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Teacher Retention in Rural Schools Nested in Large Districts: An Ethnographic Qualitative Study

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TEACHER RETENTION IN RURAL SCHOOLS NESTED IN LARGE DISTRICTS:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Dissertation

by

SANDRA GOMEZ CERDA

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2017

Major Subject: Educational Leadership

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AN ETHNOGRAGHIC QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Committee Member

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May 2017

ABSTRACT

Cerda, Sandra G., <u>Teacher Retention in Rural Schools Nested in Large School Districts: An Ethnographic Qualitative Study</u>. Doctor of Education (EdD), May, 2017, 125 pp., 3 tables, 1 figure, references, 88 titles.

The retention of teachers in rural schools nested in large school districts is a continuing issue districts encounter. Many rural schools lack in the quality of life in the community, working conditions are problematic, student needs are great, support services are limited, and professional support networks are scarce. This study examined the general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses; studied what draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts; and explored the factors that contributed to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts. An interpretive descriptive ethnographic study was used which utilized convenience sampling to select the research participants. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: building relationships, relying on support systems, embracing at-rusk students, and connecting with students' lives. The findings indicated that rural school teachers could retained in rural areas that are a part of large school districts. The research will provide a guide to retain teachers in rural areas by using the themes uncovered. Further research is recommended to continue the stability of retention of rural school teachers and what can schools and districts do to prepare teachers for the unique challenges of teaching in rural schools. It is also recommended that the findings be used to engage other community stakeholders to support

school efforts and what can be done to bring awareness of the issues that rural school face. Rural schools are unique and found in international, national, state, and local level.

DEDICATION

I thank the Lord for giving me the strength to believe in myself and being the light that showed me the path. I want to thank my family for being by my side every step of the way when I was tired and wanted to give up. Next, I want to thank my parents for always praying for me to stay healthy in order to accomplish my goals. To my brother and sisters, I also want to say it was worth it and this one is for you. To Ama Nachita, I know you are in heaven watching over me, and I thank you for raising me with love and compassion. I especially want to thank my daughter, Ciera, who always believed I could do anything I wanted to and was so patient and helpful throughout my entire research. Ciera, your faith in me was unquestionable as you took my hand to reassure me not to be afraid. I always want you to remember, I love you to the moon and beyond. To Juan, my partner, thank you for being more than tolerant with me throughout this entire journey. Finally, I want to dedicate this study to all teachers that work tirelessly to teach our children no matter the challenges.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study focused on specifically four rural schools of two South Texas school districts with familiar student population demographics. I selected two schools from each district to conduct my study. A series of questions were conducted through a survey of all teacher participants at their perspective campus. As a former teacher, the opportunity of working in a school community that gave the students what they did not have made all the difference in the world to me. The years of my life working there made me appreciate teaching and people. Working in a rural school, I spent every penny I could spare to buy the students incentives and supplies. I wore many hats as I served my class as the gifted and talented teacher, bilingual teacher, music teacher, reading specialist, and their classroom teacher. Our school population consisted of 99% Hispanic of Mexican descent. I saw the students walk to school every day as the district had a policy of no bus transportation within a three- mile radius. As a teacher, my willingness to keep working at a rural school was to bring success to the students and school. The drive daily to teach and interact with the community took the place of worrying about the distance and time. My participation working in a rural school will help me prompt further insights from the teacher participants in the study.

Some rural teachers may enjoy the challenge of the work environment, the challenges they encounter in a rural area differ as for the demographics of the area change. If the school personnel were unable to find a highly qualified teacher, then the school would have to resort to hiring uncertified teachers with a provisional or emergency certificate. These teachers might have to teach an unfamiliar subject or grade level. The ability to retain teachers in rural areas under these working situations is difficult, but in some cases, some teachers may have grown up nearby or appreciate the community. Therefore, they have a connection, and they stay. These teachers have family and understand the rural identity and culture. This trait is hard to find in teachers if they do not identify with the community.

As a former teacher in a rural school, the influence of poverty on schools and communities, demographic shifts in student populations, educational policies and the interrelationships between schools and communities are all contributing factors enabling the retention of teachers in rural areas. These issues played an important part in my career as an educator working in a rural school. Eventually teaching with less became a norm for me but the question of why I stayed teaching in that rural community lingered for years. As the researcher for this study, I have many experiences and plan to learn more from other teachers teaching in rural areas. Their issues will become the voice for this study on teacher retention in rural schools that are nested in larger districts.

To understand the need for "highly qualified teachers" *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (2002) which has placed distress on school districts to retain teachers especially in rural areas, we need to understand the definition of a rural school. The geographic and population size are included in rural areas. The National Center for Education Statistics defines these locales by the school's proximity to a city. The four locale categories used by the National Center for

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Education Statistics urban centric classification system are city, suburb, town and rural. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), a rural territory is defined into three categories. First, fringe is a rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, and is also less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. Second, distant is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area as it is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. Third, a rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster is remote.

The definition of rural has different names as it pertains to the agency or the use of the name. In 2013-2014, the Texas Education Agency classified community types by enrollment, growth, economic status, and remoteness. These community types are grouped into nine categories. The categories include Major Urban, Major Suburban, Other Central City Suburban, Independent Town, Non-Metropolitan: Fast Growing, Non-Metropolitan: Stable, Rural, and Charter School Districts. According to the Texas Education Agency, a rural district has an enrollment amid 300 and the state's district enrollment median or less than 300 enrolled students. It also includes an increase in enrollment over the past five years or less than a 20 enrollment percentage.

Rural districts often have restricted resources due to limited economic growth, which may decrease populations and increase poverty (Eddy, 2007). The demanding workloads and social isolation are also contributing factors to the retention of teachers. Rural teachers have the same expectations as other teachers. In some rural areas the need for a specialization teacher may be needed but these teachers may have to work in multiple schools therefore they are not present daily. Professional isolation and lack of professional support can affect retention (Jean-

Marie & Moore, 2004; Schmidt, 2004); mainly because there is not enough of a staff selection pool, therefore, they cannot dialogue or communicate with other teachers. Geographic isolation was another factor that impeded rural educators from communicating with other professionals lacking a system of vertical alignment to support teaching practices.

Statement of the Problem

According to the United States Government Accountability Office (2004), one quarter of the nation's school districts are rural, many in isolated locations with large populations of economically disadvantaged students (U.S. GAO, 2004). Many rural schools face difficulty hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers. As a result, rural schools face more difficulties in meeting the provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 than non-rural schools. Rural students make up 22% of all United States public school students (Johnson, 2007); many are already confronted with isolation due to limited exposure to newer practices due to their location.

The problem was that in order to expose students to new practices the teacher must be highly qualified to teach the subject in any location. The issue of retaining highly qualified teachers in remote rural areas remains a priority for school districts. To retain teachers in rural schools, we needed to find alternative strategies to confront the contributing factors that will facilitate us to retain teachers. The literature suggested rural administrators have difficulty finding qualified teachers who fit in with the school, community and who will stay in the job. According to Collins (1999), a rural teacher is qualified to teach different subjects or grade levels, teach differentiated abilities, manage additional activities, and connect with the community. The retention of teachers in rural schools lied in their willingness to teach even if it

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meant traveling. The importance of retaining highly qualified teachers is for students to get the best education accessible to them at any location or setting.

Need of the Study

The need for this study was to find ways to retain highly qualified teachers in rural schools nested in large districts. The study embodies the need to seek general characteristics of large school districts that have small rural campuses, the need to find out what draws teachers to teach in rural, and the need to discover what factors contribute to the decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts. There is also a need for more studies as there is a gap in the literature and a need for more descriptive studies. According to Monk (2007), rural schools need support systems, healthy work environment, and community relations with other schools. Salaries are lower for teachers in rural schools for many interconnected reasons. Some rural schools make do with what they have such as teachers with fewer qualifications which resulted in higher turnover rates. The lack of qualified teachers, in turn, affected the quality of teaching, and the students lacked the preparation for a higher institution.

The degree to which a rural teacher has become involved in a community educational and cultural program influenced his or her decision to remain; therefore, retention requires a coordinated school-community effort. A school-community orientation can help new rural teachers overcome feelings of isolation, acquire a sense of community security, and develop professional competence. Principals should select a new teacher's initial assignments carefully, set clear goals, welcome feedback, establish a supportive and non-threatening environment, and provide opportunities to interact with experienced colleagues and parents.

These issues are critical components to the success or failure of the retention of teachers working in rural areas. According to McCracken & Miller (1988), there is little definitive data on rural teachers despite the fact that teachers are the key to educational excellence in any community or cultural context. The research explored the need of the study for the retention of teachers from a large urban school district which also consolidates small rural schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the retention of teachers that work in large school districts with rural schools. The study examined: 1) the general characteristics of large school districts that have small rural campuses that retain and recruit teachers; 2) what draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts, and 3) what factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts.

Teaching in rural areas has challenges especially in retaining highly qualified teachers due to limited resources and issues with long distance transportation. Instruction in any place should have the same quality and quantity of resources including teachers in rural areas. According to the National Education Association (2010), recognizes the issues of rural communities that vary where there is no one size fits all policy solution to serving their needs. Rural students and educators have unique needs, and collaboration need, to be supported in rural communities. The purpose of the study was to maximize our benefits to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers in rural areas.

Significance of the Study

This study identified variables that would explain the retention of teachers teaching in rural areas nested in large school districts. This qualitative study used a constructive reality to offer voices to the teachers as they were interviewed in their setting. A qualitative research was used to promote a thorough understanding of the social setting as viewed from the perspective of the research participants.

This study explained the general characteristics of large school districts with rural schools. It was used to inform, bring awareness and tell the stories of teachers that have not been told from this area. It also offered suggestions to conduct more research in this area. The existence to retain highly qualified teachers in our rural communities remained essential for the success and retention of our students.

This study also explained why teachers chose to stay and teach in rural schools. The issues disclosed the importance of teaching in rural areas and the reasons they stay. The reasons uncovered the source for retaining teachers in other rural areas.

Research Questions

It is crucial for school districts to look at their retention and their recruitment policies of teachers in rural schools. Recruiting and retaining teachers continues to be one of the most critical issues in large districts that have small rural schools. The recruitment and retention of rural school teachers are affected by geographic and social isolation and demanding workloads (Mollenkopf, 2009). To gain a better understanding of how to retain teachers in rural areas, the data analysis and summary of the findings were based on the following research questions to guide the inquiry of this qualitative study:

1. What are general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses?

2. What draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts?

3. Why factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts?

Design of the Study

Collins (1999) from the American Association of School Administrators observed that the main problem of rural school districts is attracting and keeping quality teachers. The rural school teacher shortage affects all subject areas, especially in specialized areas. By exploring the personal experiences and conditions of rural school teachers, I was able to discover what keeps teachers working in remote locations with limited resources.

The study did shed light on the retention of teachers in rural areas as vital to the existence of rural schools in large urban school districts. The study was designed to allow participants to give their opinions, reasons, and their voice as a rural school teacher with unique challenges as they succeed or fail in their endeavors. The collections of their words have left their mark and created their legacy as teachers working in rural areas. Observations of teachers teaching were documented that unified their responses or represented their perceptions of their voices as to why they work in rural schools in large urban districts.

To address the research questions and hear the spoken words of the participants, the qualitative method was used to understand and to interpret the information. As the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, I analyzed the conversations of the participants to ensure that my biases did not influence how participants' perceptions are portrayed. The use of the member checks as a further indication of validity was used. The transcribing of the

interviews and sending summaries of the researcher's conclusions to participants for review was also implemented.

The use of focus group interviews as the primary technique for acquiring information from the participants was utilized. The collection of the data took place in three phases. The first phase included all the participating teachers of four rural schools in two school districts. In phase one, all the preliminary participants were given a demographic survey (see Appendix A), which gathered general information on their professional status and experience. Fowler, 2014 states an advantage to survey methodology is that it is relatively unobtrusive and easily administered and managed.

The second phase of the study included five teacher participants from each school to participate in the focus groups. I purposefully selected the rural schools and twenty teachers were selected by a school administrator. The interview method was employed because it had the potential to elicit rich, thick descriptions. Creswell (2007), Denzin and Lincoln (2008), and Marshall and Rossman (2016) state that a major benefit of collecting data through individual, in-depth interviews is that they offer the potential to capture a person's perspective of an event or experience. The selected teacher participants were interviewed using an in-depth protocol (see Appendix B).

In the third phase, the use of document analysis research was a valuable research tool and invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation. This procedure involved analyzing and interpreting data generated from the examination of documents and records relevant to this study. A document is something that we can read and which relates to some aspect of the social world.

According to Bowen (2009), document analysis contains an orderly technique for written and electronic documents in revising and assessing this material.

Definition of Terms

<u>Highly Qualified Teachers</u> refers to teachers who have: 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

<u>Major Urban District</u> (a) it is located in a county with a population of at least 870,000; (b) its enrollment is the largest in the county or at least 75 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county, and (c) at least 35 percent of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged. Under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program, students classified as economically disadvantaged are eligible for free or reduced-price meals (Texas Education Agency, 2015-2016).

<u>Major Suburban District</u> (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification as major urban; (b) it is contiguous to a major urban district, and (c) its enrollment is at least 3 percent that of the adjacent major urban or at least 4,500 students. A major suburban district does not meet the criteria for classification as major urban and if it is not adjacent to a major urban district (http://txsmartschools.org/pdf/2010/FASTp5Appendix.pdf). In 2015, the Texas Education Agency stated a major urban had an enrollment of at least 15 percent, or 4,500 students of the closest major urban (Texas Education Agency, 2015-2016).

<u>No Child Left Behind</u> Federal law that requires 1) measure the extent to which all students have highly qualified teachers, particularly minority and disadvantaged students, 2) adopt goals and

plans to ensure all teachers are highly skilled and, 3) publicly report plans and progress in meeting teacher quality targets (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Non-Metropolitan: Fast Growing A district is classified as non-metropolitan: fast growing if it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories and it has an enrollment of at least 300 students. Also, the enrollment has increased by at least 20 percent over the past five years (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013).

Rural School District   is a district classified as rural if it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories. A rural school district has either: (a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20 percent; or (b) an enrollment of fewer than 300 students (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013).

Rural Communities are small size, sparse settlement, distance from population concentrations, and economic reliance on agricultural industries that are increasingly using seasonal and immigrant workers to minimize labor costs (Monk, 2007).

Rural Schools are smaller, less likely to have minority students, and less likely to provide bilingual, magnet, and job placement programs than urban or suburban schools (Sullivan, 2000).

School District is an area or region containing the schools that a school board is in charge of (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

South Texas is a large region with some sub-regions at considerable distances from each other, including the Lower Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and Laredo (South Texas Regional Overview, 2011).

Texas Education Agency (TEA) is an administrative unit for primary and secondary public

education (Texas Education Agency).

Summary

A review of the literature regarding retention of rural teachers in large school districts

with small rural schools will be included in Chapter 2. This literature review specifically

discusses the challenges of retention, the need for highly qualified teachers in rural areas,

description of rural districts and schools in the United States, key issues affecting rural schools,

description of large rural schools nested in large districts and key issues affecting rural schools in

foreign countries. The following chapters will reveal the findings and explanation of the study as

it will be conducted.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This study explores how rural schools and districts can retain highly qualified teachers in large school districts to provide academic excellence to all students. The goal is to examine the factors that contribute to the retention of teachers in rural work areas. It will explain the definition of rural district and schools with the interpretation of the No Child Left Behind Act that affects rural schools and districts. A portion of the literature focuses on the challenges that affect rural schools in the retention of teachers. Other literature emphasizes on the benefits of teaching in remote rural areas and the components introduced to assist teachers in making connections to the rural school's culture.

The need to provide highly qualified teachers and support systems are vital to the retention of teachers in rural areas. Redding and Walberg (2012) strongly assert, "the people closest to the students have the greatest impact on the student's performance" (p.2). It is vital that we hire highly qualified teachers that have high expectations for their students. Teaching is not always easy, but it requires passion, and if you are serious about teaching you will be able to conquer any difficulties. Malhoit, 2005 states all students, regardless of their place of residence, race, disability, or economic background, are capable of learning and achieving excellence if

they are provided with educational opportunities and resources.

Description of Rural Districts and Schools in the United States

There are multiple determinations of what is considered "rural." The National Center for Education Statistics uses locale codes in its Common Core of Data to describe urban, suburban, and rural districts and schools. Beginning in 2006-2007, the Urban- Centric locale codes replaced the older Metro-Centric codes. Rural is defined by Fringe, Distant and Remote. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) cites Fringe by a rural region that is approximately to 5 miles from a residential region and approximately 2.5 miles from an urban group. A five-mile radius to approximately 25-mile radius from an urbanized region and a rural area that is 2.5 or 10 miles from an urban group is categorized as Distant. Remote was described as more than 25 miles from an urbanized region and is also more than 10 miles from an urban group.

