Sociocultural Background Influences on Early Career Rural Educational Leaders: A Phenomenological Study of Appalachian Leadership

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Effective school leaders develop the capacity to connect with their staff, students, and educational stakeholders to form bonds of respect and trust, and to foster a sense of efficacy in their practice and the practice of others. This phenomenological investigation aims to better understand how school principals interpret the influence of their sociocultural backgrounds and how they make meaning of their lived experiences as school leaders in relation to that influence. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this qualitative study investigates how five rural school leaders consciously perceive and make making of the influence that their sociocultural backgrounds have on their leadership styles and strategies. Findings from this inquiry were organized into four thematic units: the advantages of being local, the context of the community in school-community relations, the leaders' "application of the school" with stakeholders, and the leaders' personal identities. Focusing on their lived experiences, participants provided insights into connections between their local identities as Appalachian leaders and their ability to relate to the diversity of stakeholders in their school communities.

Background and Context

Educational scholars have maintained that effective school leaders have the capacity to connect with their staff, students, and educational stakeholders to form bonds of respect, trust, and foster efficacy in their own practice and the practice of others (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2009; Mielke, 2021). Having such a capacity to connect in the complexities of today's school systems is arguably more critical than ever. Not only are contemporary educational leaders held to new standards for student expectations and achievement, effective leadership methods, and conventional school responsibilities, but educational leaders are now also part of multicultural, diversifying schools (Fyans & Maehr, 1990; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Gardiner et al., 2009; Barakat et al, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021; Lisak & Harush, 2021; Theoharis, 2010).

Fyans and Maehr (1990) explored instances of "how sociocultural background may interact with the perceived culture of the school to influence student motivation and achievement" (p. 5), focusing specifically on public-school elementary, middle, and high school students. Similarly, Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) focused on the role of public-school principals as multicultural leaders. Studies revealed principals did not feel prepared to work with educational students and stakeholders who came from different cultures and backgrounds, but all delt with issues connected with sociocultural diversity (Faas et al., 2018; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Vervaet et al., 2018). Gardiner et al. (2009) stressed the importance of the leader's sociocultural background, stating, "all individuals, whether they recognize it or not, are multicultural in one way or another, by ascribing to certain beliefs, political persuasions, religions, sexual orientations, or other societal differences" (p. 143).

Within the context of ever-diversifying school systems in the United States, there is a growing need for educational leaders to understand how heir sociocultural background influences their ability to connect with each member of today's diverse staff, students, and educational stakeholders (Brown, 2004; Santamaría, 2014). Understanding educational leaders' self-perception of the influence that their sociocultural background has on their strategies to professionally connect with others might offer important insights for the current divisive social and political tendencies found in many of today's schools and communities (Chan et al., 2019; Houston, 2019; Ylimaki et al, 2017).

This phenomenological study seeks to add to and inform literature on principal preparation programs and scholarship on the impact of the sociocultural background of rural school leaders on their practice. Specifically, themes emphasize the state of sociocultural awareness in rural education systems on methods and rationales current public-school principals take to address connecting with their staff, students, and stakeholders of similar and different backgrounds and cultures. We introduce results relevant to understanding how these thematic elements relate to leadership responsibilities of social justice and cultural relevance awareness and investment within the role of principal as educational leader. To do so, we explore the following phenomenological questions:

1. How do educational leaders consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on how they connect with their staff, students, and stakeholders?
2. Subsequently, we seek to better understand how do these elements tie into social justice and cultural relevance for these individuals within their role as rural educational leaders in Appalachian Ohio?

Related Literature

Sociocultural Background

Current research confirms that there are several factors involved when exploring possible influences on an individual's sociocultural background. For example, many researchers confirm that home and family structure plays a major role in shaping a person's sociocultural background (Adhikari, et al., 2018; Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Hobbs, 2013; Kitchen, et al., 2012; Osterman, 2000). Additionally, the culture of one's society and upbringing within that society has an impact on sociocultural background development (Hobbs, 2013; Osterman, 2000; Tichnor-Wagner, 2017). Further, external variables, such as regional development or political climate, can be major influences as well (McCann, 1998; Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001; Walls & Billings, 1977).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has been identified as a key factor for a healthy school climate as well as stakeholder well-being and success in schools (Akur Vural et al., 2020; Encina & Berger, 2021; Longaretti, 2020). It is clear in scholarship that sociocultural factors affect students' senses of belonging in education organizations, especially students from underrepresented backgrounds (Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Walls et al., 2021). This is true within the United States and globally, in education and healthcare fields (Adhikari, et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2019; Kitchen, et al., 2012; Osterman, 2000). Additionally, the need to cultivate a sense of belonging in educational organizations has been connected to academic achievement and retention (Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Hausmann et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000; Pendergast, et al., 2018).

