The Rural Educator

Volume 45 | Number 2 Article 1

Spring 2024

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Recommended Citation

Partin, J. M., & Hayes, S. D. (2024). Learning From Each Other: Experiences of Rural Principals in a Networked Learning Community. *The Rural Educator, 45*(2), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1396

Research Article

Learning From Each Other: Experiences of Rural Principals in a Networked Learning Community

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*Rural school principals in Tennessee face serious challenges in leading their schools, including isolation, high turnover, and a lack of instructional leadership skills. Facilitated by a state university, the Tennessee Rural Principals Network (TRPN) was developed to provide professional learning opportunities for rural school principals. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of principals in rural schools who participated in the TRPN during the years 2019–2021 (*n *= 133). The study used a basic qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews of 12 participants. Through our data analysis, key learning strengths and challenges were identified and organized under the codes of learning needs, coaching, mentoring, and networking. From these categories, we developed three themes: (a) sharing and collaborating through networks; (b) building capacity through mentoring and coaching; and (c) addressing the learning needs of principals in a rural context. Findings revealed that principals were pleased with the network and felt it helped them better navigate their roles as rural principals by providing the tools to develop best practices and a network to share ideas and resources.*

A campus principal is an important influence in improving student achievement (Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2021). Branch et al. (2013) asserted, "highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount" (p. 63). Grissom et al. (2021) found that principals play a critical role in improving student achievement and asserted that school districts should invest in improving the performance of the school principal as "the most efficient way to affect student achievement" (p. 40). Moreover, the principal is a critical factor in supporting and developing teachers (Burkhauser, 2017), hiring and retaining quality teachers (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019), and establishing a positive and inclusive learning environment for students (Faas et al., 2018).

Although the importance of a school principal is well established in research, scholarship centering on effective school leadership is often unrelated to situational realities and geography (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Starr & White, 2008), and little is known about the conditions in which rural principals do their work and successfully lead their schools (Preston & Barnes, 2017). The study of rural school leadership is important as school leadership is informed by the particulars of the school community and its geographical setting (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Unlike urban and suburban schools, "little is understood about rural schools and the unique challenges they face outside of the communities in which they operate" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 1). Additionally, the leadership experiences, barriers, and administrative opportunities of rural school principals have been overlooked as compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Parson et al., 2016).

Rural school principals face many challenges in leading rural schools, including being professionally and geographically isolated (Hansen, 2018), recruiting and retaining quality school teachers (Hildreth et al., 2018), deepening and persistent poverty among students and their families (Showalter et al., 2017), lack of educational resources (Barrett et al., 2015), and limited fiscal resources (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Researchers (Hansen, 2018; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018) have indicated that rural school principals are overwhelmed, isolated, and in need of support, and they have cited three primary challenges facing rural school leaders: diverse responsibilities, lack of mentoring support, and scarcity of social and professional networks. Due to limited human resources, on any given day rural principals might play the role of change agent, classroom teacher, instructional specialist, assessment leader, community leader, and parent liaison (Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Rural principals fill multiple roles, but their primary role as a campus leader is to support teaching and learning (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022).

However, they often lack the means for continuous professional development designed for the rural school context (Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Klocko & Justis, 2019). Effective principals often collaborate with peers and build professional networks (Smylie et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2021), but rural principals are often geographically isolated and have limited professional learning opportunities with their peers, contributing to social isolation and a lack of efficacy (Hansen, 2018; Preston et al., 2013; Wells et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals have expressed need for more professional learning on instructional leadership and shared leadership (Wells et al., 2021), opportunities to network with peers in similar contexts (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2015), and additional mentoring and/or coaching support (Hansen, 2018).

While rural school leaders face challenges, rural schools are often ideal places to create conducive learning environments for students (Surface & Theobald, 2014). Rural principals lead smaller schools with small student populations in more cohesive communities, which allow students and adults to be more familiar with each other and create spaces for interactions (Surface & Theobald, 2014). The cohesive community structure lends itself to a school-community environment in which family engagement is relatively high (Semke & Sheridan, 2012), and principals are viewed as leaders and pillars of the community (Preston and Barnes, 2017). For example, Hayes et al. (2020) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, rural school principals assumed the role of caretaker for their communities:

> We found that the rural school principals were a calming presence for their communities and focused on the needs of their stakeholders. With limited direction from the district or the state, rural school leaders relied on their own expertise and knowledge to take care of their staff, their students, and their parents. Their self-reliance was amplified during the pandemic as they advocated for technology and broadband resources so that students could continue to learn; they maintained strong relationships with the community by providing support to families with food and resources; and they became the safe haven for their communities through virtual check-ins with students and helping families stay connected to the school community. (p. 8)

Serving as a principal in a rural context affords principals the opportunity to be caretakers of schools in supportive communities with strong relationships. Effective rural principals are seen as people-centered leaders because they create and sustain healthy relationships with stakeholders (Klar & Brewer, 2014) and nurture positive school-community relationships (Ashton & Duncan, 2012).

