Instructional Leadership Challenges and Practices of Novice Principals in Rural Schools

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We report on a phenomenological study of the leadership experiences of six novice, rural public school principals in a midwestern U.S. state. We situated our analysis within existing research on leadership for learning, particularly how novice principals interpreted instructional leadership challenges in the context of rural school leadership. Our findings indicated that principals worked to balance their professional and private lives and were challenged to meet their community's expectations to be visible and engaged. To meet districts' constrained budgetary circumstances, the principals also maintained overlapping district- and building-level responsibilities. The principals focused heavily on developing relationships and trust among their teachers, students, and parents. The implications of this study demonstrate a need to develop new leaders' understanding of rural school community expectations; develop skills to fulfill expanding job responsibilities; and supplement leadership preparation, mentoring, and professional development programs regarding the specialized needs of rural school leaders.

Educational leadership scholars have asserted that broader community, school, and organizational contexts can influence and define principals' leadership practices (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Jennings, 1999). How principals work in the context of rural schools is critical to understanding how principals interpret and enact instructional leadership to meet the diverse needs of their rural community stakeholders (Bauch, 2001; Hallinger, 2011, Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2014; Tuters, 2015). Previous research has investigated and discussed how principals working in rural, urban, and suburban settings encounter contextually relevant challenges and respond in different ways to meet the instructional leadership needs of their schools and communities (Burgess & Dermott, 1983; Chance & Lingren 1988, 1989; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Howley, Howley, & Larson, 1999; Jacobson & Whitworth, 1990). Principals' work in rural schools is conducted within tight social communities that require them to fulfill multiple

roles and unique responsibilities that encompass the school and the community (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985; Preston et al., 2014; Wildy & Clarke, 2008b). Rural communities' expectations of rural school leaders are very high and require a principal who is willing to engage with all stakeholders to help lead the school community (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). Due to these contextual attributes, rural school principal leadership is a unique challenge for all principals and can be especially challenging for novice principals (Hazi, 1998; Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Novice principal leadership experiences are often described as overwhelming, pressure-filled induction "reality shocks" (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 434). Compared to their professional training, the majority of novice principals see their most important learning as occurring via trial and error and through reflection on professional experiences and lessons learned while in the principal position (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008). Novice principals face many management and leadership challenges as they navigate in their new leadership role, such as time management, lack of policy knowledge, timely completion of paperwork, curriculum knowledge, and budget management (Lee, 2015; Nelson et al., 2008; Starr & White, 2008). Chalker (1999) and colleagues provided an insightful text on effective principal leadership in rural schools. They documented strategies to

assist experienced and developing rural principals "cope" with challenges and expectations brought upon by the broader community, parents, and school boards (Chalker, 1999, p. 260). Among these strategies are focusing on people and relationships, sincerity, sequential progress, and hard work and resilience (Hurley, 1999).

In consideration of the varieties of local contexts and characteristics that comprise rural settings and communities, we situated our study within the most recent studies on contextually relevant rural instructional leadership that have been completed in both international and U.S. settings. The most recent research on novice rural principals' instructional leadership has primarily investigated principals' experiences and challenges within or across international locations (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Northfield, 2013; Wildy & Clarke, 2008a, 2012). In the United States, there has been a greater research focus on novice principals who work in U.S. urban schools (e.g., Spillane & Lee, 2014) with a comparatively lower number of studies that have investigated novice rural principals' instructional leadership knowledge and development over the last 30 years (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985; Nelson et al., 2008). Additional research is needed on novice rural principals and their instructional leadership experiences and challenges in consideration of evolving challenges brought upon by community, policy, and economic demands in rural areas within the United States (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Brenner, Elder, Wimbish, & Walker, 2015; Budge, 2006; Edwards & Longo, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Parson, Hunter, & Kellio, 2016; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

In response to this gap in the novice rural school principal leadership literature, the purpose of this study was to understand how novice rural principals thought about and described their emerging and contextually responsive instructional leadership practices. Building on previous research on rural communities, rural leadership, and novice rural principals' instructional leadership experiences, we wanted to know how a small sample of novice rural principals interpreted their own instructional leadership to respond to contextually relevant challenges within their contemporary rural school communities. We investigated the early career experiences of six rural novice public school principals in a midwestern state within the first three years of their tenure as head principal. We addressed two main research questions.

1. What educational leadership challenges do rural novice public school principals identify as they transition to the principal position?

2. How do rural novice public school principals interpret these challenges to their leadership practices as emerging instructional leaders?

Our study makes a unique contribution to the literature in a few important ways. First, our investigation is one of the few contemporary studies that has investigated rural novice principals' instructional leadership experiences in the context of a rapidly evolving educational landscape in one state within the United States. Second, recent research has identified the complex nature of experienced and novice principal leadership in rural school and community settings that have not been documented extensively from novice principals' perspectives within the United States. Finally, our research design and analysis enabled us to investigate and compare principals' perspectives on their instructional leadership based on their previous experiences within and outside of rural school and community settings. Our findings indicate how complex the rural principal position is to novice principals, even among those principals who previously worked and lived in rural school communities. Our study presents evidence that familiarity and experience in rural school communities as educators and citizens may not automatically translate to positive feelings of rural novice principal professional confidence or self-efficacy.

Literature Review

We situated our study within three areas of existing educational leadership literature: principal leadership and the context of rural schools, leadership for learning, and novice principal leadership. Our conceptual framework draws on research that situates principals' work in context, noting the unique needs and characteristics of rural school communities that potentially define aspects of their school leadership. In support of our analysis, we used principals' sensemaking as a theoretical framework to understand novice rural principals' interpretations of how conditions within their school and surrounding communities potentially impacted their work as new leaders.

Principal Leadership and the Context of Rural Schools

Rural communities are unique school-community contexts that are characterized by a strong "sense of place" (Bauch, 2001, p. 205; Brown & Schafft, 2011; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). A sense of place within rural settings has been more specifically described as "the central cohesion point of a life interconnected with other beings" (Bushnell, 1999, p. 81). Highlighting how a rural sense of place connects to school leadership, Budge (2006) conducted a case study of 11 rural school and community leaders to understand how rural contexts influence principals' perspectives of their communities and schools. She advocated for principals to enact a leadership and pedagogy that reflected a "critical leadership of place" and encouraged school leaders to understand and accept that schools function as

an indicator of the welfare of the broader rural community (Budge, 2006, p. 9). Described in terms of pedagogy and leadership philosophy, critical leadership of place requires school leaders to enable all community stakeholders to "cherish and celebrate local values, histories, culture, and the ecology of place they inhabit [and simultaneously] confront the social, political, economic, and environmental problems in their communities" (p. 81). Residents in rural areas value the bonds created through personal, social connectedness that is also reflected in the small, positive school cultures in rural schools (Bauch, 2001; Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Rural school communities are characterized by feelings of family bonds, "peace, safety, and caring" that permeate throughout the community (Herzog & Pittman, 1999, p. 19). Rural communities also face challenges, such as changing demographics, poverty, economic changes and strain, educational accountability, school consolidation, and younger citizens' population shifts to more urban and suburban areas (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Meckley & Hazi, 1994; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Tuters, 2015). Previous research and broader narratives in society have also mischaracterized rural school communities as homogeneous, lacking in diversity, culturally banal, and as "a problem to overcome rather than a setting to understand" (Burton, 2013, p. 8; Tuters, 2015). Indeed, rural communities have complex identities and unique needs that contribute to the broader discussions of diversity, inclusion, economic development, and community engagement (Avant, Rich-Rice, & Copeland, 2013; Burton, Brown, & Johnson, 2013; Redding & Walberg, 2012; Tuters, 2015). Salient to rural public schooling, how principals approach their school leadership in the context of demanding, changeable, and variable communities is an understudied area of educational leadership research (Hallinger, 2016). Contextually responsive leadership is not only shaped by the characteristics and culture of a particularly rural sense of place, but also the particular issues and challenges that are present in the community, school systems, and the political environment (Hallinger, 2016).

