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# Revisiting the Rural Superintendency: Rethinking Guiding Theories for Contemporary Practice

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*This conceptual article challenges researchers and practitioners to reconsider the utility of current constructs used to understand the rural school superintendency. We evaluate the rural leadership literature through two waves of scholarship: insider/outsider conceptions and place-conscious/critical place-conscious constructs. We assert critical place-conscious leadership as potentially responsive to contemporary rural realities, but we provide a number of revisions for theoretical development to increase applicability to the realities of the rural superintendency in practice in the early part of the twenty-first century.*

The contemporary rural superintendency is a practice in need of a theory. Rural district leadership work has been undertheorized through a reliance on dichotomous insider/outsider constructions of the rural superintendent and, more recently, prescriptive theories of critical place consciousness that lack utility in practice. These theoretical leanings reflect a continuous theme of the rural community as a singular entity, or a homogenous space, marginalized or otherwise negatively influenced by external forces.

This notion of the homogenous rural community has resulted in superficial attention in theories of leadership to justice and equity issues within rural communities. As McLaren and Giroux (1990) argue, “even within geographical contexts considered predominantly homogenous and white, a complex cultural and class politics is often at work” (p. 161). Increasing demographic diversification has created new or more pronounced racial inequities within rural communities, alongside intra-community gender and class disparities. Rural communities, like other communities, experience rapid economic and social transformation, including rapid economic growth or decline, changing industries, and new economic and social insecurities.

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Recent sociological research has highlighted myriad social and economic challenges that require rural superintendents to critique internal spaces of oppression and exclusion. This body of scholarship illustrates the need for a revised conception of the rural superintendency as a position responsive to external influences, while simultaneously attuned to within-community spaces of marginalization and inequity. Inattention to these intra-community spaces of marginalization threatens the utility of a critical place-conscious framework for leadership (Nespor, 2008).

In this conceptual article, we identify constructs for understanding the work of rural educational leaders in two iterations, or waves, of literature since the 1960s: (1) insider/outsider and (2) place-conscious/critical place-conscious. We interrogate a focused set of publications that have driven or researched in practice these constructs. We find that the second wave—place-conscious/critical place-conscious—is largely prescriptive, and recent research attempting to use critical place-conscious leadership, coupled with literature on rural community change and broader superintendent scholarship, has exposed weaknesses in the model. Thus, we argue for a revised model of critical place-conscious leadership that better addresses the heterogeneity within rural communities, the rapidly changing context of rural communities, and the realities of contemporary practicalities of the professionalized rural superintendent.

## Methods

This conceptual article was borne from conversations between us as we considered our own research and practice

as faculty engaged with rural educational leaders. Through dialogue, we became intrigued by theories of action that inform the work of rural superintendents. These discussions initially led us to a Google Scholar search of the rural superintendency. Our first search was not limited by date, as we wanted to trace rural superintendency constructs historically. We included only peer-reviewed articles and books, but we did not restrict our search to rural education journals as we wanted to capture articles that may have been published in other education and leadership journals, as well as the ERIC database. We also specifically searched archived volumes of the two major U.S. rural education journals: the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* and the *Rural Educator*. We discarded publications that focused on other aspects of leadership, such as school board governance and school politics studies not focused on rural leadership, as described in publication abstracts. This focus illuminated a few relevant publications in the 1960s and 1970s followed by a concentration in the late 1980s through the 1990s, and then again from the mid-2000s to the present. Thematic analysis of publication abstracts generated emergent codes such as local, turnover, successful, and effective.

From these themes we created a main category of successful/effective<sup>1</sup> practice and incorporated other initial themes into a hierarchy under this major heading. A second round of thematic analysis led us to three major categories of rural superintendency: insider/outsider, place-conscious, and critical place-conscious. Some lesser attributive codes included native, urban, turnover, longevity, reform, status quo, community, and change.

We then analyzed full publications that fell into these three categories with a specific goal of understanding (1) the collective definitions of these constructs and (2) their application to studies of effective, or successful, leadership practice. In addition to thematic coding, we categorized the publications chronologically to develop a timeline of theorizing about the rural superintendency. Each analysis step was conducted individually. Through dialogue, we reached consensus regarding codes, interpretations, and themes.

### **First Wave: The Rural Superintendent as Insider/Outsider<sup>2</sup>**

The first wave of rural superintendent construction positioned him—as the office was most often filled by

<sup>1</sup>The terms successful and effective do not necessarily reflect the authors' conceptions of success; rather, they reflect the focus of the publication reviewed.

<sup>2</sup>We group the different classifications of rural superintendents in waves. The wave metaphor is appropriate to this work as it is suggestive of the overlap between classifications and their ability to occur concurrently, despite time-linear shifts in scholarship. This model is akin to constructions of feminism (see Evans & Chamberlain, 2015).

a man—as either community insider or outsider. Most often insider status was attributed to elusive geographic community bounds, while some research also included notions of cultural insider values and knowledge. Since 1922, with the publication of Cubberley's rural-school problem, rural education scholars have investigated the ways rural schools and communities reciprocally shape one another, many with a focus on the rural superintendent. In Cubberley's seminal work, the local, or insider, leader was ill-equipped to solve the complex, contemporary problems of schooling. Thus, an outsider with more cosmopolitan funds of knowledge was needed to save rural schools and their communities.

Suburbanizing shifts in the 1960s led to a renewed interest in leadership amid changing communities. Carlson's (1962) foundational study of insider/outsider superintendents, termed place-bound and career-bound, differentiated between binary constructs of leadership. Place-bound, or insider, superintendents rose from within the rank and file of the local district and were considered more likely to adopt or value community norms than their career-bound, or outsider, counterparts. School boards might hire an insider to maintain the status quo or in times of crisis to encourage a sense of stability through externally-imposed changes, while an outsider might be hired to lead district reform efforts (Carlson, 1962). Insider/outsider studies of rural superintendents continued over the next 50 years, beginning in earnest in the late 1980s, and fell into one of several simultaneously occurring categories: (1) longevity and turnover, (2) outsider disruption, and (3) insider as reformer.