The importance of belonging can also be applied to school leaders. Thus, the social and cultural contexts of the school's community have distinct implication for the types of students who will feel they innately belong within that community and for those who require additional supports to feel a similar sense of belonging (Kennedy & Jain-Link, 2021; Osterman, 2000; Tichnor-Wagner, 2017).

Rural Schools and Communities

Tichnor-Wagner (2017) commented on how today's young people are "both globally connected *and* locally rooted" (p. 70) because of the inter-connectedness of global economies and industries, such as businesses, Internet services, and educational organizations. This included students in urban and rural communities, alike (Tichnor-Wagner, 2017). Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) found that parents, especially father-figures, play a large role in influencing rural Appalachian students' goals out of high school. Additionally, in their study, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) noted that, regarding college aspirations, rural Appalachian students share many similarities with students in other rural areas with high poverty rates. Additionally, Hobbs (2013) has found that, "Teaching is a dynamic activity where broad-scale and local changes mean that teachers are continually learning new things and need to adapt" (p. 288). This type of adapting also requires them to understand the social context of the school and local community (Hobbs, 2013).

The Politics of the Local in Appalachia

Politics in the Appalachian region often return to the land and local or regional geography (Holtcamp & Weaver, 2019; Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001; Steele & Jeffers, 2020). Nesbitt and Weiner (2001) also discussed the merits and pitfalls surrounding political ecology in Central Appalachia. The concept of

"political ecology" connects to what Walls and Billings (1977) called "political psychology" (p. 134). Walls and Billings specified,

> Actions taken by regional and national planners are defended as technical decisions, rather than political choices among alternative courses of development. Political sociology calls attention to the possibility that the most important decisions may be the "non-decision": the questions that are never raised and the subjects that never make the public agenda. Examples include public ownership of the region's natural resources and worker or community owned and controlled industry. (p. 134)

With these political processes in mind, McCann (1998) pointed out that the concept of "mapping" Appalachia is, in itself, subject to social implications and context. McCann (1998) encouraged academics, policymakers, and other interested parties to seek a "…critical understanding of maps and mapmaking… through dialogue between grassroots activists and cartographers in the context of ongoing political projects rather than through continued "contracting out" of mapping projects to external "experts"" (p. 87). The social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of the Appalachian region have influenced policy and politics in the region.

The Role of Leadership Identity in Schools

Hobbs (2013) describes factors influencing rural teacher identities in school-community contexts as boundary-crossing events. When considering the potential for differences in teacher identity-construction and that of educational leaders, DeRue and Ashford (2010) describe leadership as being a "socially constructed and reciprocal relationship" with those whom they lead (p. 628). Further, DeRue and Ashford (2010) theorized . . .

> . . . leader and follower identities are not only cognitions that reside within an individual's self-concept (Day & Harrison, 2007; Day & Lance, 2004; DeRue et al., 2009); they are also socially constructed and inherently related (e.g., granting one person a leader identity frequently instantiates a follower identity for others). (pp. 627-628)

Educational leaders construct their identity through externally and internally influenced processes. DeRue and Ashford (2010) designate three salient components of this process as, "individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement" (p. 629). These components evolve in complexity as the leader and followers, as respective groups, increasingly accept and hone these titles through "verbal/nonverbal and direct/indirect" actions (p. 632). As educational leaders shape their identity, they are also influenced by their students' backgrounds and local community-school context (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Marishane, 2020).

Phenomenological Framework

This investigation employs a phenomenological framework. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method of inquiry (DeHart & Dunn, 2020; Qutoshi, 2018; van Manen, 2016). According to Smith et al. (2012), "Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience" (p. 11). As van Manen (2016) stated, "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9). With philosophical roots in Husserl (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2021), phenomenology is typically described as an application of hermeneutics that is concerned with four components: lived experiences, how phenomena are consciously perceived, the "essence" of phenomena, and the description of experiential meanings (van Manen, 2016). For scholars such as van Manen, it is primarily a human approach to understanding—*the human scientific study of phenomena* that ultimately attempts to get at *what it means to be human*. In other words, phenomenology is "committed to thinking

about how we might come to understand what our experiences of the world are like" (Smith, 2012, p. 11). As such, we are primarily concerned with the lived experiences of rural Appalachian leaders of K12 public schools and how those educational practitioners perceive and understand the way their sociocultural backgrounds influence their practice.

