

Rural Leaders, Rural Places: Problem, Privilege, and Possibility

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I present a case study of the influence of rurality and a sense of place on leaders' beliefs about purposes of local schooling and their concomitant theories of action in one rural school district. Interview data show that despite their portrayal of life in the valley as a privilege, most leaders viewed their place as presenting more problems than possibilities in the lives of most students. I conclude with the suggestion that a critical leadership of place may best address the strengths and challenges found in much of rural America.

Part of the Columbia River watershed, the Cascade River¹ winds through several small communities in southwest Washington State. The river, as well as the surrounding forest and agricultural land, are inextricably linked to the culture, history, economics, and ecology of the rural school district and its neighboring communities that are the focus of the present study. Mount Rainier School District (MRSD) is located in this scenic area in the Cascade Mountains, nestled at the base of three volcanoes and encompassing three unincorporated communities: Lewis, Adams, and Wanpaash. The region provides abundant recreational opportunities and the economy of the area has been largely dependent on timber. As locals are quick to note, each of the communities served by MRSD has a distinct identity, but they share a common identity as residents of the Deep Water Valley in the eastern end of Hampton County. The area—"East End"—was considered isolated and remote when its first permanent White resident arrived in 1883. At the time, the 90-mile trip on foot from the nearest settlement to the easternmost point of the valley took 2 weeks.² In 2005, the area is still considered by many, including its inhabitants, to be remote and isolated. It boasts no fast food chain, no movie theatre, no strip mall, no commercial chain stores, and no stoplights. Shelly, a community leader, aptly described how the three communities might be perceived by an outsider when she said, "Lewis is a town, Adams is more like a street, and Wanpaash is a zip code."

As one leaves the north-south interstate and drives the state arterial highway toward the Cascades, there is no

abrupt, visible change in the topography or economic health of the land adjacent to the arterial. Rolling hills and fertile farmland, largely idle, with modest well-maintained homes is characteristic of houses seen in the first 20 to 30 miles of highway. About 20 miles from the interstate, a large reservoir provides recreational opportunities and summer homes for those with the means to purchase them. Climbing higher into the foothills, overshadowed by the snowcapped mountains, one is struck by the vista and the beauty of the area. But further east on this state highway, as one progresses eastward into the Deep Water Valley, indications of rural poverty begin to appear. On the open bottom of the valley, homes are few and far between or tucked away in the forested land. Many, but not all, of the homes evidence the effects of years of economic hardship. Mobile homes make up approximately 30% of the single unit housing (Missouri Census Data Center, 2005). Recent-model cars so commonplace on the interstate are much less in evidence here. There is no public transportation.

Two of the elementary schools were closed during the 2003-2004 school year. When school began in the fall of 2004, the district's three elementary schools were consolidated into one school with approximately 300 students. The consolidated elementary school and the junior/senior high school share a campus. Facilities at both schools are aging and in poor condition.

During the 2004-2005 school year, the school district attempted a bond election that would have provided resources to modernize the junior/senior high facility and generate state funds to modernize the elementary school. According

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¹All names and place names are pseudonyms.

²Specific citation withheld to preserve participant anonymity.

to school district records, the heating, piping, and electrical systems were severely outdated, expensive to maintain, and in need of replacement. Lighting, telephone, and data systems were inadequate. Additionally, it was noted that the buildings' safety systems were no longer in compliance with current regulations.³ On February 8, 2005, the bond election failed to generate the supermajority needed in Washington State (with 49.9% of the citizens voting in favor of the bond).

MRSD and the three scenic communities it serves face similar challenges to those found in much of rural America. The purpose of this article is threefold: (a) introduce conceptualizations for rurality and a sense of place, which may be useful for framing inquiry into rural schools and communities; (b) examine the influence of rurality and place on leaders in one rural community; and (c) suggest that a critical leadership of place may be needed to address the strengths and challenges found in much of rural America.

