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FORGOTTEN LEADERS: AN EXAMINATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NEEDS
OF CALIFORNIA'S RURAL SUPERINTENDENT-PRINCIPALS

By

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Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Professional isolation and lack of relevant professional growth opportunities are common challenges for California's rural school administrators. More than 27% of California's 1,026 public school districts employ superintendent-principals as their sole administrator. The problem examined in this study is the degree to which participation in a blended community of practice (COP) affected the professional isolation and lack of professional growth opportunities that California's superintendent-principals experience. The purpose of this descriptive case study is to help decision makers understand better the impact that blended COPs have on alleviating professional isolation and gaps in professional learning. This study informs the reader on the unique aspects of the superintendent-principal role through the lens of the administrators who participated in the blended COP known as the California Rural Superintendent Principal's Academy (CRSPA). The data was collected through an interview process with a sample of eight CRSPA participants from the 2018-2019 cohort. Five key thematic themes were identified from analyzed data including: (a) collegial networks (e.g., CRSPA) are important to addressing professional isolation of superintendent-principals, (b) CRSPA's blended COP model was a positive experience that supported their professional growth, (c) the scope of responsibilities of the superintendent-principal role can be overwhelming, (d) the advantages to the superintendent-principal role are related to the efficiency and freedom of the position, and (e) coaching was an important part of CRSPA's design.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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DEDICATION

This journey could not have been possible without the love, patience, and devotion of my partner in life Toni Elizabeth Smart. Your commitment, tolerance, and encouragement have sustained me academically, professionally, and internally. I am so fortunate to have you with me as we tend the garden of our life. Your essential contribution to this work is found not in the words on the page, but in the spaces between them, for it is an invisible thread binding knowledge, passion, and understanding. It is with eternal gratitude and affection that I dedicate this study to you, my love.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

California is geographically, culturally, and economically diverse and is a state that defies convention. According to the United States Census Bureau (2017), California's population reached 39.5 million people as of July 1, 2017. The majority of the population is concentrated within its largest cities: Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Jose. Los Angeles is the second most populous city in the United States after New York City. According to the California Communities Program of the University of California (2018), approximately half of the total population of the state resides in only four of the 58 counties: Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, and San Bernardino. The state's public school system serves more than 6 million students within its 1,026 school districts. The Los Angeles Unified School District is the largest district in California. During the 2017–2018 school year, it served 621,414 students in Transitional Kindergarten–Grade 12 (TK–12), whereas the second most populated district, San Diego Unified School District, served 126,400 students. By contrast, the smallest district, Panoche Elementary School District in San Benito County, served three students, which was followed by Coffee Creek Elementary School District in Trinity County that served five students. The 25 smallest districts in California served a combined 306 students (California Department of Education, 2018).

Of California's 1,026 school districts, 27% are led by superintendent–principals. These dual role administrative positions are held to the same fiscal, instructional, policy and reporting requirements as districts that have multiple administrators or specialists. Superintendent–principals are unable to delegate tasks to other administrators. Invariably this leads the

administrator to prioritize what gets done and what goes unattended or tended to poorly, and the pressures of the combined administrative position contributes to high frequency turnover and stress Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2010).

Each of the 58 counties in California has a County Office of Education (COE). The primary historic purpose of COEs has been to provide fiscal oversight of districts that fall within their boundaries of responsibility. Most COEs have more than one district that falls within their scope of responsibility. Humboldt County, located in coastal northern California, serves 31 independent school districts. County offices of education have been a part of California's educational system since its founding in 1850 (Eagles, 2017). Humboldt County, California, is a large and rural part of the state that encompasses 4,052 square miles; by comparison, it is roughly the size of the State of Connecticut. The 31 school districts operate a combined 84 schools and serve more than 18,000 students.

Like many areas in California, the history of Humboldt County has been largely defined by its rural landscape and dependence on a natural resource economy. Historically, redwood logging, agriculture, and fishing were the most dominant economic sectors; therefore, schools dot the rural landscape in the most out of the way, hard to get to areas of the county. As an example, 158 miles separate Humboldt County's southernmost school from its northernmost school. Each of these outlier schools has a student population of not more than 35 students. Jack Norton Elementary, Humboldt County's most rural school was, until recently, the last school in California powered by a generator. Most schools in Humboldt County are rural, and they exist in communities that are place-based. By the turn of the 20th century, Humboldt County had more than 100 districts. As the economy became less dependent on natural resources during the latter half of the 20th century, the number of districts dwindled, and they were consolidated to reflect

the new reality; however, it is still not uncommon for districts with less than 100 students to exist 3 miles from another district. Figure 1 illustrates the concentration of superintendent–principals by county in the State of California.

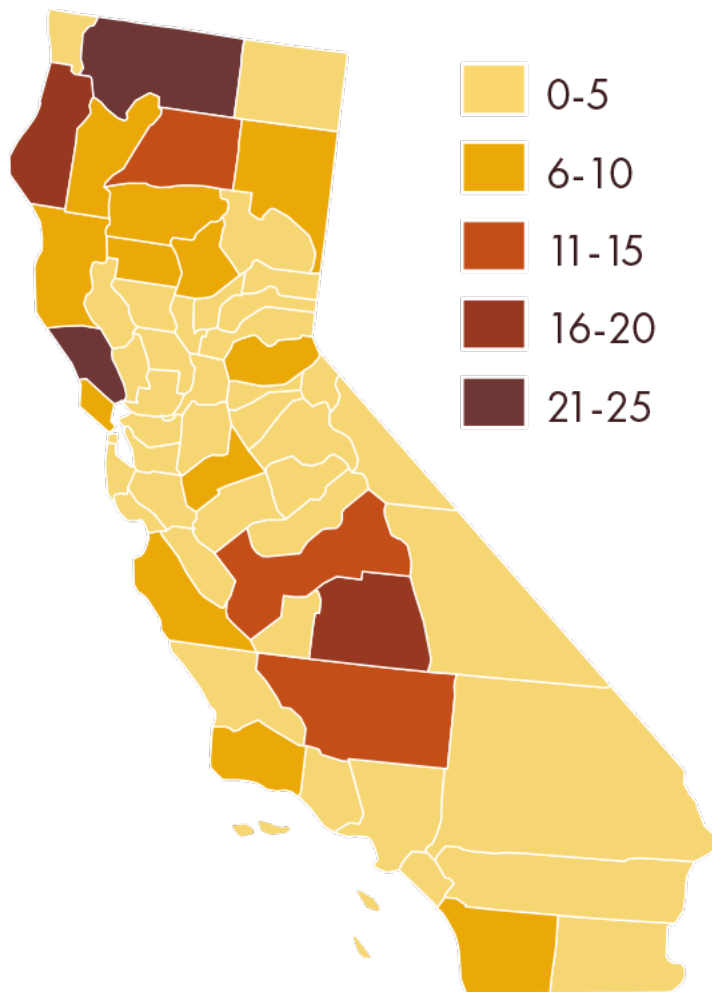


Figure 1. Concentration of superintendent–principals by county in California.

The history of the Humboldt COE (HCOE) has been shaped by policy shifts in Sacramento and the unique needs of its many rural school districts. Historically COEs in California were subject to oversight by the county board of supervisors. In the late 1970s, COEs became fiscally independent of the counties and were then directly accountable to the voting public (Eagles, 2017). The county superintendent of schools is an elected position and HCOE has

enjoyed relative stability with its elected leaders over the last 100 years. In the early 1990s, the role of the HCOE changed because of Assembly Bill 1200 (AB 1200) that gave authority of fiscal oversight over school districts. Passed in 1991, AB 1200 overhauled the way that school districts manage fiscal accountability. AB 1200 required that all school districts develop 2-year budget projections that would demonstrate fiscal solvency. The law requires interim report updates twice a year (Assembly Bill 1200 County Office of Education Fiscal Oversight 1991).

The most recent change to California's educational system has been the shift in how funding is allocated to districts. Historically, funding was bundled into categories, where monies were designated at the state level for districts and county offices to fulfill certain objectives (e.g., special education, transportation, technology, and curriculum). With the election of Governor Jerry Brown, in 2010, this funding mechanism shifted from a categorical model to a local control model, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The transition to the LCFF meant that funding would now be allocated directly to districts to decide how to allocate the funds, according to their goals and state priorities. Thus, the COE is now responsible not only for fiscal oversight, but also for the oversight of a district-developed plan, the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), that outlines how the COE will allocate funds, serve students, and measure district goals.

Over the last 20 years, fiscal oversight, workforce development, accountability, policy guidance, and conducting regionalized student instructional programs have been priorities in how the HCOE has supported districts; for example, HCOE has been instrumental in developing and managing Humboldt County's Career Technical Education (CTE) programs. With the advent of the LCFF and LCAP, CTE programs are now largely the responsibility of districts. This shift has affected the CTE programs in small and rural districts. When resources were centralized, they

could be distributed efficiently, and teaching staff effectively shared them. However, it is not feasible for small districts to run robust CTE programs individually, for the number of students and teaching staff needed to run the program does not exist. In other areas, where the HCOE plays a critical role in the support of school districts, there is school accountability (fiscal and curriculum), instructional leadership, special education, accountability, and professional learning opportunities for educators.

According to Edley and Kimner (2018), schools with fewer than 500 students employ a disproportionate number of less-than-fully qualified (i.e., credentialed) teachers when compared with urban and suburban schools. Rural schools lack the capacity to scale resources and they often need to spend revenues on meeting basic infrastructure needs (e.g., transportation and food) compared with larger districts that can leverage economies of scale to spend more on supplementary instructional programs (Edley & Kimner, 2018). This dynamic leads to disparities in achieving equitable access and the attainment of quality learning opportunities for rural students. Edley and Kimner (2018) also found a lack of early learning programs, which affects students entering school. There is also a void of leadership capacity in rural districts to enable them to meet the facilitation challenges of the LCAP development, analysis, and progress monitoring. District leaders often turn to the COEs to accommodate this lack of capacity, which injects inconsistent and undue COE influence into what should essentially be a district-specific process (Koppich & Humphrey, with Tobben & Behr, 2018).

Problem Statement

The problem examined by this study is the degree to which participation in a blended community of practice (COP) affects the professional isolation and lack of professional growth opportunities that California's rural, public school, superintendent-principals experience.

According to Salazar (2007), rural educational leaders have increased responsibilities in 21st-century education, which include instructional shifts, policy changes, technological challenges, and school improvement efforts. It is critical for these leaders to take part in continuous professional growth to maintain and improve their effectiveness (Salazar, 2007). Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) found that being an administrator in a rural community is more akin to leading a lifestyle than simply having a job. Expectations of community participation are high in rural communities and gaining acceptance among residents is critical. Compared with urban administrators, rural superintendent–principals have a more diverse and unpredictable set of responsibilities (Preston et al., 2013). Ashton and Duncan (2012) found that state and federal mandates add to the stresses of rural educational leaders, for they do not have the additional staff to delegate and distribute the added responsibilities.

The pressures that exist for small and rural districts are strikingly different compared to urban and suburban districts. Rural schools employ more unqualified teachers proportionally, they have fewer early learning programs to prepare children entering Kindergarten and the lack of economies of scale inhibit rural districts from meeting state mandates in academic achievement (Edley & Kimner, 2018). Most districts in the United States that have a chronic absenteeism rate of more than 30% are rural areas (Findley, Johnson, Jordan, Leong, & Reed, 2016). Children in rural areas also experience higher rates of adverse childhood experiences are greater compared with their urban and suburban counterparts (Belanger et al., 2018). These pressures are also amplified when state and federal educational policy makers do not consider how changes will affect rural schools and the populations that they serve. Areas of critical importance and interest for the smallest rural schools and districts include declining enrollment, high socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, transportation costs, high teacher turnover,

and access to higher level courses (Gemin, Smith, Vashaw, Watson, & Harrington, 2018). Strong collaborative relationships among rural districts are critical to building the capacity of rural school administrators for more effective decision making and leadership. Administrators in small and rural schools and districts have unique challenges that their larger and more suburban and urban colleagues do not have (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). Districts with small student populations, coupled with the dual role of superintendent–principal, require administrators to assume an array of nontraditional role responsibilities, including bus driver, cook, after-school coordinator, instructional leader and more (Canales, Tejada-Delgado & Slate, 2010). Curry and Wolf (2017) found that role identity confusion existed as the expectations of the superintendent–principal differed, depending on who was being served. School board members tended to view the position as superintendent, whereas teachers tended to expect the role to serve primarily as a principal. The dynamic nature of rural educational settings and the unique and varied demands placed on rural superintendent/principals necessitate professional learning opportunities that are tailored to the unique responsibilities of these administrators (Preston et al., 2013).

Purpose of the Study

Rural school leadership can be an isolating experience. California’s rural superintendent–principals are often the only administrator in their respective districts that span the wide geographic distances of the state’s rural regions. The purpose of this descriptive case study is to help rural administrators and other education policymakers better understand the impact of professional isolation on rural superintendent–principals and the impact that blended COPs can have in alleviating this isolation and the gaps in professional development. California is the most populous state where the majority of children attend schools in suburban or urban settings. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2019),

5.5% of students in California attend rural schools. However, 27% of the state's 1,026 school districts are located in rural areas and are led by superintendent–principals. Education policy often reflects the needs of larger more urban school districts; for example, recent changes in the California's public school funding model, the LCFF, have disproportionately affected rural communities because of their size. LCFF replaced categorical funding that required money to be spent on specific categories and now gives districts more freedom to decide how and where monies are spent (Fehrenbacher, n.d.). The change to the LCFF has had effects on rural districts with small populations of students. Although the LCFF does consider schools with unduplicated student populations that include economically disadvantaged, English learners, and special education students, it does not factor in the special needs of rural schools. A strong relationship exists between rural areas and lower standardized test scores (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2018). For example, Humboldt County, California, is home to the Hoopa Reservation, the largest Native American reservation and tribal system in the State of California. The Klamath-Trinity School District is home to three federally recognized tribes, including the Yurok, the Hupa, and the Karuk Tribes. Along with many other states, the relationship that public education has in these communities is riddled with historical trauma that includes forced attendance at boarding schools that were designed to *Americanize* native students.

Although the largest of the 31 school districts in Humboldt County has a student population of 3,300 students with several separate school campuses, the average or typical district is a one-school district with less than 250 enrolled students. Their populations are small; therefore, rural schools that have less than 250 students bear a disproportionate economic burden in district expenditures compared to urban and suburban districts (Canales et al., 2010). Transportation, professional growth, special education, speech pathology, and other costs have a

higher impact on the limited budgets of rural schools, for they cannot be scaled by volume. These diseconomies of scale affect rural districts, which is one reason that COEs play a significant role as brokers of services, policy advocates, conduits for professional development, and other supports. COEs that support rural districts in California will continue to be an important influence in identifying and reducing the present challenges because of geographic isolation, policy, and diseconomies of scale.

Research Questions

1. How do sampled, rural, California superintendent–principals describe their professional challenges?
2. How do sampled, California superintendent–principals describe the impact of their current level of professional learning?
3. How do sampled, California superintendent–principals describe the impact that participation in a blended COE has on their professional isolation?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is built around a blended COP model. Blended learning, *andragogy*, and legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) inform the structure of the COP, the California Rural Superintendent–Principal’s Academy (CRSPA). A COP is formed when groups of people with shared needs come together to work on common issues, to collaborate, and to share knowledge (Bouchamma & Michaud, 2014). First defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), COPs include ongoing interaction among their members. The purpose of this study was to examine how COPs could be used to enhance the professional growth and to decrease the professional isolation that rural administrators experience. *Andragogy*, the study of adult learning, informs the design of the COP; in particular, it informs the various strategies

employed to nurture community engagement. Adult learners tend to be intrinsically motivated and self-directed (Knowles, 1980). CRSPA participants go through an application process and make a yearlong commitment to the community. CRSPA is a blended COP that forms the foundation of participant interaction. CRSPA participants are sprinkled throughout California's expansive rural areas. Approximately half of the 27 participants meet via a Zoom video conference (Zoom Video Communications [Zoom]; 2019) webinar during the monthly gatherings while the other half meets face-to-face (Smart, 2017). Legitimate peripheral participation informs the coaching structure of the program. Three of the coaches in the COP are veteran rural administrators. Each coach is assigned between seven to 10 participants, and they act as mentors and confidants. Coaches meet with the participants on a monthly basis via phone and are expected to make at least one site visit during the course of the year.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope

In this study, the researcher assumed certain common conditions within the rural educational community. Assumption 1 was that participants in the study would operate within a similar context of change. LCFF, LCAP, and other school improvement and accountability efforts have transformed California's public education system. Assumption 2 was that the participants of the study worked in rural settings; therefore, certain similarities were expected in relation to their experiences as rural administrators, including that they were considered community leaders, that they experienced professional isolation, and that they operated with a high degree of professional stress because of their position. CRSPA is a voluntary COP; therefore, Assumption 3 was that participants were actively seeking to improve their own practice as leaders; therefore, their responses to interviews would be truthful.

In the study, the researcher examines the impact that participation in a blended professional learning model designed for rural superintendent–principals has on reducing professional isolation and improving pathways for professional growth. The study is not intended to resolve these problems. This researcher works and lives in rural northern California, and the experience of working within the context of this study has the potential to introduce bias that might threaten the perceived objectivity of the study. This researcher is also the primary creator of the CRSPA, which is the only blended professional learning model in California that is specifically designed for rural superintendent–principals; therefore, it offered an ideal opportunity to study the impact that the model might have on addressing professional growth needs and the isolation that rural administrators experience. CRSPA was the sole, blended COP that was designed for the dual administrative role in California; therefore, the scope of the participants was limited compared to the overall number of superintendent–principals who are employed across the State of California. However, the scope was justified, for the geographic and participant sampling of the study was representative of the occupational context found within the total population of California’s rural superintendent–principals. CRSPA had 27 participants, from which eight participants were selected to participate in this qualitative study. This study does not draw conclusions about the validity or effectiveness of the dual-role position as an administrative construct. However, it does examine the impact that participation in a blended professional learning model can have on the professional growth and isolation that rural superintendent–principals experience.

The participants were representative of the wide expanse of California’s rural geography. Protection against bias was addressed by using a two-interview protocol. The first interview collected data from nine questions and the second interview allowed the participants to clarify

their responses or to offer additional information. The data was triangulated with additional literature that supported or challenged the claims in Chapters 4 and 5 of the study to ensure that bias was minimized.