Background and Context for the Study

Tennessee school districts are mostly organized by county, except for a few local city school districts. Currently, 36% of school districts in Tennessee are classified as rural (Showalter et al., 2023). Approximately 283,00 students attend rural schools in Tennessee, and 15.7% of these students live in poverty (Showalter et al., 2023). Rural school principals in Tennessee face serious challenges in leading their schools, including isolation, high turnover, and a lack of instructional leadership skills (McIntyre, 2017). To address these challenges, a state university collaborated with rural school experts to design a leadership development program that would potentially increase the number of effective rural school principals across the state. The Tennessee Rural Principals Network (TRPN) was developed by this university team and was implemented in 2018 to provide professional learning opportunities for rural school principals. The TRPN was offered to all rural school principals in Tennessee regardless of experience level. Currently, 891 rural school principals work in Tennessee, and 133 of these principals participated in the TRPN. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of rural school principals who participated in the TRPN during the years 2018–2021 about their professional learning experiences.

TRPN Background and Components

The TRPN began in the 2018–2019 academic year. Initially funded through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the network was developed by the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Tennessee. The CEL director assembled a team of rural school leaders from across the state to design the TRPN's core values and program components. This design team created a shared definition for an effective rural school leader as "one who is: a) an instructional leader; b) creates a personal professional community; c) builds and harnesses social and political capital; d) shares and distributes leadership; and e) sustains success" (McIntyre, 2017, p. 20). From this shared definition, the team created the TRPN professional learning curriculum and delivery models.

Curriculum Components

The curriculum components for the learning sessions included topics centered on instructional leadership, professional learning communities, social and political capital, shared and distributed leadership, building capacity in and sustaining school improvement. The topics for each session included:

1. Instructional Leadership: understanding good instruction, data-driven instructional practices, engaging students in poverty, fostering positive teacher-student relationships, systems-thinking, growth-mindset, and progress monitoring.
2. Professional Learning Communities: building a culture of collaboration and efficacy, demonstrating care for teachers and students, combatting isolation, and focusing on both academic and social-emotional success.
3. Social and Political Capital: understanding and responding to the community's context, fostering partnerships with the community and higher education, engaging with and advocating for families and community members, fostering a post-secondary attainment culture for the community.
4. Shared and Distributed Leadership: empowering others to solve problems individually and collectively, delegating work, soliciting feedback, and building a leadership team focused on strengths.
5. Building Capacity in and Sustaining School Improvement: creating a vision focused on student success, creating a talent pipeline, encouraging career advancement, and obtaining and utilizing resources. (McIntyre, 2017, p. 16)

Delivery Models

The delivery models and the assigned definition for each model included:

1. Learning Networks: a facilitated group of school leaders who regularly convene for a set period of time on a specific topic(s) that are taught more informally through readings, discussions, walkthroughs, or speakers.
2. Cohort Experiences: a group of school leaders selected for a formal learning experience (e.g., a course or intensive multi-week experience) during which they learn about a specific topic(s) together and from each other, with an expectation of an ongoing relationship.
3. Mentoring: the pairing of a school leader with a more experienced peer from whom the leader can learn specific strategies and tactics for his/her job and understand decision-making processes.
4. Coaching: intentional pairing of a school leader with a trained expert who provides 'just in time' services on a predetermined set of goals or objectives aimed at improving the school leader's effectiveness. (McIntyre, 2017, p. 24)

The design team envisioned a learning opportunity in which rural school principals from all experience levels would convene as a cohort in a learning network and receive professional development on topics that affect rural schools, as well as mentoring and professional coaching support based on their individual learning needs.

Learning Network and Cohort Experience

When the TRPN was initiated in 2018, 52 rural principals (all experience levels and varying school levels) from across the state formed the first cohort. The cohort convened in Nashville every other month for a two-day learning experience. Travel, lodging, and food costs were covered by the CEL through the grant. The learning sessions were facilitated by guest instructors who were considered experts in their field of study, including university faculty, state department of education staff, superintendents, and education consultants. The first year received a favorable response from attendees, so the state department of education awarded the CEL a second grant to continue the learning network. For 2019–2020 TRPN accepted its second cohort of 46 rural school principals (all experience levels and varying school levels). Both cohorts 1 and 2 met every other month in Nashville until March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent quarantine forced the network to move to a virtual learning model. The TRPN stayed with a virtual model during the 2020–2021 academic year and accepted its third cohort of 35 rural school principals (all experience levels and varying school levels). At the end of the 2020–2021 academic year, the TRPN was suspended due to university faculty changes.

