Developing Equitable School Leaders in a Predominantly White Rural Educational Leadership Program in the US

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Education systems in the United States (US) increasingly experience disagreement over how to address cultural and societal injustices. At the heart of these debates includes the role of the rural sociocultural experience – which in the US is based on racial and spatial isolation, the idea of whiteness as the norm, and more recently economic deprivation due to globalization. This paper examines the experiences of 17 aspiring educational leaders in a predominantly White rural state in the US. Drawing from the field of cultural psychology, this study illustrates the role educational preparation programs must play in developing greater sociocultural awareness among White educational leadership candidates who lack exposure to racially and culturally diverse environments. Using findings from this study, preparation programs and school districts in predominantly White rural areas can foster greater self-reflection for educators to address social injustices, as well as reject ahistorical and apolitical philosophies of education.
There is a robust body of literature on the development of urban educational leadership programs, specifically on the development of racially and socially just educational leaders to serve in an urban context (Dantley, 2005; Green, 2015; Rivera-McCutchen, 2020). While there is no ‘official’ listing, by conducting a simple search online, one can find over 50 universities throughout the US that offer some form of urban education leadership development. Additionally, urban education continues to receive enormous attention in the form of grant funding, philanthropic donation, and financial leveraging to influence school systems on a large scale (Turnbull et al., 2021). However, there is little focus provided to rural educational leadership programs as there are only a few rural leadership centers which are currently studying the needs of rural schools and of rural school leadership development (Superville, 2021).

As noted by Parson et al. (2016), the challenges encountered by “the rural principal often fundamentally differ from those of urban and suburban principals” (p. 63). Many rural school leaders “face cultural and stereotypical characterizations of rural life and living and therefore, by extension, cultural and stereotypical characterizations regarding the worth and quality of rural education” (Surface, 2014, p. 567). The stereotyping and treatment of rural schools and the education provided in these schools became a great debate following the election of Donald Trump, particularly the critique of US rural schools existing to serve as a resource for the development of the global economy (Biddle & Hall, 2017). Given the focus placed on the US urban experience, as well as the cultural and social capital that is concentrated in many urban areas, many young rural people continue to leave for urban areas that provide greater opportunities than if they were to stay in the rural US (Corbett, 2007).

Given the lack of attention on the development of rural educational leadership programs in the US, as well as the increased awareness of the important role rural education systems can have on influencing the sociocultural conditions of the US, this study contributes to the understanding cultural psychology plays on the future development of rural educational leaders. Specifically, this study examines how one educational leadership program in a predominantly White rural state can inform the development of aspiring principal candidates to help develop greater sociocultural awareness to address social injustices in rural spaces across the US. The study examined one primary research question, namely, “How and in what ways can preparation programs and school districts in predominantly White rural areas foster greater self-reflection for educators to address social injustices, as well as reject ahistorical and apolitical philosophies of education?”

Rural Education in the US

Rural education systems have historically received less attention than urban education counterparts regarding school improvement initiatives and have been provided less funding to help address lack of resources within rural communities, all of which creates demanding workloads for rural principals who must attend to a wide variety of stressors to keep rural schools running (Klar & Huggins, 2020). Referred to as the ‘rural problem’ (Tieken, 2014), neoliberal policies help reinforce urban-centric paradigms about how schools should operate, particularly as it relates to economic growth, efficiency, and economies of scale that tend to favor larger and typically urban school systems (Butler, 2014). However, over the past decade there has been growing interest in studying how rural schools contribute to more equitable outcomes in the US, a country that continues to experience rapid demographic diversification and migration (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; McHenry-Sorber & Hall, 2018). Specifically, there is a need to study how school leaders in rural areas are being developed to produce more equitable outcomes for all rural students, including but not limited to understanding how rural areas address racial, socioeconomic, and spatial inequities that in turn influence how or if inclusive practices translate into predominantly white rural classrooms and school buildings.
Clearly there is a need to develop high-quality rural school leaders who can deliver equitable outcomes for rural students and families, however rural schools also often experience high levels of turnover among educators that lack the professional development networks (Rowland, 2017). The lack of ongoing rural-relevant leader development for leaders, as well as the retention of rural school leaders, is critical to address (Orphan & McClure, 2019), particularly if rural schools are to contribute to helping make the US a more equitable and just society. As such, the role of rural leadership development – and the sociocultural development needs of rural school leaders – is of utmost importance.

