Rural Superintendents' Experiences with Empowerment and Alignment to Vision in the Application of Principle-Centered Leadership

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This qualitative phenomenological narrative inquiry research study used narrative inquiry to investigate rural superintendents' experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts. Ten superintendents from rural districts in east Texas were interviewed. Narratives were analyzed by organizing, describing, classifying, and interpreting data collected from the interviews. The study results support the notion that the application of principle-centered leadership helps superintendents to become effective leaders in their districts. Other findings from this study include the notion that effective superintendents practice the tenets of principle-centered leadership with different actions and methods based on their beliefs and personalities. Findings also emphasized that trustworthiness and trust is the foundation of principle-centered leadership, which allows for empowerment and alignment to vision. This study provides superintendents and other educational leaders with practices critical to practicing principle-centered leadership in order to become more effective leaders in their districts.

The expectations for school district superintendents have become much more extensive, complex, and demanding over the past 150 years (Kowalski, 2013). While Bjork (2009) noted the main roles of earlier superintendents was primarily to implement state standards and supervise teachers, Moritz (2010) argued that feeling the weight of the responsibility and impact of the many decisions faced by superintendents today has the potential to totally mentally consume and exhaust a person. Sharp and Walter (2004) commented that being a superintendent can be very lonely. In addition, very few positions have higher expectations with such a low degree of trust and confidence of the public (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Copeland (2013) concluded that superintendents wear many hats. These hats include manager, planner, listener, communicator, and coordinator of community involvement. Copeland also suggested rural districts and communities have even different expectations of superintendents than did both urban and suburban districts. These differences were related primarily to the vast number of different roles that the superintendent must balance in the rural environment, as well as being the center of community involvement. Because rural superintendents are often seen as the most central and recognizable figures of the community, these superintendents are often overburdened and overwhelmed by all of the unique responsibilities, demands, and requirements of the position.

Wilson (2010) researched leadership practices that required the most attention from rural school superintendents. Study findings fell into four separate categorizations. First and foremost, strong communication was required for a superintendent to be an effective leader. Second, superintendents must exhibit high moral and ethical leadership based on doing what is best for students. Third, superintendents must effectively manage the administrative tasks of the school. Lastly, superintendents should practice reflection of on the value of their leadership practices and how their leadership practices are interrelated. Spanneut, Tobin, and Ayers (2011) suggested that if superintendents are to thrive and be successful, they must recognize both their leadership skill limitations as well as their leadership skill needs.

Covey (1990) suggested that one person could be the change catalyst, or the "transformer," in any situation or any organization. That individual is "yeast that can leaven an entire loaf" (p. 287). In public school districts, that "transformer" is the superintendent. Covey explained that when leaders lead from the inside out based on the "true north" principles of trustworthiness, trust, empowerment, and alignment, transformation would occur in the organization. Covey also identified the following

characteristics of leaders who lead by the following principles: they are continually learning, they are service oriented, they radiate positive energy, they believe in other people, they lead balanced lives, they see life as an adventure, they are synergistic, and they exercise for self-renewal. Jones (1999) suggested it would seem logical that a self-disciplined person who is highly principled and is not swayed by popular opinion would be an excellent leader. As rural superintendents gain a deeper understanding of the "true north" principles that define principle-centered leadership, they may utilize them in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities of leading transformation in their districts. Because of the transforming capacity of these principles, it is important that the role that principle-centered leadership plays in superintendents becoming transforming agents in their districts be shared with and taught to other superintendents.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to explore rural superintendents' experiences in the application of principle-centered leadership. The following research questions guided this study:
1. What do rural superintendents experience in the application of the principle of empowerment at the managerial level?
2. What do rural superintendents experience in the application of the principle of alignment at the organizational level?

Conceptual Underpinnings

Principle-Centered Leadership

The seminal work that guided this study comes from the book, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (Covey, 1990). Covey defined principle-centered leadership as leadership based on leaders centering their lives and the leadership of organizations and people on certain "true-north" principles. Covey suggested that principle-centered leadership is practiced from the "inside out" based on four principles on four levels. The four levels of principle-centered leadership suggested by Covey (1990) were: personal (my relationship with myself), interpersonal (my relationships with others), managerial (my responsibility to get a job done with others), and organizational (my need to recruit people and build teams).

