Rural Principal Perspectives of Leadership Development Needs

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Rural school principals often face issues of professional isolation and lack of access to leadership development opportunities, particularly when compared to principals from larger school districts. To address these challenges, the Elgin Children's Foundation launched its Principal Support Program (PSP) in 2017 to support the development of effective school leaders in three states with high rural student populations in the Appalachian region. The PSP posited four components as essential for principal development: professional development, networking, mentoring, and learning plans. The aim of this qualitative study is to determine what participants of the PSP believe to be the most effective in terms of principal development. Research questions include: 1) What is the impact of the PSP on rural principal mindsets and practices? and 2) What components of the PSP are most beneficial for rural principal development? Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and observations. Results indicate that because of PSP training, rural principals grew from managers to instructional leaders, as well as changed their mindsets and practices regarding shared leadership. Most importantly, principals believed that they benefited most from the networking and coaching that the PSP provided. Future professional development for rural principals should consider a focus on providing opportunities to learn with and through others.

The school principal holds a critical role in K-12 education (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Murphy, 2017). Louis et al. (2010), who used a national sample of schools to study factors that impact student achievement, found that aside from classroom instruction, school leadership emerged as the most important school-related factor to contribute to student learning. The work of school principals matters, and those who are effective school leaders often operate within a network of other principals (Smylie et al., 2020; Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Howley et al., 2002). Although effective school leaders are well connected, unfortunately, many principals report that they feel isolated or alone in their role (Smylie et al., 2020; Stewart & Matthews, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). This isolation is heightened in rural areas, where principals are often the only administrator in their schools and lack the support offered in larger districts. One organization attempting to remedy the challenges that rural principals face is the Elgin Children's Foundation.

The Elgin Children's Foundation founded the Principal Support Program (PSP) in 2017 to leverage their impact in the Appalachian region, and it was developed in partnership with the Kentucky Education Co-op with the goal of supporting principals in becoming effective school leaders. The original goals of the program focused on developing a network for principals to engage in professional development, implement strategies, and receive support with the ultimate goal of improving student academic performance. The content of the program was also originally based on Kentucky Principal Performance Standards, specifically within six main categories: instructional leadership, school climate and culture, human resources management, organizational management, communication and community relations, and professionalism. However, PSP stakeholders revealed that during the first two years of the program, learning revolved only around three of those areas: school climate and culture, instructional leadership, and organizational management. To structure the programming offered, Elgin leadership predicted that four components would be essential for principal development (i.e., professional development, networking, mentoring, and learning plans) that are described below.

Professional Development

Principals attend annual meetings with all PSP principals as well as monthly meetings led by PSP coaches along with other principals in their region. Informal interviews with PSP coaches and a review of PSP agendas revealed that professional development focused on principal mindsets and practices related to school culture and climate, instructional leadership, and organizational

management during the first two years of the program. During training, principals participated in a variety of learning activities, including hearing from guest speakers, discussing books, reflecting on their practices, and learning from others during informal conversations.

Networking

The cohort-model of the PSP provides principals the opportunity to learn through and with each other. Networking occurs during the program when school leaders attend long-term training, in which they gather with principals from Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky, and monthly meetings, in which they gather with principals from their region. A by-product of this networking is the opportunity for principals to visit other principals' schools to observe the implementation of best practices of those who work in similar contexts.

Mentoring

PSP principals are provided a coach who meets with them monthly at their school to provide individual mentoring. The PSP coach supports principals as they implement the learning that occurs during PSP professional development. The six PSP coaches were hired by Elgin leadership based on previous success in the principal role. Collectively, the six coaches have an average of 14 years of experience as principal. PSP coaches also lead monthly training and collaborate with principals to establish learning plans and monthly meeting agendas.

Learning Plan

The final component of the PSP is a reflection in the form of a learning plan. Principals develop learning plans in collaboration with their coach.

