Dwelling Upon the Backstage of the Success of Rural Schools: A Systematic Review Analysis

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The subject of this study is to look into the 'secret' behind the success of rural schools. For this purpose, successful schools were searched in databases and 31 studies were reached as a result of the said examination. These studies were analyzed by systematic review analysis. According to the results of the research, 13 themes and 70 codes emerged. It has been revealed that school administrators have strong leadership characteristics and accordingly, school cultures of the schools in question constitute a healthy structure. In addition, teachers attach importance to their own professional development. They have a strong communication with each other with the stakeholders e.g., administrators/students within the school and their communication with families is also strong. In these schools, instructional materials are sufficient, student interactions are given importance, and there are environments where social activities can be carried out easily. Lastly, school administrations make student-centered plans with measurable realistic missions.

Keywords: Rural schools, successful rural schools, secrets of success

INTRODUCTION

The expenditures of education systems in regard to an individual or an institution have long been the subject of discussion in terms of the individual and social benefits of education. There are also schools which are arguably successful even though they spend relatively little on the relevant areas and in spite of lacking most of the necessary facilities in rural areas where they are based. In a sense, this paradox expresses the almost impossible challenges, poverty and lack of equal opportunities in education. Despite all these negativities, investigating the success stories of these schools is a worthy subject for closer examination.

Studies of rural schools (RS) are thought to be valuable for the literature. Clonch (2016) stated that there is a research gap in terms of the successful rural school environment and sought to help to close this gap. He reported that examples of relevant actions and stories can emerge for schools which want to improve themselves. Similarly, Uphoff (2008) commented that although there are many studies in the literature on school successes, there are few studies of RS. He stated that it is difficult to understand what is going on in these areas due to the difficulty of accessing rural areas. In line with this observation, it was concluded that there is a limited number of studies on RS (Diel, 1998) and that scholarly endeavors in particular in this direction are limited (Hemming, 2018). It has also been emphasized that the lack of continuous research into successful schools in rural areas makes it difficult to determine how these schools achieve success (Aman, 2018). It is clear that RS cannot benefit from successful programs because access to information is limited (Hildebrand-Veile, 2016).

It is apparent that there indeed is a need for school research in rural areas (Centilli, 2008) and although there have been studies on the inadequacy of RS, there have been few studies conducted on the situation of the successful rural schools (SRS) (Pate, 2012). It has been consistently stated by researchers that the data on what happens in SRS is not sufficient and it is therefore necessary to examine it (Aman, 2018; Clonch, 2016; Diel, 1998; Hildebrand-Veile, 2016; Hemming, 2018; Tilley, 2011; Pate, 2012; Uphoff, 2008). Studies on SRS have tended to examine the success of a specific school or that of a region, but no specific research has hitherto been identified which has examined the success of all these institutions in a holistic fashion. The present study was therefore designed to focus on investigating the success of schools in rural areas which have high academic achievement despite not having sufficient facilities.

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Literature Review

Equal opportunity in education

Allocating sufficient resources to education and distributing these resources fairly are issues which can help to ensure equality of opportunity in education. Not only equal financing to create equality of opportunity, but also education policies must be established and implemented with a view to providing equal opportunities in a large number of fields to all schools, because education is amongst the keys to success for poor children, but researchers have determined that most education systems created to date have not adequately met the needs of this specific group of children (Hiebert, 2006). Similarly, it is acknowledged that poverty has negative consequences not only for education but also for all areas of life (Levin & Riffel, 2000).

That being said, numerous efforts are currently being made to ensure equality of opportunity in education. For example, developed countries such as the US and the UK strive to improve the education level of their citizens. Countries offer opportunities to their citizens to achieve desired results in the area of education and so seek to continuously improve their education systems (Chantarapunya, 1976). Even so, Radulović and Krstić (2017) have stated that education spreads to a wider area over time and that practices aimed at enhancing the inclusion of new generations in education do not reduce the inequality in education. Various forms of social inequality are also emerging which pose far-reaching consequences, so social inequality in education is a subject which has been addressed by different scientific disciplines.

Equality of opportunity depends on two features in an education system: the level of expansion of education and education inequality (Treiman & Ganzeboom, 2013). In is necessary to point out that the current size of the education system has expanded over time and this inequality has increased internationally. Increasing inequality is not limited to the education system alone: it causes the formation of social imbalance in society, an increase in class differences and the emergence of several social, sociological, and economic problems. In order to prevent all of these issues, measuring inequality of opportunity emerges as a necessity, but it might be difficult to develop a criterion to determine equality or inequality of opportunity in this regard. Almost half a century ago, Chantarapunya (1976) stated that although there had been plentiful attempts to set the criteria by which to evaluate equality of opportunity in education, they cannot be easily sustained. That said, a set of principles can now be determined in this direction. In this context, socio-economic level appears as an important indicator acting as a criterion. In a similar vein, Hiebert (2006) stated that there is a common view that low income equals poverty.

The role of families' socio-economic structure in education

If families have higher socio-economic levels, they can have more educational resources at home and provide a better learning environment for their children. On the other hand, low-income families cannot offer their children the same opportunities (Kır, 2016). The parents realize in advance that they cannot provide the necessary opportunities to their child, but the awareness of the child comes relatively later. Indeed, most children from families with a low economic level (on or below the poverty line) are not conscious of their family circumstances until they go to school (Howley & Howley, 2010). School therefore is the first place where class difference is felt by the child. Even if a pupil who has just started school is completely unaware of the term 'class difference', s/he can nevertheless feel it. As a result of this feeling, what is going on in the pupil's own world and how he or she starts to look at the world also arise as a comprehensive problem.

One of the problems which this creates is the low academic achievement of the child. Many studies (for example, Coleman, 1966; Hauser, 1976; Jencks, 1972; Thorndike, 1973; cited in Bhuwanee, 2000) have identified a high level of positive correlation between the socio-economic status of families and the learning achievement of their children. Similarly, studies conducted in many countries have reported that the socio-economic backgrounds of individual children have significant effects on their academic performance (OECD, UNESCO, UIS, 2003; cited in Rambla, Ferrer, Tarabini & Verger, 2008). In other words, poverty can have negative effects on the formal learning of the child (Hiebert, 2006).