The four principles of principle-centered leadership identified by Covey are: trustworthiness at the personal level, trust at the interpersonal level, empowerment at the managerial level, and alignment at the organizational level. Kane-Urrabazo (2006) emphasized these principles are the foundation of any thriving organization.

Superintendency in the Rural Environment

There are many challenges unique to the superintendency in rural environments (Lamkin, 2006). School leadership in the rural environment can often be described as difficult at best because of issues such as fragmentation along class lines and political factions representing different values and interests related to the purposes of rural schooling (Surface, 2014). However, rural superintendents have no choice but to be involved in all areas of school improvement (Kowalski, 2013). Because the challenges in the rural environment that make the rural superintendency less attractive than other areas, it is becoming more difficult for rural districts to attract and retain superintendents in the rural environment (Lamkin, 2006).

Copeland (2013) concluded that rural superintendents wear many hats. These hats included manager, planner, listener, communicator, and coordinator of community involvement. Copeland also suggested that rural districts and communities had different expectations than did urban and suburban superintendents. These differences were manifested primarily in the vast number of different roles in which the rural superintendent must balance, as well as the rural superintendent being at the center of community involvement. However, there were many in state education departments and agencies who did not perceive the differences in leading a rural district as compared with the urban district.

Wrysinski-Guden (2014) found school finance and the budget were identified as an important role of the superintendent. Other items identified in the study were creating a positive climate, setting the tone, and ensuring efficiency in the running of the district. In addition, the new superintendents in the study considered budget/school finance as the most important expectation while school board relations/training was viewed as least important.

Empowerment at The Managerial Level

Covey (1990) commented that in a high trust environment, leaders don't have to supervise people

because they can provide self-supervision. The leader offers guidance and help for the people as all stakeholders agree upon expectations. In addition, the needs of the people must be intertwined with the needs of the organization. There is strong accountability and the people are involved in the evaluation of their performance. Ultimately, the goal is that the people are empowered to evaluate their own performance because their knowledge rises above the system of evaluation.

Covey (1990) identified six conditions of effective empowerment. These conditions of empowerment are:

1. Develop a win-win agreement – a psychological contract between manager and subordinate where results are specified, guidelines are set, available resources are identified, accountability identified, and consequences determined.
2. People supervise themselves in terms of the win-win agreement. Managers act as sources of help.
3. Managers establish helpful organizational structures and systems upon which self-directing, self-controlling individuals can draw to fulfill the win-win agreement.
4. Employees are accountable for their responsibilities occasionally and evaluate themselves by the specified criteria.
5. Character – what a person is (at the center of all of the conditions) – their integrity, maturity, and abundance mentality.
6. Skills – what a person can do (at the center of all of the conditions), such as communication, planning/organization, and synergistic problem solving (pp. 192-197).

Maxwell (1998) commented that a person would not reach their full potential without being empowered. Furthermore, when a leader refuses or fails to empower others in the organization, barriers are created and ultimately people give up or move to other places where they may fulfill their potential. Some reasons why leaders fail to empower others are desire for job security, resistance to change, and lack of self-worth (pp. 126-127). However, leaders must strongly believe in others in order to empower them. Maxwell concluded that empowerment is beneficial both for the person being empowered and the leader and mentor as well.

In order to improve empowerment in organizations, Yukl (2006) suggested multiple guidelines for participative leadership, delegation, as well as general guidelines for empowering managers. Yukl and Becker (2006) explained that empowerment in an organization is improved by employee access to all resources needed to complete the task effectively as well as information about the mission and organizational performance. In addition, a culture that encourages and values employees and their contributions strengthens empowerment in the organization. Blanchard, Carlos, and Randolph (1999) stated that, "the real essence of empowerment comes from releasing the knowledge, experience and motivational power that is already in people but is being severely underutilized" (p.6). Blanchard et al. (1999) suggested the following three keys to empowerment: share information with everyone, create autonomy through boundaries, and teams become the hierarchy.

