Leadership for Rural School District Improvement: The Case of One Statewide Research Practice Partnership

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Research-practice partnerships (RPPs), where researchers and practitioners work in concert to address persistent problems of practice, provide promising mutualistic benefits in urban school settings. Drawing on an integrated framework, this case study explores the initial development of an RPP between six small and rural school districts and two universities, highlighting the complexities of leadership and rurality associated with this type of school improvement work. By using a rapid reconnaissance focus group approach, known as the Sondeos, the political landscape in each district emerged, with nuanced (and in many cases shifting) boundaries. This place-conscious adaptive method may be a promising tool to support rural education researchers and rural school leaders as they work together to actualize viable research-informed improvement. However, our findings illustrate that adaptive leadership capacity building may be a necessary element to sustain such work.

Introduction

An often-unrecognized legacy of progressive-era educational reforms has been a sense that education reform and research are largely initiated by external entities with little concern for the particular interests of local communities. Specifically to address practitioner needs in ways that are in tune with local contexts in both urban (e.g., Firestone & Fisher, 2002) and rural (e.g., Denner et al., 2019; Zuckerman, 2019) locales, a growing body of research is emerging that highlights the promise of research-practice partnership (RPP) arrangements—long-

term collaborations between researchers and practitioners to address persistent problems of practice (Coburn et al., 2013). In addition, other studies document the potential for these arrangements to provide sustained improvement of student outcomes (e.g., Anderson & Shattuck, 2012), curriculum implementation (e.g., Fishman et al., 2003), trust development (e.g., Chhuon et al., 2007), and effects on teaching and assessment practices (e.g., Yarnall et al., 2006). Alongside these promising findings is an emerging body of research showcasing the work of research-practice partnerships (RPP) as significantly different from the traditional work of both researchers and practitioners (Fishman et al., 2013). Such change presents the need to better understand the process of how researchers and practitioners work together in these arrangements (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel et al., 2017), particularly in rural locales (Kunz et al., 2017; Mette et al., 2019; Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019; Zuckerman, 2019). One particular element of such collective work in need of exploration is how partnerships begin the work required for informed decision making which draws on local expertise, especially expertise from those at the margins, as partners engage in joint work across multiple boundaries (Penuel et al., 2015).

To address this knowledge gap, we examine the initial

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development stages of a larger RPP project between six small and rural school districts and two universities. We do so by exploring initial partner engagement and collaboration between ourselves as researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders associated with the process of developing the RPP using complexity leadership theory (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) as an overarching frame. Specifically, this study examines adaptation and boundary work associated with the use of a rapid reconnaissance focus group method known as "the Sondeo" and how this place-conscious emergent method positioned research as something "in and for rural communities" (Corbett & White, 2014, p. 1), as well as how the method served as a starting place for joint decomposition as RPP work which surfaced past social orders and assisted partners to "draw out local wisdom" (Resnick & Kazemi, 2019, p. 14). Using an ethnographic approach, participant observation (Spradley, 1980), document analysis, and the data emerging from the Sondeos themselves, we answer the following three research questions.

1. How did the RPP arrangement develop?
2. How did participants engage with each other during the partnership which took place across a variety of rural contexts?
3. How did collaborative work evolve during the initial stages of the partnership?

By answering these questions, this study provides insights into how RPP arrangements may work toward overcoming inequities and marginalization, providing a promising vehicle to assist rural education researchers and rural school leaders as they work in concert to actualize viable research-informed improvement—if partners closely attend to the process of developing the RPP in ways that support adaptive leadership capacity building. We argue that such capacity is critical to RPP success in that many researchers and practitioners are ill-equipped to engage in these new forms of collaboration (which involve much attention to boundaries within shifting rural communities) in ways that do not further systems that perpetuate injustice. In this sense, this study does not compare or highlight outcomes of this largely rural RPP against those that have been reported as successful in urban or other rural contexts. Instead it serves as a case in point which illuminates how the nuances and complexities of leadership and rurality matter when embarking on this type of school improvement venture, and how by not paying attention to these constructs RPPs might just be another structure that serves to reproduce inequality.

The Complexity of RPP Leadership

Using complexity leadership theory (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) as an overarching frame we further draw on two interrelated constructs, adaptation and boundaries, as vehicles to consider the complexity associated with the process of developing an RPP arrangement in a rural place. Complexity leadership theory frames leadership as "an *outcome* [emphasis added] of relational interactions among agents" (Lichtenstein et al., 2006, p. 2). As such, leadership (as opposed to leaders) is more than a symbol, an exchange, or a skill. Instead, leadership emerges through dynamic interactions within a social system (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000). In this sense, leadership is a series of events, the meaning of which emerges from the interactions of many actors immersed in generating it (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). Partnerships across systems provide much promise for enabling and potentially developing such leadership. Literature related to school-community partnerships offers several examples of how these partnerships provide opportunities to support community-engaged leadership (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Tieken, 2014), but less is known about how partnerships support research-informed leadership, or about how researchers and practitioners adapt as they work in concert in ways that promote justice and equity.

Adaptive Leadership

RPPs are a specific form of partnership work in which research is used to directly assist practitioners' unique needs instead of addressing gaps in existing theory or research (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 49). These mutualistic partnerships leverage the expertise of both practitioners and researchers to address problems of practice and collectively build the knowledge needed for improvement solutions (Teeters, 2015). However, equitable partnerships must navigate often-hidden dynamics of culture, power, and hierarchy (Denner et al., 2019; Ryoo et al., 2015). In the case of RPP arrangements, one particular leadership framework, adaptive leadership—mobilizing individuals and groups to combat tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009)—assists in understanding the process of developing a partnership where researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders engage across a web of complex social systems.

Emerging from Heifetz's experience in the medical field, adaptive leadership uses the notion of not only treating symptoms but also taking the time to understand the root cause(s) of such ailments at a systems level. Applied to education settings, the work of Heifetz and colleagues provides a theoretical frame to support the challenge of current notions of learning by examining, rethinking, and adapting deeply-held beliefs, as most challenges facing school leaders cannot be solved with known solutions (Heifetz, 2006). In part, this approach means navigating situations in new ways, which may disrupt social systems.

Heifetz et al.'s (2009) adaptive leadership framework outlines an iterative process with three activities: (1) observing events and patterns, (2) interpreting these observations, and (3) designing interventions based on these observations (p. 32). Within each of these phases is the

notion that tension, or disequilibrium, is needed as a catalyst to yield the adaptation necessary to thrive anew. In the case of an RPP arrangement, partners must work in concert on persistent problems of practice and then act to design and test potential solutions, continuously negotiating joint work along the way. In this sense researchers and practitioners must adapt their priorities, beliefs, and habits, indicating that RPPs may provide promising adaptive leadership development opportunities for participants as they work across organizational systems to support inclusive practices in shifting rural communities. For Heifetz et al. (2009), adaptive leadership is a theoretical framework that helps organizations adapt and thrive to overcome challenges, in part broadening the construct of leadership beyond past experience and expertise. However, in the case of an RPP where the adaptive work happens in and across rural social spaces (Reid et al., 2010), the framework alone is not enough to ensure inclusivity (i.e., that improvements do not reproduce inequalities) without attending to complexities of boundary work involved in bringing together diverse individuals and groups representative of the changing communities school districts serve.

