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This qualitative case study explores the perceptions of school leadership that future school counselors have regarding leadership roles for women in rural Appalachia. Using a feminist-geographical lens, several cultural, economic, geographic, and identity-based themes were found. Participants' definitions of ideal school leadership included strong community collaboration, advocacy, and leading by example. Some aspects of participants' rural hometowns supported these ideals, such as a community culture offering high levels of cohesion and familial support, leading to them wanting to live there again. However, other characteristics of the community culture, such as being closed to change, sexism against women in leadership, and a lack of women role models, were perceived barriers. In addition, participants' leadership identity was nascent and context based. These factors, combined with poor perceptions of schools in the community, led to participants not to want to live and work in their hometowns. Overall, these participants appear to experience a complex push and pull between pursuing their careers in educational leadership and their desire to take on school leadership roles in rural communities.

Introduction

Rural school leadership has garnered considerable scholarly investigation (e.g., Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wells et al., 2021). Much of the extant literature has focused on what may be viewed as "traditional" leadership roles in rural schools, assumed by principals and superintendents (e.g., Davidson & Butcher, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Indeed, principals and superintendents are highly visible leaders who play instrumental roles in the copacetic functioning of districts and schools. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is resolute regarding school counselors' positioning as leaders, advocates, and systemic change agents in K–12 settings (ASCA, 2019a, 2019b), but limited rural educational research reinforces ASCA's assertions regarding school counselors' potential for leadership (e.g., Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Wimberly & Brickman, 2014).

Nationally, rural youth and communities have been disproportionately impacted by the ongoing youth mental health crisis (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). To make matters worse, the US is experiencing a severe shortage of school-based mental health professionals (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019), and inadequate access to mental health services may be particularly pronounced in rural communities (Graves et al., 2020). Hence, it is imperative that schools across all geographic regions take action to recruit and retain these critical school community leaders. Although school counselors have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to lead in rural school communities, contemporary research suggests that women in school leadership roles in rural settings may have mixed opinions regarding their own abilities to lead (Daz, 2018; Nissen & Shemwell, 2016). Moreover, issues such as sexism, discrimination, and bias may elicit great consternation regarding not only their leadership acumen but their interest and abilities in working in rural schools in general (Duma, 2015). In response to this issue, the present study highlights the voices of eight women preservice school counseling graduate students, all of whom hail from rural Appalachian communities. We examine their conceptualization of leadership and perceptions of factors that promote and impede their interest and abilities in leading in their home communities.

Rural Appalachia

The assets the Appalachian region offers are many, including natural beauty, tourism (Fritsch & Johannsen, 2014), community cohesion (Creamer, 2019), and resilience (Helton & Keller, 2010). However, the region has not escaped several challenges. Isolation has been a constant in Appalachia, fostering individualism and self-reliance (Elam, 2002). This seclusion also has encouraged deep family bonds, supportive community ties, and a mistrust of outsiders (Gibbons et al., 2019), leading

to a high level of kinship and large, patriarchal family structures (Elam, 2002).

This geographic, economic, and social history created a culture closed off to change (Elam, 2002) and higher education (Hendrickson, 2012), and many rural Appalachians have had to leave their hometowns or suffer long-term poverty (Sarnoff, 2003). Emigration from rural Appalachia to urban regions for jobs has been a historical trend (Vazzana & Rudi-Polloshka, 2019); from 2010–2020, emigration led to population decline in the region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023. Despite outmigration, relationships and values within families remain strong (Coyne et al., 2006; Gibbons et al., 2019), as adults in rural communities are more likely to live in the community where they grew up than are those from suburban or urban communities (Parker, 2018).

Rural Appalachian School Leadership

The close ties between rural schools and their communities have been documented for decades (e.g., Budge, 2006; Tieken, 2014). Due to these close ties, educational leaders in rural districts often have a very visible public role in their communities (Preston et al., 2013). In rural Appalachia, schools are often respected, and residents value relationships and want to remain in the region to support its development (Daniels, 2014; Wright, 2012). Barriers to leadership exist, though, for Appalachian women, including a lack of women role models and limited networking opportunities (Kegley & Milligan, 2019), gender and culture-based stereotypes (McHenry-Sorber & Swisher, 2020), a lack of educational opportunities, and ambivalence toward women (Smith & Reed, 2010). Furthermore, rural schools often have fewer financial resources and smaller administrative staff (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019), leading to fewer assistant principals and instructional coaches (Wood et al., 2013).