Alignment at the Organizational Level

Covey (1990) explained that in a high trust environment, the culture of the organization is built around a common vision based upon the foundation of strong principles and the strategy, style, structure, and systems of the organization is continually being aligned to the mission and vision. Covey further explained, "Leaders create a common vision and a set of principles and work on decreasing the restraining forces" (p. 280). Bethel (2009) added that for a leader's vision to be truly effective, it must be backed by competence. Covey (2006) suggested the importance of building trust through the mission and values statements of the organization. Everyone is involved in the development of the mission and leaders help create a shared vision where everyone is accountable for results. Covey emphasized that the structures and systems of the organization should demonstrate the belief by leaders that people can be trusted. When these structures are put into place in organizations in a high trust environment, Covey noted the following dividends are realized: increased value, accelerated growth, enhanced motivation, improved collaboration, stronger partnering, better execution, and heightened loyalty. In addition, Covey (1990) identified several problems related to improper alignment at the organizational level. The problems are as follows: no shared vision or values, no strategic path to express the mission, poor alignment between visions and systems, wrong management style or philosophy, poor management skills, low trust with staff, and no self-integrity.

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) explained that most successful school leaders use the same basic leadership practices, although the differences in which these practices are used demonstrate a responsiveness to the contexts of their particular situation. In addition, Leithwood et al. organized four sets of leadership qualities and practices and practices. The leadership qualities identified are as follows: building vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning program. Blanchard and Stoner (2004, p.21) suggested that top organizations are driven by three critical factors: clear vision and direction championed by top management, trained and equipped people who are focused on implementation of agreed-upon vision and direction, and established recognition and consequence systems that sustain the behaviors and performance that the vision and direction require.

Methodology

Design of the Study

This study was a qualitative study, which used a phenomenological narrative inquiry approach in an attempt to gain a better understanding of rural superintendents' experiences in the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts. Narrative inquiry entails researching and evaluating experiences through "collaboration between researchers and participants, over time, in a place or series or places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p, 20). The following describes a narrative inquiry:

> People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as a story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375).

Phenomenological research is most appropriate when the researcher desires to understand the common or shared experiences of several individuals with a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The goal of a phenomenological study, according to Creswell, is to investigate a concept or phenomenon and describe common meaning for multiple individuals of the lived experiences of the phenomenon. The use of the phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to describe the common meaning for the participants of the lived experiences of principle-centered leadership.

Participants and Setting

Participants in this study were ten superintendents representing rural public school districts in East Texas. Participants for the study were purposely chosen from several different counties as well as from districts of varying sizes of student enrollment. The participants ranged from forty-three to sixty-eight years of age. All were of Caucasian ethnicity and all were male. Years spent as a superintendent of their current district ranged from four to sixteen years. Four of the superintendents are serving their first superintendent role and two of the superintendents are previously retired superintendents. As criteria for inclusion in the study, the superintendents had to:

1. Serve in a rural district as defined by Kowalski (2013) as a district comprised of primarily non-residential areas and/or serve in a district located in a town of less than 10,000 population.
2. Serve as a superintendent in the Region VII Educational Service Center Region (see Figure 1).
3. Have served as a superintendent in their current district for at least two years.
4. Be identified by the Region VII Educational Service Center Operations Director as providing exceptional leadership in their district.

Limitations

Limitations are "potential weaknesses or problems with the study defined by the researcher" (Creswell, 2012, p. 199). Creswell explained that limitations help readers determine the extent to which the research findings may or may not be generalized to other situations. This study had the following limitations:

1. The study was limited by the experiences of superintendents who were investigated and their willingness to share their information.
2. The study was limited by the manner in which each of the superintendents was selected to participate in the study. Superintendents were recommended by the Region VII Service Center School Operations Director based upon their reputation as being an effective leader in their district.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in a phenomenological study typically relies heavily on in-depth and multiple interviews of participants who have experienced the concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The researcher collected data by audio recording using a digital recorder and Notability, a note-taking application that facilitates audio recording, pdf annotation, and written notes. Face to face interviews were conducted with each respondent using multiple questions regarding their attitudes and perceptions regarding the role of principle-centered leadership behaviors in their becoming effective leaders in their districts. Each participant was invited by email to participate in the study after first being contacted by the Region VII Educational Service Center Operations Director. All interviews were conducted in person in the superintendent's office. The interviews were later transcribed into field texts. The researcher took detailed scripted notes during each participant interview. The participants were informed that their names would not be associated with any of the research findings and the confidentiality of their responses would be protected. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Treatment of the Data