Mentoring and Coaching

The original plan for the mentoring component was for design team members to mentor TRPN

participants. However, due to the varying locations of participants at rural schools across Tennessee, this mentoring model shifted to a coaching model coordinated by a university partner, the American Institutes for Research (AIR). An AIR staff member selected and trained the coaches using the AIR instructional coaching model. This model, developed for teacher professional development, consisted of an instructional coach who partnered with a principal to analyze their situation, establish goals, identify and explain leadership strategies to achieve their goals, and provide support until their goals were met (AIR, n.d.). Cohorts 1 and 2 were allocated 3 hours of coaching (four 45-minute sessions) for the academic year, and these sessions were conducted virtually. Cohort 3 was allocated 6 hours of coaching (eight 45-minute sessions) for the calendar year, and these sessions were conducted virtually.

Effective Professional Development for School Leaders

Continuous adult education is critical to school principals' success. Principals need transformative learning that includes powerful learning experiences (PLEs; Zepeda et al., 2014). PLEs are

> adult learning experiences that reflect a set of nine andragogical practices that individually, or in combination, have been shown to help broaden and shift leadership candidates' mind-sets so that they see their lived experience from a different perspective and to build the kinds of leadership skills needed to engage deeply and meaningfully in their leadership work. (Cunningham et al., 2019, p. 75)

Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) identified the types of learning that are critical for developing effective principals, including mentoring and coaching. Similarly, Daniels et al. (2019) found that a learning community is critical in the leadership development of school principals, and "school leaders recognize the importance of networking and collegial consulting" in their professional development (p. 121). As mentoring, coaching, and networking have been identified as effective means for promoting in-service principals' leadership development, we review these strategies in more detail below.

Mentoring

Although serving as a school principal is a rewarding career, it is often a difficult, lonely, and isolating role (Hayes, 2019). Moreover, the only people who understand the extent of the principalship are other principals (Young et al., 2005). Mentoring provides principals with a trusted confidante and adviser to support them as they navigate the diverse responsibilities of leading a school. Supportive mentoring relationships are essential to principals to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to lead successful schools (Boerema, 2011; Hayes, 2019; Parylo et al., 2012; Tahir et al., 2016). Boerema (2011) noted that mentoring programs are essential to helping school leaders socialize into the profession and acclimate to their district's organizational culture. Tahir et al. (2016) confirmed that mentoring has psychological and social benefits, instills professional values, improves leadership skills, and enhances management skills (p. 440), and they concluded that "the mentoring process is definitely effective in improving leadership capacities" (p. 441) among principals.

Mentoring also promotes professional learning by supporting school leaders and encouraging their professional growth (Connery & Frick, 2021; Hayes, 2019). Hayes (2019) studied mentoring experiences of novice principals and found that mentoring can support principals as leaders of learning by building their capacity to collaborate with teachers to improve teaching and learning. Hayes (2019) asserted that through their mentoring experiences "principals became more confident in collaborating with teachers to advance the instructional program and in building a shared learning culture on their campuses" (p. 208). Similarly, Parylo et al. (2012) stated that school principals saw mentoring as a form of learning that promoted professional growth and socialization. They explained that mentoring relationships are effective in a principal's ongoing professional growth because mentoring is "valuable for school leaders at all stages of their leadership career" (p.131). For rural principals, mentoring is a profound learning experience because it provides one-on-one learning from a qualified mentor in a similar context (Hayes, 2019), encourages open communication and problem-solving (Connery & Frick, 2021), provides constructive feedback (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Parylo et al., 2012), and offers support in self-care and well-being (Connery & Frick, 2021; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019).

Coaching

In leadership coaching, an experienced coach collaborates with a willing participant to set achievable professional goals with actionable steps to improve leadership practice (Bloom et al., 2005). A

leadership coach's primary role is to help an individual achieve their desired results and facilitate their personal development (Hargrove, 2008). Unlike mentoring, coaching is generally timebound, is context-specific, has a narrow focus, and is personalized to the participant (Jones et al., 2015).

Leadership coaching provides contextualized learning, relevant practice, and purposeful interaction and reflection (Warren & Kelsen, 2013). Wise and Cavazos (2017) found that principals who received coaching reported that it was effective in increasing their efficacy as a school leader. Principals in rural contexts reported that coaching was the most beneficial form of professional learning for them, and their coaching sessions supported them as instructional leaders (Wells et al., 2021). Lochmiller (2013) conducted a three-year study of a leadership coaching program for novice principals and found that coaching is value-added in supporting and developing the professional learning of principals when coaching occurs within the context of the school and is designed to meet the varying needs of the principal. Principals have also reported that coaching improves their leadership practice in improving teaching and learning (Wise & Cavazos, 2017) and their self-efficacy as campus leaders (Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013).

