The Lone Ranger in Rural Education:

The Small Rural School Principal and Professional Development

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A pressing need on principals and their demands for personal professional development is improving their performance based on evaluation policy standards. State policy standards dictate how principals evaluate teachers and how they are evaluated. Surveying rural principals we investigated the current understanding of state standards and needs for professional development. Rural districts in Utah are remote and isolated. This research highlighted that within Utah rural schools, small school principals have different needs and practices when compared to medium sized rural school principals. Small school principals reported having spent two hours less in collaborating with and mentoring their teachers than did medium school principals. Small school principals also spent less time collaborating with other principals. Based on these results, we recommend that district and state administrators and policy makers target small school principals to provide the needed professional development to assist them in an already isolated and overloaded position.

Keywords: rural, small school, principal evaluation, principal professional development

It has been well established that the role of the principal is essential with student learning. Many studies have established that the quality of a principal and his or her impact on academic success of the school is powerful (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Robinson and his colleagues (2008) found that the more a school leader focuses on learning about teaching and student learning, the greater influence he or she had on student outcomes. Specifically, professional learning and development research have increased as evidenced by the numbers of articles dedicated to understanding how principals are receiving professional development (Parylo, 2012; Spanneut, Tobin, & Ayers, 2012). Driven by national leadership standards, the shift in the role of the principal as an instructional leader also has increased the need to continually develop professionally (Spanneut et al., 2012). Duncan (2013) also found that principals at all levels of experience have an increased need for professional development. The most recent pressing need on principals and their demands for personal professional development are improving their performance based on evaluation policy standards.

Theoretical Framework

The national focus on principal evaluation is currently increasing. As teacher evaluations have been adopted in all states, principal evaluation has also emerged as another method to meet current accountability pressures. However, research on principal evaluation is lacking (NAESP & NASSP, 2012) and those that do exist have called for improvement in principal evaluations because in the past these evaluations have not focused on current standards, or they have not been implemented systematically across a state system (Clifford & Ross, 2012). Studies have also found that attempts to evaluate principal effectiveness based on student performance or other management areas should not be used to make judgments as to principal quality (Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Goldring, Cravens, Murphy, Porter, Elliott, & Carson, 2009). With the dearth in literature on principal evaluation, some researchers (Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011) have raised the question as to whether there is an impact from evaluation systems on the hopeful improvement of school goals and student growth. There is some research suggesting changes in the way principals should be evaluated. Sun and Youngs (2009) found that principals would be more active in learner centered leadership practices when the evaluation included professional development. Sun and colleagues (2012) also found that district evaluations can promote greater instructional leadership.

In September 2011, the Utah State Board of Education adopted R277-531, which outlined the educator evaluation requirements for all school districts in Utah. Because of that policy, principals are evaluated by the Utah Educational Leadership Standards (UELS). These six standards are based on the national Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) six standards. Also from this policy, teachers are evaluated by the Utah Effective Teaching Standards (UETS), which are based on the 10 Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards. Principals in Utah (as in many states) are currently evaluating teachers using UETS and being evaluated by their supervisors using UELS. With any systemic change and added pressure of evaluation, principals need to learn what is required by the standards they apply in the evaluation of teachers, and they need to learn what is required by the standards in which they are being evaluated.

These evaluations are even more problematic with rural school principals. Often rural school principals lack any professional development in understanding how to evaluate teachers, which may lead them to evaluate teachers according to their own set of standards. As Erikson, Noonan, and McCall (2012) reported, rural school districts are often lacking in resources and support for professional development opportunities. New mandates requiring principals to be more effective are placing added pressure on an already difficult position as a rural school principal.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Utah rural principals about their preparedness in meeting the evaluation policy requirements of the new state teaching and educational leadership standards. Further, we also studied whether differences existed across demographic groups and if principals' knowledge of the standards was sufficient. Additionally, we studied the perceptions of the personal professional development of rural school principals and what needs they have regarding professional development.