The researcher followed recommendations by Creswell (2013) for qualitative data research, which
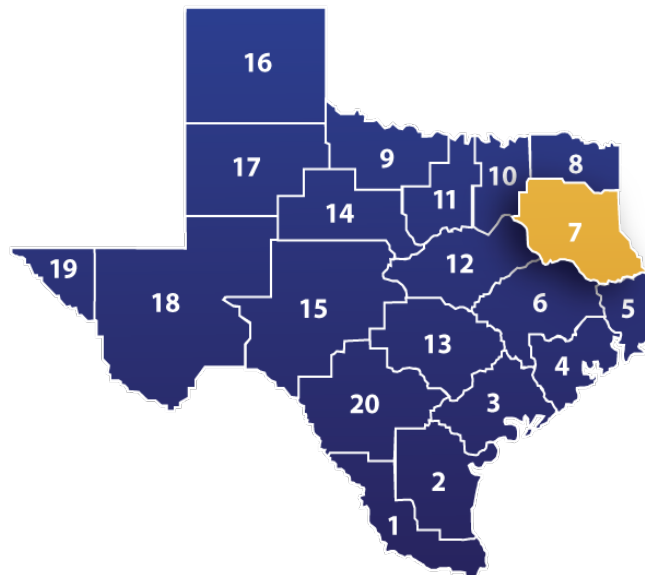

Figure 1: Region 7 Education Service Center serves 95 school districts, 7 charter schools, and 13,305 square miles in 17 East Texas counties

involves organizing the data, reading and memoing the data, as well as describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes. Data were collected from the participant's answers to research questions from the interviews. Interviews were recorded with two devices and transcribed. The texts of these transcriptions were examined for patterns, threads, and common themes. Creswell suggested narrowing data into meaningful segments, assigning names for segments, combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and then comparing and analyzing data with graphs, tables, and charts. Data were then analyzed for significant statements and meaning units in order to provide detailed descriptions of "what" the participants have experienced and "how" they have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 79). In order to assure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for names of superintendents included in the study.

Findings

Research questions investigated the lived experiences of superintendents in the application of empowerment at the managerial level and alignment to vision at the organizational level. Emergent themes in the application of empowerment at the managerial level included stakeholder participation, communication of resources, and maintaining control. Emergent themes included individual value alignment, mission statement representation, and organizational alignment. Multiple quotes from the participants were used to allow their voices to be heard.

Stakeholder Participation

An emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with empowerment at the managerial level was the importance of stakeholder participation in setting the standards of acceptable performance. All of the participants noted the importance of stakeholder participation in setting the standards of acceptable performance in the empowerment of others. The superintendents felt that stakeholders must be included in setting the standards of performance in order to be empowered to accomplish the vision and mission of the district. If stakeholders are not involved in setting the standards of acceptable performance, progress will most likely not happen.

Ethan spoke of stakeholders participating in setting standards of acceptable performance being the

key for the entire district. He noted that everyone has to buy into the vision of the district and determine the best way to achieve that vision. Seth explained that if you don't give your people the chance to share their ideas, it seems like a dictatorship and they may lose respect for leadership. Ben stressed that when you empower others, they buy into the vision and take ownership of the job. William stated, "If they don't have buy-in in to what they're trying to achieve, then it's going to be much harder for them to try and achieve it."

Importance of Communication of Resources

Another emergent theme regarding empowerment at the managerial level was the importance of communication of resources. This theme was supported in participant comments since all of the participants discussed the importance of communicating that needed resources to accomplish the goals of the district would be available. Communicating that needed resources would be made available is extremely important in staff feeling that they are empowered to meet the goals of the district. The superintendents interviewed felt that it was of utmost importance that staff know that needed resources would be made available for students to be successful.