As of 2020, the program has served 81 principals in Elgin counties with most principals working in Kentucky. The first year included 21 principals, the second year included 31 principals, and the third year included 29 principals. Some principals have been part of the PSP since 2017 while others started during the 2019-2020 school year; 80% have participated in the program for at least two years. Notably, some districts required principals' participation while other principals volunteered to be part of the program.

Lastly, other programs targeted to rural school principal development have provided similar content and delivery methods. For example, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation's Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC) describes how their work with rural principals in Wyoming highlighted how a learning cohort, professional learning networks, and coaching can support administrators in improving teaching and learning (Gibson et al., 2020); the content of the training included school culture and instructional leadership. In addition, a few states have developed programming, such as the Alaska School Leadership Institute (Alaska Staff Development Network, 2020), a three-day conference focused on how to build teacher efficacy and promote collaboration, as well as NC State University's Principal Academy (Northeast Leadership Academy, 2021) that provides individual coaching to help principals become instructional leaders in digital environments. Although each program describes the elements of its professional development design and content, none include outcome data in terms of principals' perceptions of effectiveness or correlations to student achievement.

Literature Review

While we agree that school leadership matters, there has been less consensus surrounding the specific best practices of principalship. The extant literature affirmed that the conceptualization of principal best practices has been fluid and shaped by external influences (Murphy, 2017). For this study, we focused on literature that reviewed practices relevant to principals' instructional leadership and professional development needs within the rural school context. The rural school context is significant, as principals in these schools work within close "social communities that require them to fulfill multiple roles and unique responsibilities that encompass the school and the community" (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018, p. 1), indicating that principals' roles often extend beyond instructional and managerial responsibilities (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). There are additional restraints that rural principals encounter; Wieczorek & Manard (2018) discussed how "rural school principals continue to experience changeable and excessive workloads in their roles as rural school leaders due to local resource constraints, organizational changes aimed to increase efficiency, and state-level budgetary regulations that favor larger school districts" (p. 16). These elements are essential to consider within the professional development needs of rural principals.

Instructional Leadership

In a review of literature, Hitt and Tucker (2016) described how instructional leadership is multifaceted. As noted by Goldring et al. (2015), "instructional leaders are often described as leaders who maintain a focus on improving teaching and learning in daily decision making, but there is limited specificity as to what matters for whether instructional leadership leads to school improvement" (p. 18). Despite limited specificity, the literature indicates that strong instructional leadership includes building a caring school culture (Smylie et al., 2020) and developing a positive instructional climate (May & Supovitz, 2011), as well as engaging with teachers on instructional and curriculum concerns (Horng & Loeb, 2010). Moreover, studies point to the importance of an instructional leader who leads collaboratively (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Murphy, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). These shared or distributed leadership practices have grown to become a component of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Lastly, informal evaluation practices, such as drop-ins and walkthroughs, have also become a popular identifier of instructional leadership (Grissom et al., 2013).

School Leader Development

The literature highlights various essential elements for principals' professional development. For example, Wahlstorm and York-Barr (2011) argued that the two key ingredients for principal development were structure and nurture, including standard meeting times, learning protocols, and opportunities for reflection, as well as learning alongside others. Another study, which examined principal-pipeline initiatives in urban school districts, also noted the importance of structure, in that support was aligned to leadership standards, as well as nurture, in that aspiring principals received on-the-job training (Gates et al., 2019). In the rural context, the professional development needs for principals may differ, as literature suggests that the role of principal can be particularly isolating (Stewart & Matthews, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Preston et al., 2014), and these principals often feel pressure to perform multiple roles within the school system. For example, Preston et al. (2014) described how rural principals are "often recognized by both staff and the school community members as instructional experts in all subject areas, an extremely

burdensome and heavy reputation to uphold" (p. 7), while also lacking access to "professional development, administrative assistance, the acquisition of teachers across specialized areas, and physical resources" (p. 7) that are more regularly available in larger school districts.