Literature Review

Rural school leaders have challenges that may impede their receiving the needed help in meeting the mandates and other challenges of the position that are put upon them. Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) identified these challenges as hiring disadvantages, diverse responsibilities, gender discrimination, and a general lack of professional development support. Southworth (2004) found that rural principals, especially in small schools, when compared to medium and large schools, were more isolated from resources, other principals, and leadership programs. Preston et al. (2013) found in their comprehensive literature review that problems of funding, travel access to professional development, infrastructure, financial ability to create budgets, and facing accountability measures on their own were pervasive struggles for rural principals. Aside from the school functions themselves, principals in rural areas also face being highly visible within a small community that is culturally attached and tied to similar members living in the area.

Rural school districts are particularly at risk for not having adequate funding to provide strong professional development. Because of budget short falls, rural school districts are challenged to develop instructional leadership skills for school principals. According to a recent Rural Low Income Schools (RLIS) report, "Rural school districts with high rates of low-income students also tend to have a reduced property tax base, which is critical to local district funding" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In our study, core testing achievement scores for low-income and underserved populations in the State of Utah are significantly below those of other populations (USOE, 2009).

As in many states, the current expectations from the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) are that school leaders must be able to provide strong instructional leadership that is capable of meeting the policy standards that are dictated in Utah house bill R277-531. Professional development for principals to improve teaching and learning through instructional leadership is important for meeting these challenges (Levine & Lezotte, 2001). Principals will only be able to provide leadership for improving teaching and learning if they themselves receive this relevant training (Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), 80% of the United States' inhabitants live in suburban and urban areas, and metropolitan areas occupy only 2% of the country. Rural areas occupy the remaining 98%. The principals that this study targeted were in Utah and were outside the main corridor of Utah's populated Wasatch Front, and were not located in the cities from Provo to Ogden, nor were they located in Salt Lake City. In Utah, urban school districts comprise approximately 80% of total school populations and are highly concentrated in an area that has the 7th highest density population area in the nation along an urban corridor approximately 100 miles long. Roughly 80% of Utah's population lies in this corridor. Within this corridor are a number of resources available to

principals, including large districts, collaboration with colleagues, and public and private universities for professional help. Rural districts in Utah are remote, isolated, and widely dispersed geographically, leaving rural districts at a great disadvantage because of limited resources for leadership development.

Methodology

For this study, we utilized a survey research methodology with principals to investigate their current understanding of state standards and challenges and to study their needs with professional development. We recruited participants through emails to rural school principals, which asked them to participate in an online survey.

Participants

In order to identify the target population of rural school principals, we utilized the following four criteria:

1. Necessary Existing Small Schools (NESS).
2. Student population density with less than 10 students per mile within the district.
3. Distance greater than 40 miles from a city of 50,000 population.
4. A designated state licensed school principal existed in the school.

NESS (Utah Code R277-445) schools are identified as rural schools in Utah that meet the criteria for receiving additional funds that support the schools' operational expenses. Schools that meet the classification receive supplementary state funds in addition to their regular operating monies. The requirements to be a NESS are based on average daily membership (ADM) and distance of travel by students to the school.

In this study, student density was defined as the district ADM per square mile of the district boundary. Student population density has been used by the Land Policy Institute (LPI) to measure population change. The LPI identified a student population density of less than 10 students as the most remote and rural areas. We similarly included any school that had a population density of less than 10 students per square mile.

Although many national organizations define rural differently, The Office of Management and Budget and Census Bureau (USDA, 2014) defines rural areas that are not identified as Metropolitan Statistics Areas (MSA) with cities of 50,000 or more people. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2006) supplements this definition by including rural areas with a distance greater than 45 miles from cities of 50,000 people. We selected any rural school that was 40 miles from a city of 50,000 or less.

The final requirement in identifying our population was that the schools selected needed to have a designated state licensed school principal. Because we were interested in studying principal professional development practices with evaluation and knowledge of standards, we needed a licensed principal, as opposed to a teacher leader or head teacher.

The result from the four criteria identified 149 principals as our target population. NESS criteria provided 92 principals and by including criteria 2-4 we added 57 principals.

Data collection

We created an electronic survey and piloted it with principals before distribution to the selected rural school principals identified in the above criteria. The survey was a self-perception based survey that included 19 demographic questions and 14 scaled response questions. The scaled response questions had two sections, a section on the UET and UEL standards (See Table 1 for the UET and UEL standards) and a section on professional development. The final three questions were open-ended, asking the principal to rank their challenges and their needs as rural principals. After distributing the 36-item survey through email, 71 principals responded (48%).