Networking

A professional learning network (PLN) offers school principals another opportunity to enhance their professional learning. A PLN is defined as "any group engaging in collaborative learning with others outside of their everyday community of practice" (Brown & Flood, 2020, p. 1). Some researchers have identified PLNs as an effective means of supporting school improvement efforts (e.g., Boylan, 2018; Prenger et al., 2017); other researchers have asserted that PLNs are effective in the professional learning of school principals (Acton, 2021; Klar et al., 2019; Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Lazenby et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2021). Acton (2021) found that "networking with trusted colleagues" (p. 47) is an effective approach to the professional learning of principals and recommended establishing professional networks for principals to facilitate their learning.

More specific to the rural context, Hardwick-Franco (2018) suggested that rural principals should collaborate and learn from one another in networks to meet the needs of rural schools. Likewise, Klar et al. (2019) found that a leadership learning community is a promising practice for building leadership efficacy of rural school principals. Researchers (Klar et al., 2019; Lazenby et al., 2020) have found that PLNs are essential to principals' professional development primarily because principals want to collaborate and learn from other principals in similar contexts. Moreover, Lazenby et al. (2020) asserted that networking is "effective, beneficial, and relevant professional learning" for principals because it is a "deliberate strategy in capacity building" and reduces principals' feelings of isolation (p. 543). Engaging a network to support rural principals in their learning "provides principals with time and space to discuss practices and witness them in real time in a real context" (Wells et al., 2021, p. 52).

Research Methods and Data Sources

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of principals in rural schools who participated in the TRPN during the years 2019–2021 about their learning experiences. Our research question was: What are the perceptions of rural school principals of their learning experiences in the TRPN program? To understand the perceptions of rural school principals involved in TRPN, we employed a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that basic qualitative research studies have three broad goals: (a) to explore how people construct their personal world; (b) to better understand how people interpret their experiences; and (c) to understand the meaning that is attributed to these experiences. Using a basic qualitative design, we explored the experiences of rural school principals in the TRPN to better understand their learning experiences and the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Data Collection and Participants

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews. We employed a researcher-created semi-structured interview protocol that asked participants about their experiences in the TRPN. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to use a set of questions intended to answer the research problem but also allow for participant voices to emerge (Hays & Singh, 2012). For consistency, all interviews were conducted by Sonya Hayes. We validated the questions through face validity (Edmondson & Irby, 2008), using a focus group of rural principals not associated with the TRPN. Face validity is used to validate interview questions by piloting the interview questions with nonparticipants

who match the sample criteria to gauge participants' understanding of the questions and solicit clarity and feedback (Edmonson & Irby, 2008).

To identify participants for the study, we used a purposive criterion sampling technique (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Our criteria included: still serving as a principal in a rural school, school level, cohort membership, and locale within the state. We strived to have a diverse group of participants from varying rural school levels and cohorts. We sent invitations to all 129 TRPN participants and received 20 responses. Using the preestablished criteria, we selected 12 participants to interview. We excluded eight of the volunteers because they were no longer serving as school principals. All 12 participants were given a pseudonym. To give some context to the participants, we present demographic data in Table 1 (online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/), including a summary of the participating principals' years of experience and their cohort number. We also provide information about their schools: their school level, the number of students in their school, and their students' demographics. The 12 respondents participated in semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996), which were conducted via Zoom and lasted 1 hour each. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a transcription service. Sonya Hayes reviewed the transcripts while listening to the audio files to check for accuracy and conducted follow-up interviews with all individual participants to clarify and verify the data.

Data Analysis

After all transcriptions were reviewed, each author coded each transcript. By applying directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), we individually read through the data and highlighted common words used by the participants, then categorized the codes into clusters to identify patterns (Saldaña, 2016). We paid specific attention to the participants' perceptions of their learning experiences in the TRPN and how these experiences informed their leadership practices. As we independently coded the transcripts, we met several times to review codes. We also checked for inter-coder reliability by coding a small subset (two transcripts) of the other's coded transcripts to check for consistency (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Once we agreed that we had established inter-coder reliability, we discussed prevalent codes and patterns that we developed into themes (Saldaña, 2016).

Positionality and Trustworthiness

We both work for the University of Tennessee and serve in the Department for Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS). Jeana Partin is a former graduate research assistant for the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) and worked with the TRPN director. Sonya Hayes is a researcher and faculty member in ELPS, was a faculty associate for CEL, and served as the researcher for the TRPN.

We achieved trustworthiness through triangulation and multiple analyses of the data. First, we used the same interview protocol with all participants and collected data from different principals in different cohorts and at various school levels (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, for consistency only one author conducted all interviews. Second, we both analyzed and coded transcripts individually and then met to compare findings and develop themes. Third, we established inter-coder reliability by cross coding a subset of each other's transcripts. Fourth, we met frequently to discuss individual and collective findings.

Findings

Through our data analysis, we identified key learning strengths and challenges from participation in the TRPN that we organized into the codes of learning needs, coaching, mentoring, and networking. From these categories, we developed three themes: (a) sharing and collaborating through networks, (b) building capacity through mentoring and coaching, and (c) addressing the learning needs of principals in a rural context. We present these three themes, highlighting both the strengths and the challenges of learning in the TRPN.