Rurality and Sense of Place

Many rural communities are in economic distress, which contributes to many social problems that affect rural schools and rural students' achievement. In general, rural economies, dependent upon agriculture or extraction of natural resources, are weak throughout the nation. These economies have suffered for decades. Lower-paying jobs in trade and service industries are replacing living-wage jobs. Geographic isolation from global markets, weak community infrastructure for encouraging business development and growth, out-migration of highly skilled human capital, technological advancements, and increased regulations have contributed to weakening rural economies (Hammer, 2001; Kalomiris, 2003; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002). Changes in agriculture and extractive industries such as mining, logging, and fishing are analogous; therefore, an Appalachian coal-mining town, a small farming community in the heartland, and a small logging/fishing community in the Northwest are likely suffering similar economic hardships. Rather than viewing rural communities as places where people live, policymakers have viewed rural areas as sectors of a national economy. When rural economic sectors (logging, fisheries, agriculture) can no longer compete and contribute to the national economy, policymakers view these communities as expendable (Hammer, 2001).

A consideration of rural America cannot be complete without contemplation of the importance of place. Michael Tierney, an activist working in rural West Virginia, states that "[t]here is something very powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that helps them transcend the challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources" (in Nadel & Sagawa, 2002, p. 66). Although this may sound like

a sentimental notion, scientists from a variety of disciplines have confirmed that our behavior, emotions, dispositions, and thoughts are "indeed shaped not just by our genes and neurochemistry, history, and relationships, but also by our surroundings" (Gallagher, 1993, p.12). As a theoretical construct, sense of place can be described as a fluid "human experience of geographical contexts" (Gruenewald, 2003a, p.626). It is a "marriage between the geography of mind and geographical places" (Heaney, as cited in Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 626).

What is the relationship between school leaders—administrators, board members, and teacher leaders—and the unique communities they are responsible for serving? After all, "theories of professional practice . . . determine all deliberate behavior" (Argyris & Schon, as cited in Webb, Shumway, & Shute, 1996, p. 12). One's perspective, or personal frame of reference, shapes thoughts and influences behavior. Educators lead and teach according to their theories of action (Webb et al., 1996). Exploring the influence of rurality and place on rural leaders' beliefs about the purpose(s) of local public schooling and their theories of action could help determine the potential relationship between schooling and the well being of rural communities. But what is rurality, and how might one "sense a place?"

Drawing from literature in education (particularly rural education), rural sociology, rural economic development, history, literature, and critical theory, the following conceptual frameworks guided the study of the influence of rurality and sense of place on rural leadership in MRSD.

What is Rurality?

Because rural schools and communities are quite diverse, rural education researchers acknowledge it is difficult to establish a universal set of characteristics to describe or define rural schools and communities (Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Sherwood, 2000). Each rural community is unique. Nevertheless, many rural places possess similar strengths and face challenges like: (a) low population density and isolation (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Stern, 1994), (b) school and community interdependence (Collins et al., 2001; Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lane & Dorfman, 1997; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Stern, 1994), (c) oppression as lived experience (Hammer, 2001; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002), (d) a history of conflict regarding purposes of schooling (Harmon & Branham, 1999; Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Sherwood, 2000; Smith, 2003) (e) an "out migration" of young talent (Hammer, 2001; Howley et. al, 1996; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Smith, 2003), and (f) a salient attachment to place (Bauch, 2001; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Howley, et al., 1996; Kemmis, 1990; Porter, 2001).

³Specific citation withheld to preserve participant anonymity.

What is a Sense of Place?

Many inhabitants of rural settings have a salient attachment to place (Bauch, 2001; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Howley, et al., 1996; Kemmis, 1990; Porter, 2001). This is not to say that rural people exclusively experience a sense of place. However, the concept appears to be more pervasive in literature on rural schools and communities than urban and suburban places. The study of place has recently gained attention across a variety of disciplines including architecture, ecology, geography, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, literary theory, psychology, and cultural studies, but as an educational construct, there thus far is “no single, axiomatic theory of place that might inform educational studies” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 622). An understanding of place is vital to understanding “the nature of our relationships with each other and the world” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 622). Its power in our lives is profound.