In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 7,757 rural schools districts existed across the country with about 11.3 million students enrolled in primary and secondary rural schools. In 2013, Texas reported 1,027 public school districts by state or jurisdiction with rural schools having the following subcategories: Fringe, 105 school districts, Distant, 305 school districts; and Remote, 221 school districts. These statistics gave Texas the highest enrollment of rural schools. Evidently, the rural student population is growing and has been largely ignored by policymakers (Ayers, 2012). The National Education Association (2010) recognizes the issues of rural communities that vary where there is no one size fits all policy solution to serving their needs. Rural students and educators have unique needs, and collaboration should be supported and incentivized in rural communities.

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The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) reported in 2010-2011, approximately 57 percent of all operating regular school districts were located in rural areas, while 20 percent of districts were located in suburban areas, 18 percent in towns, and 5 percent in cities. In rural areas, a greater percentage of students attending public schools in fringe rural areas were subgroups of Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander. The percentage was greater than in outlying rural and remote rural areas. A smaller percentage of school-age children in rural areas live below the poverty brink than those in cities or towns. Using annual household income data collected by the American Community Survey, households in poverty had an annual income below the poverty line. The percentage of rural children living in poverty was highest in the South, followed by the West, Midwest, and Northeast. This information stipulates the statistics of rural areas in America.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) indicated the following specific rural locales, 19 percent of rural students in remote areas attended high-poverty schools in 2010-2011, as 11 percent in outlying rural areas and 8 percent in fringe rural areas. Additional, more than half of American Indian/Alaska Native and Black students respectively lived in remote rural areas attended high- poverty schools. These statistics were the results of subgroups of White, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and students of two or more races.

Under the terms of rural schools, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, or Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), provides for rural use in granting funds under Title VI. The United States Census provided limitations to determine whether an area or territory is considered to be rural. Title VI of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Elementary and Secondary Act provides funding to endorse student achievement under the Rural Education Initiative (No Child Left Behind Act, PL 107-110, Section 6202). The requirements recruit that a school district have

a regular attendance of fewer than 600 students or serve only schools located in counties with a population mass of fewer than ten persons per square mile and

A) all of the schools served by the local educational agency are designated with a school locale code of 7 or 8, as determined by the Secretary; or

(B) the agency meets the criteria established in subparagraph (A)(i) and the Secretary, in accordance with paragraph (2), grants the local educational agency's request to waive the criteria described in subparagraph (A)(ii) (No Child Left Behind Act, PL 107-110, Section 6211(b)(1)).

Key Issues Affecting Rural Schools in the United States

Marshall (1996) states that one explanation for rural schools will help researchers in classifying and gathering data. The American Youth Policy Forum (2010) recognized important matters that have concerns nationally for policies at the local, state, and federal levels regarding rural education. The identification of Federal funding formulas using rural districts may receive smaller percentages of Title 1 federal funding as compared to urban and suburban districts. Rural districts typically enroll fewer students so they may not benefit from the "number weighting" formula as larger, urban districts do.

O'Hare and Johnson (2004) note that many state funding formulas also penalize smaller, rural districts. Several issues affecting rural schools in the lack of funding are the deficiency of partnerships across the region, districts and sectors. Technology is another deficiency needed to deliver instructional development to students in rural districts. Another deficiency is preparing teachers to work in rural settings where multiple subject areas are a common trend in rural schools. Finally, transportation is another concern due to the distances that exist between homes

and schools in rural locations to and from schools. These can be long commutes and time to consuming for students and teachers. These issues are not isolated factors but factors that impede the retention of highly qualified teachers to serve students in rural school areas.

According to Strange, Johnson, Showalter and Klein (2012), discovered a variety of important features associated with rural schools and communities and education policies that influence rural areas. The statistics used for their sixth biannual report, *Why Rural Matters*, was obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics and the United States Census Bureau, (2012).

Strange, Johnson, Showalter and Klein (2012) identified key points that were enrollment, diversity, poverty and special education. The enrollment of rural schools in the United States increased by two million students which is an increase of more than 22% between the years of 1999-2000 and 2008-2009. Rural districts accounted for approximately 70% of the nation's total increase in student enrollment during that decade. The Strange et al. report (2012) indicates that students of color comprise one-fourth of all students in rural areas; however, the percentages range dramatically from state to state. The percentage of rural students living in poverty has risen significantly between 1999-2000 and 2008-2009. Their findings on special education were contrary to the belief if living with high rates of poverty is associated with high levels of special education. The higher the rate of rural poverty, the lower the rate of students with individual education plans (Strange et.al, 2012).

Teacher retention is another challenge that faces rural districts and schools. Rural schools want highly qualified teachers in every classroom. The American Youth Policy Forum (2010) reported perplexing responsibilities for retaining teachers in rural and remote districts in

the school systems. Some features contributing to the difficulty in rural staffing are pre-existing teacher shortage, low proportional salaries, teaching several classes or perceived social, cultural, and professional isolation (Jimerson, 2005).

<div align="center">**Description of Rural Schools in International Countries**</div>

According to Solstad (2008), the Intersokola conference in 2013 met in Domle, Sweden to investigate the present state of small multi-graded schools in rural areas. The formation of an inquiry framework was initiated to select individuals with considerable experience in rural education and ask them to participate in an investigation. Replies were established from six of the original main countries Wales, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and England. These countries together with a contribution from Iceland on rural schools provided a discussion on the challenges, obstacles, and opportunities they encountered.

Solstad (2008) cited in Wales, the decline in small rural schools over several years parallels the decline in rural economies, farming, and family size. There has been increasing pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government for Local Education Authority (LEAs) to study the efficiency cost of the plans and policies of "Best Value" policy. All LEAs were aware of the problems that funding was creating for their smaller schools. In rural area schools, the challenges faced by very small schools are transport provision, the effects of school closing and the extent to which the school assists the whole community as an educational source. Small schools are expected to provide the same core curriculum and social chances for their pupils as do other, larger schools (Evans, 2005).

In Sweden, of a small rural school is "A rural school with 50 pupils between 6 and 13." In 1997, the National Rural Development Agency, responsible for promoting the positive

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development of rural, sparsely populated and archipelago areas in Sweden, wanted to investigate the rural schools' situation. The condition is due to a combination of issues such as local authorities struggling with financial problems, the reduction in the number of students moving, and a drop in the birth rate (Solstad ,2008). In Sweden, decisions on school organization and class size are made by the local authority. They are free to decide on the organization of their schools. There are no longer any restrictions on how many pupils are permitted in a class. Within a community rule, the headmaster is free to establish the schools within his/her charge as she/he decides (Solstad, 2008). Local authorities, who are responsible for their schools, handle the closure of schools in a variety of ways. There are no longer any regulations which give dedicated money for a small school within the system of local decision-making. There is no financial support provided by the government and no assistance provided for primary schools (Solstad, 2008). The method of teaching in mixed age groups has become a trend even in the major central schools. In these schools, the multi-grade organization has been focused on primary pupils aged 6-9 in the first instance. There is no administrative help especially in respect of small rural schools. People assert that it is difficult for a small rural school to provide an education which is equal to one offered by a larger school with more resources. In rural areas, there seems to be a general opinion among the inhabitants that small village schools provide a valuable environment for the children. If the rural school is to survive, it must be seen as more than the local primary school. The rural school must also be established into an educational means for the whole community, a meeting room, a library, a place for learning, and a place of educational improvement for all ages (Solstad, 2008).

In the Republic of Ireland, small one school with two teachers is very much a feature of primary school education. There is no variation is made in the division of resources to small and

larger schools (Solstad, 2008). Strict guidelines exist about the teacher number or the schools. According to Irish government regulation (DES, 2004), the number of teachers in a school is dependent on the number of students. For example, schools with 12 or more students and under 50 students are entitled to two teachers. Schools with over 50 students but below 82 students are entitled to three teachers, and schools with more than 82 students and fewer than 116 pupils are entitled to four teachers. Teachers are expected to teach the full range of primary school subjects. In the case of small schools, teachers are shared by some schools. In schools with less than 180 students and less than eight teachers, the school principal is also a class teacher. In schools with greater than 280 pupils, the principal is an "administrative" principal and does not have teaching responsibilities. Seventy-five percent of primary schools have less than 280 pupils resulting in the majority of school principals at the elementary level having teaching responsibilities.

Many teachers share difficulties in trying to establish and manage their classes for instruction and knowledge. Most teachers find it difficult in trying to teach different grades levels and meet the child's needs in a timely manner. Teachers contemplate that multi-grade teaching needs more structure and planning than teaching a single-grade. Teachers who were also school principals needed to do one job instead of hindering one over the other. The condition that finance is based on the amount of pupils in the school means that small schools are provided with the same type of resources and services as in bigger schools (Solstad, 2008).

Solstad (2008) state the circumstances in Finland of rural primary education has experienced great changes. The State supports approximately 50% of the costs, on average, but the state authorities do not interfere with local policies. The state provincial offices provide free in-service training days and they also employ a corps of part-time teacher-counselors. The

service provides assistances to small rural schools with fewer funds. The state provincial offices also inspire schools to make use of trainings to their benefit. There are no guidelines on the size and usage of multi-grade courses in general education. Only special education classes are still protected by regulations which specify the maximum number of pupils (Solstad, 2008). The number of students in small rural primary schools is as good as that of large schools. In a place for public education the small school can be better than the large institution. However, the lack of skilled teaching personnel may have a positive outcome on student achievement. Small rural primary schools face two main problems: the lack of students and the lack of qualified teachers. Any decisions to close or retain small rural primary schools are determined at the local levels. The state should consider teacher education in universities to save small rural schools from bigger problems (Solstad, 2008).

According to Solstad (2008), in rural Norway, the origins of popular education may be drawn back to the 1739 Act on Schools of Rural Norway. The 1739 Act on Schools of Rural Norway stated that the parish school should cater for all children between 7 and 12 years of age and that the school holder should "…teach all the children in the catchment area defined for his school, poor and rich" (p.42). The main differences between rural and an urban primary education was related to schooling time, class size, and subject change. The annual teaching time in rural schools is approximately half of that of urban school. The reduced maximum class size in rural schools depending on the number of age- groups in the class and rural schools were exempted from teaching English and home economics as a compulsory subject. Thirty-five percent of all primary schools are a multi-grade and, cater to 10-12 percent of the primary school population. Small schools and multi-grade teaching have created a considerable portion of the education establishment in rural Norway. The professional support supporting the trials of multi-

grade teaching has been restricted. A reference that teachers in small schools must modify

themes and approaches to "incomplete division of school classes" including more than one age

or grade level. In the colleges of education, including those located in and serving counties

where the majority of the schools do have a multi-grade organization, teaching practice as part of

pre-service training is mainly undertaken in single-grade classes. There are no logical measures

to distribute extra managerial or para-professional help for small rural schools. In January 2004,

new regulations stated that the students should be grouped as required and each student should

be assigned to a dedicated contact teacher who has a responsibility for the practical,

administrative, and pastoral aspects of the student's education together with home school contact

(Solstad, 2008).

The Cornish perspective within the English system characterizes the contemporary scene

for small rural schools. The Cornish staff obtains financial support, administrative and

paraprofessional help, regulations governing multi-grade classes and special needs provision as

essential features for education. The student achievement, high cost to educate rural students,

parental observations of schooling, teacher pressure, job sharing, informal maintenance,

implementing guidelines are additional features in education. Finally, the professional

reinforcement and development, small schools and excess student places and school evaluations

are also a part of the Cornish educational endeavor. The future brings relieve to rural areas by

suggesting consolidation, federation, rural housing, clustering and rural school staffing (Solstad,

2008).

Icelandic perspective of small rural schools where there is no professional support

provided for small compulsory schools. The rural schools do not have much administrative help,

there are no regulations on class size or staffing in classes, and small schools have to fight for

their existence some as merging municipalities. Small schools continue to be a prominent part of the Icelandic school system, and they continue to be one of the main preconditions for attracting young people to the area. Problems need to offset class size, administrative support, multi-grade classes, student achievement, school groups, and community (Solstad, 2008).

The small schools are a vital element in rural life. They educate the young, contribute to social and cultural life and act as a force to retain and attract families. Small rural schools and the communities from foreign countries deserve support from more informed, more sensitive and more policies geared to their unique situations.

Key Issues Affecting Rural Schools in International Countries

Staffing rural and remote schools equitably present a challenge for education systems in other countries (Auditor General, 2000; Martinez, 1993). The attraction and retention of qualified teachers are essential for improving quality outcomes for students. The issues faced in the United States are not unique characteristics that other countries have not experienced. Carrick (1989), states that despite identifying the need for effective rural teacher placement and the action to improve teacher retention the issues remain. A significant number of new graduates continue to be a concern as they are appointed to rural schools due to difficulties in recruiting experienced teachers (ECU, 2007; Mills & Gale, 2003).

The characteristics of rural schools in the United States in regards to recruitment and retention of teachers including other countries that have large rural schools with small campuses are illustrated (see Appendix C). Class size is a common problem not only in the Unites States but Sweden, Ireland, Finland, Norway, and Iceland. Class size refers to the quantity of students in the classroom (Solstad, 2008). If the class does not have enough students, then the option of

multi-grade classrooms becomes an alternative solution. If equality is a basis for the country's education system, then it must be well-defined at a national level. Ireland stands alone as it controls class size nationally, while Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland decentralize and class size is determined as a local matter.

Solstad (2008) cites financial support has become a problem in many countries as this sector of education is not a national but a local responsibility. Financial support has resulted in uneven accountability for the education where each resident community, large or small, poor or wealthy, is the responsibility for the education of the children.

Networking should be promoted as an effective learning tool among these countries. Solstad (2008) cites parts of Iceland are thinly populated and especially communities in the winter. Due to this geographic isolation, it makes the opportunities for teachers to meet and also to facilitate interactions with others through the use of technology.

Teacher stress becomes another issue as they become the primary teacher in all subject areas with limited resources and assistance. The pressure to achieve results at least equal to those of students in the cities becomes an added concern for these teachers that do not have enough experience. The stress of living in isolated areas, seasonal conditions, stores, community all compiles the existing conditions of working in remote regions.

Rural school staffing has become more evident in constant political intervention in the running of schools, the national assessments, government initiatives supplemented by documents, and requests for education data and reports (Solstad, 2008). The volume of initiatives and excessive administrative demands are the same for both large and small schools,

but with less professional support. Therefore, staffing in rural areas has become a problem found not only in the United States but also in other countries.

A shortage of highly qualified teachers is a worldwide concern. Welsh, Sweden, Ireland, Finland, Norway, the Cornish English system, and Iceland all share this concern with the United States. The shortage of highly qualified teachers is noted in rural regions as teachers are not drawn to remote areas. These countries that I have described differ from the rural schools in large districts in my research study. My intent was to describe rural schools from different countries and describe their characteristics.

Challenges of Teacher Retention in Large Districts with Rural Campuses

According to Monk (2007), rural districts struggle retaining new teachers due to exclusive conditions that exist in the districts. Barrow and Burchett (2001) reported that 49% of rural agricultural teachers had more than four daily arrangements. In filling posts, rural districts reported a higher rate to fill vacancies for 4 of the 12 instruction areas surveyed. English as a second language was reported at 42.3% and foreign languages at 48% were the most challenging (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006). These issues show the lack of opportunities for the teacher to find jobs or retain them in areas that present challenges. The main goal for educators is to educate students in any school setting.

A challenge for rural schools is recruiting and retaining teachers is essential. About recruitment, of rural school teachers, the "ideal" rural teachers can teach several grades or subjects, organize additional activities, and fit in with the environment and community (Collins, 2003). It is tough to find teachers who fit in with the rural community and stay for extended periods of time. The teachers who decide to stay are either from a common background or have

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previous understanding with rural populations. Small rural schools have faced challenges in finding teachers, but now their challenges are to find quality rural teachers. Teachers are supposed to show academic achievement, but what they need to show first is fairness (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

The Association of State Boards of Education says that the number of teachers trained per year is adequate, but what is not adequate is the distribution of teachers. Rural schools tend to have less teaching vacancies than city or residential schools, so redistributing classes from noncertified to endorse teachers, as many schools have done, may not be possible. Finally, rural schools have challenges retaining new teachers, not just as a outcome of the highly qualified teacher initiatives, but because of unique teaching circumstances to rural schools (Monk, 2007). The teachers recruited by rural schools must be prepared for the circumstances of educating in rural areas. They not only need the qualifications, but they should be mindful of the environment of small schools in rural communities. To find sustainable teachers, rural schools must recruit on a yearlong basis, engage the community and schools to assist with the process and be committed to academic excellence. According to Monk, smaller schools have a difficulty hiring universal elementary teachers, although the minutest schools have more difficulty than others. The lack of some teachers in certain subjects has a percentage to be higher than in rural schools, again suggesting that these rural schools have different obstacles in retaining teachers.