For purposes of data analysis, individuals were separated into the following demographic groups: gender, years as an administrator (early 1-7, mid 8-29), age (early 32-49, mid 50-70), enrollment (small 15-350, mid 351-110), and year in current position (early 1-5, mid 6-30). Other than gender, we divided the groups in an attempt to have equal numbers among the groups. The data analysis was descriptive in nature and utilized Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). We used independent and paired T-tests in order to compare significance among the calculated means of each identified group.

Table 1

Utah Standards for Teaching and Leadership

UET Standards	UEL Standards
Standard 1: Learner Development	Standard 1: Visionary Leadership
Standard 2: Learning Differences	Standard 2: Teaching and Learning
Standard 3: Learning Environments	Standard 3: Management for Learning
Standard 4: Content Knowledge	Standard 4: Community Collaboration
Standard 5: Assessment	Standard 5: Ethical Leadership
Standard 6: Instructional Planning	Standard 6: System Leadership
Standard 7: Instructional Strategies	
Standard 8: Reflection and Continuous Growth	
Standard 9: Leadership and Collaboration	
Standard 10: Professional and Ethical Behavior	

Findings

The responding principals were predominantly male (62%), white (100%), and middle aged (mean = 49 yrs), although ages ranged from 32-70 years. The principals had been fairly stable in their current position (mean = 7 yrs), in education (mean = 23 yrs), and as an administrator (mean = 9.6 yrs). Ninety percent of the principals also lived within the communities where they were employed. Many were also raised in rural communities (65%) and even attended the school where they were currently employed (23%). The school in which these principals worked varied in size with enrollments from 15 to 1100 students, with a mean of 386 students.

UET and UEL Standards

Table 2 illustrates the familiarity of rural principals with the UET and UEL standards. Overall principals ranked familiarity with UET standards higher than the UEL standards. A paired t-test analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in how all principals rated UET and UEL standard familiarity. Each group was similar on average with other principals in a particular group in that they ranked UET standards by .80 to .46 degree higher than UEL standards. The group with the lowest difference in ranking was indicated with the student Enrollment groups and indication of .46. In comparing the different demographic groups, two group comparisons were statistically significant, Gender and Enrollment.

Table 2

UET/ UEL Familiarity by group

Group	Number	UET Familiarity	UEL Familiarity
All*	(*n*= 71)	4.09	3.48
Gender*	Female (*n*=25)/ Male *n*=43)	4.40 / 3.90	3.70 / 3.36
Yrs. Admin	Early (*n*=27) / Mid (*n*=39)	4.21 / 4.00	3.41 / 3.59
Age	Early (*n*=33) / Mid (*n*=34)	4.15 / 4.00	3.60 / 3.37
Enrollment*	Small (*n*=31) / Mid (*n*=37)	3.83 / 4.30	3.37 / 3.58
Yrs. Current	Early (*n*= 35) / Mid (*n*=33)	4.08 / 4.09	3.60 / 3.36

Notes: Likert scale of 1-5 (1- not familiar, 5 – very familiar); * $p \leq .01$ level (2 tailed)

Table 3 illustrates how demographic groups rated the standard where they had the greatest proficiency and the greatest need. Overall, each group was similar in their rating of the proficient and needed UET standards, which was also true with the proficient UEL standard. However, there was much

more variability in the needs within the UEL standards among the groups, and no one standard was dominant in being identified.