Some scholars distinguish between residing and inhabiting a place (Orr, as cited in Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Kemmis, 1990). To inhabit a place is to be conscious of one’s relationship to it. I use “place-consciousness” and “sense of place” interchangeably, and I propose six habits of place as tools for examining rural schools and communities. The six habits are not exhaustive of the ways in which place can be experienced; rather, they represent that which might have the greatest influence on educational leaders’ beliefs about the purposes of schooling and theories of action related to student learning. The six habits of place, or practiced ways of living, are (a) connectedness, (b) development of identity and culture, (c) interdependence with the land, (d) spirituality, (e) ideology and politics, and (f) activism and civic engagement.

Case Study Methodology

Several factors were considered in selection of the case, including demographic factors and community attributes thought to influence student achievement, together with other characteristics commonly described in the literature. Other factors included limited access to basic services, a natural resource-based economy, higher than average levels of poverty, professional isolation of the teaching staff, school consolidation, declining enrollment, and limited access to professional development centers.

The Case

MRSD, and the three unincorporated communities it serves, is more than 70 miles from a metropolitan area. The largest of the three communities, Adams, boasts a population of 2,120 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Lewis and Wanpaash have populations of 1,094 and 1,208, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The district serves a predominately

white (91.6%) student body, of which 54% qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program. The school district employs 4 administrators and 45 classroom teachers who average 16 years experience. Forty percent of the teachers hold masters degrees (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2004).

Timber-based enterprises have been the major industry in the region. Timber-related employment peaked in this area in the late 1970s and has been in general decline since. This place, like many other rural areas in the nation, is transitioning from a natural resource-based economy to an economy largely dependent on trade and services, which has caused a significant decline in living-wage jobs. The lumber mill in Lewis closed its doors in 1998 resulting in a loss of 220 jobs. After a brief closing for retooling, a lumber mill in Adams was reopened. Unemployment ranges from 9%-17% in the three communities.

Methods

Because this study examined the influence of rurality and a sense of place on rural leadership, a case study approach was selected. Case study methodology facilitated description and analysis of a particular phenomenon from the participants’ point of view within the context in which it occurred (Merriam, 1998). Three methods of data collection were utilized: (a) semistructured interviews, (b) document reviews, and (d) member checks. Administrators, as well as other leaders acting from various vantage points (teacher leaders, parent/community leaders, school board members), can significantly influence teaching and learning in small, rural districts. Eleven leaders were interviewed: three administrators, two school board members, four teacher leaders, and two parent/community leaders. Those interviewed have lived and/or worked in the school district for an average of 21 years. The superintendent, who had the shortest tenure, lived in the district for 4 years, and the leader with greatest longevity had been in the district for 37 years. Data were collected and analyzed by means of a constant comparative method. A “start list” generated from conceptual frameworks was utilized to begin initial coding. Themes were derived that were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998), and assertions were developed. Pattern matching (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to test themes and assertions that were iteratively refined using inductive reasoning. Thematic-conceptual matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were created to assist in analysis and development of findings. Member checks were conducted related to findings.

Positionality

As the researcher, I was the “primary instrument” for data collection and analysis. My rural upbringing, working-

class girlhood, career experiences, gender (female), and racial identity (White), together with lived experiences of a sense of place, influence my worldview and the assumptions I make regarding rural schooling and rural communities. My childhood years were spent in a geographically isolated, predominantly working-class community. Although I was raised in a family that provided for my basic needs, in retrospect I am acutely aware of the effects of poverty experienced by many of my classmates. As is true in other schools serving working-class students, educational experiences were, for the most part, domesticating rather than empowering. As a female, I was discouraged by family and some teachers from attending college and was thought to be a better fit for homemaking. Small school size supported a sense of belongingness and self-exploration for me, but I know that not to be true for others. As a first generation college graduate, I have experienced a keenly felt sense of scholastic inadequacy and discomfort in the world of higher education. Nevertheless, my rural roots are inextricably linked to my identity. The physical geography of the place—mountains, lakes, rivers—richly enhanced my childhood. Generational connections, strong community cohesion, and a pride in “taking care of one’s own” were all a part of living in a rural community and contributed to a personal identity with place that continues to mark how I conceptualize who I am in the world. As assistant superintendent for a regional educational service district that serves MRSD and 44 other predominately small, rural school districts in a five-county region, I have continued to live and/or work in rural communities. My lived experience, together with my role in an educational service district, allowed me to be viewed as a trusted “insider” with an “outsider’s” perspective. In order to enhance internal validity, I clarified biases at the outset of the study and used reflective journaling throughout to reveal assumptions that might influence my analysis of data and conclusions.