Toyon (2022) observed that many aspects of contemporary society have developed over time, one of which is the understanding that in order to live together in a society, social capital is an important element in social relations. People interact with each other, share resources and solve problems collaboratively. All of these can be explained as the norms, expectations and responsibilities of the global society. Understanding social capital is facilitated by these facts. The number of students in RS is also less than in urban schools. In addition, the fact that the numbers and interactions of people in villages are less than in cities creates their cultural capital in a unique structure. In other words, it should be underlined that rural areas have long faced various challenges, especially in America. In particular, globalization and the various threats to which Americans have been exposed for many years can be given as examples of this situation. Faircloth (2009) commented that globalization is not a new concept for indigenous people in the US: for over 500 years, foreigners have been causing threats to their land and people. Naturally, this constant situation will have negatively affected the cultural capital of the students in RS.

Wang (2022) said that the cultural capital of the family as an important means of maintaining class status has been a concern for sociology researchers in recent years and reported that parents who have and benefit from more family cultural capital tend to have a stronger motivation to transfer it to others. In addition, the intergenerational transfer and reproduction of family cultural capital is influenced by both the home and the school. It should be underlined that despite the disadvantages in transferring cultural capital in RS, there are also success stories. Thus, the role of RS in the success story of SRS can be important not only for economic inadequacies and problems, but also for the cultural structures of rural families.

In RS, it is useful to evaluate the cultural capital as well as the human capital of the family. For example, Light (2004) said that knowing how to dress to be successful at something is a form of cultural knowledge. Often, human capital and cultural capital should be considered together, because people who have one often have the other. However, the two capitals are different in principle. Anyone can have human capital without cultural capital or cultural capital without human capital. In principle, adults can acquire cultural capital through training from a teacher. In this context, Rautenbach, Shozi and Nicolaides (2023) found students in higher education institutions in rural environments face various difficulties and their findings suggested that it is necessary to be aware not only that there is a problem of marginalization and privilege in rural settings, but that the same problem also exists in urban settings where facilities are inadequate in less affluent areas and places where many other disadvantages arise. For this reason, any desired upward class mobility for students from poorer areas turns out to be difficult, to say the least. In short, cultural resources and assets inherited from one's own family can be a significant source of social inequality (Kallunki & Purhonen, 2017). Despite all these human and social inequalities, if there is a success story, determining how this story is realized can emerge as a multi-faceted research topic.

It is crucial to emphasise that poverty is not created by schools and that poverty problems cannot be solved directly by schools. Even so, there are some things that schools can do to help the relevant parties better comprehend the issue and cope with poverty more effectively (Levin & Riffel, 2000). Hiebert (2006) commented that a good school for students from poor backgrounds needs administrators and teachers who know what poverty is as a sociological concept and as a realm and who can empathize with poor students.

It can be asserted that poverty comprises a comprehensive social problem, and that the solution is perhaps not embedded only in the school, but points to a responsibility that a social state must accept. It would also be meaningful here to repeat that RS do not offer equal opportunities in education.

Rural schools

Arnold (2000) commented that RS are disadvantaged schools and that the number of quality studies of them is limited. There is therefore limited information about these schools simply because of the lack of data on RS. Furthermore, not only are studies on RS limited in number but also recent studies have generally been carried out in the US. For these reasons, the current study was designed to focus on RS studies conducted in the US.

Endeavors to address RS inevitably have some restrictions and difficulties. For example, these schools are difficult to inspect on a regular basis as they are situated in remote areas (Mulkeen, 2005), children of agricultural workers with high poverty rates are educated in these schools (Greenough & Nelson, 2015), in some schools, multi-grade classes still continue (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2005), and educators are not professionals, and school administrators and teachers cannot receive adequate training concentrating upon professional development (Lavalley, 2018).

The concepts of rural areas and poverty have a close relationship with each other. According to the teachers and students who define their environment as a rural area, such areas are insufficient in financial support, opportunities are not adequate and the personnel are inexperienced and cannot internalize the cultural elements found in the local environment (Baade, 2016). When the issue is examined historically and financially, therefore, it can be inevitable that the labels attributed to students in rural communities are labels indicating poverty (Howley & Howley, 2010).

Centilli (2008) described the characteristics of the rural school in terms of local values and customs and a unique worldview. He also emphasized that education has an important function in order for these schools to survive and maintain the values of the environment in which they operate. An examination of the strengths of RS shows that they often have smaller classrooms, lower dropout rates and safer school environments. They also have stronger community support, higher parent involvement and greater opportunities for individual teaching (Lee & McIntire, 2000). Small schools such as RS are more successful in overcoming the effects of poverty and have better social adjustments to their environment (Howley & Bickel, 1999).

In regard to the problems of RS, Barley and Beesley (2007) stated that teachers in RS face serious problems in accessing resources to assure continuity at school and to be successful. RS serve students with a variety of characteristics, including ethnic minorities, the socio-economically disadvantaged, uneducated families, and single-parent or parentless families (Flora, Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997; Stern, 1994; cited in Hardré, 2007). Pate (2012) stated that most of the educational deficiencies in RS which Gillette had noted in 1929 still continued and that some of them were due to the lack of funding. It has also been suggested that small RS have historically lacked funding to attract and retain qualified staff, to have state-of-the-art technology and to be able to take advantage of a range of courses. Teachers in rural areas teach in environments where there is not much interaction and therefore have difficulty in taking advantage of professional development opportunities (Lee & McIntire, 2000). Aman (2018) reported that there is an inequality in supporting academic programs in RS and that one of the challenges which RS face is the inability to access quality academic programs.

Context of the successful village/RS

Prior to moving onto an examination of SRS, it will be helpful to scrutinize the 'No Child Left Behind Act' because it can be seen that studies of the success of RS generally address two issues (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Hollenbeck, 2006): i), the no child left behind law (No Child Left Behind Act, NCLB) and ii) RS with high performance but also with high needs (Success in High-Performing, High-Needs RS-HPHN). The former act was signed by the American President George W. Bush on 8 January 2002 as an educational reform initiative. This law is intended to provide all children with a fair, equal and substantial opportunity to receive a high-quality education (NCLB, 2003). The US Department of Education highlighted four themes in this initiative:

- accountability to enable disadvantaged students to gain academic competence,
- flexibility in how federal education funds are used to increase student achievement,
- research-based training to implement educational programs and practices that have proven effective through scientific research, and
- increasing the options available to parents of students attending designated schools (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2019).