Table 3

UET/ UEL Standard Proficient/ Need

Group	Number	UET Proficient	UET Need	UEL Proficient	UEL Need
All	(*n*= 71)	10	5&2+	5	4&6+
Gender	Female (*n*=25)/ Male (*n*=43)	3&9+ / 10	5 / 2	2 / 5	1&6+ /2
Yrs. Admin	Early (*n*=27) / Mid (*n*=39)	10 / 10	2 / 5	5 / 5	6 / 4
Age	Early (*n*=33) / Mid (*n*=34)	10 / 10	5 / 2&8+	5 / 5	4&6+ / 1
Enrollment	Small (*n*=31) / Mid (*n*=37)	10 / 3	5 / 2	5 / 5	3 / 1
Yrs. Current	Early (*n*= 35) / Mid (*n*=33)	10 / 10	2 / 2	5 / 5	3&6+ / 4

Notes: + = indicates a tie among standard

After analyzing the differences among the demographic groups and observing that all but two groups were similar in responses and not significantly different, we focused specifically on student Enrollment groups to understand how small and medium sized schools differed across the remaining survey items. Although Gender was identified as significantly different within the standards, Gender was not further analyzed because of the large unequal group size. The following findings represent a specific breakdown of each section of the professional development practices of rural principals based on whether the school was a small school with enrollment of less than 350 or a medium sized school with enrollments greater than 350.

Descriptive information of the two different levels of school enrollment is presented in Table 4. In the small school level, most schools (52%) had fewer than 200 students in comparison to most medium schools (70%) being between 351 and 600. This breakdown also showed that in small schools the principals were predominately male (74%) compared to almost being equal in gender at the medium enrollment schools. The average age (48, 49), years in education (22.5, 23), and years in current position (6.5, 7.2) were similar between small and medium sized school principals. There were more principals that held doctorates (5%) among medium than small (0%) schools, yet most held master's degrees among both (90%, 78%). A greater percentage of small school principals lived within school boundaries (74%) and attended schools where they were currently employed (32%). Small school principals held more additional roles than the medium sized school principals, with 29% working also as teachers compared to 3% in the medium sized schools.

Professional Development Resources

When rural principals were asked to rate what was the most useful resource for professional development, the response between small and medium enrollment schools was similar. Table 5 shows the mean response for each resource by each level. An independent t-test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the responses of principals in small and medium schools in their view of leadership academies. Principals at medium schools (M=5.05) rated leadership academies higher than principals at small schools (M=3.82) in their usefulness in providing professional development. The next greatest difference among the principals' responses was in higher education courses, where principals at small schools (M= 4.62) rated them as more useful by .85 than principals at medium sized schools (M=3.77).

Table 4

Enrollment Category Characteristics

Demographics	Small (n)	%	Med (n)	%
Enrollment				

1 - 200	16	52	-	-
200-350	15	48	-	-
351-600	-	-	26	70
601-750	-	-	8	22
751 +	-	-	3	8
Gender				
Male	23	74	20	54
Female	8	26	17	46
Age				
30-40	5	16	7	19
41-50	14	45	13	36
51-60	9	29	12	33
61-70	3	10	4	11
Education				
Bachelors	1	3	-	-
Masters	27	90	29	78
Doctorate	-	-	2	5
Education Specialist	2	7	6	16
Years in education				
0-10	3	10	3	8
11-20	14	45	12	32
21-30	8	26	16	43
31-40+	6	19	6	16
Years in current position				
0-5	19	61	18	49
6-10	5	16	11	30
11-15	4	13	5	14
16 +	3	10	3	8
Rural				
Lives in school boundary	23	74	24	65
Raised in rural area	21	68	24	65
Attended district as student	10	32	3	8
Additional Roles				
Teacher	9	29	1	3
Director	3	10	6	16
Human resources	3	10	-	-
Student government	5	16	-	-
Athletic director	4	13	-	-
Other	7	23	6	16

Table 5

Most Useful Professional Development Resources

	Small	Med	All
Useful PD resource	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Higher education courses	4.62 (1.97)	3.77 (1.68)	4.14 (1.84)
District PD activity	4.59 (1.68)	4.80 (1.77)	4.70 (1.70)
State department of Ed	4.46 (1.73)	4.48 (1.57)	4.50 (1.63)
State organization PD	4.30 (1.60)	4.30 (1.35)	4.28 (1.45)
Partnerships	3.96 (1.83)	3.86 (1.82)	3.91 (1.80)
Leadership academy *	3.82 (1.92)	5.05 (1.57)	4.49 (1.82)
National organization PD	3.64 (1.92)	3.72 (1.74)	3.71 (1.80)

Private consultant	2.96 (1.71)	3.26 (1.83)	3.13 (1.76)