Rural Place: Is it Problem, Privilege, or Possibility?

In semistructured interviews, educational leaders discussed how they came to live and work in the area as well as what they viewed as advantages and disadvantages of doing so. Additionally, they described their beliefs regarding purposes of local schooling and their conceptualizations of student achievement. Specific questions related to the following: how living and working in MRSD had influenced their thinking about the role of education in the lives of students, whether educators and the community in general shared the same values and beliefs regarding the purposes of local schooling, and what the history of the place had taught them. Furthermore, they were asked to recount particular things about living and working in the district/community that had influenced their leadership; and to describe how, if

at all, students’ educational experiences were connected to learning how to live well in the local community.

Place as Problem

Isolation, oppression as a lived experience, the historical tension regarding purposes of rural schooling, and out-migration appeared to be aspects of rurality at play as leaders articulated that local schooling should build students’ confidence and expose them to options and opportunities for their future, especially those outside the valley. Students were viewed as apathetic and having limited aspirations, which was believed to stem, in part, from students questioning the relevancy of education to their lives. Questions of relevancy were linked, leaders thought, to factors of isolation that severely limited the quality and quantity of experiences students needed to prepare for their future. Inability of students to “see the big picture” was consistently mentioned. Alex, an administrator, exemplified this concern: “I get so frustrated because I really believe our kids are just not looking ahead.” Many parents and members of the community were thought to have limited aspirations for their children and/or to have a limited understanding of what their children would need to be successful in the future. Terry, a teacher leader, observed that for many students and families, obtaining a diploma is more important than what a student actually learns:

So many kids’ attitude—and parents support that attitude—is that he just needs the credit. He just needs the credit to graduate. . . . In this community it’s paycheck to paycheck, and for a lot of people it’s “Well, I’m going to work at the mill,” so you need a high school diploma to work at the mill.

Leaders believed their necessary course of action was to motivate students. They pointed to strong relationships with parents and unquestioned educational practices as indicators that educators were trusted to do what was needed to prepare students for the future. As Terry said, “It is our mission—‘Get them ready for the world.’ All they’ve ever known is East Hampton County.”

When describing the need for students to have experiences outside the valley, leaders spoke of the valley as though it was, in some tangible and important way, different from other places. Phrases such as “the real world,” “big world,” and “real life” were used to describe life outside the valley. Pat, an administrator, stated that “many of our kids have never left Hampton County. We work really hard to make sure they know what choices they have.” Jerri, a fellow administrator, echoed this sentiment and elaborated on the importance of students not limiting themselves to what is known in the valley:

So, my belief is that we need to give our students every opportunity to explore potential career paths and opportunities to continue their education and expose them as much as we can to life outside. . . . It's the big world out there, and if you limit yourself, you're looking through a narrow scope.

Living in the eastern most part of the county provided a distinct identity that encompassed both positive and negative characteristics. Being "East End" connoted attributes of independence, strength, and caring. It also entailed pejorative characterizations. When he was hired, Jerri, an administrator, said people told him not to go to Mount Rainier: "I think a reputation is a hard thing to beat down, and Mount Rainer has a reputation. We're East End." When asked what it meant to be "East End," Jerri had this to say: "Oh geez, I'm going to say some ugly things here: 'Okie,' 'tar heal,' 'come out of the mountain,' 'blue tarped roofs,' 'no running water,' and 'end of the earth.'" In spite of this, being East End also signified strength, unity with each other, and independence from the rest of the county. Renee, a community leader, noted:

People that live in East Hampton County often feel isolated from the rest of the county and many of the services that are offered. While the feeling of isolation has been prevalent among residents in the East End, it has also brought unity to this area. Basically you could say that, "We take care of our own."