### **Longevity and Turnover**

Through the 1980s and well into the 2000s, scholars sought to understand causes of rural superintendent turnover and stability. Insider/outsider dichotomies of rural leadership allowed researchers to evaluate superintendents' success in terms of their status relative to the geographic and cultural bounds of the rural community. Superintendent longevity was often used as a proxy for leadership success and was attributed to insider status (Chance & Capps, 1992; De Young, 1995; Grady & Bryant, 1988).

Grady and Bryant (1988) found a major trend in superintendent turnover in rural districts in Nebraska was the replacement of an outside leader by a community insider. They suggested that school boards' propensity to maintain community norms and stability was the cause of outsider turnover. Several studies followed this logic and noted the value of insider knowledge possessed by successful insider superintendents (Chance & Capps, 1992; Mayo, 1999).

Chance and Capps (1992) wrote that the superintendency had changed "dramatically," marked in part by a shift toward the political demands of practice. The authors painted a picture of a leader who "constantly battles district

employees and strives to stamp out fires of discontent” (p. 3). In Chance and Capp’s research, the long-tenured rural leader was most often place-bound, rising through the ranks of his or her district. The successful superintendent in this study, among other things, “sees himself as a very fortunate man who works for a good school board, works with good, dedicated people, and lives in a fine community” (p. 15). In short, the insider was deemed better able to maintain his or her position because of place-bound status. Mayo (1999) focused these depictions of conflict on outsider superintendents who arguably experienced it in greater degrees than their insider counterparts. Further, Mayo posited that micro-contexts varied in community acceptance of outsiders, with “some communities ... more critical of ‘outsiders’” than others (p. 161). According to Mayo, the outsider superintendent disrupted established loyalties and routines, while the insider knew “the community and its traditions and expectations” (p. 166). Moreover, Mayo asserted that research on outsider status was important to the practice of superintendents because of the role’s continued ambiguity. Such research, Mayo argued, had the potential, among other outcomes, to increase instructional effectiveness and reduce conflict and superintendent turnover.

Chance (2002) and Nestor-Baker (2002) similarly argued that insiders were more successful superintendents (again marked by longevity in position) but focused the definition of insider to include shared values with that of the community. These insiders knew “the community and what the community’s values and expectations are for the school district” (p. 89). Common characteristics of long-tenured insider superintendents included understanding “the nature of local politics” and attempts “to ensure that they were seen as part of the political, religious, and educational milieu of the rural community” (p. 89). Referencing an earlier study by Copeland and Chance (1996) on antecedents to success, Chance (2002) noted that “all superintendents were born and reared within 100 miles of the school district they led. Thus, they understood regional values and beliefs” (p. 87). That same year Nestor-Baker (2002) noted the “place-bound” nature of the insider superintendent in a comparative study of insider and outsider leaders, the insider characterized by “a personal and professional history with the district” (p. 232). As “an ongoing part of the social fabric of the community and district,” the insider superintendent understood “the norms of that fabric” (p. 232). Further, she found insider superintendents prioritized trusting relationships with the community and were more highly focused on school district members than their outsider counterparts.

### **Outsider Disruption**

Concurrent with research on superintendent longevity, researchers (Howley, Carnes, et al., 2005; Theobald, 1988) studied the effects of outside change on rural districts, with

an eye to insider/outsider leadership strategies. This line of inquiry showed the challenges outsiders posed to rural school systems and their leaders.

In 1988, Theobald published a manuscript on the changing community of Banon, a once-rural community in a state of transition. In Banon, Theobald argued, an influx of urban newcomers disrupted the school system, bringing “apathy” and “urban” problems, such as “drugs, sex, alcohol, tobacco, single-parents, divorce” (p. 11). During this period of social change, the district hired a community outsider to serve as its new superintendent. Theobald depicted him in the this way: “He is not a native of the region, he has no apparent philosophic bent for fiscal conservatism, and he has no desire to deal with discipline,” (p. 13). Such attributes, according to Theobald, would make him “fit ‘like a good shoe’ in a large, affluent suburb, not fit at all in a rural area, and fall somewhere in between in a penturb like Banon” (p. 13). Further, Theobald argued, this outsider focused on increasing academic achievement while ignoring community traditions, and thus did not represent the interests of the once “homogenous” community. Theobald showed clear disdain for the outsider in the Banon case, preferring the will of insiders to adhere to community norms and values in place prior to the influx of suburbanites to the district.

Howley, Carnes, et al. (2005) also noted the multiple effects of newcomers to a once-unified rural school district and community. They asserted that while the district “once served a rural community and provided educational services compatible with that community’s expectations, it now faces increasing pressure to service multiple constituencies with competing views of what good schooling entails” (p. 11). While this work does not explicitly address the insider status of the superintendent, the authors argue the need for the district to “walk a fine line” (p. 11) in addressing insider and outsider concerns and interests. The “dysfunction” (p. 11) created by an influx of outsiders initiated a district identity crisis, goal ambiguity, and problematic resource allocation, and the reader is left questioning whether the presumably insider superintendent was able to successfully navigate such outsider-imposed changes.

### **Insider as Reformer**

In contrast to Theobald (1988) and Howley, Carnes, et al. (2005), some insider/outsider researchers intentionally positioned insider superintendents as effective change agents. This vein of insider/outsider scholarship focused on the insider’s ability to lead reform because of existing knowledge of community values and norms, and the trust engendered by the superintendent’s insider status (DeYoung, 1995; Jacobson, 1988).

Jacobson (1988) conducted a comparative study of two rural school districts in which the superintendents were considered insiders. The superintendent in the district

viewed as more effective (e.g., higher achievement, wider variety of programming) was considered a change agent who “actively worked to raise community expectations,” believing it was his responsibility to educate the community and the school board about “the educational services they should want” (p. 38). In contrast, in the less effective district (e.g., lower student achievement, fewer programs) the superintendent viewed himself as “a steward [of the community] who was responsible for providing only the type of educational services the community wanted” (p. 38). Jacobson pointed out, “Since the community did not want much from its schools, that is exactly what it got” (p. 38).