For example, Gary stressed that he tries as best as he can to never turn down a reasonable request for resources so that his staff knows they are empowered to accomplish the mission and vision of the district. Seth explained that his people understand that he and the school board will do whatever is possible to ensure that they get those funds that are necessary for their students to be successful. David challenged to find someone in the district who has asked for something reasonable that did not get it as he said he must ask his staff 100 times "do you have everything you need?"

Maintaining Control

Another emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with empowerment at the managerial level was maintaining control. The superintendents explained that it was entirely possible to maintain control while giving others the freedom and autonomy they need to be effective and fulfilled. The superintendents felt that only when others were empowered with freedom and autonomy would they rise to meet challenges and seize opportunities. However, as the leader of the district,

all superintendents interviewed felt that they were able to maintain control through accountability while empowering their staff with freedom and autonomy.

Seven of the participants spoke of maintaining control through accountability. William explained that not only do you need accountability on the end as to whether the goal or objective was met, but in other phases of the process as well to determine whether progress is being made in all phases. Jeffrey explained that accountability is more of a casual follow up instead of a formal report while John holds his people accountable through reflection exercises. Scott mentioned that giving freedom and accountability is the ultimate control for him. He noted, "There's never a threat of not being in control as long as I am in support."

Individual Value Alignment

An emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with alignment to vision at the organizational level was individual value alignment. Nine of the participants supported this theme by acknowledging how their individual values align with the values and goals of their district. All agreed that their individual values aligned with their district's values. In addition, if there are conflicts between individual values and the values of the district, it is very unlikely that the superintendent would be happy or successful in the district.

Charles explained in detail how his values align with the values and goals of the district. He shared how he deals with conflicts between individual values and legal guidelines.

> The only conflict that individually I would have in values would be my faith and some of the things we are required to do by law. Sometimes that's in conflict, but I can get over that. We figure a way to work around it and be legal and sometimes I have to put personal feelings aside.

John spoke of the importance of building relationships in the district and how "that leads me in our school to push for that." David explained that his values aligning with district was "why I'm happy here." Seth explained that "if you've got a conflict with the core values of the district and your individual lives, I don't think you can be successful and I don't think you're going to be happy working in that."

Mission Statement Representation

Another emergent theme regarding superintendents' experiences with alignment at the organizational level was the mission statement representing the best from the superintendent and the district. Nine of the participants supported this theme by noting that the district's mission statement truly represented the best from themselves and the district. The superintendents noted that since much work goes into developing the mission statement and it gives stakeholders a glance of what the district is about, it is of utmost importance that the mission statement represents the very best of the district and superintendent individually.

Only one of the participants (Ethan) noted that he really did not like his district's mission statement. Ethan explained the reason of not liking the mission statement had more to do with state testing than the mission of the district. Of the nine who felt that their district's mission statement truly represented their best, several explanations were given. The explanations of the superintendents' views of mission statement representation follow.

Scott explained that their mission statement "is very truthful and generally pretty good. I inherited the mission statement, but it's pretty reflective of what should be going on." Gary emphasized, "The mission statement and our vision are my mission and values." Ben admitted "I can't quote it to you right now… but it's generally pretty lofty and has a good purpose."

Organizational Alignment to Vision

Another emergent theme regarding superintendent's experiences with alignment to vision at the organizational level was organizational alignment to the vision of the district. All ten participants supported the importance of alignment of the organization to the vision of the district. It is important that a superintendent plans his activities around the vision to maintain focus on the goals of the district.

Jeffrey explained that organizational alignment to vision "keeps everybody on the same page. I mean you're working toward a common goal. We're all on the same track moving down the same track at the same time."

John emphasized that organizational alignment to vision allows him to "keep everything focused. It's like a map, lots of times there are many ways to get to a certain destination and as long as you get to that destination, it's ok." David explained that

organizational alignment to vision helps to set expectations as "people want to know what is expected, what I expect out of them and what the organization expects out of them. This is a confirmation of 'this is what we believe. This is what we are doing, and we can agree on that.'" Seth stressed, "If you've got people going different directions with different goals and different viewpoints, then it's just harder to be successful."