Note. Likert scale 1-7 (1= Not useful, 7= Most useful); * $p \leq .01$ level (2 tailed)

Source of Recent Innovations

Table 6 illustrates the principals' reported sources for innovations in their schools. Overall the most utilized source of innovations, with 75% of all participants reporting, was other administrators. The next highest chosen category was teachers (65%). When comparing small and medium sized schools there were a number of categories that differed markedly. Medium school principals selected private consultants (32%) and state mandates (32%) almost twice as often as small school principals (16% and 19% respectively). Similarly, the reported professional development resources that were most useful showed more medium school principals identified leadership academies as a recent source of innovation than small school principals reported. Small school principals selected national/ state associations (25%) and parents/ community members (38%) almost twice as much as medium school principals (8%, 19%). The least selected sources of innovation by all participants were business partnerships and policy centers/ research labs.

Table 6

Sources for Recent Innovations

Source of innovation	Small (n)	%	Med (n)	%	All	%
Other administrators	22	69	29	78	51	75
Teachers	20	63	24	65	44	65
Self	19	59	21	57	40	59
District mandates	16	50	17	46	33	49
Professional readings	16	50	23	62	39	57
Parents / community members	12	38	7	19	19	28
Leadership academies	10	31	16	43	26	38
National/State associations	8	25	3	8	11	16
State department of Ed	7	22	8	22	15	22
State mandates	6	19	12	32	18	26
Private consultants	5	16	12	32	17	25
Local workshops	5	16	6	16	11	16
College/University courses	4	13	4	11	8	12
Central office staff	3	9	3	8	6	9
Business partnerships	1	3	1	3	2	3
Policy centers/ research labs	1	3	1	3	2	3

Note: categorical frequency counts by principals

Professional Development Needs

Table 7 represents the participants' selected needs for professional development. Overall the greatest identified needs of the participants were improving staff performance (57%) and improving student performance (51%). When these needs were compared based on enrollment, a number of differences emerged. Small school principals selected three categories twice as much as medium school principals: supervision (22%), managing student behavior (31%), and budgeting (34%). Improving school/ community relations (38%) was identified twice as often by middle school principals when compared to the response rate of small school principals. The least identified needs by all participants were communication and assessing student knowledge & skills.

Table 7

Principals Need for Professional Development

PD need	Small (n)	%	Med (n)	%	All (n)	%
Improving staff performance	17	53	22	59	39	57
Improving student performance	14	44	21	57	35	51
Coping with political forces	12	38	11	30	23	34
Assessing/evaluating instructional program	11	34	10	27	21	31
Assessing/evaluating staff	11	34	14	38	25	37
Budgeting	11	34	4	11	15	22
Planning/implementing curriculum goals	10	31	8	22	18	26
Managing student behavior	10	31	4	11	14	21
Decision making/ group dynamics	8	25	6	16	14	21
Planning/organizing personal time	8	25	8	22	16	24
Supervision	7	22	3	8	10	15
Improving school/community relations	7	22	14	38	21	32
Leadership behavior	5	16	6	16	11	16
Communication	5	16	3	8	8	12
Assessing student knowledge & skills	3	9	6	16	9	13

Note: categorical frequency counts by principals

Weekly Collaboration

Table 8 illustrates the reported hours spent by the principal collaborating with other members of the school and district. Overall, principals spent the most amount of time collaborating with teachers (M=4.58) and the least amount of time collaborating with the superintendent (M=0.72). Looking further at the relationship between small and medium school principals reported collaboration hours, there was a stark difference in the amount of time spent by medium principals (M=5.53) than the small school principals (M=3.48). Further analysis of this comparison revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Although the participants reported a substantially lower amount of time spent collaborating with other principals, there was a statistically significant difference between medium (M=1.57) and small (M=0.77) school principals. Thus, in small schools, principals indicated that they are collaborating with teachers by an average of almost 3 hours a week, yet still 2 hours less than average time medium school principals spend with teachers. This difference is not as great when comparing the average weekly hours spent collaborating with the district office or superintendent.

Table 8

Weekly Hours Spent Collaborating

Hours spent with collaborating	Small Mean (SD)	Med Mean (SD)	All Mean (SD)
Teachers *	3.48 (2.62)	5.53 (5.53)	4.58 (3.82)
Other Principals *	0.77 (0.76)	1.57 (1.50)	1.21 (1.28)
District office other than superintendent	0.94 (0.96)	1.32 (1.43)	1.15 (1.25)
Superintendent	0.65 (0.61)	0.78 (1.07)	0.72 (0.88)

Note. * sig. $p \leq .01$ level

Table 9 shows the reported hours of rural principals in providing mentoring and professional development. Overall principals reported a mean of 1.34 hours of providing professional development to teachers and 4.47 hours of mentoring. There was little difference between the different sizes of school and their time in providing professional development to teachers (small M=1.10, medium M=1.51). When comparing the two sizes of school, the smaller school principals spent less time with mentoring than did the medium school principals (M=3.71, M=5.11). Further comparison of these two groups indicated that the difference of hours spent mentoring teachers for small and medium school principals was statistically significant (F= .074, *p*=. 05).

Table 9

Weekly Hours Spent in PD /Mentoring

Hours spent	Small Mean (SD)	Med Mean (SD)	All Mean (SD)
Providing PD to teachers	1.10 (0.47)	1.51 (0.99)	1.32 (0.82)
Mentoring teachers*	3.71 (3.09)	5.11 (2.81)	4.47 (3.00)

Note. * $p \leq .01$ level (2 tailed)

Initially we attributed this difference in small schools and time spent mentoring and collaborating to the factor that many small school rural principals were also working in an additional role as a teacher. We assumed that principals who are also teachers would be too busy to provide collaboration and mentoring to other teachers. However, in comparing small schools only, we saw that principals in small schools who had the additional role of teaching reported more time spent collaborating with other teachers and more time spent mentoring (see tables 10 and 11). On average, the principals who were also teachers (M=4.22) spent an hour more collaborating with other teachers than principals who were not also serving as teachers (M=3.18). Similarly, principals who were also teachers (M=4.00) spent half an hour more mentoring than principals who were not involved in teaching (M=3.59). An additional finding revealed that principals who are also teachers spent on average more than 30 minutes less time a week collaborating with other principals, the district office, and superintendents than those principals who were not also teachers.

Table 10

Additional Role as Teacher Weekly Hours Spent Collaborating

Hours spent with collaborating	Also Teacher Mean (SD)	Not Teacher Mean (SD)	All Small Mean (SD)
Teachers	4.22 (3.46)	3.18 (2.04)	3.48 (2.62)
Other Principals	0.33 (0.47)	0.95 (0.77)	0.77 (0.76)
District office other than superintendent	0.56 (0.50)	1.09 (1.04)	0.94 (0.96)
Superintendent	0.33 (0.47)	0.77 (0.60)	0.65 (0.61)

Table 11

Additional Role as Teacher Weekly Hours Spent in PD /Mentoring

Hours spent	Also Teacher Mean (SD)	Not Teacher Mean (SD)	All Small Mean (SD)
Providing PD to teachers	1.22 (0.42)	1.05 (0.47)	1.10 (0.47)
Mentoring teachers	4.00 (2.62)	3.59 (3.19)	3.71 (3.09)

Discussion

This study provided an initial view of what rural principals felt they understood and learned about the newly established Utah teachers and leaders standards. Overall, rural principals reported that they were less proficient on state leadership standards than they were on state teaching standards. This difference was statistically different when comparing all groups of principals with their familiarity of the standards. This difference might be indicative of the reality that principals are continually assessing and evaluating teachers and have been for many years, yet in the infancy of the new state mandated principal

evaluations, principals might be slower to understand these new standards. The new standards might also be less immediate in vying for their attention and focus because principals have many other responsibilities. Yet the two standards that principals rated as most proficient were professional behavior for the teaching standards and ethical leadership for the leadership standards. Conversely, the greatest needs identified by principals for the teaching standards were assessment and learning differences. For the UEL standards, principals reported that community collaboration and system leadership were in greatest need.