Boundary Work

In shifting rural communities, boundary creation, protection, and permutation serves many social purposes. The practice of adaptive leaders involved in forming an RPP offers partners many opportunities to explore and span existing boundaries as well as form new ones.

Boundary spanning, or communicating across traditional group boundaries (Shah et al., 2018), is a necessary element for enabling connections between otherwise separate organizational structures in RPPs (Coburn et al., 2008; Firestone & Fisher, 2002; Penuel et al., 2013; Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019). In the case of adaptive work involving school districts with unique languages and frameworks, boundary spanners must broker connections to local community insights to inform needs (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016, p. 369). This process involves power sharing to overcome challenges associated with fluid multilayer dynamics (Buskey et al., 2018; Coburn et al., 2008). Drawing on contextual knowledge, interpersonal skills, trust, and connectedness may assist partners in overcoming these challenges, but underlying loyalties cannot be completely dissolved (Miller, 2008). This boundary work, often visible by the roles one plays, depends on situational context and values (Heifetz et al., 2009).

A growing body of research highlights how successful school leaders in rural locales must negotiate between local desires and external demands (Budge, 2006, 2010; Eppley, 2009; Jennings, 2000; Kannapel, 2000; McHenry-Sober & Budge, 2018; Zuckerman et al., 2018). Less is known, however, about the adaptive work of researchers and practitioners in an RPP arrangement in this space between and within the "local" and "external" with stakeholders, and how this setup might matter for moving an RPP forward.

In forming a successful RPP which equitably serves the educational improvement needs of shifting rural communities, practical issues and pressures that affect the practice of leadership are intertwined beyond the district as a unit of organization, as rural school districts play key economic, social, and political roles in rural locales (Schafft, 2016). Thus, there is a need to better understand leadership as adaptive and boundary RPP work from a perspective largely underrepresented in the literature: the rural perspective. Such understanding is needed to mitigate against potential reproduction of inequalities, lest RPPs become just be another strategy for rural education "improvement."

Research Methods

The findings presented in this study stem from a larger project for school improvement within remote and rural contexts across Idaho. In this article, we draw on complexity leadership theory (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) to highlight how adaptive leadership and boundary work are crucial for better understanding the development of an RPP across rural contexts using a mini-ethnographic case study design (Fusch et al., 2017). While it is too early to tell definitively if the larger RPP project for school improvement was a great success or failure, we can begin to look at the adaptive leadership and boundary work of researchers and school district stakeholders involved in the initial startup stage and consider the likelihood that this mutualistic arrangement will affect rural school districts and researchers in positive ways.

Description of the Case

The geographically vast, rugged, mountainous state of Idaho is in the northwestern United States, covering 83,557 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Divided by deep canyons and steep gorges (U.S. Geological Survey, 2005), the sparsely populated state has 1.75 million people and 19.0 residents per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Over 60% of the land is owned by federal or state government (Vincent et al., 2015) and is highly inaccessible. Thirty-seven of Idaho's 44 counties are considered rural by the Idaho Department of Labor, many of which are isolated due to the state's limited highway access and vast wilderness.

During the 2015 Idaho legislative session, a senate bill passed to designate general fund monies for a school improvement grant overseen by the Idaho State Board of Education. From these funds, a multi-year RPP project aimed at improving student outcomes through systemic change at the district level began. Six rural school districts and two universities were involved.

Six Regions and Their Districts and Communities

In the state of Idaho, six geographical regions provide the frame for educational services and support from state agencies and public higher education institutions. One school district from each region was contacted and asked to voluntarily participate in the RPP, with the goal of improving performance by investigating and implementing long-term systems-oriented programs and practices. The districts that were invited emerged from a list of potential districts identified as "ready to benefit" by the grant's principal investigators as well as a regional coordinator for the Idaho State Department of Education's Idaho Capacity Builders program.

A mandated stipulation of the grant was that the project include two "large" districts (i.e., student population over 1,000; Districts C and D in the study), yet all six school districts were among the three-fourths of those Idaho districts considered rural (Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.), and all were categorized as distant or remote by the National Center of Education Statistics. Participating districts ranged in size from 350 to 3,900 students (Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.), and all were in communities identified as rural remote, rural distant, or town distant (U.S. Census, 2010), ranging in population from 815 to 11,800 people.

No two rural communities are exactly alike, but size of the community, proximity to urbanized areas, median household income, economic dependencies, and modal educational attainment offer points of characterization through which parallels can be drawn (Coladarci, 2007, p. 2). Situated within communities marked by small populations, low density, boom-and-bust economies, and long distances from major transportation hubs or universities, the rural districts included in the RPP under study were among the primary social institutions supporting youth within their communities.

Two Universities

Although the school improvement grant funds for the larger project were awarded to the University of Idaho (Idaho's land-grant university); a faculty member and school improvement specialists from Boise State University (the largest university in the state) also participated in the project as subcontractors. This allocation was due in part to the political nature of the appropriated funds coming from the state's legislature, as well as because of Boise State's geographic proximity to rural districts in the southern regions of the state. The authors are faculty members at these institutions who, along with one improvement specialist from each university, engaged with the six districts as part of the larger project as a six member research team. The lead author (Wargo) joined the other members of the research team (including the supporting authors Budge, Carr-Chellman, and Canfield-Davis) on the project in July 2017, halfway through the year in which this study's data

were drawn.

Data Collection

To better understand the early-stage development of an RPP, this study required extensive field work. The methods employed combined traditional aspects of an exploratory case study with an ethnography approach (Fusch et al., 2017) to inform data collection. This mini-ethnographic case study approach (Fusch et al., 2017) was appropriate as the process of forming an RPP has ill-defined boundaries and is complex, requiring an in-depth understanding through multiple data sources (Yin, 2018), including those data from our extended participant observation (Spradley, 1980) in a variety of RPP events such as planning meetings and respective events and actions from those meetings over the course of one calendar year. In particular, this study draws on three data sources: (1) transcripts from in-depth focus groups called Sondeos (Butler, 1995), (2) extensive field notes, and (3) archival documents (including two post-event surveys) emerging out of partnership work.

