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## Building Educational Leaders' Capacity In A Community Of Practice

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## **Building Educational Leaders' Capacity in a Community of Practice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examined rural educational leaders' perceptions of the outcomes of the 2019 Leadership Camps (LCs). This capacity-building opportunity helped educational leaders meet as a community of practice (CoP) where participants' interactions contributed to learning with and from one another, reducing perceived isolation and increasing self-efficacy. We analyzed data collected from 242 participants' responses using an open, axial, and selective coding process. With this sample, 52.5% of participants were rural educational leaders. Overall, educational leaders most often appreciated interacting, networking, and collaborating with peers. Additionally, educational leaders highlighted the importance of the in-depth understanding and application of the Leadership Standards and reflective practices. We claim that this approach to professional development within a CoP offers rural educational leaders various work-related growth opportunities, including fostering collaboration, promoting professional conversations, and creating a community for reduced isolation, which will likely enhance their job performance and satisfaction.

**Keywords:** collaboration, community of practice, professional learning, rural school leaders, self-efficacy

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Well-equipped and continuously supported educational leadership is one of the salient factors in promoting high-quality education and boosting student learning and achievement, in particular (Grissom et al. 2021; Zuckerman & O'Shea, 2021). Educational leadership also affects teacher collegiality and collaboration that nurtures a team-oriented spirit to improve teaching and learning, likely leading to positive outcomes in student achievement (Day et al., 2016).

Hence, the impact of educational leaders requires continuous professional learning because effective leadership is crucial for successful schools (Grissom et al. 2021). Educational leaders play the role of administrator, disciplinarian, politician, problem solver, and spirit booster (Zuckerman & O'Shea, 2021). Developing educational leaders' capacity enables them to perform successfully in such an array of different roles, enhances their ability to promote dialogue and trust among team members, and guides "conversations about instruction and school improvement, seeking to build consensus and avoiding top-down mandates through democratic decision-making processes" (Zuckerman & O'Shea, 2021, p. 19). Capacity-building efforts for educational leaders become more critical for rural educational leaders who deal with distinctive challenges due to the specific cultural and socioeconomic difficulties of the rural school community and context that set them apart substantially from those in urban areas (du Plessis, 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019).

Undoubtedly, rural school communities have multiple benefits such as smaller schools and strong teacher-learner relationships (du Plessis, 2017). However, due to geographic isolation, rural educational leaders often encounter numerous hindrances to reaching academic success. These obstacles include limited funding, pressures related to school consolidations, difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly qualified and experienced teachers and staff, outdated infrastructure and equipment, as well as limited up-to-date and secure technology (du Plessis, 2017). Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (2022) added that "rural schools oftentimes serve a large number of minority, English language learners and high poverty students" (para. 1).

More importantly, rural school principals have limited access to capacity-building opportunities, mainly face-to-face, as well as collaborations and work-related support from more experienced employees found in urban areas (Rosenberg et al., 2015). Lavalley (2018) argued rural educational leaders tend to lack capacity building courses because many of them are offered by universities whose rural access is very limited due to physical isolation. Klocko and Justis (2019) further maintained rural educational leaders are short of critical leadership competencies because they cannot meet colleagues, and it is challenging for them to find professional development opportunities locally.

### **Context of the Study**

Given the unique issues rural educational leaders face and the need to support contextually-relevant leadership development, this study analyzes educational leaders' perceptions of the outcomes of the 2019 Leadership Camps (LCs). They are intended to help rural educational leaders meet as a community of practice (CoP) and allow them to learn with and from one another, build professional networking, reduce perceived isolation, and increase self-efficacy. The LCs were conducted as part of the larger Leading and Learning with Character Project (LLCP) underway and were hosted at a comprehensive midwestern university.

To ensure that development opportunities were coming to the rural leaders, the LLCPP intentionally held the LCs across the state rather than only in the major urban areas where a university might be located. In addition, during the first phase of the LLCPP action plan (2019–2022), the LCs targeted principals, superintendents, and other district educational leaders such as deans, coordinators, facilitators, and student support service directors.