Summary of the Findings

This qualitative study investigated rural superintendents' experiences with the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts. This study affirms that practicing principle-centered leadership helps superintendents to become effective leaders in their districts. During this study, it was apparent that effective superintendents practice the tenets of principle-centered leadership with different methods and actions based on their beliefs and personalities. In addition, it was apparent in the study that trustworthiness and trust is the foundation of principle-centered leadership which allows for empowerment and alignment to vision. Based on the findings from the individual interviews, specific conclusions are discussed in terms of the research questions that guided the study.

Research Question 1: What do rural superintendents experience in the application of empowerment at the managerial level? Based on the findings, it can be concluded that for superintendents to be successful and effective, stakeholders in the district must participate in setting the standards of acceptable performance in order to be empowered to accomplish the goals and mission of the district. In addition, superintendents must communicate resources needed to accomplish the goals and objectives of the district will be provided. Furthermore, superintendents can and must maintain control while giving others in the organization the freedom and autonomy to meet challenges and seize opportunities. These findings were consistent with the principle of empowerment at the managerial level (Covey, 1990) and the suggestion by Maxwell (1998) that empowerment is beneficial both for the person being empowered and the leader or mentor as well. In addition, the findings were consistent with the research of Yukl (2006) regarding guidelines for participative leadership and delegation, the research of Yukl and Becker (2006) regarding employees'

access to resources and information about the mission and organizational performance. The findings were also consistent with the research of Blanchard et al. (1999) regarding the keys to empowerment.

Research Question 2: What do rural superintendents experience in the application of alignment to vision at the organizational level? Based on the findings, it can be concluded that for superintendents to be successful and effective, their individual values must align with the values and goals of the district. Furthermore, the district's mission statement must represent the very best from the district and the superintendent. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that the organization of the district must be aligned to the district's vision. These findings were consistent with the principle of alignment to vision at the organizational level where in a high trust environment, the culture of the organization is built around a common vision based upon the foundation of strong principles and the strategy, style, structure, and systems of the organization is continually being aligned to the mission and vision (Covey, 1990). The findings were also consistent with the research of Leithwood et al. (2008) regarding leadership qualities and practices in building vision and setting directions and the research of Blanchard and Stoner (2004) regarding critical factors of vision and organization.

Implications for Practice

Followers tend to trust those whose personality is founded upon correct principles (Covey, 1990). These principles as suggested by Covey are trustworthiness at the personal level, trust at the interpersonal level, empowerment at the managerial level, and alignment to vision at the organizational level. The findings of this study provide practices by superintendents to empower others in the district and align the organization of the district to the district's vision and values.

These practices related to empowerment are consistent with the research of Yukl (2006) regarding guidelines for participative leadership and delegation, the research of Yukl and Becker (2006) regarding employees' access to resources and information about the mission and organizational performance. The findings are also consistent with the research of Blanchard et al. (1999) regarding the keys to empowerment and the suggestions of Covey (1990) regarding empowerment at the managerial level.

These practices related to alignment to vision are consistent with the research of Leithwood et al. (2008) regarding leadership qualities and practices in building vision and setting directions as well as the research of Blanchard and Stoner (2004) regarding critical factors of vision and organization. The practices are also consistent with the principle of alignment to vision at the organizational level Covey (1990).

Suggestions to implement for practice include the following:

1. Allow stakeholders to participate in setting the standards of acceptable performance.
2. Communicate to others and ensure that resources needed to accomplish the goals and objectives of the district will be made available.
3. Maintain control through accountability when giving others the freedom and authority to meet challenges and seize opportunities in the organization.
4. Align the values and goals of the district with the superintendent's individual values.
5. Represent the very best from yourself and the district in the district's mission statement.
6. Align the district's organizational structure with the vision of the district.

Summary

This study provided insight into what rural superintendents experience in the application of principle-centered leadership in their districts. The study also provided insight into what superintendents believe to be critical aspects and methods of practicing principle-centered leadership in order to become more effective leaders in their districts. Each superintendent had a unique and interesting story as well as varied experiences regarding how they practice tenets of principle-centered leadership. However, all of the participants were shaped by these varied experiences throughout their life. Ultimately, they have all been successful and effective as they apply characteristics of principle-centered leadership in their districts.

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