Contextually responsive leadership in rural schools. Educational leadership research has identified evidence of the contextual influence on principals' perceptions and practices of instructional leadership (Hannaway & Talbert, 1993; Hallinger, 2016; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Wieczorek, 2017; Wimpelberg, Teddlie, & Stringfield, 1989). Principals' leadership practices have been positioned as "situational," meaning that their leadership is defined by "the organizational structures that shape their interactions, and the cultural context in which they are embedded" (Diamond & Spillane, 2016, p. 148; Spillane et al., 2001). Previous research has established that contexts of school leadership include geographic location, demographics, socioeconomic status, policy environment, and the culture of local and surrounding communities

(Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Hallinger, 2016). A recent review of the impacts of context on leadership demonstrates that community contexts of leadership vary for school leaders "with respect to needs, opportunities, resources and constraints they present to school leaders" (Hallinger, 2016, p. 7). The school principal is a critical, visible presence who is tasked with responding to the school's and community's needs.

Rural schools and their principals are subject to similar environmental influences and challenges as compared to their suburban and urban school counterparts, such as educational policies, accountability, financial constraints, poverty, and community engagement (Preston & Barnes, 2017). However, research on rural communities and the contemporary rural principalship has demonstrated principals' distinctive responses to unique types of rural school needs that are conflated with these broader external influences, such as geographic isolation (Klar & Brewer, 2014), teacher recruitment and retention (Brenner et al., 2015), district consolidation (Edwards & Longo, 2013), low levels of academic expectations and motivation (Budge, 2006), and lower levels of staffed teaching and administrative positions and organizational capacity (Parson, Hunter, & Kallio, 2016). Recent research studies highlight contextually responsive rural school leadership that address some of these issues. For example, in their case study of Principal Cummings, Klar and Brewer (2014) highlighted Mr. Cummings' strategy to build community among a geographically dispersed school population where some students traveled 20 miles to attend school. He emphasized parental and community involvement and provided more convenient times for parents to attend school functions during all times of the year that were advertised well in advance. He also solicited support from local organizations and companies to support a long-standing summer reading program. Brenner et al. (2015) described how 10 middle school principals in Mississippi perceived alternative teacher training pathways designed to fill vacancies and supply rural schools with new, high-quality teachers. Despite their optimism to hire teachers with more content knowledge and professional experience, they were concerned that the program needed intense site-based mentoring and development for new teachers. Over the longer term they believed that it could be difficult for schools to meet new teachers' needs because of a lack of master teacher mentors. These examples highlight how the rural principal is a prominent citizen, member, and position of the community at large and serves as a crucial problem-solver who bridges the concerns and priorities of the school, community, and state policymakers (Arnold et al., 2005; Chalker, 1999; Eady & Zepeda, 2007; Mette, 2014).

Rural school principals' perceptions of their leadership. Compared to the contexts of urban and suburban school systems, rural principals often experience

heightened feelings of professional isolation and pressure to perform multiple roles within the school system (Hazi, 1998; Preston et al., 2014; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). In a systematic review of research published internationally from 2003-13 that concerned the challenges faced by rural school leaders, Preston et al. (2014) found several themes that are relevant to this current study. Their review found rural principals are often isolated in their positions and are viewed as "instructional experts" by their faculty and staff (p. 7). As a means to adapt to the constraints of a rural school principalship, an effective rural principal embraces teachers as collaborative co-leaders to foster school success, "where resources are limited and teachers provide important links between the community's values, beliefs, and attitudes and those reflected by the public schools" (Hilty, 1999, p. 163). In a follow-up review of 40 studies regarding effective rural leaders' professional skills, dispositions, and practices, Preston and Barnes (2017) found that rural principals value person-centered leadership through the development of relationships and collaborations with stakeholders to enact their instructional leadership. For example, in a cross-case analysis of four principals in three districts in California, Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) found rural principals fostered high levels of engagement and collaboration with parents, students, teachers, and local community leaders. They also identified leaders who focused on high expectations for instruction, teacher performance, and meeting students' needs. In another example, Starr and White (2008) investigated the leadership challenges of 76 principals in rural areas of Australia in response to policy reforms. They found rural principals were constrained by resources and reported high levels of work responsibilities and time management difficulties. They also found the principals were strategic in how they built relationships and collaborations with community stakeholders. Most often, rural school principals feel as though they employ their isolated positions as "lone rangers," as the ones who are ultimately responsible for all aspects of school improvement, including resource management, academic expectations and standards, professional development, and instructional supervision (Stewart & Matthews, 2015, p. 1). The research intersections on the unique nature of the rural context and the rural principal position are also informed by broader conceptual ideas and research on instructional leadership. Although principals' instructional leadership cuts across all contexts, it is important to understand principals' challenges to balance multiple job responsibilities within a community that relies heavily on their leadership and stature in the rural community.

Leadership for Learning

Principals' instructional leadership across all school contexts, including rural, suburban, and urban areas, requires high levels of collaboration and involvement of all school-level stakeholders and the broader community at large (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Research on effective principal leadership continues to evolve, and a comprehensive review of the leadership effectiveness literature revealed how contemporary instructional leadership is multi-dimensional (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Principals' instructional leadership should include practices that reflect principals' shared instructional leadership, transformative leadership, and distributed leadership practices (Hallinger, 2011; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003; Spillane et al., 2001; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Principals can no longer act alone, and administrators' instructional leadership should be collaborative and build upon the existing capacity of the organization to create a cohesive professional culture (Hallinger, 2011; Marks & Printy, 2003). One model of instructional leadership that reflects these contemporary dimensions of effective instructional leadership is *leadership for learning* (Hallinger, 2011).

Research on leadership for learning has firmly established that effective principal leadership is essential to successful schools and positive teacher and student development and learning (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, Elliot, Goldring, & Porter, 2007; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). As defined by Hallinger (2011), leadership for learning incorporates multiple stakeholders and aspects on instructional leadership practices that "suggests a broader conceptualization that incorporates both a wider range of leadership sources as well as additional foci for action" (p. 126). For example, Hallinger (2011) consolidated leadership for learning concepts into four dimensions: values leadership, leadership focus, contexts of leadership, and sharing leadership. Principals' leadership values include how they communicate and model their principles and standards for their school community, such as respect, work ethic, and fairness. Leadership focus includes the ways in which principals enact their vision, goals, and structures to develop others and foster school improvement through actions such as teacher professional development, resource management, and developing school culture. Leadership is also a function of context, and principals enact instructional leadership and approach school goals, students, staff, and community concerns differently based on their particular school and community environments (Hallinger, 2011, 2016). Finally, principals that share leadership include and value their stakeholder input and collaboration to promote mutual accountability and ownership of school goals.