Sharing and Collaborating Through Networks

Participant responses indicated that the TRPN provided opportunities to collaborate with other principals going through similar experiences. Networking sessions encouraged cohort members to share their stories and develop relationships with like-minded principals. For example, Christy stated, "So having another rural principal to just talk to, it's been really good for networking, and when we get together in person and being able to talk about similar issues, that to me is the most important thing." Tamara also expressed how collaboration helped her address problems: "We got to do a lot of collaboration between other principals. So being able to hear how another principal handled it and get ideas

from them was a tremendous support." Melanie echoed, "The thing for me with TRPN has been just having a group of people to collaborate with."

Several principals indicated that building relationships through sharing ideas was important. Joan stated, "The benefits are building relationships with fellow principals from across the state that you can share your ideas, you can learn from their ideas." Beverly said, "The takeaways from it were just amazing." She commented, "Dang, I've never thought of that," while discussing new ideas for her school. Shawn discussed the importance of sharing ideas to help them to learn from each other: "I feel like there are people if I've got an idea or I see an idea that I can call." He reflected further on the importance of relationships when he said:

> If we're going to have good test scores on TNReady, if we're going to go through this uncharted water with COVID and whatever is coming down the pipe, that's the only way we can get through it is to lean on each other.

Carol expressed how participating in the network gave her the opportunity to get to know other principals, and she could reach out to them by phone to get advice. She said, "Well, I knew some of them, too, so I could call them and ask, 'So how did you do this?'" Ryan discussed the benefits of networking and sharing ideas, reflecting on the support he received and his appreciation for networking: "Oh yeah, it's [TRPN] very supportive. It's made me better… I'm networking now throughout the state, and I'm enjoying that." All participants appreciated the learning network within the TRPN and how sharing ideas supported their leadership development.

Although the participants enjoyed the learning networks for sharing ideas, some expressed their desire for more intentional learning networks. For example, Ryan discussed how the small groups within the learning network changed every meeting, so he could "never really get to know one core group of people really well." Tamara spoke of how she "wished the small groups were arranged by area so they could visit each other's campuses." When discussing the challenges of her small learning network, Joan stated, "It always seems like there is someone new to the program, and I never got to really know anyone really well." Riana explained that she "lost that connectedness when we shifted to online because we were never with a core group." Riana elaborated on what would have made her learning more meaningful in the network: "But one of the things that I think I could learn so much from is to have meetings at schools, actual rural schools where learning and everything that you would want to learn about was at that school." Many of the principals expressed desire to be more intentionally connected with their peers in the network and have the chance to visit other campuses.

Another challenge the TRPN participants discussed was the shift to virtual networking. The TRPN began in person with Cohort 1 but changed to remote learning during COVID-19. Principals expressed a desire for more in-person sessions. For example, Dori commented, "The thing that I miss is the in-person networking… I know that's COVID, but I think a personal session is much different than a video session because you have those sidebar conversations that we are not having right now." Fiona also expressed a desire for in-person meetings: "It's really easy to turn your video camera off and pretend that you're sitting there interacting, and you're really not. It's also really hard to have a zoom with 50 people and have authentic, good communication." Continuing in the same theme, Melanie expressed her feelings: "The negatives I've had is just, and it can't be helped. The negatives are that we had to go to Zoom. Nobody can help that. It just wasn't the same." Many principals expressed that their "learning was more meaningful" when they could meet in person and in small groups.

Building Capacity Through Mentoring and Coaching

Several participants commented that coaching was one of the strengths of the TRPN that enhanced their learning. Each principal had a personal coach as part of their TRPN participation. Coaching consisted of online or in-person meetings, depending on the cohort. These sessions were important professional development opportunities with helpful tools and recommendations for best practices. For example, Shawn noted, "He shared a school improvement plan." Christy explained that her coach asked, "What were my goals for the year that I wanted to have happen at my school?" Christy continued, "We talked about those and every time, she would kind of say, 'Well, where are we at with this goal?'"

TRPN coaches shared contacts and relatable experiences with their designated mentees. For example, Leslie commented, "I just asked about some things we were discussing, like the COVID things, and how I felt like the Rural Principal Network was going." Fiona stated, "And she's been there. She's had the experience. But I don't feel like she's just someone at a university that doesn't have hands-on

experience. She's been very real with us." Tamar explained:

> She did a really good job of having meetings with us, one on one. She sent me a bunch of paperwork and information on how to develop leaders in the building. And that was really helpful… I actually used it in my developing leaders courses with my teachers here.