**Sociocultural factors in the Rural US**

There are countless examples of how rural education in the US is stereotyped in popular culture, (Gallo, 2020), including the poverty experienced by students, the lack of resources available to teachers, and perhaps most pronounced, the lack of cultural capital available to rural students and parents (Mette, forthcoming). Outside of the rural South, many rural US communities historically have been defined as predominantly White, which most recently has been explored through geographic locations and the large percentage of the population (80% or more) that identifies as White (Mann et al., 2021). In these spaces, educators, parents, and students alike might not question a lack of racial diversity due to the fact they have no real reference point of an existence that requires an understanding of anything other than a White experience. Thus, these rural communities reinforce the idea of the ‘racial contract’ which defines space, particularly who is allowed to live in rural areas, based on whiteness (Mills, 1997), as well as what is stereotypically considered ‘normal’ for the rural US.

While the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classifies 27.6% of rural US students as people of color (2013), rural US schools continue to experience rapid racial and ethnic diversification (Biddle & Mette, 2017). These shifts are influenced by neoliberal polices and the demographic changes that result from a globalized economy, both of which produce an increasingly diverse student body as it relates to race, ethnicity, and culture (Ylimaki et al., 2016). As such, rural US schools that historically have been spatially and racially isolated will increasingly need leadership that is able to challenge the idea of ‘whiteness as the norm’ (Lynch, 2018). While this type of educational leadership training has occurred in urban areas of the US for several decades now, it is not something that has received much attention in the literature around training for ruralcentric principal development.

Perhaps most important is the consideration of how school leaders need to address the historic sociocultural factors influencing the traditions of rural education in the US. Specifically, as the rise in nationalism continues to influence the political system in the US and around the world (Bieber, 2018), rural school systems will need educational leaders who are able to question how systems of oppression have been created based on race (Mealy, 2020) and how social systems reinforce white supremacy. These challenges go beyond addressing Eurocentric curricula or addressing achievement gaps based on race, but rather will require educational leaders who are able to engage with students, parents, and teachers who are invested in maintaining whiteness as the norm. This includes developing local education policies that encourage and protect teachers to engage in equitable education efforts even in the face of state legislation that bans critical analysis of race in the US (Sawchuk, 2021).

**Cultural Psychology and Education**

This paper is informed by the cultural psychology literature to help educational leadership preparation programs better conceptualize the developmental needs of their students as it relates to sociocultural understanding. Cultural psychology provides a theoretical lens that allows educators to analyze how culture, values, and historic relationships inform ways of knowing through shared
experiences (Cohen & Kitayama, 2019; Guan et al., 2020; Heine, 2010). Cultural psychology also allows researchers to study and identify factors that cause a person to adopt a certain paradigm about society, specifically the interaction that occurs between the environment and a person that leads to cultural constructs (Cohen, 2019). Given these aspects of the theoretical framework, cultural psychology offers great opportunities for educational leadership preparation programs to better understand how people learn to identify with the school and the community they serve.

