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Research Article

Comparing Rural and Non-rural Principal's Instructional Leadership in the Age of ESSA

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This qualitative study compares the instructional leadership practices of rural and non-rural principals, seeking to understand contextually based differences in how principals create a focus on teaching and learning. Principals across settings report similarities in instructional leadership tasks; however, they reported significant contextual differences in how they are carried out. These include the use of formal distributed leadership in non-rural schools and informal distributed leadership in rural schools. Additionally, rural principals report adaptive practices that shape policy implementation in ways that support people-centered leadership. We conclude with areas for additional research: the unique demands of the role of principal-superintendent; how principals make sense of multiple messages about instructional leadership; and the qualitative aspects of instructional leadership that support principal effectiveness.

Comparing Rural and Non-rural Principal's Instructional Leadership in the Age of ESSA

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) included flexible Title II funds to support the training and recruitment of high-quality principals. Attention to school leadership as a lever for improvement reflects a growing body of research that suggests principals play essential roles in supporting student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021). The Nebraska Every Child Succeeds (ESSA) Leadership Learning Community (ELLC), a Wallace Foundation initiative, sought to develop flexible strategies to support school leader capacity across a state with districts in large urban centers, small cities, and rural communities. As part of that work, a mixed-methods study examined principals' perceptions of their jobs and professional development opportunities (Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019). This secondary analysis of the interview data is guided by our interest in understanding our rural and non-rural school leaders engage in school improvement and the contextual challenges they face in doing so, including demographic, economic, sociocultural, and organizational factors (Klar & Huggins, 2020). Contextual differences in school leadership remain important areas for research, as much of the principal literature focuses on urban schools as normative and present findings as generalizable (Biddle et al., 2019), leading to policy interventions that are incompatible with small, rural districts (Schafft & Jackson, 2010).

However, previous research suggests that promoting effective leadership requires

understanding schools' contexts, particularly those in rural communities (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Preston et al., 2013, 2017; Starr & White, 2008). This study builds from this research to compare rural and urban principals in two specific dimensions: instructional leadership practices and the contextual challenges principals face. Our previous research suggests that principals' philosophies of leadership shape how they enact these practices despite undertaking similar instructional leadership tasks (Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019). This reflects the need to understand what instructional leadership practices principals enact and their qualities (Robinson & Gray, 2019). Additionally, these findings suggest a need to examine how school leaders can adopt common instructional leadership practices in their contexts (Klar & Huggins, 2020).

Literature Review

This review of the literature provides a brief overview of the effective school leadership literature and the research on rural principals.

Effective School Leadership

Over the past two decades, researchers have identified principals as the second most important school-level factor in student outcomes after teachers (Leithwood et al., 2004). Studies suggest this influence is indirect, supporting the conditions and capacities for the improvement of teaching and learning (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2008; 2020; Louis et al., 2010). Grissom and colleagues' (2021) review of

the literature suggests that principal effects have a wider influence than teachers, making effective school leadership a key lever for student outcomes. They identified four categories of effective principal behaviors: instructionally focused interactions with teachers, contributing to a positive school environment, facilitating collaboration, and managing personnel and resources (Grissom et al., 2021). For the sake of brevity, we focus on factors related to instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership has traditionally been defined as the management of curriculum and instruction by a school principal (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Instructionally focused interactions with teachers include practices typically identified as instructional leadership, such as teacher evaluation, coaching, and the development of data-driven instructional systems to facilitate such interactions (Grissom et al., 2021). These interactions are critical as the principal's roles in developing teacher capacity for teaching and learning have the greatest impact on achievement (Robinson et al., 2008). One way in which principals develop teacher instructional capacity is through a distributed view of instructional leadership (Harris, 2008; Klar, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2020). Distributed leadership examines the practice of all who engage in leadership and encourages input from those in formal and informal roles (Spillane et al., 2004). This intentional focus on the inclusion of multiple stakeholders has shown to positively affect student performance (Liu, 2021) and help develop a more positive school climate (Bellibas & Liu, 2018). School climate proves to be fundamental for school improvement as components such as trust and relationships contribute to collective decision-making, implementation of reform initiatives, and improved student learning (Louis et al., 2016).

Following the Race to the Top agenda, policy mandates have focused heavily on principal observation of instruction and the provision of feedback during formal evaluations and informal observations (Zuckerman et al., 2018; Grissom & Youngs 2016; Neumerski et al., 2018). Instructional expertise enables principals to observe and provide feedback in a constructive manner (City et al., 2009). In addition to technical expertise, instructionally focused interactions with teachers require attention to trust and relationships. Trusting relationships support constructive feedback and teachers' sense of collective responsibility (Lawson et al., 2017; Louis et al., 2016). Trust with and among teachers supports

teacher efficacy and risk-taking (Hollingworth et al., 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). The development of positive relationships with teachers supports collective commitment to improvement efforts (Lawson et al., 2017; Stoll, 2009), helps scaffold teacher-student relationships which enhance teacher job satisfaction (O'Shea, 2021), and building will and capacity for evidence-based decision-making and continuous improvement efforts (Park et al., 2013; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017).