Lived experiences are complex notions (Smith et al., 2009). Most individuals live out their everyday experiences as taken-for-granted events. Intentionality defines "the relationship between the process occurring in consciousness, and the object of attention for that process" (p. 13). The intentional quality of an incident or happening is defined by one's personal involvement and perceived understanding of the experience (p. 19). According to Moustakas (1994), "intentionality directs consciousness *toward* something" (p. 68). In van Manen's words (2015), intentionality refers to "the inseparable connectedness to the human being to the world" (p. 181) and it is "only retrospectively available to consciousness" (p. 182). In this study, we use the phenomenological interview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to invite participants to turn their retrospective gaze with intentionality on the relationship of their sociocultural background and their lived experiences as school leaders.

Methods

Research Design

IPA is a form of qualitative research. Smith et al. (2012) explained, "When people are engaged with 'an experience' of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections" (p. 3). From there, the researchers make sense of the participants' meaning-making strategies and concepts. Given the "double hermeneutic" nature of the IPA method (Smith et al., 2012), the data collection and analysis procedures enabled the researchers to explore increased depth in understanding the data.

Participants

As the context of this study is the Appalachian region, we used a criteria-based purposeful sampling of early-career, K12 educational leaders selected from Appalachian Ohio public school districts. Purposeful sampling ensures participant responses are "'information rich' and illuminative, that is, [they] offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2015, p. 46). For an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a sample size of 3-6 participants is considered an adequate representation of the target population of the study.

According to Smith et. al. (2009), "IPA is an idiographic approach concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts" (p. 49). As a result, studies using IPA should use "small sample sizes" that make it "possible to gradually build a picture for larger populations" (p. 49). Criteria for the study were the following: (a) licensed K12 public school principals, (b) practitioner in one of the 131 districts of Appalachian Ohio, (c) identify/recognize the district and school as "Appalachian," and (d) have sufficient experience as a school leader to relate meaningful lived experiences (2-3 years minimum).

As Smith et al. (2009) have instructed, IPA is an approach that is 'participant-oriented'; that is, by engaging in IPA, the researchers focus on the "human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it" (p. 34). Therefore, participants were selected through a purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) of licensed school superintendents practicing in public school districts primarily within the Appalachian counties with similarly populated rural counties, as designated by databases such as the United States Division of Agriculture and the World Population Review (World Population Review, 2020; USDA, 2020).

Typically, IPA selects three to six participants, which are then in turn studied in depth as significant case studies (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA process may involve multiple interviews for extended periods of time with a small sample of participants. A limiting factor was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With school closings in the spring of 2021 and increased political concerns faced by many district leaders in the fall of 2021, many school leaders found their attention being directed to those immediate concerns.

For this the study, five principals from four school districts across 6 southern Appalachian Ohio counties were recruited and interviewed. All participants were licensed, practicing building-level educational leaders in their respective districts. Participants were recruited by determining the inclusionary criteria systematically. First, a list of principals of Appalachian schools and their principals was determined using data from both the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools (a grassroots organization of superintendents and principals in rural eastern and southeastern Ohio). Contact information was provided via a list available at the Ohio Department of Education. Once location was determined an email invitation was sent to potential participants

Of the five educational leaders who participated in this study, most were male and only one was female. Their years of experience as educational leaders ranged from one to seven. While participants' race and ethnicity were not inquired, all could be considered "white" and are representative of the demographics of the region where the study was conducted. There was a range of primary and secondary administrators as well, but secondary-level administrator-participants were of the majority. All participants have been given a pseudonym generated at random via an online baby-name generator website. Much of this demographic information is viewable in Table 1, below.

Table 1

An Overview of Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Years as a Principal	School Level
Marcus	Male	2	High School
Werner	Male	7	Middle School
Sarah	Female	5	Elementary School
Samwell	Male	1	High School
Hardy	Male	2	High School

Data Collection

Utilizing semi-structured interview protocol as the primary data collection method (Alase, 2017; Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015), we developed questions in the research schedule to "facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participant which will, in turn, enable them to provide a detailed account of the experience under investigation" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 59). Interview questions were intended to elicit descriptive, narrative, and structural responses, and the interviewer employed prompts and probes to extend and clarify as needed. The semi-structured interview procedure allowed participants (i.e., principals) to share their narratives of lived experiences and collect data on how they make meaning of and understand the impact of opioids on their schools and students (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2015).