Changes in economic conditions were cited as the reason most students would need to leave the valley—to find a "family-wage job." As a district administrator, Pat's statement is descriptive of the view held by all leaders interviewed:

The quick money jobs that were high paying, the timber jobs that you could make a lot of money 15 years ago right out of high school—those jobs aren't here anymore, so I think we know our kids are going to have to go somewhere else. Most of them will.

Marcel, a teacher leader, echoes the concern about economic opportunity:

I would hope that when we're educating kids, we give them a sense of a bigger community—not just Adams, Lewis, and Wanpaash, but the bigger community because their future begins in the bigger community.

Micky, a member of the board observed, "I think there's an attitude that's developing . . . they want the kids to be

able to get out of town." When asked why such a change in attitude was occurring, Micky replied, "Because the district is starting to feel like it's dying."

Place as Privilege

Leaders participating in this study clearly articulated their own attachment to place. The physical geography of the valley—mountains, pristine rivers and lakes, close proximity to a national park—provides the residents of the area with many opportunities for recreation and renewal. As a teacher leader, Terry's perspective is typical of the attitude expressed by others in extolling the virtues of living in this place:

I value living close to the mountains for hiking and backpacking. When I used to teach in the Puget Sound area, it was 35 minutes for me to be on the Burke Gillman Trail or Green Lake. Now within 5 minutes, I can be on a beautiful trailhead—like tonight, I can leave here at 3:30 and be done before dark.

The geographical characteristics of the area are not the only factors providing inhabitants with a valued life style. Many leaders also described low population density and smallness as benefits of living in the area. Statements made by Jerri and Alex, both administrators, illustrated this value. Jerri explained, "I think people value not being in a rat race. By that I mean we're an hour from a stop light and an hour from a McDonalds." Alex stated, "I think it's the pace—the pace of life, not being in that traffic everyday, not being in town. It's quiet and beautiful out here."

The size of the community allowed, and in some cases encouraged, those participating in the study to develop a sense of efficacy and worth as contributing members of the district and community. Shelley, a community leader, expressed this perspective when she said, "I think we've been more motivated to be involved . . . maybe because [the district] needs a lot of help . . . I think we probably feel needed." Lou, a member of the board of directors, stated, "I have had the opportunity to be on the school board . . . I had the opportunity to be a contributing member of my community, and that's very important to me." Micky, another board member, agreed: "A lot of people will ask me why I'm even bothering with the board—'you never had any kids in the district?'" I say, "You've got to be active in your community or you're just a number like in Seattle." Terry, a teacher leader, saw advantages in working in a small, rural district in that she was called to take more of a leadership role than she otherwise might have taken:

I think in a bigger district, I wouldn't take on the challenges, or I wouldn't feel the need to continually be getting better. I think in a larger district,

I would defer to others because there would be people that I could just be mentored by. I'm taking more of a leadership role.

Ricky, another teacher leader, affirmed the opportunities to grow professionally: "Being in this small district allowed me to step out and [join the statewide Reading Leadership Cadre]. If it had been a bigger district, I might not have been chosen." And, Marcel, a teacher leader, shared her sense of empowerment:

I started by writing one little grant . . . When I talk to other directors in other districts, they have to go to their director, and then, you know to someone else, and then to the assistant superintendent—you know that whole hierarchy. I walk into the superintendent's office without an appointment.

Leaders' most commonly held, and passionately voiced, privilege of living in the valley because of the sense of extended family in the district and community. Leaders described the place as somewhere people return to, stay for many years, and/or want to raise their family. Pat, an administrator, illustrated: "I think one of the biggest values is a real sense of family here. It's tough economically, but . . . people really pull together. If someone is sick, the community turns out for a benefit." He continued, "People want to raise their families here." When asked why that was so, Pat said, "I think it's how people treat each other and it's the connection and the history and there's a comfort in that. There's a safety in having things you know and you can count on." Jerri, another administrator, also noted the generosity of the community: "This community never ceases to amaze me . . . I've seen people who are hard up and this community rallies around the underdog. They don't keep their gold in their pocket."

Leaders described the district and community as a place where one can belong. Teachers tended to know not only their students, but their students' family members as well. Educators formed close relationships with each other and were known in the community. Dane, a teacher leader, stated that "you know the parents, you know all the brothers and sisters, rather than just the kid that you see each day."