However, the ability of principals to carry out the tasks most important to student achievement assumes several conditions: principals' knowledge of pedagogy and learning (Marks & Printy, 2003); principals' ability to commit time to instructional leadership tasks, as opposed to building management and student discipline (Cuban, 1988); principals' ability to balance the needs of many stakeholders in the face of constant, evolving demands (McBrayer et al., 2018; Metz et al., 2019); the messages principals receive from their districts and preparation (Rigby, 2015); and leaders' schema about what constitutes 'good' leadership (Zuckerman & O'Shea, 2021). This suggests that effective instructional leadership requires a mix of instructional knowledge, capacity to navigate competing demands, and ability to make sense of policy messages.

Rural School Leadership

The effective school leadership literature derives primarily from urban schools. However, rural schools and districts remain organizationally distinct (Monk, 2017), as do rural principals' roles (Preston et al., 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Theobald, 2005). Rural principals take up the slack by filling in for bus drivers and janitors, as well as take on district roles such as athletic director (Zuckerman et al., 2019). These roles and tasks are more influenced by their organizational contexts, as well as community contexts in which the boundaries between school and community may be blurred (Surface & Theobald, 2015; Tieken, 2014). This includes the centrality of rural schools in the civic, social, and economic lives in their communities (Klar & Huggins, 2020; Schafft, 2016; Seelig, 2017; Tieken, 2014); density of social ties that promote trust and engage families and community members (Chance & Segura, 2009; Semke & Sheridan, 2012); and access to historical, cultural, and natural resources for hands-on, authentic, place-based learning beyond school walls (Rural School and Community Trust, 2003).

Research on effective rural school leadership suggests principals navigate these contextual differences through people-centered, boundary-crossing leadership with teachers, staff, students, parents, and the wider community (McHenry-Sorber, 2021; Preston & Barnes, 2017). People-centered leadership or nurturing interpersonal relationships within and between stakeholders also appears to support collaboration with teachers, sharing of leadership tasks, and instructional leadership practices that support teachers' professional development (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

However, principals' abilities to engage in these important instructional leadership tasks may be limited to the demands created by small rural school organizations that have few administrators and support staff (i.e., assistant principals, receptionists, coordinators) (Bard et al., 2005; Preston et al., 2013). Likewise, rural principals may split their time between administration and teaching duties (Cortez-Jimenez, 2012; Masumoto & Browne-Welty, 2009; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Reniham & Noonan, 2012). Some rural principals may also play dual roles as district and school leaders (Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019).

As a result, rural principals are engaged in policy implementation, standards alignment, and professional development efforts (Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Often, rural principals must engage in these efforts with reduced levels of funding and increased costs (Forner et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2015; Ramón et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2017). In addition to the many roles rural principals play, they face increased expectations from parents and community members (Preston et al., 2013; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018). They must balance local expectations with distal demands, such as state accountability and other policies that are often urban-centric (Mette, 2014), requiring rural principals to engage in adaptive leadership to buffer teachers from external pressure and to selectively identify resources to meet local goals (Zuckerman et al., 2018). These challenges, along with tensions from competing demands and pressure from community and school board members, contribute to the turnover of rural principals (Lock et al., 2012; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Hansen, 2018).

To meet these competing demands, on the one hand, rural principals require a thorough understanding of a community's value system, awareness of local history, politics, and culture, and knowledge of students' backgrounds to guide their

decision-making and support students (Budge, 2006; 2010; Klar & Huggins, 2020; Lock et al., 2012; Morrow, 2012; Reniham & Noonan, 2012). On the other hand, others suggest that rural principals lack 21st-century leadership capacities due to their isolation, limited access to professional development and professional networks (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Lack of access to professional support and networks may, and work-related stress also contribute to rural principal turnover (Hansen, 2018). Areas of stress for rural principals include responding to new curriculum demands and working with ineffective teachers (Klocko & Justis, 2019), possibly reflecting one-size fits all policy demands (Mette & Stanoch, 2016) tied to teacher evaluations and adoption of new state standards.

Theoretical Framework

Given the importance of community-aware rural school leadership, we utilize the contextually relevant rural school leadership framework developed by Klar and Huggins (2020). Their model suggests the need for adaptive leadership strategies to shape common practices to local contexts, including tensions between local values and extra-local educational policies; economic restructuring that has led to an increase in community poverty; demographic changes due to both in- and outmigration; and socio-cultural contexts of values, beliefs, and norms. In addition to this attention to community context, Klar and Huggins (2020) also suggest a tripart framework for effective rural school leadership centering on continuous improvement (Figure 1). The three legs include: (1) creating a culture that supports teaching and learning, including individual instructional capacity and teacher professional communities for peer-learning and limitation of teacher turnover; (2) ensuring all have the ability and opportunity to use data to inform decision-making; (3) developing the capacity of others to distribute leadership.