School Counselor Role

School counselors play an important role in supporting student success (ASCA, 2019a). Within school settings, they render direct and indirect services (e.g., individual counseling, classroom lessons, consultation, collaboration) and champion student success. Contemporary empirical research has highlighted school counselors' impact on students' academic, social-emotional, and career development. For example, Goodman-Scott and colleagues (2018) found that lower school counselor-to-student ratios were associated with improved academic achievement (e.g., graduation and grade point average), and Mariani and colleagues' (2016) investigation of a school counselor-led college and career readiness intervention reported improved knowledge and skills among elementary-aged participants. Furthermore, Tang and Ng (2019) found that school counselor-student contact predicted postsecondary enrollment, and Lemberger-Truelove and colleagues (2021) found that a school counselor-led social-emotional learning intervention positively impacted middle school students' curiosity, stress tolerance, executive functioning, and academic achievement. While additional empirical research on school counselors' impact is warranted, the current body of literature is positive regarding school counselors' effectiveness and influence.

Leadership and Advocacy

Since the late 1990s, school counselors' work has required effective leadership and advocacy skills (ASCA, n.d., 2019a, 2023; see also Chen-Hayes et al., 2013; McMahon et al., 2014). School counselors are uniquely positioned and called upon to identify and address inequities impeding students' academic, social-emotional, and career development (e.g., racism, prejudice, discriminatory school policies) and serve as advocates for inclusivity, access, and systemic change (ASCA, 2022). Prior research has documented adverse school-based experiences for historically marginalized youth (e.g., Hartley et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2012), and school counselors advocate for safe and affirming school environments (ASCA, 2018) while simultaneously helping students develop essential self-advocacy skills.

Young and Bryan (2015) identified five elements essential to school counselor leadership: (a) interpersonal influence, (b) systemic collaboration, (c) resourceful problem solving, (d) professional efficacy, and (e) social justice advocacy. Effective leadership necessitates appropriate interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Additionally, as leaders, they cultivate partnerships with school community stakeholders and engage in social justice advocacy, requiring them to identify, interrogate, and eradicate inequities that hinder students' academic, social-emotional, and career development (ASCA, 2021a; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). School counselors also must exude confidence and trust that their unique repository of knowledge, skills, and abilities position them to lead and advocate on students' behalf (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Most school counselors develop their identity as leaders during their counseling master's programs. In fact, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015) requires that school counseling programs incorporate leadership and advocacy content and experiences into didactic coursework and field experiences (e.g., practicum and internship). Hence, school counseling graduate students in CACREP-accredited counseling programs graduate with the fundamental knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to assume the dual roles and identities of leaders and advocates in schools.

School Counseling in Rural Settings

While school counselors are critical across all contexts, rural settings often contain a unique assortment of characteristics that make school counselors important cornerstones within these communities. In recent decades youth mental health challenges have increased markedly (Twenge et al., 2019), with youth residing in rural communities disproportionately impacted by this crisis (Fontanella et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2017). Several factors inform these challenges, including lack of qualified mental health providers (Andrilla et al., 2018) and the high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences noted in rural locales (Crouch et al., 2020).

School counselors are frequently the only accessible mental health providers in communities designated as rural (Crumb et al., 2021). Limited yet nascent literature has defined rural school counseling characteristics. For instance, while some scholars noted that these school counselors often feel isolated (Boulden et al., 2022), others found that they enjoy the "close-knit" nature commonly associated with rural schools and communities (L. E. Grimes et al., 2014; T. O. Grimes, 2020), which often positions them as leaders and champions for student success. This close-knit environment necessitates the development and maintenance of strong school counselor-school-parent relationships (Boulden et al., 2021). Moreover, like other rural school leaders, rural school counselors must wear many hats throughout the school day (Boulden et al., 2022; T. O. Grimes, 2020), which sometimes results in being assigned roles and duties not endorsed by ASCA (e.g., serving in disciplinary roles, assuming clerical roles).

Theoretical Framework

Studies of Appalachia have often defined it geographically and culturally (Keefe, 2005) and some through a feminist-geographical lens (McHenry-

Sorber & Swisher, 2020). The present study is also guided by a feminist-geographical lens, as it focuses on the intersections of geography, culture, and gender. It is important to remember that places and the identities formed within them are both dynamic, changing and interconnecting (Massey, 2013). Place is not to be confused with community, as communities can exist online and are "a constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (Massey, 2013, p. 154). Local cultural forces shape identities through daily interactions, defining and validating certain roles for specific activities for men and women (Massey, 2013). Gender struggles occur in response to these local cultures (Massey, 2013), and these struggles and the identities they allow are the focus areas for this research. The coding structure from this lens helped us classify themes into broader categories of culture, daily interactions, economy, and identity.