This experience of belongingness extended beyond caring about students and their families to caring about each other as colleagues. Renee, a community leader and former teacher in the district, described the close and enduring ties formed:

As staff members, we all got along and basically are still yet very close to each other even though there are some who retired. There are some who moved on. We've all stayed in constant contact with

each other and, you know, enjoyed each other away from school as well as colleagues.

A sense of knowing and being known was also felt in the community at large. The following comment by Mickey, a member of the board of directors, illustrates:

In this town, if someone wants to find you they go to the grocery store. And they know where you live. That's what I totally love about this small community is the fact that, yeah, it can be gossipy because everybody knows your business; but it's also very warm because everybody knows your business.

Finally, Ricky, a teacher leader, who has lived in the area for more than 20 years, aptly summarized what she and other leaders valued about living in this place: "The first year we moved here, I didn't unpack the dishes because I figured we would be moving on. And we never have. Hiking, skiing, I'm involved with my church, opportunities for fishing—I've got everything I want here."

Leadership Paradox

Rural students experience greater internal conflict regarding their post high school choices than their nonrural counterparts, and they evidence an aspiration for a sense of place (Howley et al., 1996). Renee, a community leader, exemplifies this point: "There are some kids who never move out of the valley and truthfully love where they live, but I think for them it's becoming harder to do because of the lack of economic choices as far as work. There just isn't a lot."

Paradoxically, despite their own keenly expressed sense of place, leaders could describe very few ways in which schooling provided experiences to help students live well in the local community should they decide to do so. They were aware of the dilemma confronting students who may wish to remain in the community but nevertheless felt compelled to leave because of economic, educational, or career considerations. Many leaders spoke of students' reluctance to leave or their eventual return to the community, but they viewed such homecoming as a sign of fear or failure. Terry registered surprise at former students' apparent inability to leave the valley,

They are just stuck. The mill is not hiring as much . . . people aren't being able to hold on to those jobs. But they still don't leave the valley, or they commute—It just amazes me—It's like they can't get out of here.

When asked what she believed to be motivating the unwillingness to leave, she replied, "Fear of the big world."

Observing that many graduates remain or return home and wait for something to change for them, she stated:

[Graduates of the district] live in a family house or live in a trailer on the property. I have talked to a couple of parents whose sons graduated 2 years ago. And I asked, “What are they doing? What are they up to?” [They are] lying on the couch waiting for the big break.

Jerri’s perspective was similar:

[W]e have quite a few [students]—I don’t have a number, but I’m just thinking of the faces that I see coming back—who aren’t doing anything, still living at home . . . that concerns me because they’ve graduated from here. Some of them go to [postsecondary] school and aren’t quite sure, so they come back and that saddens me.

When asked if he viewed the desire or need to return as different for rural students than for their suburban and urban counterparts, he replied, “Yes, because they’ve had less experiences, less opportunities to do other things.”

It is obvious that leaders in this district are caring people who face significant challenges, not the least of which are aging facilities and a considerable reduction in funding due to decreased enrollment. Such challenges, and others, are inextricably linked to the health of the communities the school district serves. Descriptions of long-time ties to family and friends, an appreciation of rural life-ways, and a personal identification with place provided strong evidence that leaders were influenced by a sense of place. Conversely, the absence of evidence related to the interdependent relationship between school district and community—an aspect of rurality replete in the literature (Collins, Flaxman, & Schartman, 2001; Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lane & Dorfman, 1997; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Stern, 1994)—stood in stark contrast to leaders’ place consciousness.

