Centering Students in the Community: Building Capacity for School Improvement Efforts through Community Connections

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Introduction

Rural schools very often serve as a social and cultural hub for the communities in which they are located, and in many cases, rural schools support a wide range of official and unofficial local infrastructure. Not only do schools within many rural communities provide critical infrastructure and a sense of identity to remote towns (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011), the economic health of a community is often linked to the presence and performance of schools within that community (Bouck, 2004; Lyson, 2002). In addition to providing a sense of identity and a gathering space, rural schools are also often the local providers of social services (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). As a result, rural schools often function as community hubs more so than schools in urban communities, a dynamic with social and economic implications (Schafft, 2016).

This study focused on the ways in which educational leaders in rural schools set about incorporating community engagement into their school leadership agendas and, specifically, the role of the visibility of students within the community in building capacity for these agendas.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

A key duty of rural administrators is to create links between the local community and schools to support learning improvement efforts (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009), and such links are important to supporting the well-bring of schools and the communities they serve (Surface & Theobald, 2014). In working with the community to create these links, rural administrators can leverage the traditionally tightknit nature of rural communities to encourage student success by nurturing and leveraging social capital (Bauch, 2001). Yet, while many rural communities are traditionally tightknit, they may also be fragmented along class or demographic lines (McHenry-Sorber, 2014). Therefore, rural administrators must navigate a variety of stakeholders who may have competing interests to marshal support for school goals (Lochmiller, 2015). As a result, rural administrators often face greater stress than their non-rural peers as they navigate such community politics in a highly visible role (Lamkin, 2006), but the most successful rural administrators proactively seek to build positive relationships with the community-at-large through public relations strategies that leverage local communities' formal and informal networks (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Jenkins, 2007). According to Jenkins, the increased visibility of superintendents within the community is the biggest difference between leading a rural district and a larger, more urban district. Rural principals also work as public figures in highly visible roles (Preston & Barnes, 2018) and are very frequently the chief intermediary between schools, community and local infrastructure, such as social

and health services (Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005). Yet, the current scholarship exploring the link between tightknit communities and schools focuses most significantly on the visibility of education leaders. Therefore, it is important to explore how administrators understand the role of students in facilitating authentic connections between schools and the community and the role of the community in supporting students' learning.

As Budge (2006) explored, the interdependence between schools and communities is particularly strong in rural communities, and Haas and Lambert (1995) conducted a nationwide review of school-community projects and found that successful projects: (a) were rooted in a sense of place; (b) valued evolving outcomes rather than fixed goals; (c) supported broad engagement from the community, particularly those typically marginalized in community development efforts; (d) were long-term and multifaceted; and (e) were rooted in the notion that participants are engaging in important work. Further, Bauch's (2001) review of the literature identified six types of family-school-community connections that support student success in rural communities: (a) *social capital* that creates tight-knit communities; (b) *sense of place* providing a feeling of belonging; (c) *potential for family involvement*; (d) *church ties* in religiously homogeneous communities; (e) *school-business-agency relationships*; and (f) using the *community as a curricular resource*.

This study was designed to extend previously developed frameworks that investigated connections between schools and rural communities to better understand the ways in which educational leaders can leverage the prominent place of their schools within the community to support and extend learning opportunities for students. Therefore, this research was conducted to better understand: (a) the role of schools as community hubs in administrators' efforts to build capacity for their school leadership agendas; (b) the ways in which these agendas are influenced by communities' expectations for schools and students; and (c) how administrators place students within their official and unofficial community outreach plans.

Methodology

This study engaged 14 principal and superintendent participants from a diverse range of rural schools in Washington state. The districts and schools selected for this study represented a purposeful sample population of rural schools in the state. In particular, the districts were situated across the diverse geographic regions of Western and Central Washington and had varied local industries and community sizes. All schools were designated 'rural' by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which uses 2010 census information to make locale determinations (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, over a four-

year period from 2010-2011 to 2013-2014, all schools included in this study experienced a general upward trend in the state Achievement Index classifications or remained in the "good" or "excellent" categories. The Achievement Index rating is as a composite score of statewide standardized tests and other measures (e.g., college and career readiness for high schools).

Data for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews with seven principals, six superintendents, and one superintendent/principal, covering a total of eight schools across seven districts. These schools were distributed nearly evenly across geographic regions with three schools in two regions and two schools in the remaining region. The schools represented a cross section of communities within Washington state, and the schools' nonwhite student populations ranged from 17% to 96% and free or reduced-price lunch eligibility ranged from 32% to 78%.