In addition to the work of Klar and Huggins (2020), Casto et al. (2016) developed a link between education policy and community development termed community-aware education policy. Their work was based on the idea that human need is "thick" (pg. 3), and requires more accounts for relational context instead of an individualistic focus. In their work, the authors describe how existing school related resources and policies can be adjusted to develop social support frameworks and allow for the examination of community-level outcomes that are

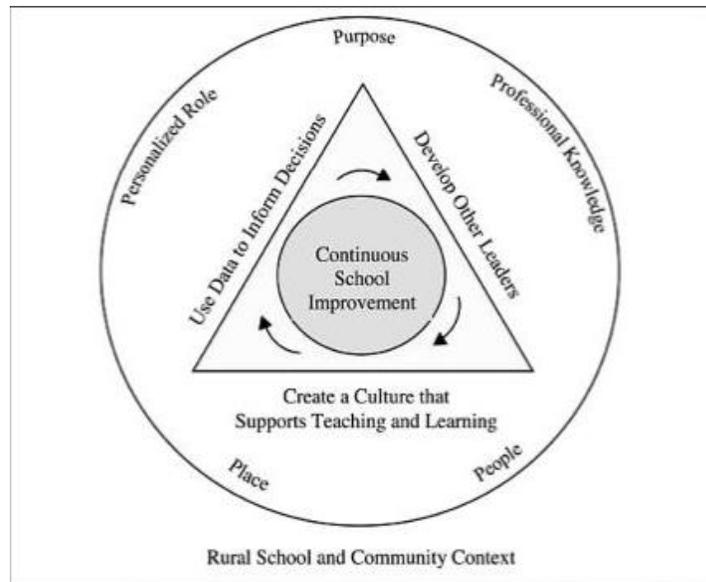


Figure 1. Contextually relevant Rural School Leadership (Klar & Huggins, 2020)

mutually beneficial for children, schools, and communities (Casto et al., 2016). Similarly, Klar and Huggins (2020) emphasize that these practices must be attentive and adaptive to the local context by drawing on personal experience, professional knowledge, a strong sense of purpose, attention to people, and understanding of place. Given the one-size-fits-all accountability policies and theories of leadership derived primarily from urban schools, understanding how rural principals differ in their enactment of leadership provides insight for how policy might be differentiated and how preparation programs serving rural areas might better support the development of school leaders.

Methods

This study was undertaken in the summer of 2018 to inform the Nebraska ELLC's efforts to create flexible in-service supports for principals in a state that encompasses a major metropolitan area, large and small cities, and rural communities. The original study consisted of interviews with individual principals, focus groups with principals from similar types of schools (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban), and a survey. Findings from the qualitative portion aligned with specific questions asked in interviews, including principals' espoused philosophies of leadership; their vision and goals for their school; their approaches to school improvement; their definition of high-quality instruction and curriculum; their instructional leadership efforts; relationships

and partnerships in the wider community; principals' professional development and support networks; and the barriers they face in meeting goals for their schools. Although not directly asked, principals spoke about the importance of school culture and climate (Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019).

This secondary analysis focuses on the interview data, which provided richer data on principals' work in their individual contexts. Following initial analysis, this study is guided by two research questions: *How do rural and non-rural leaders differ in their efforts to improve student learning? What contextually-based challenges do they face in doing so?*

Sampling

Sampling for the original study sought to identify principals from diverse schools with free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) rates at or above the state average of 45%. We considered accountability rankings, geography, and location. Rural principals were oversampled as more than half of the schools in Nebraska are in rural areas (Showalter et al., 2017), and urban schools are concentrated in a handful of districts. Sampling was challenged by difficulty finding schools with high proportions of FRPL students, scoring the highest accountability rating, and recruiting principals in the state's most remote areas. Principals were recruited using a combination of phone calls and emails. From an initial sample of over fifty principals, 20 agreed to participate.

Table 1

School Characteristics

School Pseudonym	Locale ¹	Enrollment	ESSA Rating	FRPL %	Minority %
Oak Springs ES	CS	120	3	60%	40%
Midway ES	TR	400	1	60%	20%
Crane-Lakeview K-12	RR	130	3	70%	20%
Hillside K-8	RR	110	4	50%	10%
Eagle County HS	RR	40	1	45%	10%
Mt. View ES	RD	200	2	45%	10%
Bernard HS	CL	1400	1	80%	80%
Jefferson MS	CL	600	1	90%	80%
Eastside HS	CL	1700	1	70%	60%
River View ES	RR	120	1	80%	70%
Clark City MS	SM	800	3	70%	80%
Fairmont ES	CL	270	1	70%	90%
Carleton ES	RD	140	3	70%	40%
Smith ES	CL	390	2	80%	80%
Green Lake ES	RR	160	1	60%	10%
Wagner ES	RR	300	2	50%	10%
Green Lake Jr.-Sr. HS	RR	80	3	60%	10%
Sharp ES	RR	300	3	50%	10%
Harris ES	CL	500	3	50%	50%
Cardinal Jr.-Sr. HS	RR	100	3	50%	20%

¹CL= City Large, CS= City Small, SM= Suburban, TR= Town Remote, RD= Rural Distant, RR= Rural Remote

Six principals were located in the central region of the state, six in the northeast, seven in the southeast, and one in the western region. All the principals in the study were white, reflective of the limited diversity of school leaders in the state. Five principals were women, and the remainder were men. Table 1 provides school information.