Place as Possibility:

The Need For a Critical Leadership of Place

Without exception, leaders participating in this study articulated the role of place in their personal identity development and its importance to their quality of life. In contrast, they seemingly have not come to grips with the tension between their appraisal of the valley as it relates to students’ future and the viability of the place they so greatly value. These leaders were not indifferent to the importance of relationship between schools and community; however, their sense of place appeared to manifest in a theory of action related more to perceived community expectations for indi-

vidual leaders than to strengthening the relationship between school and community well-being. Successful leaders, it was believed, needed to understand the “mentality” of a small, rural community, which included willingness to be highly visible, accessible, and approachable, as well as reach out to members of the community to provide rationale for district action. It was the norm to “drop in” rather than schedule an appointment. Renee, a community leader, elucidated:

[A] lot of times people are not going to make an appointment to go see the superintendent. Yes, they get there and they understand they might have to wait, but they want to have people be accessible to them . . . you just have to almost live, eat, and breathe your job to be successful in small communities.

Gaining respect and developing trust necessitated such actions as listing one’s telephone number in the phone book, as well as taking personal time to respond to parents and other community members. Jerri, an administrator, stated,

I’ve learned you damn well better care. If people here don’t think that you care about them, that you’re just doing a job, you’re not going to be doing your job very long, or you’re not going to have the respect of the community very long.

Mickey, a member of the school board, agreed: “In a small community, the board member has to be a board member 24/7.” These dedicated leaders appear to be acting in what Boyd (1982) called a “zone of tolerance” within which predominant local expectations and values exist and local educators are “free to practice professional leadership” (p. 1124). He suggests that educators’ professional training and socialization results in the introduction of a “nonlocal influence” into the community that is a reflection of “a special set of professional and universalistic values” (p. 1124). Although the board members interviewed had no training or socialization as professional educators, they were aware of the tension between professional practices, such as those related to standards-based reform and high stakes testing, and community values and expectations. They were supportive spokespeople for local educators. Mickey, a member of the board, explained,

[T]his district and its leaders, not necessarily just administrators, have wrapped their arms around personalizing the testing standards. [They are] trying to add what we have in this district to something that’s totally depersonalized education. These kids here are from blue-collar families—90% of them. And without personalization they’re going to reject education.

Community leaders were sensitive to the workload and the “fishbowl” in which leaders acted. They seemed to be concerned with supporting professional educators and elected board members in successfully operating within the zone of tolerance through frequent communication and volunteerism. Renee, a community leader, states:

I personally have told administrators and teachers what is being said in the community. I could be the person who sits back out there and just talks about it and never bring it to [educators], but they need to know what’s being said so they can address it.

As an alternative to working within a zone of tolerance, leaders might better serve the needs of students, families, and communities if they were to act from a “critical leadership of place” (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004, p. 64). A critical leadership of place expands the notion of leadership for social justice and equity beyond the current emphasis on closing the achievement gap—measured as higher test scores—to one that demonstrates an understanding of the interdependence between people and the places in which they live (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004). A critical leadership of place is leadership that specifically aims to improve the quality of life in particular communities. Leaders with a critical leadership of place support community as a context for learning, understand that schools and their local communities are inextricably linked, and that the ability of each to thrive is dependent upon the other. They work to conserve what is beneficial to the well being of students, families, and communities, while actively leading efforts that address the challenges and/or contradictions found in the local context.

Focusing on pragmatic support for developing critical pedagogies of place, Furman and Gruenewald (2004) suggest five areas of action indicative of a critical leadership of place: (a) shaping the cultural politics of the school, (b) negotiating the borders between imposed mandates and place-based teaching, (c) actively supporting place-based initiatives, (d) securing resources, and (e) identifying professional development opportunities. Educational leaders need to personally develop a critical sense of place. Other scholars have called upon the field to restore a sense of place to educational leadership (Driscoll & Kerchner, 1999). But if leaders in MRSD typify those in other struggling rural communities, it is probable that a sense of place is not enough. An examined or a critical sense of place is needed if leaders are to act from a theory of action regarding the connection between education and place. Without this critical sense of place, the paradox identified in MRSD between “place as problem” and “place as privilege” goes unrecognized. Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) describe “an analyzed sense of place as a window to the Lebenswelt, a vehicle to self-knowledge” (p. 6). Developing a critical sense of place

would require leaders to deeply examine their professional practice in relation to their assumptions about place—both for themselves and for a wider community of students, teachers, and local inhabitants.