Rationale and Significance

This study is important because it furthers the understanding of the unique professional learning needs of rural superintendent–principals in California and examines how these needs can be address through participation in a blended professional learning model. The results of the study might assist local, state, and federal education policy makers in developing relevant and rational professional learning opportunities for underserved rural administrators. Implementing relevant professional COP that would have an impact and would be designed for superintendent–principals might reduce professional isolation and improve job satisfaction, retention, and effectiveness. The historical relationship between rural LEAs and COEs is complex and varied. As changes in state and federal education policy continue to effect school districts and the populations they serve, it will be incumbent on COEs to develop systems of support that cater to the needs and inequities present in rural, small school districts. County offices of education play an important role in rural counties as brokers of services, policy advocates, professional growth, and other supports. The small populations in California’s rural schools can be an advantage for students, for they offer a setting that reflects the communities in which they serve. These and other advantages were explored with the study’s participants. The atmosphere is often highly personalized and is reflective of a familial construct. Schools in rural areas are often the center of public and civic life. When schools are closed or consolidated (because of the perceived increase in efficiency) the community suffers (Nadel & Sagawa, 2002).

It is unclear what role, if any, small district population sizes play in student performance, given the recent changes to the state's school accountability model, including computerized assessments and California's multiple measures dashboard. What is clear is that understanding the effects of policy shifts (e.g., the LCAP and LCFF models) cannot be understood within the context of a single, rural school. In addition, rural schools are ill equipped to deal with the effects of policy changes and the resulting inequities because of their small size.

Definition of Terms

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975. The IDEA codifies the requirement of schools to provide a free and fair public education to students who have disabilities at no additional expense to parents (Lee, 2017).

Local Control Accountability Plan. The LCAP is a locally developed plan developed from eight California educational priorities. Each district is responsible for developing a plan on how funds will be allocated to meet each priority (Camp, 2017).

Local Control Funding Formula. Adopted in 2013, the LCFF eliminated most categorical funding, and replaced it with a funding model with local control. Most funds that schools receive are discretionary and are not tied to specific programs. LCFF is the most significant change to California's school funding model since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1973. Districts receive a base allotment of funds, and additional dollars are added according to identified student groups, including low-income students, English learners, and foster youths (Koppich & Humphrey, 2018).

Local Education Agency. LEAs are defined in ESEA as legal bodies; they are generally school boards that have administrative authority to manage a school district (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Professional Learning Network. A PLN is an expanded COP that leverages modern technology to facilitate expanded synchronous and asynchronous communication and learning opportunities. PLNs are generally leveraged face-to-face interaction and digital Web technologies. A core purpose of a PLN is to develop networks and communities with similar interests or professions (Crowley, 2014).

Superintendent–principal. An educational administrative position that has the combined responsibilities of a district level superintendent and school principal is termed a superintendent–principal position (Curry & Wolf, 2017).

Conclusion

Rural school districts in California are at a crossroad and they are encountering new pressures because of changing economic realities, changing policies, changing demographics, and geographic isolation (Lavalley, 2018). The inequities created because of urban centric policy decisions have long affected rural schools. With the elimination of most categorical programs under the LCFF, and with increased costs, dwindling funding sources, and additional administrative requirements, rural schools are at risk. A well-qualified workforce, that includes teachers, classified employees (e.g., bus drivers, cooks, and teacher’s aides), and administrators can act as a firewall against this risk. Superintendent–principals are at the center of navigating these changes in California’s rural school districts and it is important to understand the contexts from which these educational leaders work and live. Moreover, the State of California can benefit from a better understanding from those who serve in the role the nature of the superintendent–principal position and the challenges they face in accessing relevant professional growth opportunities.

County offices of education play a unique role in supporting rural school districts in the areas of fiscal oversight, professional development, technology support, and advocacy. In addition, COEs play a significant role in holding districts accountable under LCFF passed in 2013. The LCFF operates under the subsidiarity principle, which means that better outcomes for school districts will occur when decisions are made locally instead of the state or federal government making the decisions (Koppich & Humphrey, 2018). As inequities, both historical and emerging, continue to affect rural school districts, COEs are ideally suited to identify and implement solutions to these inequities. Humboldt County is an outlier within the context of California's educational settings. Humboldt County has a total population of more than 18,000 students and 31 school districts in contrast to the majority urban and suburban districts who have at least 18,000 students per district (Educational Data Partnership, 2018).

The diverse makeup of Humboldt County's rural schools is a reflection of the place-based nature of its communities. It is common for independent school districts of less than 100 students to be located within a 3-mile radius of another district. Likewise, California's rural educational landscape is complex. Of school districts in the state, 27% employ a single administrator as a superintendent–principal. The dual-role position has unique and often ill-defined responsibilities added to the traditional requirements of a superintendent or principal. Copland (2013) found that rural administrators fulfill five major roles, including manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community volunteer. Curry and Wolf (2017) identified financial oversight and a positive school climate as the two most important responsibilities of the superintendent–principal. The position is unique to the distinct characteristics of the community it serves; therefore, it is critical to understand how best to develop the leadership capacity of those in the position. Moreover, professional growth opportunities that support this role are far

and few between. CRSPA offered an opportunity to study the impact that participation in a blended COP could have on reducing professional isolation and improving access to professional growth opportunities for rural superintendent–principals.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this literature review, the researcher considers the factors that contribute to the professional isolation and the lack of professional growth opportunities for California's rural superintendent-principals. The researcher accomplishes this task by reviewing blended learning models, rural education, professional learning for administrators, the history of the CRSPA, and the methods used in this study. The literature in this review comes from peer reviewed research journals, government sources, reports, raw data, and books. The purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which participation in the CRSPA, blended professional learning affected the professional isolation and the access to professional growth opportunities for California's rural public school superintendent-principals. The resources in this literature review represent the broad nature of the topic, and they are intended to develop a baseline understanding of (a) the issues that affect California's rural superintendent-principals and (b) the context in which they work and live.

Depending on where a student lives and on which school he or she attends, it is quite likely that the free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that is codified in federal and state laws is fraught with systemic inequities. Title I for example, is a federal program that targets low-income students and calculates funding on the total number of poor students instead of a proportional concentration of poverty. This calculation leads to an inequitable distribution of federal funds favoring large population centers (Ayers, 2011). One in five American students attends a rural school, and Lavalley (2018) has demonstrated that barriers to a quality education

are greater in rural areas because of the diseconomies of scale that exist in schools with a lower number of students.

Although students in rural areas are more likely to graduate from high school, they are less likely to attend college (Jordan, Kostandini, & Mykerezi, 2012). Students living in rural areas have barriers to accessing rigorous coursework as compared to urban and suburban students; for example, 73% of rural high school students have access to advanced placement courses compared to 95% of urban and suburban students who have access to the same courses (Lavalley, 2018). Funding in most states is determined by a per student formula, the average daily attendance; therefore, schools with larger populations are able to distribute the cost of fixed and discretionary resources in ways that their rural counterparts cannot do.

Rural Education

Rural education has been a perennial topic in American public life, and it is usually punctuated by times of national transition. In a time of massive new mechanization in the United States, President Theodore Roosevelt (1909, as cited in Biddle & Azano, 2016) commissioned the *Report on Country Life*, describing the state of rural America. In part, the goal of the report was to identify the ways in which the government could make rural life more appealing. In this report, President Roosevelt was responding to the Nation as it was rapidly moving from country to city. President Roosevelt (1909, as cited in Biddle & Azano, 2016) concluded that rural schools continued to lack the resources needed to prepare young people for the demands and practical benefits of rural life. The White House, under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, (as cited in Dawson & Hubbard, 1944) held the Conference on Rural Education. The primary outcome of the conference was to identify the rights that students in rural settings were entitled, including the right (a) to modern infrastructure, (b) to a school lunch program, (c) to

transportation, and (d) to qualified teachers who understood the unique nature of living and teaching in rural America. The commission, who met over the course of four sessions in the White House's East Room, brought together 230 educators from around the country. One outcome of the commission was the *Charter for the Education of Rural Children* that contained 10 rights that all American children—regardless of demographic background—should be afforded, and that demonstrated the federal government's commitment to ensuring a quality education for rural students (Dawson & Hubbard, 1944). The Conference on Rural Education occurred during a time of great transition for the country, and it was initiated to begin examining the needs of rural education in a post-World War II world.

Rural schools are at a similar crossroad in the first quarter of the 21st century. Shifting economic realities, globalization, technology, and demographics all affect the current position of rural schools and those who lead them. According to Showalter, Klein, Johnson, and Hartman (2017), Vermont has the highest percentage (54.7%) of rural students in the United States, Nevada has the lowest percentage (1.7%), and California's rural student population percentage is 3.1%. Access to higher level courses is a persistent challenge for rural school districts (Showalter et al., 2017).

To understand rural education, researchers must consider all of the variables that comprise the rural education ecosystem (Valvo, 2015). At the system's core is the school board, for it acts not only as a fiscal oversight body, but also as a formalized conduit between the school district and the community at large (Valvo, 2015). The inability to scale resources is exacerbated further by the limited budgets of rural districts that have historically been underfunded as compared with suburban and urban population centers (Edley & Kimner, 2018). According to Ikpa (2018), funding does not adequately address the unique needs of rural schools, for it does

little more than maintain the status quo, instead of allowing rural schools to build the capacity of their teachers and students.

The needs in rural and urban school districts are different and unique. Mathis (2003) found common financial issues that are relevant to rural schools and communities, including issues related to school consolidation, special education, the impact of charter schools, facilities, technology, transportation, and declining enrollments. The challenges are more diverse and numerous for rural schools than for their urban counterparts. One of these challenges includes an inequitable distribution of funding per pupil (Mathis, 2003). The systemic issues that exist in rural schools are primarily the result of geographic isolation, diseconomies of scale because of the low student enrollment, and state and federal policy mandates that are designed for more concentrated population centers (Edley & Kimner, 2018).

The suspension rates are higher in California's rural schools; in fact, according to Romney and Willis (2019), the average rate of suspension for rural schools in 2018 was 8.28 students for every 100 students compared to 5.22 students per every 100 students in urban and suburban schools. In addition, a disproportionate rate of suspensions occurs among Black, Latino, White, and Asian students in rural schools as compared to their peers in urban and suburban schools. In addition, Romney and Willis (2019) reported that poor access for rural schools to professional development that could address alternatives to suspension is one explanation for the disparity in suspension rates.

Shifting instructional practice and shifting access to Common-Core-aligned curriculum has proven to be a challenge for rural school districts. According to Timar and Carter (2017), rural districts struggle because of a lack of high-quality professional development for new or anticipated curriculum adoptions. The lack of professional development support contributes to

the poor implementation, and expensive curriculum goes unused or is used without fidelity. Instructional shifts (e.g., Common Core) and policy shifts (e.g., LCFF and LCAP) have stretched the resources of rural administrators and school districts. Each of these initiatives represents a substantial departure from the previous modes of operation in California's public education system, and the dearth of support and the quality professional learning opportunities for rural educators have contributed to the disproportionality of outcomes among rural, suburban, and rural students (Timar & Carter, 2017).

The superintendent–principal position is unique among administrative roles in public education. In the combined role, the superintendent–principal assumes the responsibilities of both superintendent and principal. According to Curry and Wolf (2017), the role combines the fiscal, political, community relations, and strategic development responsibilities of a superintendent with the instructional leadership, site management, staff evaluation responsibilities of a principal. These positions are predominantly located in rural school districts that have a smaller number of students, and they are located where combining the role is meant to save the district from spending money on personnel costs (Curry & Wolf, 2017). Beesley and Clark (2015) found that rural administrators are predominantly White men, are less likely to have terminal degrees, and are more likely to work beyond their contracted days as compared to nonrural administrators. According to McCormick (2016), the most significant challenges of the position include (a) balancing the complex number of responsibilities, (b) the shortage of and retention of qualified staff, and (c) maintaining enrollment. Superintendent–principals rely on shared leadership among the teaching staff and on sharing expertise among colleagues in a similar position to cope with the isolation inherent in being the sole administrator in the district (McCormick, 2016).

Professional Learning for Rural Administrators

Highly qualified administrators have a direct impact on the quality of learning experiences that students can expect, for teachers who report a lack administrative support are more than twice as likely to leave a school site (or the profession) as teachers who enjoy such support (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The *Constitution of the State of California* (Article IX § 1) recognized the critical importance that education plays in a healthy and free society. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975) codified the requirement of schools to serve students with disabilities at no additional expense to parents. IDEA (1975) also required that schools provide a FAPE to students with disabilities (Lee, 2017). When dual-role administrators do not have access to ongoing professional learning, this right becomes at risk, resulting in an equity crisis for California's rural communities. Statistically, California's rural communities struggle economically because of a shifting economic base that was once dominated by natural resource extraction, agriculture, logging, and maritime activities. It is also more expensive to educate students in rural communities because of transportation costs and a smaller pool of qualified educators (Lavalley, 2018).

Effective professional learning does not happen in a vacuum (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Instead, it must be tied to larger school improvement initiatives and must be aligned with the educational objectives of the organization. An array of professional learning models supports this alignment, but the scope of this literature review is not sufficiently broad to explain each model. Nevertheless, some models that are associated with positive learning outcomes are COPs, PLNs, and job-embedded coaching. Superintendent–principals are the sole administrative role in many rural schools in California; therefore, according to Rowland (2017), many administrators leave the position within the first 3 years. The uncertainty created by high

turnover affects many facets of a district, including teacher recruitment, school improvement, and school climate. DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, and Haycock (2007) found that simply providing training in the form of workshops for administrators does little to improve leadership abilities. Instead, sustained coaching and facilitated guidance is an essential element of developing effective school leaders. Preston and Barnes (2017) found that effective rural administrators operate in a collaborative environment and have strong interpersonal relationships with staff. This social leadership, ongoing professional learning, and coaching aligns well with a blended-learning COP that is designed specifically for superintendent principals. In a study of rural administrators' professional learning needs, Stewart and Matthews (2015) found that supervision, managing student behavior, and budgeting were the most commonly reported needs.

Professional learning models must take into consideration the audiences for which they are designed. Andragogy is derived from the Greek words “andra” that means “adult,” and “gogy” that means “learning”; thus, andragogy is specifically a set of principles that defines the best practices for adult learning (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). Knowles (1980) defined andragogy as learning by adults who are self-aware and who expect to have self-directed opportunities to leverage their prior knowledge. Adult learners are intrinsically motivated when learning is considered a problem to be solved, rather than a subject to be learned. Adult learners value experiential knowledge; therefore, teachers need to integrate the learner's experience into the lesson design to make it more relevant (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). Although Knowles (1975) made the concept of andragogy more widely known, German scholar Alexander Kapp (1833, as cited in Loeng, 2017) is credited with the first use of *andragogy*. Kapp (1833, as cited in Loeng, 2017) felt that knowing the self was the first and most important responsibility of the individual. According to Fornaciari and Dean (2014), andragogy places the learner (rather than the teacher)

at the center of the experience. The principles of andragogy help to inform the development of blended COP.

Professional Isolation Among Rural Administrators

Professional isolation is among the more frequently reported aspects of the rural superintendent–principal experience. Ashton and Duncan (2012) found that leadership in general could be a lonely affair; however, the isolated context of a rural setting adds to the insulating effects of the position. Ashton and Duncan suggested that rural administrator–principals find mentors, places to socialize, healthy outlets to relieve stress, and a personal mission or mantra to combat the isolating realities of rural leadership. Drago and Pecchia (2016) found that 74% of principals felt that the time constraints contributed to their professional isolation. The respondents also cited a lack of collaborative systems and physical distance between colleagues as the reasons for professional isolation. Wrynski-Guden (2014) argued that three primary themes comprise the challenges to rural educational leaders, including administrative demands, educational leadership, and curriculum. The complex leadership requirements of superintendent–principals, the physical distance from other administrators, and the lack of collegial opportunities contribute to the professional isolation of the position. For example, the HCOE, where most countywide professional development takes place, is a 3-hour drive from the most distant school in the county. Rural teachers and administrators often miss opportunities to improve their practice simply because of travel time. Other pressures that impede accessing professional development opportunities included lack of substitutes and the quality or relevance of the professional development that is currently offered (Blanchet & Bakkegard, 2018). Professional isolation and best practices in professional development point to the need for reform in the way that rural administrators can gain access to professional development opportunities.

Blended Professional Learning Models

In the context of this study, blended professional learning models are models that use Web technologies to augment or supplement face-to-face instruction. The combination and composition of face-to-face and technology-facilitated learning is what constitutes the “blend” in blended learning (Fresen, 2018). Leaders in most industries have increasingly used blended learning as a means to support flexibility, to improve learning outcomes for adult learners, and to minimize the costs the associated with face-to-face instruction (Acree, Gibson, Mangum, Wolf, & Kellogg, 2017). Nevertheless, finding a balance between face-to-face and online instruction remains an issue of efficacy. Hunt-Barron, Tracy, Howell, and Kaminski (2015) found that offering on-going, online professional development was a valuable way to connect rural educators with new teaching strategies (e.g., blogging and Google applications for education). However, time and inconsistent access to technology presented primary obstacles to implementing into instruction many of the strategies.

Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) suggested that ongoing and repeated professional development was more effective than single workshops. Professional development should be tied to systems of improvement, rather than being conducted in isolation. Using digital tools for online or blended instruction might represent the best way to bridge the geographic and resource constraints of rural districts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Philipsen, Tondeur, Pareja Roblin, Vanslambrouck, & Zhu (2019) argued that the primary drivers for using blended professional learning approaches were their cost effectiveness and their ability to extend availability of curriculum to people and areas that otherwise would not be able to access them. Robinson (2008) found that digital resources and distance education could have a positive effect on professional development for educators and that the lack of quality professional development

for teachers in rural areas is primarily because of the cost involved in providing traditional face-to-face workshops. With so many policy and curricular changes occurring in California's public schools, it is imperative that administrators receive ongoing professional learning support; nevertheless, in the rural parts of California, this support can be hard to materialize. Wolf (2006) found that blended or completely online professional development could be more appropriate for organizational participants who are separated by geography. Although California's rural superintendent-principals represent different organizations, commonalities exist in their professional context that bind them into a unique subset of administrators. When professional development is designed to be collaborative, effectiveness increases (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Blended learning offers flexibility for the rural administrator that face-to-face instruction alone cannot. The participants have the ability to work with content differently and at their own pace (Acree et al., 2017); therefore, blended learning is increasingly used as an effective professional development intervention internationally (Hilliard, 2016). However, according to Wang and Huang (2018), blended learning environments that incorporate asynchronous communication can be limiting because of delayed feedback and collaboration with other participants. Although a single definition of blended learning is elusive, Maxwell (2016) found that three parts of blended learning should be considered universal. Blended learning should have a structure that includes some form of online learning, a physical location where face-to-face learning takes place, and both online and face-to-face learning experiences that are integrated with one another (Maxwell, 2016). According to O'Byrne and Pytash (2015), no blended learning model is universally effective; therefore, in whatever manner the model is designed and implemented, a strict alignment must be made to educational objectives and considerations of the audience.