Considering the multifaceted nature of principals' leadership for learning demands, previous literature on novice school principals demonstrates how novice leaders have difficulty navigating the various expectations of management and leadership demands during their initial years on the job (Buckner, 1999; Duncan & Sequin, 2002; LeGore & Parker, 1997; Petzko, 2008).

Novice Principal Learning and Development

The novice principal experience has been described as a difficult transition in all contextual settings, where new principals often express frustration, anxiety, and role conflict as they begin their leadership careers (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Focusing on the rural novice experience, a few studies have demonstrated novice principals' challenges to develop relationships, maintain positive cultures, and meet students' needs in the face of constrained resources. For example, in a case study of four novice principals in Texas, Nelson et al. (2008) investigated how new principals applied their educational training in principal preparation programs to their new positions. They found the principals were prepared for the technical or management aspects of the work but were challenged by developing and maintaining positive professional relationships. The researchers noted relationships were both "a source of angst and of support" for principals (p. 697). In another example that portrayed a different set of findings, five novice principals provided work logs and were interviewed in Scotland to learn about their experiences as new leaders (Cowie & Crawford, 2008). Among a multitude of management concerns that ranged from bullying to staff absences, the researchers noted that the principals quickly recognized the importance of rising above task-driven work and focusing on community building and school culture.

One of the largest and most widely cited studies of novice rural leadership was conducted by Alvy and Coladarci (1985). In their survey study of 70 elementary and secondary principals in Montana, they identified 17 challenge areas that gave new principals the most difficulty. The top five reported challenges were related to instruction: evaluating instruction, promoting change, improving teachers' instruction, implementation of research based practices, and meeting students' needs. In one of the very few more recent investigations of novice rural school leadership, Clarke and Wildy (2004) shared the narrative of "Hazel," a beginning principal from Australia. Their rich account of her first year as head teacher and principal portrays a leader who understands the needs of her community and works in relative isolation with constrained resources to meet the needs of her school. A substantive research review and practitioner-minded discussion of the unique challenges of rural leadership was published by Aston and Duncan (2012), who proposed a contextually relevant principal toolkit for novice rural principals. They outlined eight leadership behaviors that contribute to emerging rural leaders' success. Among them are: taking time to build rapport, establish key relationships, getting to know the community at large, finding a supportive mentor, and developing resilience and coping strategies (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). Whether from Texas, Scotland, Australia, or Montana, the role of the novice principal is challenging, and rural principals confront unique challenges as they begin their careers compared to principals in other contexts.

The literature review provides evidence that principal effectiveness is essential to school improvement across all school contexts, but there is growing evidence that how principals enact leadership for learning is contextually relevant. Due in part to the isolated nature of their jobs, as well as their prominent position in rural schools and communities, rural principals should facilitate close relationships with their teachers, stakeholders, and surrounding communities to manage their complex position responsibilities. Novice principals experience initial role conflicts and uncertainties as they learn to lead, and in the context of rural schools this learning curve is potentially acute. The experiences of novice rural principals have not been studied extensively in the literature, especially in the United States. This study is a timely investigation of a small, purposeful sample of new school leaders that can potentially contribute to the existing literature on rural school leadership.

Theoretical Framework

We theoretically framed our analysis of novice rural principals' accounts of their leadership for learning activities as socially constructed *sensemaking* phenomena (Sleegers, Wassnick, van Veen, Imants, 2009; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking posits that individuals continuously construct meaning from their personal histories, professional experiences, and beliefs within the situational contexts of their work with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Weick, 1995). We analyzed principals' responses as reflective snapshots of their past actions and how they narrated their thoughts, beliefs, and priorities regarding their leadership for learning actions intended to improve their rural schools (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking as a theoretical framework has been sparsely used in peer-reviewed studies on rural school teachers (Tuters, 2015) and rural school leadership (Rogers, 2011); it has been applied more to research on leadership in urban school settings (e.g., DeMatthews, 2015; Shirrell, 2016; Stern, 2016). We drew on two peer-reviewed studies that applied contextual aspects of senesmaking to understand novice rural school principals' experiences in this study.

Following the theoretical applications of sensemaking presented by Sleegers et al. (2009) and Spillane and Lee (2014), we applied sensemaking to understand how the principals in this study narrated their practices in the context of rural school communities and their professional experiences. In their study, Sleegers et al. (2009) investigated the sensemaking of two novice secondary principals in the Netherlands and how they managed difficult situations in their first years as school leaders. To determine the most

pressing concerns among principals who were brand new to the position, Spillane and Lee (2014) conducted a mixed methods study of 17 novice principals who started new jobs after completing their principal preparation program. In both studies, researchers aimed to understand how novice principals interpreted the needs of their school communities in context, while consciously thinking about their own perspectives and experiences in the midst of emerging challenges, opportunities, and aspirations as new leaders. The theory of sensemaking is appropriate to analyze principals' responses in this study. Each of the principals had different experiences and backgrounds when they commenced their rural principalship. Supported by sensemaking theory, we took into account participants' personal and professional histories, the contexts of the school and surrounding rural community, as well as broader conceptual ideas of instructional leadership the principals learned and used as part of their previous experiences in schools and leadership preparation training.

Methods

We used semi-structured interviewing as part of a phenomenological, qualitative study design (Creswell, 2013). This study reports on the reflective responses and experiences of six novice principals who worked in rural school settings in a midwestern state in the United States. We recruited volunteer principal participants from a state database of novice principals who participated in an intra-district administrative mentoring program supported by a private, state-level school leadership association. We interviewed principals who worked in six separate rural district and county locations as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as "distant rural," or "census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area" (NCES, 2006). Due to resource constraints, we limited our sample to the surrounding rural communities of one large urban area within the state and received six confirmations for participation. The definition and identification of a novice principal varies in the literature from as little as three months' experience in the position (Spillane & Lee, 2014) up through their first three years on the job (Gentilucci, Denti, & Guaglianone, 2013; Sleegers et al., 2009). We used purposeful sampling to recruit principals who were in their first three years as head principal. The professional backgrounds of our participants and rural community characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Data Collection

We conducted the study from January-October 2016. A set of 14 semi-structured interview questions based on previous literature were posed to each participant and audio-recorded during a 60- to 75-minute session. The question protocol was reviewed and edited among four additional faculty peer members and two public school administrator colleagues who worked in rural school districts. The interview protocol included questions about participants' past experiences in education; questions about their leadership practices as new principals; and reflective questions about principals' perspectives about rural leadership, their future needs as leaders, and potential changes in their practices. All six interviews were conducted in person at the participants' school offices. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were taken and incorporated as observer comments during the interview process. We added observer comments as part of our joint post-interview coding and discussion sessions. We referenced district web pages, state education department demographic information, and publicly available information from NCES and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide background information for the communities and supplement principals' responses in the findings section where applicable. We did not collect or analyze documents pertaining specifically to principals' daily leadership work or school management processes such as calendars, memos, or professional correspondence. Our phenomenological design relied on principals' interpretations of their work.