It was found in the literature that most of the studies on rural areas were carried out after the enactment of this law (for example, Aman, 2018; Clark, 2009; Clonch, 2016; Hemming, 2018; Hildebrand-Veile, 2016; Hollenbeck, 2006; Tijivikua, 2006, Tilley, 2011; Pate, 2012; Uphoff, 2008). Despite this, studies of successful schools in rural areas have generally concentrated on the roles of school administrators

and leadership skills (Clark, 2009; Hollenbeck, 2006; Tijivikua, 2006, Tilley, 2011; Uphoff, 2008; Waweru, 1987). It has already been stated that the number of studies of schools in rural areas is small (Aman, 2018; Diel, 1998; Masumoto, 2006; Uphoff, 2008) but the number of studies of successful schools in rural areas is much smaller (Clonch, 2016; Pate, 2012). It is clear that most of the research on RS was carried out after the introduction of the law and that the law caused an increase in RS research.

Studies in rural areas have centered on the specific aspects of a particular school or chools in the region as the research topic (for example, Aman, 2018; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Barley & Wegner, 2010; Brown, 2009; Childs, 2011; Eisele, 2005; Hemming, 2018; Hildebrand-Veile, 2016; King, 2006; Miller, 2013; Pate, 2012; Ritter, 2013; Rosenberger, 2012; Westerman, 2014; Ziskin, 2016).

RS can be defined as schools which have to contend with relatively more difficulties than other schools. The achievements which they make despite the meager opportunities are therefore worth investigating. The subjects of rural studies show that researchers have examined the teaching strategies in RS (Hildebrand-Veile, 2016; Pate, 2012), their priorities in education (Brown, 2009), the effects of additional training on success (Barley & Wegner, 2010), the behaviors of supervisors (Ziskin, 2016), the reading program (Rosenberger, 2012), how school administrators lead the change (Ritter, 2013), how much differentiated education teachers adopt (Westerman, 2014), factors affecting student success/failure (Eisele, 2005; Miller, 2013), the comparison of student achievement in different regions (King, 2006), the differences in success in terms of various variables (Aman, 2018) and school success in terms of various factors (Barley & Beesley, 2007). The subjects of recent studies have been concentrated in a specific area. Consequently, these studies seem in a way to have explored successful schools in ways which have not been holistic. They attempted to make findings related to the subjects on which they chose to concentrate. The problem which the current study addressed was therefore to seek a holistic answer to the question 'what can be the 'secret' behind the success of rural schools?'

METHOD

This research was carried out using the systematic review method. Thomas, Ciliska, Dobbins and Micucci (2004) recommended that a systematic review comprises a seven-stage process. These stages are: i) question formulation, ii) literature search, iii) establishing relevance, iv) relevance and quality assessment, v) data extraction and synthesis, vi) peer review of the report and vii) dissemination of the final report. The application of these stages in the current study is explained in order below.

Question formulation (How did the research idea come about?)

The researcher worked at the Nevşehir Provincial Directorate of National Education Measurement and Evaluation Center. In this center, the academic achievements of the schools are evaluated. In a meeting, the researcher came across findings showing that there are some rural schools which have achieved academic success despite being in a rural village and have increased this success every year. With his curiosity aroused to investigate the reasons for the continuing success of these schools in the world, the researcher devised the following questions:

i. Are there schools in other parts of the world which are successful despite being located in the countryside?

ii. If there are, what are the secrets of their success?

iii. How can the secrets of success of these schools be explained in a holistic manner?

As an initial step, the relevant literature was searched to seek answers to these questions. The steps followed in this process are given below.

Literature search

The relevant literature was searched using the ProQuest, Scopus, ERIC, ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost and Google Academic databases using the keywords "successful rural schools", "rural schools' success", and "rural schools". The search for these keywords in the databases was performed sequentially. To illustrate, the keyword "successful rural schools" was first searched in all the databases. Then the second keyword was searched, and so on. These processes took about three weeks. The retrieved studies were systematically filed under the surnames of the relevant authors and the year of publication. This made the identification of similar files easier.

After this stage, the criterion sampling method was used, one of the purposive sampling methods. Criterion sampling examines cases which meet a specific criterion or several criteria of importance (Patton, 2002). The criteria used in the study were:

    i. First, attempts were made to reach studies of schools which had a success story despite being located in rural areas;

    ii. Second, studies were scrutinized to determine whether the secrets of schools' success were clearly presented by empirical findings or the observations of researchers. Necessary eliminations were made on the basis of these examinations;

    iii. Third, the findings of the remaining studies were assessed; and

    iv. Finally, the factors which had been effective in schools being successful were coded using the induction method. Codes were allocated and then the themes in which these codes were gathered together were identified.

In line with the criteria and procedures described above, studies which were found to be suitable for the purpose of the research were analysed. The following steps were followed and an analysis file was created.

Establishing relevance

The MAXQDA software program was used for the analysis of the acquired data and two separate folders were created in the program. The first folder contained the studies which were thought to have findings pertaining to the success of rural schools as a result of the literature review. After a detailed examination of the studies in this folder, decisions were made as to whether they should be included in the analysis. The studies which were included in the analysis were collected in the second folder. The common criterion of each study included in the analysis is that it had a finding or observation of success within the related frame of reference.

Relevance and quality assessment

The criteria which were effective in deciding whether a study was put into the analysis folder or not constituted the quality assessment of this research. To this end, each study analysed had findings which were pertinent to a rural school's success or observations of a similar sort. These findings merely constituted the results about a specific school and so did not give an overall idea about the success of all rural schools. Even so, after analysing the findings of each included study, an holistic view of the achievements of rural schools in general was obtained. Accordingly, the subject, research method and empirical results or observations of the studies included in the analysis were taken into account. Moreover, documents including direct observations, interviews, archive files and official documents were included. Findings were built around the consistency of data from these sources and these results can be expressed in both quantitative and qualitative terms (Yin, 2000).