Data Collection

Interviews used a semi-structured protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that covered principals' philosophies of leadership, approaches to goal setting and school improvement planning, definitions of high-quality instruction, and instructional leadership practices. Each principal was interviewed once and interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes in length, which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All but one interview was conducted at the principals' school; the remaining interview was conducted via video conferencing software. Note-taking, in addition to audio recording, contributed to the accuracy of data (Kelly, 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded iteratively. Transcribed interviews were uploaded into an Nvivo 10 database for analysis. Analysis of the interviews began through the development of narrative descriptions of conversations with each principal, derived from both field notes and transcripts. Initial analysis used content analysis to identify common themes and areas of disagreement of answers to each interview question. The secondary analysis drew on that initial analysis to develop themes identified in initial analysis and conversations between the researchers (Miles et al., 2013), as well as developing additional a priori codes from previous research on school leadership, including leadership philosophies of distributed leadership, facilitative leadership, relational leadership, and servant leadership (Zuckerman & O'Shea, 2021) and the Conversations between the two researchers served to identify commonalities and differences, particularly between different regions and types of schools. Matrix displays (Miles et al., 2013) were used to examine

connections, similarities, and differences across principals.

Emerging differences between rural and non-rural leaders led to seeking out additional theoretical guidance on contextual-based leadership. The addition of Klar and Huggin's (2020) culturally responsive framework for rural leadership at this stage helped guide our analysis to focus on principals' statements on creating a culture that supports teaching and learning, use of data to inform decision-making, and developing distributed leadership, as well as how principals described the contextual barriers to their efforts. Barriers described by participants included the economic constraints imposed by the over-reliance on local property taxes in the state aid formula, the impact of demographic changes in the form of declining enrollments, and the social isolation of rural principals. We used these overarching categories to provide an organizational structure for our previous coding.

Credibility

To increase the credibility of analysis, both the primary investigator and secondary researcher both coded a quarter of the transcripts and engaged in analytic conversations to develop operational definitions, which served as the basis for consolidating the final codebook that each researcher used to code half of the remaining transcripts. We also sought to increase credibility of our findings by using detailed participant quotations, including dissenting opinions that illustrate the fullness and range of participants' perceptions, contribute to the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Findings

Rural context appeared to shape leadership practices, such as the level of structure and formality of instructional leadership practices.

Creating a Culture that Supports Teaching and Learning

Principals in rural and non-rural schools reported using a variety of instructional leadership strategies to support a culture of teaching and learning. We noted similarities across settings regarding the use of formal and informal feedback to teachers, likely in response to state teacher evaluation policy. We also noted similarities in principals' discussions of the

importance of trust and the use of modeling of instructional and relational behaviors.

However, in larger non-rural schools such tasks were distributed to additional formal instructional leaders. In larger schools, feedback to teachers was reported by a majority of participants as distributed across assistant principals, department heads, curriculum specialists, and instructional coaches. The suburban Clark City MS principal demonstrated the color-coded Google Docs to ensure teachers received regular feedback from himself and two assistant principals. However, in some larger urban schools, principals reported challenges in engaging in coaching and informal feedback to teachers. For example, the principal of urban Erickson HS reported challenges in engaging in instructional leadership, "In a big school like this...you just get consumed.... administratively, you have these great intentions to be able to support people, but stuff happens."

On the other hand, at smaller rural schools, a majority of principals reported more informal arrangements for feedback. For example, River View ES, the principal-superintendent, reported, "I'm in their classrooms multiple times throughout the day. I know what they're doing, and so I try to always give them as much feedback as I can." Like other rural principals, she reported that the small number of classrooms made it easier to know what is going on in each room, allowing her: "a much better grasp of what's going on in the classrooms on a day-to-day basis." Additionally, she reported balancing external teacher evaluation demands with support, stating, "Evaluation can be such a negative thing, so what I try to do is balance it with coaching and support systems."

Across settings, eleven of the principals reported that positive relationships supported a culture of teaching and learning. For example, the principal of suburban Clark City MS, reported his philosophy of leadership as "building relationships" and explained, "I don't think you can go anywhere without building relationships with people, whether it's kids or whether that's adults." Likewise, at rural Green Lake ES, the principal emphasized the importance of relationships: "I think that's what makes you a good leader... [I] think the stronger you can have those relationships the easier that is to be a leader and to say I have faith in you, so now you have to have a little faith in me." Similarly, principals reported the importance of credibility and trust in providing feedback to teachers. For example, at rural Hillside K-8, the principal stated, "Once they know that you

have something to offer them and can give them valid feedback, I think you gained a good relationship because, at least our staff, they are always trying to be better, and so they appreciate feedback.” At urban Harris ES, the principal stated, “You’ve got to make sure that you are providing good authentic feedback, giving encouragement, and providing resources and support for the teacher so that way they could be open and receptive to the feedback.”

Principals reported modeling instructional and relational behaviors for teachers. Interestingly, modeling was more frequently mentioned by rural principals (6 rural, 3 non-rural) as a way to help lead and develop staff. The principal of rural Hillside ES reported modeling “positive interactions with staff” to show “them that we care about relationships and about each other” in support of implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. She also stated, “If you want them to do 4-to-1’s (four positive reinforcements to one negative), you do it, too. I do it with my staff. I want them to do it with our students, so I do it. . .just to keep your culture positive.” Non-rural principals also reported using modeling as part of their leadership. At small city Oak Spring, the principal reported she is the “forerunner” of new initiatives and models behaviors to help teachers to bridge the gap between where they are now and where she wants them to be. At urban Fairmont, the principal reported modeling explicit instruction strategies during staff meetings and asking teachers to try them in their classrooms.

