to a lack of familiarity with the realities of rural life. Fishman (2015) cautioned rural communities are diverse and not all are in crisis. Statistics confirm, however, a disproportionate number of young people in rural areas of the United States abuse methamphetamines, experience depression, and attempt suicide (Fishman, 2015).

Rural students face significant resource deficits at school and at home (Showalter et al., 2017). In 23 states, most rural students come from families with limited economic means (Showalter et al., 2017). A lack of adequate resources, difficulties with teacher recruitment

and retention, and a shortage of early childhood services are commonplace in rural school districts (Showalter et al., 2017).

Rural adults also face barriers. Fewer rural adults earn college degrees, and the gap between rural and urban degree attainment is increasing (Marre, 2017). Nonrural settings continue to provide greater income-earning potential than rural communities (Marre, 2017). Lower levels of rural educational achievement are linked to higher levels of unemployment and family poverty (Marre, 2017).

While outmigration is an ongoing phenomenon in rural communities, Howley et al. (2014) noted ethnic and cultural diversity are increasing in rural America. Battelle for Kids (2016) identified 80% of the rural population growth, beginning in 2000, came from ethnic and minority groups. Changing rural demographics are reportedly contributing to social tensions, prejudice, discrimination, and bigoted behavior in some rural schools and communities across the United States (Howley et al., 2014).

Adopting a Rural Education Growth Mindset

While numerous challenges exist in rural schools and communities throughout the United States, viable solutions to overcome existing barriers also exist. Several strategies were addressed in the literature review. The NASBE (2016) further outlined four recommendations for increasing the quality of rural education: expand access to technology, maximize partnerships and collaborative opportunities, allow flexibility in funding, and support rural human resource deficits by providing programs to increase educator capacity. Battelle for Kids (2016) advocated for rural education collaboratives as a comprehensive strategy to mitigate rural opportunity gaps and demographic shifts. The key advantages of rural education collaboratives include participating in rural advocacy, sharing resources, scaling up programs and best practices, and focusing on college and career readiness for all students (Battelle for Kids, 2016).

Chapter Summary

The literature showed rural school districts face inadequate fiscal resources (Roza, 2015), limited human capital (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015), and geographic isolation (Glover et al.,

2016). In addition, strategies to overcome these challenges have been proposed (Fishman, 2015). Little empirical research exists to identify how inadequate fiscal resources, limited human capital, and geographic isolation impact superintendent delivery of teacher professional development in rural school districts. The researcher sought to fill this gap in the literature and extend knowledge.

The literature showed rural superintendents play an important role in school districts (Henrikson, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Lashway et al., 2013; WSSDA, 2014) and have a multifaceted and time-intensive role in rural environments (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Doerksen & Wise, 2016; Howley et al., 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). Little empirical research exists to identify how the multifaceted and time-intensive superintendent role impacts teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. The researcher sought to fill this gap in the literature and extend knowledge.

The literature showed effective teacher professional development is complex in nature (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; ESSA, 2015; Gokbel & Alqurashi, 2018; Hill & Uribe-Florez, 2020; Kuehnert, Cason, Young, & Pratt, 2019; Learning Forward, 2017; Thripp, 2019), resource intensive (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; ESSA, 2015; Kaur, 2020; Learning Forward, 2017), and linked to student learning and achievement (Althausen, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2015; Wallace-Spurgin, 2020). Little empirical research exists to identify how the complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development impacts superintendent delivery given the existing resource limitations in rural environments. The researcher sought to fill this gap in the literature and extend knowledge.

Providing an equitable education for rural students is a moral imperative (Adams & Woods, 2015). Superintendents are frequently the educational leaders responsible for implementing teacher training in rural settings. Providing knowledgeable and skilled rural teachers must remain a strong priority if student learning and achievement goals are to be realized. Ylimaki and Brunner (2014) found the rural educational context has not attracted the same level of scholarly interest as urban and suburban settings, and identified the need for more research on the rural superintendent role. Smith (2015) asserted additional studies are needed to better understand how effective instructional leadership practices are implemented in rural settings. Glover et al. (2016) identified a dearth of research addressing rural teacher professional

development. Doerksen and Wise (2016) noted few studies describe how rural school districts attain high levels of academic achievement. In summary, researchers issued a strong call to conduct this research study to fill the gap in the literature.

The literature review examined the existing challenges and strategies for overcoming barriers which may impact teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. Chapter 3 presents the methodology for the study. The research design and rationale are provided. The study's population, sample selection, instrumentation, and analysis procedures are described.

Citation

Cadero-Smith, L. A. (2020). The literature review of teacher professional development challenges of superintendents. In I. Sahin & P. Vu (Eds.), *Teacher professional development challenges faced by rural superintendents* (pp. 13-36). ISTES Organization.

CHAPTER 3: MEASURING RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS' EXPERIENCES REGARDING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This applied research study examined a real-world problem in a rural educational setting to inform future policy implementation, resource allocation, and professional development delivery. The study was intended to be practical and problem based. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described qualitative research as exploratory in nature and concerned with understanding the meanings people attribute to social problems. Qualitative research is inductive in nature, often generated in the participants' settings, and focused on presenting the complexity of a phenomenon. Qualitative studies are distinguished from quantitative studies, which examine the relationships among variables, test theories deductively, and apply statistical procedures to analyze numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Trochim et al. (2016) identified qualitative research as a methodology grounded in human interpretation and experience. Generating new theories, describing phenomena, and developing a deep understanding of social issues are the central goals (Trochim et al., 2016). Qualitative studies are ideally suited for the beginning stages of theory development (Trochim et al., 2016).

This qualitative study was designed to answer the following research question and subquestions:

Research Question: What are superintendents' common experiences providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion One: What are superintendents' common challenges providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Two: How do superintendents overcome common challenges to provide teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Three: How can federal, state, and regional policymakers and service providers support superintendents to overcome common challenges and deliver effective teacher professional development in rural school districts?

To answer the research question and subquestions, a semistructured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions aligned to the study's purpose was utilized (Appendix A). The following documents were also given to the participants to create further context for the research: Introduction to the Study (Appendix B), Informed Consent (Appendix C), Description of Effective Teacher Professional Development (Appendix D), Sample List of District and School-Level Strategies (Appendix E), and Sample List of Policymaker and Service Provider Strategies (Appendix F). Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the methodology employed to operationalize the study's purpose and provide in-depth answers to the research question and subquestions. Chapter 3 includes the following sections: Introduction, Research Design and Rationale, Role of the Researcher, Research Procedures, Data Analysis, Reliability and Validity, Ethical Procedures, and Chapter Summary. At the end of Chapter 3, the reader will have a complete understanding of how the researcher queried the phenomenon of rural teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts through the lens of superintendents.

Research Design and Rationale

For the study, a transcendental phenomenological research design was employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology originated with German philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and represents both a philosophical perspective and a research methodology (Trochim et al., 2016). *Transcendental* means perceiving anew, as through fresh eyes (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenologists seek to interpret how participants commonly perceive a phenomenon based on lived experiences with the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Van Manen (2015), a phenomenologist in the hermeneutic tradition, described lived experiences as the beginning and end of all phenomenological studies. The overarching goal of phenomenology is to understand the universal essence of a phenomenon as experienced by all subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Six key philosophical concepts are central to understanding transcendental phenomenology: natural attitude, intentionality, noesis, noema, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994).

Natural attitude refers to the ordinary view of the world (Bevan, 2014). Natural attitude is the unexamined view of life which is irreflective and unmindful (Bevan, 2014). Natural attitude represents what is already known or taken for granted about phenomena in the world (Bevan, 2014). The phenomenological researcher seeks to overcome natural attitude and generate new knowledge by engaging in the process of intentionality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Intentionality is a concept meaning an object's reality is intricately linked to the subject's awareness of the object (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Subjects and objects are not viewed as separate entities but, rather, are perceived as symbiotic in nature, one dependent on the other. *Intentionality* may be thought of as the internal consciousness of something (Moustakas, 1994), or awareness (Peoples, 2017). In the transcendental phenomenological tradition, intentionality comprises two components: noema and noesis (Moustakas, 1994).

Noesis means to reflect on or interpret (Peoples, 2017). The investigator engages in noesis by shining a light on the study topic (Peoples, 2017), setting aside all presuppositions and preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994). The study topic is the *noema*, or the thing which is considered (Peoples, 2017). Noema is not the physical matter of the study topic but, rather, how the topic is perceived in one's consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction consists of reducing data to the essential meaning. Reduction begins with the *epoché* process (also called *bracketing*) and ends with a textural description of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). During *epoché*, the investigator identifies personal experiences with the topic to ensure transparency and maintain undivided attention on the subjects' reported experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researcher judgement is suspended until knowledge is established empirically (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The remaining components of the phenomenological reduction process include grouping, reducing, and thematizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher compiles subjects' critical experiences and perceptions with the study phenomenon following a process called *horizontalizing*, which consists of highlighting participants' significant statements relevant to the experiences with the phenomenon and reducing the statements into nonoverlapping statements of equal value called *invariant*

constituents (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents are identified and then grouped into themes (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents and themes are used to write a textural description of the phenomenon as it appears to the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Following the development of a textural description of the participants' experiences, the researcher engages in the act of *imaginative variation* to develop a structural description of the phenomenon. Imaginative variation consists of intentionally altering frames of reference and viewing the phenomenon from different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Because phenomena have multiple modes of appearing and are perceived uniquely by each participant (Bevan, 2014), engaging in the intentional practice of imaginative variation allows the researcher to see a phenomenon from a variety of angles. The last step in the data analysis process involves combining the textural and structural descriptions to convey the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This final, composite description is referred to as the *textural-structural synthesis* (Moustakas, 1994, p. 50). Transcendental phenomenology was the ideal methodology for answering the research question and subquestions because so little is known about the study topic. Transcendental phenomenology focuses less on researcher interpretation and more on participant experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As superintendent voice was largely absent from the empirical literature on the topic of teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts, querying superintendents' lived experiences and perceptions was an appropriate and responsible starting point to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Using specific contexts and superintendents' perspectives, the phenomenon was clearly and accurately portrayed (Moustakas, 1994). The anticipated benefit of the research design is developing new knowledge on a little-known topic based on human perception (Moustakas, 1994) examined from multiple perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher was the key research instrument in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through interviews with rural superintendents. The researcher was responsible for selecting the study population, creating open-ended interview questions aligned to the study's purpose, and providing a digital audio device to accurately capture the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees. Multiple qualitative research strategies were employed to ensure reliability of data and validity of interpretations and conclusions. Both an audit trail and member checks were performed to establish credibility and dependability. Audit trails

involve creating digital records of the researcher's thinking and data analysis processes throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In member checking, participants' views are solicited to determine credibility of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the interviews, the four participants received a copy of the respective transcript to review for accuracy. Each participant had the opportunity to revise or clarify the comments. None of the participants suggested any changes. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a confidential online service to ensure accuracy. Thick descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the participants' perspectives, in the form of quoted statements, are provided in Chapter 4 to increase transferability. No power relationships existed between the researcher and the superintendents in the target population. No rewards or incentives were offered for participation in the study.

Epoché Process

Prior to conducting the study and analyzing the data, the researcher performed the epoché process to disclose and set aside previous involvement with the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The process was in preparation for attaining new knowledge through a fresh lens (Moustakas, 1994). Conducting the epoché process allowed the researcher to assume a neutral position related to teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher Epoché

The study represented a strong area of personal and professional interest for the researcher, consistent with transcendental phenomenological research. The researcher grew up in a semirural area in Western Washington state and previously worked in a rural, remote school district in the region where the study was conducted. The researcher holds a Washington Continuing Superintendent Certificate and currently works as the assistant superintendent of K–12 education in a medium-sized school district in Washington state. The district where the researcher is employed includes both rural and nonrural areas. One of the researcher's core professional responsibilities includes providing teacher professional development. The researcher chose to interview superintendents for the study because superintendents are responsible for creating the vision for teacher professional development in rural school districts and allocating the necessary resources to support the vision. Without strong

superintendent leadership, the researcher believes teacher professional development is difficult to implement in a guaranteed and viable way. Rural superintendents represent a critical voice which is missing from the empirical literature on the study topic. The researcher asserts, based on personal experience, teacher professional development requires significant planning and preparation to deliver effectively. The researcher has observed the inordinate amount of agency and time required for teachers to translate professional development into practice without the necessary system supports provided through the processes of feedback, reflection, and coaching. The researcher's perception is, when teacher professional development is not delivered effectively, as outlined by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), systemic changes in teaching practices and increases in student learning outcomes are less likely to occur. The researcher appreciates and respects rural people and spaces. The researcher believes the equitable education of rural students is a moral imperative. The researcher views a quality education as foundational to ensuring social and civic engagement and personal empowerment and fulfillment. When rural students are denied access to a quality education, the researcher believes the students' opportunities in life and the pursuit of hopes and dreams are limited. The researcher has multiple preunderstandings, biases, and experiences related to the topic. These factors generated the researcher's interest in the study and a strong desire to give voice to the rural superintendents whose perspectives are missing from the empirical literature. The researcher set aside biases during the data analysis process to allow the study phenomenon to be revealed through the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Research Procedures

The target and study populations for the research project are identified in the following subsections. A definition of *purposeful sampling* is provided, and procedures for selecting candidates are described. A brief description of the data collection instrument is included.

Population and Sample Selection

The target population for the qualitative study included 10 superintendents from rural, remote school districts in Western Washington state with the urban-centric locale code of 43. School district locale codes are assigned by the ERDC (2010) and are aligned to the urban-centric codes designated by the NCES (2006). In both the ERDC and NCES systems, rural, remote

school districts are identified as districts located “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and . . . more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (ERDC, 2010, p. 2). Trochim et al. (2016) identified *purposeful sampling* as a form of nonprobability sampling with a particular focus. Sampling practices must align with the research paradigm (Leung, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) noted phenomenological studies typically range in size from three to 15 participants who have experienced the same phenomenon. In the present study, four current superintendents were purposefully selected from rural, remote school districts in Western Washington state to explore the phenomenon of rural teacher professional development implementation. To identify the study population, the researcher compiled the names and contact information for the 10 superintendents in the target population in an Excel spreadsheet. After obtaining written permission from the American College of Education Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher called an administrator at the regional ESD which serves the target population and requested four participants from the spreadsheet be contacted to participate in the study. The administrator selected four superintendents from the spreadsheet for inclusion. The ESD administrator chose the candidates, contacted each superintendent via telephone, and set up the interview dates and times. After the interviews were scheduled, the researcher followed up with each superintendent via e-mail which introduced the study and included the informed consent document and four documents providing further context for the study: a description of effective teacher professional development; a sample list of district and school-level strategies for overcoming rural teacher professional development delivery challenges; a sample list of federal, state, and regional-level strategies for overcoming rural teacher professional development delivery challenges; and the interview questions. The questions explored superintendents’ experiences and perceptions, including challenges, strategies, and desired supports from policymakers and service providers, when implementing teacher professional development in rural school districts. The study’s purpose, selection criteria, required time commitment, and confidentiality measures were also outlined in the study documents. The interview date and time were listed. Each superintendent was asked to return the signed consent form via e-mail or in person prior to the interview.

Instrumentation

The instrument used to gather data for the qualitative study was a semistructured interview protocol consisting of open-ended interview questions. The interview protocol (Appendix A)

was developed by the researcher. Data were collected from the subjects in audio-recorded interviews, which were transcribed by a confidential online service and shared with participants to ensure accuracy. Developing a new data collection instrument was necessary for the study because the researcher could not locate the research topic in the empirical literature. The instrument was considered to be trustworthy and dependable because the instrument was aligned to the study's purpose, comprised of open-ended questions designed to generate thick descriptions consistent with qualitative research, and constructed in a manner consistent with phenomenological research by querying *what* and *how* participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Content validity was established by asking two rural superintendents in Western Washington state who were not included in the study population to review and suggest revisions to the interview questions.

Data Collection

Interviews ranged in length from 43 minutes to one hour and 52 minutes. The interview questions addressed key topics aligned to the study's purpose and literature review. Participants were exited from the study via e-mail after reviewing the respective transcribed comments and verifying accuracy.

Data Preparation

Data production and management must align with technological changes (DeVries et al., 2017). The data gathered in the study were digitally transcribed and stored on the researcher's computer. The computer was password protected and accessible only to the researcher. Following the study, the data will be stored digitally for a period of three years, after which the data will be destroyed.

Reliability and Validity

Appropriate devices, evidence, and plans must be employed in qualitative research to ensure reliability and validity of results (Leung, 2015). Confirmability was established in the study through the phenomenological epoché process. An audit trail and member-checking procedures were utilized to establish credibility and dependability. Each participant received a written transcript of the respective interview and had the opportunity to make necessary

revisions to ensure accuracy. A thick description of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions in the form of quoted statements was included in Chapter 4 to support the data analysis process and to ensure transferability of study results.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using the phenomenological reduction framework outlined by Moustakas (1994). Prior to data collection and analysis, the researcher performed the epoché process to identify and set aside personal and professional experiences and perceptions related to the study phenomenon. The researcher read each transcript multiple times to gain a holistic sense of the subject's experiences. Each transcript was e-mailed to the respective participant to conduct the member-checking process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software tool ATLAS.ti. The process of horizontalization was conducted in ATLAS.ti linking participants' significant statements to preset codes aligned to the research questions. The horizontalized statements, attached to the preset codes, were downloaded to Excel spreadsheets. The spreadsheets were analyzed to determine the invariant constituents of the superintendents' experiences and perceptions, drawn from the horizontalized statements. The invariant constituents were clustered into themes, which were organized based on the patterns presented within the data. The invariant constituents provided evidence of the superintendents' lived experiences with the study phenomenon. A textural description of the study phenomenon was written identifying what the participants experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A structural description was written describing how the experiences occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The textural and structural descriptions were combined into a textural-structural synthesis identifying the essence of teacher professional development implementation in rural school districts through the lens of superintendents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Discrepant data were included in the Discrepancies section of Chapter 4, following the Composite Structural Description section.

Ethical Procedures

IRBs hold the authority to approve, modify, or deny research activities in the interest of protecting human subjects (Lynch, 2018). The study maintained strict adherence to all guidelines established by the American College of Education IRB. Permission was obtained

from the IRB prior to contacting the ESD administrator and superintendents and collecting data. Appropriate measures were put in place to ensure the confidentiality of each participant. The researcher knew one of the superintendents in the study population on a professional basis. No professional conflicts of interest or power relationships existed between the researcher and study participants. IRBs ensure appropriate safeguards are implemented to protect the privacy of participants (Lynch, 2018). Subjects were further advised of the ability to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Participant confidentiality was protected through the use of numbers (Superintendent One, Superintendent Two, etc.) and the districts' common urban-centric locale code (43) within Western Washington state.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 included a detailed description of the methodology employed to query the study's research question and subquestions and operationalize the study's purpose. The study was identified as a transcendental phenomenological study designed to explore the common experiences and perceptions of superintendents responsible for providing teacher professional development in rural school districts, a topic which has been minimally addressed in the empirical literature and required further study and theory development. Phenomenological research was an ideal fit because the topic was not well known and required close examination to ensure a deeper level of understanding. Chapter 4 presents the study results and data analysis.

Citation

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CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS FOR RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS' EXPERIENCES REGARDING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 4 presents the results of this social constructivist study, manifested through a transcendental phenomenological lens. The theoretical framework was woven throughout the chapter in the form of participant quotations, gathered through semistructured interviews and arranged thematically to construct new knowledge related to the study phenomenon. Superintendents' perspectives were synthesized into a composite description conveying the essence of teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Chapter 4 includes the following sections: Introduction, Research Question and Subquestions, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Results, Reliability and Validity, and Chapter Summary. Each section is discussed in detail, providing a thick description of the superintendents' lived experiences. At the end of Chapter 4, the reader will have a clear understanding of the research findings and data analysis results.

Research Question and Subquestions

The study results were based on four in-depth interviews conducted with rural school district superintendents in Western Washington state. The following research question and subquestions guided the study:

Research Question: What are superintendents' common experiences providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion One: What are superintendents' common challenges providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Two: How do superintendents overcome common challenges to provide teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Three: How can federal, state, and regional policymakers and service providers support superintendents to overcome common challenges and deliver effective teacher professional development in rural school districts?

The research question and subquestions were developed to understand the depth and breadth of rural superintendents' experiences and perceptions delivering teacher professional development. The rural districts in the study ranged in distance from 50 to 90 miles from the regional ESD. These districts are the most geographically remote in Western Washington and warranted specific examination as entities responsible for the learning outcomes of approximately 1,200 prekindergarten through 12th-grade students (OSPI, 2018).

Research Subquestion One examined the challenges superintendents face delivering teacher professional development in rural school districts. The researcher found no empirical studies identifying how inadequate fiscal resources, limited human capital, geographic isolation, and the complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development impact superintendents' abilities to provide effective professional development for teachers. Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) description of *effective teacher professional development* was used to frame the first research subquestion and was e-mailed to the participants prior to the interviews.

Research Subquestion Two focused on the principles and strategies superintendents employ to deliver teacher professional development in rural school districts. The question approached the study phenomenon from a strengths-based perspective. The goal of the question was to lay a foundation for theory development in the area of guaranteed and viable teacher professional development delivery systems in rural school districts aligned to available resources.

Research Subquestion Three explored the perceptions of rural superintendents to identify how policymakers and service providers could provide support to deliver effective teacher professional development. The question was developed to understand how federal, state, and regional entities could address teacher professional development challenges in rural school districts in systemic and innovative ways. The purpose of the question was to identify what

may be missing from rural superintendents' toolkits to ensure teachers receive guaranteed and viable access to quality training.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected from the superintendents in the form of audiotaped semistructured interviews which were digitally transcribed. Data collection occurred over a two-week period of time during the last week of November and first week of December 2018. The interviews ranged in length from 43 minutes to one hour and 52 minutes. No unusual events or circumstances were encountered during the data collection process.

Three of the interviews were conducted at school district sites. The fourth interview was scheduled at a regional ESD by mutual agreement of the ESD administrator and the superintendent. The only deviation from the data collection plan was the location of the fourth interview at the ESD facility instead of the superintendent's school district site. The deviation was a matter of personal preference for the superintendent.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using the phenomenological reduction framework outlined by Moustakas (1994). Prior to data collection and analysis, the researcher performed the epoché process to identify and set aside personal and professional experiences and perceptions related to the study phenomenon. The researcher's epoché is located in the Role of the Researcher section in Chapter 3. Following data collection, audio recordings from research participant interviews were digitally transcribed by a confidential online service. Transcripts were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. Each transcript was read multiple times by the researcher to gain a holistic sense of the data. A revised copy of each transcript was drafted, removing identifiable information (e.g., the names of communities where school districts were located, nearby towns, people's names). The original and revised transcripts were e-mailed to the participants to conduct the member-checking process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All four participants responded to the researcher via e-mail and made no suggestions for corrections to either the original or revised versions of the transcripts. The transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software tool ATLAS.ti. The process of horizontalization was conducted in ATLAS.ti linking participants'

significant statements to nine preset codes aligned to the research questions. The preset codes were fiscal, human resources, geographic isolation, superintendent, professional development, other challenges, strategies, desired supports, and a general “other” code. The horizontalized statements, attached to the preset codes, were downloaded to Excel spreadsheets. The spreadsheets were analyzed to determine the invariant constituents of the superintendents’ experiences and perceptions, drawn from the horizontalized statements.

The invariant constituents were clustered into 13 themes: (a) current or future impacts to the general fund; (b) categorical funding limitations; (c) workloads exceeding personnel; (d) inadequate support for superintendents; (e) difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers; (f) difficulties securing substitute teachers; (g) limitations of having one teacher per grade level or course; (h) distance from resources; (i) lack of time; (j) impacts of rural poverty and trauma; (k) superintendents articulate a vision and systems for teacher professional development within existing resources; (l) superintendents employ professional development practices aligned to the vision, systems, resources, and community needs; and (m) superintendents desire supports from policymakers and service providers responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. Data were presented in a manner consistent with transcendental phenomenology, relying heavily on participants’ descriptions of lived experiences. A textural description of the study phenomenon was written identifying what the participants experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A structural description was developed describing how the experiences occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The textural and structural descriptions were combined into a textural-structural synthesis, located in the Conclusion section of Chapter 5, identifying the essence of teacher professional development implementation in rural school districts through the lens of superintendents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Nonconforming data are identified in the Discrepancies section of Chapter 4.

Results

The research question in the study explored superintendents’ common experiences and perceptions providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. Challenges, strategies, and desired supports were explored through three subquestions querying key aspects of superintendent experience with the study phenomenon. Participant quotations are provided throughout the Results section to cohere themes and answer the research question

and subquestions. A strong focus was placed on participant description. Researcher interpretation played a less prominent role, consistent with transcendental phenomenology.

Research Subquestion One

The first research subquestion examined the common challenges superintendents experienced providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. Four topics from the empirical literature were explored: (a) inadequate fiscal resources, (b) limited human capital, (c) geographic isolation, and (d) the complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development. Two themes emerged on the topic of inadequate fiscal resources: current or future impacts to the general fund and categorical funding limitations. Five themes emerged on the topic of limited human capital: workloads exceeding personnel, inadequate support for superintendents, difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, challenges securing substitute teachers, and limitations of one teacher per grade level or course. Three themes emerged on the topic of geographic isolation: distance from resources, lack of time, and impacts of rural poverty and trauma. The fourth topic, the complex and resource intensive nature of effective teacher professional development, also presented as a common challenge for all four superintendents in six component areas. Figure 1 depicts the common challenges to teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts.



Figure 1. Challenges to Rural Teacher Professional Development

Inadequate fiscal resources. The topic manifested in the research when participants described the specific challenges faced securing funding to provide teacher professional development in the school districts. Two themes emerged from the topic: (a) current or future impacts to the general fund and (b) categorical funding limitations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Inadequate Fiscal Resources

Theme	Participant	Quotation
Current or future impacts to the general fund	Superintendent One	Where money's a little different for us is in the cost compared to the overall budget. I've had this talk with the ESD. . . . Even if they took \$500 off [for professional development services], I can't afford them. [I also] need to have a higher reserve. . . . In some cases, it's more expensive to do work out here. If I have a boiler go out . . . they're going to charge me because I'm 30 miles off the highway. I have to pay mileage, and I have to pay a rural fee. I [also] think rural communities have more retirees joining them. . . . We are struggling to sell the school to retired folks who didn't go to school here. That has been a challenge for us.
	Superintendent Two	If you look at trends across the last . . . probably 12 years . . . it was declining. . . . We're probably steadier now. . . . We can't predict it. . . . Kindergarten is small, but then other classes are big.
	Superintendent Three	There's no such thing [as levies and bonds]. . . . We only have [a few] people [who] pay taxes. It's all Impact Aid. . . . If we didn't have that, we couldn't run the school.
	Superintendent Four	You listen to what everybody talks about, the legislators and everything. . . . I'm trying to keep [up with] that, how [state funding is] going to impact rural school districts.
Categorical funding limitations	Superintendent One	Especially with the new change in funding. . . . If it's not a grant, it's not going to happen. There's just no other option at this point. . . . We have brought in some national trainers. . . . We were booking from California before. But, again, it's always grant funded. If that grant [goes] away, they [go] away.
	Superintendent Two	The LAP High Poverty dollars you can use for certain purposes. . . . We could do more . . . if some of the funds weren't as restrictive. . . . I can only use certain pots of money for certain things. . . . The prototypical funding model doesn't fund [professional development]. That's a challenge.
	Superintendent Three	We lost . . . a three-year [school improvement grant for] around \$300,000. . . . So, yes, there are some issues because of finances. . . . One of my biggest concerns when I came here [was] that there was no curriculum. There's none. And there hasn't been any money set aside so that you're renewing every seven years or every five years.
	Superintendent Four	I think fiscally, the problem I have in the rural school district . . . is . . . what they call targeted money. . . . A frustration . . . is I have a lot of ELL [English language learner] money. I can't use all that ELL money. But I can't use that ELL money on anything but ELL. . . . Give me the resources, and let me do what I'm supposed to do. . . . I'm in that job because I'm confident. . . . I'm not purposely going to try to violate the law. . . . Fiscally, I have enough money. I just wish I [were] able to move it around a little bit more.

Limited human capital. The topic manifested in the research when participants described a lack of human resources necessary to provide teacher professional development in the

school districts. Five themes emerged from the topic: (a) workload exceeds personnel, (b) superintendents have inadequate support to perform roles effectively, (c) difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, (d) challenges securing substitute teachers, and (e) limitations of one teacher per grade level or course (see Table 2).

Table 2. Limited Human Capital

Theme	Participant	Quotation
Workload exceeds personnel	Superintendent One	We have to share the load because one of the things at a small school is, we have people that administrators “park on” for whatever reason. . . . The ESD superintendents’ meetings are always on Wednesdays. Well, that happens to be our day of training, which means . . . I’ve been missing those [because of my principal role], but sometimes I’m going to have to go. If I’m gone, [and] the PD [professional development] is solely on my shoulders, I’m in trouble.
	Superintendent Two	I think it’s what we’re struggling with now. . . . You have limited people; they have to play multiple roles. At some point you don’t have enough people to do all the roles. . . . We have people being mentors; we have people on leadership team. . . . Some people aren’t ready for all of this, so you have a smaller group. We have people that we want to deliver PD, and be [the] expert in that. . . . We want a coach. The principal can’t do it all, nor should they. How do you have enough people to have a full continuum of the supports you need . . . ? You’ve got to get systems and processes in place, but . . . you still are at . . . capacity.
	Superintendent Three	We really consider ourselves together. I mean, we don’t even say, “Oh, you do that, and I do this” kind of piece. Even [our human resources person] subbed. She has her emergency sub license, but it hurts kids. It really does. The learning is gone for the day, if there was going to be any learning.
	Superintendent Four	Am I able to focus on the professional development like I . . . did when I first [came here]? . . . Really, no. My principal does more of that. . . . I can’t do it all myself. I learned that a long time ago.
Superintendents have inadequate support to perform roles effectively	Superintendent One	At the end of last year . . . I had to go back to the superintendent/principal role . . . which is miserable. . . . As a superintendent, there is no report that [I] don’t do that everyone else does. Which means A, it’s on me. But it’s also [on] my two office staff. The workload on my business manager is immense. . . . For a district secretary, it’s immense. If I don’t have them willing to take on an extra load, then that’s a huge piece. . . . In order to have effective PD, the support for admin had better be amazingly strong. I’ve been in places where as administrator, I had very little office support, for whatever reason. . . . [My] focus [had] to be on other areas.
	Superintendent Two	It’s an interesting walk in a small school. . . . You wear more hats, and you have to, so you’re stretched a little thinner. . . . Sometimes you have to jump into the day-to-day tasks, and then you’re not at the level that you normally [are]. And that blurs lines, at times, for people of your role. . . . You can impact trust at times if you’re not careful about it. You have to communicate it pretty clearly because you can jump in and help, and someone thinks, “Why are you micromanaging me?”
	Superintendent Three	Superintendent Three did not believe the multifaceted superintendent role impacted the ability to provide teacher professional development in the school district. The school was

		administratively staffed at a higher rate to provide additional support. The superintendent planned to request a reduced contract from the school board after appropriate schoolwide systems were put in place. Superintendent Three explained, "Once we get systems in place, because there's so much chaos, I'm going to offer that I just go two days a week."
	Superintendent Four	When...[the State Education Agency (SEA)] came out for CPR [Consolidated Program Review], I said, "This is it, guys. I don't have team members. I don't have a Title I office. . . . [It] is me. I don't have a Title II office. . . . [It] is me. I do have Special Ed., but that's run by [a regional ESD]."
Difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers	Superintendent One	If I [post] a third-grade position here . . . there's a good chance that I [will] have zero applicants. . . . We hire a lot of people who are not finished or have not started their certification process. . . . I have one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight of my 12 teachers who are not or were not certified when they started here. . . . My teachers in this building have nine preps. If you come from [a nearby city] where you had two, you're not going to like it here.
	Superintendent Two	Last year, we added a mentor program for new teachers. We didn't have anything in place. . . . We did not get enough training with the people being mentors but enough to get them started. . . . They would advocate you need full-time mentors, but that's not a reality here.
	Superintendent Three	There's turnover here every year. There are only three teachers here that have been here. . . . I think over the years those three teachers . . . watched administrators come and go. "Oh, another new thing? I'm just going to do my old way of teaching." . . . The rest are brand new. I think that sometimes in a rural school you'll get who can't be hired. I've already had to put a teacher on administrative leave that was hired before I even came. . . . [Also] we have housing, and they just brought in two more mobile homes thinking that would help, but [it hasn't]. So now I'm looking into the Peace Corps. . . . Can I find people who really have the heart and want to come and serve these kids instead of someone who couldn't find a job? . . . I call it "drinking the Kool-Aid," trying to let [teachers] see the difference . . . they can make here for kids [so] they'll stay.
	Superintendent Four	[The Teacher on Special Assignment] has talked about the professional development, how we can keep teachers. We were working right now on trying to get more teachers, how we're going to bring GLAD [Guided Language Acquisition Design] training to all the teachers.
	Superintendent One	I think all districts, we're all losing substitutes. I think we have four subs, maybe three. . . . [They live in] the community. . . . There is a sub co-op out of [nearby town]. We are just far enough that we [can't] get anyone to come out here, so we do it on our own.
Challenges securing substitute teachers	Superintendent Two	If we want to send somebody even up to the ESD, it's an hour each way and a full day sub. Which is a challenge because we're short of subs and the planning and the missed instruction. . . . Getting subs limits what we can do during the day. Sometimes you want teachers to stay after school, but sometimes you want to do [professional development] with somebody during the day, when you can get [the] whole group together. You miss things when you can't [get substitute teachers].
	Superintendent Three	The substitute issue is horrid. . . . Student learning is completely lost when a teacher is gone. How [we] fill . . . in [is with teachers'] prep time[s]. . . . The whole day is really lost because people . . . come in every hour. There's no consistency. Last year . . . a teacher [was hired] who . . . just . . . subbed every day. . . . But I guess the

		quality of the person was so low that it wasn't effective. . . . I have a team going to a Love and Logic training. It's our leadership team, and . . . the problem is I had to make sure [I had] subs for them. I had to see how I could creatively cover their resources.
	Superintendent Four	Substitutes are a problem. I have four substitutes now. I'm usually down to about two or three substitutes. . . . That's very typical. . . . And then of course, the teachers' time out of the classroom. . . . I can't use a sub service because they're not out there. . . . So, we have emergency subs. Requirement is you've got to at least have a two-year degree.
Limitations of one teacher per grade level or course	Superintendent One	We've tried . . . having a mentor, like over-the-phone mentoring. We've tried video mentoring, and we've not had great success. Those have been a real struggle for our staff.
	Superintendent Two	There's only so many of us, like in the high school there's really one math teacher and in the junior high there's one. So how do you create the same collaboration and that kind of conversation that we know supports improvement if you're that isolated? So we've tried a couple of things cross-level. . . . We don't have a good answer yet.
	Superintendent Three	If I were to send people off . . . but again, I think that there [are] creative [and] . . . sustainable . . . ways to help us all learn [that] cover . . . all of us and not just the one going. Especially because we only have one teacher per grade. So we all should be scope and sequencing our own learning.
	Superintendent Four	We're one teacher per grade level for elementary and one teacher per subject in secondary. . . . When you take them out of the classroom, you're affecting a lot of grades. . . . Not . . . just . . . 11th-grade English, you're affecting all the English. . . . That's an impact there.

Geographic isolation. The topic manifested in the research when participants described the specific challenges faced providing teacher professional development in geographically isolated school districts. Three themes emerged from the topic: (a) distance from resources, (b) lack of time, and (c) impacts of rural poverty and trauma (see Table 3).

Table 3. Geographic Isolation

Theme	Participant	Quotation
Distance from resources	Superintendent One	The biggest challenge is distance. There are experts all over, but getting them here is hard because of time. So, distance is a big key. Here at [my school district], we have a . . . great hotel. I've been able to get people to come and stay. But now I'm paying a hotel cost. So, distance is really an issue.
	Superintendent Two	The other challenge is distance. . . . If we want to send somebody even up to the ESD, it's an hour each way and a full-day sub. . . .
	Superintendent Three	The road ends here. We're at the end of the earth. . . . So the location highly affects [teacher professional development].
	Superintendent Four	The other [challenge] is distance. If the training is in [a nearby town], I can usually get away with a half a day, maybe. If it's in [the city where the regional ESD is located], it's a full day regardless of how long the training is. . . . The ESD has come up here; we've had some after-school training. We've had some other half-day trainings and stuff like that.
Lack of time	Superintendent One	We struggle [to] retain . . . long-term administrators in small schools [because of] the amount of time it takes. . . . Having administrators who

	are willing to put in the time is an issue. . . . I'm normally at work at 3:30 in the morning. I normally leave [at] 3:30. So, it's a 12-hour day. . . . [Then] I'm at home doing . . . work because my kids and my...[spouse] need to see me. . . . Time is a factor.
Superintendent Two	Time is always a factor. . . . Last year in the elementary, they didn't have any common planning times. . . . Now . . . there [are] structures in place for more conversation. That has helped us . . . grow. . . . The principals . . . have the PLCs but . . . don't have any other . . . structured time within [the] calendar to work with teachers. . . . In their school improvement plan, we don't have the time built in. So we're struggling a bit with that. . . . If we want to send somebody . . . up to the ESD, it's an hour each way and a full-day sub. Which is a challenge because we're short of subs, and the planning, and the missed instruction, so it goes back to time.
Superintendent Three	"It takes time. It takes a good three years to turn a system around and really bring teachers to that place. But we don't have three years when we think about our kids. There's a real urgency.
Superintendent Four	The issue is the time. When I'm taking a teacher out . . . that's time out of the classroom. . . . Time and distance are the most impact. . . . Well, you have your 10- to 12-hour days.
Superintendent One	My PD is tied to [this community] . . . because my kids come from [this community]. When I was on the reservation, [I] learned about teaching Hispanic kids [and] connecting with a Native community. When I was at [another school district, we] talked about [the] blue collar work ethic. . . . [What] does that look like in a classroom, and how do you have conversations with families and build those relationships? So, it's just different. Here in [this community], we [have a high] free and reduced rate. So, we are dealing with poverty. . . everything Eric Jensen says [about] poverty. So, we are spending a good portion of our money . . . sending our elementary staff . . . to Eric Jensen for . . . proper training. . . Teaching kids of poverty, we need . . . that knowledge.
Impacts of rural poverty and trauma Superintendent Two	So, if you grew up here and went to school here and then came back and taught here, it's the kids that have changed, not you. Teachers will say to me, "It worked when I was here; why can't it work now?" Well, we're not the same community. . . . I think that's another piece of the resistance. . . . It's scary. It is overwhelming for teachers. The LAP High Poverty dollars you can use for certain purposes, so . . . we sent a team . . . for . . . poverty training. . . . Our other [professional development] focus is social-emotional. . . . We've realized . . . we need to understand it deeply and understand our own emotional intelligence . . . before we can expect our teachers to teach it. . . . We're going to . . . build our own knowledge . . . around our . . . emotions and how we deal with them, so . . . we can better implement a system with kids. . . . Everything we've read seems to [indicate] that should help us in the long run.
Superintendent Three	Even the students, they don't really want to get to know you because you're going to leave. This is a community of trauma where people have left their lives so much. . . . We're doing . . . a PLC . . . on trauma. . . . All of those pieces are just so layered according to your population. . . . [A local person from the community is] providing some support also. She's well trained in trauma. . . . It's been this way for so long here. They have no sense of rigor, what it means to learn, what it means to have a code of conduct, why am I even here? . . . Why try?
Superintendent Four	I have found . . . in the 12 years I've been here . . . working in a high-poverty school with high needs, [that] 25% of my kids come to school every day . . . and . . . the last thing on their mind [is learning]. I haven't eaten. I'm cold. I probably had a terrible night last night with my drunk or drug induced parents. All I want to do is be cared for. That wears on teachers. I had a teacher last year, [a] very good teacher come in. . . . [She] spent one

year and . . . got out of the profession. . . . She . . . said, “I can’t give enough to these kids.” She couldn’t. She gave it her all, but she was being burned out.

[It] was obvious to me [that I’ve] got to watch for my teachers, because they do care, and it is hard. My principal and I have talked about it. We have said we could probably take the majority of our teachers and put them in any school in an urban or suburban area, and they’re going to do fine, not vice versa. These kids need stuff, and they’ll suck it out of you. . . . [You’ve] got to also have . . . professional development [on] how to take care of yourself.

Complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development. The topic manifested in the research when participants described the challenges experienced implementing teacher professional development in the school districts given the resource deficits faced. Six components of effective teacher professional development were difficult to deliver in rural environments: (a) content-focused training, (b) collaborative opportunities, (c) models of effective practice, (d) coaching and expert support, (e) feedback and reflection, and (f) training of sustained duration (see Table 4).

Table 4. The Complex and Resource-Intensive Nature of Effective Teacher Professional Development

Component	Participant	Quotation
Effective teacher professional development is content focused	Superintendent One	I have one math teacher. . . . I’m not going to do a math content focus with my staff.
	Superintendent Two	About [my professional development] being content based . . . it is and it isn’t. . . . It’s not . . . content, but it is about . . . learning.
	Superintendent Three	First, we need to build a culture. . . . It’s really starting to build a trust level [before focusing on any other aspects of teacher professional development].
	Superintendent Four	I have a middle school science teacher, and I have a high school science teacher. The middle school [teacher] teaches sixth, seventh, eighth. The high school [teacher] teaches ninth through 12th. And so, what professional development [do] I send them to? . . . Those are the frustrating things when you try to do targeted or focused professional development. The same way down in the elementary. . . . When you’re talking about elementary teachers going in and working on math, well they [have] to be an expert in what math? Are we doing kindergarten, are we . . . third grade, which level?
Effective teacher professional development supports teacher collaboration	Superintendent One	We’ve tried . . . over-the-phone mentoring [and] video mentoring, and we’ve not had great success. . . . It’s so costly.
	Superintendent Two	I think we make [the] assumption teachers know how to have . . . collaborative conversations, and they don’t always know. . . . There’s a group that [is] having great conversations, but they’re struggling with, “How do I . . . take action from that?” . . . There was a real hesitancy to share.
	Superintendent Three	I know collaboration is important, but not when you’re not sharing good ideas.
	Superintendent Four	In a rural district; that is extremely hard. Take [for] example in [my school district], when they talk about teams of teachers. . . . [I] have one. As a matter of fact, a couple years ago, that same teacher

		taught two grades.
Effective teacher professional development uses models of effective practice	Superintendent One	To be honest with you, our professional development is people bringing back what they learned. Which is good; it's not great. Or, it's the administrators teaching it. Which is only as good as my knowledge of it.
	Superintendent Two	When [the teachers] took initiative, other teachers would come to them and say, "Stop doing that. You can't make us look bad." [In] big districts you have full-time coaches in many buildings, and it's more of an expectation and way of work. It's never been that way [here]. They haven't had that luxury . . . and we aren't always trusting of outsiders.
	Superintendent Three	Powerful teaching and learning. I don't know if you know about that. We went through that when I was in [a previous school district], but what does it really look like? And I know [the teachers here] don't see what it looks like.
	Superintendent Four	We're one teacher per grade level for elementary and one teacher per subject in secondary. . . . When you take them out of the classroom [for professional development], you're affecting a lot of grades.
Effective teacher professional development provides coaching and expert support	Superintendent One	[If] I have a teacher whose need is not exactly where my strength [is] . . . I struggle supporting that teacher. I don't provide expert support. And it's because I can't afford it, and I can't keep it going.
	Superintendent Two	There's a company [that provides] virtual coaching. . . . We just put it out there and said, "Who wants to do it?" I said to the principals, "I want somebody in every building, so tap at least somebody." . . . I thought [there will] be a great ground swell of others, and [there] wasn't. . . . Our teachers aren't comfortable . . . but honestly I don't think our principals are comfortable [either]. . . . They haven't had that experience.
	Superintendent Three	The ESD says they can provide that, but they don't have any. That's kind of that mentor person or coach person.
	Superintendent Four	I can't use a sub service because they're not out here. You're not going to get someone to come out here for, what is it? \$125 or \$140 per day.
Effective teacher professional development offers feedback and reflection	Superintendent One	We've had it where [other teachers] come here [to observe teachers who need help]. That . . . never worked . . . because [the teachers being observed were] so nervous.
	Superintendent Two	When we first started walking through . . . we didn't take anything with us because they didn't want me or anyone else in their classrooms. . . . I didn't go into a classroom without . . . a principal with me because we didn't have trust.
	Superintendent Three	There are so many layers that need to happen. . . . How do I help teachers here? What is your strength? Find your strength. What do you love about teaching? Let's go there.
	Superintendent Four	These teachers are out in the field . . . but they're away from anybody else. . . . Who are they going to talk to? There's nobody really to bounce ideas off of.
Effective teacher professional development is of sustained duration	Superintendent One	Sustained duration, that is the challenge. How do you keep it at the forefront? How do I . . . keep coming back?
	Superintendent Two	In their school improvement plan we don't have the time built in. So, we're struggling a bit with that, so how do we create structures of time for that?
	Superintendent Three	Without good systems, everything's just . . . I say the word is chaos. Everything is chaos.
	Superintendent Four	It's hard to get some people out. They [say], "You're too far out." And that gets frustrating.

Research Subquestion Two

The second research subquestion investigated how superintendents overcame common challenges to provide teacher professional development in rural school districts. Two key themes emerged from the study: (a) superintendents established a vision and systems for teacher professional development within existing resources, and (b) superintendents employed professional development practices aligned to the vision, systems, resources, and community needs. Figure 2 shows a proposed rural teacher professional development model generated from select elements reported by the study participants. A composite view is represented.

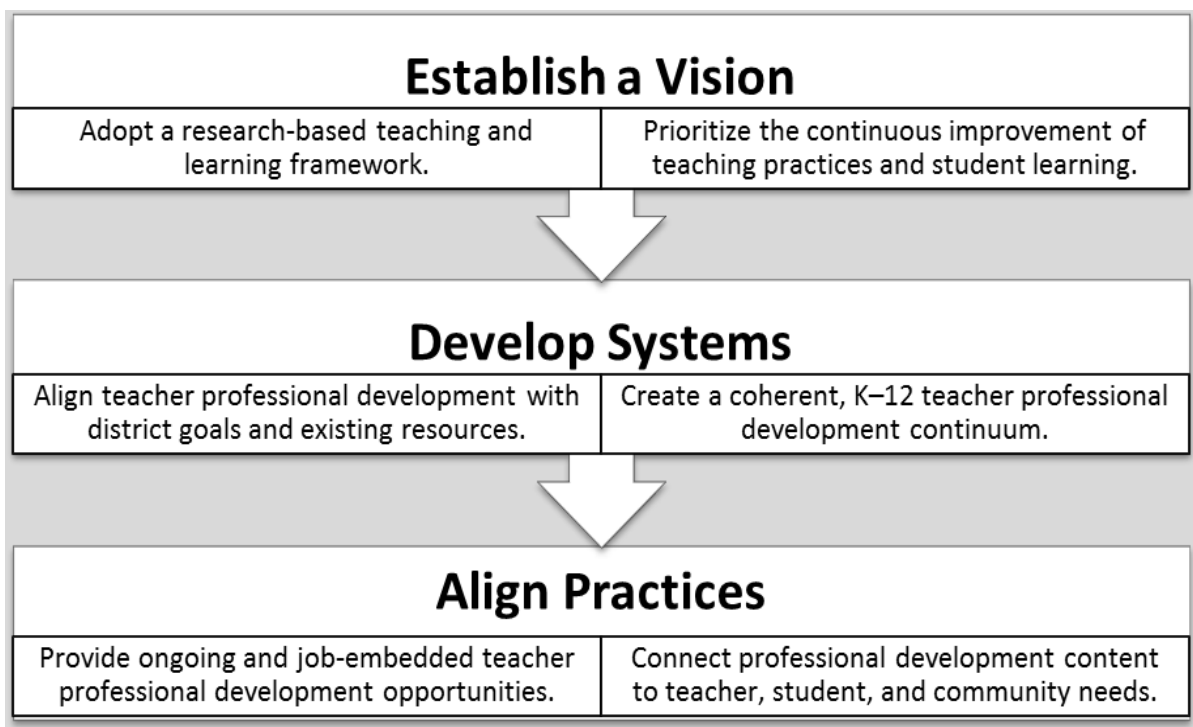


Figure 2. Composite Model of Rural Teacher Professional Development

Superintendents established a vision and systems for teacher professional development within existing resources. The theme emerged when participants identified the underlying operating principles and plans employed to implement teacher professional development in the school districts. The principles and plans were aligned to the superintendents’ visions and tailored to existing resources in each school district (see Table 5).

Table 5. Superintendents Established a Professional Development Vision and Systems

Participant	Vision/system	Quotation
Superintendent One	Vision	That [professional development] document . . . is actually part of my setting the stage from last year. . . . All the staff got that a week before we met. . . . [We] sat down, and we talked about it. . . . This is where we're going. This is our focus. This is who we are going to be.
	Systems	It needs to be a K–12 focus. [It] works a lot better. If there's a building level only, it only has so much impact, as opposed to . . . the Russian nesting dolls [concept]. . . . We tend to have . . . better buy-in [when we] link our PD to [current initiatives].
Superintendent Two	Vision	We have worked to build the culture of belief in continual growth first, by doing multiple things. . . . To try and create just even a mindset that professional development is beyond getting clock hours for the renewal of your certificate and create a way of work where we're constantly learning and growing. We're working on a vision of excellent instruction, an instructional framework, which will help drive our PD more intentionally in the future.
	Systems	It's about prioritizing. So, we have a PD budget, and we pull from multiple funding sources. We have a spreadsheet, and across the top are all the areas of focus, like PLCs . . . conferences . . . the Powerful Learning . . . rubric, GLAD strategies, whatever else we need. We developed a mentor program, mentor teachers. . . . Then we figure out what funding source. . . . We use Title II, Title IV, Title I, Migrant, ELL. We have some Title III Consortium dollars, TPEP [Teacher/Principal Evaluation Program], some GenEd, CTE [Career and Technical Education]. And then we figure out how to fund what our priorities are based upon that. . . . It would include the areas we've identified in our school improvement plan and strategic plan. . . . And then we adjust as we go because needs can change.
Superintendent Three	Vision	The first [need] is to create that culture of urgency but also of caring for the students, seeing how important [we] can be in their lives. [It's] building the staff back up [and] . . . really starting to build a trust level along with an urgency because we serve kids. I think you can override any...challenges. I really do. . . . It really boils down to, as a team, how are we learning together?
	Systems	Being a superintendent . . . you have to really do your own needs assessment first . . . around the whole entire system. We're just a team here. I have a principal, and we really work side by side. . . . We're working together to figure out how we can best serve. It isn't just black and white. There [are] so many layers to a system, a human system, and how it works, and you need to get systems in place. . . . That's the other side that I've been working on is [getting] systems in place so that you can provide good professional development. . . . Without good systems, everything . . . is chaos. Powerful Teaching and Learning. . . . We went through that when I was in [a previous district]. The [teachers here] think, "Hey, I'm doing the job; I'm teaching." But it really isn't.
Superintendent Four	Vision	I guess the important thing I have to keep in front of me is where my vision is. . . . Professional development is very, very important. What you receive in college is not going to be good for you for 20-, 30-odd years. . . . I use the analogy . . . I don't want a heart surgeon [operating on] me who hasn't gone back to school in 30 years. Things change; education has changed; kids

	<p>have changed. . . . We need professional development.</p> <p>I've told my teachers, we know what our goals are; we develop goals; we know where we're going; and I said, "I want the professional development to support the goals. If you feel you want to go to something, if it's a workshop . . . ask me."</p>
Systems	<p>My big thing is to remove the barriers. . . . I don't want you to have . . . excuse[s] as obstacles. We'll get rid of the obstacles for you. . . . [I provided] days off [to pursue National Board Certification]. We provided subs [at] no cost to them. . . . We provided a small stipend at the end of the year to offset some of the costs . . . they have. . . . They [needed] some camera equipment, stuff like that, [and] we provided all that. . . . Those who are in master's degree [programs], we will reimburse half the tuition of the university. . . . If there are several courses during the year, at the end of the year . . . we reimburse half of the cost.</p>

Superintendents employed professional development practices aligned to the vision, systems, and existing resources. The theme emerged when participants described the specific practices employed to deliver teacher professional development in the school districts. Aligned practices were implemented. Available resources were utilized (see Table 6).

Table 6. Superintendents Employed Aligned Professional Development Practices

Participant	Practice	Quotation
Superintendent One	Aligning teacher training to the needs of the students and community	<p>I've been in four rural schools. They've been different environments. . . . [Here] we need to learn about poverty [and understand] why kids don't like school. . . . My PD is tied to [the needs of the community] . . . I don't think just about my kids; I think about my community.</p>
	Providing ongoing, job-embedded teacher training	<p>I think back to my early years as a teacher, I felt like we'd have a training, and it was a "one and done." . . . You sit and get and then you move on, which never worked. . . . I talked to my principal. . . . If we really want to have a shift . . . it's got to be ongoing. It's got to be embedded.</p> <p>The further [you are] off the highway, the more you have untrained staff. . . . It's a grow-your-own, and it's also a targeted demographic that you want to pursue. . . . A lot of small schools [have] to be really, really creative in filling positions. . . . Hiring practice[s] . . . impact . . . our PD [because] we hire a lot of people who are not finished [with their degrees] or [who] have not started their certification process. . . . We become a mini university of teaching. . . . If I have a good para . . . I'm trying to move them in . . . [to a teaching role]. . . . I want to hire someone that meets . . . [the] criteria or experience I want. If [a candidate] graduated from [this county] I'm really interested. I don't care that you're not a teacher. . . .</p>
		<p>If you've been in a rural school before as a teacher, you're more likely to stay. . . . If I have a good coach, if I know . . . I can out pay what he's working [for], and he . . . or she has a college degree, I'm going to steal that</p>

person. Two of our 12 [teachers] were former coaches that had degree[s]. . . . We do True Colors training . . . as part of our hiring process. When [new teachers] come on, we know how they fit in our team, and we know how to respond to them.

We have brought in . . . national trainers. . . . It's always grant funded. If [the] grant went away, they [went] away. . . . At the elementary, [the principal] . . . has a trainer that goes along with...[the] curriculum. . . . [The trainer] comes every other week. . . . For [the trainer] to come 15 times [it costs] \$30,000. . . . It's . . . eating up an immense amount of [resources].

We do a lot of one-on-one PD, so it's . . . informal PD. . . . We call [it] "huddles." If you think of the football term, the team gets together, calls a play, breaks, goes, and then they come back and do it again. . . . Once a month, I meet with every teacher, and we do . . . a huddle. . . . We sit down one-on-one for a period. . . . [The teacher] pick[s] a class. We . . . go over the class, where they're at, what . . . they want to do, what's their goal, [and] what's their action? We meet the next week and . . . look at that. It's . . . informal . . . job-embedded PD.

The first Wednesday of each month [is] focused on an AVID strategy; the second on classroom management; the third on educational philosophy; the fourth on instructional strategies, and the fifth Wednesday [is] a fun day focused on activities to relieve stress. I have found [this system] help[s] . . . keep us on guard. The reason [is] . . . it's pretty structured. . . . Principals don't do nuts and bolts meetings. You can do that in an e-mail. Our PM meetings are PLCs. We have math, ELA [English Language Arts], AVID [Advancement via Individual Determination], and there's another one, SPED [Special Education], that we do. We have four PLCs that go. Wednesdays we have more PLCs. CTE does theirs. . . . In terms of feedback . . . we do a lot of sitting in a circle. There are times [when] we're sitting . . . talking, and we're learning something. . . . We're active and . . . engaged. . . . There are other times . . . we're going to . . . share our experiences.

If I have a teacher who is struggling, let's say with standards-based grading . . . if it's not my strength, I'm going to lean on someone in the building . . . to help that person. There's a lot of collaboration. . . . Standards-based grading, classroom management, or . . . instructional strategies, we do a lot of "let's get people working together."

I think a lot of small schools [use the] . . . train the trainer [model]. . . . [The] difficulty is [you have to pick] the right person that goes. . . . It's a small . . . percent of . . . staff [who] are really leaders [and can] pull it off.

We rely on other small districts [for] help. "Can we set up some time . . . to come and observe . . . ?" We also have interlocal agreements. . . . A lot of small schools . . . live on [those]. . . . We did an interdistrict walk. . . . The principals would invite in . . . the administrators from the two districts [and] say, "This is our problem of practice. . . . We would . . . do an observation. . . . [Then we] . . . come back . . . bring in some different ideas, and create a PD plan for him and his staff. Then we come

	<p>back at the end of the year to see how it went.” We had . . . a retired . . . principal [who] lived out here, and . . .</p> <p>[the principal] was great. . . . [The principal] would charge us like . . . \$600 a day. . . . [to] do an hour here, an hour there. . . . It would take six days to get a full day. . . . [The principal] was okay with that....[The principal] is retired now [and] wants to be a...[grandparent].</p>
	<p>We are spending a good portion of our money . . . sending staff to . . . [training].</p>
	<p>The LAP High Poverty dollars you can use for certain purposes. . . . The elementary [are going to do] a book study . . . on one of Eric Jensen’s books.</p>
	<p>Last year, we added a mentor program for new teachers. . . . They each have an individual mentor, and then they get together about three times a year, all the mentors, all the new people, and I provide a meal.</p> <p>We created a district leadership team. It’s myself; we have two principals, elementary and junior high/high school. Then we have some high school teachers, junior high teachers, and elementary teachers on it. . . . [It is] another piece of facilitating the culture of professional learning and developing teacher leadership.</p> <p>[The company that provides virtual coaching] will come out in person [in the fall and do a] design lab . . . to get the ground swell.</p> <p>[Teachers] fill out . . . a request form [to go to conferences]. . . . [They] have a reflection sheet they have to bring back, and they meet with their supervisor and talk about what they learned, and how they’re going to implement it. . . . So at least there’s some intentionality [in] what we’re doing there.</p>
Superintendent Two	<p>Providing ongoing, job-embedded teacher training</p> <p>Last year we really focused on PLCs, and they helped develop . . . the definition. . . . Here’s what a PLC [is]. . . . We set norms. . . . Now, elementary does theirs . . . and secondary does theirs. . . . They’re all in different places. Then when I meet with the principals weekly [we] talk about where are your PLCs, what do you need now? Then at leadership team, we also talk about it.</p> <p>I think developing the capacity of our staff as leaders and teacher leaders and providing professional development [is important]. . . . How do I help make sure our administrators have the skill to build that capacity in everyone? Everyone has a gift in some way. . . . That’s going to help us get that culture of</p> <p>continual learning going.</p> <p>We watched some videos on . . . collaborative conversations. . . . [Also] there’s a company [that provides] virtual coaching. We have three [teachers] that are Nationally Board Certified. We have one that got the facilitator training . . . and...[the teacher] is doing a cohort. They’re in their second year. . . . What I like about it is it teaches you to reflect, and it’s about improving your practices. It’s a way to help support [the] culture of “we’re always learning.” The principals and I</p>

		walk every month together, and then I walk individually with each principal every month. . . . What's our own . . . understanding of instruction? . . . It's helping us ask better questions and get deeper.
	Providing opportunities for teachers to attend conferences and trainings	We've budgeted a certain amount just to go to conferences. We sent a team [out of state for] training, and now they've come back, and they presented to their staff, which was the first time they'd ever done that.
	Aligning teacher training to the needs of the students and community	The parents, they're not concerned about their child's academic progress. They're really focused on sports. And then a lot of alcohol, a lot of sexual issues here. Just a myriad of things, so that's why our PD might not be like some, but it's really understanding trauma so that [teachers] can build good relationships with the students.
Superintendent Three	Providing ongoing, job-embedded teacher training	So, three of our teachers are involved in the ESD BEST [Beginning Educator Support Team] program. It's after school. . . . The last time they met was at [a nearby town]. So it's not that far. And . . . next time I think [it will be at another nearby town, and] then next time it will be here. . . . And then the ESD [director of teaching and learning] . . . brings the training forward. Insurance can provide some training. I brought some classroom management training in through them. It didn't cost a thing, but it was really excellent. There will be some personalized learning time, but for now, we'll all just need to come together. We're doing PLCs. . . . We're doing [one] . . . on trauma. This is just a really good beginning. We have a Monday PD time here. Just really slowly starting to say, "This is what good teaching looks like," that sort of thing. I'm doing some things with Love and Logic through CDs. . . . I'm [also] reaching out [to] an organization that works with rural schools. They try to put other schools together to collaborate either Skyping [or] . . . once a month meet[ing] in a common place. Our ESD is . . . helping us . . . start to do that.
	Providing ongoing, job-embedded teacher training	I sent a first-grade teacher. He's a brand new teacher, never taught first grade, to shadow another teacher that I know is excellent. . . . He loved it. Now they've formed a collaborative partnership. I know that he's going to get excellent instruction from him. . . . I have teachers who are phenomenal who can come in. It's cheaper to bring people in than to go out.
	Providing opportunities for teachers to attend conferences and trainings	I have a team going to a Love and Logic training. It's our leadership team.
	Aligning teacher training to the needs of the students and community	We [are] working right now on . . . how we're going to bring GLAD training to all the teachers. . . . [Also] we've had some professional development on trauma with the kids, to help our teachers better understand somewhat what our kids are coming into. The other important thing is the poverty training for us.
Superintendent Four	Providing ongoing, job-embedded teacher training	The TOSA [Teacher on Special Assignment] is identifying areas that we need to get people trained in or further assistance . . . so that helps. . . . My principal and

	<p>I have decided she's going to stay where she's at . . . because she's identifying some of the professional development areas. . . . [It] is worth the money and . . . sacrifice. . . . [It] is paying off. I'm doing the Washington State Leadership Academy now [with a district team].</p> <p>[The ESD's] ELL coach has been out in our district for the past two days and meets individually with each teacher, observes classrooms, and stuff like that. That is really worth it. They provided support [for] mathematics, which [was] worth it. So, those are things that I really do appreciate, and they help bring those things that are needed into a small district. If there wasn't [the regional ESD], I really don't know what I would do.</p> <p>[The] majority of my teachers did not have master's degrees, and I said, "Wait a minute," and we changed that. Now I have six teachers; some have left. . . . We will reimburse half the tuition of the university that they're in. . . . If they're [in] several courses during the year, at the end of the year, we reimburse half the cost. What we had decided to do was take one of our teachers [and] put her as a TOSA. She is probably my strongest teacher in the district. She is a model of what you would expect [of] a teacher. She's been an elementary teacher; she's National Board Certified in art. Fortunately, we have very good technology. So, we're not remote that way. I have some teachers that use the K-12 network and that kind of thing very extensively.</p> <p>We had nothing when I came in here. No National Board Certification. . . . [Now] two have received National Board Certification.</p>
<p>Providing opportunities for teachers to attend conferences and trainings</p>	<p>We sent two of our teachers to the latest Dual Language [conference]. . . . They came back, and they said it was good. They learned some things, but . . . really a lot of it, they don't know how to put it in place in a small school.</p>

Research Subquestion Three

The third research subquestion explored the supports superintendents desired from policymakers and service providers to overcome common challenges and deliver effective teacher professional development in rural school districts. A single theme emerged from the study: superintendents desired supports responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. Figure 3 summarizes the findings related to Research Subquestion Three and shows the supports desired from the SEA, ESDs, and state legislature by the study participants.

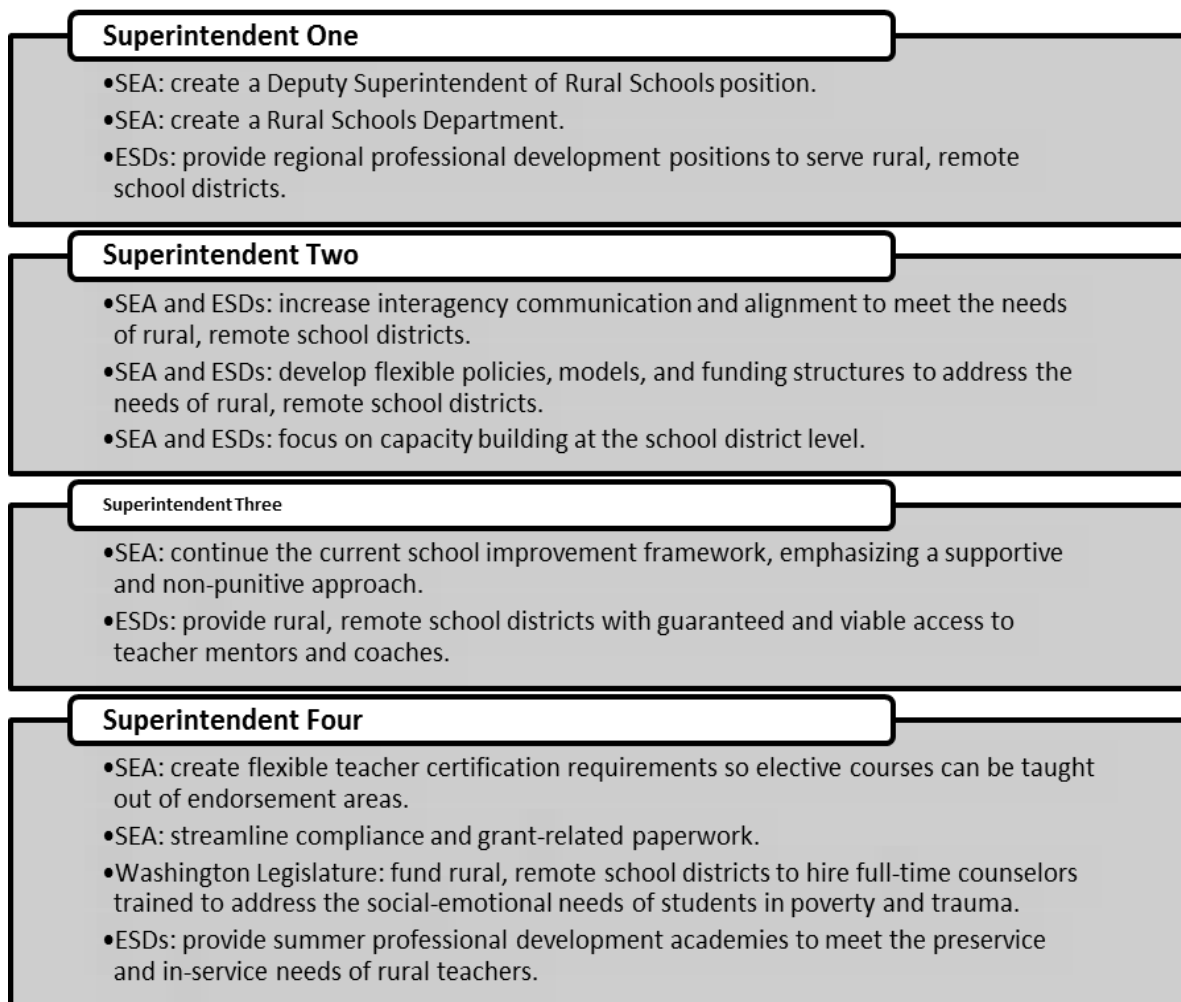


Figure 3. Rural School District Supports Desired from Policymakers and Service Providers

Respond to the unique needs of rural, remote school districts. The theme manifested in the research when participants described the desire to receive supports specifically aligned to needs as rural, remote school districts (see Table 7).

Table 7. Superintendents Desired Supports Tailored to Rural School Districts

Theme	Participant	Quotation
Superintendents desire supports responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts	Superintendent One	When I talk to . . . our senator, he always wants to give me money, and money doesn't solve my problems. . . . As [the state superintendent of public instruction] reconfigured his department and his cabinet, I urged him, "You need a deputy of rural schools that has a department unto himself that says, 'If you have a Title [I] question, if you have a discipline question, whatever it is, it's rural. You come here.'" . . . That would make my life easier. . . . I don't want to call . . . Title I because they just tell me to talk to someone [in my district] who's Title I. I am, but I still don't know how to do that job.
		I'm losing my ability to send people to be trained. I can't afford to bring someone in. It costs too much. . . . Administrators are trying to be that person, and it's not working. . . . I need experts that are nearby, that are affordable, and that know me. I think this is the purpose of the ESD, but I

<p>Superintendent Two</p>	<p>don't know that they can fix that problem.</p> <p>That's kind of a trick question, because [support] always comes with strings attached. One [idea] would be funding with flexibility. The ESD does great work . . . but it's disconnected. [For example] we're working on . . . strategic plans . . . and then . . . it's like, "Oh, we should be working on this. Wait a minute. . . . We've got to focus." . . . I guess it's creating a responsiveness. Right now, it is top down. It seems like there could be . . . better structures, and we should be better at advocating for this. Better connections at the ESD level and state level to say, "Here's our needs. Here's what we need [you to do], to be responsive to our needs." How do we better create systems that are more responsive versus reactive and top down?</p> <p>[We're] in the same ESD. We're all diverse. . . . [I] guess the more ways we could create it . . . locally. It's great when they say, "Oh, we're going to hire a person to be this." Well, we see them once a year. It's not helping us. If you're going to do sustained, embedded, supported PD to help people implement what they learn in their practice, that's not going to work. . . .</p> <p>I guess it's listening, and then it's creating structures, maybe remotely, and the infrastructure to support that, video and all, whatever that would be, that would help those of us that are more remote access it more creatively, but with flexibility, without strings attached, and we could [match] it to our context and our need. The other thing [I wish] I had was some resources . . . and access . . . just models. . . . Don't dictate to us. [Help] us build the capacity locally. . . . Create the policy, the funding, and the structures that help us do that. That's going to help us flourish. . . . It [will] help us attract teachers. . . . It creates that supportive work environment.</p>
<p>Superintendent Three</p>	<p>I'm so thankful . . . we're in school improvement. . . . It's changed. It's not the punishment piece now. . . . The shift from "You're in trouble because your scores are so low" to "How can we support you?" has been huge. The people on my team, I'm so thankful. The ESD is always working on [providing teacher mentors or coaches]. . . . That's something down the road that can possibly happen.</p>
<p>Superintendent Four</p>	<p>I think it would be interesting to find out what your other Western Washington superintendents feel about...[the SEA] and how they understand the small districts. [For example, due to Highly Qualified teacher certification requirements], we don't have the ability to have elective teachers. . . . We don't have the ability [like] larger schools to have teachers just teaching electives.</p> <p>[Also] do you realize how long I spend on paperwork down here? . . . You don't have this sense of what it's like in the trenches. . . . When [I] get those Title II forms [I] want to write what [I'm] doing. But in reality . . . I just put . . . down . . . what they want . . . me to say . . . and it gets approved. . . . [There] is no reality to what I'm really doing. That's where I get frustrated.</p> <p>I have funding for a [partial] counselor. . . . They tell us it's important for children with trauma . . . take care of behaviors, etc. Why do I get less than half a counselor? . . . My kids have just as much, or maybe more drama and trauma than other kids. . . . [They] tell us we need to . . . take care of our kids, but [they] don't give us the resources.</p> <p>[The] ESD[s] know their districts better than anybody else. . . . They really do. They're the ones who can provide the professional training. . . . They should be funded appropriately to have the professional development academies . . . during the summertime . . . where I don't have to worry about subs. I just have to pay . . . whatever time for the teachers to go. . . . A week or two-week intensive training at each of the ESDs for different levels of teachers. . . . Maybe once after your first year, and then once after your fifth year, and then go down the road a little bit. Done right, that would be more . . . bang for the buck than how we do it now.</p>

Composite Textural Description

The composite textural description provides a combined account of rural teacher professional development delivery through the lens of superintendents. Based on the data collected, in the form of themes and invariant constituents, an aggregate portrayal of the superintendents' lived experiences with the phenomenon was developed. The intent was to present a clear depiction of what superintendents experienced delivering teacher professional development in rural school districts.

Regarding inadequate fiscal resource, all four participants described current or potential impacts to the districts' general fund balances. Superintendent One reported the need to maintain a higher budget reserve to pay for increased rural costs incurred in mileage and service fees charged by providers. Superintendent Two identified current enrollment stability but unpredictable patterns overall. Superintendent Three described a lack of levy funds due to the district's location on federally protected land and overall inadequate resources to pay for basic supplies and services such as student curriculum and teacher training. Superintendent Four described having more than adequate overall funding but was uncertain about upcoming legislative impacts to the district and other rural school districts.

All participants reported dependence on categorical funding to provide teacher professional development in the school districts. Superintendent One explained 100% of the teacher professional development budget was funded with grants. When funds were expended, professional development ended. Superintendents Two and Four described grant parameters restricting usage for locally determined purposes. Superintendent Three identified the loss of a \$300,000 school improvement grant, which ended the previous year. Superintendent Four described having a surplus of funds to support English language learners and the inability to apply the surplus to other needed areas.

All four superintendents experienced limited human capital in five areas impacting teacher professional development: workloads exceeding personnel, inadequate support for superintendents, difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, challenges securing substitute teachers, and having one teacher per grade level or course. The inability to secure substitutes in all four districts created barriers to providing in-district professional development and to teachers attending trainings outside the district. Furthermore, the lack of available teaching

partners across grade levels and courses limited teachers' abilities to engage in professional collaboration with job-alike partners in all four districts.

All four subjects identified geographic isolation as a barrier to teacher professional development in the school districts. Superintendents One and Four noted the added lodging costs associated with teacher professional development activities. Superintendent Two explained the importance of avoiding professional isolation, which can result from geographic isolation. Superintendents Two and Four identified the need to secure full-day substitutes for half-day trainings held at the regional ESD. Superintendent Three described being "at the end of the earth" and needing to find "creative ways" to promote adult learning within the district. Superintendent Four noted difficulties securing professional development experts due to the district's remote location.

Lack of time was described as a barrier to teacher professional development by all four superintendents. One impact included the length of the administrative workday. Superintendent One reported a 12-hour workday. Superintendent Three described being "stretched thinner" and wearing "more hats." Superintendent Four reported a 10- to 12-hour workday. Superintendent Two identified the lack of guaranteed time built into the schedule for teacher professional collaboration. All four superintendents reported lengthy travel times to and from the district. Superintendent Three reported the length of time needed to turn around a school system in need of significant reform. Lack of time had either an immediate impact on teacher professional development activities or a secondary impact on overall available time to perform work in the districts.

All four superintendents experienced high poverty levels in the school districts which impacted the content of the teacher professional development delivered. All four subjects reported the need to provide poverty or trauma training to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to address the needs of the students and communities. Effective teacher professional development is multifaceted and resource intensive. Key components include a focus on content, collaborative opportunities, models of effective practice, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustainability over time. All four superintendents reported challenges in each of the areas identified.

Having one teacher per grade level or course made content-focused professional development and collaborative activities challenging. Superintendents One and Two reported attempts to use digital mentoring services with disappointing results. Superintendent Three described significant social-emotional challenges experienced by staff and students and the need to prioritize culture building over pedagogical practices until trust was established. Superintendent Four identified the challenge of missed student instructional time while teachers attend training.

All four subjects delivered teacher professional development in the school districts by articulating a vision, implementing systems within existing resources, and employing aligned practices. Practices utilized by all four subjects included alignment of teacher training to student and community needs, job-embedded approaches in the forms of induction and mentoring support, leadership teaming, consultant-led initiatives, and opportunities to attend conferences and trainings. Superintendents One, Two, and Four provided personalized learning in various forms and employed context-specific practices to build internal capacity; Superintendents One, Two, and Three employed PLCs; Superintendents One and Two used the Train the Trainer delivery model; Superintendents One and Three adhered to weekly professional development schedules; and Superintendents Two and Four supported teachers in pursuing National Board Certification.

All four subjects desired supports from policymakers and service providers responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. Superintendent One expressed a desire to create a rural deputy superintendent of schools position at the SEA with a corresponding rural department. Superintendent One would also benefit from regional professional development experts deployed through the regional ESD. Superintendent Two desired greater alignment between the SEA and ESDs in order to generate policies, models, and aligned funding which are flexible, responsive to the rural district context, and focused on local capacity building. Superintendent Two summarized the approach as “teaching [rural school districts] to fish versus giving them the fish.”

Superintendent Three appreciated the supportive focus of the new school improvement framework, now devoid of the punitive measures of the past. Superintendent Three also reported a desire to access teacher mentors and coaches based at the regional ESD. Superintendent Four would benefit from flexibility in teacher certification requirements to

offer elective courses, streamlining compliance and grant-related paperwork, funding for full-time counselors to address the significant social-emotional needs of students in poverty and trauma, and summer professional development academies based at the regional ESDs to meet teachers' preservice and in-service professional development needs.

Composite Structural Description

The composite structural description explores the contextual factors which influenced rural superintendents' experiences with the study phenomenon. Additional background information was provided, and interrelationships among factors were explored. Through the process, a more complex understanding of teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts emerged.

The rural, remote school districts in the study existed in a backdrop of fiscal, human, and geographic insecurity. State funds were apportioned to all four districts based on low student enrollments. Property taxes were generated from sparse populations, and state and federal categorical funds were allocated for specific purposes which may or may not align to district needs. Fiscal insecurity was further exacerbated by the districts' long distances from available resources, limited human capital, and local populations' high rates of poverty and trauma. All of these factors impacted teacher professional development delivery in the school districts.

Inadequate fiscal resources, limited human capital, and geographic isolation were interrelated barriers in the school districts studied and had an adverse impact on teacher professional development implementation. Geographic isolation increased the need for personnel (e.g., full-day substitutes required for teachers to attend half-day trainings); increased the distances teachers and consultants were required to travel for training; increased the length of time teachers spent not providing instruction for students; increased the fees charged by consultants; and increased the mileage, lodging, and meal costs associated with professional development activities. Ironically, all of these factors existed in school district settings characterized by lower per-pupil funding allocations, lower (or in one case no) property tax revenues, and categorical funding sources which limited superintendents' fiscal flexibility. All four participants expressed the viewpoint teacher professional development is important; all four participants articulated a vision and

implemented systems for delivering teacher professional development in the school districts; and all four participants applied practices within the fiscal, human, and geographic frameworks provided. Successes and challenges were reported across all four settings.

Discrepancies

In the interview, Superintendent Three identified the multifaceted role of the rural superintendent did not impact the ability to provide teacher professional development in the school district. The information was recorded in the Findings section. Despite the divergence from the reports of the other three superintendents, the theme superintendents have inadequate support was included as a finding under limited human capital. The decision to report the finding was made for two reasons. First, Superintendent Three had been serving in the position for less than a year and was still becoming oriented to the district's needs. Superintendent Three was asked to lead the school district because of the pervasive challenges which existed and the participant's proven leadership in previous school districts. Superintendent Three explained, technically, the size of the school district did not warrant a full-time superintendent and principal. However, the problems the district faced called for increased leadership. Superintendent Three intended to ask the school board for a contract reduction to two days per week after implementing systems to stabilize the environment and set the district on a viable improvement pathway. Superintendent Three's full-time presence at a school district which generated less administrative apportionment based on size was deemed to be adequate evidence of limited human capital related to the superintendent role.

Superintendent Four identified inadequate fiscal resources was not a topic which impacted teacher professional development delivery in the school district. Despite the divergence from the reports of the other three superintendents, the topic of inadequate fiscal resources was included in the findings for the following two reasons. First, Superintendent Four expressed concern about the impacts the current state legislative session would have on rural school funding, conveying a level of uncertainty. The concern was evidence of the theme current or future impacts to the general fund. Also, Superintendent Four was frustrated by the categorical nature of the school funds received, limiting the ability to allocate resources where needed and generating unspent surpluses in other areas. The frustration was evidence of the theme categorical funding limitations.

Reliability and Validity

Threats to reliability and validity were successfully mitigated in the study by applying the processes outlined in Chapter 3. Confirmability was established through the researcher's epoché process. An audit trail and member-checking procedures were utilized as described in Chapter 3 to ensure credibility and dependability. A thick description of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions in the form of quotations supporting each theme was included in Chapter 4 to verify the data analysis process and ensure transferability of study results.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 provided a detailed description of the study's results, which were organized by research subquestion and presented thematically. Thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences and perceptions were included in a manner consistent with transcendental phenomenology. The transcendental phenomenological tradition privileges the descriptions of lived experiences over researcher interpretations. Composite textural and structural descriptions of teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts were also offered. The research question explored superintendents' common experiences and perceptions delivering teacher professional development in rural school districts. Challenges, strategies, and desired supports were explored through three subquestions querying key aspects of superintendent experience.

The first research subquestion examined the challenges superintendents experienced providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. Four topics from the empirical literature were explored: inadequate fiscal resources, limited human capital, geographic isolation, and the complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development. Two themes emerged on the topic of inadequate fiscal resources to answer the research subquestion: current or future impacts to the general fund and categorical funding limitations. Five themes emerged on the topic of limited human capital to answer the research subquestion: workloads exceeding personnel, inadequate support for superintendents, difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, challenges securing substitute teachers, and limitations of one teacher per grade level or course. Three themes emerged on the topic of geographic isolation to answer the research subquestion: distance from

resources, lack of time, and impacts of rural poverty and trauma. The fourth topic, the complex and resource intensive nature of effective teacher professional development, also presented as a common challenge for all four superintendents in six component areas to answer the research subquestion.

The second subquestion investigated how superintendents overcame common challenges to provide effective teacher professional development in rural school districts. Two themes emerged from the study to answer the research subquestion: superintendents established a vision and systems for teacher professional development within existing resources and superintendents employed professional development practices aligned to the vision, systems, resources, and community needs.

The third subquestion explored the supports superintendents desired from policymakers and service providers to overcome common challenges and deliver effective teacher professional development in rural school districts. A single theme emerged from the study to answer the research subquestion: superintendents desired supports responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. Combined, the findings from the three subquestions addressed the research question by identifying superintendents' common experiences and perceptions providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. Chapter 5 presents recommendations, implications for leadership, and conclusions related to the findings.

Citation

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CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES OF SUPERINTENDENTS

Of the superintendent's multiple obligations in a rural school district, the most important is to ensure an impactful teacher in every classroom. Impactful teachers possess self-efficacy, deep content knowledge, and a comprehensive toolkit of instructional skills. Impactful teachers are well equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of students and close learning gaps. To perform at the highest levels, teachers must have access to effective and continuous professional development.

Superintendents face common challenges unique to the rural environment which hinder the delivery of effective teacher professional development in rural school districts. The researcher sought to understand the common experiences and perceptions of superintendents responsible for providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. The intent was to create a baseline for future study and theory development. The qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach, gathering data through semistructured interviews with four rural superintendents in Western Washington state. A single research question, divided into three subquestions, guided the study:

Research Question: What are superintendents' common experiences providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion One: What are superintendents' common challenges providing teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Two: How do superintendents overcome common challenges to provide teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Research Subquestion Three: How can federal, state, and regional policymakers and service providers support superintendents to overcome common challenges and deliver effective teacher professional development in rural school districts?

Key findings from the study showed rural superintendents experienced challenges, employed strategies, and sought supports from state and regional policymakers and service providers to address the unique needs of the school districts. Challenges included (a) current or future impacts to the general fund, (b) categorical funding limitations, (c) workloads exceeding personnel, (d) inadequate support for superintendents, (e) difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, (f) challenges securing substitute teachers, (g) limitations of having one teacher per grade level or course, (h) distance from resources, (i) lack of time, (j) impacts of rural poverty and trauma, and (k) the complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development. In addition, rural superintendents established a vision and systems for teacher professional development within existing resources and employed professional development practices aligned to the vision, systems, resources, and community needs. Finally, superintendents desired supports from policymakers and service providers responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts.

Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

Social constructivism, manifested through a transcendental phenomenological lens, was the theoretical framework utilized for the study. The framework guided the construction of new knowledge through a socially negotiated process (Shabani, 2016) involving the researcher as key study instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and four rural superintendents as subjects. The transcendental phenomenological component of the framework informed the specific nature of the knowledge generated, focusing on the subjects' thick descriptions of experiences and perceptions. Following are the thematized findings compared to researchers' findings from the literature review. The comparison extends knowledge by identifying the gap the study filled in the empirical literature related to the study phenomenon.

Common Challenges Superintendents Experienced Providing Teacher Professional Development in Rural School Districts

Inadequate fiscal resources. Researchers have shown rural school districts experience inadequate fiscal resources (Culbertson & Billig, 2016; Roza, 2015) resulting from lower property tax revenues (Forner, 2016), difficulties passing levy and bond referenda (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014), and lower state and federal allocations resulting from diminishing student populations (Forner, 2016; Smith, 2015). Grant funds exist but may carry stipulations which

limit usability (Fishman, 2015). The present study confirmed previous findings by showing all four superintendents experienced inadequate fiscal resources. The study extended knowledge by showing how two themes—current or potential impacts to the district general fund and categorical funding limitations—impacted teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. Examples included the need to maintain a higher budget reserve to allow for increased rural mileage and service fees, unpredictable student enrollment patterns driving fluctuating state and federal per-pupil funding allocations, lack of levy funds due to one district’s location on federally protected land, uncertain state legislative action related to future rural schools funding, and within-budget deficits and surpluses resulting from categorical grants which were not aligned with district needs.

Limited human capital. Researchers have shown rural school districts experience limited human capital. Three human capital-related issues identified in the literature include the lack of administrative support for superintendents (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Hansen, 2018; NASBE, 2016; Smith, 2015; Yettick et al., 2014; Ylimaki & Brunner, 2014), teacher recruitment and retention difficulties (Culbertson & Billig, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015), and challenges securing substitute teachers (Glover et al., 2016; Yettick et al., 2014). The present study confirmed previous findings by showing all four superintendents experienced limited human capital. The study extended knowledge by showing how five themes—workloads exceed personnel, superintendents have inadequate support to perform roles effectively, difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, challenges securing substitute teachers, and limitations of one teacher per grade level or course—impacted teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. Examples included inadequate staffing to perform all required roles within the school district; inability to secure skilled substitute teachers to provide quality student instruction while teachers attended trainings; and the absence of in-district, job-alike mentors and partners to collaboratively grow teacher professional practice.

Geographic isolation. Researchers have shown rural school districts experience geographic isolation (Culbertson & Billig, 2016; Glover et al., 2016; Smith, 2015). Barriers were identified as high travel costs to attend trainings in metropolitan areas, difficulties hiring professional development consultants (Glover et al., 2016; Yettick et al., 2014), challenges providing opportunities for teacher collaboration (Hargreaves et al., 2015; Kotok & Kryst, 2017; NASBE, 2016), lack of time (Yettick et al., 2014), and rural poverty (Cromarte, 2017;

Culbertson & Billig, 2016; Marre, 2017). The present study confirmed previous findings by showing all four superintendents experienced challenges due to geographic isolation. The study extended knowledge by showing how three themes—distance from resources, lack of time, and impacts of rural poverty and trauma—impacted teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. Examples included higher travel and service costs, lengthy administrator workdays, and the need to provide teacher professional development focused on the topics of poverty and trauma.

Complex and resource-intensive nature of effective teacher professional development.

Researchers have shown effective teacher professional development is complex and resource intensive to deliver (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Yoon, Kong, Diefes-Dux, & Strobel, 2018). The present study showed all four superintendents delivered multiple components of effective instruction outlined by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). The study extended knowledge by showing how six components of effective teacher professional development were difficult to implement in rural school districts characterized by inadequate fiscal resources, limited human capital, and geographic isolation. Content-specific professional development and job-alike collaboration activities were particularly challenging to deliver with only one teacher per grade level or course. In addition, digital mentoring services had shown disappointing results. Finally, students lost instructional time due to teachers' increased travel times to attend trainings and difficulties securing quality substitutes in the teachers' absence.

Common Strategies Superintendents Employed to Provide Teacher Professional Development in Rural School Districts

Superintendents established a vision and systems for teacher professional development within existing resources. Researchers have shown rural school districts benefit from establishing a strong vision and effective systems. Doerksen and Wise (2016) examined the systemic practices of four high-achieving, rural school districts in the San Joaquin Valley of California characterized by high student poverty rates and diverse student populations. The researchers found the following six organizational practices in place at all school districts: (a) a robust district culture with commonly held beliefs; (b) a strong emphasis on teacher instruction and student learning; (c) effective alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (d) ongoing data monitoring and data-based decision making; (e) collaborative

communities of practice; and (f) effective instructional leadership. Based on the research, superintendents were advised to establish and communicate a strong district vision; develop a district culture of learning; enact systems to monitor student learning; engage in frequent data conversations; apply a backward design model to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment; create and monitor PLCs; and recruit and retain teachers who support the district's vision and beliefs.

The present study confirmed previous findings by showing all four rural superintendents established a vision and systems in the school districts. The study extended knowledge by showing how all four superintendents implemented a vision and systems for teacher professional development in the districts within existing resources. Examples included maintaining a coherent K–12 focus, aligning professional development to district goals and funding sources, establishing a culture of urgency and caring for students, and maintaining a continuous focus on the removal of barriers to teacher professional development.

Superintendents employed professional development practices aligned to the vision, systems, resources, and community needs. Researchers have identified several promising professional development practices in rural environments. Examples include region-based professional development (Smith, 2015); promoting teacher leadership (Alan, 2019; Smith, 2015); teacher partnerships (Hartman, 2017); PLCs (Kelly & Cherkowski, 2015); university partnerships (Maheady et al., 2016); university preparation programs for rural schools (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Chua & Lin, 2020; Gurgenedze, 2018; Ishnaiwer, 2020; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Laadem & Mallahi, 2019; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Mukeredzi, 2016; Mutlu, Polat, & Alan, 2019); virtual learning, blended learning, and virtual professional networks (Hilton & Canciello, 2018; Keskin, Akcay, & Kapici, 2020; Olowo, Alabi, Okotoni, & Yusuf, 2020; Petković, Denić, & Perenić, 2017; RTP, 2015; Sanabria et al., 2016; Serhan, 2019; Yigit, 2020); and online communities of practice (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).

The present study confirmed previous findings by showing all four rural superintendents employed a variety of promising practices in the school districts. Examples included regionalized professional development solutions, teacher leadership activities, teacher mentorships and partnerships, and PLCs. The study extended knowledge by showing how all four superintendents aligned teacher training to the needs of the students and community;

provided ongoing, job-embedded teacher training; and provided opportunities for teachers to attend conferences and trainings.

Superintendents Desired Supports From Policymakers and Service Providers to Overcome Common Challenges and Provide Teacher Professional Development in Rural School Districts

Superintendents desired supports responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. Researchers have identified several promising practices policymakers and service providers may employ to provide a higher level of support for rural school districts: (a) partnering with rural school districts to ensure maximization of funding (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015); (b) gathering information on rural budget constraints and creating policies to ensure adequate funding of basic education and implementation of state and federal initiatives (Smith, 2015); (c) offering financial incentives for sharing facilities, personnel, courses, and teacher professional development (Hill, 2015); (d) allowing districts to pay teachers beyond full-time to serve in unique roles which may otherwise go unfilled (Hill, 2015); (e) reducing the burden of compliance reporting (Fishman, 2015); (f) collaborating with state lawmakers and federal policymakers to combine programs and seek changes and waivers (Hill, 2015); (g) implementing digital data input, analysis, and retrieval systems to reduce time and address human resource deficits in rural school districts (RTP, 2015); (h) providing alternative routes to teacher licensure for difficult-to-fill positions (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015); (i) offering e-mentoring services to increase teacher support and retention (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015); (j) ensuring rural school districts have access to digital service delivery models for special populations (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015); (k) implementing GYO initiatives to recruit and retain teachers (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015); (l) offering financial incentives to recruit and retain teachers (Bailey & Zumeta, 2015); and (m) providing a fund for rural school leaders to use for travel purposes to reduce isolation and increase professional empowerment (Hill, 2015).

The present study showed all four rural superintendents welcomed supports from policymakers and service providers which would increase the ability to deliver effective teacher professional development in the school districts. The study extended knowledge by showing all four superintendents welcomed supports responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. Examples include (a) the establishment of a rural schools department at the SEA; (b) implementation of aligned and flexible policies, models, and funding structures

between the SEA and regional ESDs with a focus on local capacity building; (c) guaranteed and viable access to teacher mentors and coaches; and (d) summer professional development academies for new and experienced teachers held at the regional ESDs.

Textural-Structural Synthesis

In transcendental phenomenology, the textural-structural synthesis combines the composite textural and structural descriptions, which were provided in the Results section of Chapter 4 in the present study, to offer a holistic account of the phenomenon. The synthesis blends the subjects' concrete experiences summarized in the textural description with the overarching explanations and interrelationships outlined in the structural description. The goal is to convey the essence of the phenomenon.

The superintendents in the study established a vision and systems for teacher professional development within existing resources and employed practices aligned to the vision, systems, resources, and community needs. Superintendents reported challenges, successes, and desired supports within an overall framework of fiscal, human, and geographic insecurity. The rural context created difficulties for superintendents to deliver all the components of effective teacher professional development necessary to ensure translation of the teacher learning to instructional practices and student achievement.

The combination of contextual factors posed a risk to the guaranteed and viable delivery of effective teacher professional development in the rural school districts studied. Teacher professional development, when delivered effectively, has the capacity to impact instructional practices and student learning. Professional development, when delivered poorly, is unlikely to impact teaching strategies and student growth and achievement.

Several factors are working against superintendents attempting to provide effective teacher professional development in rural school districts. Superintendents desire supports from policymakers and service providers which mitigate barriers and address rural school districts' unique needs. Given the high levels of poverty and trauma in the districts studied, and the importance of a quality education for all students, the matter requires a systemic response by federal, state, and regional stakeholders to ensure the equitable education of all rural students.

Limitations

This transcendental phenomenological study was limited to the verbal reflections of four Western Washington superintendents purposefully selected to share lived experiences and perceptions of teacher professional development delivery in rural, remote school districts. Credibility and confirmability were established through the researcher epoché, audit trails, and member-checking processes. Dependability was achieved through the application of methodical procedures articulated throughout Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Transferability depended on the subjects' accurate reporting of the experiences and perceptions related to the study phenomenon. Transferability also relied on the researcher's skill in horizontalizing, thematizing, and reporting the subjects' experiences and perceptions in an authentic manner, aligned to the subjects' intentions and the tenets of transcendental phenomenology. Thick descriptions, in the form of participant quotations, were provided as evidence of each theme in Chapter 4. Discrepancies were also noted.

The study may have the greatest transference to other rural, remote school district settings characterized by high levels of student poverty, despite the researcher encountering significant diversity among the four school districts studied. The diversity component is important because all four districts were small in size, remotely located in the same region of a single state, and experienced high levels of poverty. Despite these commonalities, each district was distinct from the others, shaped by a unique history, culture, community, and set of resources. Transferability of study results, as in all qualitative research, will ultimately be the purview of the reader to determine.

Recommendations for Changes in Policies and Practices

The superintendents who participated in the study faced significant challenges providing effective teacher professional development in the rural, remote school districts studied. These challenges may be overcome, and solutions have been proposed. The findings may inform the work of rural administrators, professional development consultants, policymakers, regulatory agencies, and rural organizations. The findings may also lead to policy changes, shifts in rural school district resource allocation, and changes in rural teacher professional development delivery to ensure the educational equity of all rural students.

The study participants made the following policy and practice recommendations (see Figure 3): (a) Create a deputy superintendent of rural schools position and corresponding rural department at the SEA. (b) Create regional professional developer positions (trainers, mentors, coaches) through the ESDs to serve the adult learning needs of rural school districts. (c) Increase interagency communication and alignment between the SEA and regional ESDs to better meet the professional development needs of rural school districts. (d) Develop flexible and aligned professional development policies, models, and funding structures focused on local school district capacity building. (e) Continue the current school improvement framework aligned to ESSA in a supportive and nonpunitive manner. (f) Increase flexibility in teacher certification requirements so elective courses can be taught by teachers out of endorsement areas in rural school districts. (g) Streamline compliance and grant-related paperwork. (h) Fund rural school districts to hire full-time counselors trained to address the social-emotional needs of students in poverty and trauma. (i) Provide summer professional development academies based at the regional ESDs to meet the preservice and in-service needs of rural teachers.

The researcher made additional recommendations:

- (a) Conduct needs assessments in rural school districts to create state and regional professional development systems based on local stakeholder feedback.
- (b) Increase regional partnerships and collaborative activities related to teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development to meet the needs of rural school districts.
- (c) Develop university–rural school district partnerships, and extend university support for new rural teachers into the first year of teaching.
- (d) Participate in district partnerships, including neighboring districts and larger districts, to engage rural school districts in professional development activities.
- (e) Participate in the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement Network sponsored by the Regional Education Laboratory Northwest to provide in-person and digital teacher professional development and collaboration opportunities.
- (f) Engage with the Rural Education Center sponsored by Washington State University to increase rural networking, policy development, and legislative advocacy.
- (g) Engage with the Rural Alliance based in Eastern Washington to increase rural networking, policy development, and legislative advocacy.

(h) Access professional development-related and other resources through the following national organizations: National Center for Research on Rural Education, National Rural Education Association, Center for Research on Rural Education, Rural School and Community Trust, National Forum to Advance Rural Education, and the Wallace Foundation for Rural Research and Development.

(i) Access professional development-related and other resources through the following peer-reviewed journals: *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *Journal of Rural Education Policy and Practice*, *The Rural Educator*, and *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*.

Recommendations for Further Research

Very little superintendent voice exists in the empirical literature on the topic of teacher professional development delivery in rural school districts. Conducting survey research with superintendents across Washington state and throughout the United States would provide a broader perspective on teacher professional development delivery in rural settings. The recommendation seems particularly important given the diverse nature of the rural school districts studied.

The central actors in rural teacher professional development are teachers. Teachers are also the most important school-level factor in increasing student learning and achievement (Marzano, 2017). Focusing future research on teachers' experiences and desired supports related to rural professional development would elevate teacher voice on the topic.

Educational Equity Implications for Leadership

Rural students represent one fourth of the overall student population in the United States (NASBE, 2016), and in 23 states, the majority of rural students live in poverty (Showalter et al., 2017). Inadequate resources, difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers, and a lack of early childhood services are common problems (Showalter et al., 2017). Ensuring an equitable education for rural students is a moral imperative (Adams & Woods, 2015). Providing knowledgeable and skilled teachers in rural school districts is essential if students are to gain access to a quality education which leads to a prosperous future. Rural teachers require effective professional development to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to

deliver high-quality instruction leading to exemplary levels of student learning and achievement.

Implications for Rural Superintendent Leadership

Superintendents are the educational leaders responsible for implementing a vision of student learning in school districts (WSSDA, 2014). Superintendents face numerous challenges attempting to provide effective teacher professional development in rural school districts. Superintendents desire supports from state and regional policymakers and service providers responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. High levels of poverty exist in many rural school districts, and a quality education for all rural students must be a priority. The issue requires a comprehensive leadership response, including federal, state, and regional stakeholders.

Conclusion

Rural superintendents deliver teacher professional development in insecure environments with varying levels of success. The rural landscape presents challenges, but viable solutions exist. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) summarized the importance of teacher professional development as follows:

In the end, well-designed and implemented [professional development] should be considered an essential component of a comprehensive system of teaching and learning that supports students to develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to thrive in the 21st century. (p. vi)

At the conclusion of the third interview for the research study, the superintendent summarized thoughts by sharing the traditional greeting of the Maasai people of East Africa. The greeting “And how are the children?” conveys a shared understanding indicating when the children are well, the community is thriving. Throughout the interview, Superintendent Three reflected on the devastating conditions in the community and school district, which include poverty and trauma, the absence of trust, inadequate fiscal resources, no curriculum materials, poor-quality teaching practices, and tremendous difficulties providing teacher professional development. The superintendent ended the interview by saying, “The children are not well here.”

Ultimately, providing effective teacher professional development in rural school districts is an issue of educational equity. The faces of rural students may not come to mind when people think about the nation's most vulnerable young people, but the statistics tell another story. The best hope for rural students is to receive a high-quality education. Rural teachers need guaranteed and viable access to effective professional development to turn students' hopes into reality.

Citation

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A. Data Instrument

Do you have any questions for me before we get underway?

Do I have permission to begin recording you in this interview to ensure the accuracy of your statements?

1. Please tell me about your **experiences** providing teacher professional development in your school district.
2. Please tell me about any **challenges** you have experienced providing teacher professional development in your school district.
3. Consider how each **factor** I am going to read has impacted your ability to provide **effective teacher professional development** in your school district. When I use the term *effective teacher professional development*, I am referring to the definition provided by Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner. You are welcome to refer to this document if you would like.
 - 3.1. Please describe how your district's **fiscal resources** impact your ability to provide effective teacher professional development.
 - 3.2. Please describe how your district's **human resources** impact your ability to provide effective teacher professional development.
 - 3.3. Please describe how your district's **geographic location** impacts your ability to provide effective teacher professional development

- 3.4. Please describe how your **multifaceted role** and **limited time** as a rural superintendent impact your ability to provide effective teacher professional development.
 - 3.5. Please describe how the **complex and resources intensive nature** of teacher professional development impacts your ability to deliver it.
 - 3.6. Describe **any factors I have not mentioned** that impact your ability to provide effective teacher professional development.
4. Describe **district-level or school-level practices you have successfully implemented** to provide effective teacher professional development.
 5. Describe **practices policymakers and service providers could implement** that would increase your ability to provide effective teacher professional development.

When I use the term *policymakers* I am referring to entities such as the United States Department of Education, the Washington State Legislature, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the State Board of Education, the State Professional Educator Standards Board, the Department of Early Learning, and the Washington Student Achievement Council.

When I use the term *service providers* I am referring to entities such as educational service districts, colleges and universities, professional development consultants, rural education collaboratives, rural organizations, and neighboring school districts.

What **practices could any of these policymakers and service providers implement** that would increase your ability to provide effective teacher professional development in your school district?

Appendix B. Description of Effective Teacher Professional Development by Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) Utilized for the Purposes of This Research Study

“Effective [teacher] professional development (PD) [is defined] as structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017, p. v).

This document is provided as a reference. Superintendents may implement teacher professional development in their school districts that includes all, some, or none of the features identified.

Seven widely shared features of effective professional development:

1. **“Is content focused:** PD that focuses on *teaching strategies associated with specific curriculum content* supports teacher learning within teachers’ classroom contexts. This element includes an intentional focus on *discipline-specific curriculum development and pedagogies in areas such as mathematics, science, or literacy*” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2015, p. v).
2. **“Incorporates active learning:** Active learning *engages teachers directly in designing and trying out teaching strategies, providing them an opportunity to engage in the same style of learning they are designing for their students.* Such PD uses authentic artifacts, interactive activities, and other strategies to provide deeply embedded, highly contextualized professional learning. This approach moves away from traditional learning models and environments that are lecture based and have no direct connection to teachers’ classrooms and students” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2015, p. v).
3. **“Supports collaboration:** High-quality PD creates space for teachers to *share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts.* By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the culture and instruction of their entire grade level, department, school and/or district” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2015, p. v).

4. **“Uses models of effective practice:** Curricular models and *modeling of instruction* provide teachers with a clear vision of what best practices look like. Teachers may view models that include lesson plans, unit plans, sample student work, observations of peer teachers, and video or written cases of teaching” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2015, p. v).

5. **“Provides coaching and expert support:** Coaching and expert support involve the *sharing of expertise about content and evidence-based practices*, focused directly on *teachers’ individual needs*” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. vi).

6. **“Offers feedback and reflection:** High-quality professional learning frequently provides *built-in time for teachers to think about, receive input on, and make changes to their practice by facilitating reflection and soliciting feedback*. Feedback and reflection both help teachers to thoughtfully move toward the expert visions of practice” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. vi).

7. **“Is of sustained duration:** Effective PD provides teachers with *adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect* upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their practice” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. vii).

“In the end, well-designed and implemented PD should be considered an essential component of a comprehensive system of teaching and learning that supports students to develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to thrive in the 21st century. To ensure a coherent system that supports teachers across the entire professional continuum, professional learning should link to their experiences in preparation and induction, as well as to teaching standards and evaluation. It should also bridge to leadership opportunities to ensure a comprehensive system focused on the growth and development of teachers” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. vi).

Appendix C. Sample District and School-Level Strategies to Support Rural Teacher Professional Development Implementation

This document is provided as a reference. The strategies listed are not intended to be exhaustive. Superintendents may implement all, some, or none of the strategies identified to provide teacher professional development.

Sample district and school-level strategies cited by researchers and policymakers to support rural teacher professional development implementation:

1. regularly conduct needs assessments to identify professional development offerings;
2. maximize all funding sources, including Title IIA, Small Rural School Achievement Program (REAP-SRSA), and Rural and Low-Income School Program (REAP-RLIS) grants;
3. redesign the school day to increase professional learning and collaboration opportunities (e.g., professional learning communities, peer coaching and classroom observations, and collaborative planning);
4. examine the practices of other rural school districts with high student achievement and emulate their practices;
5. engage in collaborative efforts with other rural school districts to offset costs, pool resources, and hire professional development providers;
6. work closely with educational service districts to provide teacher professional development and instructional coaching;
7. develop college and university partnerships to provide professional development and instructional coaching;
8. promote teacher leadership within the school district;

9. encourage teacher mentorships and partnerships;
10. provide online professional development opportunities such as virtual learning, blended learning, virtual professional networks, and e-mentoring services;
11. maximize school and community strengths and local ingenuity; and
12. capitalize on the district's small size to act with greater agility.

Appendix D. Sample Federal, State, and Regional-Level Strategies to Support Rural Teacher Professional Development Implementation

This document is provided as a reference. The strategies listed are not intended to be exhaustive. Superintendents may find all, some, or none of the strategies beneficial.

Sample federal, state, and regional-level strategies cited by researchers and policymakers to support rural teacher professional development implementation:

1. gather information on rural budget constraints and create policies to ensure adequate funding of Basic Education;
2. offer financial incentives for rural school districts to share facilities, personnel, student courses, and teacher professional development;
3. allow school districts to pay teachers beyond full-time to serve in unique roles that may otherwise go unfilled;
4. reduce the burden of compliance;
5. combine federal programs;
6. seek waivers for compliance requirements that unduly burden rural settings;
7. provide access to affordable digital data input, analysis, and retrieval systems to reduce time and human resource deficits;
8. address teacher recruitment and retention challenges systemically;
9. provide alternate routes to teacher licensure for difficult to fill positions;
10. offer e-mentoring services for teacher support and service delivery to special populations;

11. promote *Grow Your Own* initiatives and provide financial incentives to attract teachers to rural areas;
12. provide a fund for rural leaders to use for travel purpose, reducing isolation, and increasing professional empowerment at the Capitol and with legislators; and
13. provide dedicated personnel at the state level to answer questions on a case by case basis so rural superintendents fully utilize the flexibility they have and are aware of their options.

Effective teacher professional development is defined as structured professional learning activities which result in changes in teacher practice and improvements in student learning outcomes. Superintendents face common challenges unique to the rural environment which hinder the delivery of effective teacher professional development in rural school districts. These barriers must be addressed to ensure a high-quality education for all rural students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the common experiences and perceptions of superintendents responsible for providing teacher professional development in rural school districts. Social constructivism, interpreted through a transcendental phenomenological lens, was the theoretical framework guiding the research. The investigator interviewed 4 purposefully selected superintendents from rural, remote school districts in Western Washington state. A semistructured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions aligned to the study's purpose was utilized to gather data. Results showed superintendents faced inadequate fiscal resources, limited human capital, geographic isolation, and difficulties implementing effective teacher professional development in rural environments. Superintendents overcame challenges by establishing a vision and systems within existing resources and employing aligned professional development practices. Superintendents desired supports which were responsive to the unique needs of rural school districts. The findings may inform the work of rural administrators, professional development consultants, policymakers, regulatory agencies, and rural organizations. The findings may also lead to policy changes, shifts in rural school district resource allocation, and changes in rural teacher professional development delivery to ensure the educational equity of all rural students.