Data extraction and synthesis

The collection and separation of the data was executed in accordance with the criterion sampling method described above. In summary, three steps were followed to identify the studies analysed, and these are shown in Figure.
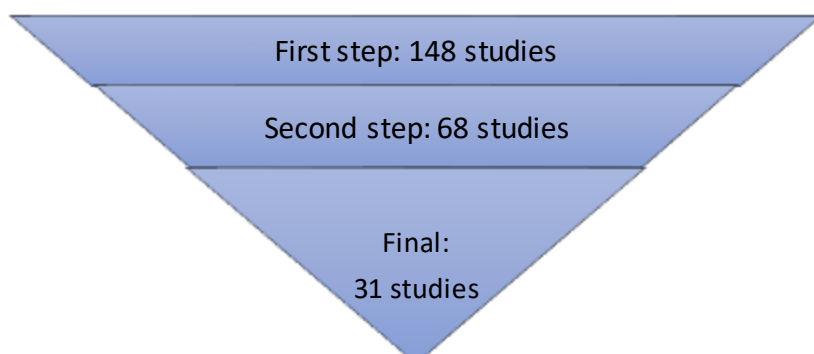
Figure 1: Data collection process

As Figure 1 shows, 148 studies of SRS were found in the literature. Some of these studies were not related specifically to education but had examined various trainings applied for rural development such as agricultural education in rural areas. Non-educational studies and subjective reports were not included in the analysis. This elimination left 68 studies which had been conducted according to scientific principles and were related to education. Some of these studies, however, did not serve the purpose of the current review since they do not provide empirical findings or observation results on how success is achieved in rural areas. Therefore, a second elimination process was needed. As a result of this final elimination stage, 31 studies were identified which contained empirical findings or observations which shed light on the reasons for the success of a rural school. Table 1 gives details of these 31 studies.

Table 1. Documents used in the systematic review analysis

Authors and year	Title of Study	Type of Study	Number of codes
Phelps, Peach & Reddick, 1998	Meeting facility needs in RS	Information Analyses	6
Lee & McIntire, 1999	Understanding rural student achievement: identifying instructional and organizational differences between rural and non-RS	Reports Research	3
Marshall, 2000	Rural policy in a new century	Opinion Paper	6
Lee & McIntire, 2000	Interstate variation in the mathematics achievement of rural and non-rural students	Research Paper	4
Howley, 2000	School district size and school performance: rural education issues digest	Information Analyses	2
Hines, 2002	Transforming the rural school counselor	Review Article	2
McClure & Reeves, 2004	Rural teacher recruitment and retention review of the research and practice literature	Reports Research	7
Howley & Howley, 2005	High-quality teaching: providing for rural teachers' professional development	Review Article	2
Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson & Ylimaki, 2007	Successful leadership in three high-poverty urban elementary schools	Research Paper	5
Barley & Beesley, 2007	Rural school success: what can we learn?	Research Paper	5
Salazar, 2007	The professional development needs of rural high school principals: a seven-state study	Research Paper	5
Chance & Segura, 2009	A rural high school's collaborative approach to school improvement	Research Paper	5
Clark, 2009	The impact of leadership and culture on student achievement: a case study of a successful rural school district	Dissertation	2
Childs, 2011	Collegiality and leadership in action: an ethnography of school culture and climate in a small-town elementary district	Dissertation	7
Tilley, 2011	Success despite socio-economics: a case study of a high achieving, high poverty school	Dissertation	4
Pate, 2012	Perspectives and practices of successful teachers in diverse rural south Texas high-performing high-needs elementary schools	Dissertation	3
Rosenberger, 2012	No School Left Behind: a multiple case study of high-performing third-grade reading	Dissertation	10

	programs in low-income rural schools in Southern Illinois		
Ritter, 2013	An examination of how principals lead instructional change in rural high schools	Dissertation	4
Musselman, Crittenden & Lyons, 2014	A comparison of collaborative practice and teacher leadership between low-performing and high-performing rural Kentucky high schools	Research Paper	2
Ziskin, 2016	Self-identified behaviors and decisions of superintendents in high-need/low-resource rural school districts with higher-than-average graduation rates	Dissertation	2
Preston & Barnes, 2017	Successful leadership in RS: cultivating collaboration	Research Paper	3
Aman, 2018	The geographic achievement gap: a quantitative investigation into academic success in rural and non-rural public high schools in North Carolina	Dissertation	2
Schmitt-Wilson, Downey & Beck, 2018	Rural educational attainment: the importance of context	Research Paper	1
Turner, Finch & Uribe-Zarain, 2019	Three Midwest rural school districts' first year transition to the four-day school week: parents' perspectives	Research Paper	1
Jordan, 2020	Instructional and managerial challenges of school principals in small rural schools	Dissertation	1
Salamondra, 2020	Defending rural schools	Review Article	2
Bailey, 2021	Educators' perspectives on implementing and sustaining collective leadership to promote student learning in rural schools: a qualitative descriptive study	Dissertation	4
Jones, 2021	Leadership practices that influence family and community partnerships in successful rural elementary schools	Dissertation	3
LaBaza Tucker, 2021	A case study: perceptions of rural school principals that utilized the transformation turnaround model for school success and sustainability	Dissertation	9
Rivera, 2021	Leading schools in poverty: principal perceptions, key factors, and strategies to academic success	Dissertation	3
Bradshaw, 2022	The lived experiences of east Texas rural school principals: a narrative study	Dissertation	
Total:			*116*

As Table 1 shows, the included 31 studies were analysed and were coded 116 times in total. When the types of these studies are checked, it can be seen that two of them were information analyses, two were reports research, one was an opinion paper, three were review articles, nine were research papers and fourteen were dissertations. In addition, all of the studies in the table were related to SRS in American culture. Due to the lack of clear information about the research topic internationally, the findings and results of the current review are limited to SRS in the US.