Initial interviews were conducted from January 2021 until March 2021. Interview sessions were scheduled for and lasted, on average, 60 minutes. By seeking depth and detail, probes and written follow-up questions were used to invite school leaders to share intimate responses and the conversation going while clarifying ambiguities (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Initial interviews were conducted remotely, using video-conferencing platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed using an online automated transcription service. After ensuring the accuracy of the transcriptions, we used the data analyzed in the initial interviews to form the follow-up questions that formed our emailed questionnaire. Participants agreed also to respond to an emailed questionnaire and one follow-up interview for clarification. Participants responded to the emailed question prompts via written responses. Notes and memoing were used for the third round of data collection in the follow-up interviews.

Data Analysis

All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded (Saldaña, 2021). Transcriptions were created using an automated transcription software, then reviewed and "cleaned" by the research team. The transcriptions were then read and re-read, and coded, using labels through an iterative process of initial noting conducted by both researchers (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Smith et al., 2012). The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to assist with the data organization and management during the analysis process. In this process, the first cycle of coding was made using descriptive codes. Initial coding identified labels that were open and descriptive; second cycle coding was done as, what Smith et al. (2009) refer to as "explanatory" or "interpretative" coding. In this process, we began to interpret the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants, beginning to "get at" the meaning and essence of the data they provided.

We employed explanatory or interpretative coding during the second cycle coding process. These codes were then organized into themes (Patton, 2015; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Smith et al., 2012). In this phase we identified themes by examining and re-examining the coded data for useful patterns (as a post-coding analysis) in participant narratives that provide evidence of common themes and issues via coding (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Next, the emergent themes from this analysis resulted in units of analyses related to local, national, versus global identities and balancing teacher support with socially and culturally conscious student connection to academic assignments. We utilized emergent data and categorical themes as the primary vehicle for interpretation and analysis. The analytic activities of IPA are further described and detailed as the hermeneutic process.

Hermeneutics as a Process of Analysis

According to Smith et al. (2012), IPA is "strongly influenced by the hermeneutic version of phenomenology" (p. 34). Hermeneutics—the art of interpretation—has a long historical association with translating, or interpreting, textual language. The roots of contemporary hermeneutics can found in the philosophical works of Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Martin Heidegger (Crotty, 2020). Although contemporary hermeneutics can be attributed to Gadamer, Ricoeur is often credited for developing hermeneutics as a phenomenological process (Malpas & Gander, 2015; Porter & Robinson, 2011).

Moustakas' (1994) work, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, places hermeneutics as a central and essential component of phenomenological analysis. Drawing from Dilthey, Moustakas stated, "hermeneutic science involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood" (p. 9). For the researcher using the phenomenological interview, the text is the interview and the analysis of the interview. Through in-depth interviewing, we were able to generate texts of participants' experiences through an interrelationship between the one sharing their experience (the interviewee) and the listener (the interviewer). The process of reflective interpretation involves both a description of a lived experience and the perceptive and intuitive interpretation of the experience's underlying content and contexts (DeHart & Dunn, 2021; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2012).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) relies on several interpretative strategies to engage in hermeneutics (DeHart & Dunn, 2021). First, researchers employ line-by-line analysis, coding participants' experiential claims, concerns, and understanding and identify themes or patterns that emerge from the experiential material (Smith et al., 2012). The interpretative process requires that the researchers develop a "dialogue" between the coded data and their psychological (personal, professional, and practical) knowledge to understand and make meaning of the participants' responses. This was accomplished by a collaborative analysis in which both researchers read and re-read the transcriptions and making initial notes of content, language, and interesting comments and concepts. These notes included descriptions of the content, linguistic comments on how participants used language, and conceptual annotations of "each interesting feature of a participant's account" (p. 88).

The next stage of analysis in IPA is the development of emergent themes. According to Smith et al. (2012), "Analyzing exploratory comments to identify emergent themes involves a focus, as the local level, on discrete chunks of transcript" (p. 91). Thematic identification is a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle—an understanding of the whole through its parts (Malpas & Gander, 2015). As Smith et al. (2012) have stated, "The original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts . . ., but these then come together in another new whole . . . in the write up" (p. 91).