Comparatively, rural and non-rural principals reported relatively similar descriptions of how they create a culture that supports teaching and learning through feedback, developing trust, and modeling practices. However, rural principals were able to cultivate more direct relationships with teachers and their instruction due to the smaller staff sizes.

Using Data to Inform Decisions

Across settings, the majority of principals reported the use of frequent assessment data to monitor student growth. Many reported using the NWEA MAP assessment, which has been provided to schools free of charge by the Nebraska Department of Education and is used by about half of the schools in the state (Nebraska Department of Education, 2020; NWEA, 2021), along with AIMSweb and DIBLES. Principals also reported the use of teacher-developed formative assessments. In small city Oak Springs where the principal reported she and the

instructional coach meet with teachers every other week to discuss student assessment scores. She described asking teachers to critically examine student assessment data to focus on developing a growth mindset and focus on what teachers can do instructionally to help all students be successful. At remote town Midway ES, the principal reported using a behavioral screening assessment three times a year, in addition to academic progress monitoring.

In addition to using data to meet individual student needs, several rural principals reported using data to examine curriculum. For example, the principal-superintendent at rural Carleton ES lowered the projection screen in his office to explain the ways in which literacy assessments are tracked in a spreadsheet. He reported the data tracking was largely his wife’s idea as the Title I Reading Specialist and that they have used the data to implement a phonics program and new core reading curriculum:

We’ve actually tracked that over time, and it’s really been exciting to see the progress we’ve made in reading with all of our students. So, the next natural progression of that is to strengthen our core reading curriculum. We’re gonna get a new curriculum on the K-2 level and really try to reduce the number of students that are in our special education program but are still meeting their needs and getting their test scores up to where they’re not needing as many services.

Principals also reported using state assessments as part of their efforts to realign curriculum to state standards, which were implemented in 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2020 for the core subjects of ELA, math, science, and social studies. (Nebraska remains one of the few states that did not adopt the Common Core State Standards and has adopted a seven-year revision process for standards.) At rural River View, the principal-superintendent reported, “We’re in a process of redoing our entire curriculum, and so with that, we’re going to be creating new formative assessments and identifying our power standards. . .so as the new standards get revised and updated, we move through that process and just make sure that we’re teaching the most current information to the kids.”

However, non-rural principals in larger districts may have more limited control over curriculum decisions. For example, in talking about her goals for the school, the principal at urban Fairmont said, “We received a new math curriculum” which was “challenging for the staff” and one of her goals was

to help them navigate this change and provide teachers with feedback to “teach it with fidelity.” She also described working with teachers to identify what wasn’t working about specific lessons. Another principal in the same district spoke of pressures to deliver curriculum with fidelity but also the need to use data to identify which kids need additional support and individualization.

Across rural and non-rural settings, participants reported using multiple types of assessment data for instructional decision-making. However, rural principals appeared to have more autonomy to use data to examine and change curriculum. This difference demonstrates the autonomy of rural principals in making curriculum decisions, but it also highlights how rural principals are asked to wear yet another hat.

Developing Distributed Leadership

Principals in both rural (5) and non-rural schools (4) identified practices to distributed leadership. In non-rural schools, distributed leadership focused on formal roles such as assistant principals, instructional coaches, and department heads, with principals viewing their role as supporting the development of these leaders. At urban Bernard HS, the principal reported sharing instructional leadership with a team of twelve. He identified his role as “empower[ing] my leadership team. I need to build their capacity to recognize good instruction.” The principal of urban Wheaton MS reported distributing instructional leadership tasks to assistant principals was necessary due to the demands of school discipline, stating, “I wish I was able to do more coaching than I was, but, you know, when you’re dealing with behavior.” Likewise, at urban Erickson HS, the principal reported the importance of having instructional coaches as he is often unable to be in classrooms.

While rural principals reported greater ease in being able to be in classrooms frequently, they also spoke of informal arrangements compared to the more formal distribution of leadership across assistant principals and others in non-rural schools. Part of the distribution of leadership focused on providing opportunities for teachers in rural schools to develop leadership capacity. At rural Eagle County HS, the principal reported developing teacher leadership by “Providing leadership opportunities for the staff... trying to keep open lines of communication and encouraging them to generate ideas for improvement.” At rural Sharp ES, the

principal reported empowering teachers to make decisions and to support decisions made in the best interest of students. Similarly, the principal-superintendent at rural Riverview stated:

I don’t believe in top-down I believe in side by side. I have learned a lot from the teachers that I work with. I try to bring them ideas and suggestions, but together we collaboratively develop it so that it fits our needs here locally. I like—I like to push and hold people accountable and challenge ideas, but I’m not a dictator and my way or the highway.

For her, leadership included freeing up time for classroom teachers to serve as instructional coaches and creating structures for PLCs within her own small district and pairing teachers up with similar content area teachers from cooperating districts. This commonality across settings demonstrates the importance principals in this study gave to developing other leaders.

Yet, some informal distribution of leadership remains constrained by the small size of the district. For example, the principal of remote town Midway ES reported using a peer coaching model has “been a mess” due to the challenges of finding subs for them. Likewise, the principal-superintendent of small Crane-Lakeview K-12 reported a need to increase the distribution of instructional leadership due to the challenges of providing feedback to teachers who felt threatened by his position. He reported, “If I just do a walkthrough observation and I want to give a suggestion, a teacher will feel threatened because it’s coming from the superintendent.” He reported seeking to hire an instructional coach to provide additional instructional capacity building but was currently unable to do so due to funding constraints.