The purpose of the LCs as a context-specific capacity-building opportunity was to reduce perceived geographic and positional isolation of rural educational leaders, improve dispositions toward the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL), and increase self-efficacy among leaders through training on evaluating teachers under their supervision. Thus, the LCs created a venue where educational leaders could meet and learn about ethical practices, develop work-related networks, and deepen their understanding of the ISSL many educational leaders need.

The six standards are related to educational leaders' evaluation and plans for their professional learning opportunities. The LCs thoroughly discussed each standard, with a special emphasis on ISSL 5 around professional norms and ethics. The LCs' purpose was to provide educational leaders with new capacities and strategies in the evaluation process with integrity, fairness, and in a supportive environment through constructive conversations.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

As described previously, there is a need to build rural educational leaders' capacity to cope with the multiple unique challenges they face in their duties. It is worth noting how professional learning focused on addressing a contextually-relevant problem can empower rural principals with the knowledge and dispositions they need to align their leadership to their specific school-community contexts (Klar & Huggins, 2020).

There is abundant research on rural educational leadership development (Andreoli et al., 2019; du Plessis, 2017; Klar & Huggins, 2020; Klar et al., 2019). In addition, a handful of studies assessed the relevance of the professional development of educational leaders in general through the CoP approach (Bickmore et al., 2021; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2021; Smith, 2019). However, there is a noticeable lack of scholarship that examines the importance of contextually relevant professional learning within a CoP for rural educational leaders, with particular attention to a specific set of leadership standards.

To close the gap, we designed this study to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on rural educational leaders' development by assessing the perceptions of rural educational leaders who participated in the LCs using the CoP approach with an emphasis on the ISSL 5. The one-size-fits-all nature of educational policies and professional learning opportunities created with larger urban districts in mind makes it challenging for educational leaders of rural schools to adhere to specific policy criteria (Klar, 2020; Zuckerman & O'Shea, 2021). As a result, the situation critically demands unique capacity-building opportunities to succeed in rural settings (Klar, 2020; Klar & Huggins, 2020). Hence, due to this isolation, rural educational leaders may benefit from collaborating, learning, and networking with peers as a CoP (du Plessis, 2017), which was the spirit and key objectives of the LCs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Unique Challenges Facing Rural Educational Leaders**

Researchers have attempted to provide definitions of “rural,” but without consensus (Hawley et al., 2016). Klar (2020) defined rural schools as “situated in communities that have small populations and are located some distance from urban centers. In such a setting, the school is often the center of the community (para, 1).” According to Zuckerman and O’Shea (2021), a rural school district is defined as a district with only one high school, and that school must be located in a town of fewer than 10,000 people. Latterman and Sarah (2017) added that schools that are defined “as the most rural are classified as remote, meaning they are 25 miles from an urban center” (para, 3). As the need for school consolidations has grown, schools often serve as the center of several rural communities, thus we straddle these definitions, and for the purpose of this project, we define a rural school district as having one high school located in a town of fewer than 10,000 people.

As discussed previously, schools falling under the “rural” designation can face multiple issues, including “geographic isolation, poor working conditions for teachers, lack of resources, and poor community involvement” (du Plessis, 2017, p. 8). Rural schools may lack sufficient resources due to isolation and lower salaries, making it challenging to recruit and retain qualified and experienced teachers (Lavalley, 2018). In addition, rural educational leaders often perform multiple roles and lack professional development opportunities. Rural educational leaders are instructional leaders, but they also have a heavy load of managerial responsibilities, which tends to require them to spend more time on management than instruction (Buckmiller et al., 2020).

This situation suggests that rural educational leaders need specialized leadership styles adapted to their working conditions and situations (Lavalley, 2018). For example, Stewart and Matthews (2015) argued that rural principals lack professional learning that is likely to equip them with knowledge about the teacher evaluation process. Therefore, they need professional development exclusively designed to fit their context, which could positively influence their retention as well as job satisfaction and performance (Lavalley, 2018).