Data Analysis

We used NVivo 11 to develop codes framed epistemologically by principals' socially constructed sensemaking (Sleegers et al., 2009) regarding their leadership for learning experiences (Hallinger, 2011). We used a three-stage coding procedure based on an analytic inductive approach (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). We first separately completed an initial line-by-line open emergent coding session that was based strictly on the information contained in the transcribed notes. We discussed our first-round interpretations and came to a shared understanding of participants' responses. Second, we completed an a priori coding procedure based on Hallinger's (2011) leadership for learning conceptual framework: leadership focus, values, sharing, and context. We selected Hallinger's (2011) model to determine leadership for learning activities in support of research question one, as well as an analytic mechanism to separate principals' experiences that were significant to the rural school community context in support of research question two. Hallinger's model also provided structure to organize multiple, interrelated aspects of principals' instructional leadership practices. Finally, we conducted a third round of focused coding by comparing initial round one and round two codes and data to one another to reveal the most emergent patterns of leadership that were embedded

Table 1

Principal, School, and Community Characteristics

Principal's Name (Pseudonym)	Principal's Head Leadership Experience at School	Principal's Professional Background in Education	School Grade Levels	School Enrollment & Ethnicity	School F/RP Lunch Rate	Community Rate of Bachelor Degree Attainment	Community Economy Type	Community Median Household Income
Catherine	2	Suburban Special education	2-12	< 100 93% White	35%	31%	Farming, Manufacturing	$59,887
Samantha	2	Urban Special education & elementary education	9-12	<300 96% White	27%	16%	Farming, Manufacturing, Railroad	$51,782
Jonathan	3	Urban Business and technology education	9-12	<700 95% White	44%	17%	Farming, Manufacturing, Railroad	$47,843
Samuel	2	Rural Physical education and health	5-8	<700 95% White	44%	17%	Farming, Manufacturing, Railroad	$47,843
Madeleine	1	Rural Elementary, middle level language arts and technology, special education	6-12	<200 97% White	29%	10%	Farming, Manufacturing	$42,495
Elena	1	Suburban Elementary education	2-4	<500 92% White	44%	17%	Farming, Manufacturing, Railroad	$47,843

Note. Data collected from study participants, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), state education department.

specifically within the context of rural schools (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Coded entries were then consolidated into themes to determine the most salient findings related to the two research questions.

Researchers' Stance

Doug is a former administrator who worked in private and public suburban K-12 schools. Currently, he teaches leadership preparation courses and is engaged in research and practice partnerships with rural schools regarding school improvement initiatives such as blended learning and competency based education. As a former rural school principal and superintendent, Carolyn possesses an insider perspective on rural school leadership within this research study. Her mentoring work with new principals, as well as supervising principals on a daily basis, are potential sources of evaluative bias. We acknowledge our respective roles and

professional histories and how they potentially impacted our analysis. Together, we worked to mitigate analysis bias through coding debriefing conversations to ensure study validity.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with institutional review requirements, we have taken extreme care to protect the identities of our participants. In their positions as new administrators, they are inherently professionally vulnerable to identity disclosure and negative professional consequences resulting from their participation. Each of the participants shared stories or vignettes that would possibly identify them, other stakeholders, or their school communities. The participants were very forthcoming, vulnerable, and honest when providing insights about their work. We have redacted sensitive details from the data set and withheld extensive details about the state setting, participants, their schools, or surrounding communities. We assigned pseudonyms for all participants and rounded numbers of schools' student populations.

Findings

To review, we posed two research questions: (1) What educational leadership challenges do rural, novice public school principals identify as they transition to the principal position? and (2) How do rural, novice public school principals interpret these challenges to their leadership practices as emerging instructional leaders? We present our findings in three main sections. First, the principals described how their positional stature and visibility in the rural community brought feelings of pressure to meet their community's expectations. They were expected to participate in all school and community events and shared how they strived to find professional balance and fit into the community culture. Second, the principals explained how their school communities experienced resource constraints that impacted their abilities to recruit teachers and maintain instructional programs. These fiscal matters were beyond their immediate positional control, so they focused on strategies to bolster school-community connections, develop school-community partnerships, recruit quality teachers, and maintain positive public relations with their communities. Third, in response to these resource constraints, districts worked to become more efficient and consolidate inter-district administrative roles and positions. The principals experienced significant time constraints and role uncertainty and sought to work within the structure of districts' efforts to consolidate human and capital resources.

Pressure and Visibility in the Rural Community

Although each principal embraced the smaller, close-knit community that is inherent in rural school communities, the principals were also challenged by the smaller feel and intimacy of the school and surrounding community. Unanimously, the principals were enthusiastic and caring leaders who were wholly committed to leading rural schools. As an example, Catherine stated, "With any job, there are challenges, but I absolutely love it. This isn't a job that I would look at leaving any time soon." Despite their differences in professional backgrounds and perspectives, they all provided examples of how the rural school community context challenged their learning and development as new leaders. With the exception of Catherine, who worked in a more specialized rural special education school, the principals recognized that their respective school districts were one of the largest employers of the community, where traditions and personal connections are centralized and valued.

Most days these rural principals feel as if they need to be seen everywhere in order to appear engaged in the school and community. The principals were invited to attend various school and community events such as the local pancake breakfast to support cancer, the Rotary fundraiser to support school scholarships, and the baseball fundraiser at the local chicken restaurant. The rural principals felt pulled in every direction and constantly worried about saying "no" in fear of negative backlash in the community. Catherine, a former suburban educator, shared her concerns of being so visible in a rural community:

> If you're in a larger district as an administrator I don't think anyone would know my name. Good and bad to that, because sometimes I don't want people to know who I am. But you're more visible in a rural setting because there's not as many, obviously. There are only a few administrators in a rural district.

This statement points to a clear distinction that emerges from the principals' responses. In rural communities the principal is not just a bureaucratic leader of the school building, but a respected and prominent member of the community who needs to embrace being visible. The protection of weekend anonymity as a means to separate life and work may not be available to rural principals. Principals are indeed important members of all communities, but in rural school communities the circles may also be tighter and multi-generational. The principals each expressed in their own way how community members are very closely linked. Samantha, a former urban educator, shared how she made sense of the surrounding community:

Everybody either knows somebody who has gone there [the school], has gone there, has kids that go there, and so it's really the centerpiece of the community. Everybody is related to everybody. Most people have parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, [and] uncles that have already gone to my school district. It's pretty amazing how that works.

In the majority of school contexts, the main connections are between principals, teachers, and parents. As Samantha stated, what makes rural settings unique is the nature of student-school relations among extended relatives and generations. The principals believed the close connections with and among people are valuable assets in rural communities. They believed that principals have more of a connection with parents and community members in a rural setting rather than in a larger urban or suburban setting. As examples, Samuel and Madeline shared how if they are not present for even a single community or school event, it gets noticed by various stakeholders in the community. Madeline described this challenge:

I think in a rural setting you have to be visible at all times. That's another challenge. In a larger district I could go out in the public and nobody may know me. Everybody knows you and wants to discuss things with you.... I think that is very challenging in a small town, they want you to be at the pancake breakfast and then the Cub Scout event. That's part of it, then, since everybody knows each other. I think you have to walk a fine line between different stakeholders, make sure that incorrect perceptions get changed.