Kraus et al. (2012) posit that social class informs how we engage in shared experiences, specifically how it relates to access to resources, the formulation of knowledge, and responses to a social environment. This paper uses the work of Kraus et al. (2012) to better understand how social class, contextualism, and solipsism relate to the development of rural educational leaders. Defined as “a philosophical idea that centers on the notion that one’s own mind is a fundamental source of knowledge about the social world and is the primary influence on people’s everyday thought” (Kraus et al., 2012, p. 550), solipsism is highly influenced by social and economic factors. Within the context of the study, this framework is used to better understand how identities inform responses in leadership decisions around addressing changing rural demographics and what this means when addressing school systems that have historically accepted whiteness as the norm. Kraus et al. (2012) suggest social class influences a range of perceptions about control and thus perceptual tendencies, including the “sense that one’s actions are chronically influenced by external forces outside individual control” (p. 549) as well as the ability to pursue “goals and interests relatively free of concerns about their material costs” (p. 550). Thus, the ability to understand how social class is central to understanding how contextualism is oriented towards external factors and threats, and how solipsism is oriented towards internal beliefs and knowledge about the world, including identities such as race and gender, among many others.

Using this paradigm, cultural psychology allows those in rural leadership preparation programs to better prepare school leaders to be aware of race, class, access to scarce resources, social opportunities, and the ability to attend to personal emotional needs (Kraus et al., 2012). As it relates to the sociocultural factors influencing the rural US, rural educational leadership preparation programs can use this framework to more deeply explore and study how rural school leaders are prepared to move into educational leadership roles. Specifically, there is a need to address the influences of global economic decline, cultural and social deprivation, racial isolation due to historic control of where Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people live, and the ability to reimagine how rural education systems can contribute to a more equitable US society.

Methods

Program Description and Participant Selection

A rural educational leadership preparation program, located in the northern US in one of the most rural states in the country, serves as the case for this study. It is also a state with one of the highest percentages of citizens who identify as White. In this program there is an explicit focus on preparing educational leaders for the challenges they will face in rural schools. The program delivers instruction around interpersonal, cognitive, and intrapersonal aspects of leadership (Donaldson, 2008), but also on developing an equity lens for school leaders to assess, address, and improve organizational inequities, particularly for educators who work in predominantly White school buildings and school districts (Irby, 2021). Educators in this educational leadership program experience learning as a cohort, allowing future teacher leaders and principals to develop a professional network of support once they have completed the requirements of the degree.

The study included 17 aspiring educational leaders, all of whom were full-time educators in school systems throughout the northern rural US state. Of the 17 total participants, 10 were female and seven
were male. All identified as White. Nine were under the age of 40 and eight were 41 or older. Seven had
nine or less years of experience and 10 had 10 or more years of experience. Table 1 provides more detail
about the participants.

The educational leadership program in this study continually updates curriculum based on
accreditation review cycles. Using evidence collected from the previous three years of instruction, the
faculty in this program were intentional about increasing training to address equity in schools at the time
of data collection. The data from this study are also evidence of future curriculum improvement efforts
as part of the ongoing improvement cycle to ensure students are able to address organizational inequities
through their own leadership development and apply their leadership skills within their own school
building.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

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Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and used for this study. Based on the
research literature about sociocultural factors and cultural psychology development, including race,
privilege, and socioeconomic status (SES), open-ended questions were asked during interviews that lasted
roughly 45-60 minutes in length. These interviews were done through video-conferencing to protect
people during the height of the pandemic. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis focused on identifying and understanding social constructs (Creswell, 2013; Herr &
Anderson, 2015), as well as identifying and analyzing historical aspects of understanding (McIntyre, 2008),
specifically as it connects to perceptions of race in US education. Initial coding utilized a provisional coding
process related to the literature on sociocultural factors and identity development. Once the initial coding
process was complete, memos and jottings were used to develop themes detailing the experiences of the
participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). Themes were shared with participants as a form of
member-checking to ensure validity by those who were interviewed (Saldaña, 2021).
Findings

Three major categories emerged from this study, particularly as it relates to the perceptions of aspiring educational leaders in a predominantly White rural educational leadership program. The first category identifies the struggle to engage in class structures and confront capitalism in a racist society. The second category highlights reimagining solipsistic tendencies and orientations about educational outcomes. The third category underscores a rising awareness of spatially-induced racial illiteracy. The three findings are provided in more detail below.