Some first-year principals in the network reflected that the coaching helped them navigate the difficulties of COVID-19 and their first-year duties. For example, Melanie stated, "That expertise was invaluable to me when you're starting out as a brand-new principal… I don't think, if I hadn't had that, I couldn't have gotten through it." Riana explained, "She would give me a couple of challenges, but it almost always ended up being something that I needed because I was so new…. She challenged me to look at a problem of practice." The participants expressed appreciation for having a coach to help them in their personal learning and growth.

Mentoring and coaching were described as a learning strength, but principals desired even more personal coaching and mentoring. As noted above, COVID-19 restrictions made in-person mentoring impossible. Some principals expressed desire for more in-person coaching and mentoring, such as Dori, who commented, "I'd say the one thing I've missed is having a mentor—it just kind of fell apart when COVID hit." Carol commented:

> We [my coach and I] would email back and forth if I had a question or whatever, and he would call me, we would Zoom…. But that was one of the things that I miss, is being able to still have my coach as my mentor.

Melanie remarked about her experience of having several mentors through several networks and her desire for a consistent mentor. She stated, "Once again, look how many mentors I've lost... I've lost [mentor 1], [mentor 2], and then I lost my district person now. I mean, there's been a lot of change."

Other participants expressed their desire for more organic coaching. Ryan explained that his coach "never reached out," but his coach would respond via email if he had a question. Ryan stated, "I would have liked for my coach to be more involved. I would have liked to have set goals and discuss how to meet those goals—maybe even have my coach come to my building and work with me." Riana also discussed her desire for more one-on-one coaching. She explained, "My coach had about 10 people she mentored, and she would meet with all of us on Google Meets. I would have liked more personal time with her to discuss my needs." Most principals in the study expressed desire for more coaching sessions catered to their individual needs.

Addressing the Learning Needs of Principals in Rural Contexts

The participants in the study discussed the topics that were most meaningful to them and relevant to their rural context, including how to plan professional development for teachers, how to care for themselves during COVID-19, and how to be better instructional leaders. Participants also discussed topics that they wish the TRPN could have included, including how to solicit additional funding through grants and how to support their students' social-emotional needs.

Teacher Professional Development

One meaningful topic for participants was understanding how to organize and plan professional learning opportunities for teachers. The principals expressed that they do not have access to human resources such as instructional coaches or district professional development staff, so they "have to be the staff developer" for their campus. Some of the principals in the study reflected on how beneficial the professional learning tools used in the TRPN were in helping them in their learning, and they explained how they could use these tools in their own staff's team building and professional development sessions. For example, Ryan commented:

> One thing I learned was the importance of collaboration and networking and so I was able to kind of model that and take that to my campus and develop learning networks for my teachers and coach them.

Use of small professional learning communities (PLCs) also resonated with other principals, and they applied their learning on PLCs to support teacher development on their campuses. Fiona explained, "I kind of created some smaller PLCs within the building, and that has been successful… I think that's been a direct result from the TRPN… PLCs don't have to look a certain way." The participants explained that their TRPN small learning teams modeled small PLCs for them to share on campus.

Some participants enjoyed learning about their strengths in the Clifton StrengthsFinder, and they wanted to use it as professional development for their teachers. Christy explained, "I really learned a lot about how to bring out the best in my teachers by building on their strengths. I am designing an entire PD on how to teach to your strengths." Leslie shared,

"We did the StrengthsFinder, and we got to talk about that, and look at people who had the same strengths as us, and who had very opposite strengths. I can see how this could be used with my teachers." Tamara also spoke of using the StrengthsFinder tool:

> I used it with my teacher leaders. I asked them to bring the results to the meeting. By understanding our collective strengths, [it] helps me lead improvement and for it not to be seen as I always have to be the one doing the leading, but to leverage each other's strengths.

Many participants discussed the value of their learning regarding how to be better leaders and how to support their teachers' professional development. When asked about the greatest benefit of the TPRN, Tamara summarized its importance to her own learning and to that of her school: "Access to the professional learning that I would not have received otherwise, and then using the opportunity to use that learning to impact my leadership team or my admin team that then impacts students."

COVID-19 and Self-Care

During Cohort 2, COVID-19 became a pandemic, and all public schools closed in spring 2020. As a result, the TRPN shifted from being an off-site face-to-face learning network to being a virtual network. Principals who continued in the virtual learning network were given the opportunity to connect and learn coping strategies during the COVID-19 quarantine. Leslie stated:

> We talked a lot there on the front end about how everybody else was coping… It was really stressful during COVID to figure out all these things and answer all the questions. But we did talk a lot about that, and about taking time for ourselves, and being able to step away some.