Purpose

Schools in rural places define, shape, and sustain the communities (Tieken, 2014), and most people working in these schools are women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Women can be leaders in these schools and communities, but they must first be prepared and empowered to lead. Preservice counseling preparation programs can learn from the perceptions and experiences of rural Appalachian women and adapt their curriculum to prepare these future leaders better.

For decades researchers have explored educational leadership in rural spaces (Budge, 2006; Hansen, 2018) and how women's experiences in administration roles in rural schools differ (Allred et al., 2017; Channing, 2020; Kruse & Krumm, 2016; Vaughn, 2011). In addition, some research has focused on rural Appalachian administrators' experiences (Hess & Lowery, 2020, Tackett, 2022). However, the experiences of Appalachian women counselors who take on leadership roles in schools and communities have been under-researched.

The purpose of the current study was to begin to fill this gap by understanding the perspectives of women from Appalachian regions who plan to become school counselor leaders. To understand the experiences and perceptions of these women, addressed two specific questions: (a) How do women preservice counselors from rural Appalachian communities define leadership? (b) How do women preservice counselors perceive their opportunities for leadership roles in their home communities? By

examining how Appalachian women who are preservice counselors view leadership broadly and how they view opportunities or impediments to taking on leadership roles in their communities, we provide a more detailed perspective of their development of leadership identity, supports, barriers, and conceptualizations of leadership.

Methodology

The design followed Yin's (2018) definition of a case study, as the goal was to investigate "a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context may not be clearly evident" (p. 15). Case study design was flexible enough for the research questions' varied settings and specific leadership and social-cultural foci. The case study design allowed participants from different communities within the same geographical-cultural region to share their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These experiences were taking place within the same institutional contexts (schools), and a focus on convergence and divergence across these spaces and experiences was applied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also allowed for an adaptive, iterative design since new information guided modifications to the methods as needed (Yin, 2018). The cases were bound by current women preservice counselors from rural Appalachian communities.

Data Collection

Students in a graduate-level counseling program were invited to complete a survey in which they were asked to indicate their hometowns and gender. As the focus of the study was experiences of women, the sample did not include men. In addition, most school counselors are White women (ASCA, 2020). In 2020, ASCA members were 74% White and 87% female (ASCA, 2020). Women respondents to the survey who indicated they were from rural communities (Table 1, online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/) then completed essay reflections. Eight White, cisgender women preservice school counselors in a master's program participated as cases, and five engaged in semi-structured interviews. Triangulation of data was used to explore their perceptions of leadership in rural spaces.

Reflections

The essay reflection prompts were developed to understand how participants conceptualized leadership, what they perceived as barriers and opportunities to school leadership, and if they thought their gender may play a role in their leadership. The essays were an assignment within a course at the end of the unit on leadership. It was explained in advance that these essays would be used if they chose to participate in the study. Since the course professor and third author graded them, students may have responded in a manner that was not entirely authentic, which was a consideration during the analysis. However, the professor had more familiarity and rapport with the participants, which may have led them to share more honestly. Initial analysis of the reflection essays informed modifications to the interview questions.

Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with five preservice women counselors through Zoom, which was also used for recordings and initial transcription. The interviewing researchers conducted a second round of manual transcription, and transcripts were member-checked by participants. The interviews included 12 guiding questions and lasted an average of 21 minutes.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used for all data sources. Codes related to themes and subthemes were derived largely from participant essay responses in which they described qualities and actions associated with leadership. The researchers became familiar with the data through careful transcription and initial in vivo coding. Inductive codes were then generated independently. These codes were shared as a team to identify potential themes. Thematic maps were created using the inductive codes, then larger themes from the feminist-geographical framework (Massey, 2013) were aligned with the data. The team recoded the data with these feminist-geographical themes, including physical geography, economic forces, the historic and present cultural norms affecting local roles and power structures, and identity formation (Massey, 2013).

Positionality Statement

The researchers practiced reflexivity throughout the design and implementation of the study, questioning how influential their own perceptions or experiences were. At the time of the study, the first author was a doctoral candidate in learning sciences and human development. She is a former teacher who identifies as a White, cisgender female. She was raised in a remote rural community where her mother was a school counselor for 13 years. This familiarity with rurality and the roles counselors can have in rural schools may have allowed for a deeper understanding of the settings described. However, this background also brought with it assumptions that women from rural communities have more opportunities to make community connections but often face more cultural challenges to official leadership roles.

The second author was a doctoral candidate in learning sciences and human development, at the time of the study. She identifies as a White, cisgender woman. She was raised in West Virginia and identifies as Appalachian. Given her familiarity with Appalachian culture, she presumed that school settings served as social hubs in rural communities yet faced specific challenges related to resources, traditional values, and leadership styles.