According to Stewart and Matthews (2018), in this "isolated and overloaded position...principals might benefit from more formalized opportunities for networking and collaborating with other principals" (p. 11). This opportunity for principals to network and collaborate is echoed by Smylie et al. (2020), who described it as learning vicariously through others. Smylie et al. (2020) also argued that the network was important for principals to create a caring school culture and climate. Other researchers agree that to be an effective instructional leader, a principal should function within a network of other principals and have a mentor (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Howley et al., 2002). The extant literature also explores other types of principal development activities. For example, some principal development is promoted to improve student achievement, while others are promoted for principal self-care (Wahlstrom & York-Barr, 2011; Smylie et al., 2020). Wahlstrom and York-Barr (2011) noted the difference between having knowledge of effective principal practices ("the what") and carrying out these practices ("the how"), or what is known as the implementation gap. Lastly, the literature also notes that development requires "strengthening leaders' understanding of who they are and who they want to be" (Goleman et al., 2013, as cited in Smylie et al., 2020, p. 137 - 138). Thus, measuring principal development includes considering what is important for development, including mindsets and practices, as well as if learning is implemented in context.

Current Study

For this study, we partnered with the Elgin Children's Foundation to better understand PSP principals' experiences in rural schools and their leadership development needs. These perspectives are valuable, as identifying the needs of rural principals is needed to help improve the structure and content of professional development programming that districts, universities, or other organizations may offer. To discover which elements of support that PSP principals, as well as their coaches and district officials, perceived to be most effective, this study focused on two research questions: 1) What is the

impact of the PSP on rural principal mindsets and practices? and 2) What components of the PSP are most beneficial for rural principal development?

Research Design and Methods

This qualitative study utilizes grounded theory as its framework for analysis; we examined principals' perceptions of what types of support they believe were most beneficial in order to develop an emerging theory on rural principal development. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) views an emerging theory as grounded or rooted in data, providing a more nuanced explanation than a theory derived from other studies. We conducted semi-structured interviews with PSP coaches, principals, and district officials to gather data regarding perceptions of the program and how the program influenced principals' mindsets and practices. In-person observations were conducted at three schools as follow-ups to these interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

For interviews, we focused on "capturing and understanding diverse perspectives, observing and analyzing behaviors in context, looking for patterns in what human beings do and think, and examining the implications of those patterns" (Patton, 2015, p. 8). A qualitative design complements our purpose in that interview questions can generate in-depth, individualized, and contextually sensitive understanding. These interviews took place between October 2019 through February 2020 and were conducted in-person, by telephone, or by video conference. Observations occurred on-site at three schools. For data analysis, we created individual concept-cluster matrices for each interview that focused on key concepts. We synthesized the data by combining single matrices into a consolidated matrix organized by major themes.

Sample

Based on the belief that principals need to have been in the PSP for a full year to see an impact on their mindsets and practices, we focused our interviews on principals who had participated in the program for at least two years.

Interview data included 14 PSP principals, five coaches, and six district officials. As for principals, seven worked in Tennessee, six worked in Kentucky, and one worked in Virginia, and they had an average of 4.6 years of experience as principal. In the year the

PSP was studied, 2019-2020, there were a total of 29 principals in the program. As for PSP coach data, five out of the six coaches were interviewed. These coaches had an average of 14 years of prior experience as principal. The remaining six interviews were conducted with district officials who supervised PSP principals: two from Kentucky, three from Tennessee, and one from Virginia.

Limitations

Participant selection is of concern for the internal validity of our data, as we relied on participants to volunteer to interview. We cannot be certain that findings are representative of all principals in PSP and may have only interviewed those who held strong opinions in favor or against PSP and its programming. This limitation is the same for the district officials who volunteered to be interviewed.

Findings

Question 1: What is the impact of the PSP on rural principal mindsets and practices?