Interviews with administrators were transcribed and analyzed using the general inductive method (Thomas, 2006) and open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, memos for each principal and superintendent, independently, were composed followed by integrative memos for each district (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Final rounds of memoing included composing memos for each geographic region and memos capturing the perspectives of all principals, all superintendents, and all administrators. This process facilitated the linking of coding categories and themes emerging from the data to cover cases within districts and across districts and regions.

The semi-structured interviews engaged administrators in conversations regarding their school improvement efforts, their understanding of their community's goals for students, and the ways in which they interacted with local communities through formal and informal means. All principals were interviewed at their schools, and this provided the opportunity for observation of schools, including school tours and, in several cases, classroom walkthroughs. An additional benefit of interviewing all principals at their schools, and all but one superintendent at their district office, was the opportunity to spend time in their communities. Fieldnotes and a review of publicly available school and district materials were included in the data analysis to support triangulation.

Findings

Findings for this study indicated that superintendents and principals worked to engage the community in schools, as previous research suggests, but that they also sought opportunities to actively involve the schools within the civic life of the community. Such involvement hinged on leveraging the visibility of students to bring additional resources into schools to support teaching and learning and to

foster new conversations about the purpose of schooling within these communities.

This study found three key themes in which the visibility of students within the community was central to administrators' school leadership agendas. First, these rural administrators sought to showcase the school as a community hub. Second, through their efforts to leverage the role of the school within these communities, the administrators also worked to secure opportunities for students. Finally, with the nature of their communities and, in particular, their communities' expectations for students in mind, these administrators sought opportunities to meet the communities' expectations for schools while also implementing programs that supported students' development as "good citizens" who would be successful in meeting the demands of changing local economies. While superintendents from across the districts noted the importance of highlighting the districts' good works to gain continued levy support, the purpose of showcasing schools and students' accomplishments was also rooted in creating a community dynamic that supported students.

Showcasing the School as a Community Hub

Each administrator offered that the schools within their community served as a community hub. Not only did administrators seek opportunities to welcome the community into the schools, they identified the role of the school as a community hub as a catalyst for drawing attention to the successes and needs of students. Administrators recognized the importance of the visibility of students within the community and sought to continue or expand traditions that tied students to the community. These efforts were consistent across administrators "from" their community and those who had been hired from outside the area.

The ways in which the school served as a community hub included the role of the school as a physical hub for gathering, a community connector for special programs, and a service provider. For example, administrators described the importance of bringing the community into the school and using those interactions as organic opportunities to showcase the school's academic offerings, thereby bolstering the community's perception of the academic and social significance of the school. Therefore, even in the case of schoolwide events and community festivals, administrators emphasized the importance of welcoming families as an opportunity to discuss the schools' instructional programs or individual student progress in these informal settings.

Across the communities, principals and superintendents explored the benefits of working as educators in a small community because they were able to connect individually with families in the community to discuss students' progress with parents. Many administrators volunteered that engaging a community was

"easier" in a small town because there were fewer degrees of separation and it allowed educators to know students "inside and out" which fostered a "cohesive closeness" within schools. Yet, at the same time, multiple participants noted two significant drawbacks of living in such tightknit communities. First, transparency is much stronger in small communities, and this posed a challenge in schools where there was one teacher per grade or less. In these cases, when statewide standardized test scores were made public, the community conversation centered on individual teachers and groups of students rather than a recognition of this information as one of many measures of teaching and learning within schools. This transparency stretched to communities' quick responses to changes they noticed in the local schools. As one superintendent commented, "everything you choose to do is analyzed more rapidly than in a larger district." Additionally, principals in all but one district noted that they rely heavily on family and community volunteers to provide educational programming, but a minority of principals noted the challenges of having partners so deeply embedded within their school. For example, some volunteers had not kept what they saw at school, such as student behavior or academic performance, confidential.

The larger communities represented in the study had more historically stratified populations based on socioeconomic status and/or diverse demographics. In these communities, the superintendents discussed their efforts to "make-up" for lost time by reallocating resources or restructuring decision-making processes in a way that benefited learning opportunities for all students. For example, despite the importance of word-of-mouth as one of the most successful communication platforms in rural communities (Owens, Richerson, Murphy, Jageleweski, & Rossi, 2007), one superintendent was eager to bring structure to community input in decision-making after she was hired. In particular, she established formal advisory committees (ongoing bodies) and task forces (groups with a clear charge and completion date). As she built these groups, she sought to ensure representation from all socio-economic and demographic groups within the community. The principal within this district verified that this formalization of community engagement was a significant shift to longstanding practices within the community, and this shift had increased the representation of perspectives that influenced district decision-making.