Communities of Practice

In this study, the researcher examined the impact of CRSPA on the professional isolation and professional growth of rural administrators who participate in the blended learning model. The learning theories that informed the conceptual framework of the study were LPP, blended learning, and andragogy. Each of these theories defined CRSPA's conceptual design as a blended COP, which was infused into the design of the program to maximize the learning experience of superintendent-principals. Figure 1 illustrates the layered conceptual design of CRSPA. The authors who guided this study fell into two primary categories: (a) authors who influenced the understanding of rural education, administration, and professional learning; and (b) authors who influenced the structural development of the research.

Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term *COP*, which is an organization of individuals who share common interests and come together on a reoccurring basis to develop further their understanding, to solve problems, or to improve their professional practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Communities of practice are strengthened through a shared experience, professional networking, and collaborative problem solving in a social setting (Bouchamma & Michaud, 2014). According to Niesz (2010), COPs develop group identity, improve cultural connections, and develop meaning among participating members. Virtual or blended COPs can help break down geographic barriers and allow the expansion of participation in the communities (McLoughlin, Patel, O'Callaghan, & Reeves, 2017). Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Tayner (2015) explained that COPs are defined by three characteristics:

- The Domain: A COP is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest.

Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared

competence that distinguishes members from other people (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Tayner, 2015 paragraph 7).

- The Community: In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other; they care about their standing with each other (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Tayner 2015, paragraph 8).
- The Practice: A COP is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies for instance. Members of a COP are practitioners (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Tayner, 2015, paragraph 9).

Rural superintendent–principals are a unique group of leaders with a common identity that acts as a binding agent when developing a COP for a rural school leadership. LPP offers an opportunity to measure the health of the COP and the leadership capacity of the group. LPP informed CRSPA’s structure as a COP. CRSPA includes the use of coaches who mentor participants (Lave & Wagner, 1991). As collaboration, intellectual exchange, and social interaction occur, the newer members of the community mature as practitioners; thus, they strengthen the community as a whole (Zaffini, 2018). The study was informed by several baseline sources of data, including interviews with participants and coaches, and monthly observations of and evaluations from the CRSPA COP meetings.

LPP is rooted in a situational approach to group development and is inherently a social experience (Floding & Swier, 2012). The framework acknowledges the social aspects of group dynamics. Rural schools are reflections of the communities they serve. The change process, when it occurs, is a result of relational bonds between the people who make the change and the people who are affected by it. A COP that is comprised of rural educational leaders offers an

opportunity to collaborate to address the challenges that are specific to rural schools and superintendent–principals (Gaumer, Noonan, & McCall, 2012). Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, and Salgado (2005) found that the primary factors that contribute to educator attrition are professional isolation, comparatively lower salaries, lack of social opportunities, and overwhelming working conditions. LPP offers a mentoring construct that increases the opportunity for engagement for both experienced and inexperienced leaders.

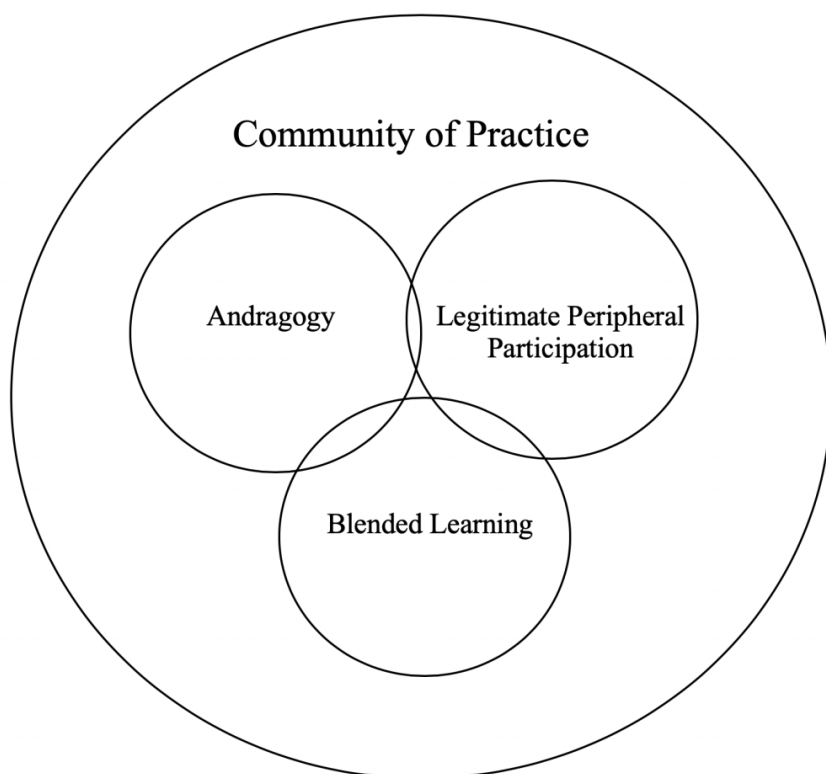


Figure 2. Conceptual design of the California Rural Superintendent-Principal's Academy community of practice.

The California Rural Superintendent-Principal's Academy

The theoretical concept for CRSPA was first developed in the fall of 2017 because of ongoing dialogue among superintendent–principals in Humboldt County, California. Prior to the formation of CRSPA, Humboldt County superintendent–principals had been meeting informally on a monthly basis to discuss the collective challenges that were related to rural districts in the

county. One outcome of the discussions was identifying the need to develop a more formalized system of support for rural superintendent principals. As envisioned, the system would not only support local administrators, but would also support superintendent–principals across California. Its primary goals were to increase the leadership capacity of rural superintendent–principals and to reduce professional isolation through the creation of a statewide blended COP. Prior to CRSPA, no dedicated, professional growth option existed that was specifically designed to support the needs of rural superintendent–principals (Smart, 2017). The HCOE took the lead in researching the existing COP models that were designed for rural superintendent–principals, but none was found. The Association of California Administrators hosts superintendent and principal academies, but these are designed for each specific role. The association provides no academy that would support the combined role of the superintendent–principals who serve in a rural context. As part of the research, the HCOE discovered that little was known about the total number of administrators who served in this role across California. Therefore, the HCOE, with this researcher as the lead grant writer, submitted and received a \$670,000 grant from California Educators of the Deaf (Cal-Ed; 2019) that would support the development and implementation of the first and only blended COP designed for rural superintendent–principals in California (Smart, 2017). CRSPA is built on a 1-year, cohort model that supports up to 30 participants from around the State of California. The funding from the Cal-Ed grant supports travel, material expense, technology, dedicated HCOE staff time, and stipends for coaches and guest facilitators. It is open to superintendent–principals with all levels of experience; however, the majority of participants have 0–5 years of experience. CRSPA Cohort 1 was launched in the summer of 2018 during which all participants congregated in Eureka, California, for a 3-day leadership institute. The participants met monthly in a blended learning environment. Approximately half of the

participants met face to face and the other half joined them via Zoom Web conferencing. CRSPA included a coaching model in which each of the three coaches had seven to 10 participants assigned to them. The coaches were veteran superintendent–principals who had spent their careers in rural school settings. They each attended a monthly session, checked in with their assigned participants at least once per month, and were required to conduct a site visit at least once over the course of the year. The topics for monthly sessions were derived from a needs-assessment completed with CRSPA applicants prior to the beginning of the next academy (Slentz & Smart, 2018). Monthly topics were thematic, and they occurred on Saturdays to minimize the time away from a participant’s home district. Guest speakers at the monthly thematic topic were identified, and they acted as facilitators. The topics that were identified as critical in the needs-assessment included board governance, employee management, student and teacher retention, managing school district finances, school climate, equity, special education, and instructional leadership (Slentz & Smart, 2018). In addition to synchronous/face-to-face monthly sessions, an asynchronous communication channel was created using Google Groups (2019), which linked the participants’ email addresses and became a valuable source of information sharing among participants. CRSPA was comprised of administrators with varying degrees of experience so that the participants could leverage their colleagues’ collective expertise on topics on an as-needed basis through Google Groups. Google Forms (2019) was used to establish frequent and ongoing feedback opportunities for participants to help guide the direction and development of the COP. The participants were asked to provide detailed feedback after each monthly learning session so that the researcher could adjust the program structure, themes, and topics.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was drawn from the conceptual design of CRSPA, which was a COP informed by andragogy, LPP, and blended learning. A COP is a group of people with a shared interest or identity who engage in reoccurring collaborative exchange of resources and ideas (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Tayner, 2015). CRSPA offered rural superintendent–principals the opportunity to join a blended COP whose members lived and worked across the State of California. One primary goal of CRSPA was, by engaging in sustained collaboration through synchronous learning sessions and asynchronous communication, to affect positively the professional isolation and barriers in accessing relevant professional growth that rural superintendent–principals experience. Superintendent–principals report a sense of professional isolation because they are the sole administrator in the district, and they report that site-shared expertise is a strategy that addresses this isolation (McCormick, 2016).

Prior to CRSPA, no formalized COP had been specifically designed to address the needs of rural superintendent–principals (Smart, 2017). Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study that outlines the connection in the CRSPA model between the COP, the participants, the coaches, the leadership team, asynchronous communications, and monthly blended learning sessions. In this study, the researcher measured the impact that participation in CRSPA had on professional isolation and the professional growth of a select group of California’s rural superintendent–principals. A presumed connection was made between professional isolation and the lack of formalized and sustained collaboration among superintendent–principals (McCormick, 2016). In addition, the researcher aimed to measure the validity of this connection between participation in a blended COP and the decrease in

professional isolation. Moreover, the researcher examined the impact that participation in a blended COP had on the superintendent–principals’ reported ability to perform successfully in their roles.

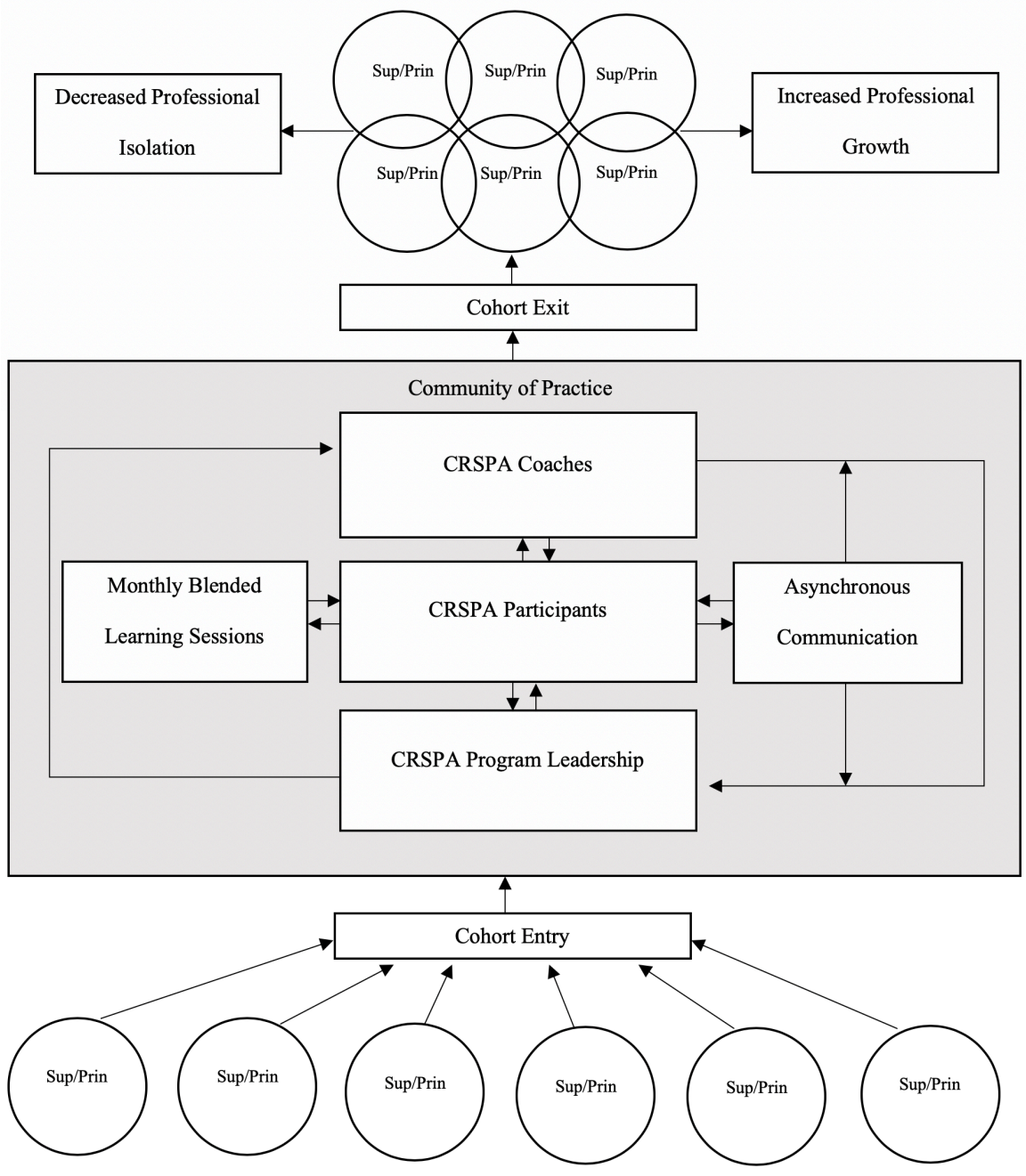


Figure 3. Conceptual framework of the study.

Methods

A case study is a multisourced investigation that is designed to gain a holistic understanding of a phenomenon as it relates to the subject being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This study is a descriptive case study that the researcher has used to describe an intervention within the context of a phenomenon or setting (Yin, 2003). Case study research differs from other types of qualitative research. For example, narrative inquiry research typically focuses on an individual's story, whereas a case study is focused on the issue related to the case and not the individual in the case (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). CRSPA is a blended COP designed to support the professional growth needs of California's rural superintendent-principals. As an intervention, it might have an impact on reducing professional isolation and improving professional growth opportunities by connecting a group of people around common issues and shared practices (Bouchamma & Michaud, 2014).

Like all methodologies, case studies have advantages and disadvantages, and they must match the purpose of the study. Murphy (2014) suggested that case studies have "tradeoffs" because they allow the researcher to go in depth with a subject, but they can be constrained by a small sample size as compared to qualitative studies. This feature aligns with the thoughts of Merriam (1998), and Merriam and Tisdale (2016) who both advised that a case study must be bounded to a specific group, event, system, or experience. Creswell et al. (2007) found that questions in case study research must help researchers gain an in-depth understanding of the subject and that they are exploratory in nature, which allows for significant interaction with the study participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Yin (2003) suggested using the following tools during the data collection phase of a case study: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts.

This study uses interviews, observations, and evaluation data to address research questions. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), the triangulation of data is an essential part of developing a holistic understanding of the case that is being studied. In addition, triangulation, which is the use of multiple sources of data, increases a study's rigor and validity.

Conclusion

This literature review provides a broad overview of the conceptual design of the study, the background of the CRSPA, the context of rural education, the professional development for rural administrators, the professional isolation, and the case study methodology. The study will further an understanding of the unique context in which California's rural superintendent–principals work. This unique group of administrators represents a diverse collective and represents a significant number of districts in California; however, the number of students within each district is low; therefore, the resources and structures necessary to improve professional growth and professional isolation are lacking in the state. Studying the impact of participating in a COP that is designed specifically for rural administrators will further an understating of how to meet their unique and diverse professional needs in a state that is dominated by urban and suburban concerns.

District leaders and school boards, COEs, and California's policy makers will benefit from this study, for it will test their assumptions about rural education in the state and it will act as a guided reference when developing responsive professional growth systems for California's rural educational leaders. Communities of practice are well documented and have been implemented with fidelity across many business and organizational settings. The examination of a COP that was designed specifically for rural administrators across California's rural landscape promised to offer an understanding the relationships among professional networks, the reduction

of professional isolation, and overcoming the challenges to ongoing professional growth that rural administrators experience. Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the study's methodology.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, descriptive case study included superintendent–principals from rural school districts across California who participated in CRSPA, the blended COP. In this chapter, the researcher introduces the methodological structure of the study in the following sections: the research questions, the methodology, the setting, the participant description, the types of data that were collected, the framework analysis, the participants’ rights, and the potential limitations.

Superintendent–principal positions are unique among other public school administrative positions in California because they typically serve populations from rural and remote regions. California has 1,026 school districts and 27% of these districts employ a superintendent–principal as their sole administrator. Despite the small size of these districts, administrators are faced with the same level of fiscal and policy requirements as larger districts that typically have dedicated staff to perform various administrative responsibilities. The demands placed on rural administrators require a unique skill set, for they are expected to take on multiple roles, including politician, educator, administrator, personnel manager, instructional leader, and fiscal expert (Ashton & Duncan, 2012).

A review of the literature showed that further investigation was necessary to understand the unique leadership qualities and skills that superintendent–principals must have to be successful in these roles. Further, the research showed that a gap exists in the quality, ongoing professional learning, and networking opportunities that are designed to support dual-role administrators in rural California. Twenty percent of American students attend rural schools, and barriers to quality education are greater in rural areas because of the diseconomies of scale that

exist in schools with lower a number of students. Funding in most states is determined by a per student formula known as the average daily attendance; therefore, schools with larger populations are able to distribute the cost of fixed and discretionary resources in ways that their rural counterparts cannot do. In this study, the researcher focused on three primary research questions that were related to professional isolation and access to professional growth opportunities for California's rural superintendent-principals.

Research Questions

1. How do sampled, rural, California superintendent-principals describe their professional challenges?
2. How do sampled, rural, California's superintendent-principals describe the impact of their current level of professional learning?
3. How do sampled, rural, California's superintendent-principals describe the impact that participation in a blended COE has on their professional isolation?