In an in-depth study of a successful rural superintendent, DeYoung (1995) described his research participant, pseudonymed KS, as “a ‘local boy’ whose family suffered the dangers of an extractive economy, yet a person who went away to the university, received an Ed.D., and came back to champion many of the goals and skills he found useful outside of Central Appalachia” (p. 187). Like Chance and Capps (1992), De Young attributed KS’s success to his insider status in a county school system characterized by familial ties and “suspicion of outsiders” (p. 190). Having generational and extended family ties to the area and being a graduate of the local district gave KS great credibility in the community as “a local boy who made good in the same environment of his neighbors” (p. 193). This insider trust enabled KS to implement what DeYoung deemed “innovative” reforms to the district, including the consolidation of several schools (p. 196).

Despite differences in the purpose of insider/outsider superintendent studies, one point of consistency across the literature is rural homogenous community values and interests regarding schooling and the community. Insider superintendents across studies either worked to maintain and uphold these common values and norms or guide the community toward reform. Nowhere in the literature do we find factions, differences of opinion, or diverse populations. Neither do we hear of disparate values or interests in the rural community district, unless they are forced upon the rural place by (urban or cosmopolitan) outsiders. Because this research failed to interrogate hegemony of values, marginalization of ideas, or socially-constructed groups, the only threats to rural community districts, and thus challenges for their leaders, came in the form of urbanization or suburbanization and its accompanying outsider social ills and demands for schooling, which differed from existing community “norms.” While shifts began to emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century regarding consciousness of place for the insider/outsider, assumed community homogeneity created a paucity of knowledge about community fragmentation, factionalization, or marginalization, leaving little room for academic discourse around critique of place or rural leadership for social justice.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Maxwell, Locke, and Scheurich (2014) provide a notable exception.

### A Turn Toward the Second Wave

By the early 2000s, rural education researchers began to nuance and question the insider/outsider argument. Morford (2002), for example, found insider/outsider status had varying advantages and disadvantages depending on district context and superintendent gender. McFadden and Smith (2004) noted a more insidious notion of insider/outsider bounds, with “majority race males” achieving insider status, contrary to women or individuals identifying with other races (p. 189).

In McFadden and Smith’s (2004) work, we see a turn toward consciousness of place as a rural leadership imperative. They asserted that rural leaders (insiders and outsiders) should engage with their specific contexts, including full cognizance of “cultural norms and taboos, dominant and dominated (silenced) ideologies, and spoken and unspoken assumptions about how things are done here” (p. 192). They referred to this practice as “mind of place” (p. 192). Engaging in such practices, McFadden and Smith argued, creates a path to acceptance as an insider. This trend toward insider/outsider as conscious of place continued into contemporary publications, marking a notable shift in the focus of insider/outsider research. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) and Maxwell, Locke, and Scheurich (2014) reported similar findings in their research.

Forner et al. (2012) studied seven rural leaders who built support for academic reform. Only two could be considered insiders initially, but the others “without exception” became viewed as insiders during their tenure (M. Forner, personal communication, September 30, 2015). These leaders believed current students could “help lead the future revitalization of their communities” (p. 12). Maxwell et al. (2014) associated insider identity with rural leaders’ ability to confront and address systemic inequities. In contrast to earlier studies (DeYoung, 1995; Jacobsen, 1988), the superintendents in this study “did not buy into a deficit thinking model” about rural people. While all were initially outsiders, during their tenure they came to “personally identify” with a “community identity” they viewed as connected to place, specifically the land, and attributed their ability to sustain their equity-oriented efforts to the “connections they grew to have, grew to appreciate, and hesitated to forgo with the communities they served” (p. 502).

Such studies turned attention away from longevity and toward effective reforms and community mindedness as a marker of success. These later works aligned with earlier broader superintendent literature shifts toward transformational leadership (see, for example, Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1992) and later trends toward contextually responsive leadership (Bredeson, Klar, & Johnsson, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). This scholarship is suggestive of a turn toward consciousness of place, regardless of initial insider/outsider status.

## Second Wave: The Revisionist Model of Place-Conscious and Critical Place-Conscious Leadership

The second wave marked a major shift in constructions of the rural superintendent. While some scholars remained focused on insider/outsider constructs of the rural superintendent, others turned their attention to notions of the place-conscious or critical place-conscious leader. This revisionist model sought to understand rural superintendents not in terms of their own relationship to a respective place (i.e., insider or outsider), but in terms of their ability to lead with a cognizance of the needs, values, and interests of their current district community as place. This research focus was reflective of broader superintendent constructs that positioned the effective educational leader as contextually responsive (Bredeson et al., 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2008). A contextually responsive superintendent interacted with multiple contexts, including district and community size, organizational culture, community type and geographic location, financial situation, and political climate, shaping and responding to them while engaging in the core work of educational leadership (Bredeson et al., 2011).

Focused on rural education leadership, although not necessarily on the superintendency, scholars appeared to take this conception of contextually responsive leadership a step further, through a construct of place-conscious leadership (Gruenewald, 2003a; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). The second wave includes place-consciousness as well as its transition to critical place-consciousness as a construct for understanding leadership. Critical place-conscious theorizing has taken two major forms: (1) leadership for ecojustice (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003b), and (2) leadership that rejects outside policy mandates as agents of rural marginalization (Budge, 2006, 2010; Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005). While a plethora of research exists on place-conscious and critical place-conscious teaching practices, literature focused on leadership has been almost exclusively prescriptive in nature.