Administrators in all districts described their efforts to ensure and increase buy-in from formal and informal community leaders. For example, schools hosted open houses and curriculum nights, community festivals were held on school grounds, and holiday programs were celebrated to encourage students' families to spend time in the schools. Administrators described these as organic opportunities that allowed educators to talk with families about student learning in social settings. Engaging diverse communities in rural schools requires rethinking traditional strategies (Isernhagen, Lin, Scherz, & Denner, 2014), and creating

organic opportunities for families and the community to engage with educators was one way in which these schools worked to foster a welcoming environment.

Community-wide events served as an important platform for schools in these rural communities, and some communities featured parades where all students within a school or district marched to represent the schools. Administrators within these towns noted that it was important to support these traditions because it was a central component of civic life in these communities. Several administrators volunteered that their local traditions may be considered "small town" but were important because such visibility reinforced the central role of the schools in forging and sustaining a community identity. Maintaining or growing this visibility, and in particular the visibility of the students within the community, was of particular importance to the administrators.

Administrators from one district offered that featuring all of their students from kindergarten through twelfth grade in a homecoming parade allowed them to promote cohesion within their community and to feature a variety of the positive attributes within their district. In this case, the administrators leveraged a tradition typically reserved to celebrate athletics to highlight the cross-section of academic and extra-curricular attributes within the schools. This district was one of several in the study that featured a mentoring program pairing elementary and high school students. Administrators emphasized that this leveraged community connectedness and also provided the younger students with modeling for academic and school-engagement. In another case, the high school required students to complete 20 hours of community service during their senior year. The principal explained that this pushed students out into the community and ensured that they benefited from the partnerships that were established for them within the community-at-large. At the same time, the presence of students within the community bolstered the notion that local communities extended the teaching and learning that unfolded within schools.

Administrators also recognized the role schools play in the life of families and the community by providing critical services (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). As a superintendent described the school's role, "We kind of do it all because there's not a lot of other resources [within the community]… We have a lot of support in our school that's not just academic." Food insecurity was a common theme explored by principals, and they worked to extend their ability to address that when possible. Examples included a high school that collected uneaten apples and bananas at lunch and repackaged them for students to pick up on their way home and a middle school that kept lunch leftovers at regulation temperatures so students could eat another meal before they went home for the day. In addition to supporting students' nourishment, principals also worked to provide other valuable resources for students and their families. These examples ranged from an elementary principal who had a washing machine for students'

use to a high school principal who arranged for advocates to discuss difficult but important topics such as navigating the juvenile justice system during school-family meetings that took the place of more traditional parent teacher association meetings.

Across districts, administrators extolled the importance of open communication with the community-at-large. One principal, who was a longtime resident of his community, offered, "Communication is key, especially in a rural [district]." As noted previously, word-of-mouth tends to be the favored communication method within rural communities (Owens, et al., 2007). Most administrators discussed "community networks," which emerged when an administrator talked to three people and each of them would talk to three people and so on. But, most administrators also openly acknowledged that relying on such networks could result in an unequal distribution of information, leaving historically marginalized communities without important updates and critical information. As a result, these administrators worked to close the information gap through formal means, such as advisory committees that were truly representative of the community, and through informal means, such as sharing information and resources through diverse social media platforms.

Securing Opportunities for Students

Administrators voiced that they simply were not able to provide the programs larger schools might, but they strove to use the tightknit nature of the community to their advantage by viewing the community as an extension of their campus. In this community-facing work, superintendents and principals worked to connect students with opportunities in the community that extended their learning. Examples ranged from partnerships with local fish and wildlife agencies that supported science curriculum, to professional internships as a component of the senior project, to a 20-hour community service requirement in high school. Administrators emphasized that these partnerships helped address some of the resource and access gaps that otherwise impacted students' opportunities. For example, in one case, a local organization offered targeted philanthropic support by sponsoring students' 'college in the high school' course fees for students who volunteered at a local event.