In both rural and non-rural schools, principals reported that the role was too big for one person. To extend the available leadership, principals across school types utilized distributed leadership approaches. In non-rural schools, leadership was distributed across formal roles and principals saw their roles as supporting and developing the capacity of coaches and others. Rural principals with smaller staff utilized distributed leadership by relying more on teachers in non-formal roles to engage in building wide decision-making. This difference highlights the how similar leadership philosophies are enacted differently based on local.

Contextual Challenges

In addition to the differences in instructional leadership activities between rural and non-rural principals, principals in rural schools identified contextual challenges that impacted their work more generally. These included funding, small size and low enrollment, geographic isolation, and filling multiple roles.

Funding. Both urban and rural principals reported a lack of resources as a barrier to success. The principal of urban Wheaton MS reported the biggest challenge to achieving success was “Dollars and cents. Money. Staffing.” However, principals in rural schools identified the low level of state funding as a particular challenge. At small-town Midway ES, the principal reported:

We have a huge budgeting challenge ahead of us, and I think for everybody that’s not in [the urban areas] [funding] is serious problem...That is truly the thing that holds me back. For instance, I would love to hire a full-time reading coach that can look at reading data and go around and coach our staff. It is not going to happen, probably not in my lifetime.

In rural districts with both high and low land valuations, principals reported funding challenges. Describing the challenges of school funding in land-rich agricultural districts, the principal-superintendent of Carleton ES reported a recent increase in land valuations that led to a decrease in state funding, leading to an increased reliance on local property taxes. In turn, he reported this slowed down initiatives such as increasing the number of pre-school spaces. The principal-superintendent of remote Crane-Lakeview reported, on the other hand, low land valuations made it challenging to fill budget holes created by reduced state aid, which he reported makes up half of the district’s budget. He reported that the land valuation is so low that a one-cent levy increase only brings in \$17,000, not nearly enough to fill the loss of \$275,000 in state aid. He relayed a conversation with a reporter who came to do a story on the district: “he was shocked, like, ‘Well, do people not care about education?’ I said, ‘No, it’s not that they don’t care, but when you are asking a family to pick between education and keeping the family farm, what are you gonna choose?’” These statements reflect the low proportion of state aid rural schools in Nebraska receive, the lowest in the country (Showalter et al., 2017).

Compounding funding challenges, rural principals reported challenges due to what they perceived as unfunded mandates from the legislature and State Department of Education. These mandates included certification requirements that put pressure on rural schools that have a hard time finding teachers and new safety requirements following the Parkland shooting. The principal of rural Cardinal HS stated, “It just seems like there’s a lot of things that don’t necessarily apply to a smaller district that everyone is required to do...We know our kids. We know our community. We know how to keep our building secure.”

Small size and low enrollments. While rural principals reported benefits of smaller district size in reducing the distance between themselves and teachers, as well as superintendents, they also identified that the small size of rural districts created operational challenges. At Riverview ES, the principal-superintendent spoke of relying on paraprofessionals to differentiate reading instruction and the need to create long distance PLCs with other districts, while the principal at Green Lake ES noted that “Our school improvement team is the whole school. Everyone has to have a role.” Small district size also created stress for principals. The principal at Cardinal HS reported feeling isolated, having to make difficult decisions alone without other administrators to consult.

At the smallest school in the study, Eagle County HS, the principal identified low enrollment as a challenge, stating, “It’s hard to offer enough classes. We do have distance education, and we can offer those types of things, but it’s kind of a challenge to push the kids into doing that because it’s a different experience. It’s much different than just being physically face-to-face.” However, he reported the greatest challenge was simply to stay open. He described the uncertainty caused by the state law that required community members to vote frequently to keep the district open created uncertainty, which he cited as their greatest challenge. He stated: “We’re below the 25-student number in the high school. State legislatures made it so that you’re supposed to have at the general election, you have to have an election to stay open.” He reported this vote had to occur annually until recent changes shifted to every four years.

Geographic isolation. Rural principals reported geographic isolation as creating challenges. At

Riverview ES, nearly two hours away from the nearest small city, the principal reported background knowledge was a challenge due to students' limited experiences. She stated, "Just building background knowledge, giving them something that they can relate to prior to new learning that they can connect with. They just haven't had a lot of experiences because they don't get very far away from home."

Isolation also created challenges for transportation. At Crane-Lakeview K-12, the superintendent-principal reported most students take the bus to school, with some traveling 50 miles one way. To ease the burden on students, the district shifted to a four-day school week. He reported that this schedule helped ease the challenges of sports and activities, stating, "we're nowhere near anything, so we have to go a minimum of an hour and a half to get anywhere...If you have a football, volleyball game, or anything like that, you're losing your entire school."

Several rural principals reported the challenge of recruiting teachers. Principals at Green Lake ES and HS reported recruiting teachers was difficult. The elementary principal stated:

I feel like the people that I have hired now want to be here and have a passion for that, but it is hard when you're over an hour from any Walmart to lure a 22-year-old energetic person here. I don't have much to offer. I mean, we have a great town if you have three kids or your parents lived here, and you want to come back, but if you're 22 years old, this is not a lot to lure here.