The final steps of the hermeneutic analysis in IPA include making connections across emergent themes and then finding patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2012). Specific statements and responses that were identified and recorded were arranged into thematic units or individual textual descriptions (Moustakas, 1994. These thematic units were then integrated based on all participant descriptions and were used to develop a composite textural description (Moustakas, 1994). We categorized these descriptions under four thematic headings:

- The Advantages of Being 'Local'
- The Context of the Community in the Community-School Relationship
- The Leaders' Applications of the School with Community Stakeholders
- The Leaders' Personal Identities, Roles, and Observations.

For the early-career principals in Appalachian Ohio who participated in this study, connection to the local area, as a local or as someone who is clearly invested in the area—if not both, was key to successful leadership.

Trustworthiness

We used methods of validation and trustworthiness for triangulation and to improve the quality of results, such as: peer-debriefing, inter-rater reliability, and follow-up communication as needed for clarification (Patton, 2015). Further, we have previously stated our positionality in connection and relation to the region. The First Author is from the Appalachian region and has worked and lived in this region for most of her life. The Second Author has worked and lived in this region for a number of years. In addition to our closeness to the region, we bridled our experiences through the upkeep of our researcher's journals and through peer-debriefing processes regarding our positionality and separation of our own perceptions and experiences from those of our participants (Ahmankwaa, 2016; Dahlberg, 2006; Hopkins et. al, 2017; Shufutinsky, 2020).

Findings

The fundamental purpose of this study was "to get at" how K12 rural principals in Appalachian schools make meaning of their lived experiences regarding the influence of their sociocultural backgrounds on their leadership styles and strategies. The participants in this study identified as

Appalachian or recognized their schools as being Appalachian and had sufficient experiences in the early years of their principalships to speak to the phenomenon under exploration. Each were licensed K12 practitioners, and all had between 1 and 10 years of service as principal. From the data provided by these individuals four main categorical themes emerged: (1) the advantages of being "local"; (2) the context of the community in the community-school relationship; (3) the leaders' application of the school with community stakeholders; (4) the leaders' personal identities, including the way their viewed their roles and general leadership observations. As these findings are discussed through excerpts from the data in the following section, bear in mind the story-telling nature of the Appalachian region.

The Advantages of Being "Local"

The dichotomy between the concepts of "insider" or an "outsider" is common throughout fiction and nonfiction texts concern the U.S. Appalachian region (Billings & Kingsolver, 2018; Schumann & Fowler, 2002). The idea of educational leaders being aware of their status as "local" or "not local" indicated a certain amount of awareness of the context of their position beyond the school-community. Even so, Werner took this idea a step farther when they specifically differentiated between "[Name] County local" and regional local:

> I think there's two kinds of local. There's [Name] County local—I mean, there is this, 'Our people from [Name] County, and then there's the regional, Southeast Ohio/ Appalachian [local]. The benefit I'm speaking out is absolutely [name of] County. It is, "You are one of us. Therefore, we trust you first and we're not as skeptical."

This sense of being accepted, as being local, not only gave Werner credibility but also helped to connect his identity and work as a school principal directly to the community. Werner viewed this connection as an essential aspect of being able to effect change and lead in school improvement. In their words,

> Typically, because I'm local, because people have some sort of knowledge—even if it's incorrect—it gives you an advantage. It gives you the ability for them to listen first and then ask why they're listening later. That can be very helpful. Instead of fighting for your reputation, your reputation precedes you. It allows for many menial decisions to be just that. You don't get a lot of pushback on silly stuff because they kind of trust you to take care of the silly stuff. Maybe it's unwarranted, but I do have to be aware that I kind of get the benefit of bias in most occasions. (Werner, Principal Interview, February 9, 2021)

The advantages of being "local" include not having to "fight for your reputation" and being able to make mistakes without harming school-community relationships (Werner, Principal Interview, February 9, 2021).

Being "local" is defined as being born and raised in the community (Samwell, Principal Interview, March 18, 2021). There is a distinguishment between "county local" and "regionally local," although both identities generally enjoy smooth transitions into the local rural community as an educational leader. However, the "local" privilege does not negate the growth and development of the participants from their own personal experiences within the community to their professional role as educational leaders.