To conceptualize instructional leadership for the PSP, principals were asked to consider three key questions regarding instruction at their school: 1) Is everyone working hard every day? (Instructional Expectations), 2) Is everyone teaching well and using effective strategies? (Coaching for Improvement), and 3) Is everyone teaching to the appropriate grade level? (Rigor and Standards). Additionally, Elgin focused on utilizing data, such as benchmark or state standardized test data, to help drive instruction in the school. The PSP taught strategies for utilizing data more effectively and efficiently. Lastly, there was an additional focus on principal visibility. Training on visibility practices included the type of observation and purpose (e.g., pop-in, walkthrough, or formal observation), providing feedback to improve instruction, and facilitating post-observation conferences.

Finding 1: PSP stakeholders described shifts in instructional leadership practices. During interviews with PSP coaches, all five of them described a shift from PSP principals as "managers" to "instructional leaders." One coach described how one principal "shifted from looking at the principalship to managing to the instructional leadership part. He realized that he needed to be viewed as the instructional leader." This coach

clearly captured the pattern of change that occurred in some principals. Principals learned from the PSP about the importance of being an instructional leader and adopted a new set of strategies, practices, and mindsets around using data and being visible in classrooms. Data and visibility were the focus of instructional leadership during the PSP monthly training that coaches led.

As one coach noted, "for most of my schools, the principals are good managers." The PSP helped principals learn that they must become instructional leaders in their buildings as well. A coach noted that principals are "more focused on what is important to them and being instructional leaders" because of the PSP. Another coach described that this was the "biggest change that I see. [Principals] were becoming more tuned in to being the instructional leader, not just the manager." This is significant, as one coach discussed, because it is a shift in principals' mindset: "If that principal was a manager of the building, it is very easy to fall into the trap; it is very easy to be a manager." The PSP helped refine how principals viewed their role while providing strategies to do so, including how to track and analyze student data and how to facilitate classroom observations.

Becoming an instructional leader is a process, and the PSP is helping principals make progress towards this. A district official commented on this shift they have seen: "The most beneficial thing we have seen is the growth in our principals. Looking at where they were before to where they are today, they are dramatically different; they do different jobs." This shift is further explored when principals learned to utilize data and be more visible.

Ten of the principals articulated how their use of data had changed because of the PSP, with regard to what data were analyzed, how often data were analyzed, the tools used to analyze data, and even the questions they asked about their data. One principal noted, the PSP "showed us a different way to look at it, and it is easier than the way I had mastered it." Principals often referenced how the PSP, including the monthly meetings and individual coaching, made them more aware of how data usage could be expanded. One principal shared how "I have always thought of myself as a data person, but there's so much more...I don't know squat about data; something very simple that I thought would be impossible." Some principals did not know how limited their knowledge of data utilization actually was: "We always looked at data. I was already

looking at data and the teachers were, too. But one thing that changed was looking at student work: bringing in student work samples and looking at the rigor of the tasks; Elgin took it to the next level." Principals went from 'surface-level' use of data to utilizing data to help with student grouping, more focused conferences with teachers, teaching teachers to track data, and making data visual. Principals were also provided tools and templates for reviewing benchmark and state test data. By using data better, a principal commented how she does "not just collect it," but uses it to "set better goals, shared goals," as well as "teaching them [teachers] how to break it down into smaller or more measurable goals."

A new principal shared how it was challenging to begin using data. He stated how "data was the hardest to take on as a first year of principal. Going from a school that didn't look at it was tough to overcome, and it's been a journey." However, even experienced principals found that they were learning to use data more effectively: "Just looking more in-depth I think when I took this job; this is my 6th year as an admin. The way that data has been used from principal to principal has been so different… deeper way of using it, tracking it, everything I told you is based on what I learned [from the PSP]." One principal explained his journey in utilizing data and the challenges that a principal must overcome:

We have started to have a look at data a lot more and differently than we have in the past in the previous principals. I try to take a lot of what we talk about in the Principal Support Program and bring it back to teachers. We didn't talk about it before. The teachers are starting to look at it. When we first talked about it, there were some people that got their feelings hurt because their scores were not what they liked, but it is not about their feelings; it is about the students, it is about if they want to do better, they need to do better. I have not gotten to a point where I am fully comfortable with it, so they probably are not comfortable either.