The third author is an assistant professor in school counseling who identifies as an African American, cisgender male. He has lived experience as a school counselor in urban and suburban school settings. Moreover, he has published on rural school counseling topics and regularly provides in-service trainings to educators in rural school settings. The third author's inexperience working and residing in rural settings may have supported increased neutrality during data analysis. At the study's onset, he assumed that rural women preservice school counselors may have low self-efficacy regarding their ability to lead in rural locales.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

Throughout the study, the research team employed several trustworthiness strategies to enhance rigor (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). First, the researcher team engaged in bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018), regularly meeting to discuss reactions, biases, and thoughts regarding participants' experiences. Second, they engaged in member checks during and following interviews and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, during the

interviews, research team members reflected on participants' meaning to confirm content and afterward shared transcriptions with participants. Following the analysis, participants received de-identified copies of the study's results, and no participants requested revisions. The team also used two external auditors (Hays & Singh, 2012), professors of qualitative methodology, to review and offer feedback on the study's materials. Lastly, negative case analyses, or counternarratives, were included in the results section, shedding light on dissenting participant perspectives.

Results

Geographic Town Descriptions

In 2009, the Appalachian Regional Commission (2021) divided the region into smaller sections. To preserve participants' anonymity, the geographical boundaries of this study were the North Central Appalachian region. All participants received a pseudonym (Table 1, online only https://scholars junction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/), and their hometowns are referred to generally as "Hometown."

When asked to describe their hometowns, participants shared a common sense of community cohesion. For example, Kate shared that she felt that if members of her community needed anything, they would receive it. Some participants described more negative aspects of the closeness in their hometowns. Kate described her hometown as being "nosy" such that "everyone knows everything about you." Mary shared that her hometown was "segregated and not just between like races, or like people, like it's every kind of way. It's like there's so many boxes that everyone fits inside of... Everybody organizes it in that fashion."

Additional participants also described their towns less positively, noting some of the more common issues associated with the Appalachian region. For example, several participants noted that their communities were often limited by a lack of opportunity and held more traditional values. Alice noted that her community did not have "a lot of job opportunities, so most people travel outside of our hometown for jobs."

Several participants noted that their communities were resilient despite a lack of resources. Kate recognized the limitations of her community and noted that while being from an "impoverished area," she felt "we are still very resilient and are willing to

help each other out.... Maybe we don't have much, but like we're strong." A sense of hopeful optimism while recognizing limitations was common among additional participants. Rachel noted similar sentiments about her community, describing it as "stratified" such that there was a wealth gap and that her community faced poverty, but she also described it as "engaged" and "expanding." She saw that "community members [were] very passionate about making changes and improving the community."

Defining Leadership

To address our first research question, participants described their definition of school counselor leadership. The first theme centered around positive aspects of school counselor leadership (see Figure 1, online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate. edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/). Participants described aspects and activities that they felt contributed favorably to school counselor leadership. Within this major theme were the subthemes of leading by example, collaborating with the community, and advocacy.

Positive Aspects of School Counselor Leadership

School counselor leadership to my understanding can be described as leading the school in systematic change, striving to close opportunity gaps, advocating for students' overall well-being as well as supporting positive school climate. I believe to be a successful leader you must lead by example before you lead others. – Paige

Leading by Example. In participants' essay reflections they wrote about how they conceptualized school counselor leadership. More than half of participants referenced leading by example and provided insights related to the practice. For instance, Holly noted that she "hope[s] that as a future school counselor I lead by example for my fellow staff, students, and community." Beyond stating that leadership requires one to act as an exemplar, participants also conceptualized examples of how leaders might positively influence others while working to meet the needs of those they serve. For example, Rachel described a woman city council member from her town who demonstrated leadership by "integrating school concerns and youth concerns into sort of like the public agenda and elevating that sort of concern for people."

Collaboration and Working With the Community. Participants indicated that a leader is expected to work alongside their community. For example, when describing how she views leadership and hopes to lead in the future, Kate noted that "working with other people to get things done instead of just you know, demanding that things be done and advocating and working with people I think it's important." Mary shared the same sentiment but provided examples of leaders who ignored the needs of their community. In her community, where leadership is poor, leaders "don't support the needs for the community, they support themselves and their needs." Rachel related a similar example, noting that newer leaders in her community are "less like individualistic like, 'I'm pulling myself up by my bootstraps I will be a leader,' and more like, 'I'm leaning on my community around me, and I'm getting support and we're making change together.'"

Participants identified an additional way of engaging the school and community—educating colleagues in schools and the larger community. Participants discussed providing training and lessons for students and staff and collaborating with parents, teachers, and the community. Alice described this practice as "educating teachers to make school a safe and more welcoming environment for everyone."