Peer review of the report

The findings of the current review and the method followed were evaluated by two experts in the field of educational administration. Code compatibility and the meanings of the codes were examined by these experts. Using their feedback, some adjustments were made in some of the codes under the code names and themes.

Dissemination of the final report (Analysis of documents)

After all these processes, the final report was prepared. The MAXQDA software program was used in the analysis of the data and the included documents were listed in chronological order of publication. Then, the type of research to which the documents belonged was determined, such as research papers and dissertations. In the analysis of the data, the research findings and results in the documents were studied. The factors which had made an RS successful were identified and coded.

The documents were again carefully read by the researcher and the findings in the documents were ascertained. Then, the expressions of the research findings were coded. The coding process was repeatedly examined and edited at different times. Themes on which the codes could be collected together were determined and research findings were reached. First, the codes and then the themes which the codes created were identified. In this regard, the data were analysed using an inductive approach. All data files were saved as an .mx20 extension file.

Ethical Principals

This research was conducted taking into account the ethical principles of APA and COPE. In addition, since the data for the review came from studies in the literature, no human and/or animal elements were studied. The research was carried out with the permission of the ethics committee of Nevşehir Hacıbektaş Veli University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, where the research does not pose an ethical problem (Meeting date: 24.02.2023/ Number of decisions: 2023.02.57).

Findings

According to the findings of the research, thirteen themes emerged. The distribution of these themes according to their frequency is presented in Figure 2.

∨ 🔲 Success Secrets of Successful Rural Schools	
❯ 🔲 School culture	24
❯ 🔲 School administrator features	17
❯ 🔲 Academic	14
❯ 🔲 Management	11
❯ 🔲 School-environment relationship	11
❯ 🔲 Teacher features	9
❯ 🔲 Mission	8
❯ 🔲 School equipment	6
❯ 🔲 Advantages	5
❯ 🔲 Teacher's professional development	3
❯ 🔲 Teaching methods	3
❯ 🔲 Measurement and evaluation	3
❯ 🔲 Social events	2

Figure 2: Distribution of themes by frequency

As Figure 2 shows, most of the success of SRS could be attributed to school culture. Other factors were the characteristics of the school administrator, academic practices, school management skills, school and environment relations, teacher characteristics, the school's mission and equipment, some advantages of the school, the value that teachers attach to professional development, teaching methods, measurement and evaluation system, and social activities.

In order to show the distribution of the themes and codes of the success order of successful RS in the review, more detailed findings are set out in Figure 3.
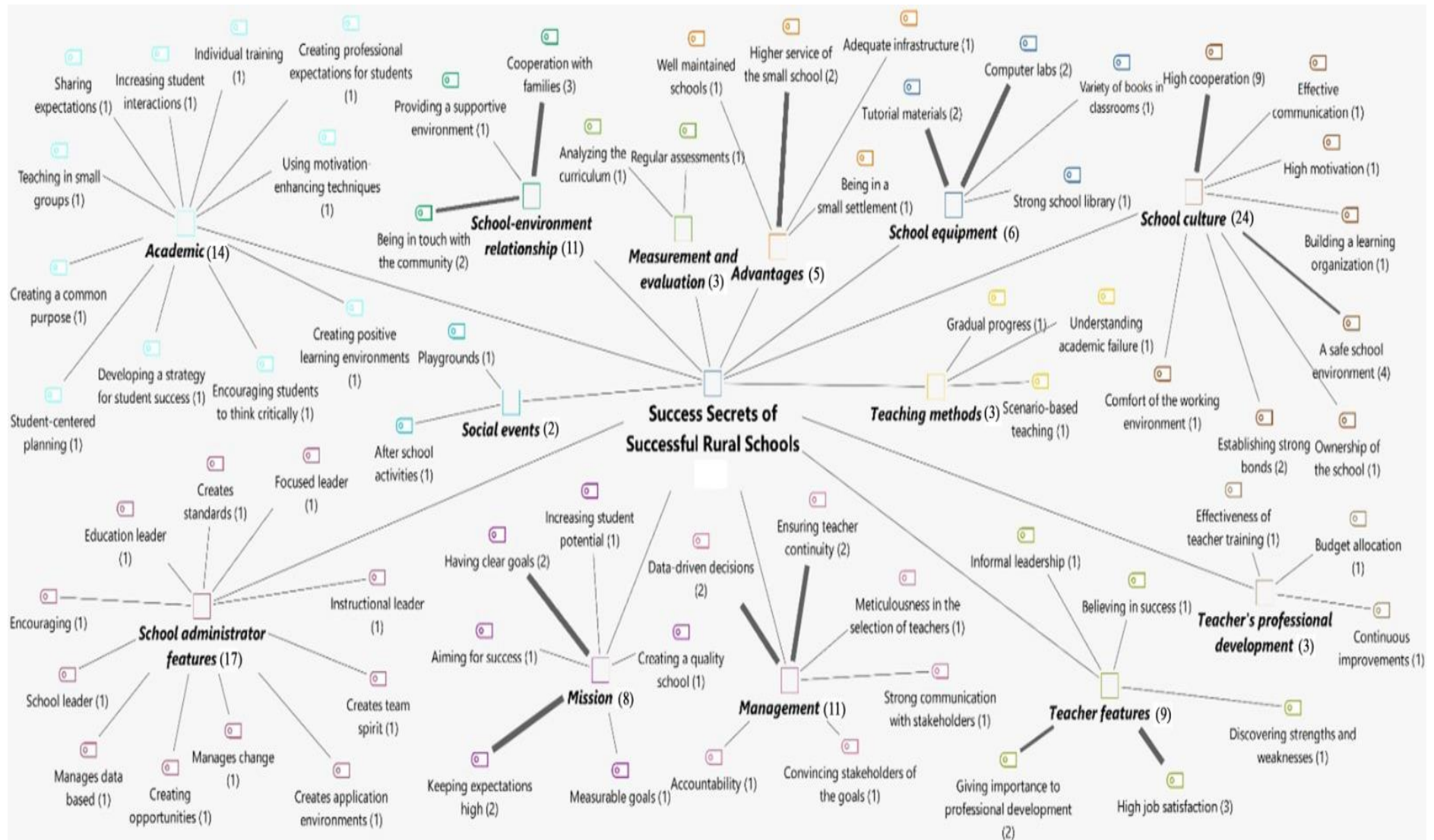
Figure 3: Success secrets of SRS

Figure 3 shows the factors behind SRS. Thirteen themes and 70 codes emerged. The themes are discussed below according to the number of codes which they had and the frequency of coding.

School culture

SRS seem to have a well-established school culture over time. A school culture is regarded as one in which the working environment is comfortable, the ownership of the school is high, the school is a safe and learning organization, and the teachers have high levels of job satisfaction. In addition to these, human relations are strong, cooperation is quite high and effective communication is established in the school.

> Successful rural principals promote people-focused relationships with staff, students, parents, and community members … rural principals have the opportunity to be agents of change through balancing local and district policies and through enacting instructional leadership. At the root, both of these themes reveal the importance of rich collaboration with members of the school community. This research is pertinent to researchers, government leaders, policymakers, school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members interested in understanding and responding to the demands of RS. (Preston & Barnes, 2017)

As can be understood from this quotation, the school administrator has an essential role in the formation of school culture. In particular, in-school relations, the leadership characteristics of the administrator and strong school/environment relations enable a school culture to have a healthy structure.

School administrator features

It can infer from the findings that school administrators who have focused leadership, educational leadership, instructional leadership and school leadership characteristics boost their school's success. School administrators create opportunities for the school's stakeholders in the management of the school, demonstrate data-based management have an encouraging attitude and have the ability to create a team spirit.

> Principals identified their most important professional development needs in the areas of building a team commitment, creating a learning organization, sustaining, and motivating for continuous, improvement, setting instructional direction – results, orientation, communicating effectively, facilitating the change process. (Salazar, 2007)

This quotation implies that a school administrator's effective communication skills, capacity to manage change and ability to create a learning school are influential factors in the school being successful.

Academic

One of the contributing factors to a successful RS is the paths followed for academic success. This includes student-centered plans being made at the school, common goals being created, student-centered individual training being offered to small groups, motivation-enhancing techniques being used, student interactions being given importance and positive learning environments being created. On top of these, professional expectations are created in students, they are encouraged to think critically and strategies are developed for student success.

> … the characteristics of successful RS, which include having well-defined goals, a positive learning environment, high expectations for student performance, and adequate facilities and instructional materials. (Phelps, Peach & Reddick, 1998)

In order to be able to achieve academic success, it is deemed important to have a positive learning environment and an adequate infrastructure. In particular, the school community believes in success and creates a mission for this purpose.

Teacher features

Teacher characteristics have been identified as one of the secrets of success in SRS. The teachers attach importance to their professional development, have high job satisfaction, are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, have high belief in success and have informal leadership characteristics.

> Teachers remain the constant resource that can adapt to the unforeseen future challenges through flexibility, innovation, and creativity in meeting the needs of their students. For this reason, teacher beliefs and attitudes are a significant factor in program reform. (Rosenberger, 2012)

The personal characteristics of teachers and their attitudes toward their students are effective in achieving success. More specifically, the teachers' love for their profession and their focus on their work are seen as crucial characteristics of the teacher in an SRS.

Mission

It was found that SRS have a mission: their goals are clearly defined and measurable and they work to create a quality school. Over and above that, they have high expectations, aim for success and strive to elevate the potential of their students.

> Three principals responded to the challenges of their high-poverty communities by establishing safe, nurturing environments for children and adults: setting high expectations for student performance, and holding everyone – students, faculty, staff, parents, and themselves – accountable for meeting those expectations. Although different in personal style, all three set clear directions for the school and then influenced members of the school community to begin moving in that direction, in great measure by modeling the behaviors and practices they desired. (Jacobson et al., 2007)

As can be understood from this quotation, the school mission in an SRS is established as student-centered. A student-centered school mission contributes to the academic and social success of each student.

Management

The management structure and the policies which follow contribute to the success of an SRS. The school administration is accountable, takes decisions based on data, has strong communication with its stakeholders and has convinced the stakeholders of the school's goals. They also have a management approach that confirms the continuity of teachers in schools and is meticulous in choosing teachers.

> Three essential elements identified for successful collaboration were (a) scheduled time for teacher collaboration; (b) structured and focused collaboration time devoted to improving instruction and student achievement, and (c) leadership behaviors that focused on student-centered planning and accountability. (Chance & Segura, 2009)

It should be stressed that the main task of creating the necessary conditions for student success belongs to the school administration. Notably, student-centered planning and an accountable leadership approach are realized with a school management structure established under the leadership of the school administrator.

School equipment

School equipment also has a share in creating a school's success. The libraries of these schools are rich and the classrooms have a wide variety of books, instructional materials and computer labs.

> The differences and gains appear to be explained by variance in a broad range on schooling factors; instructional resources, advanced course offerings, progressive instruction, professional training, safe/orderly climate, collective support … . (Lee & McIntire, 2000.)

It is indispensable for success that the school provides a suitable environment and sufficient material to the students. The fact that teaching materials are under the control of effective teachers escalates school success.

School/environment relationship

In school/environment relations, SRS have strong communication with families and receive support from their environment. They are also intertwined with the society in which they live.

> RS have some benefits from the nature of the communities in which they operate. Communities and parents are more likely to be involved in the schools' activities and school personnel are more likely to live in and participate in community affairs. In remote rural areas, for example, secondary school teachers devote 5.5 hours a week to

after-school activities involving student contact compared with 4.0 for central city secondary teachers and 4.2 for those in suburban schools. (Marshall, 2000)

RS are schools which reflect the characteristics of the society in which they exist. Being a part of their environment in their relations with the environment contributes to their success. Having strong school/environment relations emerges as an important advantage. Likewise, it contributes to the effectiveness of children's social activities.

Advantages

Successful RS are said to have many advantages. They are well-maintained schools, have the capacity to serve more students and their infrastructure is sufficient.

The school is an adequate size for the student population that it serves. There were no signs of crowding or limited instructional space. (Rosenberger, 2012)

It is a significant advantage that RS are not overcrowded and that the school structure and community serve small student populations. It can therefore be said that students can be trained more easily and that more time can be allocated to each student.