A district official also noted a change in data practices: "[My principals] have become data gurus. They all have data rooms where they work with their staff from benchmark data to map data to SLO data to absent data, and they look at that and track where they are, what students need, and where they need to go, and come up with a plan how to do it."

Eight of the principals also discussed the importance of being more visible in the school and in teachers' classrooms, claiming that "being as visible

as possible is the main objective." This change in practice for one principal led to a change in teacher perception: "Teachers see me more as an instructional leader". Some principals commented on how their perception of what an instructional leader looks like has changed because of the PSP: "I thought I was an instructional leader because I love data, but going into classrooms and seeing those drop-ins, when I meet with teachers I come in and drop in on their lunch or planning and go down, visit whatever and have instructional conversations because I love grammar and reading...I thought I was an instructional leader." Principals changed their daily practices because of the PSP, as one principal now "starts each day by visiting classrooms" to "see what [he] can do to help teachers grow." While teacher observations are taking place more consistently, principals have different approaches to provide teachers with feedback.

Finding 2: Principals discuss shared leadership mindsets and practices. PSP principals provided a variety of responses in terms of both their mindsets and practices regarding shared leadership. Some shared that they already had school teams in place prior to the PSP, and there was variation across school-based teams in terms of quantity, purpose, composition, and structure. Overall, seven of the principals discussed the changes in their shared leadership mindsets and practices because of the PSP. For example, one principal shared that his thinking on leadership had changed with regards to his teachers, stating, "You have to trust them to do it. I always thought if you didn't have your hands on it, it was not going to get done." Others confirmed that the implementation of shared leadership practices was a result of the PSP, although again there was variation in their descriptions. One principal simply reported that he had created a leadership team to improve school climate and culture, while another shared that creating teacher leaders was a result of the PSP.

Several coaches also confirmed that their principals had made changes with regards to shared leadership. Two coaches discussed principals who had created leadership teams, although again their description and purpose varied. One told a story about a principal who chose to include teachers in the hiring process while another told a story about a principal who created different teams so that "everybody had a place in leadership." The other coach commented that the shared leadership change was in the principal's mindset, as opposed to

practice, noting they had seen a change in the principal's "belief" of "working as a team."

Question 2: What components of the PSP are beneficial for rural principal development?

Finding 3: The PSP fulfills a regional leadership development need. Eight principals, all six district officials, and all five coaches noted the need for this type of programming for principal development within their region. None of the principals or coaches mentioned other supports available for current principal development, even after prompting. Some recalled programming for aspiring principals but noted that these programs were not designed for principals already in the role. Principals and coaches confirmed that there were district level meetings for principals yet explained that leadership development was not the focus. One coach described the focus of these meetings as "compliance" and "reporting," as opposed to leader development. Another coach described these meetings as a time when principals are told to "do this, do that, do this, do that," which was similar to a principal who said district meetings were focused on telling principals what to do as opposed to how to do it. The consensus from principals, coaches, and district officials was that if PSP did not exist, these supports would not exist. One principal commented on the lack of support prior to PSP, reflecting on her first year as a principal: "When I was hired to be a principal, they handed me the keys and then nobody told me what to do... they just said, "you are the principal," and I sat here in my office that summer and thought about what I had to do. I think most of what I learned - how to be a principal and what a principal does - through the Principal Support Program."