Advocacy. Another subtheme related to positive school counselor leadership was the importance of advocacy, which was mentioned in two different ways across multiple data sources. Participants noted both needs and fears associated with social justice advocacy in rural spaces and how it is necessary for successful school counseling leadership.

Half the participants expressed enthusiasm for advocating for various groups in their hometowns. For instance, Kate explained that she saw herself as a leader because she advocates for justice: "I speak my mind and advocate for what I think is right, and I think that's a large part of leading." Rachel shared a similar sentiment, noting that she was "hugely passionate about change. Hugely passionate about advocating for making [the] community more inclusive more supportive of people."

Participants also described ways in which advocacy could be challenging for leaders in their home communities. Alice described this concern:

> I do think I would really butt heads with my opinion and my advocacy for students with the community because like I said—very close-minded, not willing to see change, especially when it comes to students of like LGBT of the LGBTQ community like that's a big thing in my hometown that like we're just going to turn away from it, and I feel like a huge advocate for it.

Taylor shared a similar sentiment, noting that while she was looking forward to working to help students in school settings it "makes me nervous." She worried about the "backlash I [could] get for educating on topics that not everyone agrees on."

Leading in Home Communities

Beyond understanding how women preservice school counseling students from rural communities perceived leadership, we also hoped to understand the ways they perceived their ability to lead in their home communities. We categorized the themes that emerged during analysis of both interview and reflection data into two broad themes: *opportunities* and *barriers* for leadership roles. Subthemes are discussed below.

Opportunities for Leadership

Community Cohesion. Participants' feelings of familiarity and cohesion in their home communities presented opportunities for leadership. Mary shared this sentiment and extended her discussion to include her own beliefs about her ability to lead. She noted that in her home community, "There's a lot of people surrounding me and the people that I know from that area" on whom she felt she could lean. However, Mary also shared that this sense of community cohesion persists even if her beliefs differed from those of other community members: "You can rely on [others] even if you have opposing views." Alice expressed a similar belief that working as a leader in her home community "would be easier because people knew me from living there, my whole life."

Wanting to Live in Home Community. More than half the interviewed participants expressed desire to live in their home community after graduating. These participants felt that by returning to their home community and taking on a leadership role, they could make a positive difference. For instance, Rachel noted that there is "a lot of personal fulfillment in being able to give back…. I also see a huge need for it there, especially being in the school counseling track…. I would really like to be able to give back and sort of create improvements for younger people." Mary shared a similar sentiment, explaining that while she may not necessarily want to live in hometown, she felt ties to her community that made her interested in helping in the future. She shared that she could see herself remaining in her home state, noting,

> I don't really want to leave State, and I want to be part of what makes it safe, and like that's

what kind of gives me that empowerment…. So many people didn't have that and like, why are we not giving that to our young girls, or just young people in general? And I want to help change that."

Job Opportunities in the Community. Beyond cultural factors that impacted how participants perceived opportunities for leadership, an additional way participants conceptualized opportunities for leadership related to the availability of jobs for them in their home communities. In contrast with much of the literature on rural Appalachian communities (e.g., Santopietro & Zipper, 2021), all participants felt they would not have much difficulty finding school counseling jobs in their communities. For instance, Kate remarked, "I don't think as far as like getting a job that it would be an issue, at least not for school counseling. "Rachel also stated that she would "absolutely like to" get a job in her home community and did not believe she would have difficulties finding a job.

Family Support. All participants shared that their family was supportive of not only their career in school counseling but also the leadership role the career would require. This familial support encouraged participants to consider taking on leadership roles in their communities. Rachel, for example, shared that she has been "given a lot of support in my life as far as growing and being led towards leadership positions just being encouraged that I am capable of doing things, absolutely." Kate had similar experiences: "I have explained that you know to my mom and to my aunts and stuff like that [that school counseling requires leadership], and so they're supportive of it they think it's really cool."

Women Role Models. Participants identified women role models in their communities as supports for their leadership ambitions. All but one participant viewed women in leadership positions in their communities as role models. Mary shared that, as a child, many of the leaders in her home community were men, but she recently had seen changes, which encouraged her.

> Growing up a lot of the times … it was always males were in charge and in leadership roles. And in the past like 5 to 10 years we've definitely seen like a shift, and it's become female-dominated. And I think it's amazing because here we don't … we never see that, especially in rural communities. So it's been amazing because I'm like wow this means things are changing, and now equal opportunities are available.

Alice also identified a woman to whom she looked as a role model in her community. She explained that she "was an amazing vice principal she cared about the kids she stuck up for the kids."

Barriers to Leadership

Four subthemes of barriers to participants' perceived ability to take on leadership roles in their home communities were derived from interview data.

Desire to Leave Hometown. Participants expressed a desire to leave their home community. Some participants shared that they would have to overcome too many difficulties to take on leadership roles in their home community. Kate explained that she did not want to work in the schools in her home community because she did not "want to touch it"—she sensed "a lot of hardships within those schools that I don't think one person can fix, and I don't want to make myself miserable trying to fix the mess that it is." Mary agreed, "I love Hometown, but I wish that there was more opportunities there for the people who want to live there and the people who like are leaving, even though they want to live there."

Sexism Against Women. The barrier present in all reflections and all interviews were participants' descriptions of sexism against women. Participants provided numerous descriptions of women, often in leadership positions, being discriminated against. Mary reflected on the sexism she has seen:

> So many women are like constantly disrespected, and it's a pattern I see over and over, even if you're not a leader to me, like you're a leader to somebody. Like maybe like my mom as a leader or somebody like, she's still going to be disrespected compared to a man.

She continued that she personally perceived a barrier to taking on a leadership position in the schools in her home community because of her gender.

> I think that in schools, like females do kind of dominate that field. However, to get really truly into a leadership position, I think that would be hard, like I think it'd be really easy for me to get the job, an easy low-level job, and like be part of that. But to actually like be somebody who like gave my voice and like had a voice that mattered in that system, I think that that would prove pretty difficult.

Kate shared a similar belief about how women are treated in her home community. She shared that in leadership positions, women must work in specific ways to be respected as a leader. She described women leaders in her hometown as a mother:

> It also takes a certain kind of woman to get things done in Hometown. She almost has to be like a mother, like she has to be like somebody that the community views as like—she actually usually has to have kids. I don't really know any young younger women who are leaders.

Bailey related similar concerns about her ability to take on a leadership position in her home community. She noted that one of the larger challenges she may face is being a woman: "I believe that whenever I would work within the school community or collaboratively with the community, that there will be those individuals that may not take me as seriously since I am a woman."

Participants also noted that to be respected in leadership positions in their community women had to work harder than men. For instance, when asked if women in leadership roles were respected as much as men in her home community, Alice responded, "They can be, but they have to work much harder for it." Mary mentioned a conversation with a friend: "The other day she was talking to her grandpa, and he was so mad he was like, 'She just doesn't need to be there [official leadership role in Hometown],' and they're like, 'Why?'– 'Because she's a woman.'"

Sexism against women in participants' hometowns limited not only their own beliefs about the leadership roles they could take on but also shaped how they viewed opportunities for future women leaders. Holly remarked that "it was harder for them [local women leaders] to earn their position than what it would have been for a male." Alice noted that sexism was particularly harmful for younger women in her community: "It becomes disheartening to a lot of the younger girls in school. I think it's harder for them to look up to a female when they hear them constantly being torn down by the people in their families." These experiences lead the younger women to become less interested in pursuing leadership roles in the future. Alice stated, "I've seen girls go to get … political science degrees…. They want to work in the White House one day, and then I watch it slowly not happen. Each little thing kind of pushes them down." Bailey described some members of her hometown, noting that "some small-town-minded individuals have a fixed outlook that only men should be leaders and women cater to the men."

Contextual Leadership Identity. When asked if they currently saw themselves as leaders, all interview participants shared experiences in which they couched their leadership experience with limitations. For instance, Holly shared that she felt she took on leadership roles as a coach, but she

shared that she did not see herself as a "full-on leader," explaining, "What I'm doing is impactful, but I don't think that it's … I'm not changing any lives." Additional participants described similar views, sharing that their ability to see themselves as leaders was dependent on their circumstances and opportunities. Mary noted, "It depends on the situation…. I'm at the top of my job, like I'm a supervisor, and I feel like that's where I feel like I like really got my like sense of leadership, but like outside of that I don't really feel that." Rachel shared a similar view that leadership identity depended on the context. She explained,

> I'm not sure if I would see myself as a leader in Hometown specifically, like in a place location, but I think I definitely have—I definitely play a very supportive role in a lot of … I guess just nurturing relationships I have with people in the Hometown, I think I have a very strong network of people that I support and get support from absolutely.

Community's Unwillingness to Change. Nearly all participants described their home communities as either unwilling to change or holding traditional viewpoints that negatively impacted their ability and desire to lead in their hometowns. When describing her hometown, Alice provided this explanation for why women may face obstacles to leadership: "I think it just comes down to that it's you know it's a much older population. I think they are still stuck in a mindset of men are in leadership roles so they're just looking for kind of reasons as to justify that thinking." Rachel also commented on this push and pull between community members who held more traditional views and those who were seeking change.

> There's a big conflict between people who are very interested in change in Hometown, and definitely people who … are very passionate about that. And people who are very much interested … in maintaining the status quo of what is. And you know if it's worked for them, they aren't interested in changing.

All participants indicated that their communities' unwillingness to change would negatively impact their ability to advocate for LGBTQ+ and underrepresented students. Furthermore, participants noted that underresourced schools might negatively impact their ability to lead.

Inability to Support LGBTQ+/Antiracism. Participants shared concerns about resistance from community members regarding advocacy for members of the LGBTQ+ community and for underrepresented groups in their communities. Kate encapsulated this concern in her reflection.

> It can also be hard to stand up for yourself when others are so adamantly against what you are standing for. For example, although I agree with the Black Lives Matter movement and students in my school may want to express that, if I stay in State, I can see staff and administration being very against it in a rural setting. I believe this will make it hard to navigate and figuring out how to handle it will take a lot of trial and error.

Taylor shared similar concerns about groups in schools being unwilling to accept others' gender identities. She shared the following when discussing her concerns:

> I feel that many people in the school, as well as parents, may not respect certain gender identities. We see the difference in how men are treated compared to women, let alone someone whose gender doesn't align with their biological sex. Many may not respect certain genders or treat them differently because of it.

Underresourced Schools. Participants articulated mixed views of the schools in their home communities. Participants indicated that schools were underresourced, which exacerbated other problems the schools faced. Kate, for example shared that "Our funding was not going to the right places, so … it's so hard to try to like sum up what needs to be readjusted because it feels like the entire system needs readjusted." All but one participant noted that academics often fell short. Kate shared, "Certain aspects are like a source of pride in the high school, like the band is a huge source of pride…. Sports are part of pride. But nothing … academically."

Participants also reflected on the quality of school leadership in their home communities. They explained that school leaders often shifted positions or left their schools. Kate shared that several different principals in her high school who "need[ed] some type of structure that's actually going to work for them… Just filtering through different people is not working, and it's definitely making it worse." Frequent shifts in leadership were often viewed negatively in the communities. Rachel shared how school leadership impacted her community's view of the local schools: "I think it depends on the administration…. [It] plays a huge role in how people perceive the school and what they're doing."

Discussion

Using a feminist-geographical lens, the research team examined the perceptions and experiences of eight women school counseling graduate students about rural school leadership. All participants hailed from rural communities. Data analysis yielded three themes: positive aspects of leadership, opportunities for leadership, and barriers for leadership. The findings support and advance rural education's understanding of the confluence of rurality, school counseling, leadership, identity, and gender.

In the present study, participants discussed the positive characteristics of school counselor leadership. Many of the findings are supported by contemporary school counseling and rural education literature and professional guidelines. For example, participants' desire to collaborate with school community members and advocate for students' needs is consistent with ASCA professional standards (n.d., 2019, 2022) and school counselor leadership literature (e.g., Wimberly & Brickman, 2014; Young & Bryan, 2015). These perspectives are also consistent with literature that highlights the importance of school-community partnerships in rural spaces (e.g., Boulden et al., 2021, 2022; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). While participants seemed acutely aware of key elements of school counselor leadership, some expressed concern regarding potential opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in their home communities. This hesitancy is not an uncommon phenomenon in K–12 schools (e.g., Albritton et al., 2017; Rodela et al., 2020). While school counselors are expected to promote a positive school environment for all students (ASCA, 2018; Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2017), a disconnect may exist between professional standards and confidence in implementing them.

Participants highlighted how familiarity with their rural hometowns increased the likelihood that they would consider returning to work as school counselors, reinforcing recent rural education research that found that familiarity with rural spaces may encourage working in rural schools (e.g., Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Familial support positively influenced participants' interest in returning to their rural communities, corroborating research on familial influence's impact on rural individuals' ambitions, pursuits, and decision making (Agger et al., 2018; Irvin et al., 2012). Many participants cited positive women role models in their rural communities. While participants did not directly attribute these role

models to their career choices, they could promote increased school counselor leadership self-efficacy (Bowers et al., 2016; Hora, 2014).

The barriers for leadership identified in this study expand the rural education literature on factors that may impede women preservice school counselors from working in rural settings. All participants expressed mixed perspectives regarding returning to work in their rural hometowns. Many naysayers cited systemic challenges and hardships as foundational to their disinterest in returning, consistent with prior rural education research on how school-based challenges, such as subpar standardized test performance, politics, and adversarial teacher-administrator relationships, can increase the likelihood of teacher attrition in rural spaces (Goodpaster et al., 2012; Tieken, 2014).