Teacher's professional development

In successful RS, investments are made in the professional development of teachers and continuous improvement and teacher training are designed to be effective. Understanding the reasons for failure, making consistent progress, and scenario-based teaching are also dominant in teaching methods.

The study revealed school leadership that had high expectations for staff members and emphasized small group instruction, collaboration, and continuous improvement in instructional practices. The culture of the school was that of excellence, continuous improvement, school pride, and collaboration. (Tilley, 2011)

The fact that teachers are continuously developing and renewing themselves makes them effective teachers. As the quotation implies, a school's culture and learning environment also affect teacher development.

Teaching methods

The curriculums were analysed and it was found that they focused on thinking skills.

… revealed that effective rural reading/writing teachers used motivational techniques, scaffolder and extended lessons beyond the scripted curriculum prompting critical thinking skills, authentic reading/writing literature and experiences to promote student success, and data analysis and self-reflection to meet the diverse needs of their students while maintaining the place of community. (Pate, 2012)

The curriculums of successful RS were analysed and it was perceived that they mostly served to develop students' thinking skills. It was also found that the curriculums supported the lessons. Put differently, the curriculums and their delivery went hand-in-hand.

Social events

Children in successful RS were reported as having playgrounds in the school yard and after-school social activities were also available. Because of this, children could bloom not only academically but also socially.

Through observations, I noted that the school is a large, one-story brick building that showed older and newer additions. There was a large fenced-in playground at the back of the building. The hallway of the old section of the building was plain with tiled floors and beige colored walls. This was the special education and resource wing, but it also contained the cafeteria, gym, and teacher work areas of the building. (Rosenberger, 2012)

It was found that the school structure has the potential to serve children's social activities, and this meant that children could participate in more social activities.

### Measurement and evaluation

Periodically analysing the curriculums and evaluating the students was reported as being one of the success secrets of successful RS.

> Rural school leaders need access to the best available information and data on teacher recruitment and retention, and they need to approach the task in a manner that is strategic, specific, and sustained. A review of the research and practice literature suggests 14 promising strategies for placing high-quality teachers in rural classrooms and keeping them there; (6) evaluate efforts regularly…. (McClure & Reeves, 2004)

Teacher quality was also shown to be a significant factor in successful RS. It can be affirmed that students were evaluated regularly and that teaching was structured according to the results of this evaluation.

Percentage distribution of themes according to documents

The percentage distributions of the themes which emerged in the 31 documents examined regarding the success order of successful RS are presented in Figure 3.
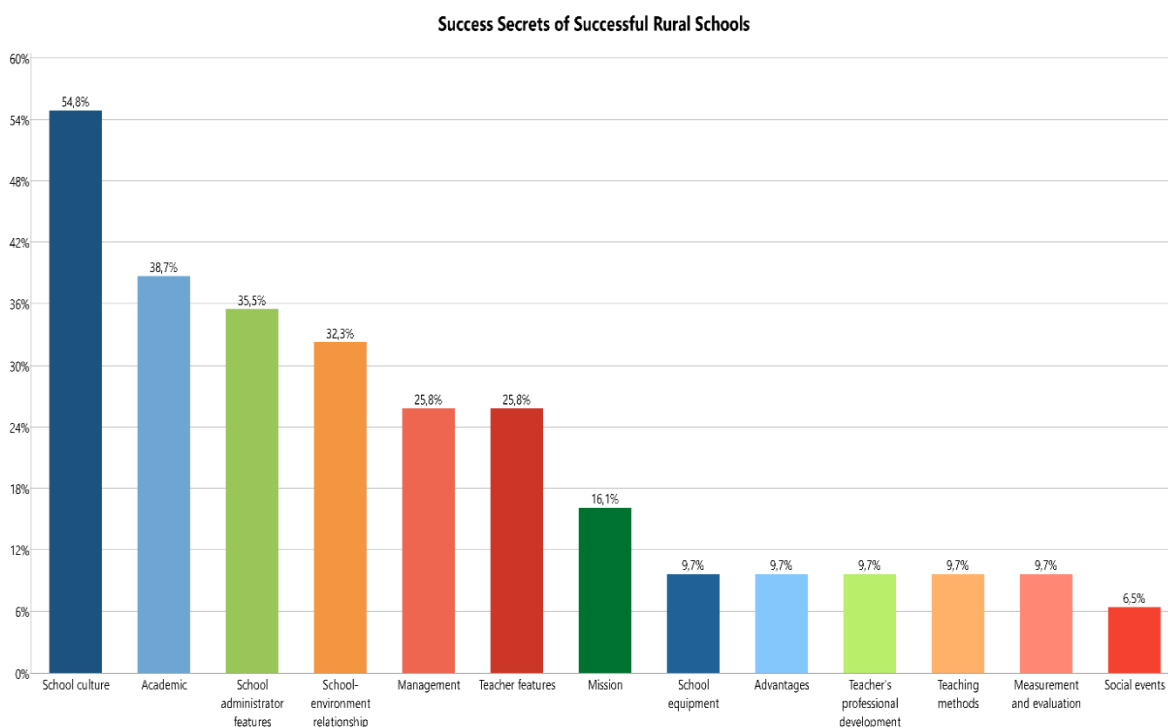
Figure 3: Distribution of themes according to documents

As Figure 3 shows, 54.8% of the 31 documents regarded school culture as the principal secret of successful RS. Then respectively, 38.7% belonged to academic aspects, 35.5% to school administrator features, management had 25.8%, teacher features had 25.8%, 16.1% was attributed to mission, school equipment had 9.7%, advantages had 9.7%, teacher professional development had 9.7%, teaching methods had 9.7%, measurement and evaluation had 9.7% and school events had 6.5%.

DISCUSSION

In the light of the results of this review, the factors which distinguish SRS from other schools and enable them to be successful can be explained through several parameters. School culture in particular can be said to be one of the most important secrets of success in SRS. The factors which were reported as contributing to establishing a positive school culture were the high motivation of teachers, their cooperation, strong bonds between them, a comfortable working atmosphere and a safe school environment. Hill (2017) identified schools in rural Alaska with high student achievement and sought to determine which factors were effective in achieving this success. Tilley (2011) conducted an in-depth study of the leadership practices and culture which contribute to school success in a low-income school. Centilli (2008) inquired into why a successful rural school model is perceived as successful. Uphoff

(2008) analysed two successful RS by exploring the policies and practices of the schools, their leadership activities and their planning focused on school development.