Tamara said, "We did talk about taking time, and the importance of taking care of ourselves because we're needed." Comments reflecting raw feelings and struggles concerning COVID-19-related issues were heard during many of the principals' interviews. Melanie stated, "It's all across the nation, and you see how educators are so impacted.… Then you had people who ultimately understood the struggle and understood the problems." Ryan added, "It was a really hard time for all of us. I was worried about my teachers and students. My colleagues in the network really got me through it. We also learned that we had to take care of ourselves." Joan also stated that she is "a workaholic and [has] a hard time with work-life balance." She explained that the pandemic amplified her tendency to work all the time, but she learned through the network that "self-care is important because if I am not taking time to unwind or turn off work, then I am no good for my teachers." Many participants expressed appreciation for how the TRPN supported them during the COVID-19 pandemic and school closings.

Instructional Leadership

Some principals discussed how being in the network supported them in becoming better instructional leaders. Beverly commented, "We talked a lot about being in the classroom more … and work with teachers. I learned from my peers how to make time to be in classrooms." Shawn also discussed how learning in the TRPN helped him in his supervision of teachers. He explained:

> My greatest takeaway is master learning. I learned that should not have a role as an evaluator all the time. I should be an instructional leader, not necessarily the evaluator. So, we've tried to remove the evaluation component with the mastery experience opportunities.

He continued, "This is probably the best professional development that I've ever experienced because it's real, and I can use it to support my teachers."

Additional principals spoke of how participating in the network improved their learning in instructional leadership by "aligning curriculum-instruction-assessment," "helping teachers align standards to their instruction," and "improving Tier One learning" in the Response to Intervention model. The data indicate that many of the principals in the study felt that learning in the TPRN was beneficial in building their capacity as instructional leaders.

Although the principals discussed the TRPN's strengths and how it supported their professional learning and growth, they also discussed topics that were not addressed that would have made for more meaningful learning: more funding for their schools and how to meet students' social-emotional needs.

Need for More Grant-Funding Training

TRPN principals desired more sessions about grants and funding opportunities because their schools lack the resources that some suburban and urban school districts have. Several principals commented explicitly about the need for funding training. For example, Dori remarked, "I got a lot from talking about grants and things specific for rural

schools, and I think that jump started me looking for more grants." Melanie stated:

> There were people that knew things of how to get this grant or how to get that grant, or … money or, some other opportunity out there…. We're sharing those types of things, and yeah, that was valuable… Maybe getting some grant opportunities.

Other principals commented that they needed more training on "how to secure grants," "how to seek additional funds," or "how to find money to pay for after-school programs." The participants expressed their need to learn more about securing funding to support their campuses and rural communities.

Social-Emotional Needs of Students

The participants also expressed the need for more learning on how to meet their students' social-emotional needs. Many participants mentioned that a strong attribute of rural schools is the relationships forged with parents and students: "everyone knows everyone." However, some principals explained that knowing their students well highlights their social-emotional needs, and they expressed desire for more learning on how to meet those needs. Ryan stated:

> I needed more on social-emotional, definitely … for my students—the social-emotional is becoming just as important as the academic part. We have students in a lot of pain, some who can be violent, and we don't know how to handle it, so they aren't learning. I think if we can take care of the social-emotional first, then the student learning will come.

Christy commented that she "only has one counselor, and he doubles as the testing coordinator and a part-time assistant principal," so she would like "more information on how to meet the growing social-emotional needs of her students." Leslie observed, "It is all about relationships with students, but I need to learn how to help teachers forge relationships with students to help students with their emotional needs." Melanie discussed "the growing mental health needs of her students" and how she needs support in learning how to address those mental health needs.

Discussion

Rural school principals are overwhelmed, isolated, and in need of support (Hansen, 2018; Johnson et al., 2014; Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Networked learning communities can provide needed support to principals, especially rural principals in geographically isolated areas (Acton, 2021; Klar et al., 2019; Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Lazenby et al., 2020). Through this study, we presented the perceptions of 12 rural principals who participated in the TRPN from 2019–2021. The findings highlight the strengths and challenges of the TRPN in terms of networking, professional learning, and mentoring/coaching. Due to the pandemic, the TRPN moved from an in-person, off-site learning opportunity to a virtual learning network. Despite the challenges of COVID-19 and the online environment, participating principals were positive about their experiences and the coaching they received.

The TRPN provided participating principals with opportunities to collaborate, share ideas, and develop relationships with other rural principals and coaches who could support them. Hardwick-Franco (2018) suggested that rural principals should collaborate and learn from one another in networks to meet the needs of rural schools, and the rural principals in the TRPN expressed that learning from other principals in similar contexts was beneficial to their leadership development. The findings of this study support the findings of Klar et al. (2019) and Lazenby et al. (2020) in that learning networks are effective and beneficial in building the leadership efficacy of rural school principals. Rural principals in the TRPN were able to meet other principals in similar contexts and share ideas, issues, and concerns. However, many of the principals expressed their desire to be "networked with principals in closer geographic locations" so they could visit each other's campuses and learn from one another. Some of the principals in Cohort 1 felt the learning networks were better in person rather than online, and they suggested that learning networks are better with face-to-face contact. Participants in Cohorts 2 and 3 who did not have the benefit of being in a face-to-face network discussed the challenges of being in a virtual network, and they expressed that "Zoom meetings are not the same" and "when I am on campus, other things take priority over meeting with my rural principal network group." Learning networks benefit principals' leadership development (Lazenby et al., 2020). The findings of this study reflect the importance of planning and organization in implementing learning networks to meet the needs of the participants.