Struggle to Confront Class and Capitalism in a Racist Society

While the aspiring rural school leaders in the predominantly White rural educational leadership program spoke about their understanding of race, class, and privilege in the US in a variety of ways, a major theme that emerged from the data was their own efforts to deepen their understanding of racial inequities in the US they had developed over time as well as through their educational leadership training, and balancing this with their own lived personal experiences in economically depressed rural areas. Participants consistently identified how their attempts to learn about equitable educational practices and apply them in their schools conflicted with moral and political ideologies they were exposed to while being raised in predominantly White rural communities. One White rural aspiring school leader described what it was like to grow up in a White rural family:

I think as I've grown and been more aware of cultural differences and the fact that my family is...it's a pretty rural family and, they're family members – I love them – but as I got older through high school, going back to family events, I remember just hearing things...that they would say then that I remember thinking 'That's not really appropriate,' you know? And it was kind of a conflict for me because, you know, these are older cousins and aunts and uncles that I thought, you know, it wasn't really my place to correct them I guess, but, you know, and I didn't feel comfortable addressing it, but I also didn't feel comfortable with the way some things were said.

Participants also noted interpersonal conflicts that arose from applying these equity belief systems, specifically as they related to family members, co-workers, and community members who struggled living in poverty but that openly communicated racial biases. Another White rural aspiring school leader shared the following conversation with her father about class and racial privilege as it relates to his experience growing up in a poor White rural setting:

So my dad grew up very poor, and made something of himself.... And he tried to have the discussion with me that he doesn't believe that white privilege exists because he was someone that comes from a background of poverty and had to, you know, pull himself up from his bootstraps.... As someone coming from poverty, he should, you know, he should know that sort of thing. And so I talked to him about how he needs to recognize this idea of a system and that, um, just because his individual circumstance was one where he came from nothing and grew into something doesn't mean that the, that there isn't such a thing as white privilege, he still started in a different place than people of color.

As such, many of the participants commented they appreciated learning about equity awareness and more inclusive instructional practices, but there were also substantial pushback from community members and many were frustrated with communication strategies from their school district when there was forceful opposition from parents.

Participants also identified their leadership development and their struggles to confront class and capitalism in predominantly White communities in various ways. These White rural aspiring school
leaders specifically identified partisan politics and belief structures that are often associated with US rural areas as socially ingrained boundaries that prevent White people from identifying with the oppression experienced by historically marginalized communities, including but not limited to people who identify as Black, Latinx, or Indigenous. Participants also noted the limited identity of their predominantly White communities, particularly the inability for many poor White ruralites to see beyond their own economic struggles and the lack of empathy for those who come from historically marginalized communities in the US, especially as it relates to racial identity. Regarding these struggles, one participant shared:

It seems to me that when you look at the [our state] there are the people who seem to think that there's an issue in our country and the people who seem to think there is no issue or the issue is that people who are White are victimized. The group who don't think that there's an issue for minorities...seem to be really focused on their own experiences and not on the experiences as a whole country and the people who do see inequities seem to be more focused on the big picture...of what everybody's experiencing in the country.

Given these sociocultural challenges, the White rural aspiring school leaders also described what they considered a moral obligation to help their predominantly White rural communities learn more about ingrained racial biases as it relates to inequities in the US. Specifically, participants spoke about the need to combat social and political agendas that seek to reinforce ahistorical paradigms of education that perpetuate racial and class divisions. For many White rural aspiring school leaders, this required them to make difficult decisions about when to speak up and combat capitalist assumptions about the history of the US, as well as how to address broader concerns or fears of existing in a capitalist society that is seen as punishing to those living in poverty, regardless of racial identity. Reflecting her perception of confronting insular identities among her predominantly White rural counterparts, one aspiring leader shared:

I came to terms with [the fact that] we are a very White and very poor, very insular state. And so I felt an increased pressure, actually an opportunity, to say, ‘Okay, because I am teaching in a place that is so insular I have an obligation to continue to try to open minds and encourage people to think about things differently.... [We need to] make the politicians and the people in power see that we have to flip things so that the poor are not continually oppressed and a lot of that involves and envelops racism.