The Context of the Community in the Community-School Relationship

The context of the community in the community-school relationship, as the label implies, puts the community needs first. However, the first step is establishing ties within the community. For instance, Sarah described their leadership style as being directly connected to the school and community members, saying,

> Well, my motto is "People before process." I like to connect with my staff and my students. [I] try

> to make a welcoming, positive climate for all people that enter our building. When people feel cared about, they usually work a little bit harder, and kids seem to react a little bit more positively when we have any issues. So always try to be proactive in the disciplinary ways, with students and staff just by building rapport. [It's the] same with parents and making sure that your communication is happening, whether it be positive or negative, but really try to hit on the positives—especially before something goes wrong. (Sarah, Principal Interview, March 12, 2021)

Meanwhile, some participants believed they fit in with the community and that that helps facilitate their leadership decisions. For instance, Samwell explained the close-knit nature of the local area in which his school is situated:

> [Town Name] is so tight knit. There's about 4,500 people. Very rich in tradition. The high school, it sits right in the middle of this town and it's the heart of the community. It runs the community. It's just, there's so much rich tradition here. If you walked through our—if you saw [Name] High School you would... it's a museum. It's not a school. Like, our building was built in 1915. Literally, it has statues and marble steps and murals and paintings and, it's crazy. … So, yeah. Being born and raised here, and just knowing... like, I just know, community leaders, business leaders, I have good relationships and good ties with people and that's been very beneficial for me to be in that position. (Samwell, Principal Interview, March 18, 2021).

Further, Hardy reflected that "community pride" was a "core value" in his community-school context (Hardy, Principal Interview, March 15, 2021).

The educational leaders in this study were sensitive to community needs, concerns, and perspectives and scaffolds decision-making strategies concerning the school based on the community's baseline. Simultaneously, participants often describe the community as "homogenous", "culturally rich", and "diverse". The seeming paradox lends itself to the glocal perspective unique to the educational leader participants.

The Leaders' Applications of the School with Community Stakeholders

In connection with community context, Hardy ties the core values of the community in with the expectations of the local Board of Education. They explained it this way:

> Community is everything. Community pride is the cultural value, "I'm proud to be from [Town Name]." I live in [Town], Ohio but [am] proud to be a graduate of [Local College/University]. Some of these students are fourth, fifth generation graduates of this school, so that's part of it. Hard work. I am fortunate to still in a school district where if there is discipline of a student 96 times out of 100, the parent is going to align themselves with me and not the other way around, as you do find in many school cultures now. (Hardy, Principal Interview, March 15, 2021)

In this excerpt, Hardy emphases the importance of his core values as they are aligned with the community's core values and resulting cooperation with students' parents and guardians. His pride of the area is a conscious perception of how his own sociocultural background and experiences influence how he connects with community members and students. This understanding of the local and his personal value systems ties into social justice and cultural relevance as it manifests in Hardy's role as educational leader, as can be seen in the continuation of this excerpt:

> So, I think there's a traditional value system here in... the village, but it's surprise—It's not conservative, politically, in the sense that you would think. It's probably quite the opposite. It's very diverse, politically. When I asked the Board of Education, when they hired me, I said, "A year from now, after my the first year, my contract is over, what will I be doing if I'm successful—in your view?" They said, "We want our parents to feel good about the school and feel good about the direction that it's headed. We want our students to be challenged every single day and held

> accountable. We want our staff to be working hard. We want to make sure our staff are really actively involved in doing the things they're supposed to do." I said, "Okay." So I wrote all those things down and I always keep them in mind as I plan what I'm doing. I remember what the expectations of the Board of Education were and are. (Hardy, Principal Interview, March 15, 2021)

The leaders' application of the school with community stakeholders, or school-first approach, exposed participants' understanding of their teaching staff, who are often not "local"; support staff, who are often wholly "local"; and the students, who are certainly "local", and creating a safe academic environment for everyone involved.

One participant describes their hope for their school-community is, "to create more understanding when you feel like you don't know the person across from you, or if you feel like they've had completely different life experiences than you" (Marcus, Principal Interview, February 4, 2021). The concept of finding common ground between groups was consistent among participant interviews. Within the local dynamic, educational leaders find themselves acting as "shields" for students seen as outsiders in the community (i.e., openly trans, gender fluid, etc.) and establishing firm boundaries with parents/guardians that often result in loyalty, if effectively done.