### Place-Consciousness

Place-conscious education, broadly, was a response to a renewed era of standardization under No Child Left Behind—a trend that arguably removed place from learning, or made schooling “placeless” (Corbett, 2010; Gruenewald, 2003a). Place-consciousness, according to Gruenewald (2003a), altered the discourse of education by “insisting on a connection between schooling and places” (p. 642). For schools to be truly place-conscious institutions, Gruenewald (2003a) argued, they must adhere to new standards of achievement, divorced from neoliberal

accountability policies that weaken ties between schools and communities.<sup>4</sup>

To place-conscious theorists and researchers, place was most often synonymous with the school or district’s local community—the geographical community served by the local school system (Gruenewald, 2003a) inclusive of demography, surrounding natural environs, and sociocultural dynamics (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Howley, Pendarvis, et al., 2005; Johnson, Shope, & Roush, 2009). Often community and place were used interchangeably in this literature (Bauch, 2001; Budge 2006, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Howley, Pendarvis, et al., 2005). Place-conscious theorizing was comprised of two veins of thought: (1) connection to place and shaping of communal identity, and (2) the related and consequential repurposing of schooling.

**Connection to place.** Howley, Pendarvis, et al. (2005) described place-consciousness as “a profound understanding” of the local community (p. 23). Budge (2006) offered six habits of place, or “practiced ways of living: (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” (p. 3). Further, numerous scholars explained place-consciousness as a form of self-knowledge important in shaping communal identity (Bauch, 2001; Budge, 2006, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Howley, Pendarvis, et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2009). Bauch (2001) and Harmon and Schafft (2009) explained such consciousness as connectedness or attachment to place, which Bauch (2001) described as “rootedness in one’s community” embodied in a “desire to cherish and cultivate” such a place (p. 212).

**Repurposing schooling.** Some place-conscious scholars considered place-consciousness the medium for reshaping the practice of educational leadership and rethinking the purpose of schooling (Budge, 2006, 2010; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Johnson et al., 2009). Johnson et al. (2009), for example, suggested place-consciousness necessitated “a reappropriation and repurposing of place as part of the means for operationalizing the understanding of schooling and community” that was responsive to its rural context (p. 4). Similarly, commitment to place could be expressed through school and community “collaborative actions that enhance the conditions necessary for all students to be successful—where community social capital serves the school and the school fosters a sense of place among students” (Harmon & Schafft, 2009, p. 7). However, scant scholarly attention was paid to the manifestation of place-consciousness in leadership practice. Instead, scholars turned their attention to the possibilities for critical place-consciousness in leadership.

<sup>4</sup>For discussions that call this dichotomy into question see Budge (2010) and Jennings, Swidler, and Koliba (2005).

### Critical Place-Consciousness

In critically place-conscious educational practices, the focus remained on the local place, but it took two divergent forms, becoming: (1) even more specific to local ecological systems, with some notice given to social inequities, particularly as they contributed to ecological degradation (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003b; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008) and (2) a focused response to outside policy mandates (Budge, 2006, 2010; Howley, Pendarvis, et al., 2005; see also Johnson et al., 2009, for a related focus).

**Critical place-consciousness, leadership, and ecojustice.** Gruenewald's (2003b) theorizing of critical place-consciousness in rural education made connections to critical education theorists focused largely on urban locales, including McLaren and Giroux (1990): "If place-based education emphasizes ecological and rural contexts, critical pedagogy—in a near mirror image—emphasizes social and urban contexts and often neglects the ecological and rural scene entirely" (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 3). Gruenewald (2003b) acknowledged that place-conscious education tended to focus on ecological, rather than cultural concerns, an area of emphasis often left to urban schooling systems. This trend is an important carryover from the insider/outsider conception of rural leadership, as it implies continued educational and leadership practice premised on a homogenous rural community.

While social and political oppression are important to this model, the emphasis is largely placed on the ways in which these injustices affect ecological and environmental systems (Gruenewald, 2003b). According to Gruenewald (2003b), "acknowledging that experience has a geographical context opens the way to admitting critical social and ecological concerns into one's understanding of place, and the role of places in education" (p. 9). Critical place-conscious pedagogy (defined broadly) asks educators to "expand school experience to foster connection, exploration and action in socioecological places" (p. 9). To accomplish these ends, Gruenewald argues the need for "rehabitation" and "decolonization" of rural places:

A critical pedagogy of place aims to (a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (rehabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization). (p. 9)

Expanding on these early definitions, Furman and Gruenewald (2004) argued that ecological concerns could not be separated from social oppression as marginalized populations are most likely to experience local environmental problems. Critical place-consciousness,

then, focused on "social and ecological justice" (pp. 48-49). While the authors recognized the importance of social justice frameworks in the broader leadership literature, they suggested the current educational discourse of social justice was limiting through its ignorance of "the deeper ecojustice issues in which it is embedded" (p. 49). Furman and Gruenewald (2004) contended that educational leaders should examine the purposes (deemed synonymous with pedagogies by the authors) of schooling. These pedagogies "explicitly aim to examine and respond to the problematic environments that human beings have created for themselves and others—human and nonhuman" (p. 58). For leadership to be critically place-conscious, according to Furman and Gruenewald, it

must problematize the taken-for-granted assumptions, and unjust outcomes, of conventional educational and cultural practices. It must be place-based because it must balance and inform its critique of culture and schooling with the first-hand, local experience of teachers, students, and citizens. (pp. 58-59)

While critical place-conscious publications included references to the importance of cultural and social justice alongside and as a component of ecojustice, their examples for practice focused largely on understanding ecosystems and cultural histories.<sup>5</sup> Furman and Gruenewald (2004) asserted that offering recommendations for critical place-conscious leadership in practice was unfeasible because "working for socioecological justice is a systemic, communal challenge involving not only policy and practice but also moral commitments and the courage to work for transformation" (p. 67). While this work theorized critical place-conscious leadership, it provided no possibilities for critical place-conscious leadership in practice. However, the publication did offer several entry points for such leadership:

(a) shaping the cultural politics of the school, (b) negotiating the practical issues as well as the ideological dissonance between a critical pedagogy of place and externally mandated reform initiatives, (c) working with the community to support community-based learning aimed at rehabitation, (d) securing resources to support the school-wide learning methodologies of a critical pedagogy of place, and (e) attending to professional development for educators and community members. (p. 67)

<sup>5</sup>One exception with possibility for attention to intra-community social injustices is Furman and Gruenewald's (2004) example of action research. Although this example does not explicitly state such awareness and action related to social inequities, this approach to schooling has the potential to respond to social justice challenges.