As noted, rural schools encounter trials that are unalike from their urban or suburban equivalents. Less resource associated with rural schools means less employees and bigger responsibilities for every staff member. Rural schools and districts must meet the same expectations as their larger, higher funded schools. There is no difference in a number of teachers produced in urban or suburban areas, only the difference in the preparation and retention

of teachers in rural areas. A key to retaining teachers is to develop teacher leaders who can share their expertise with students, fellow teachers, and administrators' (Franklin, 2012).

Some rural schools have to consolidate classes, employ out of field teachers, and decrease course offerings to teach the basics (Jimerson, 2005). Rural school districts also resort to grouping students from different grade levels in one classroom to meet the shortage of teachers. The ability to retain teachers requires the passion to teach as stated above at any level of the school grade with no regards to location or resources.

Another reason for the shortage of teacher comes from the distrust of the community as some teachers are viewed as "outsiders." The uncertainty creates a barrier for collaboration between new school personnel and families (Owens, Richerson, Murphy, Jageleweski, & Rossi, 2007). The distrust may be further aggravated by the high turnover rates for teachers, their desire to live outside the community, and their commute to work (Redding & Walberg, 2012). This situation is apparent in close-knit communities or communities that are set in their ways, so change becomes difficult. Small populations and geographic isolation in rural areas are other factors taken into consideration when recruiting teachers in rural schools to offer a high quality education to their students (McClure &Reeves, 2004).

The retention of teachers in rural areas is impacted by the fact that families move away or lose their jobs; therefore, the remote locations become an issue for the families that stay. There could be large open spaces before finding a family which means the cycle continues as families leave and the decline of students continues. Johnson, Strange, and Madden (2010) determined that there is a correlation between the decline in population along with decline in economy and a poverty increase. The reality to these circumstances surrounds these isolated people and the lack

of getting a quality education due to the shortage of teachers, only makes it harder to stay. These organizational features of rural schools directly affect teacher recruitment and retention. Among the most important features are demographic characteristics of the teachers, teachers' workloads, and teachers' salaries.

Outdated leadership models can also hinder the attraction for teachers to teach in rural areas. The traditional leadership models tend not to be attentive to culture, context or place (English, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2007; Ryan, 2005). Traditional leadership can be problematic for that reason particularly in rural communities where home embodies a land ethic and is embedded in the culture of the site (Johnson, Hess, Larson, & Wise, 2010; Johnson, Shope, & Roush, 2009). Rural communities struggle with many of the same encounters of their counterparts in the inner-city and suburban areas. Some of the problems include fiscal stress, recruitment, and retention of qualified teachers and leaders, demographic shifts in the student population, and high stakes accountability measures. These challenges tend to be intensified in rural areas due to their rural characteristics like remoteness and population sparsity that make it difficult to implement the kinds of programs and services that are a norm for the improvement of schools. The one size fits all policy also makes it difficult for leaders to implement resources that rural schools should be able to operate.

Advantages of Teacher Retention in Large Districts with Rural Campuses

Despite the challenges, there are advantages to teaching in rural areas. One is the small school size, and because of this, many rural districts have decided to consolidate in order to have access to more resources. Recent studies on rural areas have associated higher attainment with smaller schools and districts (Hopkins, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2006; Johnson et al., 2010;

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Redding & Walberg, 2012; Stewart, 2009). Williams (2010) reported that studies over the past

40 years have shown that students in small school showed equal or higher academic achievement

and graduated at a higher rate than students in larger schools.

According to Monk (2007), classes in rural schools are moderately small, and teachers

tend to report approval with their work situations and few complications with discipline. The

student teacher ratios are lower in both elementary and secondary schools that enroll few

students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, elementary schools with less

than 300 students have a ratio of 13.3, compared with 20.3 for schools with greater than 1,500

students. The minor student-teacher ratios in smaller schools affect different facets of teacher

assignments. These statistics could not be possible without a strong foundation and vision

provided by the school.

Another advantage to teaching in a rural school is the community, school, and family

relationships. Redding and Walberg (2012) referred to "social capital" as the connections to

children through community, school, and family. In a study of high performing, high necessities

rural schools, Barley and Beesley (2007) found that the accomplishment of these schools was

closely related to strong connections with the families. They also establish that teachers in small,

rural schools display a higher level of appreciation for their students' lives outside the

schoolroom; they tend to offer support for students' public and behavioral essentials as well as

their educational requirements. Redding and Walberg (2012) summarized some of the

advantages of rural school as the following:

- School boards and school staff have a vested awareness in the achievement of
  students in their communities

- Teachers who care for their students afar their schoolrooms

- Cohesive families districts

- Wide social investment within the community

- Central part of the school in community engagement

The need to provide highly qualified teachers and support systems are vital to the retention of teachers in rural areas. Redding and Walberg (2012) strongly stress, "the people closest to the students have the greatest impact on the student's performance" (p.2). It is vital that highly qualified teachers be hired that have high expectations for their students. These teachers need to use support systems that are research based to support differentiated instruction and effective teaching practices. There is a necessity to implement structures to assist teachers to be effective and have the passion to staying and teaching in challenging situations found in rural areas. One is the need to recruit and retain qualified teachers to work in rural areas as an essential element in making a difference in the student's quality of education. A second need is that they need time to work collaboratively with others to stay abreast of the latest teaching practices. Thirdly, they need time to engage in current research trends to form an alignment of curriculum to state standard measures.

Staff development is also a tool teachers can use to help them become savvy in their instructional planning. The movement of isolation becomes less stressful as they are being educated and held accountable to the highest standard as their other counterparts. The geographic area becomes a place and not isolation. The support systems of lead teachers, mentors, and administrations become a vital role in the success of the students and the retention of teachers. Rural attributes, such as sparse settlements or geographic isolations can raise costs. However, when it comes to instruction, excellence is non-negotiable. The notion of belonging to

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an organization becomes a part of the existence of rural schools, and the reality embraces teaching as a calling, not a separation.

In a study by Mahan (2010), she states that not only do teachers desire to educate close to family, but they want to educate in districts similar to the ones they graduated from in high school. This new research shows that teachers are seeking their first jobs overwhelmingly choose to teach in school districts near to where they grew up. Some teachers prefer working close to home because they know the community and as a beginning teacher, it is beneficial being close to family. These teachers have a personal connection to the students as they can identify with their culture. These teachers are home grown and are already part of the family with positive attributes of respect, family and community connection. The rural teacher that comes from a rural background also knows the struggles and conflicts that the students might encounter as they go through the educational system. These teachers become positive role models and share stories of their upbringing as having experienced it first-hand. Their resilience to overcome obstacles or financial hardships proves that any student can be a success.

If teachers do not find an importance or a distinct connection with rural areas, they will not be influenced to work in a rural school no matter the support arrangements they have. A support system to prepare teachers to work in rural areas is educator preparation classes. Educator preparation classes can bring awareness to students about the difficulties that occur in rural schools. To help them develop awareness in rural schools, they will want to help solve this issue once they get out of school and not be part of the current complications. Teachers are vital to their students as they implement the learning process. To implement this strategy, teachers need to be able to meet students' individual needs, be effective teachers, and motivate students

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intrinsically to learn. Without qualified teachers, schools in rural areas have a hard time educating the students.

Another support system is the use of technology to provide students with opportunities and educators the necessary professional development that is hard to reach in remote areas. The use of technology can allow staff and students to use innovative teaching practices and bring learning experiences to the classrooms. Technology is a tool that is evolving every day and preparing teachers and students for today's workplace (Packard, 2016). The preparation for all students to function in the world outside the perimeters of their rural area is an expectation for all students no matter the place or label where they are educated. It is important to teach and use technology in the classroom to be able to compete with students all over the world. The exposure of the development of technology is a vital portion of a student's education.

Lastly, the tool of leadership is a powerful one that can be used to retain teachers to teach in remote areas. Leaders, who utilize a place, use a conscious model of leadership, engage community members in decision making, increase stakeholder capacity and ensure sustainability can prove themselves (Johnson,Thompson & Naugle, 2009). The result in using leadership for all students is a powerful tool.

Encountering Diversity in Rural Communities

Rural America is undergoing substantial modifications. Partial areas of nonmetropolitan communities are increasing, while the other half is decreasing. Statistics from the Economic Research Service (Kusmin, 2006) indicated that nonmetropolitan areas increased by 2.2 percent from 2000 to 2005. That growth was concentrated in nonmetropolitan counties adjoining to the metropolitan areas. Part of nonmetropolitan counties saw a loss in residents. These diminishing

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counties were slightly occupied and sustained on agriculture. The states with the prevalent nonmetropolitan loss between 2000 and 2005 were located in the Midwest, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, and North Dakota. North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Texas had the biggest nonmetropolitan growth.

According to the Barley and Brigham (2008), nonmetropolitan America is becoming more assorted in population. Nearly a third of the growth is due to global movement. The migration accounts for all of the population development of nonmetropolitan areas in the Midwest and from 18 to 28 percent in the South, West, and Northeast. The states with the largest population increase in the global movement are Indiana, Oklahoma, Alabama, and New Mexico. Among the sub-groups, Hispanics have the biggest proportion of the population, followed by Asian, Native American, African American, and non-Hispanic Whites.

Worldwide relocation is producing additional trials for teachers who are unfamiliar with English language learners. Some rural schools have trouble recruiting skilled teachers to work with English language learners because of the few professional resources for teachers in rural areas (Johnson & Strange, 2009).

Policies and Practices Defined in Rural Education

To apply the definition of rural to educational policy and practices, several possibilities are to be considered. One is the unit of analysis. The process used for rural is defined and specified by school or district is likely to yield different interpretations for the rural student. These clarifications can affect education procedures and systems. The geographic and political variance among areas is a concern. Rural in one portion of the nation may not be measured as rural in another part. The Southwest is less densely populated than the Southeast; therefore,

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geographically they have larger counties and school districts. Demographic change in rural America is the third concern affecting procedures and systems in rural education. Some communities are attaining growth, while others are declining. School districts undergoing development are noting the growth in student variety (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005).

One system classifies rural schools according to the distance to an urbanized area, but other systems do not. Varying circumstances and a growing variety in rural America creates rural even more challenging (McGranahan, 1994; Stephens, 1992). Rural requires not only understanding one system but the policies created to conform to this population. A review of agriculture policy requires a consideration of the unique situations in rural places that validate national procedures (Marshall, p.59). Significant differences among rural people and venues in America make it hard to fashion domestic policies that are suitable for all places. The systematic problem is compound by diversity as well as the deficiency of a common statistical explanation of rural and the need by policy-makers to provide accommodations for shifting rural situations and balance various interests.

Getting an accurate count of the number of rural students is essential for developing education policies aimed at improving outcomes in rural communities. Under the NCES locale code systems, the locales of schools are chosen first, then by their districts. Using school information to quantify rural education indicators related to rural schools is more accurate than using district information. Using district data can eliminate students who attend rural schools that are part of larger districts and are not labeled as rural. Distinguishing rural from non-rural in district data is, therefore, less precise, and usually, results in under-counting rural representation. In many consolidated countywide districts, schools in rural areas are governed by a district office located in a town with a population greater than 2,500. In perspective, 8,797,497 students in the

25,151 schools designated by NCES as rural, while 8,036,222 students enrolled in the 7,204 districts designated as rural by district level data. About district-level data, the use of regular local education agencies data is used (Johnson and Stange, 2005).

An accompanying issue related to the geographic building blocks was used to construct the meaning of rural. Although rural and nonmetropolitan are often used interchangeably, they yield different population numbers because the nonmetropolitan designation is founded on a county unit of measure while the Census Bureau definition of rural is founded on census regions. Cromartie & Swanson (1996) found that census regions use rural populations and areas more accurately than do counties. They note that using county-based systems result in the misidentification of much of nonmetropolitan America.

Implementation of Educational Policies

According to Monk, many analysts have examined the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act in small and rural schools. One interesting feature of this legislation is the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP). The program is modest in size, with some 6,000 schools meeting the eligibility requirements and awards averaging about $20,000 (Monk, 2007).

There are compliance issues on how the law applies to rural settings. The federal government's description of a highly qualified teacher, including a requirement for complete certification, a bachelor's degree, and demonstrated ability in all subjects being communicated, can create significant issues for small rural schools, where teachers must educate in various subject areas. Likewise, measures of student performance mainly when the emphasis is on subgroup performance can create a unique challenge when there a limited number of students in each of the various groups.

The United States Department of Education has made many modifications to No Child Left Behind to address the concerns addressed by rural states. The focus on No Child Left Behind concentrates on the importance of having highly qualified teachers in every classroom which could help to move forward a serious policy agenda to improve the ability of rural schools to attract and retain teachers.

Summary

The National Center for Education Statistics recognized nearly 11.4 million students as attending schools in rural districts. These students are as economically and socially varied as their communities. Data reported by Johnson et al. (2010) show that in rural districts, 40% of the students live in poverty, 25% are children of color, and 12% have changed residence within the past year. These students are located in all 50 states, but the highest attention occurs in the states of the south and southwest. Policy-makers need to address the encounters that rural districts, schools, and students meet every day. There must be a national commitment to improving student outcomes and closing the achievement gaps. The key point to academic excellence is being educated by a highly qualified teacher regardless of the location or resources.

Some rural schools succeed at attracting and retaining teachers whose qualifications are comparable to those of teachers of other schools. The problem in some rural schools is the lack of quality of life in the community, working conditions are difficult, student needs are high, support services are scarce, and professional support systems are insufficient. Teacher knowledge is also limited in the smallest schools as teacher education is emerging as one of the most noteworthy analysts of teaching efficiency in the literature (Smith, 2005). The present

concerns are a worldwide issue with common characteristics in the recruitment and retention of

rural school teachers.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The study examined the maintenance of rural school teachers in large school districts with small rural schools. Using a qualitative research design assisted in gathering a deep understanding of a social setting as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. As a researcher, I interviewed participants to collect information in their social setting. Qualitative research was designed as pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in people's experiences. It involves the use of qualitative data, such as interviews, documents, and participant observation data, to understand and explain social phenomena. Qualitative research can be found in many disciplines and fields, using a variety of approaches, methods, and techniques. Qualitative research can be found in many disciplines and fields, using a variety of approaches, methods, and techniques. Qualitative data involve interviews, documents, and participant observations, to understand and interpret data. Thus, this research was typically enacted in a naturalistic setting, focuses on context, and was emergent and evolving.

The development of a timeline for this study was used to show the process of the data collected and analyzed. The timeline allowed for the perfect acquirement of information for the research questions promptly. The research questions were:

1. What are general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses?

2. What draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts?

3. What factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts?

Data Collection Methods

I used a qualitative research method to understand the research content and illustrate the findings from the study. Qualitative research involved collecting data and trying to understand it in a particular context (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). I looked for themes that emerged from the data to see if there are commonalities across the research. Qualitative research elicits information from questions and uses people's perceptions of reality (Newman, Ridenour, Newman, & DeMarco Jr., 2003). Social and cultural occurrence is documented in qualitative research methods to assist researchers in case study research and ethnography. A research method is a strategy of inquiry which moves from the underlying philosophical assumptions to research design and data collection. The choice of investigation influenced the way in which data is collected.

Just as there are various philosophical perspectives which can inform qualitative research, there are also various qualitative research methods. By one common definition, (Mason, 2002), all these methods rely on linguistic rather than numerical data. There is an emphasis on understanding phenomena in their right; open, exploratory research questions; unlimited, emergent description options, the use of a specific strategy for enhancing the credibility of design and analyses (Elliot, Fischer and Rennie, 1999); and definitions of success conditions regarding exploring something new.

An interpretative framework was selected, where the study will relate to the participant and will seek to understand the world of the participant's reality (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). I focused on intentional behaviors and actions to explore the reasons the participants shared their experiences. Interpretive researchers begin with the belief that is accepted as true or as a social construction of reality such as information, facts, or pictures. The scientific base of interpretive research used in the study was ethnography and phenomenology.

The use of qualitative research was implemented through a naturalistic inquiry. There was an extensive collection of field notes through observations, interviews, and documents from the participants in their school setting. This information generated useful and credible qualitative findings by examining the various paradigms, the strategies developed for studying people in the natural setting, and a variety of techniques for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting findings was implemented.

The theoretical framework I chose to analyze my data was through an interpretive descriptive ethnographic study. The description is intended to convey the rich complexity of the research discovered. Interpretation involved attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, considering different meanings, and offering potential explanations and conclusions to the research. The ethnographic research used conducted interpretation by attempting to make sense of the findings, how and in what ways the culture functioned.

Sample Identification Process

Upon approval by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, I attained permission from the two South Texas school districts superintendents, campus principals, and teachers to collect data. The emphasis in data collection was to develop research

systematically for a broad array of evidence which looks for both confirming and disconfirming data (Hartley, 2004).

This study involved two school districts where five teacher participants were selected from two elementary schools in each district for a focus group. There were a total of four elementary schools including twenty teacher participants. The teacher participants from each school were also asked to participate in a demographic survey included in the study. The research took place over a six-month period. The schools were contacted in August 2016 to set times and dates of participation in the study. Several attempts were made over the phone and emails to finalize times and dates. The explanation of the study and the purpose of conducting it in a rural school nested in a large school district were utilized. The contact person asked what was needed for the survey and the need for a room and the participants were my only request.