Another participant noted:

I feel like a lot of White America feels like, ‘Well, my life sucks. Uh, if your life sucks too, well, join the club.’ ... I feel like, uh, unless you acknowledge the fact that there is a long history of injustice, if you don't feel that, if you don't feel that that's true...you’re not willing to acknowledge that...we're operating in two different realities.

In sum, a majority of the White rural aspiring school leaders accepted the work of leading school systems to become more equitable and address racist ideologies well embedded in their communities. However, they also struggled to influence cultural values of fellow co-workers and family members to address racist tendencies that value whiteness as the norm, particularly for those who come from an economically impoverished background. Addressing these external influences are clearly part of educational leadership development that should be considered for preparation programs serving rural states.

Reimagining Ingrained Small Town Solipsistic Orientations About Education

The White rural aspiring school leaders in this study discussed a variety of ways they have experienced professional development efforts to raise awareness about addressing inequitable outcomes in their own school districts. Participants commented on how their experiences and ways of thinking
Participants in this study specifically mentioned the need to carve out time, both personally and professionally, to learn about the lived experiences of historically marginalized groups in the US. These White rural aspiring school leaders described how their perspectives on the educational experiences of students changed and evolved over time through in-person trainings in their school district as well as through the coursework in their educational leadership preparation program. For example, participants described how they valued the opportunities to learn in small groups about how the racialized history of the US is perpetuated in systems today, including but not limited to the political, economic, and educational systems in the US. However, many of the aspiring school leaders described how the applied professional development in their school systems created a sense of applying a surface-level solution that was seen as a band aid to the larger social context of their education systems that reinforced and reified historical inequities. One participant shared a reflection on the broad approach to school districts attempts to ‘address’ historic inequities:

[There has to be] time set aside to do it not, um, you know, just kind of adding on to an already busy schedule and in small groups with adults that you trust and maybe bringing in, um, students or adults of color who have had experiences that could help, you know, so if we could talk – a lot of times the professional development tends to be large group – and it’s just not conducive to delving into specific issues or situations or questions that people have. So I think it has to be a small group format where teachers are absolutely with people that they trust so that they can talk out issues.

Given the resource and time intensive approach that is needed for White educators to learn about ways to improve their education system to be more equitable and inclusive, participants also highlighted how they have begun the individual process to learn from others about ways of thinking about education in the US. By frequently engaging in online content created by people from historically marginalized groups in the US, many of the White rural aspiring school leaders described how they drove their own learning about how to create more equitable schools for all students in their communities. Participants provided examples of learning from others – specifically Black, Latinx, and Indigenous educators – through social media to help influence their development and understanding of education in the US that is neither ahistorical nor apolitical. When asked about this development, one White rural aspiring educational leader shared how he has gained new perspectives and knowledge about the US education system outside of his own understanding:

One way that I've done this recently...[is by] following people of color – influencers on social media. So like finding Black authors, Indigenous authors, social media, content creators, and just following them on Instagram or Facebook or whatever medium you might use, and every time you log into Facebook...you're going to get an update about what's going on in that community. I think that's a really, really good way...[to learn about things] White people just would never share... Those things are effective when they make you engage and they make you uncomfortable and they make you think about things in ways that you wouldn't have.

Developing the ability to ‘unlearn’ their own understanding of education in the US, particularly from the perspective of a White educator, proved to be an important concept for many aspiring educational leaders. By engaging in a process to reimagine the possibilities of their school systems, particularly by listening to and studying the lived experiences of the historically marginalized in the US, participants reflected on how learning from others to influence their knowledge of social structures and systems of oppression made them more inclusive educators. One educator commented as a result of
their intentional reflection, “I see my classroom and I see my community – so I’m able to address those inequities with my students, and be better aware, have a better awareness of, of the community and being able to address those inequities.”