One district official shared that this was a historical reality, and that in this leader's 15 years as a principal, there was never a program like the PSP. Another district official noted that these PSP supports, while aligned with district goals, are supports that their district cannot afford. When considering the regional impact of PSP, one principal concluded: "Elgin has helped change our district." District officials confirmed that PSP had led to changes in principal leadership, and in some instances, in *district* leadership. When asked about the changes that PSP principals had made because of PSP, district officials consistently mentioned practices related to data and visibility. One district

official commented on the growth of their PSP principals, stating that "they are dramatically different" because they now "do different jobs." Specifically, this district official echoed the earlier finding that principals have shifted from being "building managers" to "academic leaders." Other district officials framed the PSP impact when comparing the PSP principals to the non-PSP principals they served. When asked if there was a difference between the two, one remarked: "there's a definite difference" while another responded vaguely, but confidently, "1000% yes." The district official expounded on this vague difference with a story about a teacher who shared she had "the best pre-conference ever" with a PSP principal. The district official asserted that this experience demonstrated the extended reach of the PSP impact, explaining: "When teachers buy-in, or see an impact, it is not just hearing from principals but also hearing from teachers...our goal is to not only see this [impact] with principals but teachers as well." Another district official, who cited Elgin's impact based on how his PSP principals changed their data practices as well as the impact of prior reading assistance supports, claimed: "Our kids are reading now because of Elgin." While these findings confirmed the need for rural support geared toward meeting the instructional leadership needs of rural principals, one coach provided rationale for the program in simpler terms: "No principal should be alone." Thus overall, the PSP met a variety of regional needs when measured by helpfulness for principals.

Finding 4: Positive impact is shaped by a willing mindset, not years of experience. When commenting on the helpfulness of the PSP, two district officials and two coaches highlighted the importance of a principal's willingness to engage in development and implement new practices. One district official argued that PSP principals were open-minded to learning because they are willing to participate in the PSP. The same district official compared principals who volunteered to be part of the PSP to one who was "resistant" to change and did not choose to engage in PSP programming: "We had one principal that chose not to participate, and he is a veteran and nearing retirement, and he did not participate. He seems to be very negative about things, about change, per se, where the other principals have embraced it."

This indicated that there may be mindset differences between principals who volunteered to be part of the PSP versus those who had been told by their district that they were required to participate. While PSP coaches did not make distinctions between principals who had volunteered to be part of the program and those who were required to participate, they made similar arguments about the need to be open-minded to learn new practices. One coach mentioned that principals need to be "bought in or invested" while another coach, when reflecting on the changes she had observed with her principals commented, "there's a real sense of growth for those that are willing to grow." One principal confirmed the differences in willingness to learn among her cohort, sharing: "It is difficult when you have the nay-sayers. You can be an awesome-izer or an awful-izer in school culture, and I would say that to the other principals." While confirming differences in principals' willingness to engage, this principal also highlighted that an unwilling mindset could negatively impact her experience during training, which is important to note given how valuable the cohort and network experience is to PSP principals. While multiple coaches expressed that they had witnessed growth among all principals they worked with, others argued that for the PSP to be beneficial, principals not only need a willing mindset but also a desire to follow-through. One coach commented, "some people are really focused and highly motivated and do it. Some people need a little oversight and encouragement." This suggested that a willing mindset was not just important for learning new practices but for implementation as well. Findings suggest that a willingness to learn impacted the decision to start the PSP, engage during programming, and implement strategies afterward.

Finding 5: Learning with and through others (i.e., coaching and networking) is perceived as most useful versus siloed, unstructured supports. Among the components of the PSP (i.e., professional development, networking, coaching, and learning plans), eight principals and four district officials commented that coaching sessions were the most beneficial. Coaches themselves provided insight into this, stating that coaching sessions allow for individualized support for principals to help them with implementation of practices learned during professional development. Other coaches felt sessions were beneficial because their role was as a *supporter* as opposed to a *supervisor*. One district official similarly described the role of the coach, stating that coach support was seen as "non-

threatening." When commenting on the helpfulness of the coach, the district official described the role in terms of both support and impact, stating: "principals are feeling the most supported and getting the most out of it." Consequently, the coaching component was viewed as both supportive and effective.