Methodology

This qualitative research study was designed, using a descriptive case study methodology. A person's reality is a product of his or her social surroundings and interactions (Marriam & Tisdell, 2015). The role of superintendent-principal is unique among administrative positions in California's public education system; therefore, it was important to understand this role through the eyes of the people who serve in it. Case studies require substantial contact with the participants, for it allows the researcher a holistic understanding of the subject to be studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015). The distinctive and complex communities in which superintendent-principals are employed require an intimate examination of the contexts in which they work. The scope of the research included structured interviews of a sampling of CRSPA

participants, evaluation data from CRSPA's monthly sessions, and observations of participants in their work settings. Three bounded systems controlled the scope of the study:

1. All of the participants were superintendent–principals from rural or remote school districts.
2. All of the districts were located within the geographic boundaries of California.
3. All of the participants were members of an existing COP, the CRSPA.

These bounded systems helped to ensure a controlled research environment yielding data that could be analyzed for themes, patterns, and context.

Research Setting

California has a population of just over 40 million people. Of the state's more than 6 million students, 5.5% attend rural schools (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Approximately 250 superintendent–principals in California serve in the dual administrative role. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2018) recognizes three categories of rural schools: fringe, distant, and remote:

- Rural, fringe: This area is a U.S. Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, and it is rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
- Rural, distant: This area is a U.S. Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area and is rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
- Rural, remote: This area is a U.S. Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

National Center for Education Statistics (2018) has defined schools into 12 categories (Appendix A). These categories are derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's (2017) 2010 census. An analysis of data obtained from the Educational Data Partnership (Ed-Data; 2018), a resource offered through the California Department of Education, showed 104 LEAs with enrollment under 100 students. Siskiyou County has the highest number of LEAs (13) with enrollment under 100 students, followed by Humboldt County (8), Sonoma County (7), and with San Benito, Shasta, Trinity, and Kern counties (6 each). In total, 39 counties have LEA's with less than 100 students with an average 49.32 students per LEA. The average per pupil to teacher ratio in these LEAs is 13.35 compared with the state average of 21.1. Average per pupil spending among LEAs with less than 100 students is \$22,126 compared to the state average of \$12,334 (Educational Data Partnership [Ed-Data], 2018). California's rural school settings are unique among the vast majority of school districts because their teacher to pupil ratio is low, but their cost of educating students and geographic isolation is higher than urban or suburban districts.

Research Sample and Participants

This study was focused on a specific type of school administrator and the impact that participation in a blended COP (that was specifically designed for the needs of the dual role of superintendent–principal) had on reducing professional isolation and improving access to professional growth opportunities. A review of available research showed that this population's access to ongoing and meaningful professional growth opportunities was inadequate given the complexity of the position and the geographic isolation in the communities that they serve. A plethora of professional learning opportunities is designed for principals and superintendents; however, only one professional growth opportunity exists in California for rural superintendent–principals. The first cohort of the CRSPA was a group comprised of 27 superintendent–

principals from across California. CRSPA is a blended COP that distributes communication and learning via in person and virtual platforms. The academy offered an opportunity to examine the challenges of professional growth for rural superintendent–principals because it offered the necessary control sample for the study. CRSPA is modeled after the COP framework. Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term *COP* to describe groups of people who have shared interests and identities, and who form communities through intentional and repeated interaction (Wenger et al., 2002).

Eight of the 27 CRSPA participants fell within the scope of this study. They were superintendent–principals within the geographical boundaries of California. The participants were selected because they represented a broad geographic sampling of superintendent–principals across California. Access to the participants was obtained through a close examination of districts that met the study’s bounded systems that included participation in CRSPA. The geographic diversity that study participants represented increased the generalizability of analyzed data. In addition, the study participants represented other diverse demographics, including gender, age, level of education obtained, and years in the profession. The study participants came from every type of rural region in California from the arid high deserts of eastern California to the cool temperate climate of coastal northern California.

Data Collection

This qualitative case study was designed to result in a better understanding of the unique work contexts and leadership traits of rural superintendent–principals. The study intended (a) to advance knowledge of the impact that membership in a blended COP had on leadership development of rural superintendent–principals, (b) to reduce professional isolation, and (c) to clarify how a COE could work with superintendent–principals to improve and develop a system

of support for leadership development. The research questions required specific data collection procedures to create a baseline understanding, to establish trends, and to develop generalizable outcomes. The study includes a profile for each participant by which the researcher examined the demographic, academic, and professional similarities and differences between participants.

The selection process for the study participants included an invitation to all CRSPA members who fit within the scope of the study. The study includes eight participants. The geographic distribution, age, and gender diversity were factors in deciding who participated in the interviews. Each of the study participants was interviewed in person at their respective districts. The interviews were designed to gather data to understand participants' lived experience, including work context, setting, demographics, occupational drivers, strengths, and challenges. Case study research is an examination of peoples' lived experience to understand more fully the essence of an experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) mentioned that a qualitative interview is designed understand the structure and foundation of an experience. The participant interviews were aimed to understand the lived experience, which makes them an ideal form of data collection when investigating the uniqueness of rural superintendent–principals. In the same way that no two rural communities are the same, no two positions are the same. Rural superintendent–principals are generalists by trade who are expected to take on tasks that are unheard of in larger districts where larger numbers of students allow for administrative specialization (e.g. bus driver, substitute teacher, cook, business manager, or instructional leader).

Two Interview Protocol

The interviews were conducted over two sessions. The interview protocol used was a modified version of the three-interview, phenomenological interview model. Questions were

designed to identify the professional motivations of the individuals, their backgrounds, and their positions, including their challenges and advantages. The interviews examined the impact that professional development (or the lack thereof) had on the participants' professional growth. The interview questions (Appendix B) were specific to the lived experience of the rural superintendent–principal role and the impact that participation in CRSPA had on their efficacy as a rural educational leader. The interviews were 45–60 minutes and were spaced 2–3 weeks apart, depending on the participants' schedules and location. The first session was conducted in person at the participants' school or place of their choosing. The second session provided an opportunity to seek feedback about the data collected and analyzed. The participants were given the opportunity to clarify inaccuracies or misunderstandings.

Data Analysis

To develop a profile for each of the study's participants, the data were collected, measured, and analyzed. The interview data were collected through digital audio recordings for verbal responses, and interview notes were collected for nonverbal responses. Each audio recording was transcribed using Rev.com (2019), a transcription service. After the initial recordings were transcribed, the data were reviewed for corrections against the original audio recordings. According to Hycner (1985), the following steps should be taken when analyzing interviews: (a) all audio recordings should be transcribed and bracketed; (b) holistic reviews (many times) should be conducted; (c) the data should then be clustered and coded; (d) a summary should be developed to assess for the accuracy of the data interpretation by reviewing the summary with the interviewees; and (e) unique and trending themes should be identified for all of the interviews (Hycner, 1985). The collected, qualitative data were analyzed and coded for themes with MaxQDA (2019), a qualitative, analysis software. The results from each interview

were analyzed after each interview and were shared with study the participants to check for accuracy and the need for clarification.

Participant's Rights

All of the participants in the study were informed about their rights through the Participant's Rights Consent Form (Appendix C). Each participant was read the consent form and was asked to sign the form after the verbal agreement of understanding was checked. The consent form included information about the purpose of the research, the research questions, the benefits of the study, confidentiality, how the data was to be collected and protected, their rights to refuse or withdraw from the study, the methods of data destruction, and consent. The study's sample consisted of superintendent-principals from specific geographic regions, and each participant was given a randomized pseudonym. The language describing the school in which participants worked was limited to the number of students who attended the institution and the geographic region in which the school district operates. The language describing the region was important because it helped to illustrate the geographic diversity and the scope that this study represented.

Potential Limitations

By design, qualitative interviews generate a vast amount of data that can be difficult to analyze. The amount of data generated was large; therefore, the sampling size was kept small when compared to the total number of potential participants. However, the study participants were distributed among geographically diverse school districts across California and were inclusive of diverse participant demographics. The interviews were concerned with asking about the lived experience of participants, which revealed a deeper understanding of the unique context in which rural educational leaders work. Interpreting the interview data carried an inherent risk

of injecting the researcher's conscious and unconscious bias into the process and analysis. To protect against bias, the interviews were summarized and shared with the participants; they then had the opportunity to clarify interpretations.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive case study was to examine the impact that participation in the blended COP, CRSPA, had on professional isolation and access to professional growth opportunities for California's rural superintendent-principals. Eight participants were interviewed for the study. The participants were selected from a pool of 27 CRSPA members. The first interview was structured around nine qualitative questions. The last question was quantitative in structure, asking participants to rank various elements of CRSPA's design elements. The interviews took place at the school site of each participant where, in addition to the interview, a tour of the school site was conducted. The site tour allowed this researcher to understand more fully the context in which the participants worked. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect his or her anonymity. The name of the school site in which they work was not mentioned as part of this study; however, demographic information about the schools and the participants were included as part of a participant profile, which is found in this chapter. In addition, this chapter presents the key findings of the data collected. Data were collected using a digital recording device. Interviews were transcribed using a two-step process. First, they were transcribed using Rev.com (2019), a transcription service. The transcriptions were then downloaded, reviewed, and edited by listening to the audio version of the interview while reading for errors. Errors were minimal and this researcher found the transcription services to be highly accurate, timely, and reliable. Once the transcriptions were clean, the researcher read and listened to them independently multiple times for themes that emerged. MaxQDA (2019) qualitative analysis software was then employed to assist in the

categorization and coding process. MaxQDA software streamlines the process of conducting complex qualitative analysis. It allowed this researcher to develop a codebook, summaries, and it contains tools to conduct visual and text analyses. This software was helpful in organizing data around themes.

Participant Profiles

The participants for this study were chosen according to a predetermined set of criteria that were designed to increase the generalizability of the findings. Question 1 in the interview was designed to capture information about the participants' context of work, demographics, and background. Each of the eight participants were selected according to their voluntary interest, geographic distribution throughout the State of California, a balance of gender representation, and number of years serving in the role of superintendent–principal. All of the participants held either a bachelor's or a master's degree. In addition, each participant held his or her Administrative Services credential which qualifies a person to serve as a district or site administrator in the State of California. The number of participants could be considered a limitation of the study given the relatively small number compared to the total number of superintendent–principals in California. However, the scope of the study was primarily those administrator–principals who participated in a blended COP that was designed specifically for the superintendent–principal role; therefore, the number of participants in the study are representative of the 27 who fit the conditions of eligibility for the study. It was a primary goal of this researcher to present a broad representation of administrators that would produce generalizable sets of data. Each participant must have taken part in CRSPA Cohort 1 and be employed as a superintendent–principal in the State of California. Following is a series of

participant profiles that is intended to provide the reader a context in which each participant worked, his or her background, and the reasons why he or she decided to participate in CRSPA.

Participant 1: Michael

Michael is a 49-year-old man whose highest degree obtained was a master's degree in education. Michael grew up in an urban setting, and he has worked in urban, suburban, and rural communities. At the time of the interview, he was completing his first year of serving as a rural superintendent–principal in a district of 165 students in California's central valley. The district has one high school and one elementary school. The student body is 78% socioeconomically disadvantaged and 16.4% of its student body is classified as English language learners. The role in which he is currently serving is his first as superintendent–principal. Michael was motivated to work in rural education because of his affinity for small class sizes and small student bodies. He was drawn to his current district because of its reputation for a good climate and good culture.

Participant 2: Jonathon

Jonathon is a 45-year-old man whose highest degree obtained was a bachelor's degree. Jonathon did not grow up in a rural community. Prior to his current role, he worked in suburban settings in multiple states. His current role is his first as a superintendent–principal and, at the time of the interview, he was completing his second full year. In addition, part of his current position includes general education, classroom teaching. Jonathon works in a district of 14 students where 71% of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and no students are classified as English language learners. Jonathon reported that, when he accepted his current position, he was not actively seeking to work in a rural educational setting, but he accepted the position because of his desire to relocate to California.

Participant 3: Susan

Susan is a 49-year-old woman whose highest degree obtained was a bachelor's degree. At the time of the interview, she did not have an administrative credential, but was in the process of preparing to take the administrative services examination. This examination is one of two ways to obtain an administrative services credential in California. The other way is to enroll in an Administrative Services credential program through a university. Susan grew up in rural community not far from the district she is currently serving. She has worked her entire career in rural education and, in fact, has taught for more than 25 years in the same district in which she is now serving as superintendent–principal. At the time of the interview, she was completing her first year in the administrative role in a district located on the coast of California. Her district has an enrollment of 192 students. Sixty-seven percent of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 6.3% are classified as English language learners. Susan reported that she did not intend to leave her teaching post, but that she was approached by the school board to apply for the superintendent–principal position after her former administrator exited the role.

Participant 4: Margaret

Margaret is a 49-year-old woman whose highest degree obtained was a master's degree. She did not grow up in a rural community, but she has worked for three rural districts and one urban district in the past. At the time of this interview, she was completing her first year as superintendent–principal in a coastal district in northern California. Her district has an enrollment of 17 students. Seventy percent of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and no students classified as English language learners. Margaret had her administrative services credential 5 years before assuming her first administrative role. She gravitates towards rural education for the personable, family-oriented culture that it provides. Margaret reported that it is

much easier to get to know each student as individuals in a rural setting. At the time of the interview, she was completing her third year as superintendent–principal.

Participant 5: Jonah

Jonah is a 31-year-old man whose highest degree obtained was a master’s degree. He grew up in a rural community in central California. He has always worked in rural education. At the time of this interview, Jonah was completing his second year as superintendent–principal in a district located in north central California. His district has one high school that serves Grades 7–12 and one elementary school that serves TK–Grade 6. The district has an enrollment of 404 students. Seventy-six percent of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and 54.4% are classified as English language learners. Jonah reported that his motivation to become a superintendent–principal was his desire to increase his professional responsibility. As vice-principal in another district, he sought a principalship. However, the position that he ended up taking was that of superintendent–principal.

Participant 6: Mary

Mary is a 58-year-old woman whose highest degree obtained was a master’s degree. Mary grew up in the military and moved around the country often as a child. Consequently, she lived in urban, suburban, and rural settings. She has not always worked in rural education, for at the time of this interview, Mary was completing her first year as superintendent–principal. Her current district located in coastal northern California has an enrollment of 101 students. Ninety percent of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and 20.8% are classified as English language learners. Mary began her career as a researcher in the field of science. When she had her first child, she decided to become a teacher with the intent of achieving a work–life balance that her role as a researcher did not provide. She has taught in urban and rural settings. Her

motivation for becoming a superintendent–principal was because of her desire to relocate to a rural area in California.

Participant 7: Anastasia

Anastasia is a 49-year-old woman whose highest degree obtained was a master’s degree. Anastasia grew up in a rural community and has always worked in rural education. Her current role is the first time she has served as superintendent–principal. At the time of the interview, she was completing her seventh year in the position. She was motivated to assume her current role because, in her previous position at her COE, she had lost direct connection with children. She wanted to be back on a school site where she could be more directly involved in student education. Her district, which is located in the California’s central valley, has an enrollment of 181 students and serves Grades TK–8. Forty-six percent of the students in the district are socioeconomically disadvantaged and 9.4% are classified as English language learners.

Participant 8: Seth

Seth is a 44-year-old man whose highest degree obtained was a master’s degree. Seth grew up in a rural community and has always worked in rural education. At the time of the interview, Seth was completing his first year as superintendent–principal. He was the only participant in this study who was leaving the administrative role at the end of the year. Seth reported that the responsibilities and scope of the position were not a good fit for his professional aspirations. The role was too complex, and he has since accepted a principalship in another district. The district in which he served as a superintendent–principal had an enrollment of 195 students. Thirty-five percent of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 2.1% are classified as English language learners.

Summary Participant Profiles

The average age of the participants was 46.75 years with an equal gender distribution of 50% men and 50% women. All of the participants were currently serving in their first role as superintendent–principal with an average of 2.13 years of service. The average enrollment in the participant districts was 158.62 students. Seventy-five percent of the participants served in districts with a grade span of Grades TK–8, while 25% served in Grades TK–12 districts. Seventy-five percent of the participants held a master’s degree, whereas 25% held a bachelor’s degree. This information is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Profiles

Participant pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years in role	Enrollment	Grade span	Highest degree
Michael	49	Male	1	165	TK–12	Master’s
Jonathon	45	Male	1	14	TK–8	Bachelor’s
Susan	49	Female	1	192	TK–8	Bachelor’s
Margaret	49	Female	3	17	TK–8	Master’s
Jonah	31	Male	2	404	TK–12	Master’s
Mary	58	Female	1	101	TK–8	Master’s
Anastasia	49	Female	7	181	TK–8	Master’s
Seth	44	Male	1	195	TK–8	Master’s

Key Thematic Findings

Five key thematic findings (KTF) were identified through the data analysis phase of this study. This chapter presents the participant responses of the interview questions asked. In the

chapter, the researcher also presents the KTF from most prevalent to least. Each key thematic finding includes a descriptive summation of the finding and quotations taken directly from the participants to support the summation. The KTF were as follows:

1. Key Thematic Finding 1: 100% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that collegial networks, such as CRSPA, are important to addressing professional isolation of superintendent–principals.
2. Key Thematic Finding 2: 100% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the CRSPA blended COP was a positive experience that supported their professional growth.
3. Key Thematic Finding 3: 87.5% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the scope of responsibilities of the superintendent–principal role can be overwhelming.
4. Key Thematic Finding 4: 87.5% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the advantages to the superintendent–principal role have to do with the efficiency and freedom of the position.
5. Key Thematic Finding 5: 84.3% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that coaching was an important part of CRSPA’s design.

Interview Questions Data

The study participants were asked nine questions that related to their background, context of work, and participation in CRSPA. The following section includes the findings of each of the questions. The first interview question was designed to gain demographic information about the participants to establish a context and contrast among the study participants (see Table 1 in the Summary of Participant Profiles section). After the demographics were documented, the interviews transitioned to questions that were related to the role of superintendent–principal. Questions 2, 3, 4, and 5 were designed to collect information about how participants would

describe their professional challenges. Questions 2, 6, and 7 were designed to gain insight on how the participants described their current level of professional learning, including the barriers to accessing relevant opportunities. Questions 7, 8, and 9 were designed to gather feedback about the participants' reason for joining CRSPA, the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and CRSPA's impact on their professional isolation. Table 2 maps this study's research questions to the interview questions and KTF:

Table 2

Research Questions Mapped to Interview Questions and Key Thematic Findings

Research questions	Interview questions	Key thematic findings
Research Questions 1	1,2,3,4,5	3,4
Research Questions 2	1,2,6,7	1,3
Research Questions 3	1,7,8,9	1,2,5

Note: RQ = research question.