**Rising Awareness of Spatially-Induced Racial Illiteracy**

While many White rural aspiring educational leaders in this study discussed the ways in which they were able to address how class and race influence their school systems, as well as how they engaged in the work to unlearn many of their own solipsistic orientations about education, another consistent theme was the rising awareness of some participants’ difficulties living with spatially-induced racial illiteracy. Participants described how spatial isolation of growing up and living in predominantly White rural areas produced paradigms and experiences that severely limited their exposure to racially diverse social and cultural understandings. These participants spoke to their awareness of these limitations, however they openly struggled and were also unsure of how to learn more outside of their own limited White paradigms.

The participants that shared these perspectives described a rising awareness of how race and privilege influenced how their school systems perpetuated inequities, but they also openly struggled with how they could gain a better understanding of their privilege with almost no direct exposure to racially and culturally diverse students and parents. For example, some of the White rural aspiring leaders shared how their lack of racial literacy was influenced by their own educational experiences. Specifically, these participants noted how, up until recently with the racial reckoning of inequities exposed by the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, they had never had to address how their race influenced their understanding of education in their predominantly white rural communities, let alone the US. One participant shared:

> So race and privilege, to be honest up until the past, like, year and a half, two years, I don't think I've thought much about it. You know, I've grown up here in [this state]...and I don't think I had a lot of exposure to race. I've never really even heard of white privilege until like a year and a half ago when everything's kind of come to light...but I haven't really had many meaningful conversations about what it means for white privilege. So I don't really have a lot of experience with it.

Another participant shared a similar reflection on his experience growing up in a predominantly White, spatially isolated rural community that lacked visible racial and cultural diversity:

> It’s a tough area in our world and society growing up here [in this state], and I’ve traveled a bit over the years but I’ve never lived anywhere besides here...and so I haven’t experienced a lot of culture compared to a lot of people.... You know, growing up in a small school there is not a ton of diversity...but to say I have been living outside of diversity would be false. And a lot of it I didn’t realize until everybody began talking about this in the last few years.

These White rural aspiring school leaders who described their own rising awareness of racial illiteracy detail many of the lived experiences of White rural educators in the US, namely the ability to ignore the struggle of historically marginalized groups in US society. The difference with their experience, compared to say those who grew up in suburban or urban communities that had more racial diversity, or those who grew up in the rural US South where large segments of the rural population is Black, is that these US educators did not grow up with many – if any – opportunities to expand their understanding of racial diversity at the local population level. What results is a segment of rural educators who lack personal experiences to inform paradigms about historic inequities that are perpetuated through the US education system. For many, their spatially-induced racial illiteracy informs perspectives that do not prevent these aspiring school leaders from learning about how to make their education systems more
equitable, but it does require these educators to understand their limited understanding of racial inequities in the US and take charge of how they plan to inform their thinking of more equitable outcomes for their school system. As one participant shared, “I was probably in college before I realized that people continued to treat people of color differently...Like, it wasn’t just one race being treated differently. It was a lot of people being treated different. And I think that's only amplifying now.”

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to better understand how White rural aspiring school leaders in one educational leadership preparation program in a predominantly White northern rural US state were able to reflect on their own leadership development as it relates to the creation of an equity lens to make their own school systems more inclusive. As described in the findings, cultural psychology and the connection to education can be described in three ways, specifically; 1) experiences of how race and social class inform leadership decisions; 2) solipsistic orientations about knowledge of the social world as it relates to privilege; and 3) contextual understanding of external factors such as spatial and racial isolation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to better understand and analyze how White rural aspiring educational leaders are able to formulate new knowledge of more inclusive education systems and leadership in response to predominantly White rural social environments (Cohen, 2019; Heine, 2010; Kraus et al, 2012).