PSP coaches and district officials also provided an additional rationale for the perceived usefulness of coaching, confirming again that the role and reality of a rural principalship is isolating. One PSP coach remarked, "Rural principals are so lonely… even if they don't know it." Multiple coaches echoed this sentiment, stating that rural principals feel "isolated" or "lonely," especially when considering again that it is not uncommon for principals to be the only administrator in their building. One coach reported that fewer than half of her principals have a full-time assistant principal, while another stated that one in 12 of her principals had a full-time assistant. Another PSP coach predicted that PSP principals find the coach to be a beneficial support because of the isolation, sharing "I don't have data to back it up. Just a general feeling that, at least for the principals that I work with, they seem to enjoy having someone outside their district to just talk to." Other district officials commented on the size of their community with regards to the helpfulness of the coach. Two district officials told stories about a principal being well-liked in his community and the PSP assisting with having difficult conversations with teachers to consider what is best for kids. A coach commented on the pressure small communities create, noting: "I just think in small areas if anything happens that is out of the norm, it is automatically in the paper, and on the TV, and social media, so you really have to be proactive… not stir up the negative comments." Thus, the coach may also be particularly beneficial as a buffer in this social context due to the size of these rural communities.

Second only to coaching, six principals and three district officials reported that they perceived the PSP networking opportunities to be the most beneficial. One district official described the usefulness of networking in the cohort model, stating, "it was really amazing in the short amount of time to see principals have contact and a network." A principal shared that she appreciated her expanded network because of yearly training, as she now had the ability to reach outside the county and within for support. PSP principals, coaches, and district officials commented on the helpfulness of this support in terms of providing an opportunity to share ideas or problem-solve. A district official noted the difference between a physical network versus social media networks. This difference was evident in a story told by a PSP principal in which they were able to visit another PSP school to see the structures and systems behind a scheduling system. The principal referenced a positive change in her school's test scores and gave all credit to the principal she had visited. As opposed to simply learning about best practices, networking during the PSP provided principals with time and space to discuss practices and witness them in real time in a real context.

Overall, interview findings suggest that coaches and district officials describe a change in principals from building managers to instructional leaders, specifically in regard to their data, visibility, and shared leadership practices. While principals have thought differently about how best to spend their time and have shifted their time to instructional tasks, they still struggle to manage their time. Findings indicate that there is a perceived regional need for the PSP for principals of all experience levels, particularly for networking and coaching. We also note that a willing mindset may be important for principals' growth.

Discussion

As demonstrated in the literature, the definition of an instructional leader is multifaceted and is constantly evolving (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Goldring et al., 2015); however, the importance of instructional leadership has not changed. Principals in our study reported that they were more aware of the importance of examining and utilizing data, as well as increasing their visibility in classrooms and providing teachers with feedback.

It is important to note how Grissom et al. (2013) found that simply spending time on instructional tasks did not predict student achievement growth. However, instructional practices of coaching, evaluation, and educational programming did predict positive achievement gains. Authors discovered that time spent on informal walkthroughs negatively predicted student growth and discussed that this may be because the walkthrough process was not part of a broader improvement strategy. Therefore, authors highlighted the importance of the type and quality of instructional leadership activities as opposed to just time spent on them.

Additionally, Horng and Loeb (2010) called for a new understanding of instructional leadership that not only focused on visibility practices (e.g.,

observations), but also included vital organizational management practices, such as staffing their schools with high quality teachers and supplying resources. Authors stated that while instructional leadership is critical for school improvement, growth in student and school-wide outcomes come more from organizational management for instructional improvement (e.g., staffing and resources), as opposed to focusing too narrowly on principal observations or coaching.

The PSP structured its professional development in instructional leadership in ways that promote best practices of type and quality of activities (Grissom et al., 2013), specifically with visibility and organizational management practices (Horng & Loeb, 2010). PSP principals learned to utilize data to help improve student grouping, facilitate focused conferences with teachers, and coach teachers on how to track data, as well as create school-based leadership teams and engage in shared leadership. The emphasis on shared leadership in PSP programming is particularly important in the rural context, as principals often are viewed as the only instructional expert in the school (Preston et al., 2014), and distributing responsibilities among staff members helps to remove some pressures on the principal.