Interview Question 2

- Please describe the scope of responsibilities in your current role as superintendent–principal.

The participants reported that the scope of responsibilities that is related to their position was wide and varied. No pattern was clearly defined regarding how they reported the scope of responsibilities of the superintendent–principal role. However, what did stand out was that their responsibilities were highly dependent on the total number of staff that was available to support the functions of the district. When support staff was lacking, the responsibility would fall to the superintendent–principal. The responsibilities among participants fall within the traditional scope of the superintendent and principal parts of their position, including instructional leader, fiscal

oversight, employee management, reporting mandates. What is not consistent and is a result of available staffing levels are the nontraditional duties associated with their positions. For example, some are teachers of record as part of their contract, serve as substitute teachers, have occasional custodial duties, and/or drive the school bus. The following narratives are a representative sampling of how participants responded to the question:

- “45 to 50 hours was the minimum amount of time that I was devoting to work in a week and so I would be on campus during that amount of time and then I would usually devote anywhere between a half and a full day on the weekends and that would primarily be the Superintendent stuff but it would be also some of the Principal things like getting staff newsletters and parent newsletters ready on the weekends just because it was hard to fit that in during office hours.” – Seth
- “All the stories I've heard of when you're a superintendent principal, you'll have a plunger in one hand and a school steering wheel in the other, I haven't had that issue.” – Michael
- “There's a blend of responsibilities. I feel like when I'm the principal, I'm doing curriculum, I'm working on master scheduling, I'm dealing with students, I'm calling parents. And then, as the superintendent, it is really the board. I mean, preparing a board packet, for me, is a pretty huge task. I think there are few jobs at this place that I would not be able to do.” – Margaret
- “Everything. Anyone who's not here, I jump in and take on their role. So, teacher, custodian. I have to get my food server's permit to be able to do cafeteria, but I'm in there all the time. Anything that needs to get done I do.”
– Mary

- “Well, I would say, I would start with everything from cleaning the windows, to chasing after eloping children, to meeting with parents, to solving parents’ problems, employees’ problems, to being the head of a board meeting, or the secretary, I guess. Preparing for the board meeting, to approving a \$2 million budget. Or being part of a \$2 million budget, not approving it.” – Susan
- “Well, the scope of my responsibilities includes everything. We don’t have any support staff up at the school. It’s myself and my primary grade teacher. She teaches K through three. My main duty, on paper, 60% of the time I’m the fourth through eighth grade teacher. And then the remainder of my 40% time is keyed as admin. So I take care of my classroom as a teacher for a good part of the day, and most of my administrative duties happen in the afternoon, either at school or at home.” –
Jonathon

Interview Question 3

- Please describe the most important challenges as it relates to your current position as a superintendent–principal.

The most frequent challenge that the participants reported during the interviews about their position as superintendent–principal was amount of time it takes to fulfill their responsibilities. One participant reported that the very position of superintendent–principal should not exist in schools with 200 or more students, given the complexity and scope of responsibilities. The superintendent–principal role requires that the role of superintendent and role of principal (usually fulfilled separately) be performed by one person. This expectation requires extending the workday to working on weekends. As principals, the participants are disciplinarians, instructional leaders, and managers of staff. As superintendents, they are

responsible for all fiscal, facilities, and reporting mandates. In California, this includes the LCAP, School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA), district budgets, and more. In addition to fulfilling the traditional expectations of the principal and superintendent roles, this study's participants reported having to tend to other duties that were typically assigned to other positions (e.g., substitute teacher, cafeteria cook, maintenance custodian, and bus driver). These combined and sometimes unpredictable responsibilities contribute to a sense of role confusion. A common challenge that participants singled out was a sense of being pulled in many directions at once. Most of the participants wanted to spend their days with students, which caused them to push their superintendent duties into non-school hours. What is clear is that managing the responsibilities of both roles presented a sense of frustration among the participants. The following sampling is representative of the participant responses to the question:

- “I’m burnt after 12 hours daily, 6 days a week. So, I do the extra superintendent stuff on Saturdays. I don’t have enough time to think. If it weren’t for the help that I’m getting from people, there’s no way I would be successful.” – Mary
- “I really don’t think superintendent–principals should exist as a position in my opinion. But as I see it a school of 200 students deserves a full time principal and superintendent–principal will never be a full-time principal, it’s impossible.” – Seth
- “I think the biggest one is just that pull. I want to be visible, I want to be in the classrooms, and I want to be around the kids so I don’t mind. But you get a parent that you’re not expecting, and then you get a discipline issue you're not expecting, or then you get the bus not passing the inspection and trying to solve that problem. And so you don’t get the time to do the superintendent parts of it during the day.” – Susan

- “It varies. A lot of the time, if the kids are doing independent work, I’ll sit down and send off a quick email; depends on how much time I need to allocate for said task. I’m fortunate enough that I have a really strong coworker, teacher who has vast experience in small schools.” – Jonathon
- “Well, time is always an issue. Even just in my planning out my day, just the energy that that takes.” – Margaret
- “The challenge is identifying . . . It’s a blur to me, what the superintendent role is and a principal role is. I do get concerned if I leave here and I don’t retire from this school, I hope that doesn’t trip me up at my next position. Because if I go for a superintendent position, I’m afraid that I’ll do some principal stuff and step on toes. Or vice versa. I’ll be in a role of just principal, and step on a superintendent, or another leader’s toes. Just because I don’t know. Those lines are blurred for me.” – Anastasia

Interview Question 4

- Please describe the most important advantages as it relates to your current position as a superintendent–principal.

The participants reported that many advantages were related to the superintendent–principal position. The most common response was regarding the flexibility that the position affords, given the absence of hierarchy in a small district setting. Implementing change can happen quicker and with less bureaucratic hurdles that are found in larger districts. Another advantage that the participants reported was the strong sense of community that existed because of the low number of enrolled students. The ability to be responsive to the needs of staff,

students, and community was clearly an advantage from participant's responses to the question.

The following sampling is representative of the participant responses:

- “I love that I got to see every part of everything that happened at the school. It was kind of a unique role to be serving in the capacity of superintendent at a board meeting and to be able to address everything directly from the perspective as the principal as well.” – Seth
- “We all know each other, so there's that personal issue with the staff. And then with the students.” – Margaret
- “And so when I present at a board meeting, I'm speaking from the point of view of the staff and the kids because I see what they're doing every day because I'm in the classroom. And so there's no disconnect. There's no principal trying to convince the superintendent that their school needs something purchased, or needs some service added, because I see it.” – Susan
- “I think change can happen quicker. We can respond to concerns sooner. We can meet with kids in the morning. In the afternoon, we have a pep assembly because they wanted it, and it was something that we didn't see, or didn't recognize. Or, same thing with staff members. They have a concern and by the next day, curriculum is ordered, or they have Chromebooks in their classroom where it didn't take this huge purchasing sequence to happen. It's there.”
– Anastasia
- “You get to . . . I think you get a better view of the district than any single role person would get.” – Michael

- “Yes, it’s easier to implement change, almost to a disconcerting point. My Board is pretty hands-off; it is a very close-knit community.” – Jonathon

Interview Question 5

- Do you experience isolation as a superintendent–principal?

The participant responses to the question about isolation varied, depending on the level of existing involvement in collegial networks and the support systems available to them. From the responses, it was clear that the participants recognize that professional isolation comes with the role; however, they also recognize that building or joining networks helps to mitigate this isolation. All of the participants felt that isolation was a reality of the position and all of them felt that isolation affected their work. The reasons and the degree of the isolation depended on the geography, the number of collegial relationships, and staffing.

- “And I met other new superintendent–principals that I think weren’t as comfortable reaching out and I could see that weight was on them, so I would tell them . . . I’d just send out any stupid question to groups of people because I’m just like I have no idea what’s going on here, does anyone have any input? I could definitely see absent those networks it would be really hard.” – Seth
- “Absolutely, well, let me temper that a little bit by saying that within the context of a general day, yes, there’s a lot of isolation. I have a very finite amount of feedback within the actual campus and school. And that, coupled with the fact there isn’t support staff for me to either delegate things to, or to get direction from. But outside of the school, this year and last year, has been pretty instrumental in being able to make connections outside of even the county. Between the CRSPA Program and also

the Small Schools Network, it is the reason why I would like to stay in Humboldt County, and the networking that I've been able to do.” – Jonathon

- “Fortunately, I think in my county, we're really unique. There are five superintendent principals. So when we go to superintendent meetings, and we're all around the room and we listen to other superintendents, we have a voice in the room because we're a majority. And we're like, ‘No. It's not like that. It doesn't quite work that way at my site because I am the principal, as well’.” – Anastasia
- “Through CRSPA getting to know all these people, I feel like personally I have a really good support system, and I'm not saying, ‘It's all CRSPA,’ but really if it wasn't for that this year, I wouldn't have any connections, and then I would be completely isolated.” – Susan

Interview Question 6

- Do you experience barriers in accessing high quality professional growth opportunities as a rural superintendent–principal?
 - a. If so, please describe the barriers.
 - b. If not, how do you access high-quality, professional growth opportunities?

All of the participants reported some barriers to accessing high-quality professional growth opportunities. These barriers are inextricably linked to the reported challenges of the position: (a) geographic distance from professional development, (b) relevance of opportunities available, and (c) the unique nature of their roles. The participants reported that it was difficult to leave their sites during the school day because they are the sole administrator and they might have additional duties (as described throughout this study) that would make attending off campus

events very difficult or unlikely. The following sampling is representative of the participants' responses.

- “A lot of superintendents go to the superintendent’s trainings, meetings, events. As superintendent–principal, I feel like, a lot of times, I can’t get away to it. If it’s after school hours, I could be more likely to go, but where most things are during school hours, it’s harder for me to get away.” – Susan
- “Yeah, oh absolutely, yeah. Just the number of hours required to complete the task of superintendent–principal, it’s hard to find that much in the reserves to then go and do something else on top of. To replace is one thing, but to do it on top of is something else.” – Seth
- “I think some of them are expensive. I think, in terms of the proportionality, the economy of scale, I mean, we have a \$500,000 budget. It’s really hard for me to ask for eight grand to go to professional development.” – Margaret
- “I’d be a little bit on the fence on this one. The county office does do a really great job of knowing what the three districts are really looking to do. In being either able to send a county person out and get them trained and bring that back to us or bring someone in to do a training for the county. So, the county has been a great support.” – Jonah
- “Yes. There are things available, but I can’t get away. I think that’s my barrier. So, you have every intention of going to a training, or going to some kind of professional development, and then that’s when the power goes out, or that’s when a parent comes in, or that’s when something happens with a student, and you don’t go. That is what I see as the biggest barrier.” – Susan

Interview Question 7

- Why did you decide to apply to CRSPA?

CRSPA represented a significant investment of time on the part of its participants. The blended COP met over the course of a year. The program began at a 3-day, summer leadership institute, and then met once a month for a day of professional learning. The year ended at a 2-day conference on instructional leadership in June. The purpose of CRSPA was to provide relevant professional growth opportunities for superintendent–principals. The participants applied for CRSPA for a host of reasons, including needing to build their collegial network of superintendent–principals, the flexibility of the COP model, the accessibility of it through its blended design, and because the monthly sessions were held on Saturdays. The following sampling is representative of participants’ responses to the question about why they applied to CRSPA:

- “Being kind of isolated from other superintendent–principals out here, or not having connections with them, it was something for me that when I found out about the opportunity, I really wanted to check it out. Because one, I felt like it was great professional development in terms of helping me learn more about what I am doing.”
– Jonah
- “Because I recognized I needed help, because it was a new position. And because the people who were recommending it, I trusted. – Margaret
- “Because I’ve been looking for something like this since my first year. I felt that superintendent–principals were forgotten. I Googled things, I talked to colleagues in other counties. Nothing on superintendent principals.”
– Anastasia

- “I wanted an avenue so I could connect with other administrators in the county and elsewhere to better be prepared for my job, to And I anticipated exactly what was going to happen, that as CRSPA developed, and we made those connections and we had those avenues for which we could have the silliest of inquiries about things that are thrown at us; I saw it as a great opportunity.” – Jonathon
- “The middle two initials, SP, superintendent–principal. It was the first thing I had ever seen that actually addressed superintendent–principals. You go to [redacted organization name]. It’s geared to vice principals, assistant principals, principals. You go to these things, and you get somewhere between, I don’t know, 10% to 40% applies to you, maybe, because of the setting and what it is and because they’re talking to a broad audience.”
– Michael
- “Because I was scared to death about entering administration with . . . especially knowing that I was going right into the superintendent–principal. There were no intermediate steps for me. There was no assistant principal or principal experience.” – Seth
- “Okay. In all honesty, I didn’t apply, my predecessor did. He recommended that I do it. And so at the time, I knew nothing about it. And I was hesitant with the idea of devoting Saturdays, I mean, I still have a family. And it was like, I’m trying to learn a new job, and do I really want to do this? But it was already signed up and so I said yes.” – Susan

Interview Question 8

- Describe your overall experience as a CRSPA participant. In your opinion, what are CRSPA's strengths and areas for improvement?

Participants were asked to describe their thoughts on CRSPA's strengths and areas for improvement. Following sampling is representative of what participants reported:

Strengths. The primary strengths that were reported included coaching, relevant content, the networking opportunities, and the collegial connections formed by being in a group of fellow superintendent-principals. The participants also felt that the asynchronous communications via Google Groups (2019) was a strength. The ability to ask questions directly through email to others serving in the role was of particular note. The trust developed among participants over the course of the year resulted in collegial relationships that would endure after the program had ended.

- “The coaching is clearly a strength of it. The topics that were selected were clearly a strength, because they were all germane. There were a couple of days where I was like, ‘Ah, I didn’t get as much out of it,’ but that’s going to be with anything. But I just felt like the syllabus, pretty much, was excellent. Networking. The mentorship extended to, all of a sudden, to a group, my cohort. It was so good. Okay, so one of the strengths is developing the communication line that we have with the group threads and the emails, and just seeing this huge wealth of knowledge that is contained in the superintendent positions that attended or were participating. So that was really cool.” – Margaret
- “Building that trust and familiarity with them makes it easier to ask what often feel like stupid questions only to find out five other people have the same question.

Having the chance to get to know other people in that same role both locally and far away. I actually really like the monthly meetings. Networking was absolutely the biggest strength.” – Seth

- “I mean, honestly, the little perks as far as the friendliness, as far as the locations, as far as like, every piece of it, I think it’s all part of making it what it is. If you were sitting in a stuffy room and you were just staring at a screen all day, and that’s all you did month after month, people wouldn’t want to come. But the fact that it’s formal, but it’s also relaxed, and I think just the whole setup of it has been perfect.” – Susan
- “I think the structure of it being on the weekends, was also a way to kind of free my mindset up a little bit and be able to focus on the task at hand.” – Jonathon
- “Okay. My overall experience has been very positive. Just meeting and being with so many colleagues, I think there’s almost 30 of us.” – Anastasia
- “Other strengths were the community. Just having people to meet with that are in the same predicament and learning together. Having people who knew where to find resources and get resources was huge. It’s very important.”
– Mary
- “Strengths definitely being able to connect the superintendent–principals to each other, to utilize resources, and really just have a wealth of knowledge. A confident, someone to ask questions to. I love that part of it. The Google email group, was another big strength.” – Jonah

Areas for improvement. Areas for improvement were primarily related to the content and its delivery. The participants valued the content when it was practical and was not overly theoretical. Some of the participants felt that coaching was also an area for improvement, but this

response was dependent on the relationship between the coach and the coachee. Finally, although technology in the program was perceived as an overall strength, it was also seen as something that usually had technological glitches, and that could be improved.

- “Certain presenters I don’t think really were connected to what we were looking for. If you want me to just come out, the [redacted name of organization] ones I wasn’t extremely, I didn’t feel like I connected to them. It’s not things that necessarily pertain, I don’t feel like pertain to me because of the position, I’m in this small school environment.” – Susan
- “Some topics were too theoretical. I think some of the content felt more like superintendent stuff, and what you could do if you had a large team, a leadership team or a cabinet. It was almost kind of like ‘pie in the sky’¹ stuff. And for superintendent–principals, because of the principal aspect of our job, we’re ‘boots on the ground’².” – Anastasia

¹ π (pie) is the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter or the number that is obtained when one divides the circumference of any circle by its diameter. It begins with 3.1415 and continues forever in a never-repeating pattern. It is an infinite decimal. (See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pi>). Therefore, its ultimate resolution is forever out of reach, as though it were high in the sky. The phrase “pie in the sky” was first used in 1911 by Swedish-born American and Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies) member, Joe Hill, in his song, “The Preacher and the Slave.” As a parody of the Salvation Army song, “In the Sweet Bye and Bye,” in Hill’s song, the preachers exhort the workers to live right, but they also respond to their request for food with, “You will eat by and by/ in that glorious land above the sky/ work and play, live on hay/ you’ll eat pie in the sky when you die.” Thus, like the mathematical equation and Hill’s application of it in socioeconomics, the participant was expressing that the training that large school districts can afford is infinitely out of reach for a small district with limited resources. (See <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/pie-in-the-sky.html>; for the lyrics, see also <http://www.folkarchive.de/pie.html>).

² The primary meaning of this relatively new term is active troops who are physically on the ground in a military campaign, fighting in a war zone. However, “more and more, the phrase *boots on the ground* is coming to mean a group of people who are doing the mundane but necessary work in a situation” (see <https://grammarist.com/idiom/boots-on-the-ground/>). Therefore, the participants meaning is that, unlike “pie in the sky,” she and her team must be grounded in the reality of the circumstances in a small school district and be in the thick of the struggle to meet all practical duties and responsibilities.

- “For areas of improvement I would say the relevancy of some of the speakers drifted a little far from what I felt like was my day-to-day experience. Mix a little bit [referring to theory] in I want to hear that because it’s kind of inspiring, but for me I did want a lot more of the more practical hands-on stuff to get through my day.” – Seth
- “So I think the coaching is a really good idea, but I think there needs to be more contact between coach and coachee.” – Mary
- “I don’t necessarily know that’s something that CRSPA as a program can change. But I think, obviously, letting the participants know that that can make it even more successful and long-lasting for them if they decide to really make that effort.” – Jonah
- “An area for improvement. I mean technology can always get better. It was done well, but you can always get better with technology.” – Michael

Interview Question 9

- Please assess CRSPA’s impact (Scale 1–4), on the supplied rating card, of the following elements:
 - a. Building your collegial network of rural superintendent–principals around the State of California.
 - b. Developing your professional capacity to serve as a rural superintendent–principal.
 - c. Web technologies to connect CRSPA participants across the State of California.
 - i. Zoom Web conferencing
 - ii. Google Groups
 - d. Having CRSPA coaches as part of the program.

The last question of the interview asked participants to rate, on a scale of 1–4, various structural elements of CRSPA, including communications technologies used (Google Groups and Zoom) and coaching. Other elements that participants were asked to rate related to the impact on their own capacity to do their job and how it affected their collegial network across the State of California. The scale was designed to measure the efficacy of the identified elements of the blended COP model: 1 (*not effective*), 2 (*somewhat effective*), 3 (*highly effective*), and 4 (*extremely effective*). The highest collective score for each of the elements was 32. The following is a summary table of how the participants responded, and a visual chart to illustrate each of the elements evaluated. In addition, the qualitative responses help to qualify the participant responses. As indicated in Table 3, the elements with the highest overall rating were building collegial network and the use of Google Groups (2019). Both elements had a score of 32. The element that was rated least effective was coaching, which had a total score of 27 and an average rating of 3.375.

Table 3

Participant's Quantitative Assessment of CRSPA's Impact

Study participants	Build job capacity	Building collegial network	Google groups	Zoom	Coaching
Seth	3	4	4	3	2
Michael	4	4	4	4	3
Jonathon	4	4	4	4	4
Susan	4	4	4	4	4
Margaret	4	4	4	4	4
Jonah	3	4	4	3	4

Mary	3	4	4	4	2
Anastasia	3	4	4	4	4
Total	28	32	32	30	27
Average	3.5	4	4	3.75	3.375

Note. n = 8.

Building your collegial network of rural superintendent–principals around the State of California. Every participant in this study rated CRSPA a 4 when asked about the program building their collegial network across the State of California. Participants reported the group setting nurtured a feeling of family and connectedness. In addition, the members of the group developed an overall awareness that they were not alone and recognized that they shared an identity as superintendent–principals. The following sampling is representative of the participants’ responses:

- “I got 90% of the benefit from CRSPA out of the opportunity to actually connect with other superintendent–principals and know that when I talk to them about a particular issue they weren’t like some local superintendents look at me like ‘I don’t even know why that’s a concern’. So that’s where that networking was just really, really invaluable.” – Seth
- “It kind of encapsulates that feeling of family.” – Margaret
- “Cause it’s all about relationship building, and I think you need to have that one-to-one interaction.” – Mary
- “There’s a lot of people that I know that I would never have known.”
– Michael

- “Just because there’s strength in numbers, and knowing there’s other folks, other than my local guys that I know. I now know more people across the whole state. We’ve got some folks in southern California now that I know. So, to me, it’s just getting to know more people that are in this same role.”

– Anastasia

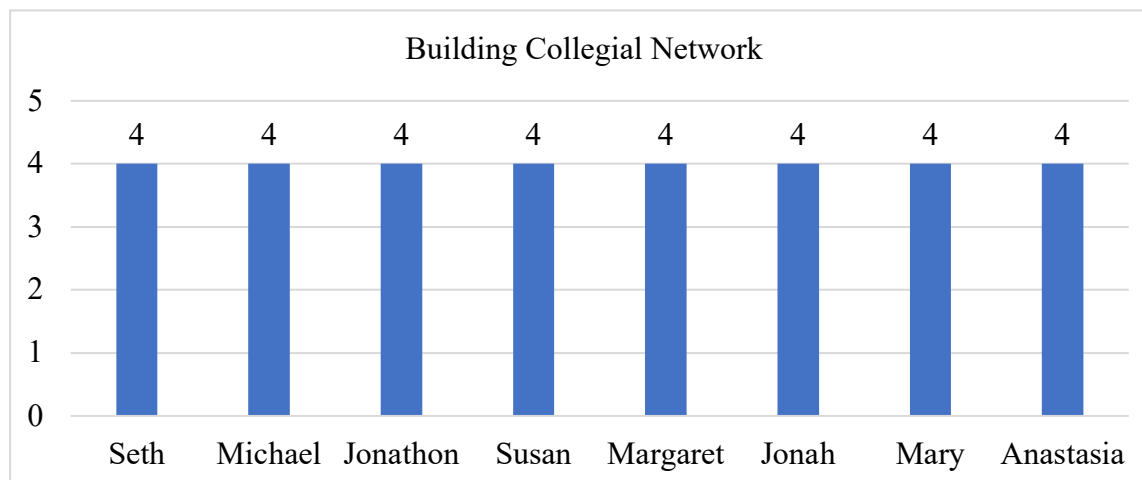


Figure 4. Building collegial network.

Developing your professional capacity to serve as a rural superintendent–principal.

The participants were asked to reflect on how participation in CRSPA increased their ability to perform in their administrative role. Overall, the participants agreed that the experience increased their professional capacity. Most of them felt that the topics that were covered were practical and that they provided a baseline understanding of the position’s responsibilities. A model curriculum was not the goal of CRSPA because the position varies, depending on size of the district, the culture, and the location. However, the participants agreed that relevant topics, combined with networking opportunities, affected their professional capacity positively. The following sampling reflects what the participants reported:

- “I felt it was very important because I have a cadre of people that I’m now established with that I feel comfortable with. And I have a professional relationship with them, and we reach out to each other, which is really good.” – Mary
- “The array of topics, and I feel like it kind of gave me a playbook. It’s up to me to take it to the next level and meet my needs of whatever next challenge comes my way, but I feel like I have a lot of places that I can ask questions, because I’m sure that’s what’s coming next in my life, is like, ‘How am I going to deal with this?’ So I feel like it gave me these access points.”
– Margaret
- “It’s been the best training that I’ve been to, to date.” – Jonathon
- “I think we got really, really close with CRSPA, but we kind of got lost in the weeds sometimes with stuff that for me wasn’t as relevant to my day-to-day experience.” – Seth
- “The content has been really good. Just being together and talking about whatever the content is, I think increased my level of understanding of my role. I was able to bring things back here. It’s helped make me a better superintendent–principal, I think, this year.” – Anastasia

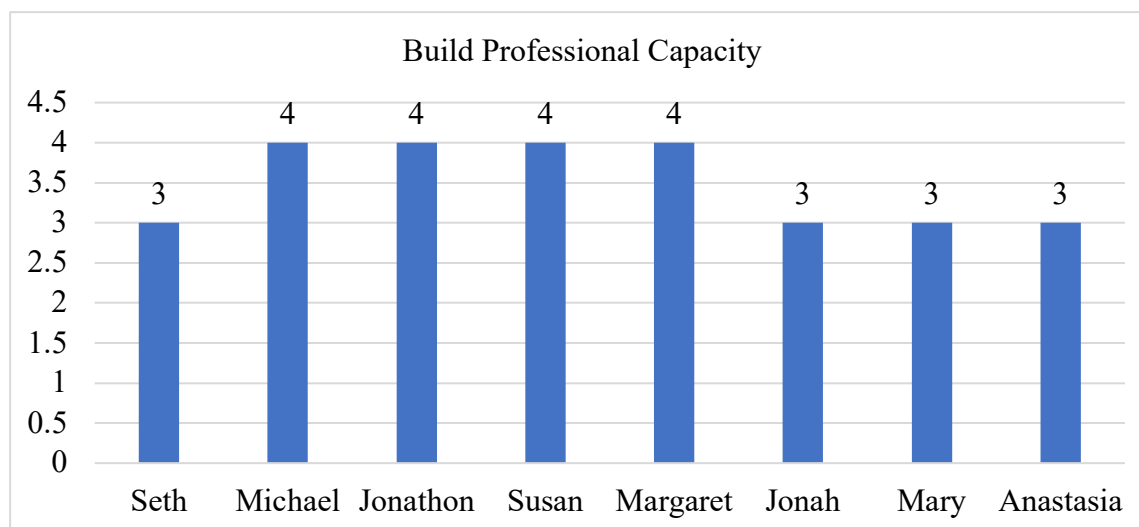


Figure 5. Developing professional capacity.

Having CRSPA coaches as part of the program. The participants responded to this element with the greatest degree of variability as compared to responses about the other elements. The total response was 27 out of a total possible rating of 32 with an average rating of 3.375. From the responses, the variability is largely a result of matching personality between coach and coachee. The following sampling is representative of the participants' responses:

- “And I feel like the mentorship/coaching is it’s . . . I don’t even know. There’s no word to describe how important it is.” – Margaret
- “The best times have been, that I’ve gotten the most out of is when we have time to meet with our coaches.” – Susan
- “I remember going out and sitting on the chair outside and we were doing a little breakout group, and she had some very key elements that changed the whole year. So it was just one conversation, and it was very applicable. It just took some weight off and empowered me to move forward.” – Michael
- “It was great. I think everybody probably had a different experience, depending on who they had.” – Jonathon

- “The problem was . . . is I didn’t see him often enough. And he wasn’t part of my life.” – Mary
- “I didn’t get as much value from my coach.” – Seth
- “Obviously I can only speak to my coach. But having her was pretty amazing. She had a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge. Didn’t always necessarily want to offer up what her answer was. So again, those kind of thought provoking questions and knowing that she’s had the experience and kind of been there done that on some of the things was always nice.” – Jonah

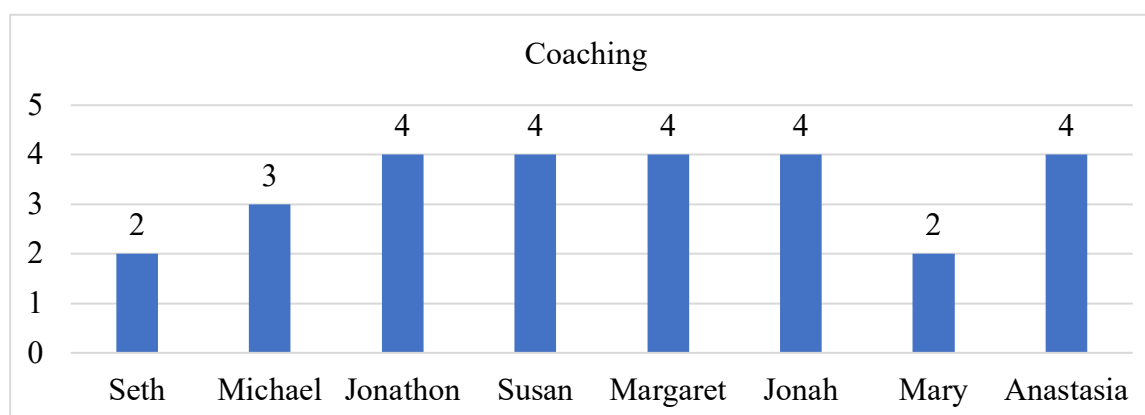


Figure 6. CRSPA coaches.

Web technologies to connect CRSPA participants across the State of California.

CRSPA used two primary communications technologies to build and maintain the blended COP. The primary goal of these technologies was to enable CRSPA participants to connect to monthly session synchronously, using Zoom, regardless of where they were in California. In addition, Google Groups (2019) was used as an asynchronous communication stream whereby participants could pose questions to the group at any time. As the year went on, the participants began to use Google Groups as an important tool to seek advice, gain clarity on a particular issue, or check-in with fellow participants. In both cases, this study’s participants rated the technologies highly.

The following sampling is representative of the participants' responses when asked about these technologies.

Google groups. The participants provided the following answers regarding Google groups.

- “And the Google Groups, oh my gosh. I probably talk about that at every superintendent meeting I go to on a monthly basis. Someone threw out this answer and I was wondering the same thing, and now I got six answers, and I can take what works best at my school.” – Anastasia
- “Invaluable.” – Jonathon
- “I’m actually not a huge user of the Google Groups in terms of putting questions out there, or even answering questions. But I love seeing the stuff that comes across. You kind of end up starring it and saving it for later, or just to read through to see what people were talking about.” – Jonah
- “I archive every single one of those email threads that comes through. I go back and search for certain ones to figure out oh this person said I’ve done that before and then I can reach out to them individually. I haven’t posted tons of questions to the group, but probably half a dozen which, each time, I got multiple responses back, and I just love that those who have something to say will say it and those who don’t I know are probably looking at it.” – Seth

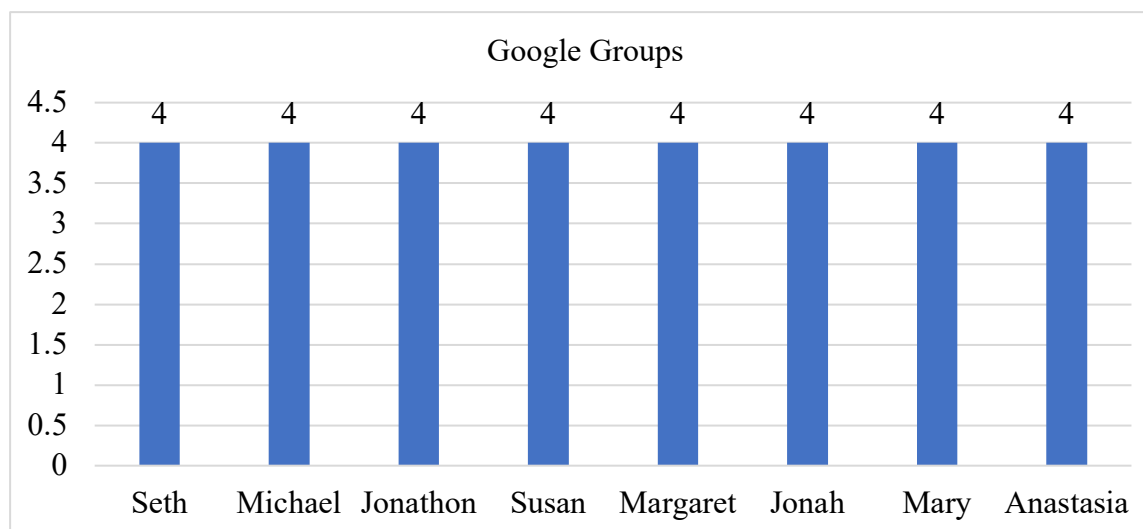


Figure 7. Effectiveness of Google Groups.

Zoom. The participants provided the following answers regarding Zoom.

- “I liked the being able to chat, because I was having a throat-sinus thing, so I didn’t want to talk. Having two ways of presenting your information if you’re not on the site is, again, another access issue. It levels. It makes more equitable, because some people are going to want to just be talking and some people are going to want to chat. I really felt like it was inclusive for people that the travel would have just been too much for them.” – Margaret
- “As someone on the other side of it, a little bit easier to, maybe, not participate fully, not be there 90% of the time. It’s convenient, but at the same time it’s really easy to, kind of, put yourself on mute.” – Jonah
- “I was able to home in my pajamas with tea and participate, so that was really . . . I felt like it really is responding to the things that we are trying to address.” – Margaret
- “Oh, God. Yeah. And I don’t think, because of the way you guys manage the rooms on Zoom, it’s lessened the experience.” – Anastasia

- “So actually I was home when you were in Redding and I felt like I heard everything that was going on there and so for my one experience with Zoom being on the remote end of things it was great. I really did feel like I was there.” – Seth

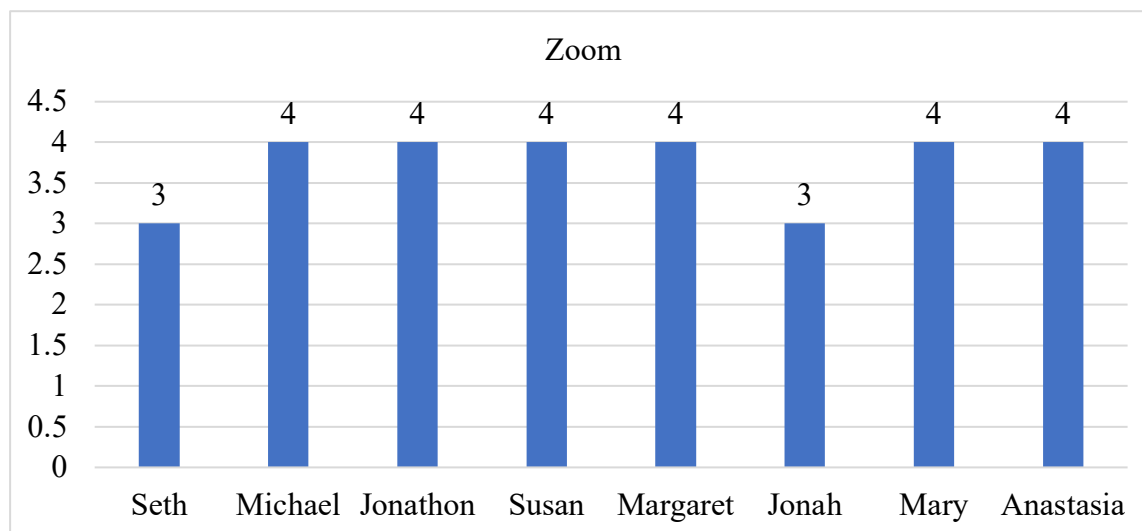


Figure 8. Effectiveness of Zoom.

Key Thematic Findings

Key Thematic Finding 1

- 100% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that collegial networks, such as CRSPA, are important to addressing professional isolation of superintendent–principals.

CRSPA is a blended COP specifically designed to meet the needs of the dual superintendent–principal role in rural California. Eight out of the eight participants reported feelings of professional isolation both because of their role as superintendent–principal and as rural administrators. The following participant statements illustrate and support that professional isolation is experienced in the role:

- “I have a resource teacher that comes up once a week so there isn’t a lot of avenues for venting or for just even conversing. I have a very finite amount of feedback within

the actual campus and school. And that, coupled with the fact there isn't support staff for me to either delegate things to, or to get direction from." – Jonathon

- "I think the isolation I feel is more in our school, at our school site . . . because there is nobody else in an administrative role here, so it's not like there's a superintendent and a principal, or a vice principal, somebody who I can talk to." – Susan
- "Yes, because when I come to work ... It's just me." – Margaret
- "I think as far as more isolation, being . . . obviously location. Being away from a lot of things here. But last year, when I started it was . . . I was the only Superintendent Principal in the county. And not really having connections to those other people yet either." – Jonah
- "So there are times where you feel like you're just making a decision on your own, and that's not how I like to work, and there is that field of isolation at that point." – Michael
- "I've talked to the board members and they say, they all basically say whatever you think. So that does leave the decision squarely in my hand, and that does feel isolated and it does put a lot of pressure." – Jonathon

CRSPA is a blended COP that brings together rural administrators who have similar contexts of work. One purpose of this study was to examine the impact that participation in a blended community might have on professional isolation. All of the study participants reported that the structure and composition of CRSPA allowed for a sense of community that nurtured social and professional bonds between participants. The following participant statements support the impact that CRSPA had on professional isolation:

- “Just having people to meet with that are in the same predicament and learning together. Having people who knew where to find resources and get resources was huge. It’s very important. Cause it’s all about relationship building, and I think you need to have that one-to-one interaction. Just because there's strength in numbers, and knowing there's other folks, other than my local guys that I know. I now know more people across the whole state. We’ve got some folks in southern California now that I know. So to me, it’s just getting to know more people that are in this same role.” – Mary
- “You know just because my time was so precious and I had not two different jobs but two slightly overlapping jobs at the same time. So that’s where that networking was just really, really invaluable.” – Seth
- “It shrinks the world, because it just feels like there’s so many things that alienate us from relationships.” – Margaret
- “It’s an enjoyable group of folks Coming from different areas was fascinating to me. But some of them are really very, very close, and who I would have never met. I wouldn't have known the person in Junction City, nor in Montague.” – Margaret
- “And when you have groups who have experiences together, doing things, drinking, going on boats, stuff like that, then you wind up having common experiences and you start developing that relationship faster.” – Mary
- “Being able to connect the superintendent–principals to each other, to utilize resources, and really just have a wealth of knowledge. A confident, someone to ask questions to. I love that part of it.” – Jonah

- “If nothing else this year, when I’m having a bad day or something’s not quite right, or someone’s complaining about something, I say to myself, ‘There are 30 other CRSPAs that are having the same issue.’ It’s just a different face and a different name. God’s honest truth, that’s what I tell myself. So the fact that I’m still getting supported after 7 years is amazing. I think that’s huge for CRSPA.” – Anastasia

Key Thematic Finding 2

- 100% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that CRSPA blended COP was a positive experience that supported their professional growth.

The participants in the study reported that CRSPA addressed some of the barriers to accessing professional growth opportunities that they experience in their role as superintendent–principals. When asked about these barriers, the most frequent phrase mentioned, when asked about barriers to professional growth, was lack of time and geographic distance. The following participant statements illustrate barriers to professional growth that were representative of the study participants as a whole:

- “If you take time off you feel guilty. That’s another part of it. You can’t . . . there’s always so many millions of things to do.” – Mary
- “Because for us, you know, I mean, Redding [CA] is doable. It’s just over 2 hours. People do that one. But when you look at, kind of, popular places that educational trainings are held . . . Sacramento, that’s 5 hours. So it’s that distance and actually getting people to commit the time outside of the actual training to go get the training.” – Jonah

- “Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. I just opened the [redacted organization name] and I was like, wow, there’s all this cool stuff, but I’m not going there.”
– Margaret
- “A lot of superintendents go to the superintendent’s trainings, meetings, events. As superintendent–principal, I feel like a lot of times I can’t get away to it. If it’s after school hours, I could be more likely to go, but where most things are during school hours, it’s harder for me to get away.” – Susan
- “I can’t leave the school with one person there.” – Jonathon

When asked about CRSPA’s strengths in addressing barriers to the professional growth that they experienced, the participants commented on the program’s structure, relevance of topic, technology, community, and different modes of communication. The following statements support and illustrate participant thoughts on CRSPA’s ability to address barriers to professional growth:

- “One of the strengths is developing the communication line that we have with the group threads and the emails, and just seeing this huge wealth of knowledge that is contained in the superintendent–principal positions that were participating. And it’s really inspiring, makes me want to be like, I want to be able to answer a question like that It felt like a totally safe space.”
– Margaret
- “CRSPA covered topics in depth that were immediately applicable to the position I was in.” – Mary
- “CRSPA was pretty powerful for me to have that access but getting out of town was a challenge. I did go down to the small schools’ conference [part of CRSPA] and that

was really wonderful. It put a strain on my site for me to be gone for those few days.”

– Seth

- “There’s just a lot of information there that’s applicable to what I do.”

– Michael

- “My overall experience has been very positive.” – Anastasia

- “I knew another colleague of mine was having that same issue, and so I’m like, look what I heard from CRSPA today. It’s been . . . Both of those, Zoom and Google Groups has been amazing for me.” – Anastasia

- “I feel like it [CRSPA] addressed the array of topics, and I feel like it kind of gave me a playbook. It’s up to me to take it to the next level and meet my needs of whatever next challenge comes my way, but I feel like I have a lot of places that I can ask questions.” – Margaret

Key Thematic Finding 3

- 87.5% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the scope of responsibilities of the superintendent–principal role can be overwhelming.

The study participants are representative of typical school districts who employ superintendent–principals in the State of California. Districts employing superintendent–principals typically have low student enrollment, are rural, and have only one administrator in the district. In California, the size of the district makes no difference in the type or number of administrative requirements or reporting mandates that are expected by the California Department of Education. When asked about the scope of responsibilities related to their position, seven out of eight reported feeling overwhelmed by the number and variability of the responsibilities.

- “Everything from . . . all the compliance documents, all of that piece as the superintendent. So, advising the board, being aware of the budget, working with other district personnel in terms of business manager, secretary. Then the principal of my own site. So getting all the instruction, curriculum, discipline.” – Jonah
- “I think at a rural school like this, if I can’t do it, then I can’t ask someone else to do it. So my scope is all encompassing. Anywhere from a classroom teacher to our custodian, to our secretary. And so to me, the scope is everything that could be done at this small school.” – Anastasia
- “I will say, there are times when I’m trying to unclog a toilet, or answer telephones, I’m like, There is a superintendent somewhere not doing this [laughs]. So to me, it’s just the scope of what can be done at the school because we’re so small.” – Anastasia
- “It’s so huge. So, I feel like there’s the horizontal articulation and then there’s the vertical articulation, and I feel like it can be anything from dealing with an individual student, and that, to me, is the closest to the ground level. Then going and sitting in the governor’s chambers, to be interacting with legislators or the representatives. So anywhere from Band-Aids® to the capitol.”
– Margaret
- “There’s a blend of responsibilities. I feel like when I’m the principal, I’m doing curriculum, I’m working on master scheduling, I’m dealing with students, I’m calling parents. And then, as the superintendent, it is really the board. I mean, preparing a board packet, for me, is a pretty huge task, because they’re the governing body and I want to make sure that they’re super clear about the decisions that they’re making.” – Margaret

- “Well, the scope of my responsibilities includes everything. We don’t have any support staff up at the school. It’s myself and my primary grade teacher. She teaches K through three. My main duty, on paper, 60% of the time I’m the fourth through eighth grade teacher. And then the remainder of my 40% time is keyed as admin. So I take care of my classroom as a teacher for a good part of the day, and most of my administrative duties happen in the afternoon, either at school or at home.” –

Jonathon

- “They ranged from your stock principal activities of making sure that I was in the classrooms observing and evaluating classified and certificated staff. Assisting students in a variety of ways from discipline to just giving them a little emotional tune-ups throughout the day. So, I was at a K–8 and it ranged anywhere from four year olds to kids that were stepping into high school towards the end of the year.” –

Seth

The one study participant who did not express a sense of being overwhelming by scope of the position did agree with the extent of responsibilities but reported that he had additional support staff that other participants did not have.

- “I mean, quite literally, it’s anything and everything having to do with school. But, on a practical standpoint, I have a director of maintenance operations, transportation director and I have a CBO and really good teachers and an athletic director and next year, we’re adding a dean of students, so they all take huge chunks of that. If our cafeteria people are out, we have a standing plan that CBO fills in for breakfast and our school secretary fills in for lunch. I have yet to, and I think we are odd here, but I have yet to plunge a toilet. I have yet to serve any food.” – Michael

Key Thematic Finding 4

- 87.5% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the advantages to the superintendent–principal role have to do with the efficiency and freedom of the position.

When asked about the advantages of the superintendent–principal role participants responded positively about the freedom, intimacy, efficiency and lack of bureaucracy associated with the position. Following are participant statements that illustrate the advantages of the position that participants reported during the interviews:

- “It’s the fact that I have a vision that I can implement.” – Mary
- “It’s easier to implement change.” – Jonathon
- “Well, because it is one person, it is, I feel like maybe a little more streamlined. Like, you know, you’re on the front lines, so you know when you’re making decisions, financial decisions, you know truly, yes, that’s something that school needs.”– Susan
- “You have a bit more freedom, in terms of . . . So, as I make decisions about my site I don’t necessarily have to worry about what the superintendent wants to do. I guess maybe less checks and balances technically. But like I said, with running a site, but also being the superintendent, it kind of allows you to see the insider vision and know how to get there with a little bit less red tape sometimes.” – Jonah

Key Thematic Finding 5

- 84.3% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that coaching was an important part of CRSPA’s design but was dependent on personality fit.

CRSPA employed three veteran administrators to act as coaches for the participants. Each coach was assigned between seven and 10 CRSPA participants. One of the coaches was still working as a superintendent–principal in a district with 35 students. The other two coaches

were retired, and both of them had decades of experience working in rural districts as the sole administrator. One coach had retired as a county superintendent of schools in the central valley of California. All of the coaches were required to make at least one site visit to each of their participant's school districts. They were also required to make monthly contact via phone, web, or email. Finally, the coaches were expected to attend CRSPA's monthly face-to-face sessions during which coaching subgroups would gather and discuss topics ranging from specific issues that the participants were trying to address, to extended conversations around the month's topic. The following statements reflect and substantiate how the participants viewed the coaching element of CRSPA's design:

- “If I need resources . . . like when I was going through the reduction in force for instance, he could send me all of the stuff that he had done, and I could use it and apply it to my school.” – Mary
- “It was great. I think everybody probably had a different experience, depending on who they had.” – Jonathon
- “She's had a great educational experience, with a plethora of information to share. She's very personable. I don't know, there's something about her that you just want her to be your coach. So, she's been amazing.” – Anastasia
- “There's no word to describe how important it is.” – Margaret
- “I didn't get as much value from my coach. It might have been the personality of the coach.” – Seth

Conclusion

This chapter presented the results of the qualitative interviews conducted at each of the study's 8 participants. The data produced from the interviews yielded insight resulted in the identification of five key thematic findings. The key thematic findings are:

1. 100% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that collegial networks, such as CRSPA, are important to addressing professional isolation of superintendent–principals.
2. 100% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that CRSPA blended COP was a positive experience that supported their professional growth.
3. 87.5% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the scope of responsibilities of the superintendent–principal role can be overwhelming.
4. 87.5% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the advantages to the superintendent–principal role have to do with the efficiency and freedom of the position.
5. 84.3% of participants ($n = 8$) reported that coaching was an important part of CRSPA's design but was dependent on personality fit.

Chapter 5 will analyze and synthesis the five key thematic findings identified in this chapter. In addition, chapter 5 will discuss how the key thematic findings address the research questions, implications of research, limitations of the study, and suggested recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this descriptive case study is to help rural administrators and other education policy makers better understand the impact of professional isolation on rural superintendent–principals, and the impact that blended COP can have alleviating this isolation and the gaps in professional development. This chapter presents an analysis and synthesis of findings from interviews that were conducted with superintendent–principals who participated in the statewide blended COP known as CRSPA. Eight participants that could provide insight and perspective on the study’s research questions were selected to be interviewed. In this chapter, the researcher will reintroduce the reader to the research questions and will align the research questions to each of the five key thematic findings (KTFs) that were identified in chapter 4 of this study. The researcher will also discuss the implications that this study has on theory and current research related to rural superintendent–principals and the challenges that they face in accessing professional growth opportunities. Finally, in this chapter, the researcher will present the limitations of the study and the recommendations for future research that will help further the understanding of the complex and unique role that rural school administrators have in supporting public school system of California and of the nation.

Research Questions

1. How do sampled, rural, California superintendent–principals describe their professional challenges?
2. How do sampled, rural, California superintendent–principals describe the impact of their current level of professional learning?

3. How do sampled, rural, California superintendent–principals describe the impact that participation in a blended COP has on their professional isolation?

Key Thematic Findings

1. KTF 1: 100% of the participants ($n = 8$) reported that collegial networks (e.g., CRSPA) are important to addressing professional isolation of superintendent–principals.
2. KTF 2: 100% of the participants ($n = 8$) report that the CRSPA blended COP was a positive experience that supported their professional growth.
3. KTF 3: 87.5% of the participants ($n = 8$) reported that the scope of responsibilities of the superintendent–principal role can be overwhelming.
4. KTF 4: 87.5% of the participants ($n = 8$) reported that the advantages to the superintendent–principal role have to do with the efficiency and the freedom of the position.
5. KTF 5: 84.3% of the participants ($n = 8$) reported that coaching was an important part of CRSPA’s design.

Interpretation of the Findings

The eight participants of the study provided a bounty of qualitative data to further researchers’ and education policymakers’ understanding of the pressures that California’s rural superintendent–principals face because of the isolation and barriers in accessing professional growth. The participants also provided insight on the impact that a blended COP can have on connecting rural administrators. The interviews offered an opportunity for this researcher to uncover common themes with respect to the unique administrative role typically associated with sparsely populated and rural parts of California. The data collected as part of the study and the

analysis presented in this section add to the collective understanding of an underserved, misunderstood, poorly supported segment of California’s public education system. Three research questions have driven the research in this study. Five KTF were identified and the data was presented in chapter four of this study. Table 4 maps these KTF to study’s research questions to demonstrate clearly the relationship between the two.

Table 4

Research Questions Mapped to Key Thematic Findings

Research question	KTF 1	KTF 2	KTF 3	KTF 4	KTF 5
Research Question 1			x	x	
Research Question 2	x		x		
Research Question 3	x	x			x

Note: KTF = Key thematic finding.

Research Question 1

- How do sampled, rural, California superintendent–principals describe its professional challenges?

California has 1,026 school districts in its public school system, and 27% of these districts are led by superintendent–principals. These dual administrative positions are found in rural and sparsely populated parts of the state. Those serving in the position describe the challenges as voluminous and situational depending on the scope and size of the district in which they serve. Each person’s role is unique to the community in which he or she serves. However, according to Gemin et al. (2018), these administrators encounter several common pressures, including declining enrollments, higher rates of student poverty, and high teacher turnover. Two KTF were identified because of this study’s data collection phase, which clarified the

professional challenges experienced by superintendent–principals. The vast majority (87.5%) of participants ($n = 8$) in the study reported that the scope of responsibilities of the superintendent role can be overwhelming (KTF 3). The time constraints experienced because of the scope of responsibilities associated with the position are the primary driver that contributes to their sense of being overwhelmed.

When asked about the scope of the responsibilities the participants uniformly responded that they were responsible for every aspect of the district. They are often the only person on staff with the flexibility to offer backup if a teacher does not report to work, a report must be written, or bus driver does not show up. The participants reported a feeling of being pulled in many directions at once. The participant, Susan, stated, “I want to be visible, I want to be in the classrooms, but you get a parent that you’re not expecting, and then you get a discipline issue you’re not expecting, or then you get the bus not passing the inspection, and trying to solve that problem.” Margaret, who is a superintendent–principal in coastal northern California, reported that even planning for the day is difficult given the variety of responsibilities she has in her position. It was common for participants to report that a strategy they used to overcome these challenges was to extend their work into the evenings and weekends. The participants often spend their days acting as a site principal, leaving their superintendent duties for when the school day is completed or for weekends, as illustrated by Jonathan who reported, “A lot of my admin work takes place in the afternoon after I get home.”

A challenge that is of particular note has to do with the role confusion that superintendent–principals experience. This role confusion is a result of the variability of the position’s responsibilities and with whom the superintendent–principal interacts. The role confusion is further influenced by the perception of the constituents being served, whether staff

or board members (Curry & Wolf, 2017). A strategy that Anastasia used to cope with the role confusion she experienced was to change her email address,

I recently changed my address on my email because I didn't really want the title of superintendent–principal. I wanted my job to bring the energy to the school, in both the staff and the students. I just want people to look to me, not necessarily as that title, but as the person they can go to.

Jonathon, who is the superintendent–principal of a district with 17 students, is also a teacher of record. To overcome transportation issues from home to school, Jonathon also drives a number of students to school each day in a district van because there is no school bus. What is clear, from the interviews conducted, is that the position has many challenges; therefore, they are concerned about the ability to do their job well given the lack of time and plethora of responsibilities. As Jonah stated, “I would say, if anything, it's the ability to do a quality job at both in the time that you have each day.” The challenges reported by participants during the interview support McCormick's (2016) assertion that balancing the number and complexity of responsibilities is one of the most challenging aspects of the role of superintendent–principal. The challenges reported also support Peccia's (2016) claim that time constraints contributed to a feeling of professional isolation.

To give the challenges that rural superintendent–principals experience the proper context, it is important to understand also the advantages that the position affords. The vast majority (87.5%) of participants ($n = 8$) reported that the advantages of the superintendent–principal role have to do with the efficiency and freedom of the position (KTF 4). The reader might not be surprised to learn that a relatively flat organizational structure influences the advantages that the participants reported, for they appreciate the relative absence of bureaucracy that tends to slow

down the rate and implementation of change in larger organizations. The dual role helps the administrator to develop a complex and holistic understanding of the district. According to Susan,

When I present at a board meeting, I'm speaking from the point of view of the staff and the kids because I see what they're doing every day because I'm in the classroom. And so there's no disconnect. There's no principal trying to convince the superintendent that their school needs something purchased, or needs some service added, because I see it.

Susan's perspective is representative of responses from the study participants and constitutes perhaps the biggest advantage of the position. Jonathon agreed, "It's pretty easy for us to implement vision and [to] collaborate." The superintendent–principal role is challenging and complex, but it offers a level of intimacy with students, staff, and the community that the participants appreciate. Seth stated, "I love that I got to see every part of everything that happened at the school," and Margaret felt,

I love having a small student population. I've always strived to get to know my students and their families. And now instead of it being like, Oh, I know all my fifth graders, it's like I know my TK's to eighth, and their pets, and their siblings, and their baby siblings that are at home. And that means so much to them.