Missing from Furman and Gruenewald's (2004) work and previous place-conscious and critical place-conscious scholarship was a commitment to understanding and critiquing social inequities within district communities. Instead, the focus was on knowing and critiquing systems that marginalized the rural community as a whole, setting up yet another insider/outsider dichotomy in which outside forces, including policies, created inequitable systems that negatively impacted local rural places and people in the same ways.

**Critical place-consciousness, leadership, and standards.** Budge (2006, 2010) focused her theorizing and research not on critical place-consciousness and ecojustice, but as a response to externally imposed mandates, such as educational standards. Budge (2010) provided a more nuanced interpretation of critical place-conscious leadership, in which the critical place-conscious leader might serve as mediator between the local community and outside policy mandates. Budge offered the possibility that

leaders oriented toward critical-place consciousness might be better prepared to engage in the balancing act between local interests and extralocal policy. Such leadership might nurture individual development and appropriately nest this aim of schooling within the broader aim of serving the commons. (p. 17)

Arguing for the necessity of more inclusive leadership work in rural schools, Budge (2010) offered critical place-conscious leadership as a practice that can alter the purpose of schooling "in a manner that serves both the individual and the collective" (p. 18).

Similarly, Johnson, Shope, and Roush (2009) offered recommendations for leadership practice that considered the community as a core element of schooling. Their approach recognized and encouraged the school to use its role as community center as an important community institution while valuing the "educative potential" of other community places outside the school (p. 5). Because of the rural school's centrality to the community, arguably the "heart" of the community (Schafft & Harmon, 2010), Johnson et al. asserted the rural school can serve, through effective leadership, as an advocate for marginalized communities. Such leaders would recognize "key cultural and economic dynamics at work in their communities, and develop the ability and willingness to see the community through multiple lenses" (p. 5). This process would require a difficult shift in the practical focus of rural leaders, according to Howley, Howley, Rhodes, and Yahn (2015), "from one that attends primarily to the State to one that attends primarily to the community" (p. 626).

While these critical place-conscious models recognize social injustices, such injustices are primarily associated

with outside forces that marginalize, peripheralize, and oppress rural peoples and communities. This view echoes earlier insider/outsider constructs, such as that of Theobald's (1988) Banon community. Within these models, the rural community is largely viewed as a singular marginalized entity, and scant attention is paid to within-community differences, diversity, and inequity. Even when the community is described as one marked by intra-community inequities in the rural education research, these are often explained as new phenomena requiring leadership attention (Howley et al. 2015; Johnson, 2014). Howley et al. (2015) note that rural superintendents are ill-prepared to engage in leadership toward greater inclusivity in the wake of demographic shifts in the communities they serve because of their own lack of knowledge, difficulty in creating successful allies, and slow pace of cultural change. However, their research posits that this leadership is required precisely when demographic shifts occur, suggesting critical place-consciousness is required because of externally imposed changes as opposed to already present community fractures and inequities.

Critical place-conscious scholarship, then, offered a number of prescriptions for rural leadership that were arguably intended to be responsive to rural interests; however, the theory was, until recently, not researched in practice. Studies by McHenry-Sorber and Provinzano (2017) and Rey (2014) found while rural superintendents' practice could be considered responsive to local circumstances and conditions, it did not reflect a critical perspective. Such problematic findings about critical place-conscious leadership in practice found support in Nespor's (2008) critique of the construct of place-consciousness. These criticisms are explored in the next section and provide, we assert, a foundation for a third wave of rural leadership conceptualizations.

### **The Need for a Third Wave**

Critical place-conscious leadership theory, as described in the Second Wave, was largely prescriptive in nature. Since the construct was put forward, there have been three developments that lead us to argue for a revision of critical place-conscious leadership for the contemporary rural superintendent: (1) Nespor's (2008) critique, (2) related sociological literature on rural communities, and (3) research that has attempted to use critical place-conscious leadership in practice specific to the superintendency.

#### **Nespor's Critique**

Critical place-conscious theorists recognized that place is not a neutral construct, and that rural places—their people and land—have been historically marginalized. It is these marginalized places with which the critical place-



conscious leader is purported to be engaged. Problematic to this movement is a failure to bring to the forefront place-based marginalization differences, or that variations in this marginalization occur as rural identities intersect with gender, class, race, religion, and other spaces of oppression. The most relevant elements of Nespor's (2008) critique to this theoretical construct include the dynamic nature of place and within-community social systems of advantage and disadvantage. Nespor contends that rural communities, like all places, are not fixed entities to which things happen. "Instead of beginning as discrete, self-contained worlds (only later to be threatened by outside, placeless forces), actual settings ... are continually interacting with what is 'outside' their recognized boundaries" (p. 480). Nespor continues, "places change even when we 'stay put' and such continuities as they have are shaped by class, gender, and racial dynamics organized through extra-local relations of power" (p. 480). Nespor argues that rural places, like all types of places, are marked by stratification and heterogeneity. Relatedly, he critiques the lack of attention given to racism, gender discrimination, sexism, and other social systems of privilege and oppression that exist within the place-conscious discourse. Nespor cautions that such inattention "marginalizes the program in relation to key political and educational debates of the day and, in the end, may undermine efforts to make place central to educational theory and practice" (p. 489).

### **Related Sociological Literature on Rural Communities**

Compounding Nespor's (2008) critique is recent literature that highlights rapid changes to rural communities and intra-community fragmentation (Groenke & Nespor, 2010; Howley et al., 2014; McHenry-Sorber, 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014). These collective works have begun to explore intracommunity divisions and fractures, as well as to challenge the idea that rural communities are a singular entity, requiring educational leaders to commit to the local at the expense of the global. This call seems, at times, to sacrifice attention to social inequities inherent within rural communities.

Rapid 21<sup>st</sup>-century changes have created new or renewed challenges for rural education leaders (Broadway, 2007; Copeland, 2013; Corbett, 2007, 2010; Gibbs, 2000; Howley et al., 2014). Persistent or declining mineral extractive communities are characterized by class divisions, outmigration, debates over the purpose of schooling and worth of teachers (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; McHenry-Sorber, 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014) as well as new vulnerabilities unevenly distributed across communities, including housing instability, food insecurity, lack of educational resources, and racism (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017). Other rural communities,

influenced by rapidly changing populations associated with meatpacking industries, are challenged with an "influx of immigrants and refugees, housing shortages, rising demands for social services, increases in various social disorders, the creation of lots of relatively low-paying or part-time jobs, and relative falls in income levels" (Broadway, 2007, pp. 577-578). Urbanization of rural communities can challenge schools and other community institutions and "social relationships" within these spheres, creating increased "social resources" or "social tensions and conflicts" as can population decline within communities (Brown & Schafft, 2011, p. 220). While some rural communities contend with population decline, others have experienced revitalization as tourist destinations. Even as these communities are likely to see business growth, they can also experience increases in low-wage and part-time job growth and new social tensions for long-term community members (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Even among similar economic community types, however, we see difference; that is, not all communities, even those with similar types of economic or social changes, experience them the same way. For example, Gibbs (2000) noted greater racial inequities in some Southern rural school systems than other areas. Sherman (2009) highlighted divisions among economically marginalized populations in economically depressed communities in the Northwest, between those who worked and those who relied on public assistance. In Broadway's (2007) study of two meatpacking communities, he found significant differences in the immigrant populations that settled in formerly racially homogenous communities as well as different responses to those new populations. As Broadway concluded, "geography still matters" (p. 579).

Lichter (2012) notes the rapid growth of racial diversity across rural communities. In such spaces, he argues, "rural minority populations are spatially segregated and invisible in ways not usually found in America's metropolitan areas" (p. 2). Rapid diversification and increased immigration create new challenges for rural school systems, which may be ineffective in promoting inclusivity and critiquing new inequities "if they lack the resources, experienced teachers, or a cultural sensitivity to new immigrant populations of children that are exposed to a voting older population that often views them as a problem rather than a resource for the future" (p. 19).

Rural communities are characterized by within-community diversity; at the same time community homogeneity, unity, and shared community spirit are assumed in much of the place-conscious/critical place-conscious theorizing (Bauch, 2001; Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005; Theobald, 1997). Homogenizing messages about rural people are perpetuated by the media and continue to be socially acceptable (see Theobald & Wood, 2010). There are real dangers to the homogenous

view of rural places in rural education research. This stance not only further marginalizes people who are already excluded by broader policies,<sup>6</sup> a continued commitment to place as a unifying entity runs the risk of supporting status quo structures and practices that privilege some community members at the expense of others in a reinforcing cycle of dominance and marginalization. Furthermore, a lens of homogeneity leaves us with an understanding of only dominant values and ideologies present in the community and a lack of cognizance about socially excluded groups or silenced critical voices and the ways in which they are marginalized, painting a partial portrait of rural places.

This line of inquiry rests on the assumption that rural places are not homogenous spaces of singular value; rather, they are contested, mutually inclusive and exclusive, fluid social spaces, characterized by negotiation of values and interests between local and extra-local forces as well as within local communities (Groenke & Nesper, 2010; McHenry-Sorber, 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014). McHenry-Sorber and Schafft (2014) provide us with an in-depth investigation of the politicization of community identity in the midst of a rural teacher strike in an economically distressed community. They found competing community values and interests regarding the purpose of schooling and worth of teachers contributed to political stalemates and the dissolution of a space for compromise and negotiation. Some of these interests fell along class lines, with working-class members allied against white-collar teachers who worked and lived in the same community. Their findings suggest the importance of responsiveness to class inequities inherent in economically depressed rural communities for rural educators and leaders. This research illustrates “complexities of the rural community as a space of both shared identity and social exclusion, a contested site in which groups vie for power through the construction of competing narratives of community with the goal of securing political dominance through a hegemonic narrative” (p. 12). In such a complex community, it is unlikely that a focus on ecojustice or critique in response to external policy mandates would result in critical leadership responsive to within-community inequities and fragmentation.

### **Research Attempting to Use Critical Place-Conscious Leadership in Practice**

Critical place-conscious theories, highlighted in the Second Wave, were prescriptive, and the construct has not proven a useful tool, as currently defined, in interrogating the actual practices of rural superintendents. McHenry-Sorber and Provinzano’s (2017) case study of a rural fracking community investigated the industry’s influence in exacerbating existing and creating new social inequities in the forms of housing displacement, food

insecurity, and unequal opportunities for schooling within a rural community district. Their research highlights the inequitable responses by educational leaders, including the superintendent, to these disparate student needs, largely along identified community insider/outsider (inclusion/exclusion) bounds and racial lines. While leaders worked collaboratively with community groups to accommodate the needs of community natives facing new insecurities, they acted within a frame of compliance to address the needs of community newcomers, who disproportionately required English language and special education services.

In McHenry-Sorber and Provinzano’s (2017) study, rural leaders were unable to justify a critical response to newcomer needs, as they blamed these outsiders for new community ills. Secondly, this work found critical place-conscious leadership impractical given dominant community power structures that favored certain segments of the population. Leaders were part of and beholden to these power structures and were thus unable to critique inequities among all segments of the community. Third, leaders’ focus solely on local responsiveness as opposed to broader extra-local power structures left them unable to form effective networks to challenge energy policies that negatively affected the school system or community. Issues experienced at the local level are often connected to broader challenges and cannot be adequately addressed in isolation. While the researchers argued the superintendent’s and other leaders’ efforts were contextually responsive, they were unable to label their actions as critically place-conscious given the Second Wave parameters of the construct.