Interview data suggest that rural principals feel isolated, and that there is a need for school leadership development in rural settings (Preston et al., 2014; Stewart & Matthews, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The fact that PSP coaches described a shift of PSP principals as "managers" to "instructional leaders" suggests that, alike with previous studies, rural principals may struggle without support in instructional leadership areas (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

While literature on rural school leadership has cited the needs of novice principals, findings suggest that access to leadership development may be beneficial for all principals at different levels of learning (Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Nelson et al., 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Specifically, we found that years of experience appeared to matter less when evaluating the perceived usefulness of principal development programming, while a *willingness to learn* appeared more important. This is critical in the rural context because principals and coaches described how the PSP was their only source for principal development in their region, aside from professional development for aspiring principals. Therefore, while Wieczorek and Manard (2018)

advocated for a context-driven preparation program for novice rural principals that would address managerial and instructional leadership needs, findings suggest that there is a need for this type of support for rural principals of all experience levels.

Extant literature on principal development advocates for different types of activities (e.g., professional development, mentorship, on-the-job training) for various outcomes. For example, some studies have advocated for support that allows principals to learn with and through others (Ashton & Duncan, 2013; Smylie et al., 2020). Networking and mentorship are important elements for the professional development of principals (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Howley et al., 2002), and these opportunities to learn through others, as noted by Smylie et al. (2020), are essential for improving school culture and climate and principal self-care.

PSP components of networking and mentoring were perceived as the most beneficial. This finding is consistent with results from Duncan and Stock (2010), who found that mentorship for beginning principals was perceived as important by nearly all participants, as well as with Ashton and Duncan (2013), who identified finding a supportive mentor as one of the eight leadership practices key to rural principal success. The fact that PSP principals identified the network and mentoring as the most beneficial components of the program may also be evidence of the importance of having "support" in principal development, which was also a key ingredient that Wahlstrom and York-Barr (2011) identified for high engagement in principal development.

Conclusion and Implications

Our study explored principals' experiences as part of Elgin's Principal Support Program. Specifically, we investigated the mindsets and practices of rural principals in the areas of instructional leadership and principal development, as well as participants' perceptions as to what elements are most helpful. To accomplish this, we gathered data from PSP principals, district officials, and coaches through interviews, observations, and school site visits. Data analysis revealed several emerging themes. First, PSP coaches described a shift from principals as *managers* to principals as *instructional leaders*. As instructional leaders, principals were more aware of methods to examine

and utilize data, but their implementation of using data varied. Principals also highlighted changes in their mindsets and practices regarding shared leadership in their schools; however, they still struggled to implement time management practices. Lastly, coaches found that the impact of the PSP was influenced by principals' mindset toward learning, not their years of experience as principal.

Most significantly, the PSP fulfilled a need for leadership development for rural principals. These principals often have limited access to professional development and networking that occur on a far more frequent, systematic basis in larger school districts. Principals in this study stated that the networking and coaching components were most beneficial in part because of the isolation they felt in their leadership role. Future research could investigate how principals' mindset impacts their willingness to learn and implement new practices, as well as describe how staff reception of these practices impacts implementation.

The PSP model could be replicated in other rural school districts by focusing on the most beneficials components of networking and mentoring. For example, rural school leaders could connect with other rural districts to initiate a collaborative effort in creating their own networks. As districts across the country are becoming more equipped with and adept at using technology, this network could extend virtually across and beyond one region or state. In addition to creating this network, school leaders should seek out mentors to provide coaching, which could be from retired principals, like the PSP model, as well as from partnerships with local colleges and universities that have educational leadership programs. Collaboration with these programs would also help align professional development to current best practices. Lastly, school districts must have the mindset that principal development is essential and provide the time and resources for principals to participate in these development activities.

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Suggested Citation: