

# The Diversity of Rural Educational Leadership

## Special Issue

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In the past decade, we have witnessed substantial change across and within rural communities, including economic transformations (e.g., Broadway, 2007; Schafft, McHenry-Sorber, Hall, & Burfoot-Rochford, 2017), greater demographic diversification (Brown & Schafft, 2011), and ever-changing demands placed on rural school systems (Budge, 2010; McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2016). At the same time, we continue to experience a nationwide teacher shortage, (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016), declines in funding for the nation's public school system (Leachman, Albares, Masterson, & Wallace, 2016), and broader policies problematic to rural schools (Seelig, 2017). These transformations require skilled building and district-level leadership of rural schools and school systems (Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017) if they are expected to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century.

The field of scholarship on rural educational leadership, however, continues to be limited, with the most recent edited volume on the topic published in 1999 (Chalker), thereby preceding many of these community and educational metamorphoses. Since then, a small subset of journals published issues on rural educational leadership topics, including the *Journal of School Leadership* (May 2014) and *Peabody Journal of Education* (October

2014). However, the field remains anemic: a search of published works on rural educational leadership in the field's major journal archives—*Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, and the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*—over the past five years shows just over 20 articles centered on leadership. These publications fall along three main lines of inquiry: leadership practice, including practices in response to external mandates and policies (e.g., Budge, 2006; Howley, Howley, Hendrickson, Belcher, & Howley, 2012; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Starr & White, 2008); preparation, access, and retention (e.g., Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Hickey & Harris, 2005; Tekniepe, 2015); and perceptions and leadership of reform efforts (e.g., Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, & Hupfeld, 2014). While this body of work is critical to expanding the field of rural educational leadership, it also reflects the need for more research, particularly on the increasingly diverse contexts of rural schooling.

This special issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* is devoted to rural educational leadership in diverse contexts. For this issue, we define diversity broadly to encompass the range of geopolitical contexts of rural districts, the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of educational stakeholders, and educational leadership positions and practices within rural spaces. We are pleased to include articles which represent a range of rural leadership contexts, issues, and methodological strategies.

The special issue begins with considerations of rural principal stability. The question of leadership turnover in rural education scholarship dates to the 1960s (see Carlson, 1962), with many studies attributing retention or attrition to the leader's status as community insider or outsider (e.g. Chance & Capps, 1992; Grady & Bryant, 1988). In Pendola and Fuller's contribution to the special

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issue entitled, “Principal Stability and the Rural Divide,” the authors examine principal retention across multiple geographic locales in Texas through logistic regression modeling. Pendola and Fuller provide us with a different lens for examining rural principal stability in the twenty-first century, emphasizing context, gender, and years of teaching experience as possible influencers. Their study finds rurality has a significant influence on principal stability, and raises new questions about leadership retention in rural spaces.

Keeping Pendola and Fuller’s findings regarding principal retention in mind, we turn our focus to experiences of rural leaders in practice, with attention to local and extra-local conditions. In “Instructional Leadership Challenges and Practices of Novice Principals in Rural School Contexts,” Wieczorek and Manard provide us with a phenomenological exploration of six novice rural principals in the Midwestern United States. Their work finds the rural principal must be prepared to visibly engage with community needs, work within constrained budgets, be flexible in their building and district-level responsibilities, and develop positive relationships with teachers, students, and parents. They argue, in part, for the need to develop novice leaders’ understanding of community expectations while building the skills necessary to respond to widening leadership responsibilities.

Beyond considerations of the influence of local needs, interests, and constraints on leadership practice, novice and seasoned rural school and district leaders are tasked with leading reform efforts mandated through external policy shifts. Zuckerman, Campbell Wilcox, Durand, and Schiller offer four instrumental cases of rural leadership in academically successful schools under Race to the Top guidelines in “Absorptive Capacity in Rural Schools: Bending not Breaking during Disruptive Innovation Implementation.” They find multiple adaptive strategies and purposeful processes aimed at creating coherence, necessary for school leaders implementing reforms in response to “disruptive innovations.”

Given these myriad—and at times competing—responsibilities for rural school leaders, we next question who are the leaders of today’s rural schools? Fuller, LeMay, and Pendola provide us with new insights in “Who Should be Our Leader? Examining the Prevalence of Women in Secondary School Principal Positions across Geographic Locales in Texas Public Schools.” Their gendered analysis of over 20 years of public school employment data in Texas examines percentages of women in the principalship by both school level and geographic locale. While they find general trends in increased hiring practices for women at the middle and high school levels, Fuller, LeMay, and Pendola conclude that rural schools are less likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to employ and hire women for the principalship. Their work suggests a continued gendered

divide in school leadership, broadly, and specifically in rural school systems, unreflective of the make-up of the teaching workforce and larger population trends.

In the special issue’s final contribution, we contemplate leadership possibilities in rural places. Hayman, RedCorn, and Zacharakis provide us with an essay entitled, “New Horizons in the Osage Nation: Agricultural Education and Leadership Development.” In this work, the authors describe transformations in the Osage Nation in Oklahoma, including government reformation, strategic planning efforts, and land (re)acquisition that necessitate new agricultural education and educational leadership to move the Nation forward given its new realities and vision. In their essay, Hayman, RedCorn, and Zacharakis offer a framework for critically place-conscious leadership and educational program development responsive to the Nation’s strategic plan and local needs and resources.

Through these empirical studies and essays, we find rural educational leadership scholars investigating a range of leadership challenges, practices, experiences, and even possibilities across diverse places. These thoughtful contributions by new and established researchers provide us a glimpse of the important work being conducted on rural educational leadership across the United States. Their work, in conjunction with our search of recent rural leadership articles, highlights that significant research is being done in this subfield of rural education. At the same time, the diversity of these articles illustrates the importance of continuing to support and expand research on rural educational leadership. Our work on this special issue highlights, for us, the need for new scholarship on rural district-level leadership in its myriad forms, including single-district leadership of small community and large consolidated school systems, shared district leadership, and multi-district or regional district leadership, across diverse places and populations. Nationwide, rural communities encompass significant diversity (Showalter, Klein, Johnson & Hartman, 2017), yet there are few contemporary studies addressing rural leadership in districts with changing demographics or high populations of historically marginalized communities. Further, we recognize a continued lack of scholarship on rural leadership related to issues of social justice, particularly around race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Finally, while the previous recommendations for future research in rural educational leadership are suggestive of the need for attention to multiple contexts, we argue that in today’s highly connected world, promising studies might also engage in an understanding of the ways in which rural and non-rural educational leaders respond to similar issues or establish effective partnerships for increased social equity and academic success.

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