The Leaders' Personal Identities, Roles, and Observations

Age and experience were something that Marcus and Werner, respectively, mentioned regarding their own identity development. For instance, Werner explained it this way:

> . . . the way I felt when I first started teaching is—when you start as a 20-something and you do whatever you're asked in terms of being in this group or coaching this sport or whatever it might be. There's always this fear that they [the teachers] look at you as the 17-year-old kid. They look at you because you were in their Boy Scout Troop or because you played high school basketball—whatever it might be. So you kind of get that... Even though you're an acquaintance of many people, they can attach [a memory/identity] to you. After I was gone for a little while, it allowed me to come back as an adult. Then I felt like, I could be viewed as a 30-something that I actually was instead of the way I was remembered—or the way they first met me. (Werner, Principal Interview, February 9, 2021)

Werner's lived experience of growing into his identity as a local school principal revealed much about how he viewed his obligations and roles within his community. Time and maturity brought with it respect and responsibility. In their words, one can see an expression of a passion for the local value system and a sense of integrity they hold in being a part of their community.

Such experiences and growth as individuals were, for the leaders, essential to their self-efficacy as decision makers and change agents. Along the same line of thinking as Werner, Marcus reflected,

> Your experiences become a really big decider about what happens. It's not just those experiences, but really how you react to those experiences. You have that internal locus of control to where you can when you have a hard decision to make. It's better to make the hard decision than the easy decision a lot a lot of times. That is really kind of the so for a while I was, that's kind of what it was really, really focused on making only the hard decisions. (Marcus, Principal Interview, February 4, 2021)

The participants' personal identities, roles, and observations are complex. Often, these principals discussed strong family ties and loyalty to their family first, which aligns with values reflected in the local community. Regarding any differing opinions or personalities within the family, Werner noted, "Nobody dug too deep and nobody really hated somebody else because they didn't agree with them. I've kind of maintained that, whereas my wife shifted to that." This example of cultural awareness leads to informed methods of "picking your battles" as an early-career principal in Appalachia.

Whether or not participants had upbringings which aligned with the majority of the students, participants were adamantly goal- and relationship-focused. Werner went so far as to say, "I am not the center of the building." Trust, connection, and reflection on the underlying issues amid the daily tasks create the opportunity for participants to recognize some ways their past experiences emerge within their leadership approaches.

Discussion

This study informs scholarship on principal preparation and practice. In particular, it addresses the issues of preparing aspiring leaders for the cultural diversity and complexities of the various districts that they will serve in. The findings of this study inform current practitioners who are experiencing new trends in issues of leadership due to diversifying demographics in school districts and communities that have historically been more culturally homogeneous. Furthermore, our findings serve to explore needed efforts to thwart the current divisive tendencies found in many of today's school-communities.

The goal of this study was explore meaning making as a theoretical framework and the phenomenological language of lived experiences of early career principals in Appalachian Ohio. Moreover, we aim to better appreciate the importance of culturally responsive leadership for educational leaders' understanding of how their sociocultural backgrounds and experiences influence their leadership style and methods. As such, this study gets at the importance of a socio-culturally aware leadership for cultivating equitable education systems for the 21st century (2022 AERA Meeting Call for Submissions, 2021). However, this study is not without its limitations.

Limitations

Because this study was conducted during a global pandemic, one limitation of this study is the unknown impact of the unique pressures put on all educational leaders at this time. Even so, participants were able to draw on a mix of previous and current experience to participate in this study. Additionally, while we had five participants, only four were available for follow-up interview response. Even so, we assumed that participants answered all questions reflectively and honestly.

Delimitations

We selected IPA as our research method because we aimed to specifically focus on current, early-career educational leaders (i.e., principals) in Appalachian Ohio. For instance, we aimed to interview principals with 10 or fewer years of leadership experience. IPA designates that a small sample size is important for an in-depth analysis and understanding of the meaning-making processes behind leadership decisions (Smith et al., 2012), so having five participants worked within the parameters of this study. However, incorporating other methods and target groups may be relevant for future research regarding how educational leaders consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on how they connect with their school-community stakeholders.