From the participant responses, one can see a clear affinity for the small student body that they serve, which occurs primarily because of the lack of bureaucratic barriers when implementing change and developing deep relationships with their students. The challenges experienced by superintendent–principals are complex and varied; however, the study participants report a number of advantages that offset these challenges.

Research Question 2

- How do sampled, rural, California superintendent–principals describe the impact of their current level of professional learning?

Accessing professional learning opportunities for superintendent–principals is difficult for a number of reasons and is primarily related to time constraints, geographic isolation, and the responsibilities of the position, as well as the few options that are designed specifically to meet the unique needs of the role. The primary avenues that were assessed for professional learning opportunities, according to this study’s participants included online webinars, independent research, collaboration with colleagues, and face-to-face workshop and conference attendance. However, they consistently reported that face-to-face workshop and conference attendance presented the biggest obstacle because of the geographic distances from the district. Relevance of topics was also presented as a barrier. The superintendent–principal is the person who holds the responsibilities of two separate positions that are combined into one. With that dual role comes the traditional responsibilities of both superintendent and principal; however, from the participant interviews the superintendent–principal has unique challenges because of the combined role that falls outside of scope of the traditionally separated roles. The scope of responsibilities can be overwhelming (KTF 3); therefore, the participants described the difficulty they had in getting off site to attend professional learning opportunities. As Jonah reported, “When you look at, kind of, popular places that educational trainings are held . . . Sacramento, that’s 5 hours. So it’s that distance and actually getting people to commit.” Susan, mentioned, “So the way to access the professional growth opportunities would be to either find things that are weekends or after school hours, or online.” This response was typical of the study participants and is in alignment with how they manage the overall scope of their role.

Superintendent–principals recognize the importance of professional learning; however, the primary avenue for them, given the realities of their positions, is to do it after hours.

Given the time constraints and barriers to accessing traditional forms of professional learning, the participants in this study reported similarly regarding the importance of developing networks of peers to find support in growing in their positions. In fact, 100% of the participants ($n = 8$) reported that collegial networks (e.g., CRSPA) are important for addressing the professional isolation of superintendent–principals (KTF 1). This finding supports Lave and Wagner’s (1991) COP model which is comprised of people with shared interests who come together on a reoccurring basis with the goal of improving professional practice (Wenger et al., 2002).

Research Question 3

- How do sampled, rural, California superintendent–principals describe the impact that participation in a blended COE has on their professional isolation?

The CRSPA is a blended COP that is specifically designed to support the unique professional learning needs of California’s rural superintendent–principals. Over the course of the 2018–2019 school year, 27 superintendent–principals participated in a yearlong cohort experience. The participants gathered in the summer of 2018 for a 3-day leadership academy. Each succeeding month the CRSPA participants gathered in a blended environment, face-to-face or via Zoom Web conferencing, for a daylong professional learning session. The sessions were structured around the topics that the participants had identified prior to the start of the yearlong experience. In addition to content specific topics, the monthly sessions included built in coaching sessions in which the group met in subgroups with their designated coaches. The participants also communicated asynchronously throughout the year in a Google Group in which questions

could be asked and fielded by the participants. The yearlong cohort experience culminated in a 2-day gathering during which the participants had the opportunity to connect face-to-face one last time.

The participants of this study were members of this first CRSPA cohort experience and 100% of them reported that collegial networks (e.g., CRSPA) are important to addressing professional isolation of superintendent–principals (KTF 1) and that CRSPA was a positive experience that supported their professional growth (KFT 2). The majority (84.3%) of the study participants reported that coaching was an important part of CRSPA’s design (KFT 5). CRSPA leveraged three theoretical principles in its conceptual design that include LPP, andragogy, and blended learning. Each of these evidence-based principles (discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this study) was foundational to the structure and implementation of CRSPA’s design as a blended COP.

The success of a blended COP is largely dependent on the level of the social cohesion that is developed among the participants. CRSPA nurtured this social cohesion by implementing a strategy that required all CRPSA participants to engage in a 3-day leadership institute in which all were physically present. The institute had social-bonding opportunities embedded throughout the 3-day experience. The strong social cohesion that resulted manifested itself in robust online communication through Google Groups throughout the year and overall retention in the program. As Anastasia reported, “Google Groups, oh my gosh. I probably talk about that at every superintendent meeting I go to on a monthly basis.” Blended online professional development can be very effective for those separated by geography (Wolf, 2006). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) found that a COP is more than a group of people who share similar curiosities; it is also the practitioners that come together to codevelop their common practice.

The social cohesion born out of the nonwork-related activities (e.g., lodging together, eating together, or travelling together) strengthens bonds and primes members of a COP for reoccurring professional learning. The findings from the study support this claim, for everyone recognizes the importance of collegial networks in addressing professional isolation in his or her profession (KTF 1). For example, Jonathon felt that “it’s been the best training that I’ve been to, to date,” and Seth reported that “networking was absolutely the biggest strength the trust is really important.” When asked about the collegial network Margaret responded, “I think of colleague[s] on the professional level and the personal level. It’s an enjoyable group of folks and coming from different areas was fascinating to me.”

A COP is stronger when the members of the group come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Legitimate peripheral participation provided structure for the coaching element of the program in which the coaches, who were veteran rural administrators, acted as the “old timers” whereas the participants were the “newcomers” (Zaffini, 2018). Coaching was embedded into the design of the program to provide the participants the opportunity to gain feedback from a coach who had deep knowledge of the superintendent–principal role. A majority (84.3%) of the study participants reported that coaching was an important part of CRSPA’s design (KFT 5). Although this was the KTF with the lowest rating, when compared to other elements of CRSPA, the participants in the study recognized the value in having coaches as part of the program. Their opinions diverged, depending on how close they felt to their coach. When developing coaching relationships, personalities matter more than level of experience. For example, Michael stated, “I remember going out and sitting on the chair outside, and we were doing a little breakout group, and she had some very key elements that changed the whole year,” whereas Mary reported, “The

problem was I didn't see him often enough. And he wasn't part of my life . . . and there was never a connection between him and me.”

Implications for Practice

California's rural superintendent-principals are those who serve in a state where the needs of rural schools are often overlooked. The vast geographic distances that separate them make developing a strong and cohesive collegial network difficult. As of 2019, CRSPA is the only blended COP specifically designed to address the professional growth needs of rural, superintendent-principals in the State of California. It was fitting to study the impact that a blended COP could have on addressing these barriers in the profession. The findings from this study can help rural administrators, board members, the COE, professional development providers, and education policy makers to understand better the context in which superintendent-principals work and live. Therefore, this study has enabled a demonstrable connection between a statewide collegial network and increasing the professional growth while decreasing the professional isolation of superintendent-principals. Vast geographic distances separate these dual role administrators; therefore, the most efficient way to connect them is through a blended COP that leverages appropriate technologies and that nurtures communication and networking. CRSPA embedded two technologies to accommodate asynchronous and synchronous learning among members of the COP. Google Groups and Zoom improved the interaction of CRSPA participants and helped to overcome the physical distances. The findings of this study offer a rationale and blueprint for improving the connectedness among the California's rural administrators. Blended COPs are ideally suited for the realities that rural administrators face as they connect underserved professionals; they are cost effective, and they improve the overall competence of the members through sustained interaction. The findings suggest that

superintendent–principals are less likely to engage in professional growth opportunities because of the difficulty of leaving school sites, the cost, and the relevance of topics that are designed for larger districts. Therefore, using this research, school boards, COEs, and policy makers should consider the positive impact that blended COPs can have on rural superintendent–principals and they should invest in building these networks to support the increasingly difficult realities of rural school administration.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are related to the dearth of research that existed prior to this study that connects the impact that blended COP has on alleviating professional isolation and barriers to accessing profession growth opportunities for rural educational leaders. The findings from this qualitative, descriptive, case study, although representative, could be strengthened further by conducting a longitudinal study of CRSPA participants that would span multiple cohorts. However, CRSPA was in its first year; therefore, this option was not available to this researcher. To understand better the impact that a COP might have, identifying a control group of superintendent–principals that were not part of CRSPA might have provided additional data that would have enabled a contrasting analysis between COP members and non-COP members.

Recommendations for Future Research

Rural education administration is a complex yet critical topic of research. Superintendent–principals are neither superintendents nor principals. They do in fact embody a position that is unique from traditional single-role positions. The role is defined by the distinctive circumstances of the district and by the composition of the community that it serves. Developing relevant and sustained professional growth opportunities for these unique administrators is a topic that has been largely absent from California’s educational community. The following five

recommendations for future research may help to increase the understanding of and fuel the sustainability of California's rural superintendent–principals:

1. Conduct a longitudinal study of superintendent–principals who participate in COPs and the impact that they have on improving job performance.
2. Identify barriers that limit participation in blended COPs (e.g., access to technology and geographic distances).
3. Examine the effect that district size has on job satisfaction and retention among rural administrators.
4. Compare and contrast differences in leadership best practices among rural and nonrural administrators.
5. Conduct a cost benefit study that examines the outcomes of professional growth opportunities for rural superintendent–principals compared to overall monetary investment.

Conclusion

The KTF that were identified in Chapter 4 support and inform the research questions of this study. Chapter 5 reintroduced the research questions and mapped the study's KTF to these questions. From the findings, implications for practice and recommendations for future research were presented. The participants in the study articulated the complex and varied challenges that they encounter as superintendent–principals in rural California. The one constant that these rural administrators experience is a lack of time and difficulty in managing the workload of this dual role position. The complexities of the superintendent–principal position reported in the study demonstrate the importance of collegial networks as a form of professional growth. In addition, they also confirmed that CRSPA's design contributed to a positive experience that supported

their professional growth as rural administrators. As a blended COP, CRSPA, helped the participants to navigate the challenges in their positions (not eliminate them) by building their professional network of colleagues across the state. The participants agreed that professional learning opportunities were important for their own growth, but they struggled with the availability of relevant opportunities that would be designed for their unique circumstances. Even if the professional learning were relevant, the participants in the study struggled with the ability to leave their school site to take part in formalized professional learning. All of the participants agreed that their positions could be professionally isolating and that a COP, like CRSPA, lessens this professional isolation. The findings and evidence in this study suggest that blended COPs, like CRSPA, can also increase access to relevant professional growth opportunities. The barriers of geographic isolation, lack of time, and fiscal constraints could be overcome by the intentional use of blended learning models that leverage technology, andragogy, and LPP in their design.

California is the most populous state in the United State of America (Johnson, 2017). It is often associated with its large metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, San Jose, and San Diego. Meeting the unique learning needs of these urban areas is critical to ensuring an educated population; however, the same is true of California's rural and remote regions. Every child in California has a right to a FAPE regardless of geographical isolation. As evidenced by this study, the constraints experienced by rural districts are different and unique from those in urban and suburban California. One size fits all does not work in a diverse state like California and it is to the detriment of its people when policy makers forget to consider or are not mindful that inequitable systems result in inequitable outcomes. Superintendent–principals lead districts that are, in many cases, the only civic organization within rural

communities and it is incumbent upon the educational community to recognize rural educators for what they are: a lifeline and conduit for students and the future of a state in transformational times. Rural superintendent–principals serve as instructional leaders, bus drivers, business managers, teachers, and cafeteria workers. In short, they are the bulwark of the local educational system and are charged with stewarding the development of California’s future while preserving the rural complexion of the communities they serve. Investing in the development of these leaders through relevant and sustainable professional learning models like blended COPs have demonstrable results, are cost effective, and most importantly ensure that today’s rural leaders are equipped to support tomorrow’s citizens.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: NCES, Urban-Centric Locale Categories, 2018

Locale	Definition
<i>City</i>	
Large	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000
<i>Suburb</i>	
Large	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000
<i>Town</i>	
Fringe	Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area
Distant	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area
Remote	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area
<i>Rural</i>	

Fringe U.S. Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster

Distant U.S. Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster

Remote U.S. Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster

SOURCE: Office of Management and Budget (2000). Standards for Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas; Notice. Federal Register (65) No. 249.

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Rural Superintendent–Principals

1. Please address the following questions about your background in education
 - a. What is your current age?
 - b. What is your gender identity?
 - c. What is your highest degree obtained?
 - d. Did you grow up in a rural community? (with less than 2,500 people)
 - e. Have you always worked in rural education?
 - f. If not, have you worked in urban and/or suburban settings?
 - g. Is this your first time in the role of superintendent–principal?
 - If not, where else have you held this role?
 - h. What motivated you to become a rural superintendent–principal?
 - i. How many years have you been in the role of superintendent–principal in California?
 - j. How long have you been with your current district?
2. Please describe the scope of responsibilities in your current role as superintendent–principal.
3. Please describe the most important challenges as it relates to your current position as a superintendent–principal.
4. Please describe the most important advantages as it relates to your current position as a superintendent–principal.
5. Do you experience isolation as a superintendent–principal?
 - a. If so, how does this affect your work?
 - b. If not, please explain how you feel connected to others professionally.
6. Do you experience barriers in accessing high quality professional growth opportunities as a rural superintendent–principal?
 - a. If so, please describe the barriers.
 - b. If not, how do you access high quality professional growth opportunities?
7. Why did you decide to apply to CRSPA?
8. Describe your overall experience as a CRSPA participant. In your opinion, What are CRSPAs
 - a. Strengths –
 - b. Areas for improvement –
9. Please assess CRSPA’s impact (Scale 1–4), on the supplied rating card, of the following elements:

- a. Building your collegial network of rural superintendent–principals around the State of California
- b. Developing your professional capacity to serve as a rural superintendent–principal.
- c. Web technologies to connect CRSPA participants across the State of California
 - (i) Zoom Web Conferencing
 - (ii) Google Groups
- d. Having CRSPA coaches as part of the program

Appendix C: Participant Rights Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND Informed Consent Form
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This informed consent form is for Rural Superintendent–Principals who are being invited to participate in a qualitative study, titled “Forgotten Leaders: An Examination of Professional Learning Needs for California’s Rural Superintendent–Principals”

You may provide the following information either as a running paragraph or under headings as shown below.

Principal Investigator: Colby James Smart

Institution: University of New England

Project Title: Forgotten Leaders: An Examination of Professional Learning Needs for California’s Rural Superintendent–Principals

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:

- Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)
- Certificate of Consent (for signatures if you choose to participate)

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction

My name is Colby Smart, and I am working on my dissertation which is a descriptive qualitative case study through the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine. I am doing research the impact that participation in a blended community of practice has on reducing professional isolation and improving professional growth opportunities for California’s rural superintendent–principals. I am going to give you information and invite you to be part of this research. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate in the research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research.

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of me).

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that participation in a blended community of practice has on reducing professional isolation and improving professional growth opportunities for California’s rural superintendent–principals. Moreover, this study will examine common challenges that are associated with the role of superintendent–principal.

Type of Research Intervention

This research will involve your participation in two primary ways:

1. Participate in a two-part interview either face to face or via web. The interview is structured in a way to gain a deep understanding of your experience as a superintendent–principal, including advantages, challenges of the position as well as your experience in relation to your own professional growth.
2. Site-based observation that will include a tour of your campus. The purpose of the tour is to gain a deep understanding of your work context and note similarities of this context among study participants.

Participant Selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as a rural superintendent–principal in California can contribute much to our understanding and knowledge of rural education leadership and the barriers that exist in accessing high quality professional growth opportunities.)

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not.

Procedures

A. Research Format

I will be asking you to help me learn more about the experience of being a rural educational leader. I am inviting you to take part in this research project. If you accept, you will be asked to take part in a two-part interview series in the spring of 2019.

B. Confidentiality and Data Protection/Destruction

You will participate in an interview with me (Colby Smart).

During the interview, I will sit down with you in a comfortable place either at your place of work or via the web using Zoom web conferencing software. If it is better for you, the interview can take place in your home or at a mutually agreed upon alternative location. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and I (the interviewer) will move on to the next question. No one else but the interviewer will be present unless you would like someone else to be there. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except Colby Smart will access to the information documented during your interview. The entire interview will be recorded digitally, but no one will be identified by name on the tape. The tape will be kept on a secure server that will be password protected. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except Colby Smart will have access to the tapes. The tapes will be destroyed after 365 days or at the completion of the study, whichever is less.

Duration

The research takes place over 3 months in total. The interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes. All research summations pertaining to your interview will be shared will be submitted to you. You will have the opportunity to provide clarification of any incorrect or incomplete summations.

Risks

There is a risk that you may share some personal or confidential information by chance, or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. However, I do not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion/interview/survey if you feel the question(s) are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you directly, but your participation is likely to help in understanding the complex and diverse challenges of superintendent–principals in rural California. The body of research that exists about these unique positions is sparse and effective models of professional growth to serve these leaders even sparser. Your contribution will potentially affect support models at the state level.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research.

Confidentiality

The research being done in your school district may draw attention and if you participate you may be asked questions by other people in the district. I will not be sharing information about you to anyone. The information that I collect from this research study will be kept private. Any information about you will have a pseudonym instead of your real name. Only I will know what your pseudonym is, and I will lock that information up with a lock and key in my home office. It will not be shared with or given to anyone by me. It is at your discretion whether or not you decide to share that you are taking part in this research study.

Sharing the Results

Nothing you tell me will be attributed to you by name. The knowledge that I get from this research will be shared with you before it is made available to the public. Each participant will receive a summary of the results.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so. You may stop participating in the interviews at any time. I will give you an opportunity after each interview to review your remarks, and you can ask to modify or remove portions of those, if you do not agree with my notes or if I did not understand you correctly.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact any me at csmart@hcoe.org or 707.601.8060

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by The University of New England's IRB, which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm.

You can ask me any more questions about any part of the research study, if you wish to. Do you have any questions?

Part II: Certificate of Consent

I have been invited to participate in research about the experience of rural superintendent–principals in California and the barriers to equitable professional growth opportunities. I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions that I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____
 Month / Day / Year

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands that the following will be done:

1. That he or she will take part in a two part interview series
2. That his/her identifiable information will be kept anonymous
3. That raw data collected will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of this study

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Information Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent _____

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____

Date _____

Appendix D: CITI Program Course Completion Certificate



Completion Date 25-Sep-2018
Expiration Date 24-Sep-2022
Record ID 28837209

This is to certify that:

Colby Smart

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Research (Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research Investigators (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of New England



Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w73b21335-6d44-4583-a8c5-f4b5ae42a3df-28837209