The principals emphasized in their responses references to "everybody" or "everyone" regarding the expectations to be visible among the community at large. It is the expectation that building principals attend as many events as they can to support all the students and the various community events. Closer to the school community, the expectations are even higher, and parents and school staff expect the principal to attend all events the school has to offer. Yet if the building principal misses an event to attend their own child's event, they could potentially upset the parents and school staff. Samuel shared his frustration to maintain this level of involvement:

I go to more events than anybody, and I can miss an event, and people will say, "Where were you last night?" I went to 154 events this year and people recognized the one that I didn't go to. I think it is just silly, but we are more recognizable and the expectation is that you do attend everything. Your job is your life. That is what you do when you're at work, then when you're away, your still at work. You don't get a lot of separation from that.

It is important to note that although Samuel and Madeleine came up through rural school settings, these sentiments were expressed by principals with and without previous rural school professional experiences. There is an increased intensity to being a rural school principal that is not comparable to working in larger systems, or even to being a teacher in a rural school. As Elena put it, "*You live in a complete bubble* that can be popped very easily if you're not careful, and you don't watch what you do, or what you say. You know, you always just have to be 'on.'" The principals also internalized their professional responsibilities in a way that impacted their personal lives, where the personal and professional "bubbles" were not mutually exclusive parts of their identities as school principals. They sought to find a sense of work-life balance that also separated their professional identities from their personal lives.

As a school leader in a rural community, being "on" also meant that it was difficult to be "off." For these principals, trying to separate principal from citizen took thoughtful planning and reflection, and they described it as an ongoing challenge. As Jonathan stated, "I think that's the thing that I'm trying to be cognizant of and trying to stay on top of things, and also maintaining my personal life outside of work and not always taking it home." Each was working to balance his or her personal and professional lives and meet family, school, and community obligations. More often than not, these two spheres of their identities collided, and the principals negotiated their spaces as best they could. For example, Samantha explained strategies she used to build in personal space for her and her family. She described one anecdote regarding how she now had to plan more carefully for trips to the community grocer. She said:

You know, there's times when I have to send [my spouse] to the grocery store because I can't be in public. I mean, because I, I love to get up on Saturday mornings and not put any make-up on and wear my pajamas all day. I can't do that as easily as [I] used to be able to.

She knew the probability was very high that she would run into a parent or community member that would want to talk to her about their child's progress, or last night's football game, or other school business. There were times she just wanted to compartmentalize her personal and professional spaces and had to purposefully create boundaries. Compared to her past experiences, she perceived that compartmentalization to be easier to accomplish in an urban school community setting. In another example, Elena elaborated on how she felt more anonymous in a larger, urban community prior to working

in a rural school community. However, she embraced the stature and recognition that was part of her job, although not explicitly stated in her position description. She explained,

> So this was all brand new for me ... that "small town feel" that you always hear about. I think I'm seen in a different light. I am more recognizable than I was in a larger community. I do try to be out and about, and be seen. It's part of my life. They see me with my [spouse], and they see me with my kids. I love that about being in a small town..., [but] you don't get that privacy that you necessarily wished that you had.

Among all the contextual effects on the principals, how they adjusted to and fit into the community as principals, citizens, and principal-citizens was the most prevalent. They were not yet settled on how to adopt a particular approach or persona that could balance their concerns. Naturally, they needed to start somewhere. In terms of the community, they wanted to be visible. In terms of their schools, they aspired to build relationships with their teachers, parents, and staff. The principals approached their new leadership from a building-centric perspective, and focused mainly on building and maintaining strong relationships and rapport among teachers, staff, parents, and students.

Building relationships and rapport. Our analysis revealed that these novice principals internalized the contextual demands and priorities in their new roles to concentrate on communicating to build relationships and rapport. They also considered the significance of being visible and accessible for parents and the community. Taken together, their focus on relationships was a mechanism to establish their emerging instructional leadership within each of their respective organizational contexts in their school and in the community.

The principals recognized very early in their new positions that they needed to maintain focused efforts on building and maintaining positive school cultures. For example, Catherine was protective of her staff and students and wanted to improve morale and make sure that she was perceived as an open-minded and frank leader whom teachers could freely engage in challenging conversations. The principals realized that their schools are in the community spotlight and can be subject to intense criticism, which is true in all contexts. However, this phenomenon may manifest a little differently in rural spaces. As Catherine explained, "News travels fast. That was the hardest thing for me to get used to, you sneeze and somebody knows about it in 10 minutes." However, given the close-knit nature and pressures they described within the community, they understood how they needed to pay particular attention to community perceptions and how it impacted morale.

Catherine stated:

> I'm working right now on just boosting morale ... you can really [feel] down on yourself pretty quickly ... sometimes they [the teachers] hear something negative and I just try to reassure them, "No, just take it with a grain of salt and move on from it." I like that it's [our staff] is a small team, so we can be very open. I always want to reassure them.

None of the schools were under external state- or federal-level accountability mandates to improve student achievement. However, the state does publish a state report card with school- and district-level rankings to which administrators do pay attention. In addition, the principals did not specifically cite overarching goals or district initiatives against which their performance was going to be evaluated. As novice principals in a rural setting, they were still figuring out how to adjust to the demands of the school and community and were particularly focused on developing relationships with their teachers, staff, and parents. Among the principals was a strong sense that they needed to build trust and rapport with their teachers and staff. Samantha emphasized the listening part of her approach with her teachers, particularly for the purposes of developing rapport with her faculty. Part of the issue she identified right away were issues of transparency and trust between the faculty and the administration. As she explained,

> Communication was a huge concern, for everyone. They had felt like, they had, had not known about a lot of things until the very last minute. So, I think they felt that there was a lot of, there wasn't a lot of transparency ... they didn't take what was happening at, at face value. So, I just really focused a lot on communicating.

Since their collective work is oftentimes stressful and uncertain, the principals recognized that it was important to create supportive atmospheres where all members of the school felt a part of the community and were valued. For example, Elena spoke directly about the core of her leadership approach. She stated, "I think the first goal is to continue the relationship building. It's not something that stops taking place. I'm here to support you [as a teacher]." According to the principals, this approach served to create mutual respect. For example, Samantha approached her work by communicating the value of treating everyone, and all members treating one another, with dignity and respect. She explained, "People in the building should be treated with dignity and respect. Whether they're a student or they're a teacher or they're an associate, everybody should

be treated with dignity and respect." She went on to explain that the school improvement team was not comprised of a representative or inclusive number of teachers and staff. Right away she took steps to change the makeup and protocols for shared decision making, particularly for decisions that impacted curriculum, assessment, and instructional processes. She stated, "My concern is that I really want to make sure we've got good diversity on this group. We don't have enough content teachers represented.... I'm not talking to the teachers that it's going to affect the most." These principals cited close relationships with staff as essential to their work as leaders. They all aspired to be inclusive and enact structures or leadership activities that brought in multiple perspectives and stakeholders' voices. While they valued these connections, the principals did not indicate significant awareness on how to involve or use the various stakeholders in the school improvement process. Their focus was primarily on relationship building and being accessible and visible.