### **Importance of Educational Leader Capacity Building for Effective Schools**

Teachers are required to enhance their teaching practice, but they need support from educational leaders who give them the necessary instructional materials (Brolund, 2016). Professional development empowers educational leaders with practical tools and strategies for classroom observation and evaluation processes and for encouraging curriculum implementation and quality instructional practices (Daniëls et al., 2019).

In this regard, Owen and Wong (2021b) indicated that building educational leaders’ capacity enables them to engage teachers in coaching conversations through which educational leaders give teachers timely and actionable feedback coupled with authentic models and opportunities to practice (Lofthouse, 2018). In addition, coaching conversations can focus on classroom management, instructional strategies, content knowledge, and delivery (Lofthouse, 2018).

Furthermore, well-equipped principals share leadership and promote collaboration to solve problems because distributed leadership (DL) enhances principal instructional leadership. DL focuses on removing leadership responsibility from formal organizational roles as performed by principals and integrating the influence of team members at all levels (Xia & O’Shea, 2022). As they share responsibilities with teachers, principals allow for networking among individuals rather than influence coming from them as one leader, which enables “cohesive conversation around leading the improvement of instruction” (Neumerski, p. 312). Consequently, DL allows for roles to spread across school leaders, coaches, and teachers, which promotes collaboration between these parties to work towards enhancing agreed-upon instructional goals (Zuckerman & O’Shea, 2021). Principals alone cannot afford to lead changes conducive to improving teaching and learning. Hence, they need to distribute leadership among teammates and empower them to be an intricate part of enhanced instruction and increased student achievement (Hermann, 2016).

### **Building Educational Leaders’ Capacity with an Adult Learning Theory Lens**

Considering the factors contributing to successful professional learning opportunities, LC facilitators adopted Adult Learning theories (ALT) and embedded them into the LC activities. Before an in-depth exploration of the ALT, it is worth noting the differences between andragogy and pedagogy. Both concepts are complementary to each other, but they serve different audiences. Pedagogy refers to facilitating the learning process for young people. Pedagogical models assign a duty to teachers because they are the ones who decide the way to teach (McAuliffe, et. al., 2009). Andragogy refers to helping

adults learn. It focuses on strategies for conveying the knowledge or skills needed to advance adult personal and professional development (Loeng, 2018).

In this regard, Knowles (1984) developed the ALTs and argued that adults learn distinctively from how children do. Knowles (1984) described the ALTs in the following key assumptions: self-concept, readiness and motivation to learn, as well as experience and orientation to learn (Cunningham & Tanner, 2021). First, the self-directed learning capability in adults helps them assimilate new knowledge, whereas children depend on the instructors for learning and comprehension. Conversely, adults acquire skills and knowledge independently through a facilitating approach (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020). During the LCs, the dialogue was facilitated using various methods, including dialogue guide prompts, small group discussion, and whole-group sharing.

Second, adults are ready to learn when there are reasons that may come from the work requirements where the assigned roles and responsibilities apply to personal and professional life. Additionally, some internal drivers motivate these individuals to learn, including self-esteem, promotion, and a desire for a raise or a reward (Stewart, 2021; Tønseth, 2015).

Third, as people mature, they accumulate experiences and references throughout their life. They can learn from these experiences, which helps them contextualize the new ideas gained from said experiences and references (Colman, 2019; New England Institute of Technology, 2021). Moreover, adult learning orientation comes from seeking knowledge and practical skills that help them solve problems and work better. During the LCs, the focus was on the teacher evaluation process and how it can be most meaningful to those in the building/district. The strategies shared with participants provided opportunities for immediate implementation aligned with the learners' role.