I provided the audio recorder and the consent forms for participation and recording. With the approval of the superintendent, the principals assisted in the selection of participants. The consent forms were administered first followed by the demographic survey and last the focus group interviews. The focus groups participation varied from 1 hour to an hour in half. The interviews were followed by a summary of the discussion and the participants were asked for any other comment they wanted to add in addition to the questions already presented. After the summary, the focus group participation was concluded. The names of contact people were left behind if the participants needed any further information or had any questions on the research conducted.

Research Participants

The selection of five teacher participants from each campus was appointed by their principal to contribute in the focus groups. The participation for the interviews was on a volunteer basis. There was no particular preference for their selection. The use of convenience sampling was used in the study. According to Marshall, convenience sampling "is the least rigorous technique, involving the composition of the most accessible subjects" (1996, p.1). Most of the research participants were chosen through the convenience of accessibility to contact information and the proximity of work environment.

Instrumentation

For the initial phase of the study, I selected four elementary campuses with similar demographic compositions and comparable resources, size, student population, and personnel from one large school district. According to TEA, the district is similar to others in other large school districts in the region and described as "non-metropolitan: fast growing." A demographic survey was administered at the individual campuses for participating teachers. Focus groups on each campus were established to conduct interviews, and I collected relevant documents about the study.

I obtained permission from the school districts and principals to carry out focus groups and disseminate demographic surveys. Surveys conducted by some people have primarily closed-ended questions, which were easy to process and analyze with statistical evidence. The study provided response choices and reduced ambiguity, and respondents were more likely to answer the question they are asked to answer. Surveys provide a particular resource allowing for a quick response for choices selected. Survey data can be collected from many people at a

relatively low cost and, depending on the survey design, fairly quickly. However, closed-ended questions were used because it can obscure what people think unless the choices are designed carefully to match the range of possible responses to the question. Most important, closed-ended response choices were mutually exclusive and exhaustive so that every participant can find one and only one response that corresponds to him or her unless the question was the "Check all that apply" format. The survey conducted revealed demographic data from teachers working in rural areas.

The focus groups were undertaken in two schools from each school district to assist in providing in-depth responses that would not be provided through the surveys. Interviewing was a research method readily accepted by most participants due to their familiarity with the techniques and because it assists them in their selection process of a certain subject (Morgan, 1997). Documents were obtained to fill in the gaps and provide information. This method of collecting information was often the only means available for developing a representative picture of the attitudes and characteristics of a population. Relevant data was gathered through documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2009). According to Yin, when reviewing documents, researchers should bear in mind that they may not always accurately reflect reality (e.g., policy and process documents may be out-of-date). Archival records are arguably more reliable, as they are usually used for record keeping purposes.

Data Collection Procedures

Upon approval by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, I attained permission from the two South Texas school districts superintendents, campus

principals, and teachers to collect data. The emphasis in data collection was to develop research systematically for a broad array of evidence which looks for both confirming and disconfirming data (Hartley, 2004).

The participants in the study were elementary teachers in rural schools of large school districts. In establishing the procedures for the study, I obtained the data collection in phases. Phase one consisted of creating a demographic survey. The significance of the study was introduced to each prospective school faculty emphasizing the importance of the study and the importance of any other data collected throughout the process of the study. The explanation of the course of the data collection was presented in person, and the administration of the survey was given at that time as permission was granted from the principal. Each teacher participant was assigned a number to keep track of the respondents and non-respondents. Confidentiality was guaranteed by having anonymous surveys. The data collected was from the four selective elementary rural schools in the two South Texas school districts.

Phase two involved the participation of focus groups. Tellis states that interviews are one of the most important sources of case study information (1997). Open-ended interviews involve key respondents to comment about certain issues or concerns. These types of interviews may propose solutions or may prompt further insight into the question. Tellis and others deem it helpful to gather from multiple sources and not to depend solely on one source of information (1997). Focus groups provide data from a group of people and allow for direct interaction with the participants. The focus groups provided opportunities for the clarification of responses, for concluding questions, and for the probing of replies. The teacher participants can qualify responses or give contingent answers to questions. It is also possible to observe nonverbal responses which may provide information that adds or contradicts the verbal responses. The

open response format of a group provided an opportunity to obtain vast and rich amounts of data in the participants' words.

Through the use of a focus group, I discovered deeper levels of meaning, necessary connections, and the ability to identify subtle hints in expressions and meaning. The focus group allowed me to react and build on the responses of other group members. The results had the possibility to produce data or ideas that might not have been discovered in individual interviews. Differences of opinion among team members also helped me to identify how and why individuals embrace or reject particular ideas.

Data Analysis

According to Hartley (2004), accurate description of the data and development of categories in which to place behaviors, followed by an examination to see how they fit or fail to fit these categories may need refining to be interpreted differently. Therefore data gathered from the teacher participants was analyzed for themes and indexed into analytical categories, a technique common to qualitative research (Mason, 2002). These categories represented key substantive topics in which the study was interested and included reasons and types of information shared. Transcripts of all interviews were indexed to readily track and retrieve all mentions of any of the categories. This aspect of the study necessitated some interpretation if needed, as participants were unlikely to use words which categories have been created. The three concurrent flows of activity in a qualitative analysis as defined by Miles & Huberman (1994) are data reduction, data display, and conclusions by drawing and verification. The data was analyzed by affixing codes to a set of field notes drawn from the observations or interviews. The data needed to be shaped into a form in which it can be shared or displayed. The goal was to

provide rich descriptions, or" thick descriptions" to make the experiences come to live as they are described. The richness of the descriptions included in the study gave the discussion an element of shared experience. Qualitative research is indeed characterized by "thick description" (Denzin, 2011).

I transcribed the audio-taped information manually to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between groups and common threads. I repeated the transcription process to ensure the validity of the transcription used in the study was reliable. I was able to isolate these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences, and taking them out to the field for the next set of data collection. After the data had been coded, the analysis of the data started.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First, the study was limited in the sample size of two school districts. Secondly, the study was conducted over a six month period, so the study was limited by time. Third, all cases were carried out in South Texas, so the study was confined to a geographic region. Fourth, the study was restricted to some rural schools in large school districts. Finally, the lack of related literature on the topic of rural schools in nesting in large school districts was also a limitation.

Summary

This research explored the factors and challenges of teachers working in South Texas rural schools. The issue of retaining highly qualified teachers in remote rural areas remains a priority for school districts. Rural education embodies the struggles, situations, and concerns of rural areas in America. Rural America has been and continues to be an essential component of

the country. I explored the factors that affect teachers through surveys, focus groups, and collection of documents relating to the validity of the research. The study conducted was exclusive to two districts with similar demographic in the South Texas region. The rural schools that participated in the study were nested in two large districts.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The perseverance to uncover the retention of teachers in rural areas nested in large school districts deserved research to discover the instability of the rural teacher shortage. The research evoked the same findings of previous research done in rural schools. The need to retain teachers in rural areas continues to be a factor faced by rural schools. Therefore, further research was required to address this issue. The purpose of this ethnographic qualitative research was to explore the general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses; to understand what draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts and to examine what factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts. To get an in depths understanding and give voice to the participants that were selected for this study, data was collected from rural school elementary teachers. The interpretation of meaning was made both by the participants and by the researcher, with the researcher bringing her understanding at this specific time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The study of rural teachers in their natural environment was important for the research. Investigating the participant's values and lifestyle, with the goal of describing and interpreting social patterns of behavior and practices was equally important (Van Maanen, 1988, 1995, 2006). The focus groups were conducted, and the participants were audio recorded. The recordings were then transcribed and finally analyzed for new codes and themes.

Lastly, the documented analysis was implemented throughout the research study to acquire additional information on rural schools' experiences, accomplishments, and general characteristics.

Two South Texas school districts participated in my research study. Each participating school district had two rural elementary schools that were a part of my study. The school districts were District A and District B. The elementary campuses were selected based on their locations nested in the two large South Texas school districts.

In this chapter, the use of the data collected was presented and examined in the retention of teachers in rural schools nested in large school districts. First, I collected and analyzed the demographics of the two districts which were obtained from the Texas Education Agency 2015-2016 Texas Academic Performance Reports to get a better picture of the type of school districts the participants were from in South Texas. The emerging factors that evolved were analyzed from the results of the data collection. The codes were organized to create smaller sets, themes, and constructs. The themes were labeled as building relationships, relying on support systems, embracing at risk students, and connecting student's lives. The themes and patterns were organized to answer the research questions: what are general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses, what draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts and what factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts. The three clusters were presented and their sub-themes that were derived from the data collected from the participants, public records, and observations. These themes were the findings from the research conducted in the two districts based on the triangulation of data. The data collected was specific to the rural schools in the two South Texas districts.

Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 demonstrate the demographics of the participating school districts in South Texas as District A and District B. Appendix A shows the result of the demographic survey as it is aligned with the demographic information depicted by the Texas Education Agency for the two school districts.

Demographics of Two Districts

The demographics show that District A in South Texas has a large number of Hispanic students at 99.6%, as well as a large number of students who are economically disadvantaged at 94.2%. District A had a total of 29, 523 students enrolled. The state average for Hispanics is 52.2%. District A has almost twice the number of Hispanics students as the state average. The district percentage for the white subgroup was 0.3% compared to the state percentage of 28.5%. The American Indian subgroup in District A had 0.1% in comparison to the state percentage of 0.4%. The state average of economically disadvantaged students is 59.0%. Again, District A has a much higher percentage of students who are on free or reduced lunch that meets the criterion. Rural schools compose a portion of the nation's school districts and are located in remote locations with a large subgroup of economically disadvantaged students. The at-risk population at this district is 80.5% much higher than the state average of 50.1%. The English Language Learner composes a 51.4 % in this district compared to the state average of 18.5%. The amount of English Language Leaners is a significant amount as it more than twice the amount reported by the state. The mobility rate of the students at this district is 18.2% as compared to the state average of 16.5%. The high mobility rate is also a characteristic of rural families due to job loss and other circumstances.

Table 4.1

Demographics for 2015-2016: District A

Student Info.	Total Students	African American	Hispanic	White	American Indian	Eco.Dis-advantaged	Non-Educationally Disadvantaged	At Risk	Mobility Rate
District Count	29,533	6	29,410	91	16	27,808	1,725	23,764	
District Percent	100%	0%	99.6%	0.3%	0.1%	94.2%	5.8%	80.5%	18.2%
State Percent	100%	12.6%	52.2%	28.5%	0.4%	59.0%	41.0%	50.1%	16.5%

District B had similar student demographic information as District A. District B had a total of 34,466 students, 33,507 were Hispanic. The Hispanic sub-group had the highest percentage of all other subgroups in this school district. The white district percentage was 1.7% compared to the state percentage of 28.5%. The American Indian subgroup had a district percentage of 0.0% while the state percentage was 0.4%. The economically disadvantaged student in this district 85.2% compared to the state average of 59%. This district percentage was much higher than the state as it is a common characteristic of this South Texas school district. The at-risk population is 61.9% compared to the state average of 50.1%. The high percentage of at-risk students is also an indicator for this district as their demographics are common for districts that encompass inner and rural areas. The mobility rate in this district is 17.1% also another indicator of rural areas embedded in large districts. The broad similarities in demographics of the two districts were the foundation for my study.

Table 4.2

Demographics for 2015-2016: District B

Student Info.	Total Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Am. Indian	Eco. Dis-advantaged	Non-Educationally Disadvantaged	At Risk	Mobility Rate
District Count	34,466	58	33,507	603	14	29,360	5,106	21,343	
District Percent	100%	0.2%	97.2%	1.7%	0.0%	85.2%	14.8%	61.9%	17.1%
State Percent	100%	12.6%	52.2%	28.5%	0.4%	59.0%	41.0%	50.1%	16.5%

Demographic Sample

In this study, I focused on specifically four rural schools nested in the two South Texas school districts which had similar student population demographics. The selection of these four rural schools also came about because of their school size, location, and teachers. There was a total of 20 research participants in the study which produced informative, rich cases from their experiences. Each principal suggested five teachers for participation in a demographic survey. The participation in the demographic survey was done on a volunteer basis. The use of convenience sampling was used in the study. According to Marshall, convenience sampling "is the least rigorous technique, involving the selection of the most accessible subjects" (1996, p.1). The research participants were chosen through the convenience of accessibility to contact information and the proximity of work environment. The survey consisted of eleven questions. Table 4.3 describes the finding of the participants' demographic information.

The research participation of twenty teachers consisted of 16 female teachers and four male teachers. Of the 20 participants, the age ranges from 41 to 50 was the most common age range. The survey indicated 15 teachers are married and five self-identified themselves as single. The marital status of married was much higher in this group than the single research participant. In the ethnicity category, 19 self-identified themselves as Hispanic while one participant self-identified as white. There were no teachers who identified themselves in the subgroups of African American, Asian, Pacific Islander or other. The teachers varied in their years of experience in education. The years of experience range from 1 to 25 years and over. Seven participants had 11 to 15 years of experience. The range of 11 to 15 years of teaching experience was the most common in the two districts. The diversity in the range of years of teaching experience produced a variety of stories from these teachers. Fifteen teachers held a bachelor's degree, and five had a master degree. Fourteen participants were not from the community. This is consistent with research that reveals that most rural school teachers do not live in the community (Strange et.at, 2012). The survey showed that 11 of the participants do not live in the district where they teach. The remaining nine participants live in the district. The most traveled miles round-trip was eleven to twenty miles by 10 participants. It was important information that four participants traveled 31 or more miles round-trip. Commuting is a factor to consider as the schools where they teach in remote places (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

Nineteen participants responded that they taught more than one subject. The final question was how many subjects do you teach, and 11 answered that they taught 5 to 6 subjects. The findings from the participant's responses were aligned to the research literature.

Table 4.3

Emerging Profile of Demographic Data

A horizontal bar chart titled with category labels on the y-axis and values 0 to 20 on the x-axis. Legend: ■ Highest Values.

- Subjects Taught: 5-6 — 11
- Teach more than one subject: Yes — 19
- Miles Commuted Roundtrip: 11-20 — 10
- Live in District: Yes — 11
- From Community — 14
- Highest Level of Education: Bachelor — 15
- Years Teaching: 11-15 — 7
- Gender: Female — 16
- Marital Status: Married — 15
- Age: 41-50 — 7
- Ethnicity: Hispanic — 19

Data Procedures

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I followed the data analysis procedures used by Miles & Huberman (1994). The purpose of coding allowed me to develop the themes. I used the components of Miles & Huberman's interactive model for the data analysis. They label their approach as "transcendental realism", and their analysis has three components:

- Data reduction

- Data display, and

- Drawing and verifying conclusions

These activities are interacting throughout the analysis see figure 4.1.

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Miles & Huberman's Interactive Model
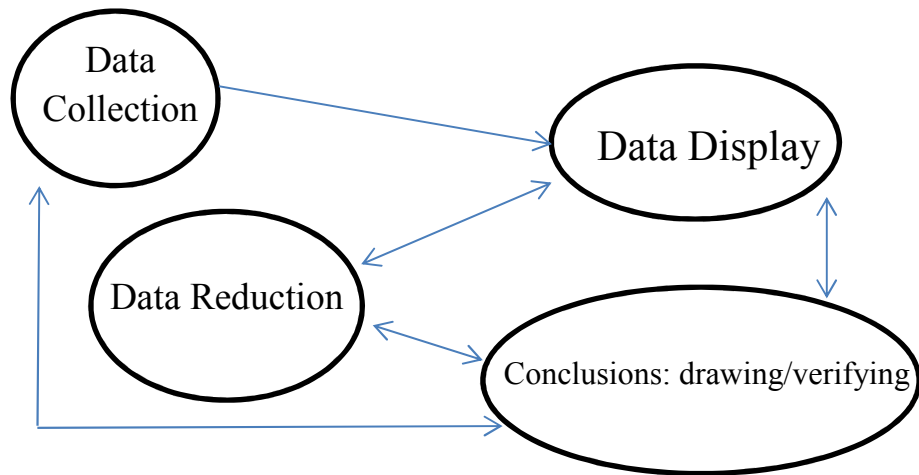
Source: Miles and Huberman, 1994

The following components were used in my research. The data reduction included

editing, segmenting, and summarizing the data collected through the interview recordings and

transcripts, survey responses and documents attained. Through coding and memoing, and

associated activities the assortment of the data collection to find themes, clusters and patterns

were revealed. It was important that I did not lose the meaning of the information as it was

collected in its content. The data display organizes compresses and assembles information. The

drawing of a table to show the repeated information assisted at arriving with the emergent

themes. The drawing and verifying conclusions took place throughout my analysis and

sometimes at the same time. The reading of the data several times was not finalized until data

had been collected for all the necessary information to be analyzed. Conclusions would be in the

form of propositions and verified. These components are interwoven and concurrent throughout

the data analysis. Four themes surfaced from the codes found in the research. The themes are

building relationships, relying on support systems, embracing at-risk students and connecting with students' lives.