The Green Lake HS principal reported relying on transitional certification programs to bring people with four-year degrees into the school. He also reported relying on informal networks, relaying, "We're having a garage sale at our house, and there's a gal there, student taught for my wife, 7-12 math, and I'm like, 'Oh, really? You don't have a job for next year? Well, let me get your number.' So yeah, I'm hunting garage sales for teachers." At Eagle County ES, the principal reported that it is "nerve-racking" to try to hire special education, music, and math teachers because the talent pool is "shallow." Like others, he stated most teachers had some connection to the community. At Cardinal HS, the principal reported the district does not provide health insurance, using the extra money to increase teacher pay significantly compared to neighboring districts, which the principal reported helped recruit people to the district.

Multiple principal roles. Similar to previous studies, rural principals in this study reported wearing many hats, potentially limiting their ability to engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers. In rural schools and the small city school, principals' roles included formal roles outside of their building, such as district-level special educational coordinator, curriculum coordinator, athletic director, and music curriculum supervisor. The Green Lake HS principal, who served as the athletic director, described how that role took time away from their leadership activities:

My role here is I feel like I wear a many, and I'm not saying that's a great thing. It's just with our size and our district set up here, it's just kind of what I have to do right now. The AD portion requires a lot of time that could probably be better used elsewhere, but that's also just part of the deal. That is probably a full-time job in itself, but again we're all in the same boat. Any other school our size, their ADs are [teaching] a couple of periods. I guess that's probably the biggest thing.

Additionally, three rural principals also served as the superintendents in their districts. One reported every day as a new challenge of balancing demands. When asked how she balanced the demands of being a principal and a superintendent, she reported:

Oh, I don't know if I do a very good job of it at any given time. There's just a lot of hats to wear, and I guess I just do what I need to do, and if that means I work late, I work late. If that means I need to come in early, I come in early. If it means weekends, I come in. I'd say a majority of my day is spent being elementary principal. And then I spend after hours, before hours, being superintendent, maybe a couple hours through the week where I can get some of the paperwork done.

This quote demonstrates the challenges of serving as an instructional leader and superintendent, with superintendent duties taking a backseat to after hours. The principal-superintendent of Crane-Lakeview K-12 reported he was the only administrator in the district. This administrator reported challenges not only in serving two schools, nearly 20 miles apart, but also the lack of a "middleman" made it a challenge to develop trusting relationships with teachers to support feedback from informal walkthroughs. He also stated "being the only administrator... I consult myself," suggesting a similar sense of isolation in his principal-

superintendent role as the Cardinal HS principal quoted above.

In addition, these principal-superintendents, and other rural principals, reported that a lack of support personnel creates additional strains on their time. The principal of Green Lake HS reported serving lunch some days, while the principal-superintendent at Carleton ES reported:

There will be days where I drive the bus and clean up vomit in the bathroom and work with a kid on math and look at the budget and correspond with community members. How do I manage that? I think it is just the daily expectations of the job.

Likewise, the principal at rural Sharp ES stated, “You don’t know from day to day what hat you’re going to wear... supervision of activities to helping, to coaching, to sponsoring activities and then just operating the school, evaluating teachers and staff and coaching students and all that stuff, all day long.” However, he also stated, it is a wonderful job,” echoing other rural principals who reported despite the demands, they enjoyed their jobs. We found this particularly meaningful as we did not explicitly ask about job satisfaction.

Additionally, rural principals reported significant engagement in their role as principal within the community. The principal of rural Green Lake HS reported that he, along with the elementary principal, are “trying to be very active in our community... that reflects positively back on our school. I get some kids to go down and help me... Those are things that can’t hurt what we’re trying to do accomplish out here.” The principal-superintendent at Riverview described her role in the community as a “lifestyle.” She continued, “It’s not just a job, it’s not an 8-4 because you don’t ever leave the role of elementary principal. Even when you’re on vacation, you find yourself constantly thinking about those types of things that go along with your job.”

Limitations

The findings of this study were limited by the focus solely on principals’ perceptions of their own leadership, per the scope of the original research conducted for the Nebraska Department of Education. As data were collected during the summer, we were unable to collect data from classroom and meeting observations and teacher interviews, limiting our ability to triangulate findings within each school building. Similarly, scheduling

interviews in the summer limited our ability to reach principals in the most rural region of the state as nine-month contracts are more common in that area of the state.

Discussion

This study examined principals’ efforts to improve instruction in rural and non-rural schools, as well as the contextual challenges principals face in doing so. Using Klar and Huggin’s (2020) framework, it is clear that both local context and extra-local policy shape school leaders’ efforts to improve student learning through their focus on teaching and learning, use of data, and distribution of instructional leadership.

Principals’ abilities to engage in instructional leadership tasks of managing curriculum and instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) appeared to be shaped by their contexts. In larger non-rural schools, principals relied on formal teams of administrators and teacher leaders to carry out this instructionally focused work, particularly teacher evaluation and feedback. The larger size of these schools, along with the increased managerial and discipline demands reported by non-rural principals necessitated taking a formal approach to distributing instructional leadership. At the same time, curriculum decisions appeared centralized at the district office, limiting principals’ leadership in this area.