### **Building School Leader Capacity within a Community of Practice: A Conceptual Framework**

Building capacity for educational leaders has direct and positive effects on teacher support, student learning, and school effectiveness (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020). However, the issue is to identify a type of school leader development that avoids some drawbacks of traditional capacity-building models that do not support rural educational leaders. For example, Smith and Squires (2016) contended that opportunities such as documentation and formal training sessions could offer educational leaders "know-that" information. However, the "know-how" must be learned in other venues where educational leaders come together and reciprocally ponder the problem. An alternative framework for educational leaders' capacity building can be found in the concept of communities of practice (CoPs).

Smith (2019) claimed that CoPs foster shared knowledge and diversities, including social capital and distributed leadership. He also goes on to indicate that the connections developed in CoPs promote camaraderie, shared repertoire and artifacts, cooperation, a common understanding of multiple viewpoints, and ultimately trust. The CoPs benefit educational leaders in several ways by providing opportunities for sharing, receiving, and co-creating knowledge and skills among community members (Bickmore, et al., 2021). The collective capacity building empowers principals to become more effective in their respective schools and mitigate the adverse effects of isolation through professional network opportunities.

In CoPs, educational leaders learn from one another by sharing information and practices. They also build and co-create knowledge, which opens their mind to new strategies and approaches relevant to their school settings. Koliba and Gajda (2009) contended that participants in CoPs do not just expect to gather knowledge and skills, but they are also willing to help their peers. The community's ability is social and dynamic (Smith et al., 2017). Thus, members of a CoP are stimulated to contribute to the communal end. Knowledge acquisition bolsters the principals' confidence and competency to lead their institutions effectively.

Professional isolation and loneliness negatively affect educational leaders' performance. Smith (2019) revealed that isolation undermines educational leaders' effectiveness due to the lack of mentoring and collaboration (Aizenberg & Oplatka, 2019). Moreover, as Stephenson and Bauer (2010) argued, there is a strong correlation between a principal's loneliness and other factors such as depression, burnout, and high turnover.

The mutual engagement and support found in the CoPs relieve the burnout that worsens educational leaders' effectiveness due to geographical barriers and self-pity (Smith, 2019). Consequently, the CoPs create unique opportunities for professional networking and collaboration among educational leaders. Moreover, the CoPs provide opportunities to rural principals for receiving and sharing their own experiences and knowledge with their peers.

In addition to breaking isolation walls, CoPs boost the principals' self-efficacy and managerial competencies while decreasing the rate of turnover. Smith (2019) defined self-efficacy as "the belief held by educational leaders that they have the capacity to effectively operate their schools and to have students achieve at high levels under their leadership" (p.15). The self-efficacy of educational leaders is linked to their attitudes and behavior. Positive self-efficacy induces high performance of educational leaders, which, in turn, affects the entire school community. Educational leaders with high self-

efficacy are committed to achieving their objectives and seem more resilient and determined than those with low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). As influenced by their educational leaders' self-efficacy, teachers' effectiveness and efficiency directly and indirectly impact students' achievement (Smith, 2019).

## METHODOLOGY

LCs were held over two eight-hour days, with 242 participants attending one of twelve camps held between February and October 2019. In this qualitative study, we examine what these educational leaders perceived as the benefits of the LC activities and whether their responses aligned with the intended purposes of a CoP. In addition, we focused on educational leaders' responses to the question asked of them following the LC experience: "As participants reflected upon key learning experiences and main ideas worth remembering from engagement in Leadership Camps, what did they benefit and what specific strategies were most helpful in supporting their learning?"

### Participants and Data Collection Procedures

The LCs were intended for principals, superintendents, instructional coaches, curriculum directors, athletic directors, and other educational leaders in K–12 school districts, namely deans, coordinators, facilitators, and student support service directors. The Department of Education and Area Education Agencies collaborated with LC facilitators to invite potential participants via email to attend the LCs and other professional development opportunities.