Sondeos

During each of the 42 Sondeos, open-ended questions posed to the groups centered on participants' thoughts about their district, yielding approximately 2,400 pages of transcript data and 84 total hours of recordings. The project leader from the University of Idaho contacted district superintendents and asked them to identify individuals who represented a cross-section of district demographics from seven stakeholder groups (students, parents, support staff, teachers, administration, community members, and board members) to participate in the Sondeos. Over the course of two days in each district (12 days in all) between March and June 2017, each of the seven stakeholder groupings engaged in two-hour generative sessions. Different from semi-structured interviews or focus groups in which a protocol closely frames the data-gathering interaction, the ethnographic Sondeo method is much more participant led. However, standardized procedures were established and followed by facilitators (all members of the research team). These procedures included: consistent communication with district leadership, adherence to a detailed script for sensitive probing developed by the facilitators, visual display of the unfolding dialogue on flip chart paper with markers; audio recording protocol, food and beverages, and information about the project scope for participants.

Each district was assigned two facilitators: one main facilitator and a supporting facilitator who also acted as an observer who documented participant comments on a flip chart and took low-inference field notes. A facilitator rotation (see Table 1) was created to balance travel time yet maintain consistent data collection. The first Sondeo was led by a member of the research team, who had deep experience of the method.

Table 1

Sondeo Facilitation

Sondeo	District	Lead Facilitator	Supporting Facilitator
1	District A	Facilitator 1	Facilitator 2
2	District B	Facilitator 2	Facilitator 3
3	District C	Facilitator 2 and 3	Facilitator 2 and 3
4	District D	Facilitator 2	Facilitator 4
5	District E	Facilitator 3 and 4	Facilitator 3 and 4
6	District F	Facilitator 3 and 4	Facilitator 3 and 4

The lead author joined the larger project after the Sondeo data were collected and the coding structure, used to create the district profiles described in more detail in the findings section, was complete. Bringing an outside perspective after these processes were finished was similar to approaches used in previous studies of other RPPs (e.g., Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Rigby et al., 2018).

Observational Field Notes

In addition to the Sondeo transcript data, this study draws on observational notes generated using an ethnographic approach. As opposed to naturalistic observation which strives to observe and record without interaction (Spradley, 1980), our participant observations were conducted in contexts of substantive interaction between researchers and participants throughout the partnership, including at planning meetings, Sondeos, and subsequent meetings and events. Researchers' recordings of reactions, responses, emotions, and specific behaviors related to topics, questions, and discussions about the status of the school district and its constituents were consistent with ethnographic field-based methods.

Archival Documents

Documents collected for the data set included: agendas and meeting minutes, slide decks, posters, worksheets used during events, photographs, and emails. Additionally, results from two post-event surveys (following the August retreat and the October summit) were used.

Data Analysis

Initial analysis of these data occurred as a collective and ongoing process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Once the data were reviewed several times and the authors agreed on the inductive coding, the data were separated for comparison between codes, to identify relationships, and to support conceptualizing themes (Maxwell, 1996), consistent with

Heifetz and colleagues' (2009) iterative adaptive leadership activities: observing events and patterns, interpreting observations, and designing interventions (p. 32), paying particular attention to boundaries and roles of those who were involved in   partnership events.

Due to the large volume of data, software (NVivo 11) was used to assist with coding, as is frequently the case in qualitative data analysis (Yin, 2018). The lead author worked iteratively during this second phase while the supporting authors served as a source of data analysis triangulation, challenging or affirming the lead author's coding logic as it related to this study's guiding integrated framework and goals. During this phase, a list of example quotes (e.g., "Dialogue emergent from data yields depth and complexity. We are doing some things well. To be successful, we need help from all our stakeholders. We need assistance in areas [where] we struggle.") with examples of each code (e.g., superintendent, dialoging about data, inclusion, boundary awareness), category (e.g., institutional role, experience, building capacity), and theme (e.g., "Gaining distance to see opportunity") assisted the process. This strategy was consistent with the retrospective approach used by other scholars (e.g., Chen & Rhoads, 2016), allowing a self-reflective lens to be applied to examine researcher positionality in the larger project.

Several extensive member-checking meetings were held where alternative explanations were explored and archival documents such as worksheets, posters, and photographs from direct participant observer interaction were revisited. These member-checking sessions provided a critical outlet to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings shared in the next section, as we distanced ourselves and accounted for our positionality as researchers for this qualitative analysis. In the next section, we describe in more detail the use of the Sondeo to launch the RPP in each district as the use of this approach figured prominently during data analysis of participants' perspectives.
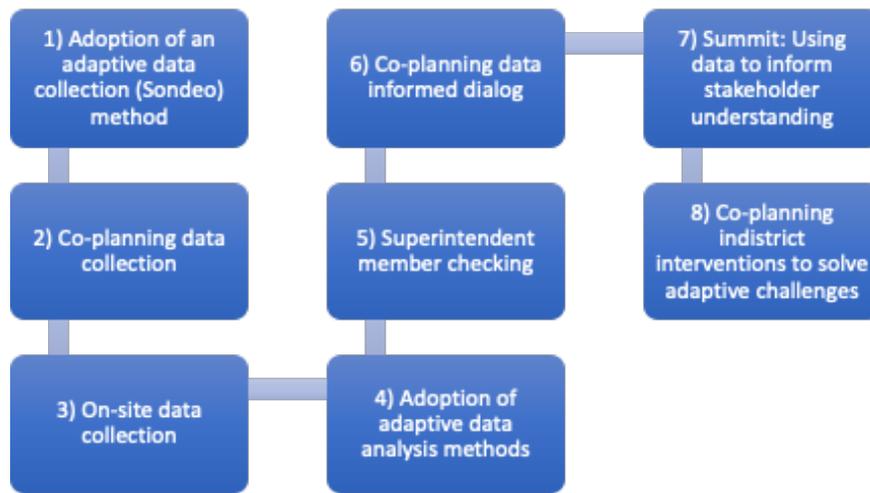
Findings

Previous studies highlight the promise of RPP arrangements where researchers and practitioners work in concert to overcome challenges and dilemmas (known in the RPP literature as "persistent problems of practice") by leveraging expertise and building collective knowledge (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Resnick & Kazemi, 2019; Teeters, 2015). To better understand the complexities and nuances of this work and to best answer our research questions, first we describe how the research team and district leaders began to engage practitioners and stakeholders in adaptive work by hosting Sondeos. This data-gathering process (Sondeos) revealed that all districts served heterogeneous communities with complex political landscapes with nuanced (and in many cases shifting) boundaries, the implications of which figure prominently in our findings. Next, we describe

the in-depth member-checking process in which district stakeholders, as Sondeo participants, studied the Sondeo-generated data. This mirroring process elevated the locally sourced knowledge that was emerging out of the Sondeos (in the form of district profiles) and allowed partners to engage in data-informed dialogue in all participating districts. Insights from this work have been incorporated into our findings about the practicality of RPP arrangements in rural places, showcasing how an adaptive approach can potentially create the boundary exploration needed to focus and sustain rural school improvement work. Doing so takes time, however, as researchers and practitioners must set new norms and processes to consolidate their work.