Rural principals often play the role of change agent, classroom teacher, instructional specialist, assessment leader, community leader, and parent liaison on any given day (Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), and they need coaching and mentoring support to help them navigate their multiple roles. Due to their geographic location,

however, many rural principals have limited coaching and mentoring opportunities (Hansen, 2018; Johnson et al., 2014; Preston et al., 2013). The assigned coaches provided by the TRPN offered personal, professional development sessions to demonstrate best practices for a rural school setting and promoted a sense of professional community instead of geographical isolation. Furthermore, TRPN sessions helped rural principals through the challenges of the pandemic. Geographical isolation became more prominent during this crisis, and the TRPN provided specific tools and support for principals dealing with challenging issues. The coaching sessions were perceived as beneficial for the rural school principals, but all participants wanted more time with their coach, including one-on-one in-person sessions—although they understood the need for online sessions and coaching. The lack of in-person meetings also created a consistency issue because some principals received more coaching than others. Principals sometimes struggled to concentrate on the online meetings due to being in their school environment while attending the meeting instead of going to an in-person meeting which would require their total commitment and attention.

Overall, principals were pleased with their learning in the network and felt it helped them better navigate their roles as rural principals by providing them with the necessary tools to develop best practices, especially in teacher development, self-care, and instructional leadership. The principals spoke favorably about learning from each other and the speakers/presenters in the network, but they wanted more learning on funding opportunities and meeting their students' social-emotional needs. Since rural school principals often lack resources (Barrett et al., 2015) such as mental health counselors and ongoing support for teachers and students, the findings of this study indicate that rural principals need more training on how to secure funds and meet the growing mental health needs of their students.

Implications for Practice and Research

From this study, we recognize that a rural school principal network can help rural school leaders to meet their professional learning needs. The TRPN offered rural principals a network of peers for collaborative learning, a coach to support their learning, and learning topics designed to meet the needs of rural school principals. Lazenby et al. (2020) argued that the time for establishing learning networks has come, as these networks are greatly beneficial in building the leadership capacity of principals. We agree that learning networks are beneficial for the professional learning of principals, and these networks need to be intentional and grounded in best practices. However, bringing leaders together in a similar context does not necessarily establish a strong learning network. The TRPN could be improved by implementing the principles of a networked improvement community (NIC; Bryk et al., 2015), where principals can be grouped based on a common learning goal or improvement goal. Principals working in a NIC can forge a powerful collaboration where they work together to improve their schools and meet their unique learning needs. These NICs would also benefit from facilitation by a trained leadership coach who oversees the learning of the group and works individually with each principal to support them with their growth and goals (Jones et al., 2015). As the TPRN continues to be the model that Tennessee uses for rural school principals' professional learning, we recommend that the model return to a resident model where principals participate in face-to-face training.

The TPRN has the potential to serve as a model for the leadership development of principals in other contexts. Biddle et al. (2019) argued that lessons learned from rural research and rural school practices can inform the work of non-rural schools and practices. Policymakers may want to consider implementing a similar program in their states to support the learning of school leaders in multiple contexts. Researchers may want to conduct future studies on learning networks for school leaders to make connections between principals' learning and their leadership practice in varying contexts. Additionally, researchers may want to conduct longitudinal studies of principal learning networks to determine their effectiveness in school improvement.

From our findings we identified other possible research opportunities to explore. First, many of the participants spoke of the need to find more funding to support their students and teachers. The participants' desire to seek more funding speaks to a general lack of resources available for schools. Researchers may want to investigate further the funding needs of rural schools and the availability of funding sources. Additionally, the participants spoke of their limited professional learning opportunities outside the network. This finding suggests that school districts may not have a systematic professional development plan for principals. Researchers may want to explore how districts are systematically supporting school leaders' professional learning and growth.

In conclusion, the participants had a positive learning experience in the TRPN, and they found the learning topics, networking, and coaching to be advantageous to their leadership development. School principals need continuous professional learning that is transformative in helping them improve their schools. Because of the challenges that rural principals face in leading their schools, a learning network appears to facilitate the learning needs of rural principals. Our study suggests that a quality networked learning community with trained leadership coaches and a well-designed curriculum is both meaningful and beneficial in the leadership development of rural school principals.

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Suggested Citation:

Partin, J., & Hayes, S. (2024). Learning from each other: Experiences of rural principals in a networked learning community. *The Rural Educator*, *45*(2), 1–15.