Participants provided feedback at the end of each day of the camp using a plus/delta worksheet that asked participants to identify parts of the training that supported their learning (plus) and suggestions for improvement (delta). The form allowed participants to identify pluses and deltas from each part of the day by having boxes labeled "morning," "afternoon," and "overall." Participants did not include any identifying information on this worksheet. Participants were given time at the end of each training day to complete their written reflections; most wrote for 10–15 minutes each day. Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects approval was secured before data collection.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the various positions held by participants in relation to rural versus non-rural locations of their school districts. A total of 127 (52.48%) LC participants worked for a rural school district, and 960 of 1449 written responses (66.2%) came from rural educational leaders.

**Table 1**

*Participants in Relation to Rural versus Non-Rural Locations of Their School Districts*

Position	Number of Participants	Rural	Non-rural
Principal	112	60	52
Assistant Principal	18	4	14
Superintendent	49	42	7
Associate Superintendent	4	0	4
Instructional Coach	7	7	0
Curriculum Director	4	3	1
Athletic Director	8	6	2
Other	40	5	35
Total	242	127	115

### Data Analysis

Our approach to analysis was built on grounded theory (Walker and Myrick, 2006), utilizing an inductive approach to identify emergent themes through open, axial, and selective coding processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, using an Excel sheet with each response listed in a separate row, two research team members worked in tandem to manually conduct the open coding, which consisted of reading responses to define similar words and concept indicators. From these, three research team members cooperatively identified broader thematic domains through the axial coding process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Comparing thematic fields led to categorizing them into higher and lower-order themes. For example, we found professional networking is a higher theme encompassing lower-order themes such as connection with peers, collaboration, and learning experiences from other districts.

Lastly, we used selective coding to define and interpret the themes connected to study focus and literature (Moghaddam, 2006). The emergent themes were (a) interaction and professional networking, (b) self-efficacy, (c) a better understanding of the ISSL, and (d) reflective practices. After identifying the major themes, we piloted the second round of analysis around the major themes to determine inter-rater reliability to ensure consistency in how words and phrases were defined and categorized (Belur et al., 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To do so, we randomly selected one-third of the participants’ responses, coded independently by three research team members. Each research team member rated the transcript on the four themes. The researchers independently marked each theme and tallied each occurrence for each theme to generate a quantitative account of major themes. The researchers subsequently discussed ratings for each emerging theme (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These research team members finally compared the outcome of their coding findings, and their agreement was above 95% (Belotto, 2018).

## FINDINGS

We identified four themes: interaction and professional networking, self-efficacy, better understanding of the ISSL, and reflective practices. The themes underscore the importance of how educational leaders’ interactions with one another can develop a CoP that enhances their experience and knowledge in all these areas. Table 2 provides a synoptic view of emergent themes and related indicative responses.

**Table 2**

***Major Themes and Representative Participant Responses***

Themes	Representative Responses
Interaction and professional networking	“We enjoyed the time to have specific conversations related to school improvement with other educational leaders.” “Time to communicate with a focus with others was the most beneficial to me. [It] allowed me to hear what others are doing in their district.” “Great strategies to help with collaborations with others.” Participants “really praised the opportunity to collaborate with the other administrators” and “enjoyed working with admin and teachers.”
Self-efficacy	“Coaching conversations gave us a REAL conversation to move our work forward while practicing the strategies and techniques, especially since we used real artifacts.” “The coaching exercise was beneficial and allowed for a quality, fact-finding conversation that led to a positive end result.”
Better understanding of the ISSL	“I loved the specific detail on each standard and the opportunity to reflect on how we know when Standards are being met.” “It was good to dive into the standards, sometimes we only look at them once a year.” “The focus on learning [and] utilizing strategies to reflect on each Standard was important.” “I enjoyed seeing and hearing what artifacts people brought in for Standard 5. It really gave me some good ideas and made me think of what I am doing.”
Reflective practices	Participants enjoyed “Interactions with peers not at tables [only] but also getting up and moving around.” “I can better see the need to listen when trying to help others move forward.”