Sondeos

Sondeo facilitators hoped using the Sondeo process would accomplish these data collection goals:
- establish a system of public and stakeholder input,
- establish knowledge of the current system,
- identify locally acceptable solutions to problems,
- hear from special interest or hard-to-reach groups,
- increase public visibility,
- build interest and commitment,
- generate ideas for programs, and
- explore attitudes and perceptions.

The Sondeo participant selection process began by relying on those holding formal leadership roles in each

Figure 1

Adaptation and Boundary Exploration Opportunities Within the RPP Process

Spring: The Promise and Complexity of the Sondeo Method as a Diagnostic Tool to Support Adaptive Work

After several planning meetings in early 2017, to launch the initial collaboration with each of the six districts, the research team chose Sondeos as the data-collecting tool. Sondeos are distinguished from traditional focus groups by their emphasis on participant empowerment. Heifetz et al. (2009) describe the ability to gain a "balcony" view as "the single most important skill and most undervalued capacity for exercising adaptive leadership" (p. 7). The Sondeo data-gathering process (described above in the data collection section and shown as the first step in Figure 1) was essential to the boundary work necessary to "getting on the balcony" to see the larger patterns in the communities.

district. The research team asked superintendents to select participants from seven different groups (Figure 1, step 2). Each group would be its own Sondeo, categorized according to Table 2.

The research team then worked with district leadership to coordinate logistics (e.g., dates, times, and discrete locations for each Sondeo).

This approach placed significant responsibility on the superintendents as gatekeepers for the initial stages of the RPP. The ripple effects of this boundary-oriented role were significant as each superintendent approached the Sondeo process differently. In Districts A and D, it was clearer than in other districts that leaders took an active role in curating diverse participants for each Sondeo. Despite this difference, Sondeo sessions were conducted in each of the districts, all revealing opportunities for adaptive work within these heterogeneous communities (Figure 1, step 3).

Table 2
Sondeo Stakeholder Groups

Group	Potential Participants
Community Members	Business leaders, chamber of commerce members, religious leaders, prominent community organizations and leaders (e.g., senior citizen groups, hospital, Rotary Club, Grange/farmers coop, police department, fire department, political and civic leaders, mayor and city council members)
Support Staff	Custodians, administrative support staff, bus drivers, food service, paraprofessionals
Students	A cross-section representing the district's demographics and academic spectrum
Parents	A cross-section representing the district's demographics and academic spectrum
Teachers	A combination of elementary, middle, and high school and ancillary content
Principals	Representative of the district
Board and Superintendent	Current school board members

Although each district approached the Sondeo process differently, with some welcoming the diagnostic opportunity more than others, it began to reveal the complexity of how power manifested across various spaces within each unique community. In this light, the Sondeo process opened doors for boundary exploration at the initial diagnosis level of adaptive leadership work, opening possibilities for the partnership arrangement to support both individual and group adaptation that acknowledged the need for inclusion. As participants described their thoughts about their district, identifiable enclaves of power were framed by an overlay of multiple identities, illuminating opportunities for exclusion. Although uncomfortable at times, facilitators attended to the emergent method as they let the dialogue unfold, adhering to principles of conducting Sondeo dialogues with participant safety and confidentiality in mind. The resulting conversations were characterized by participant-guided dialogue in which participants revealed thoughts about many subterranean issues previously under acknowledged or never discussed.

For many participants, the Sondeo created a safe context in which boundaries could be discussed. Facilitators, as participant observers (Spardley, 1980), witnessed on multiple occasions changes in participants' body language from closed (e.g., crossed arms, tense shoulders) to open (e.g., leaning forward, smiling, nodding in agreement). These moments often seemed cathartic as participants and district stakeholders reflected honestly (and in some cases quite emotionally) about power relations that resulted in exclusion, based upon racial, economic, social, geographic, and religious factors, of certain groups of students and their families within the districts and communities. As participants shared these experiences, facilitators observed their adapting as they built collective meaning about the complexities of the political landscape in their districts.

Revealing Spaces of Exclusion

Within the safe Sondeo space, some participants spoke of "insiders" whom they perceived to be in control. As one District A student explained, tribal membership mattered: "You've got the non-Tribals, the Tribals, and it's kind of like they get these little niches and if you're not Tribal you can't … do this, you can't do that."

Participants in all Sondeos (n=42) described feeling like "outsiders" as they answered general questions about their districts. They ranged from feeling "out of the loop" (District B support staff member) to, in one extreme case, a District A student sharing their feeling physically and emotionally threatened by certain groups in the community. Even participants who held formal leadership roles acknowledged feeling uneasy about how certain decisions were made. For example, a District D principal shared thoughts about forces "manipulating, in many ways, our systems here." This principal went on to speak about how important decisions were made at church by the dominant religious group in that community, and how even as a member of that church and long-time resident of the community, the principal felt conflicted about such boundaries:

> I'm not saying that they shouldn't have a say in what goes on, of course they should have a say in what goes on…. Don't get me wrong, I'm a member of that church. I just wonder how we are ever going to get to a place of open sharing when key decisions are not made in meetings.

Similarly, a District D teacher stated, "We also have some outside driving forces to the top-level administration." This teacher went on to explain how certain individuals in the community "would like to see things stay status quo because they're comfortable in it." In some districts, participants linked what they perceived as enclaves of control with lack of change, such as this District A parent: "It's the good old

boy syndrome. They will not change, no matter how many complaints you give or how many times you go in there as an adult and try to talk." A student from the same district expressed these similar thoughts: "The cliques get really tight, and they're not open to letting others in, and they're not open to different opinions, different views, anything different."

Revealing Spaces of Inclusion and Belonging

Sondeo sessions also elicited descriptions of tight-knit, supportive social structures, as illustrated by a District C board member: "We are one big family where everyone knows each other," "yes there are disagreements," but "everyone accepts you and helps you out." A District E board member said, when describing community involvement in the district, "it's like we're a tribe. We're a group that identify together in common goals and that kind of thing." Similarly, the District D superintendent, who was born and raised in the community, explained, "we have very much the feel of a family. We're all a group, very interested in everyone's child."

Many participants expressed multidimensional involvement with the school district, such as this District F community member:

> I've lived in the town basically my entire adult life. I was chairman of the board of the city council. My kids also went to school down here, and they graduated from here. And I've been around here most of my life in this whole valley.

In the District C community member Sondeo, a participant shared,

> I'm the mayor of the city. I've been a teacher at the school in the ag [agriculture] education program for the last 27 years. I've been in education for almost 34 years. All of my kids went to school here, all three daughters graduated from the school. I have two grandkids currently in the system, one at the elementary, one at the intermediate school here, and a grandson that will be in kindergarten in two years.