By comparison at rural schools, principals had more opportunities to directly engage in instructional leadership tasks. Several rural principals reported the smaller size of their schools made it easier to have direct contact with teachers and informally observe teachers and provide them with feedback. Likewise, rural principals reported more autonomy and oversight of curriculum. At the same time, the smaller size of their districts meant they experienced competing demands on their time with little additional support (Preston et al., 2013). To spread instructional leadership, they tended to rely on those in informal roles. Despite the shorter distance between principals and teachers in rural schools, building trust and relationships to support the uptake of feedback from evaluations (Lawson et al., 2017) appeared to be a particular challenge for rural principal-superintendents.

Additionally, extra-local policies may create challenges for developing trust with teachers to support instructional leaders. One small city principal in a school of less than 200 reported the challenge of

using a state-mandated rubric with teachers. In turn, she reported a refusal to score the rubric to maintain relationships with teachers. This suggests the importance of buffering activities for rural and small school principals to reduce interpersonal friction from extra-local mandates (Zuckerman et al., 2018). Our findings echo those of Preston and Barnes' (2017) review of the literature on rural school leaders in that the small organizational size of rural schools emphasizes a need for people-centered leadership (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Extra-local policy also appears to have shaped principal data use across settings. While Klar and Huggins (2020) identified the use of data for decision-making as an important aspect of effective rural school leadership, our findings suggest that principals across settings use data to inform decision-making at multiple levels, using formative and summative assessment data for instruction, goal setting and school improvement planning, and curriculum revision efforts. Principals in both rural and non-rural settings reported using progress monitoring using NWEA MAPs and other assessments. The availability of MAPS testing provided by the Nebraska Department of Education may help explain the widespread use of this assessment among principals in this study. As noted above, rural principals had greater control of curricular decisions and were better able to use data to make decisions on things like reading programs.

In addition to shaping how rural principals carried out instructional leadership tasks, rural school contexts created additional challenges related to funding, small organizational size and geographic isolation, many of which have been previously identified in the literature (e.g., Preston et al., 2013). Our findings on role multiplicity echo previous research on rural (Preston et al., 2013; Starr & White, 2008). However, unlike previous studies of rural principals (e.g., Newton, & Wallin, 2013; Wallin et al., 2019), none of the participants in our study reported regular teaching duties. Several principals held district roles, such as athletics director and special education coordinator that created competing demands on their time. Additionally, we identified specific challenges related to the particular role of the principal-superintendent. These challenges included spending nights and weekends attending to district-level work while focusing on building-level leadership during the school day. The dual role of principal-superintendent also created demands to be fully available to the community (Preston et al.,

2013), which one rural principal-superintendent reported made her role a "lifestyle" rather than a job. And for one principal-superintendent, the dual role created challenges for developing trust with teachers.

Previously, Canales and colleagues (2010) found that role ambiguity and the need to "wear multiple hats" forced principal-superintendents to prioritize their responsibilities, which pushed instructional efforts such as curriculum development to the back burner. The principal-superintendents in our study did not corroborate that finding, perhaps due to the increased attention to teacher evaluation and feedback since the Race to the Top policy agenda. The limited attention to the role of principal-superintendent in the rural literature suggests it as an area for additional research to understand how these administrators carry out and balance district and school-level roles simultaneously.

Conclusion

The main significance of this study is our findings suggest principals' instructional leadership tasks are shaped by both local and extra-local forces. Local forces include funding, small organizational size, declining enrollment, geographic isolation, and role multiplicity. Extra-local forces include educational policy and rhetoric, such as the Race to the Top focus on teacher evaluation and ESSA's focus on principals as levers for school improvement. Previous research suggests that educational policy and broader institutional discourse supersede local influence on rural schools, creating isomorphism in rural schools (Arum, 2000; Schafft & Biddle, 2013).

While extra-local policies appeared to influence what instructional leadership tasks principals engaged in, rural school context appeared to influence how they carried out these tasks. This suggests a need for additional research in how rural principals negotiate competing contextual and extra-local demands through adaptive leadership practices such as buffering (Zuckerman et al., 2018).

In addition to isomorphism created by extra-local policy and rhetoric, principal preparation and in-service training may contribute to similarities in instructional leadership tasks. School leaders are exposed to logics, or messages, about what it means to be a principal particularly in instructional leadership (Rigby, 2015). These messages about what it means to be a 'good leader' shape principals' mental models of what it means to be a 'good' leader (Zuckerman & O'Shea, 2021). Further research on

rural principals' mental models of 'good leadership' may provide insight into how to better prepare school leaders and provide professional development in rural settings. Additionally, further research where and how rural leaders are exposed to and make sense of these messages can shed additional light on how to better develop principals for rural contexts.

In terms of developing future rural school leaders, our findings also suggest a need to examine the role of the principal-superintendent. Particularly in states with declining rural enrollments and limited local and state funding, it is likely more

administrators may be in this dual role as a cost saving measure that reduces the number of higher paid administrators.

Lastly, as we identified key differences in how rural principals carried out similar tasks to their non-rural peers, our findings further suggest Robinson and Gray's (2019) call to examine the qualitative differences in school leadership to truly understand what actions impact student learning and how those actions are carried out effectively. Such research would contribute to a clearer picture of effective rural school leadership for the 21st century.

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