Through accessibility and visibility, the principals described how they worked to create inclusive school communities that incorporated all stakeholders' voices and concerns. Madeleine described a more holistic view about how she engaged with each of the major stakeholders in her school, especially parents and students. She identified and explained how she approached each group specifically when she stated,

> In the parent point of view, if you're just accessible and will talk to them and let them vent when they need to vent and try to help with a student and you actually do that ... students [are] looking for somebody who is friendly and greets them and will listen to them when they have problems or [a principal] who is willing to let them come in the office and sit down and discuss things.

The principals each realized that before they could enact changes or reforms that impacted the academic improvement of their schools, they needed to recognize and listen to their stakeholders and create an atmosphere of trust and safety. By approaching their teachers on a person-first level, they believed they could then build rapport and a collective confidence to move forward. The construction of relationships was crucial to all the principals. The emotional side of leadership and the act of purposeful listening was also integral to Samuel's approach to building trust and a positive school culture. For example, Samuel spoke about the role of emotion in his approach to leading change:

> You at least have to have [pause] you know you have to be a person that is enough of a people person to understand the complexity of emotions

that people have. And being able to put your people first and try to build on those relationships. But, you have to build trust in order to start pushing towards what your ultimate goal is.

The principals believed that establishing more supportive relationships with teachers, and all stakeholders started with their own leadership presence and behaviors. They acknowledged the importance of listening, responsiveness, inclusivity, and respect, but they also understood how they needed to model these behaviors. As Samantha summed up, "They [members of the school community] need to know that if I ask them to go and mop the floor because somebody spilled something that I'm going to do that too, if I'm the one who's asked to do it." The new principals took their mutual and intersecting roles as model leader and servant of the school community very seriously. For example, Jonathan explained how he believed that modeling positive behaviors had an impact on all the relationships in his school, acting as a connective binder between him, his teachers, and the students. He said,

> I think being supportive, walking the walk, being present, being available. I think you [as principal] build those relationships with the teachers, just like we [leaders] expect the teachers to build the relationship with the kids that they see. You [as principal] mean what you say and you say what you mean.

Despite the principals' aspirations to improve their schools, they were very aware how important it was to take a relationship building approach first. Once that framework was in place they could begin to address other aspects of their instructional leadership. Through thoughtful reflection, listening, and perceptive understanding of their schools and stakeholders, they understood that one of their first priorities was to develop relationships and get to know their community. This process is particularly relevant given the financial and organizational circumstances in their schools and communities.

Economic and Resource Constraints

All six principals shared that a lack of resources is an ever-present reality when leading in a rural school setting. What principals described is part of a larger state-driven process to increase individual rural school districts' efficiency, and when necessary to ultimately consolidate rural districts into larger, more efficient, and sustainable community schools. The main driver of this initiative is budget and fiscal solvency, which is in jeopardy for many rural communities across the state and is unique to rural

communities. According to the state education department, in the last five years, 37 rural districts have either consolidated, merged, or dissolved, with zero changes reported in suburban or urban areas. School districts are also being awarded financial incentives when school districts consolidate and/or when they share various personnel such as superintendents, business managers, directors, etc. The reality of limited resources and state-level pressure for efficiency increased the fiscal and administrative urgency to maintain programs in rural settings that are already less privileged financially due to declining enrollment.

The principals recognized there were economic and resource constraints that inhibited their abilities to move their schools' instructional programming forward. As Catherine curtly stated, "And it's hard for me to say, 'Bottom line, it's the dollars.'" School districts in this midwestern state operate on student enrollment driven budgetary resources. The more students you enroll, the more money you receive from the state. In addition, the state has an open enrollment program that permits parents to enroll their child in any school district community. While none of the principals described specific active district strategies to purposefully recruit students to alleviate budget concerns, they did describe how academic success and positive school-public relations mattered. There was an underlying competition among rural districts to keep and possibly open enroll additional students. In his short tenure, Jonathan shared that he takes responsibility to market his school to his community to reinforce his school's positive reputation. Jonathan stated:

> It is my responsibility to help communicate and push the school forward in terms of marketing ourselves. You've got to look at marketing and communication completely differently than you used to. Back in the day you didn't have to publicize yourself. Now you do. We're competing for students, and so you have to be your own marketing firm so making sure that everybody's on the same page and we're going in the same direction is really important.

Arguably, this phenomenon is unique among rural school communities. While urban and suburban districts engage in competitive activities such as athletics, music, and academics, the competition to enroll students is not a major concern. This competition extended into recruiting teachers and staff. The principals realized they were at a disadvantage to recruit due to resource constraints, salary schedules, and benefits. Jonathan described the realities for rural schools:

> There's not a lot to choose from in comparison to an urban setting. I think pay and insurance and all those things make a huge difference in comparison

to the large schools. You have to be very skilled at selling yourself and your school when interviewing candidates to have them choose us over the larger school with more resources.

The rural schools were also constrained by the relative size of the community and the businesses that support and contribute to the school system through partnerships, donations, and community support. The distance between rural schools and larger, more densely populated areas impacts their accessibility to community resources and partnership support. For example, Samuel was the only principal to share his desire to bring in community and external partners, but he was constrained by limited opportunities to do so. He stated:

> We don't have as many resources, and there are places that are farther away that can assist, but we don't have that. In a larger city about an hour away the resources are abundant and there's a million businesses, a million people wanting to help your school out. This is a challenge, to make those connections meaningful to have those people partnering with you, and it ties into everything.

Despite the challenge to locate and identify resources in his rural community, he indicated that he would keep trying to develop community-school partnerships to supplement students' instruction in light of resource constraints. The differences among larger schools and smaller schools was evident in principals' responses about budget allocations. Madeline shared that the lack of funding had a greater impact on the rural schools in comparison to the larger school districts. She explained:

> Money is a big difference for us [compared to large districts]. I guess I shouldn't say that because I imagine bigger schools have money problems too, but I think its felt more in a smaller school.

The principals acknowledged that budgets are tighter across the state in all contexts, but the problems become more acute in smaller, rural school settings. The principals also described how not all rural districts are the same, and their relative student enrollment size makes a difference in how they can absorb fiscal changes. Samantha shared that her high school building academic program budget for the school year is only $10,000. She shared that she knows a neighboring high school principal 10 miles away—also rural, but larger—and his building academic program budget is roughly $100,000 per year. Samantha stated:

> I mean when you look at the difference between my budget and his budget, when he talks about doing things in his school, some of the things he is

able to do would take almost my whole budget for the school year.

The size of the district and community affords larger schools with distinct advantages and makes instructional leadership planning and implementation a challenge for smaller schools. In another example, Samantha's district was required to cut one million dollars from their general fund over the last two years. She put this into perspective, stating "Well, you know, cutting a million dollars out of the general fund in any school is difficult, but think of a school this size." Samantha and Catherine each explained that there have been and will likely be cuts to academic budgets and extracurricular programs in their schools as districts prioritize to keep staff and teachers and maintain class sizes.

In terms of impact on principals' practices, they have entered the principal position in challenging economic times that required them to think about their instructional programs. Samuel explained that he is developing a "more with less" mindset. Due to demographic and economic shifts in the state and in his local community, he is trying to balance multiple demands in his leadership. He explained that he needs to maintain programs as well as meet students' needs in the context of future economic and career trends. He described the intersecting and layered demands that all the principals were generally facing as they began their positions:

And I think funding is a huge challenge, more with less. I mean it's declining [funding]. It's declining [funding]. We need to find solutions. We talked about it the other day. Like are you stretching your people thin on stuff?