Implications

Locally based awareness and knowledge has historically been important to individuals and communities for survival and social capital development (Beyer, 2018; Houser, 2017; Nesbitt & Weiner, 2001). Additionally, concepts of asset-based leadership (Ebersöhn, & Eloff, 2006; Forrester et al., 2020; Nel, 2018) emerge in the data. These observations imply that a more direct study about asset-based

leadership, local capital, or resource-oriented methods of educational leadership could further contribute to the currently understanding of several topics. For example, some topics may include: teaching, learning, and leading based on depth of understanding of how educational leaders' sociocultural background influences their leadership effectiveness.

Regarding principals' perspectives in Appalachian Ohio, four salient themes emerged from the data: (1) the advantages of being "local", (2) the context of the community in the community-school relationship, (3) the leaders' application of the school with community stakeholders, and (4) the leaders' personal identities, including the way their viewed their roles and general leadership observations. These themes leave implications for consideration concerning future research, school-level leadership practice, and principal preparation programs.

Implications for Future Research

There are many opportunities for future research that are evident from the findings of this study. Consideration should be given using varying methodologies to explore the influence of socio-cultural backgrounds of leaders on their practice. Alternatively, other researchers may use other methods or target groups to understand the influence sociocultural background on educational leaders' decision-making and perspective concerning social justice and cultural relevance in the school-community context. In addition to embracing other research methods, it would be valuable to understand the perspectives of other educational leaders, such as educational leaders in higher education organizations, superintendents, policy makers, and late-career principals. This research encourages educational leaders across these career pathways to consider their positionality and alternative routes to connecting with their stakeholders and constituents in more meaningful ways.

Implications for Practice

Principals and other educational leaders can benefit not only from reflecting on their "local-ness" and how that influences the messages they send to faculty, staff, students, community members, and stakeholders in the area. Based on the data, educational leaders' self-perception and awareness of their local-ness influences their effectiveness within the school context, at least at the building-level. Naturally, this tied into how the principals interacted with community members and perceived the community-school partnership—or, at least, relationship. We recommend that practicing educational leaders consider their own sociocultural background and the subliminal influences it may have on the meaning-making processes of interacting with Appalachian communities and educational stakeholders.

Implications for Preparation Programs

There is currently limited evidence that principal preparation programs explore this topic (Santamaría, 2014; Zembylas, 2010). Based on the emergent data, principals' local identities link to their calling to stay in the local area and Appalachia. Higher education institutions with educational leadership programs may consider questions such as: Do or how should principal preparation programs address these issues? How does self-understanding of sociocultural background aid preparation candidates who struggle with recognizing the sociocultural aspects of a given local area and region? How does sociocultural awareness provide additional opportunity for candidates aspiring to become school leaders? How can sociocultural education for leaders be integrated with reflective practitionership for aspiring school leaders? How does a school leader's self-awareness and knowledge of sociocultural background benefit grow-your-own programs (e.g., local programming, problem-solving based on local resources) in

their local schools and districts? As community representatives and advocates it is imperative that aspiring educational leaders know themselves and be well acquainted with who they are as individuals to empower them to connect effectively with every individual in their school in necessary and various ways.

Conclusion

This study explored what makes educational leaders effective in the diversifying, contemporary context of rural schools in the United States through educational leaders' perspectives. We found that four main themes emerged from the participants' lived experiences in answering the questions: (1) How do educational leaders consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on how they connect with their staff, students, and stakeholders? and (2) How do the elements in Research Question One tie into social justice and cultural relevance for these individuals within their role as rural educational leaders in Appalachian Ohio? These themes included: the advantages of being "local"; the context of the community in the community-school relationship; the leaders' application of the school with community stakeholders; and the leaders' personal identities, roles, and observations. Rural educational leaders today are balancing the burdens of their predecessors as well as the new dynamic of diversifying school-community needs to the best of their training and abilities.

For the most part, educational leaders did not consciously perceive the influence of their own sociocultural background and experiences on their professional interactions. It was upon reflection that the participants employed storytelling to narrate and consider examples that drew lines from their own understanding of themselves, their upbringing, and the local area to the ways in which they connected with their staff, students, and stakeholders, respectively and collectively. Further, based on the data and upon reflection, the participants saw elements of their sociocultural background as wieldable tools in their interactions with and leadership of others. For instance, some participants noted their white, maleness as something to take into consideration when interacting with female-presenting people at their school. Alternatively, the female participant was able to separate and connect her leadership within the school to her experiences as a caregiver since she knew it was socially acceptable to do so within the local community. The participants' levels of sociocultural background awareness were paired with a sense of moral agency to do right by their students and to commit to the local community within the worldview of their lived experiences.

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