### **Interaction, Professional Networking, and Collaboration**

Educational leaders highlighted the connections with peers as an invaluable experience. One participant reported they “enjoyed the time to have specific conversations related to school improvement with other educational leaders.” At the same time, another wrote, “Time to communicate with a focus with others was the most beneficial to me. [It] allowed me to hear what others are doing in their district.” The leaders frequently mentioned appreciating time set aside for them to discuss their professional learning plans and share artifacts with others, and that the interactions with professionally diverse peers boosted their leadership and managerial efficacy.



The opportunity to collaborate and learn from leaders' experiences in other schools and school districts was identified as the camp's key benefit. In this regard, meeting and working with other educational leaders allowed participants to gain insight into what other schools were doing and provided perspective into applying LC strategies in their schools and districts. "Great strategies to help with collaborations with others," was the comment from one participant, while another stated, "really praised the opportunity to collaborate with the other administrators" and "enjoyed working with admin and teachers."

### **Self-Efficacy: Gaining New Capacities and Strategies in the Evaluation Process**

Several activities were used to support educational leaders' self-efficacy during the LCs. One of the main aspects of the LCs was discussing and learning about coaching conversations. They involve helping others become self-aware and responsible for their actions and development. Participants underscored that the coaching conversations were relevant because they utilized real evidence. They said, "Coaching conversations gave us a REAL conversation to move our work forward while practicing the strategies and techniques, especially since we used real artifacts." They also noted, "The coaching exercise was beneficial and allowed for a quality, fact-finding conversation that led to a positive end result."

Participants were introduced to the "5 Whys," a brainstorming activity that helps to identify the root cause of an issue by asking "why" questions, and they also learned protocols and process tools that foster honest and meaningful conversations. This technique included objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional (ORID) questions that educational leaders can use during the staff evaluation process. In addition to the coaching conversations, participants appreciated these tools and protocols, mentioning that using ORID questions gave a framework for the discussion and helped them revisit and practice the ORID questioning strategy.

### **A Better Understanding of the Leadership Standards**

The ISSL was another prominent aspect of the LC's discussions. Within this portion, participants gained an in-depth understanding of the content of the six standards. Participants asserted that reviewing ISSL only a few times per year impeded them from understanding their value and application. Hence, the activities and methods used to assess their application during the LCs underscored their irreplaceable contribution to building a healthy school environment. One respondent pointed out, "I loved the specific detail on each standard and the opportunity to reflect on how we know when Standards are being met." In this context, some educational leaders indicated that it was their first opportunity to review specific components of the ISSL: "It was good to dive into the standards, sometimes we only look at them once a year." Furthermore, participants explained that the analysis of the standards and their application to their daily professional actions positively influenced their leadership styles in school settings. As one respondent said, echoing a sentiment expressed by many, "The focus on learning [and] utilizing strategies to reflect on each Standard was important."

While participants discussed and reviewed all six standards in depth, the majority seemed to appreciate the time spent scrutinizing Standard 5 that focuses on ethical and professional leadership. Educational leaders appeared to realize the necessity of developing and insisting on integrity in the school environment. They also suggested that sharing Standard 5 evidence was insightful as one administrator wrote, "I enjoyed seeing and hearing what artifacts people brought in for Standard 5. It really gave me some good ideas and made me think of what I am doing."

### **Reflective Practices**

One specific reflective practice was the "walk and talk," and many participants stated they appreciated "the walk and talk exercise after lunch." The respondents commented on the benefits of this strategy and enjoyed getting to converse with other people. They took time to sit, walk, and talk with their peers, which refreshed their mood and mind. One participant noted they enjoyed "interactions with peers not at tables [only] but also getting up and moving around."

Additionally, participants asserted that focusing on communication with others was the most beneficial for them. They affirmed that they had gained insights from their peers working in other districts. They realized that they did not just need to help others grow; they also needed to be careful listeners, as one educational leader pointed out, "I can better see the need to listen when trying to help others move forward."