The most important element in creating a school culture is the school administrator as a leader. As a matter of fact, school administrators' leadership skills were found to have a dominant role in the success of successful RS. The school administrator as a leader is collaborative, has strong communication skills and develops a supportive rapport with the immediate environment of the school. Tijivikua (2006) investigated the leadership role of the school principal in a successful rural school, Hollenbeck (2006) explored the roles of the principals of successful schools in difficult living conditions and Clark (2009) examined which leadership type in a successful rural school district was beneficial in increasing student achievement. Miller (2005) investigated the obstacles to the success of students who were successful in a successful school and students who were successful in a non-successful school. Austin (2017) conducted research on two rural high schools in Texas by examining how they prepared their students for university and their careers according to the perceptions of teachers and school administrators. Masumoto (2006) reviewed what kind of unique practices the most successful poor-rural school administrators held. Waweru (1987) looked into whether principals in successful rural primary schools in Kenya exhibited more leadership behavior than principals in unsuccessful schools. Diel (1998) discussed the success of RS in terms of cultural structuring.

Amongst the secrets of success in these schools was the processes by which they carried out academic activities. A student-centered education is planned and enacted according to the needs of each and every student. There is also a positive climate which encourages learning for all. Interaction between students is strong, instruction targets small groups, and expectations are shared. Curriculums are customized and techniques which meet the needs of the students are used in a way that is constantly open to improvement. It is apparent that a nurturing and democratic environment is offered to the students in successful RS. Mistakes are not judged; creativity and critical thinking are encouraged. Childs (2011) identified seven themes: positive image, student achievement, positive behavior, post-secondary follow-up, communication, parent involvement and the support of the school environment. The themes are generally involved in a novel trio of a school having a purpose, a joint effort for student success and positive relationships. This actually resembles the results of the current review. Barley and Beesley (2007) suggested that the success of these schools has four basic components: leadership, education, a professional learning community and the school environment.

The management activities of school administrations in successful RS are professional. Teacher continuity is given importance and a data-based management approach is dominant. School/environment relations are valued and support is received from pupils' families. Teachers are highly committed to their profession. They also have a mission which is realistic and achievable. They do not have any inadequacies in terms of educational materials or physical equipment in terms, for example, of facilities and infrastructure. Phelps, Peach and Reddick (1998) reported that the common features of successful schools are clearly defined goals and objectives, a positive climate for the learning environment, high expectations, a coherent education program, a competent school leader and the community's perception of the school as a good school. Their findings showed that the physical facilities and infrastructure of RS are also sufficient to provide qualified education to a small(er) number of students. Having a safe environment in the school also leads to good rapport amongst all parties. They have sufficient instructional materials and these materials are used by effective teachers. Tijivikua (2006) stated that successful schools provide quality education to students and bring students into society not only to be successful in exams, but also to be good citizens when they graduate. Clonch (2016) identified six themes: shared responsibility, rural sensitivities, a continuous improvement mindset, positive and professional staff relationships, joint practices, and a commitment to effective practices.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In line with all the findings set out above and in the literature, the debate is about the success of RS in American culture because even though they have been found to be successful around the world, the number of studies of successful rural schools is very limited. Because of the lack of clear information about the rest of the world, the findings and results of this review were limited to SRS in American

culture. In conclusion, in order to ensure an SRS, it is first necessary to create a school culture which embraces a positive climate. The most important stakeholder who creates this culture is the school administrator as the leader. A success story can emerge through the leadership of the school administrator, but the school administrator should not be someone who takes on the whole responsibility. In order to achieve success, there is a need for the support of pupils' families and also that of teachers. In addition, there should be sufficient teaching materials for effective teaching and, in particular, access to relevant physical equipment is essential.

Academic success is achieved by making detailed planning and arrangements toward implementation acknowledging each student. Where this is not possible, small groups are taught. Although the leaders who can assure such a school system are school administrators, sustainability depends on teachers' belief in the school's mission and vision and in their own efforts. Further to these, the support of families and the environment has an active role in a school's success. A needs-oriented approach is necessary for planning and implementing various aspects of education, including assessment and evaluation, teaching programs, social activities and teacher development. Identifying the needs and producing a success-oriented policy within the school also depends on both the school administrator as the leader and on the teachers. One single person cannot be expected to create a success story, but a leading school administrator is expected to designate and maintain an effective school system.

The results reported above lead to the following suggestions:
- ✓ School administrators with leadership qualities should be appointed to schools which are inherently disadvantaged, such as RS. In addition, state support should be provided so that these leader-managers can overcome any difficulties which emerge.
- ✓ A school administrator as the leader should be given the task to develop an effective school system for these schools bearing in mind the needs of the local region.
- ✓ School administrators should be able to develop leadership characteristics and increase collaborative practices within and outside the school,
- ✓ RS should have applicable, measurable and easily evaluated goals as part of their mission,
- ✓ School administrators should design and implement programs for the continuous development of teachers' professional competencies,
- ✓ The physical facilities of schools should be strengthened to serve the social development of the students,
- ✓ Schools should be arranged as safe places, risk factors should be reduced and appropriate educational materials should be accessible.

Limitations of the Study

This review was limited to rural US schools and was limited to analysing the empirical findings of 31 studies addressing the success of rural schools.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval

The formal ethics approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Nevşehir Hacıbektaş Veli University. I conducted the study in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration in 1975.

Funding

No specific grant was given to this research by funding organizations in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the research team's university ethics committee of the Nevşehir Hacıbektaş Veli University (Approval Number/ID: 02/2023/57. Hereby, i as the authors consciously assure that for the manuscript "Dwelling Upon the Backstage of the Success of Rural Schools: A Systematic Review Analysis " the following is fulfilled:

• This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.

• The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.

• The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.

• All sources used are properly disclosed.

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