In comparing individual demographic groups, the responses were consistent with the overall average in that principals reported familiarity with the standards, except within the gender and small schools differences. In understanding more about the small schools, many of the small school principals had additional roles serving as teachers where the medium sized school principals did not. Many studies (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Southworth, 2004) support this finding in that rural principals often struggle with having enough knowledge to implement accountability practices and operate as the sole accountability manager.

This research indicated that within Utah rural schools, small school principals have different needs and practices than medium sized rural school principals. The homogeneity among responses for most demographic categories accentuated the stark difference with the principals' responses between the two levels of school enrollment. Although many similarities existed among the perceived practices and needs regarding professional development, the small school principals saw the greatest resource of professional development support came from higher education courses while medium school principals rated higher education courses as one of the least useful. With the availability of online courses in higher education, this might be a relevant and easy resource for remote and rural principals.

Another significant difference in useful professional development resources was the participation in leadership academies. Small school principals rated these academies as less useful than medium sized school principals by a degree of almost 2 points on the 7-point scale. Principals at small remote schools might have a more difficult time attending and participating in leadership academies because they are often held in distant locations that are more populated. The time spent away from school and having no other person to rely on for taking over leadership roles of the school might also contribute to this lack of usefulness for leadership academies with small school principals. This phenomenon has been described in other research as well (Southworth, 2004), and has been attributed to the isolation small school principals experience.

The identified sources of Utah rural principals' professional development resources were similar among small and medium schools. Both groups saw the benefit of other administrators and teachers in providing new innovations. It was also no surprise that small and medium school principals identified the same overall highest need for professional development for improving staff and student performance. Two identified needs emerged that were not as highly reported by medium school principals as by small school principals: budgeting and managing student behavior. Preston et al (2013) observed the same indicators from their study of rural principals.

What did differ statistically was the time small and medium school principals spent in collaborating with others. Small school principals reported having spent almost two hours less in collaborating with their teachers and with time spent mentoring their teachers than did medium school principals. Small school principals also spent almost an hour less collaborating with other principals, which supports Southworth's (2004) statement concerning small rural school principals' isolation from fellow principals.

With nearly 30% of small school principals also acting as teachers, we suggest that many of the principal/teachers did not have time to collaborate or mentor other teachers. Yet when we isolated small school principals and compared principal/teachers to only principals, we found that those principals who were also teachers spent a half an hour to an hour more per week collaborating with teachers and mentoring them. We also found that principals who also served as teachers collaborated on average 20 minutes with other principals, and principals who did not have a teaching role spent an hour. This finding supports the Preston et al. (2013) study, which reported that rural principals found it more challenging to network with other principals.

As rural principals continue in their efforts to support policy standards and professional development for themselves and their faculties, district and state school administrators will need to provide additional support to rural principals to help them become more familiar with the leadership standards upon which they are being evaluated. Specifically, those principals in small schools would benefit the most from an intensive effort to support them in knowing both sets of standards.

Small school principals have different needs in comparison to medium and large school principals.

Small school principals, especially those with additional roles in teaching, have a greater need in managerial help in operating the school in such areas as building budgets, supervision, and student behavior. Additionally, small school principals might benefit from more formalized opportunities for networking and collaborating with other principals. Encouraging mentoring opportunities may also inspire small school principals to spend more time with their teachers.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this current research effort is the lack of diversity among respondents. The sample of rural school principals who responded was primarily male and Caucasian. Although the sample was representative of rural principals in Utah, there is a need to represent minorities and women who are in roles as principals in rural Utah. It would be important for future research to target principals who are not in the majority, in order to better understand their unique challenges.

Not a lot is known regarding principal professional development, but even less is known regarding small, remote, and rural principal professional development. Future research should seek to understand more in regards to the struggles and challenges faced by rural principals. Additional research should seek to understand how rural principals navigate operating schools in isolation and within culturally cohesive communities.

Conclusion

Although rural principals are similar in their level of policy standard and professional development needs, small school principals are weighed down with more responsibilities and more role assignments and thus have less time to spend mentoring or collaborating with teachers. Because of their lack of proximity to other schools and their relatively small school size, they also have fewer opportunities to connect or network with colleagues. Based on these results we recommend that district and state administrators and policy makers target small school principals and provide them with needed professional development in order to assist them in an already isolated and overloaded position.

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