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS**

The results from this study suggest that the LCs serve as a CoP by promoting ongoing professional development opportunities conducive to educational leaders' success in rural settings. The findings also have implications for mitigating

isolation issues facing rural educational leaders through collaboration and building self-efficacy using the strategies shared with participants.

### **Creating Opportunities for Educational Leaders' Collaboration and Professional Conversations**

Educational leaders have complex and constantly changing responsibilities, which requires continuous professional learning activities, especially in rural areas, for better productivity (Buckmiller et al., 2020). As the findings indicate, developing capacity within a CoP is an opportunity to build and sustain collaboration, interaction, and socialization with peers and engage in constructive conversations leading to staying current in the field and acquiring best practices (Smith & Squires, 2016). The LCs helped rural educational leaders grow professionally and establish relationships through work-related conversations, which is likely to help educational leaders gain new knowledge and skills for school improvement (Klar & Huggins, 2020).

To sustain this development, districts and states should support collaboration over individual competition and encourage interaction and networking over seclusion (Gates et al., 2020). In other words, institutions devoted to promoting school leaders' professional learning need to boost educational leaders' collaboration and support efforts to build and sustain purposeful communities. Evidence shows that educational leaders who come together, form CoPs, and learn collaboratively are empowered to address challenges in their building and district (Klar et al., 2019).

### **Establishing a Purposeful Community for Reduced Isolation and Improved Performance**

Rural principals may wear multiple hats and have limited resources that impede them from hiring enough staff and participating in professional development opportunities (du Plessis, 2017). CoPs enable educational leaders to come together, learn from and with one another, and boost self-efficacy. Additionally, CoPs, such as LCs, enable rural educational leaders to build and sustain connections across districts as friends and collaborators with whom they can share experiences and reach out for advice and mutual assistance for improved leadership practices and performance (Calderwood & Klaf, 2014).

Supporting educational leaders to learn together as a community and building their capacity beyond a few days of training is beneficial to educational leaders and schools (Lavalley, 2018). Promoting purposeful communities where educational leaders collaborate and mentor one another can allow them to learn more, grow professionally, and gain the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and best practices to bring about lasting school improvement.

## **STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

There is abundant research on educational leader development through different formats such as retreats, workshops, training, etc. However, the study at hand is likely to be the first to investigate rural educational leaders' capacity building within LCs, via peer-to-peer learning, within a CoP format, and with a laser-like focus on the ISSL and effective strategies for evaluation procedures.

Nevertheless, the study used self-reported data from participants who described their beliefs and perceptions of the LC outcomes. Further studies should include LC organizers to learn about their attitudes on the program outcomes and investigate the challenges they face and the extent to which they feel satisfied with the support they were supposed to offer educational leaders. Additionally, the study focused on the LCs' benefits to educational leaders' professional learning. Further research is needed to investigate how participants will apply the knowledge and skills they received from the LCs to support those in their care to lead and learn with character.

Finally, the study looked at the positive aspects of the LCs. Further research is needed to analyze the gaps in the LCs deliverables and methodology and how they could be improved to better address unique challenges facing educational leaders in rural school districts. Additionally, the data was collected a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be beneficial to conduct a study comparing face-to-face educational leaders' learning and capacity-building activities during the camps that took place virtually after the pandemic outbreak.

## **CONCLUSION**

Improving schools and enhancing student achievement requires effective and well-supported educational leadership. Thus, educational leaders need continuous capacity building to gain knowledge, skills, and best practices for better job performance. The call becomes more critical in rural settings where educational leaders face multiple challenges, including a lack of resources, positional and geographic isolation, and limited professional development opportunities. The findings

indicate that building educational leaders' capacity within a CoP creates a unique space for educational leaders to meet as fellow practitioners, build a collaborative platform, co-create and share knowledge, and develop social and professional networks. The LCs operating as a CoP proved to be a unique venue to empower leaders and set them up for self-efficacy, higher performance, and job satisfaction.

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