Rey’s (2014) case study of two rural, economically depressed communities in central New York provides an examination of critical place-conscious leadership in the superintendency. The inquiry begins by comparing and contrasting superintendents’ and parents’ definitions of a quality education. Both superintendents identified as insiders, which Rey points out appeared to solidify their belief in the necessity of a quality education as the means to escape poverty. Fostering an “aspirational culture” was deemed important so students would take advantage of economic opportunity largely outside their rural communities (p. 509). Rey notes that these superintendents, much like DeYoung’s (1995) KS, served as a “cultural bridge” between their notion of a quality education and those of their constituencies (p. 531). Nonetheless, Rey states, “Much to both superintendents’ disappointment, few children crossed the bridge from the social and economic struggles of their rural communities into mainstream cultural values around postsecondary education” (p. 531).

Acknowledging a tension between their definition of a quality education and parents’ definitions, both superintendents chose to publicly emphasize initiatives within the district that clearly fell into the realm of common ground, which was characterized as educating the “whole child” (p. 531). This common understanding was

<sup>6</sup>For one discussion of policy marginalization of rural places and people, see Schafft (2016).

evidenced as strong interpersonal relationships between the superintendents and students, provision of health care services, inclusion of service learning opportunities into the curriculum, and use of the school as a community center, all while maintaining fiscally conservative practices. At the same time, these superintendents were less public with their push for high academic standards, intent to raise students' aspirations, and prioritization of experiences designed to expose students to opportunities outside their rural communities. By focusing on the commonly agreed upon aspects of a quality education, they kept conflict about purposes of schooling between educators and parents at bay. Rey (2014) concludes, their leadership "fell short" of critical place-consciousness (p. 532). While arguably place-conscious, their actions were not informed by critical perspectives or a critical stance. As Rey points out, they did not question, and thus could not lead others to question, relationships of power between educators and community members. Instead, they acted in what they believed to be in the best interests of rural students.

While literature of this vein has been critiqued by more senior rural education scholars as contributing to a deficit view of rural places (see Howley et al., 2014), other researchers within the field note that such work contributes "to nuanced understandings of rural life and rural education" (Azano, 2014, p. 3). These nuanced understandings, we argue, are necessary in creating a robust portrait of the context and practice of rural leaders, enabling us to consider more appropriate constructs for the rural superintendency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Groenke and Nesper (2010) argue, "rural schools cannot ignore the existing relations and tensions among rural communities, bordering towns, and the global voices that vie for the identities of rural places" (p. 66). However, when rural leaders and their schools open themselves "to the complexity of rural community issues, we enter a space that is out of control, where we really cannot predict the outcomes" (Corbett, 2010, p. 129). In short, true critique of place is messy and unpredictable, but without it, rural leadership possibilities are stymied.

### **Toward a Third Wave: A Revision of Critical Place-Conscious Leadership**

Replete in rural scholarship is an acknowledgment of the difficulty in defining rurality; together with a recognition of the differences among rural communities. Rural communities diverge from one another because of economic, historical, racial, and other social differences. From meatpacking to mineral extractive to tourist destination communities and everything in between, rural communities experience population growth or decline, economic boom or bust, prolonged economic and social stress, social tensions or creative resurgence. They do so at different rates and at different times.

Ascription of insider/outsider identities to rural leadership negates the differences among rural communities, resting on a shared assumption that regardless of community type, the insider is better positioned to counter unwanted outside influences or promote internal reforms through native knowledge and close relationship ties to and trust with community members. Thus, regardless of community type or type of change, the insider is theoretically positioned to be more successful in leading the school system than the community outsider. Despite our critique of critical place-conscious leadership theory, we posit the construct has greater potential to inform rural superintendent practice precisely because of the diversity among rural communities. Theoretical underpinnings for leadership responsive to rural communities in their diverse manifestations necessitates a consciousness of the local and the particular.

We argue for a revision of critical place-conscious leadership theory along three parameters: (1) assumptions of rural communities as homogenous must be challenged and inequities within rural communities must be addressed, (2) the influence of professional socialization on superintendents' leadership and the unique position they hold as an agent of an elected or appointed board needs to be acknowledged, and (3) a richer epistemological foundation is needed to theorize *critical* leadership practice in rural contexts.

### **Challenging Assumptions of Rural Communities as Homogenous and Attending to Social Inequities within Rural Communities**

Critical place-conscious leadership theory should consider the heterogeneity and social inequities within rural communities. Rural scholarship has focused to a greater degree on the inequities between rural and non-rural places than on those found within rural communities. Some have argued this focus was necessary when the question of community viability was at stake (Johnson, 2014). The question of community viability, we contend, is answered by attending to both the injustice between the rural and other locales and those more localized to the rural community and place. In short, the narrative of rural struggle must be expanded in building critical place-conscious theory. The critical place-conscious leader must be able to critique not only external threats to the community, but internal spaces of privilege and oppression, attuned to spaces of intersectionality of marginalization along gender, class, racial, sexual identity, religious, and other socially constructed groups.

Drawing from the body of leadership literature beyond rural scholarship, Ylimaki and Jacobson (2013) argue for the need for leaders to "develop a critical consciousness among students and faculty to challenge inequalities in the larger society and empower parents from diverse

communities” (p. 15). At the same time, leaders must explicitly address inequities and respond to diversity issues within their communities. In their work, we see critical place-conscious leadership, but with attention given to spaces of oppression or further marginalization within the community. A similar path is suggested by Ryan (2006) in his proposal for inclusive leadership. Likewise, given rapid transformations across community types, including urban settings, Scanlan and Lowenhaupt (2015) argue for culturally and linguistically responsive leadership that ensures the necessary resources are present to sustain school systems that “respectfully integrate *all* students’ and families’ identities and experiences into the teaching and learning environment alongside ensuring that all students are held to high academic standards and supported in meeting these” (p. 230, italics in original). Muijs et al. (2010) also tackle the dilemma of attention to the social justice and standards agendas. In his multi-case study, resolving this dilemma was “a key leadership task” (p. 14) and successful leadership strategies varied depending on context. This research highlights the need to be responsive to within-community marginalization *and* educational standards, which brings us to our next argument.