The high schools included in this study, in particular, relied upon members of the community-at-large to provide academic and extra-curricular supports to students. For example, community members served as club advisors and mentors for extra-curricular activities that were important to community identity and supported traditional local economies, such as Future Farmers of America, and emerging local economies, such as the Medical Sciences Club, which was linked with the local hospital. In turn, these student groups provided community service

including the Future Farmers of America's holiday toy drive and the Medical Sciences Club's community blood drive. While extra-curricular in nature, these clubs, as well as student groups such as the Future Business Leaders Association and the Family and Consumer Sciences Club, were closely linked with career-related teaching and learning efforts within these schools. Administrators offered that these opportunities for students to learn in the community supported college and career readiness and forged pathways into higher education or sustainable careers for students who otherwise would not have been on a college or career track upon leaving high school.

All administrators volunteered that they could not offer the programs a larger or a less remote district could offer, but they worked to build partnerships wherever possible to support students. For example, administrators engaged the local Rotary Club for student scholarships and created a partnership with a regional hospital to contract hours with healthcare professionals. By doing so, administrators identified gaps in what they were able to offer students and sought opportunities to address such gaps by looking to the community or the region beyond.

As administrators discussed official and unofficial partnerships between their schools, members of the community and local organizations, they emphasized that such partnerships prepared students for success in the real world and in particular, the "big world" beyond their community (Budge, 2006). As they sought opportunities to prepare students for that big world, administrators capitalized on opportunities that linked students' learning with community-based experiences and leveraged partnerships that supported local communities' educational and character goals for students.

Developing "Good Citizens"

Administrators across the seven communities were asked to describe their community's goals for students and each indicated that preparing "good citizens" was a key expectation of the schools in addition to preparing students for success in education and life beyond high school. Administrators felt an urgency to prepare the next generation of leaders within these communities and perceived their work with students to be on display within the community. Therefore, administrators concentrated on building citizenship education into their academic curriculum and actively engaged their communities for input as they formalized their character education curriculum and school culture priorities.

As suggested by the close community-school links discussed above, one of the key priorities administrators felt their community-at-large held for students was involvement in the community. Administrators used phrases such as "well-rounded," "good citizens," and "problem solvers" to refer to the local

expectations for students' schooling outcomes. One key theme present within administrators' responses was that communities wanted students ready to take advantage of their full potential in life beyond high school. Yet, due to the Great Recession and to changing local economies, sustainable living-wage employment opportunities rooted in traditional local industries were shrinking.

Superintendents, in particular, spoke of their efforts that built awareness within the community for different options that awaited students after high school. One superintendent discussed his efforts that fostered support for formal pathways for students after high school (e.g., higher education and/or a technical career credential) because the logging industry once prevalent in their area was no longer providing the jobs it had sustained for generations. A middle school principal in another community alluded to a similar tension when he discussed goals for students by offering, "Whatever [the community wants for students], they want them ready for something." Other superintendents, and some principals, discussed their efforts to shift community thinking away from traditional four-year colleges as the only option for formal learning beyond high school, as some regions had growing employment opportunities within a reasonable drive for those with technical career credentials and/or specialized training.

One superintendent described her efforts to change local perceptions of the role the community plays in student success. As a part of these efforts, the district developed a new slogan regarding high school completion: "Graduation is not a date in June. Graduation is a process that starts before students enter school" (paraphrased). Additionally, the district created a variety of initiatives and programs that served students with the ultimate goal of graduation. These efforts encompassed an early warning system, summer credit recovery courses, college "dress up" Fridays, mentoring programs for students, and programs specifically designed to support the academic success of the district's Native American students. As the district sought to disrupt generational cycles of poverty through educational programming, district and school leaders aimed to change community perceptions of schooling by keeping conversations student centered.

Another district with a significant Native American population was also working to bridge relationships between the Native Nation and the teaching and learning that happened in the schools. For example, the hallways and classrooms were decorated to emphasize links to the local landscape, and all students were offered language instruction in the Native language each week. Through these efforts, the principal and superintendent engaged the community and the Tribal Council to highlight the benefits for students and, in particular, to the future of the community. Not only were the students destined to be the next generation of civic leaders in the town, these students were also future leaders of their Tribal Council and sustainers of their heritage.

A final theme related to character education that emerged was the priority associated with building students' capacity to be self-sufficient learners. As one administrator described their school's work, they hoped to make students "empowered to control their own academic success, their behavior, their personal success." Across diverse schools and communities, administrators addressed their efforts that were designed to build community within their student bodies and to promote a growth mindset for individual learning. As one principal explained, "The kids are being honored for what they're coming up with, and they're understanding better what they're being asked to do." Administrators had different responses to the economic and cultural shifts within their communities. In particular, some administrators were committed to pursuing an approach targeting the community-at-large that might foster buy-in for teaching twenty-first century skills. Alternatively, administrators in other communities were committed to changing the college and career readiness culture within the student body first and then, based on their successes, expanding their messaging to families and the community-at-large.