Our findings also highlighted factors that may impact preservice women school counselors' perceptions of their opportunities for leadership roles in their home communities. Generally, participants expressed modest to low levels of identification as leaders in their respective communities. This finding may be related to the fact that many participants had not had opportunities to develop and refine their leader identities. Alternatively, these low endorsements could be related to prior research that indicated that women may have a lower sense of leadership self-efficacy than men (Daz, 2018; Nissen & Shemwell, 2016).

Most participants described deep concerns about possible sexism and school community resistance to social justice efforts. It is well known that women leaders may be subjected to sexism (e.g., American Association of University Women, 2016; Preston et al., 2013), and that rural community members and educators alike may be resistant to efforts to promote inclusivity (Albritton et al., 2017; Bishop & McClellan, 2016). Considering school counselors' role (ASCA, 2018, 2022), coupled with research highlighting the plight of historically marginalized youth in rural communities (e.g., De Pedro et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2012), school counselors may not have the support needed to affect change and lead in their rural schools. While participants seemed acutely aware of this cornerstone of school counseling practice, their lived experiences and observations of their rural community's resistance to change seem to elicit great pause, thus serving as a possible barrier. None of the participants described financial barriers (e.g., pay, job opportunities) as an obstacle to returning to their rural communities. In fact, some expressed confidence in their ability to

obtain gainful employment in their hometown as school counselors. This lack of concern is a striking departure from prior research in which income was identified as a barrier to educators' working and staying in rural schools (e.g., Hansen, 2018; Tran et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2013).

Implications and Future Research

These findings offer practical implications for rural school counselor preparation and practice. Regarding school counselor preparation, graduate program faculty should first understand students' unique lived experiences and perspectives regarding rural communities. In the present study, participants offered mixed responses regarding their interests in returning to their rural communities to live and work, as well as regarding their identity as leaders. Some participants expressed interest in returning to their rural hometowns, but many expressed concern about their ability to affect systemic change there, due to possible racism, homophobia, and sexism. While participants largely commented on their own hometowns, these hometown concerns may taint their interests in working in rural schools in general. It is therefore imperative that school counseling programs recognize and honor students' lived experiences with rurality and understand how these experiences affect their initial stances regarding where they intend to seek employment as school counselors.

Regarding participants' mixed sense of efficacy to lead in rural schools, programs should infuse opportunities for students to increase their confidence through hands-on experiences with rural school counselor leadership. For instance, programs can arrange for students to complete field experiences in rural schools, under the supervision of rural school counselors. During these rural field experiences, students can be required to engage in leadership roles such as serving alongside their supervisors on school leadership teams; collaborating with school stakeholders; and cocreating initiatives designed to promote acceptance, belonging, and inclusion (Young & Bryan, 2015). At the end, students could write a detailed reflection on their thoughts and reactions to these efforts and formulate a "leadership action plan" of tangible action steps to further their school counselor leadership identity. In didactic courses, school counseling programs can incorporate a variety of methods to increase students' leadership self-efficacy, such as vignettes, role plays, and guest speakers (e.g., experienced rural school counselors with leadership experience).

Regarding school counselor practice, given the ongoing youth mental health crisis and the nationwide school counselor shortage, rural school districts would benefit from continued introspection regarding school counselor attrition and retention. While many participants articulated concerns about potential close-mindedness, sexism, discrimination, and not being seen as leaders in their hometowns, none of the participants discussed pay as a significant hindrance. While increased pay would likely be welcomed, rural school districts should critically examine if school counselors would feel safe and supported in their schools, and if they have the license to implement practices and procedures endorsed by ASCA. While innovative partnerships and programs can help increase the yield of mental health providers in rural schools and communities (e.g., Boulden & Schimmel, 2021; Texas Comprehensive Center, 2018), addressing the root causes of rural attrition could be more impactful.

Rural school districts should ensure the development and implementation of strong school counselor professional development programs. As participants shared, preservice school counselors may possess self-doubt in their abilities to lead in rural school communities, and they may question their leadership abilities in general. To promote increased self-efficacy, support, and confidence, rural school districts can create formal mentorship opportunities for novice school counselors and peer-networking opportunities such as professional learning communities. To further their school counselor leadership identity, rural school districts should encourage attendance at professional workshops to stay abreast of professional trends and best practices. These supports may help buoy rural school counselors' leadership self-efficacy and connectedness with their school districts.

The paucity of research on rural women in school counselor leadership reinforces the need for increased scholarship on this topic. Future research could explore the leadership experiences of practicing rural school counselors. Qualitative studies of rural principals could investigate their perceptions of school counselors' roles and potential for leadership, which would complement Bardhoshi and Duncan's (2009) quantitative study from years ago and contribute significant depth, insight, and implications. Future research could also more broadly explore factors that predict women preservice and in-service school counselors' leadership self-efficacy, using a national sample.

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