### **Professional Socialization’s Influence on Rural Superintendents’ Leadership Practice**

Critical place-conscious leadership has been prescribed, in large part, as a rejection of the non-local—policies and economic and social trends that peripheralized or negatively influenced rural communities. Notions of critical place-consciousness need to take into account the complex realities of the rural superintendent whose responsiveness to local and broader contexts cannot be mutually exclusive. Sperry and Hill (2015), for example, contend that rural superintendents

must earn the respect of staff and citizenry, identify which issues and initiatives to address and those whose time has not yet come, build coalitions in support of necessary actions, co-opt or neutralize opponents, and manage at the micro level of day-to-day activities while at the same time contemplating and attending to matters at the macro level of long-term strategic importance. (p. 4)

Rural superintendents, like superintendents across community and school system types, are socialized as part of a broader profession, and in most states, they serve as an agent of an elected board with fiduciary duties. Sperry and Hill (2015) and Lamkin (2006) note that rural superintendents often share the common challenge of lack of funding or other resources. It appears particularly salient, then, that rural superintendents be responsive to mandates

to funding streams, rather than resisting them. Although calling for superintendents to do so, Howley et al. (2014) posit that rural leaders “typically do not serve as the catalysts for community resistance.... Their professional culture encourages them to serve as functionaries of the State rather than to rally local resistance” (p. 631). Our position is not that this role is necessarily a bad thing—there are countless historical examples of the need for educational leaders to serve beyond the wishes of the local (consider, for example, desegregation efforts in the South). Leading resistance to the effects of globalization or global capitalism, or resolving to “disappoint the State” by rejecting neoliberal policies (see Howley et al., 2014), ignores the political realities and professional responsibilities of the contemporary rural superintendent. Adherence to extra-local policies is often required to secure government educational funding, and resistance to economic realities can lead to the under-preparation of rural graduates for self-sufficient futures.

### **The Need for a Richer Epistemological Foundation**

Our argument is not that the critical place-conscious leader should necessarily embrace extra-local policies or trends. We find this notion as problematic as the current suggestion that such leaders resist or reject them. A richer epistemological foundation is needed to theorize *critical* leadership practice in rural contexts. How is critical leadership practice different in rural places? For example, does the “successful” critical place-conscious rural leader need to understand the history of conflict regarding the purpose of rural schooling to leverage extra-local policy in the service of local interests, rather than rejecting it wholesale? In the same manner, might he or she need to understand the history of marginalization of rural communities and places to best respond to broader contextual forces, as well as understand ways in which those broader forces complicate the existing inequities within the local community? Would a critical analysis of mainstream society’s pejorative notions of rural people support superintendents in examining their own biases and increasing their self-efficacy to advance social justice? Johnson and associates (2009) observe

those holding institutional positions of authority (e.g., school superintendent) have the power and privilege to make things happen.... People lacking privilege and social capital need someone in these places to provide them with access to and understanding of the system.... To act effectively in this advocacy role, educational leaders must view themselves as cohabitants with stakeholders rather than colonizers. (p. 7)

What does critical leadership practice look like at the intersection of the rural superintendent’s role as an agent

of an elected board intended to represent the community; the social standing, power, and privilege they often hold; their professional socialization and training; and conflicting notions concerning the purposes of rural schooling? To prepare students for the probable need for postsecondary education in a post-industrial economy many school districts, rural districts included, have dropped traditional vocational course offerings (Tucker, 2012). In a study currently being conducted by one of the authors, policy focused on college and career readiness has come to mean only college readiness in the six participating rural districts. As these districts “make room” for college preparatory curricula, traditional vocational offerings have been dropped. Given the financial constraints the districts are facing, this scenario may not be surprising. Nonetheless, would a critical perspective, conscious of place, result in prioritizing the maintenance of vocational coursework, often valued in rural communities, through creative means such as cooperative efforts with other districts and school-business partnerships, even as the school district expands “college-prep” curricula?

### Conclusions

In both insider/outsider and critical place-conscious constructs of rural leadership, there is an accepted belief that the community is a whole entity, that insider leaders know and represent community interests, and that critical place-conscious leaders advocate on their behalf. We find these notions problematic and are left asking whose interests “successful” leaders are serving? In rethinking rural communities as factional places, the rural superintendent is confronted with multiple and shifting divisions within the community with diverse values and beliefs. The rural superintendent who can coalesce these competing factions is one who can keep the formal and informal negotiation spaces open.

The human propensity to make insider/outsider distinctions may work against the development of common and shared purposes between school and community and among community members, as insider/outsider bounds are fluid (Eaton, Eswaran, & Oxoby, 2011). Traditional notions of the insider as a representative of monolithic community values undermines the responsibility of the rural district leader to be conscious of and responsive to marginalized social groups within the communities they serve. Insider/outsider identity lacks an imperative for consciousness, consciousness that comes from reflection on, and critique of, the lived experience—one’s own and others’.

Casey (1997) reminds us “Nothing we do is unplaced,” but places are not bounded, unchanging entities (p. ix). In fact, the characteristics of any one place are an amalgam of the remnants of connections between places (Massey &

Jess, 1995). Critical place-consciousness leadership theory has the potential to challenge dichotomies between the local and the global, as it acknowledges the inextricable link between places. Corbett (2010) argues that rural schools, and, we argue by extension, rural leaders, should “build bridges between the local and the global by helping young people investigate systematically the ways that globalization transforms, complicates, and infuses necessarily local lives” (p. 130).

Recent research has highlighted the heterogeneity and inequities present within rural communities and diversity across them. We would expect, then, that the global affects local lives in divergent ways across and within communities. At the same time, the U.S. political climate has become increasingly hostile toward immigrant populations, complete with increases in white supremacist violence and recruiting efforts (Anti-Defamation League, 2018a, 2018b). Such national contextual factors complicate already present or new racial and linguistic inequities within rural communities. The construct of critical place-conscious leadership has not proven useful in interrogating the complex, multi-faceted practice of the rural superintendent given these shifting realities. Because we find the need for evolution of the critical place-consciousness theory, we end with a call for future research that interrogates the construct as currently prescribed and evaluates the practicality of our suggested revisions so that we might advance the theory of practice of the rural superintendency within the field of rural educational research.

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