This participant went on to share how his family was not always so involved, describing how their great-grandparents had told stories about feeling "like an outsider" when they first arrived off the Oregon Trail. This participant also shared how now they sensed that some Hispanic students felt the same way today. Other long-time residents in most districts shared similar thoughts, as illustrated by one District F school board member:

> It's just not that like you're in or you're out. I'd already been here 10, 12 years before I could even get jobs around here and even have the chance to get a job because I was an outsider, and I still am to some people even though I've been here since '81, 36 years. They're still you're not a blueblood. I've been in [town name] that long, the majority of my life. I'm still considered in certain things as an outsider.

Supporting Adaptive Work

For those participants who are normally "on the dance floor," the Sondeo method helped facilitate boundary exploration spaces to "gain some distance" (Heifetz et.al., 2009, pp. 32-33) in ways that stakeholders welcomed. As one District C participant declared, "I very much appreciated the collaborative effort of our community in looking at how we can work together to improve not only the learning environment therein but by doing so increase the overall prosperity and well-being of all." In some cases, at the end of Sondeo sessions, facilitators explicitly expressed their intent to continue using similar adaptive processes in the future as a means for district improvement. As such, by recognizing the promising potential of continuing collective dialogue they were recognizing the need for the stakeholders themselves to continue engaging in diagnostic adaptive work to build the capacity necessary for adaptive improvement work. As one facilitator explained to District A parent Sondeo participants:

> This is not a project where the university comes in and says, you better do this, or you need to do that, it's not, we don't, that's not what this is about. It's about working with districts to identify those high priority needs and then figuring out how to get the help that you need. And that will kind of look different for some districts but it will, there could be some commonalities so that's kind of our next step.

Despite sharing this vision for the Sondeo process, in a debrief session later in the week the same individual acknowledged "feeling a lot of tension" associated with knowing that this project had instigated a process which stirred up a lot of historic inequities. This facilitator who previously served as a superintendent, felt strongly that, moving forward, the group needed to empower community members to "get to a place of healing before it's reasonable to ask these people for more." This facilitator and others (after facilitating the other Sondeos) felt it was important to co-construct the next steps in the process of developing the shared work by leveraging the data to support district partners in identifying what Heifetz et al. (2009) described as "productive zone of disequilibrium" (p. 29).

Summer: Gaining Distance to See Opportunity

Upon completion of all 42 Sondeos, the research team conducted transcript data analysis (via open coding, axial coding, sorting categories, and determining themes) and

created draft narrative reports known as district profiles (Figure 1, step 4). These profiles also included quantitative district and community demographic data. Each district profile exposed multiple dimensions of inclusion and exclusion, such as those described in the previous section, as well as other challenges (e.g., increased state accountability, teacher shortages, consolidation conflict, changing demographics, and decreased funding). They also included descriptions of the heterogeneous communities each district served.

The research team sensed these profiles could be powerful tools to help superintendents see opportunities for specific adaptive work aimed at helping their stakeholders further explore boundaries as they worked toward improving outcomes for all students. The research team believed that by sharing the profile contents with the superintendents and asking them to conduct member checking, they would continue to build the trust necessary for future joint work and the respect superintendents need to protect certain boundaries and "think politically" to lead adaptive change (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 90). Additionally, the research team felt it was important to model an adaptive and boundary-spanning approach (e.g., continuing to express the value of local expertise, redirecting questions with "what do you think" style statements, etc.) given the heterogeneity of the communities that was exposed during the Sondeo process.

Figure 2

Four Square Graphic Organizer

Gaining a Balcony View

In August 2017, superintendents attended a retreat in the northernmost region of the state to review drafts of their district profiles (Figure 1, step 5). Throughout the two-day retreat, the superintendents reviewed their district profiles using graphic organizers (Figure 2), with the aim of helping them better understand their unique context as voiced by their districts' stakeholders. The graphic organizers prompted participants to frame their observations of the data into four categories: strengths, challenges, opportunities, and questions. This framework provided by the research team was aimed at helping these leaders to see all the Sondeo data and have a chance to be on the "balcony," after which they could share their observations of their district profiles and begin to articulate their interpretations out loud. According to Heifetz et al. (2009), "to practice adaptive leadership, you have to take the time to think through your interpretations of what you observe, before jumping into action" (p. 34).

During this profile review time, superintendents were observed discussing how they have (or have not) worked with individuals and groups (including their school boards) in their communities. In this process they were exploring their understanding of the boundaries within their communities and were beginning to think about how they might be reimaged. As the District B superintendent said, "Wow, you get your board together for a two-day retreat? I can barely get mine together for a meeting. When we do come together, all they want to talk about is football." This sharing led to further dialogue between the research team and the superintendents about change, and many of the superintendents started to open up and express feelings about underserving certain groups in their communities and a desire to improve relationships with these groups. As the District E superintendent observed, "Change is difficult, but worth it. This process might allow for the needed change to take root and grow."

After two days of interpreting and discussing the contents of their district profiles, the research team and the superintendents agreed it was important to structure a series of events to support sharing the profiles with stakeholders in their respective districts, including hosting a two-day summit where the profiles would be reviewed by many of the same individuals who participated in the Sondeos. Post-retreat "exit ticket" surveys indicated that most superintendents felt the process of developing the necessary adaptive leadership capacity to live with disequilibrium could only be accomplished by continuing to leverage the RPP to support further diagnostic work before assisting districts with the development of interventions. They asked the research team to help them share the profile information not just during this subsequent summit, but as needed moving forward, particularly with their school board members. As the District E superintendent stated, "Dialogue emergent from data yields depth and complexity. We are doing some things well. To be successful, we need help from all our stakeholders. We need assistance in areas [where] we struggle."

The Challenge of Redefining Boundaries

Interpreting is more complex than observing (Heifetz et al., 2009). During the Sondeo data-gathering process, the facilitators had the benefit of observing stakeholders

in representative groups (e.g., teachers, parents, etc.) as they shared their observations and interpretations about their district and community. On the other hand, superintendents only witnessed those Sondeo participants in formal leadership positions as they engaged in only one Sondeo with members of their school boards. This left the research team wondering where the "productive zone of disequilibrium" might be and what boundary work was needed to navigate the complexity associated with elevating those stakeholders without official leadership roles at the same time as supporting those individuals in formal leadership positions.

At the end of the second day of the superintendent retreat, the research team leader suggested to the superintendents that they form stakeholder teams comprised of Sondeo participants as a practical means to continue partner work. In doing so, they were attempting to support those with formal power and authority to begin redefining boundaries within each district. Post-retreat surveys showed superintendents were wrestling with this concept. The District E superintendent wondered, "How do I unite the different stakeholders in a common effort?" while the District C superintendent expressed, "I need to make sure I get the right members to be on the team. Are they the 'change agents' we need?" Similarly, research team members indicated these sentiments meant that the superintendents were struggling with the notion of where to span boundaries and where to protect them as they started to conceptualize stakeholder participation in interpreting the information contained in the district profiles.