Clearly a lack of resources can impact rural schools and principals need to make sense of how to find solutions and continue to lead in positive ways that improve their school communities. The principals described how their work was impacted, and how they were also "stretched thin" to fulfill multiple roles in the context of constrained district and school resources.

The Multiple Roles of the Rural Principal

Each of the principals described how they wore multiple hats in their rural schools and districts. Their responsibilities often extended beyond those duties that are usual and customary to the school principal position. In each case, the principals described how their schools and districts were working to run more efficiently, which resulted in administrative changes and collapsing of job responsibilities.

Organizational and contextual circumstances increased principals' time management concerns and feelings of isolation from other colleagues in administration. Madeline stated, "There's only one of me!" when she was asked about her position and responsibilities. The relative size of their organizations indicated by district budgets, numbers of staff, and administrators' job responsibilities influenced how they thought about and approached their leadership. The principals worked amid shifting organizational workflow changes at the administrative level. In some cases, there were only two principals per district, meaning there was not a significant administrative team available to the principals. Also, in other cases the principals were not part of a building-level administrative team and did not have assistant principals or deans of students to support their work. While each relied on fellow principals within their districts and a mentor at the district level, such as an associate superintendent or superintendent, they had limited capacity to consult with a variety of administrative colleagues for guidance on managerial matters compared to larger urban or suburban districts. For example, regarding the volume and variety of her position responsibilities, Catherine stated,

In rural [schools], you do wear multiple hats. There's no HR [human resources department or director]. You do that. You're spread out, where a lot of times in those districts [larger suburban and urban], you're a little closer with those people, so that transition's unique. And maybe that's a difference between rural and urban settings, and I just perceived it.

This contextual difference especially impacted the principals' workload and abilities to balance multiple responsibilities. Larger districts have a dedicated human resources department and staff at the district level. Within these human resource departments, the leadership and staff manage the hiring process, mentoring programs, as well as other aspects of personnel management such as professional leave, benefits, and professional development credentialing. These processes take a significant amount of time from principals' duties as instructional leaders.

Madeline, Elena, Catherine, and Samantha also shared the challenge of wearing multiple hats while serving in their rural school districts. Catherine served as the special needs principal and district special education director, Madeline served as the secondary principal and district curriculum director, Samantha served as the high school principal and district special education director, and Elena served as the elementary principal and district Title I Coordinator. Although they did not complain or lament on their situations, they did explain how the combination of less staff and increased professional responsibilities were trying on their practices. They expressed how they had difficulty keeping up with their jobs due to the high demands on their time and the multiple roles that they fulfill for their schools and school districts. Madeline stated:

I think we do it all here [in the rural setting]. I think that's a lot. Bigger schools have a curriculum director and other roles. I think we have to do it here, all of it, and sometimes the lines get blurred between who is supposed to do what.

Although the principals did not specifically express it, the principals were describing how the districts were taking steps to be administratively efficient to preserve instructional programming and positions. Madeline realized how the various district-wide responsibilities fall on her shoulders since she is a principal in a rural setting. The job still needs to get done and since the rural schools do not have district-level people available to fulfill the multiple roles, the building principal needs to do it. Elena shared the same opinion as she was given the responsibility of building principal and Title I Coordinator for the school district. She explained:

In a rural school, it's interesting because you become some of the other roles that in a big district they'd have another person. For instance, I am the Title I Coordinator. In a bigger district there would be a person for that role. I just find that our roles are a little more compacted into other roles, where you wouldn't have that in a bigger district.

Catherine also echoed the challenge of meeting all the job demands of being a principal and special education director: "Personally, I need to figure out the balance of how things are going to work and how I can devote my time to both jobs, both titles." Balancing was a common solution for the principals when they described their approaches to manage their multiple roles. These shifts in roles often took place from one year to the next, resulting in organizational confusion. For example, in Samantha's district the previous high school principal also served as the part-time district superintendent. The district made organizational changes to the makeup of the administrative team, and now the district has a dedicated superintendent position. She now primarily serves as the principal and special education director and does not have duties as a superintendent. She explained:

So, that's kind of the atmosphere that I came in with. Just for everyone, it was different to have someone that was here, because last year, the principal was actually also the half-time superintendent. So, he was here all the time, but he was more doing the superintendent role than he was able to do the high school principal role.

In another example, Madeleine entered a situation where her principal colleague also previously served as the school principal and superintendent. In her current position she is now the main principal of the junior/senior high school building, and her colleague is now the dedicated superintendent. When she started her position, even the school board was confused as to who was responsible for particular administrative duties, and who was responsible for reporting on specific issues to the board. For example:

The board [community school board], they don't call me, they call the superintendent when they want to know stuff [about the building]. And I think it's a transition, yet, because he was the principal-superintendent so they go to him first. Until he tells them that, "You need to call [Madeleine] because she's dealing with that now." It's just that they're so used to going to him.

It was challenging for principals to learn their new roles in the context of organizational change within their school districts. Novice principals have a difficult enough time learning their jobs when the job descriptions are clear and consistent form one year to the next. Samantha summed up the strains on the whole administrative team when there is a lack of actual staff members to complete all the necessary tasks

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We have three administrators in our district, well actually two and a half. Our superintendent is half time. There are probably a lot of things that I currently do that if I had a full-time superintendent, I might not necessarily be doing. All the reporting [state and federal requirements] we do on our own. The other principal and I get together and do those things. We are developing a kind of at-risk plan, working on an evaluation process to make sure we are matching, we're the home school liaison, the ELL (English Language Learners) person, the 504 Coordinator. Between the two of us, we do all of those things. You have to be a master of a lot of things.

Although the workload of principals in all schools is demanding and requires time management, work-life balance, and boundaries, the rural school principals described an acute level of exposure and vulnerability. Their responses provide evidence that the number and level of responsibilities these novice principals faced far exceeded the workload of typical novice principals in other settings. Traditionally, formalized principal job descriptions may require district committee work and extended obligations in the community, but the principals in this study engaged in wide ranging district-level leadership work in conjunction with their usual and customary principal responsibilities.

Discussion

This article reports on how six novice principals in a midwestern U.S. state engaged in contextually responsive rural leadership for learning practices during the first three years of their leadership tenure. We argue that the unique, contextually responsive nature of rural schools and communities presents significant challenges for novice principals if they are not fully prepared for the role. Principals in rural communities are expected to be fully woven into the fabric of the community, and the principals in this study described tensions between their work and private lives. In addition, the press for efficiency, resource constraints, and administrative multi-tasking may limit novice principals' desires to enact deep and meaningful instructional leadership within their buildings. The starting point for the principals in this study was to develop relationships with their teachers, parents, and students in order to begin their instructional leadership processes, but participants did not describe specific strategies how they could draw upon the community to support their instructional leadership work.