Moving from Problem to Possibility: Why It’s Important

While important for all educational leaders, a critical leadership of place may be especially fitting for those living and working in a rural context since it seeks to bring to the foreground issues of importance to those living in such places. The health and well-being of rural schools and communities are inextricably linked; “functional rural communities are an endangered species” (Miller, as cited in Stern, 1994, p. 22).

Scholars have argued that the dominant culture does not value rurality (Herzog & Pittman, 2003). Prejudices against rural people are strong, stereotyping is socially sanctioned (Herzog & Pittman, 2003), and rural citizens have internalized messages of inferiority from the dominant culture (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). In his essay about Billy Charles, a “rural disadvantaged youth,” Barone (1989) describes his “jolting realization” of his “vast ignorance about the ways of people who live within a two-hour drive” of his home, and “about the fundamentals of a world no longer honored in the dominant culture” (p. 148).

Cocooned in the world of the middle-class educator, we are insulated from unfamiliar norms and ways of life. We have lost—indeed have been systematically encouraged to lose—the ability to reach out to honor the places (whether the barrio, the ghetto, the reservation, the Appalachian holler, or simply the peaks and pits of adolescence) where our students live. (Barone, 1989, p. 151)

Education reform initiatives that focused on the promotion of the national and global economy have resulted in an overemphasis on workforce preparation, an anti-intellectualism of the school curriculum, an out-migration of bright youth from rural communities, and a disregard for the importance of attending to local places (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Howley, 1997). Pedagogy has been severed from the lived experiences of rural students (Theobald, 1997).

There is a plethora of references to the power that place-based pedagogies hold for rural students and rural communities (Gruenewald, 2003b; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Harmon & Branham, 1999; Howley et al., 1996; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1999). On the other hand, these approaches are only rarely mentioned in the current discourse on standards-based reform. The separation of schooling from the context most known to students—their

places and communities—has detrimental effects on the individual and the common good. Yet it is precisely this separation that is enacted by the educational leaders in this study. Were leaders in this community conversant in a critical leadership of place, they likely would have been aware of the paradox that is central to this paper. Or perhaps the paradox would not exist.

Suggesting a critical leadership stance necessitates an acknowledgement of the challenges it presents. Interrogating privilege and power is painful. It requires skill (learning and unlearning) and will (courage, commitment, and empathy) to co-create with others the conditions for developing an understanding of the workings of power and privilege in order to decolonize and reinhabit places (Gruenewald, 2003b).

A pedagogy for critical place-conscious leadership warrants further conceptualization and research. Although it is beyond my scope here to fully elaborate, such a pedagogy might be an amalgam of current approaches to antioppressive education that acknowledge the multiplicity and situatedness of oppression, together with the positionality of the actors. It would necessitate an analysis of the history, culture, politics, and ecology of a particular place in relation to past, present, and future human and nonhuman conditions. Borrowing from critical traditions, critical self-reflection and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) manifested in an examined or critical sense of place might be a place to start.

“Leadership is at its heart a critical practice . . . (it) is oriented not just toward the development of more perfect organizational structures, but toward a reconceptualization of life practices where common ideals of freedom and democracy stand important” (Foster, 1989, p. 52). Leaders exercising a critical leadership of place may serve as a springboard for future generations of citizens that are accountable to each other and to the community they inhabit. Nurturing a critical sense of place enables students to cherish and celebrate local values, histories, culture, and the ecology of the place they inhabit, at the same time learning to critique and confront the social, political, economic, and environmental problems in their local communities.

Encouraging schools to nurture in students a critical sense of place, some may argue, simply adds to the long “to do” list currently demanded. Considering the impact of the continued escalation of placelessness on the future of America, especially rural America, what is the alternative? Deborah Tall (1996) reminds us, “The avoidance of ties to place, which take years to build, removes constraints, allows us to be indifferent to our towns and cities, to ignore their human and environmental plights, to say but this isn’t mine” (p. 108). Paradoxically, the present study shows that while place may be a privilege for some to embrace, it is posed as a problem for others to overcome. Students who develop a critical sense of place wherever they live will know how to live better anywhere they live. “Places, like people, may die

through accident, disaster, and neglect. Or from an exodus of hope” (Paige, 1996, p. 14).

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