After the retreat, the research team began to co-plan the summit with superintendents (Figure 1, step 6). They agreed on four goals for the summit: (1) build trust between district stakeholders and with the research team, (2) gain a common understanding about the larger initiative aimed at improving learning for all students, (3) continue to develop a space for a variety of stakeholders to engage in dialogue about their districts and communities, and (4) use the profiles as a means to start data-informed conversations about persistent problems of practice within each district. Research team members and superintendents believed that, given the heterogeneity and adaptive challenges uncovered in each district, collectively their role as designers of the project was to maintain space where stakeholders could engage in "getting people to clarify what matters most, in what balance, with what trade-offs" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 22), an essential component of adaptive leadership.

Fall: The Complexities of Adaptive Leadership

In September, the research team leader asked superintendents to identify one member from each of six stakeholder groups (teachers, parents, community and board members, support staff, and administration; it was not practical to arrange for students to attend) to participate in

an October summit. Research team members believed this event would be a chance to develop district teams. Two superintendents (Districts C and D) expressed the desire to include more members, while others (Districts A, B, and F) struggled to recruit individuals or to get them to commit to being involved. Although the group sizes ranged from between five (District B) and 12 (District D), all districts brought individual representatives from each stakeholder group to the summit (Figure 1, step 7).

Building Adaptive Leadership Capacity: The Summit

The summit event started with a series of team-building and leadership development activities followed by a process—led by various research team members, similar to the one the superintendents experienced in August—in which participants reviewed sections of their profiles using graphic organizers (Figure 2). While each member of the research team was matched with one of the six participating district teams to support facilitation of the process, superintendents were asked to lead their groups through the protocol for reviewing their profiles (Figure 1, step 7). This approach acknowledged their power and authority as well as their vulnerability. In doing so, the pace and depth at which the groups would engage in boundary exploration was placed on the districts. As the review progressed, each group produced several inclusion-oriented questions about the challenges they saw in their profile data (Table 3).

Table 3

Graphic Organizer Contents

District	Questions Raised About Persistent Problems of Practice
A	How do we work together with the community to increase parent involvement? How do we overcome chronic absenteeism for students living in poverty?
B	Why is there a lack of parent engagement with certain populations? How do we build trusting relationships with older community members? How do we overcome historical community tensions?
C	How do we address the needs of a growing Hispanic population with limited resources? Are we offering enough career readiness programing?
D	Do teachers foster diversity? How do we overcome pockets of prejudice that exist within the district? Are we actually building bridges of understanding? How do we do a better job of meeting the needs of students in poverty?

District	Questions Raised About Persistent Problems of Practice
E	How do we overcome language and culture barriers to increase parent involvement? Why is there a lack of trust between teachers and district administration? How do we increase the ability of the teaching staff to meet increasingly different learning needs? How do we find and retrain qualified teachers?
F	Why does bullying spike between 6th and 8th grade? Why is there a culture of apathy in the high school? How do we overcome differences between zip codes? How do we better support families in poverty to engage in the educational system?

As these inclusion-oriented questions emerged, all groups were observed moving through the profile contents in a "holding environment"—a space, often facilitated by an external actor, where information is exchanged and relationships are built (Heifetz, 1994, p. 105). In some district teams, however, not all individuals appeared to be engaged in this boundary exploration space despite research team members' attempts to encourage such total-team engagement.

During a debrief session at the end of the first day of the summit, members of the research team discussed the differences they had observed between district teams throughout the day as they reviewed photos and the synthesis of each team's work on poster paper. Districts C and E seemed to be engaging in deep dialogue stemming from the contents of their profiles. Their superintendents actively facilitated equity of voice and encouraged stakeholders to make statements about what they saw in the data. Both superintendents where observed spanning boundaries internally as they specifically asked for individual thoughts, such as one superintendent who was repeatedly observed asking, "What do you see in the data?" In contrast, superintendents from other districts were observed holding boundaries as they and a few individuals at their tables engaged in long, speculative conversations about why their profiles contained specific data. As these isolated conversations went on, other members of their groups began to disengage—many by turning their attention to their phone or computer.

The research team began the second day of the summit by adapting what they had initially planned (diving straight into the profiles) by introducing norms aimed at supporting individuals to share out loud their interpretations of the district profile contents. As Heifetz et al. (2009) noted,

> However provocative the practice may be, you cannot avoid making interpretations…. If you do not question your own and the group's preferred interpretation, you and your organization may end up colluding in avoiding the difficult work of

addressing the more important issues. (p. 34)

The research team also asked the group members to only use personal phones and computers during breaks as they reintroduced the discussion protocol aimed at ensuring everyone at the table had a chance to be heard. Although by the end of the second day all groups had reviewed most of their profiles, research team members questioned the degree to which some groups had built the capacity needed to begin addressing their challenges back home in their districts. One research team member's exit ticket survey response stated, "The stakeholders are excited about the process so far. They feel honored and heard. I wonder how do we individualize and pay attention to the unique cultural influences? This may take more time."

Despite this concern, research team members asked each group to begin planning when and where they would next meet in their districts to conduct future work. They also offered to provide on-site, customized assistance for continuing the data-informed facilitated discussions in local districts (Figure 1, step 8).

Challenges to Continuing the Work Back Home

After the summit, follow-up communication revealed that superintendents in Districts A, C, and E had quickly organized a series of meetings where they continued to "get on the balcony" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 126) and engage in problem-defining adaptive work with stakeholders in their districts. All three of these districts had received additional customized assistance after the summit from research team members. More specifically, in two of these districts (A and E) the superintendents revealed to the research team members they were working with that they were under immense internal pressure. In Districts C and E, the same stakeholder groups (which appeared to be comprised of members who were representative of their district and community demographics) who attended the summit were meeting regularly as teams. Additionally, one superintendent worked with two research team members and tribal education leaders in a series of meetings where they began to plan how to organize work formally with a larger team after the new year.

In these districts, superintendents collaborated with the research team to maintain data-informed dialogue, giving a voice to marginalized groups and depersonalizing tensions over district and community reform conversations. As Heifetz (2006) pointed out, superintendents need to think politically by

> identifying and engaging the key constituencies whose behaviors affect the education of children. While often skilled at marshalling processes and resources to solve technical problems, many superintendents do not appreciate the importance (and difficulty) of bringing the relevant parties onboard. (p. 512)

This case illustrates the processes used to assist superintendents in bringing others "onboard." Spanning traditional boundaries, superintendents were able to co-create new knowledge with stakeholders about the people, places, and spaces their districts serve. This approach was consistent with adaptive leadership, where individuals are mobilized to "help organizations thrive under challenging circumstances rather than perish, regress, or contract" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 2). However, not all districts continued such work.

Following the October summit, in contrast to the superintendents from Districts A, C, and E, the superintendents from Districts B, D, and F opted not to access further customized, on-site support. Two of the superintendents who did not continue the work in their districts and did not access on-site support for doing so were also those who were most concerned with controlling the discussion with stakeholder teams during the October summit. One spent far more time explaining his perspectives related to the data than he did listening to others' perspectives. The second superintendent assembled a very small team to attend the summit. He and the team were less engaged in the discussions than were the other teams. The third superintendent who did not access additional on-site support had recently stepped into the post. Prior to his appointment as interim superintendent, he had been the elementary principal and the special education director in the district. At the time of data analysis, he remained in both roles while also serving as interim superintendent, so the time and attention he could dedicate to the partnership was quite limited.

Summary and Discussion

Partnership experiences provided many opportunities for the RPP participants to engage in adaptive leadership as practice. In this study, which focused on the developing stages of an RPP, researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders had a variety of chances to practice adaptive leadership: observing events and patterns, interpreting observations, and designing interventions (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 32). Throughout the process boundaries were observed, spanned, and protected in complex and nuanced ways, which mattered for how the work was carried out in each district.

Drawing on complexity leadership theory (Lichtenstein et al., 2006), the process of developing an RPP across rural contexts involves a lot of adaptive leadership work. A major facet of this adaptive work involves the exploration of boundaries across rural social spaces and within newly emerging shared RPP spaces. In the case of the RPP described above, the arrangement developed as the research team conducted initial research, through which they discovered diversity within communities, which in turn illuminated opportunities for boundary exploration by using an adaptive data collection method which honored uniqueness of place

and local knowledge. Prior to these stakeholder-sharing sessions (Sondeos) and follow-up events, many local stakeholders reported they did not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts about their district, nor did superintendents have a structure to support the boundary work needed to learn about stakeholders' thoughts or engage with them in data-informed dialogue. Given these circumstances, is it not surprising that interconnected, long-time residents—including some superintendents—spoke of boundaries associated with tight-knit communities and supportive district processes, while others acknowledged district and community tensions yielding division and exclusion among certain groups.

Three notable implications for theory and practice stem from this study: (a) university faculty and school improvement specialists, as external partners, can serve an important adaptive role in supporting rural superintendents in building a heterogeneous community consciousness by creating a safe boundary space which elevates place to surface unvoiced stakeholder perspectives; (b) although superintendent engagement is requisite for school district improvement, better understanding the context where superintendents are asked to collaborate with district stakeholders and external partners provides insight into the complexities of boundary exploration and negotiation associated with inclusion-oriented rural school district improvement processes; and (c) adaptive leadership capacity can be developed and facilitated as a way to support rural school district improvement, although the need to customize the process is likely only supported through long-term partnership arrangements.

An Important Adaptive Role for the Research Team: Leveraging a Place-Conscious Research Method

From the onset of the RPP, the research team acknowledged the power of leveraging a qualitative data collection method which took "seriously the experiences and perspectives of rural people" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 3). Despite the fact that superintendents were asked to select the Sondeo participants, which could have limited the perspectives represented in each district, data included perceptions from individuals who reported limited social and cultural capital and a sense of exclusion from district decision making and operations.

Previous studies have highlighted the power of RPP arrangements in building bridges between knowledge and action (Buskey et al., 2018; Denner et al., 2019; Sanzo et al., 2011). In rural school districts, such bridges provide opportunities for boundary exploration, negotiation, and adaptation. This process is likely to be particularly important for school improvement because it acknowledges district positionality embedded within changing community contexts. In this case, an adaptive approach to data collection and analysis (see Figure 1) created opportunities

for stakeholders to explore beneath-the-surface challenges in rural districts and the communities they serve and the boundaries associated with such work that matter for adaptive change. This process is not surprising given previous works that acknowledge rural communities as complex, diverse, and shifting places (see Corbett, 2014; Mette et al., 2019; Tieken & Schafft, 2018 for examples). By creating a safe "holding space" (Heifetz, 2009), external partners, such as university faculty, can assume the role of advocates as they span boundaries and foster necessary dialogue and collaborative work among rural district stakeholders. This finding is consistent with Mette et al.'s (2019) argument about "the need for activist scholars to partner with communities for transformation" (p. 78) and directly supports Renick and Kazemi's (2019) argument for how decomposition may play a role in supporting RPP work that acknowledges local context. It too provides additional insight which supports the need for ongoing trust building between researchers and practitioners in RPPs in rural contexts (Buskey et al., 2018; Denner et al., 2019).

University faculty and school improvement specialists, skilled in research methods—including participant protection— are uniquely positioned to help isolated, often under-resourced, rural superintendents. As seen in this study, the Sondeos provided a rigorous and embedded method of data collection, which not only accessed local knowledge about each district, but also began the process of exploring boundaries and brokering relationships necessary for further district improvement work within and across unique rural social spaces. Such an adaptation of research practice, from theoretical to applied, may help to fill the gap in rural education research and simultaneously assist under-served rural district practitioners, but the complexity of leadership and rurality within the RPP structure, as some of our findings show, is not to be taken lightly. To inclusively meet the needs of changing rural social spaces, power must be shared across boundaries, including those created by past social orders that have treated differences as deficits. This adaptation involves recognizing inequities and marginalization of both long-time and new residents (especially those of color) and the need to refocus and redirect energy once used to maintain boundaries (class, race, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) toward inclusion and the celebration of differences. As Tieken (2014) pointed out, often unexplored dimensions in rural research such as race and class "texture rural communities and shape rural change work" (p. 217). Thus, such renegotiation of core values with equity in mind involves a fair amount of leadership action to "manage the politics" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 90).

Superintendent Engagement: Complexities of Formal Authority

"As brokers of engagement with community… rural school superintendents (as compared to their counterparts in huge cities or suburban districts) play a pivotal role in ensuring that schools address the interests of families and other citizens" (Howley et al., 2014, pp. 620-621). Working alongside extra-local partners, rural superintendents may benefit from increased capacity to broker such engagement. This strategy builds on the notion that RPP arrangements for rural school improvement may change leaders' will and capacity for improvement (Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019). Nonetheless, asking rural superintendents to fully participate in shaping RPP frameworks, such as creating diverse district teams within a set time frame, may place them in a vulnerable position. The research team in this study recognized that if they pushed too hard they would risk disabling productive future adaptive work, yet they were beholden to the grantee and believed each district was capable of and already working toward many improvement measures that had been identified in the Sondeo process. Our findings further illuminate the complexities of navigating and negotiating what Mette et al. (2019) referred to as "activist scholarship" and the messiness of empowering rural stakeholders to be the driving force behind evolving educational efforts in their communities (p. 92).

The three superintendents (from Districts A, C, and E) who collaborated with research team members to customize on-site support did so for a variety of reasons. While they seemed to place greater trust in them than did the other three superintendents (from Districts B, D and F), additional factors were probably more influential in their choice to continue to engage in this work. One superintendent was new to his position, and his team was very enthusiastic throughout the October summit. Forming a district stakeholder team in the way the research team suggested and accessing further assistance was the logical next step in determining a focal persistent problem of practice and a course of action. In the other two instances, it is not an overstatement to say the superintendents seemed quite overwhelmed by the challenges indicated by their district's data, pressure to meet external mandates, and the tension posed by involving stakeholders with varied perspectives in the improvement work. These superintendents may have felt "the pinch of reality" necessary to prompt adaptation (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001, p. 3). In both cases, collaboration with the research team was welcomed as they formed their teams and began work back in their districts.

Findings from this study suggest superintendents' capacity or readiness to engage in critical dialogue with community members to explore and negotiate boundaries varied. At the time of data analysis, the three superintendents referenced previously (from Districts A, C, and E) enacted boundary redefinition as they formally met with representative stakeholder teams "back home" in their districts. Still, half of the superintendents in this study (from Districts B, D, and F) did not continue the work of

the RPP "back home." In two instances, the act of boundary spanning needed to identify and leverage alliances may have been simply too intimidating as it appeared to challenge their construct of leadership (i.e., a leader as a decisive authority figure) and likely threatened the status quo in terms of organizational norms in their districts. In the case of the superintendent who was "wearing many hats," given some additional time, he may well have availed himself of the additional collaboration.

The Necessity of Customization: Complex, Adaptive, Boundary Spanning Work

Half the superintendents fully employed the adaptive support offered to them, but a significant amount of customization was necessary to support the unique needs in each rural school district. In two of those cases the superintendents may have initially acted more from a paradigm of seizing what could be described as an opportunity to receive outside help from new partners rather than any specific conviction toward mobilizing individuals within their communities. Even so, as previously mentioned, all three superintendents and the team of researchers had developed greater capacity to include stakeholders with diverse perspectives in the process of identifying and addressing persistent problems of practice. Findings from this study are consistent with the commonly acknowledged axiom that one size does not fit all when improving rural schools.

The necessity of customization explicates how adaptive and boundary work may be essential not only within the macro context (the statewide RPP), but also within and between micro contexts (districts with their own unique strengths and challenges). Several sense making examples were shared above, which showcase the need for partners to look further, listen longer, and just plain hang out to support the practice of leadership. In complex rural social spaces, this approach may serve as a liability when attempting to garner funding or sponsorship for RPPs. Even in a predominantly rural state such as Idaho, policy makers tend to fund improvement designs that are overwhelmingly urban-centric, and mandated to "look the same" and be implemented in the same manner and on the same timeline in every district.

Implications and Future Research

The lessons generated from this study showcase how university faculty and school improvement specialists as partners may be able to play a critical adaptive role in helping surface a heterogeneous community-consciousness in superintendents, which empowers them to collaborate with stakeholders in their communities and in doing so redefine boundaries. It too illustrates how "messy" roles within RPP arrangements can get, and potentially provides a small amount of evidence about why the current body of

RPP research is "weighted toward first-person accounts of partnerships" (Penuel & Hill, 2019, p. 4).

The constructivist nature of the adaptive, place-conscious methods described here enabled access to a variety of voices that are often unheard in larger school reform and improvement conversations, but the data from this study are only a snapshot of an RPP arrangement and of the rural districts in one intermountain state. Although the school districts under study are closely aligned with the three-fourths of schools in the state considered rural (Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.), "user generalizability" (Merriam, 2009) might be limited given that Idaho has some of the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the United States and does not operate under a regional support service model for district support. As such, collaboration with university faculty and school improvement specialists may be more complex than in states which have more options to support rural leaders.

Future research focusing on RPP arrangements in rural contexts should consider which policies, programs, or practices can best facilitate collaboration between researchers and district stakeholders to achieve equitable and just school improvement. Further exploration of various ways rural districts create team structures to actualize such improvement work may help clarify many of our assumptions presented above. Additionally, some RPP studies in non-rural locales use an additional layer to research the researchers. While this practice likely would be a welcome addition to RPP partnerships in geographically isolated places, there is still much to understand about how this can be done pragmatically. Our findings indicate the need to further consider (a) processes to build rural school leader and researcher boundary exploration capacity for addressing marginalization within changing rural communities, and (b) how such capacity building matters to sustain improvement in districts situated within the isolated and rural communities they serve.

Conclusion

Caught in the crosshairs of one-size-fits-all state and federal policy and local community circumstances with unique needs (Budge, 2010), between spaces with competing power structures (Biddle et al., 2019), rural school district leaders and educational researchers occupy complex spaces filled with adaptive challenges. Adaptive challenges are those circumstances where there are no established solutions to the problem or where there are so many solutions that clear choices are obscured (Heifetz et al., 2009).

This study stemmed from our close proximity to two adaptive challenges as part of a research-practice partnership (RPP) in the largely rural state of Idaho. The first challenge is narrowing the persistent rural research-practice gap, which researchers and practitioners both agree

is needed to provide more informed decision making for educational interventions and policy (Nugent et al., 2017), but which is also laden with a host of hurdles (Asen & Gurke, 2014; Honig et al., 2014). The second challenge is the lack of assistance rural school leaders receive, which is needed to actualize viable (and informed) improvement in rural school districts given their positionality as vital local institutions embedded within shifting multi-level economic, political, and social contexts (Schafft, 2016).

In this article, findings are shared which may serve as examples of the types of research and educational reforms needed to begin breaking cycles of exclusion, marginalization, and dominance long under-recognized in rural places by redefining traditional roles (including leadership) and boundaries. Throughout this piece examples are offered of how rurality influenced the work of both researchers and local practitioners, providing evidence that, unsurprisingly, although RPP arrangements offer much promise, this form of improvement requires a different sort of logic (Howley, 1997)—one that gives voice to local concerns and employs rural sensibility to support the interdependent relationship between rural schools and the communities they serve.

Prior research (see Howley & Howley, 2018; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995) has argued that national and state reforms directed by "outsiders" as a means to create efficient institutions which prepare students to be successful amid the backdrop of globalization have long ignored the contexts of local rural people and places. Although it is too early to tell if the larger RPP for school district improvement under study was a success, findings showcase the positive potential of the research team's use of a place-conscious method, working alongside district stakeholders, to begin to overcome persistent rural adaptive challenges. Rural school districts are vulnerable to and dependent on the changing communities in which they serve. No longer is it acceptable to work for rural school improvement in isolation. As rural communities continue to change, so too must methods of research, leadership, and school improvement initiatives.

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