Discussion and Conclusion

Rural communities across the United States feature a diverse variety of local industries and many have faced sustained economic challenges during the last 75 years (Budge, 2006; Mathis, 2003; Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). Yet, rural communities are becoming more diverse. For example, minority populations represented 83% of growth in rural communities between 2000 and 2010 (Johnson, 2012). These national realities were shared by the communities included in this study as they experienced change similar to rural communities across the country. Administrators spoke about their desire to prepare students for the "big world" beyond their communities (Budge, 2006), and in many cases, they noted the economic challenges within their regions and the challenges this posed their students and community. It was clear that schools were expected to prepare students for life beyond high school, but the sustainability of traditional industries, the lack of local opportunities in some areas, and the growth of new sectors in other areas meant that administrators had to build support within the community for embracing new ways of understanding the purposes of K-12 education including new curriculum and learning outcomes, increased engagement from the community, and different priorities for allocating instructional resources.

Engaging external stakeholders that matter for learning, including building relationships with and securing resources from groups outside the schools, is a key responsibility of educational leaders (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). By redistributing resources for more equitable learning opportunities and by building

these partnerships and outreach plans, the administrators exercised entrepreneurial skillsets that ultimately linked students with resources that best supported their learning. These administrators engaged in work that embodied Bauch's (2001) six types of family-school-community connections that support student success in rural communities: (a) *social capital* that creates tight-knit communities; (b) *sense of place* providing a feeling of belonging; (c) *potential for family involvement*; (d) *church ties* in religiously homogeneous communities; (e) *school-business-agency relationships*; and (f) using the *community as a curricular resource*. Indeed, administrators included in this study employed all six types of connections to foster family and community engagement and to leverage this engagement for positive outcomes for all students. In doing so, these rural administrators were asking the schools and community members to rethink the roles that they have traditionally played in local education (Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001).

As rural administrators worked to showcase the school as a community hub, secure opportunities for students in the community that would support or extend their learning, and develop "good citizens," they leveraged infrastructure and traditions within the community in ways that could benefit all students. For example, by embracing the role of the school as a community gathering space, the schools included in this study worked to develop relationships with students and their families that could lead to organic conversations about teaching and learning. Similarly, by embracing the traditions of the community-at-large, for example a community homecoming parade, and encouraging all students to participate, these administrators were working to ensure a focus on the collective student body. Fostering strong relationships within the community and highlighting the positive work students were accomplishing in schools helped to keep the focus on students' best interests.

Rural communities, like their metropolitan peers, may have populations with competing interests (Lochmiller, 2015; McHenry-Sorber, 2014). The principals and superintendents discussed making resource decisions that were difficult but ultimately in the service of student learning such as closing a school with dwindling enrollment and ending special enrichment programs. As one superintendent discussed her decision that eliminated librarian positions in the district to provide for full day kindergarten for all students, she emphasized that she was investing for the equitable educational opportunities of all students within the district. Nearly all administrators provided specific examples of difficult decisions they made to direct resources in a way that they hoped would provide the most significant and equitable educational impact. In doing so, these administrators kept investing in student learning at the center of their leadership agendas.

Further research designed to capture teaching and learning change within communities experiencing demographic shifts and/or administrator turnover may

illustrate the process through which administrators manage change while keeping student learning at the core of their community engagement practices. Additionally, this study engaged a cross-section of schools and communities in Washington state. While, as noted above, rural communities have faced similar economic challenges during the last 75 years (Budge, 2006; Mathis, 2003; Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017), the response of rural administrators to these dynamics may differ in other communities or in other regions. These schools were representative of the diversity within rural Washington state, and nonwhite populations within these communities were predominantly Native American, Hispanic and multiracial. Therefore, additional research in regions with different demographic diversity may support better understanding how administrators in rural schools across the country work to support student achievement for differently diverse communities.

The importance of strong relationships between schools and communities and the administrator's role in developing these relationships is significant (Riehl, 2000), but less understood is the role that authentic connections between students and the community can play in supporting students' learning. Aligning educational priorities that are responsive to potentially competing interests requires administrators to navigate tensions within communities. Navigating such tensions ultimately required the administrators interviewed to emphasize creating opportunities for students as the guiding core of their work. This study suggests that rural administrators may benefit from keeping the visibility of students within the community and the visibility of community-based student learning at the forefront of their community engagement efforts.

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