Through the application of the cultural psychology lens, this study offers important lessons as it relates to the development of rural school leaders and why this development is important in the context of the US in the 21st century (Parson et al., 2016; Superville, 2021). The first takeaway from this study highlights the important work of training rural educational leaders to engage in difficult conversations with predominantly White community members and stakeholders on the importance of addressing historical inequities due to the intersection of race and class. This includes unpacking their own racialized experiences, specifically addressing the moral and political ideologies they were exposed to while being raised in predominantly White rural communities (Leonardo, 2009). Data from this study shows how the commitment of rural educational leaders to create more equitable systems that address the historic marginalization of students and parents based on race is possible (Mealy, 2020), despite partisan politics and belief structures that reinforce inequitable education systems (Houston, 2021). As such, participants in this study display the importance of educational leadership development that produces moral and ethical educators who are able to identify oppressive educational practices, as well as apply equity belief structures that create more inclusive practices in the face of public and private pushback from the community as well as from family members.

Developing the ability to ‘unlearn’ their own ingrained solipsistic orientations about educational practices is a second important lesson to come out of this study. Specifically, valuing learning about racially sensitive topics in small groups with others, as well as listening to and reading about the lived experiences of people of color were seen as important steps in learning to apply new paradigms about education in the US (Cohen & Kitayama, 2019). In addition to the creation of intimate, trusting spaces that were relevant for their rural leadership development (Orphan & McClure, 2019), participants in this study also underscored the importance of their individual learning process to gain new knowledge about reimagining equitable education systems, particularly from the perspectives of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous authors and influencers. These spaces, both collective and individual, helped to move White rural aspiring school leaders away from solipsistic orientations of what education is, as well as deconstruct stereotypes about how rural education systems function (Gallo, 2020), and instead focused on developing new paradigms about what education in the rural US could be.

The third pertinent finding from this study is connected to the notion of the ‘racial contract’ developed by Mills (1997), which defines how space is controlled based on the concept of whiteness as a
passport, allowing White people to travel to all sections of the US without restriction and prohibits the
movement of Black people and people of color more broadly outside of major cities as well as the rural
South. However, this observation suggests White rural aspiring educational leaders are also negatively
impacted by the notion of ‘whiteness as the norm’ (Lynch, 2018), as spatially-induced racial illiteracy
negatively impacts the development of educational leaders. While it does not prevent White rural
aspiring educational leaders from developing an equity lens, it does require that they acknowledge they
have a limited understanding of racial inequities and intentionally take charge of their own development
to become a more equitable and just leader. For those that come from predominantly White rural
communities (Mann et al., 2021), this necessitates intentional development to better understand the
struggles of historically marginalized groups in US society (Menakem, 2017).

Given the implications this study has for leadership development programs, specifically those in
rural areas of the US, there are several recommendations to consider. If rural serving institutions that
support educational leadership programs are to contribute to helping make the US more equitable and
just, there must be intentional development of how to support rural school systems to become more
inclusive, particularly as rural US schools continue to experience, and will continue to experience, rapid
racial and ethnic diversification (Biddle & Mette, 2017). Related, there are profound policy and practice
implications, particularly as rural educational leaders already face high levels of turnover (Rowland, 2017)
– something that could be addressed through a rural racial literacy professional development network to
provide ongoing support for rural principals to address inequities at the community level. Additionally, it
is critical for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to help shift the paradigm from viewing rural
places in the US as ‘fly over’ country (Tickamyer et al. 2017) and take part in deconstructing the racial
contract by helping make rural places outside of the rural South truly open to all (Mills, 1997). Perhaps
most important, as rural educational leadership preparation programs continue to evolve into the 21st
century in the US, there must be increased critical analysis on how to prepare school leaders who are
intellectually committed to affirm the culture of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (Irby, 2021), while
also acknowledge White people suffer from the racial contract as well due to spatial isolation that leads
to a lack of diverse racial and cultural experiences.
References