The use of a qualitative methodology to answer my research questions was applied. The three research questions examined the factors affecting the teacher retention in rural schools nested in large school districts. The general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses were also explored. Lastly, what draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts and what contributes to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts was investigated. The qualitative methodology allowed me to delve through multiple facets of data and artifacts; thus building full descriptions.

Interpretive and descriptive designs were used to allow the research to take place within its natural setting. The information gathered allowed the participants to tell their stories as teachers from rural schools in South Texas. As an interpretive researcher, the endeavor was to understand the phenomena by interpreting their experiences in rural schools. The detailed research allowed me to describe their experiences as told through their voices.

According to Miles & Huberman (1994), the uses of codes are used as indicators for conveying meaning to the descriptive or inferential data accumulated during the study. The collection of data from the surveys, focus group interviews, documentation, and field notes began the cluster of reoccurring information. The repeated reviewing the data and color coding similar responses and coded those responses that did not belong to a category. As groups of information came together it allowed me to summarize and synthesize what was happening in my data. The beginning of my research started to develop a storyline, and it guided me on how my data should be organized and coded. The coding system was a system to organize my data.

There are two main types of codes descriptive codes and inferential codes also known as pattern codes. The descriptive codes require little or no inferencing beyond the piece of data itself. This form of coding assisted me with the focus group interviews as it was the most useful. The feelings, experiences, values and beliefs were used in the research findings.

In the first step, coding mainly uses descriptive, low inference codes, which are very useful in summarizing segments of data, and provided the basis for later higher order coding. The codes may be more interpretive, requiring some degree of inference beyond the data. The next step in coding tends to focus on pattern codes. Pattern codes pull together material into smaller and more meaningful units (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the process evolved, the responses became more vivid as the codes fit the data. The reading of the data collected and the verification of it made the findings truthful. My data collection included surveys, interviews, transcripts, field notes, and documents that were coded to help me reach my themes.

According to Campbell-Evans (1992), if research is an exploration of the truth and finding truth in this area is believed to be a constructed reality. The understanding of the truth is determined, in part, by the research's view of the world. Keeping in mind that my presence during the surveys and the focus groups could change the participant's ideas, responses or conversations, the essence of remaining neutral was vital. The tone of voice used, or the body language conveyed was a part of the research that could sway a participant's view. In the research, the consistency to evaluate the findings, their perception of my presence, and the replies were without bias.

The use of a theoretical framework incorporating the interpretive philosophical approach as part of my qualitative research was utilized. The interpretive approach viewed realism as

something personal and is based on the significance and understanding of the research. The goal of the research was to understand, rather than making predictions. As interpretive researchers consider the knowledge generated from the research to be permanent, they also use it about the time, context or beliefs in which the study is conducted. My primary data collection methods used in the interpretivist approach included interviews of the participants. The philosophical base of interpretive research used was ethnography and phenomenology. Ethnography is measured as the study of an entire culture or cluster in its natural environment, closely studying values and ways of life, with the aim of unfolding and interpreting cultural measures of actions, principles, and practices (Van Maanen, 1988, 1995, 2006). The description of my life history as an interpretation of an inside participant (emic) as well as an outside participant (etic) was used in the research study.

As an emic participant, I was a teacher in a rural school in South Texas. As an etic participant, I was educated in a Catholic school growing up with strong religion ethics. My childhood was steered to attend college, have a strong Catholic upbringing, and my parents were a part of all my educational decisions. They paid for my Catholic elementary education monthly. As the continuation of the research progressed, phenomenology was used to investigate the meaning of actual experiences of people to identify the one essence of human experience or phenomena as described by the research participants. One of the phenomena's discovered was the ethic of caring formed with the students, parents, and community. Another phenomenon was the teachers' compassion towards poverty, the tight-knit family structure, and the positive attitude teachers had to resolve to face the challenges of the community or district. This approach allowed validity and reliability, full descriptions, triangulation of data and member check. From the data analysis process described, there were similarities in the responses among

the four focus groups. During the focus group interviews, a set of questions were asked to address the research questions. The questions are as follows:

1.   Tell me why you teach at this school?

2.   What are the reasons you chose to stay?

3.   Describe the benefits of working in a rural school?

4.   This district is described as a non-metropolitan: fast growing district. This school is of course rural. What are some of the characteristics you can identify as being unique for a district?

5. Is there anything else you want to add?

The discovery of four themes and succeeding sub-themes were derived from the data retrieved from the participant's responses, observations, and documents. The four themes were building relationships, relying on support systems, embracing at-risk students and connecting with students' lives. The reviewing of the transcripts and use of the data analysis to validate my findings was verified. The data analysis process consisted of participants responses creating the codes and the codes forming the themes.

Emergent Themes

The participants in this study expressed common themes as they emerged with similar details. Their stories echoed the similar experiences shared in the literature (Beesley & Barley, 2007). Several themes emerged from my questions which were consistent with the research findings of general characteristics of large districts that have rural campuses, what draws

teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts, and what factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts.

The themes that emerged from my research were 1) building relationships, 2) relying on support systems, 3) embracing at-risk students, and 4) connecting with students' lives. Redding and Walberg's (2012) study that concluded the connection to children is through community, school, and family. Barley and Beesley (2007) found that the success of rural schools was closely related to strong relationships with the families. The rural areas often have restricted resources due to limited economic growth, which may decrease populations and increase poverty (Eddy, 2007). These emerging themes continued to be heard throughout the current literature teachers in South Texas.

As my research developed, I used myself as a tool to describe my experiences as an etic participant. Attending a Catholic school in South Texas in the 70's which was not common for most students. My parents needed to pay tuition for my elementary education on a monthly basis. They had to purchase my books and any other materials that were requested by the teachers. My teachers from kindergarten through fifth grade were nuns. The Catholic school did not have a lunch room so my parents had to bring me lunch or I had to take lunch. We did not have school transportation. As a family, we attended mass every Sunday. Prayer was a big factor in our daily lives as it was a part of our everyday routine at school. The primary reason my parents sent me to Catholic school was for academic excellence, emphasis on catholic morals, forming healthy community families, and creating a caring atmosphere. Academically, we were given the California Achievement Test, a normed standardized test that measures achievement in the areas of reading, language arts, and math. The basis of attending Catholic school was on education and religion. The choice to be self-disciplined and have the reverence for the human

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dignity of every person was encouraged through the Catholic school curriculum. These values were instilled in me from a very early age with high expectations for achievement, commitment from parents, and for a caring community. Those values were embedded and used as an emic participant when I became a rural school teacher.

As an emic participant working in a rural school, the poverty of the students, family, and community was evident. Commuting 30 minutes to work and 30 minutes back home daily for seven years was not a factor that determined the reasons for working in a rural school. The school and I were a family, and having the sense of family was imperative to me than commuting. As a school, a family environment was created as we took care of each other, and we helped one another daily.

The memories of seeing the students walking to school because we did not have buses in a 3mile radius are still vivid visions. When the weather was bad, the students walking in the pouring rain with their parents or siblings and getting to school drenched was a common occurrence. The staff had extra clothes at school for them because we knew the students only had what they wore each day. The parents were supportive of the staff as their perspective was the teacher was always correct and the students were to show respect. Home visits were an essential part of the communication with parents; it was visible that the student's homes were not completely constructed and the community was very needy. The houses had running wires outside that connected the houses as they shared electricity. Some clothes hung outside. As conversations occurred with the parents, they were very reserved and selective in their words. They only wanted to discuss their children and keep it short. The community was small and most of the parents had the same stories. They came to the United States and wanted to build a

home. They gave a deposit on a piece of land then they found out there was no electricity, water or sewage connection. Most of the community worked in the fields picking onions.

As a teacher, the challenges of the community were clear and as a teacher the sensitivity toward the needs of the children became crucial. The students could not spend money on costumes, so as teachers we put on shows for them, their parents and the community. The participation in one act plays, performing in Christmas programs, dancing in pep-rallies and singing in the choir was a thoughtful act for the students. As a school, we did as much as we could so they could have the awareness to the outside world through our plays and performances. We also had monthly activity projects such as decorating a pumpkin, a tree, valentine box, bulletin board, our hallway and the students would participate with handmade decorations. The acknowledgment of the students every six weeks by presenting them with a certificate was a school expectation. The ceremony would take place in the cafeteria, and no student was left out from the celebration. The students received a certificate for their accomplishments along with a book or a pencil as a token of appreciation. The students were needy, but it was not going to limit their learning because they did not have all the materials used to learn. As an educator, spending money to buy incentives, materials, and any resources needed to teach was a valuable experience for the students that could not be substituted.

The administrative support was a benefit to the school. The principal was always there for the students and teachers. The support was out of caring for the success and well-being of the school and community. My memory of driving to school one day and getting caught in a thunder-storm was a terrifying experience. I pulled over as the road was not visible, and my first instinct was to call the school. The principal answered and told me not to worry and stay calm. The thought that the students were at school my tardiness worried me, but the principal reassured

me that he would take care of my class until my arrival to school. There was never a time when the administrative support was not there for me. The participation with the school was priceless as they cared and without the support of everyone in the school the teachers would not feel welcomed or appreciated. The decision to leave the school came as my newborn needed my full attention for medical reasons. My best memories as a teacher came from teaching in a rural school. The teacher unity, administrative support, students, families, and community hold special moments. The tears of happiness as the experiences of a rural school teacher linger.

Through the recollection of memories of my teaching experience at a rural school, the process of analyzing the data, collecting information from the interviews, surveys, observations, and documents from the two participating South Texas school districts was valuable. The results of the following themes emerged.

Theme One: Building Relationships

Building relationships were the participant's response during their interviews, and it was broken down into three sub-themes students, parents, and community. This theme was the most talked about among the participants as they shared their stories. Building relationships are the essence for the retention of teachers as without this key factor there would be no communication. The phenomena discovered through the research of building relationships were the ethic of caring, administrative support, the humility of parents and family support.

Students

The discovery of the connection with students was the most important to the teachers as it was a common response among the participants. They commented that the first few weeks were about bonding. Once the students felt that you understood them, then they were willing to work

with you. These students are humble, and you see the need they have, and they see how much

you care for them. It takes a special person to work in rural areas because the students come

with bigger baggage as they live in economically disadvantaged areas. The teachers understand

that with the little money the students have, it is not surprising that they do not go out to town or

buy any extras. The teachers provide for them at school, and they appreciate it. As teaching

staff responded, the students also lack emotional support, but they receive it through affection,

understanding, patience and support thus, continuing to build strong relationships. The teachers

also expressed that they knew where the students lived and how they lived. It was heartbreaking

as the teachers wished they could do more, but their reward was that the students felt the

connection as they worked together. One participant stated,

> "Since it is a small place, you get to build relationships with the kids; I think
>
> that is a plus working in a small rural area."

The participants continued to share that the first couple of weeks of school is about rigor,

bonding, and building relationships. The theme continued as the teachers felt that they taught at

these schools because they could make a difference and they stayed for the students despite the

difference that other students from the inner city might encounter. These students are growing

with little opportunities, and the best you can do is open doors for them. The students are so

limited in many ways but being that teacher that brings experiences and stories to life is an

incentive to a teacher no matter if it is a rural area. Building relationships with students were the

highlight among the participants because they built a strong foundation that won the students one

at a time. During one interview with a focus group, a participant commented,

"I do not know if I would move to an inner school because we teach some kids that are a tough, tough group but there is always that part of you that says who will take this job and I know I'm not the only person that can do this job but very few people will take it and if they do they will be here for a year and then they leave because one it is challenging but it is kind of like there is a reason who knows why but I'm here for that certain reason."

The members of the focus groups observed that these students make the difference when you see their happy faces or when you are teaching something they are struggling with, and you tell them you cannot give up. As a teacher, we keep teaching and re-teaching. The reward for the teacher is when they get it. The consensus among the participants, "sometimes the teachers are the only thing the students have." The ethic of caring was a phenomenon uncovered in this theme.

Parents

Through the interviews, the discovery of building a relationship with the parents is very beneficial for the students. The teachers have parent meetings, and they get to know the parents, and at this point, you start to understand why the student is the way they act. The information collected by the participants expressed at times it was due to the lack of parenting skills. The teachers uncovered that working in a low economic area, the attitudes of parents is to support their children's education. A lot of the parents are not educated, but they are aware their children need to be educated, so buildings relationships with them are crucial. The participants expressed that there comes the point when you teach a student, and you already had their brothers and sisters then it becomes a family reunion when the parents come to school and the relationships

keep building. The teachers feel these students need them because some of these students do not have the parents to help them at home because they are working. The parents are respectful towards the teacher as they appreciate the great efforts the teachers do for their children. The parents value the commitment from the teachers. The parents do not give the teachers gifts, but they show them that they care by supporting them. Some parents might not be able to help their children with homework, but they will make sure they bring them to school every day.

By building relationships with the parents you find out about their background, and you understand the reasons why the students act the way they do. As teachers, you begin to see why the children did not do their homework as you find out they do not have electricity in their house. At this point, you stop stressing the students and parents and allow them to do their homework at school or find any alternative to help them. If you did not have that connection with the parents, you would not be able to assist them. The parents are grateful for everything you do, so you are working hand in hand with them. The participants felt that the parent's perspective is that they are thankful for everything you do for their children.

The participants added that once you win their trust, then they work with you and they trust you. The parents are afraid to come to school because some of them are not documented to live in the United States, and they believe if they say too much it might hurt them. They do not have reliable vehicles to come to school. They ask their neighbors for help when they need to come to school in cases where their children have been sick. They have cell phones from month to month as they pay for their bill as they can. Trying to communicate with parents is because, the school has to call their neighbors or make home visits if there is an emergency. The parents are modest and willing to do what they can but with caution. The parents become the bridge

between the students and school as they allow you into their child's educational needs. The parents understand that we need to work together thus building a relationship with their children.

Community

In a rural community, everybody is like a family. The participants spoke about the community as being tight knit. The community members are united and help each other. They do not venture very far away from home. The students have not been to Wal-Mart, and you do not want to act surprise, but you begin to think why they have not ever gone to Wal-Mart. In a rural community, they stay here, and they do not travel outside the area. All they have is the Dollar Store, so they do not need to leave the community area. The Dollar Store is big of the things a family needs. These little stores have from snacks to automotive supplies.

The community is humble and appreciative so building relationships with them is the central role of the school. The teachers extend themselves to the community, and they try to let parents know they are there for them. One teacher stated that she lived in the community, and she felt connected with the students and the parents. She taught in the school because she was that student that she now teaches. The community opens the doors to the teachers as they support the students and the school is the main provider in the area. As a community, they help each other, the children wear uniforms, and at times they do not have a uniform shirt. The teachers have garage sales, or the students wear used clothes from their older siblings.

The teachers stated that with all those efforts some students still do not have uniforms, so a member of the community took it upon herself and had a clothes drive. She found people that donated shirts and gave the clothes to families in the community. These actions are common acts that the teachers take upon themselves to help the community and continue to build

relationships. The teachers voiced they work in small rural communities but everybody gets along, and it feels like a family.

The participants shared that these communities are isolated from the inner schools, and therefore they stay together in their community as their participation is limited when they have to travel to the city. The isolation is part of their existence as a rural community. The teachers build relationships with the people in the community to help the students. The participants characterized the rural community as having unity, respectfulness, diverse family environment, difficult challenges, small school size, and a supportive community. A phenomenon uncovered in these communities is that they do not leave the area; they have a positive attitude of being service oriented and supportive of the school.

Theme Two: Relying on Support Systems

The support system for the teachers remains crucial for them to teach in rural schools. The teachers felt that without the assistance of the administration, family oriented environment and their place of employment they would not feel comfortable teaching. There must be systems in place to maximize procedures and allow teachers to teach in these isolated rural schools. The three sub-groups generated in this theme under support systems were the administration, a family oriented environment and their place of employment.

Administration Support

The participants felt that the administration was a big reason why they stayed and taught in rural areas. The retention rate for some of the teachers is in part because of the support from the administration. The members of the focus groups remarked that the community, students, and the administration were wonderful to them. The teachers felt they received the support from

the leadership and that was the reason they felt comfortable teaching in an economic advantage environment. They did not receive expensive gifts, but they did receive support that mattered to them.

"You have a student, a troubled student or problems with absences you do not have to worry about it but teach. The administration takes care of it as opposed to other administrators that tell you to call the parents and find out why the student is absent. If a student is disruptive then you have to take care of it but here the administration tells us to teach and they handle the situation."

In a rural school, the administration wears many hats, and they take care of things so you can focus on teaching. The administration tries their best to make it easy for us as they take care of all the behind scene stuff for us. The teachers consider that one of the strengths that an administrator that works in a rural school has is that they have not forgotten what it is to teach children.

The participants publicized that the support that administration gives them are the tools to teach. The administrators made sure that they hit the ground running the first day of school as they provided basic resources they need. At times there were not enough books, so administration made copies until they could get the books. The administration found ways to give the teachers the support, tools, and resources they needed for the classrooms. The teachers were in accord that they do not feel alone and do not know what they would do without leadership support. The participants also revealed that they get grants that allow the administration to get money to buy i-pads, school supplies and attend training. The participants

stayed for the students but also because the administration was very supportive which was a repeated subject.

Family Oriented Work Environment

The participants saw the relationships they built were not just with students and their parents but also with their peers at work. The teachers helped each other and built a family environment that helped them cope with every day work at school. They felt free to ask each other for help and every day is a new beginning because they are accomplishing tasks that others cannot. The teachers loved teaching and the relationships they had with each other. They were always cheering each other up as they were a small school community. They discovered that inside the school it does not matter who you are, you are going to make a connection with someone that is going through the same situation or knows someone that has gone through it, and it brings a sense of comfort. As teachers, you find out you are not alone, and you get much of understanding from your peers and colleagues. The participants shared that they feel rural schools are family oriented because they are small, comfortable and you know everybody. The accounts continued as the teachers were very cooperative and they knew if something came up they would help each other out because they saw themselves as a family. The participants pointed out the following,

> "It's a very family-oriented campus as far as the staff we are very close, and administration is excellent. I mean we have had several opportunities to go elsewhere because we live outside the area but we choose to stay because of those reasons."

The same responses echoed through the participants as they shared a benefit for working in a rural school was the communication within the staff, parents, and students. A significant factor

that was contributed was the family oriented environment as a characteristic of a rural school.

This environment attracted teachers to stay, and the commute was worth very minute. The

teachers networked with each other, and the feeling of being connected was a basic need for the

teachers.

Employment

The participants stated that they were hired on the spot to work at these rural schools. As

they continued to specify, the stories were the same as their search for employment brought them

to the school district, and the next day they were called that they were hired. For some teachers,

this was their first job, and they decided to stay because the students were respectful, needy, and

they needed role models. One participant shared how she was hired over the phone for one of

the rural schools, and she was excited because she had a job although it was a drive for her.

After being there, she decided to stay. Some of the teachers had not worked anywhere else as

this was their first job, and they had built relationships with the students, parents, and

community. The groups added that they were grateful for having a job. Their first job at a rural

school was challenging, but they saw it as teaching is teaching no matter the population. The

participants expressed that it is hard to recruit teachers to work in rural areas, but once they do

they stay.

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Theme Three: Embracing At-Risk Students

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These students were considered at risk due to the many challenges they face in rural

areas. Student background and personal characteristics have been acknowledged as putting the

students at risk of educational failure. Many of the features were a minority group, living with a

single parent, low parental educational achievement, limited English proficiency, and disabled

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status (Thompkins & Deloney, 1994). In South Texas, the Hispanic sub-group carried the largest population. This ethnicity was often cited as a factor putting students at risk for educational failure in rural areas. Embracing at-risk students cited four sub-groups that developed throughout the course of the interviews with the participants. Limited resources, home environment, were mentioned significantly followed by technology and field trips.

Limited Resources

The participants repeated that these students were growing with little opportunities, and they have what they get here at school. They had minimal resources, and that is all they have to work with on a daily routine. The students were all the same because they have the same background. One focus group elaborated,

"When you are poor and everyone is poor they do not know the difference. It is about being happy with what you have. For example, when you travel you accumulate experiences but they do not see what is out there they see what is on the computers at school."

Restating this theme, the participants continued to state that the students are in the same boat. No one was different, and all are pretty much the same thus you cannot compare them to other students. The inner city students had resources that these students just did not have. It was hard because they had good teachers, and they got the experiences through computers or sharing of activities. The teachers bought the students things, but the main problem was that they did not get it at home. It is not because the parents did not want to it is just that they could not. When a parent had to make a choice between buying a notebook and buying food, then there was no choice but survival. The participants remarked that the students do not have many necessary

resources this includes transportation. When the teachers talked to them about McDonalds or Wal-Mart, some students could not relate to those places because they had never been there. When you spoke to them about a hardware store that appears in a reading passage and a teacher mentioned Lowes or Home Depot, the students had a blank face because there was not transportation at home for them to go out, so the local store was their only form of visiting a store. The participants continued to elaborate on the need for resources that the students needed at school and home. The school could provide additional support for academic success at times, but it also included emotional and monetary resources. These students were very needy, but as teachers, they understood that these students did not create their environment but were born into it.

The participants added that the resources the students lacked made an impact on the whole school. The poverty surrounding them made it hard for the parents to provide all the material resources the students needed to perform at school, so as teachers they got creative with what they have and extended the resources as much as they can.

Home Environment

The participants accounted for the home environment of these students which consisted of families living with families. They accounted for children also living with their grandparents because they were left behind for different reasons. The grandparents could not help them with homework or visit the school. It was a tough situation, but the children had to learn to adapt. The home environments where these students live were very sheltered. Some students had never been to H.E.B. so when you talk about a grocery store a student may comment, "I have never been there," you forget that these students do not leave their area. It is not their usual Sunday

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grocery shopping. Their home environment was limited to their immediate surroundings. These students were very humble, and when they look around their neighborhood, they do not see two story houses but houses that have electrical wires running outside. They share electricity and basic survival needs. Their home environment consisted of living from day to day.

The participants reported that these students were grateful because they got what you gave them as oppose to inner city students that might have a different attitude because their home environment was different. The economic environment for these families suggested that rural poverty was concentrated not only in areas where employment opportunities from old industries, such as agriculture and mining, are declining, but also in places where new job opportunities were becoming available. The new possibilities for these families typically offer low wages, thereby providing few avenues out of poverty. In these rural areas, the families had fewer indigenous organizations representing local interests than do wealthier rural areas. Where they do exist in poor communities, participation in them is related to income. Other institutions found in rural areas have usually originated in the larger society and are controlled by outside interests. These factors affected the home environment for these children as employment was hard to come by because of lack of education, transportation, or other resources.

Some participants remarked that the home environments were at times unstable. The teachers added that when you picked up a permanent record you could see all the schools where these children had been at, and you wonder why they had not learned certain skills. The move from place to place was due to financial difficulties, but they remained in rural areas. The home environment for these students made it difficult for them to learn as it affected them academically and emotionally. The home environment was justified by the student's innocence in not knowing why they moved from school to school.

Technology

The participants shared that technology in the classroom was the only assess these students had as it did not flow into the homes. The parents saw this tool as something not as necessary when they needed to provide for their basic needs. The attitude of the parents was not to have electronics but the basic needs. The teachers understood and believed that access to technology could greatly enhance the learning capabilities of students, particularly those in isolated areas where educational resources were not available in the immediate community (Packard, 2016). Distance learning technology, educational videos, instructional software, and access to the Internet had all made their way into classroom instruction, and could potentially be powerful solutions for rural schools with few resources. Packard suggested that rural schools have not implemented technology to the same extent as non-rural school, and that they often lack the infrastructure and resources to do so. The teachers suggested that technology not is necessarily the only answer to small rural schools' academic needs, but it had the potential for academic improvement to be greater.

Field Trips

The participants all had in common the need for field trips. The students had never been outside their area so taking them anywhere was an eye opener for them. The students had traveled to Chuck Cheese Pizza and the high school for the Nutcracker and a Mariachi performance. The students were amazed as their faces lit up to travel outside their community. Participants shared that last year they had taken the students to the zoo in Brownsville, Texas. It was the furthest they had been, and it was a big deal. They stopped at Mr. Gatti's Pizza on the way back in Harlingen, Texas. The teachers saw the difference as the inner city students' travel

to San Antonio, Texas to go to the Alamo. These were experiences that the rural school children had not had but any field trip proved to be a great benefit.

The participants noted how it required money to go on any trip, but these students that live a couple of miles from the city had not even visited the local university in their city. To go anywhere, the school would have to pay for everything as it was not possible that the parents could help with financial means. Some parents did not allow their children to travel as they were afraid something might happen to them. The teachers trusted that field trips were an excellent means of exposure to learning about real life experiences. The relationship between books and real life experiences through field trips was not interchangeable. The ability to use field trips as a teaching tool could greatly increase the knowledge of the students as they had limited resources.

Theme Four: Connecting with Students' Lives

Since there were usually not enough highly qualified teachers in rural and remote communities to staff schools, education departments often focused on attracting outsiders to live and work in these areas. Moving to rural or remote communities could entail a higher cost of living, limited availability of housing, isolation, and remoteness. The experiences that teachers encounter could be overwhelming, but they taught because of the students. They stayed for the community, and they build strong relationships with each other. The support they got from the community, and school reassured their commitment to stay and make a difference. Connecting with the lives of the students was an important factor in their commitment to work in a rural school. The rural area had meaning to them as it did to the students. The conditions were different but yet familiar to some teacher. Their commitment stemmed from their connection to

the students. Teacher experiences developed four sub-themes commuting, student achievement, their personal background, and student stories.

Commuting

This sub-theme was described by the participants as a deciding factor for their job employment. As one participant recalled,

"Eleven years ago I volunteered to help in some of the school programs, and I just feel in love with the community. I show it by traveling thirty five miles to work and thirty-five miles back home, and I've been doing it for ten years."

The teachers continued on this topic and for some the twenty miles they traveled to work was fine because they were happy in their workplace. Another participant added that some of the members were driving back and forth daily for years, and they also did not mind because it was the first place that hired them. As the conversation continued, a teacher indicated that she drove forty-five to fifty minutes to work and back home. She responds that she did not mind because she was happy with the students, administration, and community. Most of the teachers did not mind the drive because they were happy, and they were treated as part of the community. Some of the teachers could get hired in places closer to home but if asked they would refuse the offer.

Commuting could be an issue for the teachers but since they were happy and felt welcomed by the school community it made the drive easy. Another reason one of the participants mentioned was that if there was bad weather they could call the administrators and let them know they were running late because of the climate conditions. The teachers had the

support of from the administration as they were very understanding. The administration made it clear that their safety came first. It goes back to being a part of the school community that they take care of each other where some have not found it anywhere else. The compassion from the school made the commuting a benefit to retain the teachers.

Student Achievement

The teachers saw student achievement as a reward when they saw the result. The growth at the end of the year was very vital because the students may not have been able to pass the test, and the teachers felt responsible. One member of the participants mentioned how she was pulled aside because her class received a rating of not acceptable. The administrator told her to look at the growth and see where the students were at the beginning of the year and where they were now. She realized that looking at the percentage and not the growth from the beginning to the end of the year turned her way of thinking around. Another teacher added that she checked the growth but focused on the teaching. She felt that the purpose was for them to get where they needed to be and made sure they were learning. The teacher added once you saw the data on paper that was great and very satisfying.   A lower grades teacher saw the rewards when the children come to school as a pre-kindergarten with minimal educational knowledge and then by the end of the year some of them left reading. The student academics were a big factor for the students and the teachers. The expectations are the same for any child, and they rose to the challenge. The teachers had to find ways to make it happen for them even though they might not have had the home resources. The teachers made it happen, and they felt proud because they were ranked with the rest of the schools.

Another group of participants felt that student achievement was difficult because the students did not have the experiences they needed. The teachers required administering the standardized test just like everyone else, but the students lacked the vocabulary and experiences especially for the writing part of the test. They felt it was difficult because you could be the best teacher, but if the students lack the basic skills, it is challenging for everyone. The experiences ranged throughout the grade levels because each grade level had different expectations for student achievement. The concurrence among the participants was that it was demanding to teach these students as you were accountable with the rest of the schools to the district and the state

Personal Background

. As teachers, you needed to teach no matter the home environment, lack of resources, lack of experiences or lack of vocabulary in the second language. The teachers did not want to fail the students, so they searched for assistance to help them help the students. The teachers have unique challenges to reach academic goals.

The participants had members that could relate to the students because they came from the same family background. Their stories were told throughout the interviews as the connection they felt with the students were the same struggles they encountered as students. Someone cared for them and made a difference in his or her lives. It was important for them to make that difference in the lives of these children. Participants related to the children because they also attended a low economic school with disadvantages and if they could help they would contribute their services in any way. One member added that she was considered economically disadvantaged growing up and her parents worked in the field or had some hard labor. Her

family's background was treasured, and that helped her relate to the children, parents, and community. Another participant contributed,

> "I can relate to the environment and the students as I am bilingual and I came to the
> United States when I was in third grade. I did not know any English, and I try to help the
> students as much as I can because I was that student."

With the same thoughts shared about being bilingual, the participants voiced that there was not a lot of instruction or software in Spanish. They had to act out words like sitting, and you act out sitting rather than telling them a sentence with the word sitting. It was surprising for the students to see the teachers like them; the teachers understood them because they come from the same background. Another participant shared her feelings as someone who came from Mexico when she was in elementary. She added that her family was poor and did not have shoes to go to school. She recalled running from tree to tree to cool off. She loved working with the kids because she knew what they had gone through to get where they were. Her memories took her back and she reminiscence,

> "I remember when I had to go through the river and not have an idea where I was going
> to have my next meal."

Some participants reported that they also were needy but in a different way. They expressed that working in a rural school the need is completely different, but they found the way to help each other, and as teachers, they become nurses, mothers, friends, and counselors. They were not just teachers. The participants could personally connect to these students as they grew up in places just like where they worked, so they could relate to the students and help them out as much as possible. Another member voiced,

"I am not from this community I am not even from this state you know but I have been here for a while and I have been able to make those relationships grow between the staff and parents. These kids are economic disadvantaged and it is hard to get to their level, to their hearts, and I feel that it is somehow easy but hard at the same time to help this population."

The participants mutually added that you needed to believe in this unique opportunity of working in a rural school because you could open minds and foster those dreams and add to the beliefs of these students.

Student Stories

The participants contributed to the untold stories of these students as they shared incredible stories through their eyes. A member told his story of asking a student what he wanted for Christmas, and the student replied a front door for his house. When you need a door, everything is second to that. The teacher added that many times you wondered why the student was not retaining the information and then you came to find out that he was worried about his home life. Learning about Math was not a priority at the time for the student. In the same setting, a teacher shared how she was doing a science lesson on mixtures. She asked a student to bring dirt and he did, but the dirt had fleas. The fleas were all over the classroom, and you begin to understand and visualize the home environment. As a teacher, you saw the conditions of their home life and the limited resources they could contribute. Another teacher shared his story about driving to the school for the first time and getting lost. Once he found the school, he heard donkeys and saw people burning trash. He looked around thinking this could not be and he

added you did not see that every day. A member told her story of things that we took for granted.

> A student was absent one day, so she asked her what had happened. The student
>
> replied," We did not have any light, and we went to sleep at my aunt's house. I had to
>
> sleep outside, and I got bitten by mosquitos all over my body." Those were some of the
>
> things these students endured as they did not have the necessities at home.

Poverty

A participant shared that the teachers took a bus drive into the rural community, so they could see where the children lived, and the conditions surrounding them. Some of the teachers expressed that the home conditions were not a common site while others related to their situations. A teacher told her story of one of her students that had lice on her head. She said it was so bad that the mom shaved the daughter's beautiful long hair off. The mom had gotten tired of dealing with the removal of the hair lice and never thought about how it would hinder the child by shaving her hair. The teacher saw a complete turnaround in the child. Shaving the child's hair, affected her emotionally because it was such a traumatic event. The child became withdrawn and did not want to participate in any activities. The participants understood that some students were from households that had limited resources. Some students did not have water, air conditioning, indoor restrooms and when it was cold, they warmed themselves with fire outside. Some students did have electricity, water nor indoor restrooms. When the students came to school smelling like smoke, the school was their only place of warmth. One participant remarked,

"I saw one of my students the other day as a sophomore in high school. It dawn on me how mature he looked maybe because of all the experiences that he took with him from this rural campus. I talked to the student and he looks at life in such a different light then what others in high school students do. He is focusing on simple things he says like making sure the family has light and water. He added he had everything he needed. He had God, and he wanted to thank me because I made a difference in his life."

These stories could not come alive without the experiences of these students. The teachers continued to create stories and their voices of caring continued to be heard through the students they teach daily. The participants shared they did not expect anything from the students. They only wanted for them to be successful in their education and life.

Discussion

The discovery of the challenges of rural school teachers faced in South Texas in two particular districts was similar to other rural schools in other parts of the country. The awareness of the poverty that some students have had to endure does not compare to the number of rural schools we have in South Texas. I felt I had been so sheltered growing up and did not know the challenges some of these students went through in their early years. It was not until later in my career that working in a rural school and seeing what teachers and students went through on a daily basis became a reality. Some schools had educated parents and plenty of resources, yet students from rural areas could only get certain resources at school. As a teacher, education takes a well-rounded person to teach all students. Students want to learn, and as teachers, we want to give them that opportunity to be successful in life and society. The research participants were honest and contributed personal stories to strengthen their voices as teachers in rural

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schools from South Texas. The stories from the teachers retell how it takes a special person to make a difference for these students. Building relationships with the students, parents, and community was an overwhelming theme that echoed throughout the two school districts. If you did not have the ethic of caring, it would be difficult to connect with the students, parents and community of rural schools. Drawing teachers to work in rural areas takes a strong support system to make teachers want to stay. If the administration is not supportive, then the teachers feel the disconnection. The demographics of the area were a characteristic that the teachers shared as they understood this population was different in their way of life. The research illustrated that teachers need each other to survive in rural areas as isolation and poverty become real life and teachable moments. As a teacher and as a leader, the awareness of the needs of teachers in rural areas is vital. Today, I can share my stories through my experiences with teachers, so they could continue to make a difference in the lives of those children and value this opportunity. My participation in voicing the retention of teachers in rural areas that are nested in large school districts will continue by advocating the benefits of working in a rural school.

Summary

In chapter four, the data collected from three research questions posed in my research topic was examined. The verification of my data took place through the triangulation method. The use of demographic surveys, focus group interviews, analysis from documents, and field notes was applied to my research. The research questions were analyzed, and the findings came from the data collection. My three research questions were: what are the general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses; what draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts; and what factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts. The study of the collection of data assisted in the development of the themes

from the participants' responses and their experiences. The four themes that emerged were building relationships, relying on support systems, embracing at-risk students, and connecting with students' lives. Each theme was composed of subthemes such as building relationships with students, parents, and community. Support systems had sub-themes of administration, family oriented environment, and employment. The theme of embracing at-risk students had sub-themes of resources, home environment, technology, and field trips. Finally, the theme of connecting with students' lives had the sub-themes of commuting, academic achievement, teacher background, student stories, and poverty. The following chapter will present the discussions and conclusions of the research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study lived in the examination regarding the retention of teachers in rural areas nested in large school districts. The issue of retention of teachers in rural areas was examined; (a) to explore the general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses; (b) to recognize what draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts; and (c) to understand why teachers stay in the campus despite the challenges of the community and district. The data came about from the participants' interviews, surveys, documents, and field notes presented in Chapter IV; the data was structured and submitted by common themes, which were related to the three research questions,

1. What are general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses?

2. What draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts?

3. What factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts?

In this chapter, a combination of qualitative data that answered the research questions was presented. The research included conducting four focus groups with 20 participants from four rural elementary schools in South Texas. The use of audio recording and transcribing the interviews to analyze the findings was employed. The use of demographic surveys was analyzed producing results manually. Field notes of my observations were stored.

Finally, the document analysis was used to gain information from the participants' experiences, contribution to the community, and the principle of rural school teachers.

Summary of Findings

The summary of the findings occurred once the data was collected, transcribed, coded, and summarized. I presented the following themes building relationships, relying on support systems, embracing at-risk students, and connecting with students' lives. These themes were supported by data that arose from the problem of the retention of teachers in rural schools nested in large school districts.

Building Relationships

Building relationships were the most talked about theme among the four focus groups as they shared their stories. Building relationships were the essence for the retention of teachers as without this key factor there would be no communication. The phenomena I discovered through my research of building relationships were the ethic of caring, administrative support, the humility of parents and family support. The connection with students was most important to the teachers as it was a common response across the four focus groups. They commented that the first few weeks were about bonding. Once the students felt that building a relationship was important, they were willing to work with you. It takes a special person to work in rural areas as the students come with bigger baggage, and they live in economically disadvantaged areas. The teachers understood that with the little money the students have it is not surprising that they do not go out to town or buy any extras. Whatever a teacher or school can do for them, they appreciate it.

As teachers' reiterate, the students also lack emotional support, but they receive it through their personal affection, understanding, patience and support thus, continuing to build stronger relationships. The teachers also expressed that they knew where the students lived and how they lived, and it was heartbreaking as they wished they could do more. Their reward was that the students felt the connection as they worked together. The participants continued to share that the first couple of weeks of school is about rigor, bonding, and building relationships. The theme continued as the teachers felt that they taught at these schools because they could make a difference, and they stayed for the students despite the difference that other students from the inner city might not encounter. These students have grown with little opportunities, and the best you could do was open doors for them. The students remain limited in many ways but being the teacher that stays and brings experiences to their lives is an incentive. These teachers love teaching students no matter if they live in rural areas. Building relationships with students were the highlight moment among the participants because they built a strong foundation that won the students over one at a time.

Through the interviews, I discovered that building relationships with family is very beneficial for the students. When teachers have parent meetings, they get to know more about them. At that point, you start to understand why the students behave the way they do. The information collected from the participants expressed this was due to the lack of parenting skills. The attitude parents have to support their children's education the best way they can. Some of the parents were not educated, but they were aware their children needed to be educated thus building a relationship to help their children were necessary.

The participants voiced that there comes the point when you teach a student, and you already had their brothers and sisters then it becomes a family reunion when the parents come to

school, and the relationships keep building. The teachers feel these students need them the most because some of the students do not have the parents to help them at home. Most of the parents are working late and leave early in the morning, so they rely on the school for educational assistance. The parents are respectful towards the teacher as they appreciate the great efforts the teachers do for their children. The parents value the commitment from the teachers. Most parents do not give the teachers gifts, but they show them that they care and they respect them. Some parents might not be able to help their children with homework, but they will make sure they bring them to school every day. When you start building relationships with the parents, you begin to find out about their background, and you understand the reasons for many things.

As teachers begin to understand the children, they understand why they do not have their assignments. The reason might be because they do not have electricity in their house. At this point, you stop stressing the students, parents and allow them to do their homework at school as an alternative, not a punishment. If you did not have that communication with the parents, you would not be able to help them. The parents are grateful for everything you do, so you feel you are working hand in hand with them. The participants felt that the parents are grateful for everything they do for their children. The participants added that once you win their trust, then they work with you and trust you. The parents at times are afraid because some of them are not documented to live in the United States, and they believe if they say too much it might hurt them. These parents are modest and willing to do what they can but with caution. The parents become the bridge between the students and school as they allow you into their child's educational needs. The parents understand that we need to work together thus building a relationship with their children.

In a rural community, everybody is like family. The participants spoke to the students and at times how they took some things for granted. When you hear the students have not been to Wal-Mart and you do not want to act surprise, you begin to realize that these children have not been outside the community. In a rural community, the students do not venture out, when they have a Dollar Store, so they do not need to leave the area. The Dollar Store is the store where they can buy food, medicine, clothes, and basic needs. The community was humble and appreciative, so building relationships was a central role in the school. The teachers extend themselves to the community, and they tried to let parents know that the teachers are there for them. One teacher stated that she lived in the community, and she felt connected with the students and the parents. She taught in the school because she was that student that she now teaches.

The community opened the doors to the teachers as they supported the students and the school is the main provider in the area. As a community, they help each other. The children wear uniforms, and they have garage sales or the students wear used clothes from the older siblings. The teachers stated that some students do not have uniforms, so a member of the community took it upon herself and had a clothes drive. She found people that donated clothes and gave the clothes to families in the community. These actions were common acts that the teachers took upon themselves to help the community and continued to build relationships. The participants voiced how they worked in small rural communities, but everybody got along, and it felt like a family where there is a high educational need for the students.

Relying on Support Systems

Relying on an assistance support system for the teachers was crucial for them to teach in rural schools. The teachers felt that without the support of the administration, a family oriented environment, and their place of employment they would not have felt comfortable teaching. There must be systems in place to maximize procedures and allow teachers to teach in these isolated rural schools. The three sub-groups generated in this theme under support systems were the administration, a family oriented environment and their place of employment.

The participants felt that the administration was a big reason why they stayed and taught in rural areas. The retention rate for some of the teachers is in part because of the support from the administration. The members of the focus groups remarked that the community, students, and the administration were wonderful to them. The teachers felt they got the support from the leadership and that was the reason they felt comfortable teaching in an economic advantage environment. They did not receive expensive gifts, but they did receive support that mattered to them.

In a rural school, the administration wore many hats, and they took care of things so that you could focus on teaching. The administration tried their best to make it easy for the teachers as they took care of all the behind the scene items for the teachers. The teachers considered that one of the strengths that an administrator that works in a rural school has is that they have not forgotten what it was to teach children.

The participants publicized that the support that administration gave them were the tools to teach. The administrators made sure that they hit the ground running the first day of school as they provided the teachers the basic resources they needed. At times there were not enough

books, so administration made copies until they could get the books. The administration would find ways to give the teachers the support, tools, and resources they needed for the classrooms. The teachers were in accord that they did not feel alone and did not know what they would do without their leadership support.

The participants saw the relationships they built were not just with students and their parents, but also with their peers at work. The teachers helped each other and built a family-oriented environment that helped them cope with everyday work at school. They felt free to ask each other for help, and every day was a new beginning because they were accomplishing tasks that others could not. The teachers loved teaching, and the relationships they built with each other. They were always cheering each other up as they were a small school community. They discovered that inside the school it did not matter who you were. You were going to make a connection with someone that was going through the same situation or knew someone that had gone through it, and it brought a sense of comfort. As teachers, you find out you were not alone, and you got a lot of understanding from your peers and colleagues.

The participants shared that they felt rural schools were family oriented because they were small, comfortable, and you knew everybody. The accounts continued as the teachers were very cooperative, and they knew if something came up they would help each other out because they saw themselves as a family. The participants pointed out that working in a family-oriented campus with caring staff and administration was excellent. Some teachers had several opportunities to go elsewhere because they lived outside the area, but they chose to stay because of those reasons.

The same responses echoed through the participants as they shared a benefit for working in a rural school was the communication within the staff, parents, and students. A significant factor that was contributed was the family oriented environment as a part of a rural school. This environment attracts teachers to stay, and the commute was worth very minute. The teacher's network with each other and the feeling of being connected was a basic need the teachers needed.

In regards to employment, the participants stated that they were hired on the spot to work at these rural schools. As they continued to specify, the stories were the same as their search for employment brought them to the school district, and the next day they were called that they were hired. For some teachers, this was their first job, and they decided to stay because the students were respectful, needy, and they needed role models. One participant shared how she was hired over the phone for one of the rural schools, and she was excited because she had a job. It was a drive for her, but after being there, she decided to stay.

Some of the teachers had not worked anywhere else as this was their first job, and they built relationships with the students, parents, and community. The groups added that they were grateful for having a job. Their first job at a rural school was challenging, but they saw it as teaching is teaching no matter the population. The participants expressed that it is hard to recruit teachers to work in rural areas, but once they did then they stay.

Embracing At-Risk Students

These students were considered at risk due to the many challenges they faced in rural areas. Student background and personal characteristics had been acknowledged as putting the students at risk of educational failure. Many of the features are a minority group, living with a

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single parent, low parental educational achievement, limited English proficiency, and disabled status (Thompkins & Deloney, 1994). In South Texas, the Hispanic sub-group carried the largest population. This ethnicity was often cited as a factor putting students at risk for educational failure in rural areas. Embracing at-risk students cited four sub-groups that developed throughout the course of the interviews with the participants. Limited resources, home environment, were mentioned significantly followed by technology and field trips.

The participants repeated that these students were growing with little opportunities, and they had what they got here at school. They had minimal resources, and that is all they had to work with on a daily basis. The students were all the same because they had the same background. One participant saw the students as when you are poor, and everyone is poor you did not know the difference. Restating this theme, the participants continued to state that the students came from the same surroundings. No one was different, and all were pretty much the same. You could not compare them to other students. The inner city students had resources that these students just did not have. It was hard because they had good teachers, and they got the experiences through computers or sharing of activities.

The teachers bought the students things, but the main problem was that they did not get it at home. It was not because the parents did not want to buy them things but because they couldn't afford it. When a parent had to make a choice between buying an extra notebook and buying food, then there was no option. The participants remarked that the students did not have many necessary resources and this included transportation. When the teachers talked to them about McDonalds or Wal-Mart, some students could not relate to those places because they had never been there. When you spoke to the students about a hardware store that appeared in a reading passage and a teacher mentioned Lowes or Home Depot, the students had a blank face

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because there is no transportation at home for them to go out, so the local store was their only form of visiting a store. The participants continued to elaborate on the need for resources that the students needed at school and home. The school could provide additional support for academic success at times, but it also included emotional and monetary resources. These students were very needy, but as teachers, they understood that these students did not create their environment but were born into it.

The participants added that the resources the students lacked made an impact on the whole school. The poverty surrounding them made it hard for the parents to provide all the material resources the students needed to perform at school. As teachers, they got creative with what they had and extended the resources as much as they could.

The participants accounted for the home environment of these students which consisted of families living with families. They accounted for children also living with their grandparents because they were left behind for different reasons. The grandparents could not help them with homework or visit the school. It was a tough situation, but the children have had to learn to adapt. The home environments where these students lived were very sheltered. Some students have never been to H.E.B. so when you talked about a grocery store a student may say I have never been there. The teachers might forget that these students did not leave their area, so going to H.E.B. was not their usual Sunday grocery shopping. Their home environment was limited to their immediate surroundings. These students were very humble, and when they looked around their neighborhood, they did not see two story houses but houses that have electrical wires running outside. They shared electricity and basic survival needs. Their home environment consisted of living from day to day with limited basic needs.

The participants reported that these students were grateful because they got what you gave them as oppose to inner city students that might have had a different attitude because their home environment was different. The economic environment for these families suggested that rural poverty is concentrated not only in areas where new jobs were from old industries, such as agriculture and mining, were declining, but also in places where new jobs were becoming available. The new job possibilities for these families typically offered low wages, thereby providing few avenues out of poverty. In these rural areas, the families had fewer indigenous organizations representing local interests than do wealthier rural areas. Where they do exist in poor communities, participation in them was related to income. Other institutions found in rural areas were usually originated in the larger society and were controlled by outside interests. These factors affected the home environment for these children as employment was hard to come by because of the lack of education, transportation, or other resources.

Some participants remarked that the home environments were at times unstable. The teachers added that when you picked up a perm record you saw all the schools where these children had been in one year, and then you understood why they had not learned certain skills. The move from place to place was due to financial difficulties or other circumstances, but they remained in rural areas. The home environment for these students made it difficult for them to learn as it affected them academically and emotionally.

The participants also shared that technology in the classroom was the only assess these students had as technology did not flow into the homes. The parents saw this tool as something not necessary when they needed to provide for their basic needs. The attitude of the parents was not to have electronics but enough to survive as the technology was not a basic need to them. The teachers understood and believed that access to technology could greatly enhance the

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learning capabilities of students, particularly those in isolated areas where educational resources were not available in the immediate community (Packard, 2016). Distance learning technology, educational videos, instructional software, and access to the Internet had all made their way into classroom instruction, and could potentially be powerful solutions for rural schools with few resources. Packard suggests that rural schools have not implemented technology to the same extent as non-rural schools, and they often lack the infrastructure and resources to do so. The teachers suggested that technology is necessarily the only answer to small rural schools' academic needs, but it had the potential for academic improvement to be great.

The participants had in common the need for field trips. The students had never been outside their area so taking them anywhere was an eye opener for them. The students were taken to Chuck Cheese and the high school for the Nutcracker and a Mariachi performance. The students were amazed as their faces lit up to travel outside their community. Participants shared that last year they had taken the students to the zoo in Brownsville, Texas. It was the furthest they had been, and it was a big deal. They stopped at Mr. Gatti's Pizza on the way back in Harlingen, Texas. The teachers saw how the students in the inner city traveled to San Antonio, Texas to go to the Alamo whereas the rural students were limited to their resources. These were experiences that the rural school children had but these field trips proved to be a great benefit.

The participants noted how it required money to go on any trip, but the students that lived a couple of miles from the city had not even visited the local university in their city. To go anywhere, the school would have to pay for everything as it was sometimes impossible that the parents could help with financial means. Some parents did not allow their children to travel as they were afraid something might happen to them. The teachers trusted that field trips were a great mean of exposure to learning about real life experiences. The relationship between books

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and real life experiences through field trips was not interchangeable. The ability to use field trips as a teaching tool could greatly increase the knowledge of the students as they had limited resources.

Connecting with Students' Lives

Since there were not usually enough highly qualified teachers in rural and remote communities to staff schools, education departments often focused on attracting outsiders to live and work in these areas. Moving to rural or remote communities could entail a higher cost of living, limited availability of housing, isolation, and remoteness. The experiences that teachers encountered could be overwhelming, but they taught because of the students, stayed for the community, and built strong relationships with each other. The support they got from different people reassured their commitment to stay and make a difference. Connecting with students' lives developed four sub-themes commuting, student achievement, their personal background, student stories, and poverty. The sub-themes were described by the participants as a deciding factor for their employment. A participant recalled that eleven years ago he volunteered to help in some of the school programs, and he just feels in love with the community. He showed it by traveling thirty-five miles to work and thirty-five miles back home, and he had been doing it for ten years.

The teachers continued on this topic and for some the twenty miles they travel to work is fine because they have gotten used to it. They were happy in their workplace. Other participants added that some of the members were driving back and forth daily for years, and they also did not mind because it was the first place that hired them. As the conversation continued, a teacher indicated that she drove forty-five to fifty minutes to work and back home. Her response was the

same as the previous teacher in that she did not mind because she was happy with the students, administration, and community. Most of the teachers did not mind the drive because they were happy and they are treated as part of the community. Some of the teachers could have been hired in places closer to home, but if asked they would have refused the offer.

Commuting could be an issue for the teachers but since they were happy and felt welcomed by the school community it made the drive easy. Another reason one of the participants mentioned was that if there was bad weather they could call the administrators and let them that they were running late because of the climatic conditions and the administration were very understanding. The administration made it clear that their safety came first. It went back to being a part of the school community that they took care of each other where some had not found it anywhere else. The compassion from the school and students made the commute a benefit to retain the teachers.

The teachers realized the reward when they saw the result. The growth at the end of the year was very imperative because the students may not have been able to pass the test and the teachers felt responsible. One member of a focus group mentioned how she was pulled aside because her class received a rating of not acceptable. The administrator told her to look at the growth of where the students were at the beginning of the year and where they were now. She realized that she was looking at the percentage and not the growth. Once she analyzed everything, she turned her way of thinking around. Another teacher added that she checked the growth but focused mostly on the teaching. She felt the purpose was for them to get where they needed to be and made sure the students were learning. When you saw the data on paper ,that was amazing and very satisfying. A lower grades teacher saw the rewards when the children came to school as a pre-kindergarten with minimal educational knowledge and then by the end of

the year some of them leave reading. The student academics were a big factor for the students and the teachers. The expectations were the same, and these children rose to the challenge. We had to find alternatives to make it happen for them even though they might not have had the resources, so we made it happen. You felt proud because we were ranked with the rest of the schools.

The participants felt that student achievement was difficult because the students did not have the experiences they needed. The teachers administering the standardized test just like everyone else, but the students lacked the vocabulary and experiences especially for the writing part of the test. They felt it was difficult because you could be the best teacher, but if the students lacked the basic skills needed, then it is challenging for everyone no matter how good of a teacher you were. The experiences range throughout the grade levels because each grade level had different expectations for student achievement. The concurrence among the participants was that it was challenging to teach these students as they were accountable with the rest of the schools to the district and state. As teachers, you needed to teach no matter the home environment, lack of resources, lack of experiences or lack of vocabulary in the second language. The teachers did not want to fail the students, so they searched for assistance to help them help the students.

The participants were members that could relate to the students because they came from the same family background. Their stories were told throughout the interviews as the connection they felt with the students were the same struggles they encountered as students. Someone cared for them and made a difference in his or her lives. It was important for them to make that difference in the lives of these children. One group contributed that they could relate to the children because they also disadvantaged and attended a school labeled low economic. The

teachers wanted to contribute their services in any way to help the students. One member added that she was considered economically disadvantaged growing up, and her parents worked in the field or had some hard labor. That was her family's background of where she came from, so she could relate the children, parents, and community. Another participant with heartfelt words told how she could relate to the environment and the students as she was also a bilingual student. She came to the United States when she was in third grade, and she did not know any English. She continued to try to help the students as much as she could because she was once that at-risk student.

With the same thoughts shared about being bilingual, the members of the focus groups felt that there was not a lot of instruction or software in Spanish. They had to act out words like sitting, and you demonstrated by sitting down rather than telling them a sentence with the word sitting. It was surprising for the students to see the teachers like them; the teachers understood them because they came from the same background. Another participant expressed her feelings as someone who came from Mexico when she was in elementary. She added that her family was poor and did not have shoes to go to school. She recalled running from tree to tree to cool off. She loved the kids because she knew what they had gone to get to where they were at. Her memories took her back and she reminiscence coming through the river not having an idea where she was going or when her next meal was.

The participants reported that they also were needy but in a different way. They expressed that working in a rural school the needy was completely different, but they found the way to help each other. As teachers, they become nurses, mothers, friends, and counselors. They were not just teachers. The participants could personally connect to these students as had

grown up in places just like where the students lived, and they worked in rural areas to help these students to be successful.

On another note, a participant shared how she was not from the community or even from this state. She voiced how she had been here for a while, and she had been able to build relationships between the staff and parents. These kids are economic disadvantaged, and it is hard to get to their level, to their hearts, and she felt it was somehow easy but hard at the same time to help this population.

The participants mutually added that you need to believe in this unique opportunity of working in a rural school because you can open minds and foster those dreams and add to the beliefs of these students. The participants contributed to the untold stories of these students as they shared incredible stories through their eyes. A member told his story of asking a student what he wanted for Christmas, and the student replied a front door for his house. When you need a door, everything is second to that. The teacher added that many times you wonder why the student is not retaining the information, and then you come to find out that he is worried about his home life. The teacher added that many times you wonder why the student is not retaining the information, and then you come to find out that he is worried about his home life and learning about Math is not a priority at the time.

In the same setting, a teacher shared how she was doing a science lesson on mixtures. She asked a student to bring dirt, and he did, but the dirt had fleas. The fleas were all over the classroom, and you begin to see the home environment. As a teacher, you knew the conditions of their home life, and the limited resources they can contribute. Another teacher shared his story about driving to the school for the first time and getting lost. He found the school and heard

donkeys and saw people burning trash, and he looked around thinking this cannot be. He added you do not see that every day. A member told her story of things that we take for granted. A student was absent one day, so she asked her what had happened. The student replied, "We did not have any light, and we went to sleep at my aunt's house. I had to sleep outside, and I got bitten by mosquitos all over my body." These are some of the things these students endure as they do not have the necessities at home.

Another participant said that the teachers would take a bus drive into the rural community, so they could see where the children lived along with the conditions they lived in this rural community. Some of the teachers expressed that the home conditions were not a common site while others related to their situations. A teacher told her story of one of her students that had lice on her head. The teacher saw a complete turnaround in the child. Shaving the child's hair, affected her emotionally because it was such a traumatic event. The child became withdrawn and did not want to participate in any activities. The participants understood that some students were from households that had limited resources. Some students did not have water, air conditioning, indoor restrooms and when it is cold, they will warm themselves with fire outside. Some students did have electricity, water, and indoor restrooms. When the students came to school smelling like smoke, the school was their only place of warmth. One participant remarked a student she taught, and today he was in high school. The student was focusing on simple things he says like making sure the family had light and water. He added he had everything he needed. He had God, and he wanted to thank me because I made a difference in his life

These stories could not come alive without the experiences of these students. The teachers continued to create stories and their voices of caring continued to be heard through the

students they taught daily. The participants shared they did not expect anything from the students. They only wanted for them to be successful in their education and life.

Discussions and Implications

Some rural teachers may enjoy the challenge of the work environment. The challenges they encounter in a rural area differ as for the demographics of the area change. If the school personnel were unable to find a highly qualified teacher, then the school would have to resort to hiring uncertified teachers with a provisional or emergency certificate. These teachers might have to teach an unfamiliar subject or grade level. The ability to retain teachers in rural areas under these practical situations is difficult, but in some cases, some teachers may have grown up nearby or appreciate the community and stay.

Research Question 1

My first research question was: What are the general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses? I discovered that one of the features was that these teachers expressed they were where they belonged as they developed bonds with the students. There was also a connection with the parents and community, therefore building strong relationships. The teachers felt connected to the students and community because they were needed more in rural schools than in the inner schools. The ethic of caring with the students was an important characteristic as these students were growing with little opportunities, and the only thing these teachers could do was open doors for them. The teachers could see the humbleness in the students and how needy they were. The teachers voiced how they had more subjects to teach as they did not have some specialization teachers stationed on their campuses. They had applied in other school districts, but the rural area schools were the first to call them another characteristic

of hiring teachers in rural areas. They accepted the job then they found out about the demographics of the area and the students. The distance traveled to rural schools was also another characteristic for most of the teachers as most were not from the community nor lived in the school district. Most students in rural schools were economically disadvantaged as it was common to the demographics of the two school districts and a common characteristic of rural areas. Another characteristic of rural schools was that they experienced a high mobility rate which was also a common trait in both districts.

Research Question 2

My second research question was: What draws teachers to teach in rural schools in large school districts? I was not surprised to find what draws teachers to teach in rural schools were consistent with the research literature and found the following results. The teachers expressed that they were able to connect with the school, parents, and community, and that was the reason they taught in a rural school. The administration was supportive in giving the teachers the tools they needed to teach. They work in an isolated area, but they had support, basic resources, and tools they needed to teach. One of the most valuable resources they had was each other. They considered themselves a family that serviced a different population that was needy in every way and many times all they had was each other. The students, parents, and community drew them to teach despite the isolated conditions. The communities were supportive as the teachers worked with them to help with clothes, resources, materials, and anything that could help the children become successful. The need in a rural school was greater than any other place, and the teachers made a choice to stay for that reason.

Research Question 3

My third research question was: What factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large a school district? I found the following factors that teachers taught at rural schools because of the students. Some teachers said they too attended rural schools in low economic areas with many disadvantages. They felt that if they could contribute their services in any way, they would help out and stay. Another factor the teachers voiced was that although the students might not have had all the resources or all the help at home, if they could provide some support and make a difference they were on board to stay. A contributing factor was that the teachers understood the challenges the communities and districts had experienced as they saw it growing up. The teachers were willing to provide emotional and monetary resources as they knew the students needed support sometimes overshadowing academic success. Overall, their passion was teaching the students no matter the challenges because they identified with the students. Poverty was a factor visible in the community, but the students were not poor in every aspect of it. They had teachers that cared for them. Some teachers saw the challenges of the communities and the districts as something different because they had never taught in rural poverty areas. The teachers saw the families, culture, relationships, support systems, poverty, and humility as different factors to these rural communities. As stated by one teacher, "We stay because of the children, they need us, and we need them." These students had won the teachers over, so they stayed despite any challenges the community or district may have had.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

The data indicated that rural school teachers could be retained in rural areas that were a part of large school districts. The participants reported that they needed a combination of student

involvement, family and school partnership, and school and community partnership to attain retention. About recruitment, the "ideal" rural teachers can teach several grades or subjects, organize extracurricular activities, and adjust well to the environment and the community (Collins, 2003). It is hard to find teachers who fit in with the rural community and stay for extended periods of time because of the combination of mastering partnerships among the different parties. The participants indicated those who ended up staying were either from a rural background or had previous experience with rural communities.

The analysis of the data obtained from the research participants addressed the research questions. The three research questions were: what are the general characteristics of large school districts that have rural campuses, what draws teachers to teach in large school districts and what factors contribute to decisions to stay at rural schools in large school districts. The results uncovered four themes with embedded subthemes in each one. The first theme was building relationships with the students, parents, and community. The second theme was building support systems with the administration, a family oriented environment, and employment. The third theme was embracing at-risk students with limited resources, home environment conditions, use of technology, and field trip experiences. The fourth theme was connecting with students' lives by commuting daily, achieving student academics, and related personal backgrounds. These themes were used in unification with the literature review to discuss the experiences of participants and identifying the factors that retain teachers in rural schools nested in large school districts in South Texas.

My involvement with teaching in rural schools, and at the same time being a researcher to uncover the reasons why teachers teach in rural areas was difficult. I had to reflect on my experiences and keep my perception from clouding my findings. I identified myself as an insider

as I had been a rural school teacher. I related to their stories as they told their experiences. The participants were able to communicate their feelings and opinions as they knew it was not foreign to me. As a qualitative researcher, the research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in people's lived experiences. To keep the reliability of the qualitative research, I had to separate myself from the research to report my findings without inclination. I am honored to have been a rural school teacher and have the stories and experiences that I too was able to share and summarize in the research. I understood what the teachers were talking about and did not have to ask for clarifications; however, I did dig for a deeper amount of information. I did not want my presence of a former rural school teacher to persuade them in any way, so the disclosure of my previous employment was not revealed until the end of my interviews. The answers, feelings, and experiences of the participants should be genuine without them feeling I was reporting to someone. I articulated how the research was going to be written in my study of teachers in rural schools nested in large school districts in South Texas. My experience as a tool in my research was different as I had to keep myself as a contributor and a qualitative researcher.

The findings from my research provided a guide that demonstrates how to retain teachers in rural areas in South Texas. I discovered that the existing literature is similar to the findings on my research collection. The teachers in other states or countries experience the same factors in retaining teachers in rural areas, yet there are options and strategies to retain teachers. The results from my research had choices and strategies to retain teachers by building relationships, building support systems, embracing at-risk students, and validating teacher stories.

The interview questions alluded to the research questions allowing the participants to answer the questions in different informational forms. I first distributed demographic surveys that helped me determine important factors of the research participants. I followed by

conducting focus groups and developing the existing themes from the findings. Using field notes and observations helped me to formulate my findings. Finally, utilizing the document analysis process, the use of documents produced by the Texas Education Agency, newspaper articles and public board meetings to identify valuable information was implemented.

As an educational administrator, it was important to educate people that teaching in rural areas matters. The rural school teacher was one that finds their job rewarding and gives them the opportunity to form lasting relationships with the students, parents, and community.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study had several limitations. Thus further research was recommended to continue the stability of retention of rural school teachers. First, the study could be administered in a larger sample size thus collecting more information and identifying different factors. Secondly, the study could be conducted over a longer period, therefore collecting a larger amount of information. Third, the research could be carried outside the South Texas region, so the study could yield different characteristics of a rural school. Fourth, the study was limited to a number of rural schools in large school districts in South Texas, so the recommendation is to find other rural schools nested in large school districts. Further research needs to be conducted about rural schools in this demographic area. This study could use further research in what could be done to improve the education in rural school areas and what could schools and districts do to prepare teachers for the unique challenges of teaching in rural schools. Finally, another limitation is how could rural schools engage other community stakeholders to support school efforts and how could we bring awareness to the issues faced by rural schools.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Directions: Please mark the following with an X or a check mark in the spaces that best apply to you.

1. Gender

    a. Male   _____

    b. Female   _____

2. Age

    a. 20-30   _____

    b. 31-40   _____

    c. 41-50   _____

    d. 51-60   _____

    e. 61+   _____

3. Marital Status

    a. Single   _____

    b. Married   _____

4. Ethnicity

    a.   Hispanic/Mexican American   _____

    b. White   _____

    c. Black/ African American   _____

    d. Asian/Pacific Islander   _____

    e. Other   _____

5. Years of Teaching

    a. 1-5   _____

    b. 6-10   _____

    c. 11-15   _____

    d. 16-20   _____

    e. 21-25   _____

6. Highest Level of Education

    a. Bachelor's Degree   _____

    b. Master's Degree   _____

    c. Doctoratal Degree   _____

7. Are from the community?

    a. Yes   _____

    b. No   _____

8. Do you live in this School District?

    a. Yes   _____

    b. No   _____

9. How many miles do you commute round trip, if you do not live in school district?

    a. n/a   _____

    b. 1-10 miles   _____

    c. 11-20 miles   _____

    d. 21-30 miles   _____

e. 31miles + _____

10. Do you teach more than 1 subject?

 a. Yes _____

 b. No _____

11. If yes, how many subjects do you teach?

 a. 1-2 _____

 b. 3-4 _____

 c. 5-6 _____

 d. 7-8 _____

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me why you teach at this school?

2. What are the reasons you chose to stay?

3. Describe benefits of working in a rural school?

4. This district is described as a non-metropolitan: fast growing district. Yet this school is

obviously rural. What are some characteristics you can identify as being unique for this district?

5. Is there anything else you want to add?

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C

CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN INTERNATIONAL COUNTRIES

Countries	Characteristics					
	Class Size	Financial Support	Networking	Teacher Stress Workload Housing	School Staffing	Shortage of Classroom Teachers
United States	x	x	X	x	x	x
Sweden	x			x	x	x
Ireland	x	x	X	x	x	x
Finland	x	x		x	x	x
Norway	x		X	x	x	x
Iceland	x		X	x	x	x

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sandra Judith Gomez Cerda was born in McAllen, Texas and raised in Rio Grande City, Texas. She is the daughter of Francisco Gomez and Maria Dolores Solis Gomez. She lives with Juan Benigno Cerda and their daughter Ciera D'Nai Cerda. Their family resides in La Joya, Texas. Sandra has always had high academic goals. She graduated from Rio Grande City High School in 1983. After high school, she graduated from Texas A&I Kingsville University, now Texas A&M Kingsville University, with a Bachelor's of Business Administration degree in 1987. Sandra taught in Rio Grande City at Ringgold Elementary and John & Olive Hinojosa Elementary for nine years. During her teaching years, she earned a Master's degree of Education from The University of Texas Pan American in Edinburg, Texas in 1998. In 1998, she began her employment with La Joya Independent School District and is currently a school administrator. Sandra completed requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in May, 2017 at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Permanent Address: 682 East Expressway 83, La Joya, Texas 78560