Rural School Leadership in the Local Community "Bubble"

Although the novice school principalship can be a difficult, isolating experience in all school contexts, the rural principal faces unique pressures to meet rural communities' expectations (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Chalker, 1999; Hurley, 1999; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). The principals' feelings of always being "on" and working in a "bubble" were further complicated by the intersections of their personal and professional lives that involved their own families, as well as community members at large. The principals' interpretations of their position and stature in the community was not straightforward and portrayed a process where they were constantly trying to balance their obligations to their schools, communities, and families. On the one hand, they all embraced their prominent roles in their communities. Elena admitted that "I feel like a rock star"—wherever she goes people recognize her, ask how she was doing, and genuinely care about her and her family (Herzog & Pittman, 1999). However, they also described ways in which they were challenged to find privacy and escape the pressures of the job. They each tried to purposefully create private space for reflection, down time, self-care, and family time. In addition, their focus on building relationships and healthy communications with stakeholders could simultaneously be a leadership strategy and a human coping mechanism (Chalker, 1999; Gentilucci et al., 2013). The participants with and without previous rural school community experiences described work-life balance as a challenge, and even among the experienced rural educators the level of intensity was still a revelation. Within rural communities there is an expectation that all citizens, and particularly the school principal, will develop a deeper connection and understanding of the community, its history, and stakeholders' needs despite the challenges they present to their leadership (Budge, 2006; Bushnell, 1999). At the same time, it could be argued that aspiring leaders should know in advance what is truly expected of a rural principal, and that the best coping mechanism is to accept and fuse their professional identities as principals and citizens into a mutually beneficial and servant-oriented *rural school leadership lifestyle*.

The Rural Principal as a "Master of a Lot of Things"

Similar to novice and veteran principals in all contexts, the principals acknowledged the multiple tasks and sometimes overwhelming workload that was a real part of their daily leadership positions (Petzko, 2008). Also similar to previous research on novice principals, the principals expressed difficulties with balancing multiple roles and responsibilities in their positions (Starr & White, 2008). Their feelings of being solely accountable for multiple and changeable job responsibilities impacted their professional as well as personal lives (Stewart & Matthews, 2015). In particular, they described how they maintained human resources, managerial, fiscal, and regulatory responsibilities that would normally fall to a district-level department or leadership team. Their districts also employed organizational structures that assigned intersecting responsibilities to principals and superintendents in response to budgetary constraints and efforts to streamline administrative costs (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Meckley & Hazi, 1998). With so many duties, they had difficulty describing extensive instructional leadership goals, activities, or strategies to implement long-term improvements to instruction and student achievement. To begin that process, they engaged teachers in critical conversations, shared information, and listened intently to improve teachers' commitment and sense of belonging to the community, with a primary focus on building or healing previously damaged relationships (Hurley, 1999; Preston & Barnes, 2017). In their review of the contemporary rural principalship, Preston and Barnes (2017) noted the contextually relevant challenge for rural principals to balance multiple roles. They argued that rural leaders who are collaboratively minded stand the greatest chance of achieving multiple goals that span multiple leadership domains, including student learning, instructional improvement, fiscal efficiency, cultural growth, and community relations.

The existing research on principals' leadership for learning has strongly reinforced the importance of positive school culture, teacher trust, and collaborative practices

(Hallinger, 2011, 2016). However, for novice principals who are often mired in managerial tasks and making immediate impacts, these critical aspects of leadership can often be challenging to prioritize (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Due to the rural community's expectations for principals to be visible, engaged, and connected, it could be argued that there is an elevated level of urgency to a novice rural principal's culture-building activities, and this role seemed to be a top leadership priority for this group of principals (Gentilucci et al., 2013). Although the principals in this study realized the importance of the community and its stakeholders, at their early stages of leadership they did not describe how they were moving beyond "fitting in" or "getting to know" the community to eventually activate a long-term leadership agenda (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). Their responses indicated that they spent more time learning their jobs and responsibilities, getting to know the members of their community, their school staff, and were coming to understand the scale and scope of their role in the school and community. Based on previous research on contextually responsive leadership in rural school communities, we argue that the principals needed to prioritize and take the time and establish community, trust, and safety in the hopes that would provide a foundation for the changes they aspired to affect in their positions (Budge, 2006; Preston & Barnes, 2017). This process appears to be appropriate given the considerable organizational and positional stressors they described during our interviews.

Limitations

We cannot confirm that these novice rural principals enacted or effectively implemented the leadership actions they described in our interviews. The study is also limited by a small sample of novice principal interviews from one U.S. state, the participants' subjective response bias, and recall inconsistencies. Our findings cannot be generalized to other school settings, rural schools, or novice leaders.

Conclusions and Implications

We sought to learn how novice rural school leaders identified and addressed their leadership for learning challenges as they began their tenure as principals. The role of the principal in a rural school continues to be a centrally prominent position in the school and the wider community. That level of stature and recognition in the community is admirable, yet it can also create pressures on individual principals to successfully meet the community's expectations. Rural school principals continue to experience changeable and excessive workloads

in their roles as rural school leaders due to local resource constraints, organizational changes aimed to increase efficiency, and state-level budgetary regulations that favor larger school districts. In the foreseeable future, rural principals will continue to be asked to do more with less and cover a greater share of leadership responsibilities. The rural principal may be required to maintain district-level leadership responsibilities that exceed traditional job responsibilities assigned to their suburban and urban peers. In this study, the novice principals were focused on learning "how to be a rural school principal," which included being an engaged and visible member of the community, learning wide-ranging and changeable responsibilities, building relationships, and earning trust in their building and the community during the initial years of their tenure as head principals.

This study contributes additional evidence of how novice principals' knowledge of and skills to enact contextually responsive leadership in rural areas is important for their learning and development as leaders. Although our study does not represent all the various contexts that comprise the spectral characteristics of "rurality," our study supplements ongoing work in leadership preparation (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006), in-service K-12 district leadership mentorship (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009), and principal professional development (Parson et al., 2016) that continues to define and refine the practical school leadership needs in rural communities. Our study demonstrates that as a field we should continue to research best practices that could improve how we prepare principal candidates, mentor novice principals, and coach experienced principals regarding contextually responsive leadership practices to meet the needs of their rural communities. The nature of rural school leadership should not be a surprise to novice principals when they enter the leadership role rising from within or arriving from outside rural areas. It behooves leadership preparation programs to consider more contextually relevant ways to enhance existing leadership preparation standards and practices to represent the current and future needs of rural school leaders.

For novice principals who arrive from other contexts, or who were not provided an opportunity to develop skills as part of an internship or extended field experience in a rural setting as a part of their leadership program, the scope and expectations of the position could prove to be difficult for them to persist long-term (Osborne-Lampkin & Folsom, 2017). Principal preparation programs should consider how curriculum and field experience internships meet new rural leaders' needs regarding a systems level approach to rural school leadership. Leadership preparation programs should integrate additional study and field work

that includes greater attention to the variety of managerial and leadership functions that rural principals will be required to fulfill. In addition, leadership programs should closely attend to developmental readings and study of rural school communities and leadership demands. There are also implications for local school district superintendents, school boards, and state policymakers to recruit matched candidates for rural leadership positions, as well as to fully vet and develop candidates' skills and commitment as part of rural school mentorship or professional development program within or across districts. Assuming current fiscal realities persist into the near future in rural areas across the United States, states, school districts, and leadership programs should consider a long-term shift in the preparation, recruitment, and development of rural leaders. If rural school districts continue to require principals to fulfill multiple job responsibilities, a more coherent preparation pipeline may be required to ensure that principals are fit and prepared for rural school leadership in terms of knowledge, skills, and affective dispositions.

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