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Why Shouldn't Rural Kids Have It All? Place-conscious Leadership in an Era of Extralocal Reform Policy

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Abstract

This article explores school and community leaders' beliefs about standards-based reform and the purposes of local schooling in a single rural community in the western United States. The study used interviews of 11 community and school leaders in the community. Participants engage in a balancing act between serving local interests and satisfying extralocal mandates. They care about both the students they serve and the place they inhabit, and their own assessment of the educational enterprise indicated that state and federal policy had had little constructive influence on either. The conclusion explores critical place-consciousness as a possible tool to refocus rural educators' attention on the intent of the standards-based movement and to ensure that schooling supports individual student success and the needs of rural communities.

Keywords: accountability; rural schooling; educational leadership.

¿Por qué los niños rurales no deberían tenerlo todo? Liderazgo con consciencia del lugar en una era de reforma política deslocalizada

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Resumen

Este artículo explora las creencias de directivos escolares y comunitarios acerca de las reformas basadas en estándares y los objetivos de las comunidades locales sobre la escolarización en una zona rural en el oeste de los Estados Unidos. Este estudio realizó 11 entrevistas con líderes comunitarios y escolares en una comunidad rural. Los entrevistados intentaban equilibrar el servicio de los intereses locales y el cumplimiento de mandatos extralocales de estandarización. Estos lideres se preocupan tanto con los estudiantes que atienden, el lugar que habitan y sus evaluaciones sobre la tarea educativa, indicando que las políticas estatales y federales fueron de poco influencia constructiva. Las conclusiones de esta investigación analizan el concepto de "conciencia-de lugar crítica" como una herramienta útil para enfocar la atención de los educadores rurales acerca de la intencionalidad de las reformas basadas en estándares y para garantizar que las escuelas ayuden a cada estudiante y atiendan las necesidades de las comunidades rurales.

Palabras clave: rendición de cuentas; la escolaridad rural; liderazgo educativo.

Por que crianças da zona rural não deveriam ter tudo? Liderança com consciência do espaço local em uma era de reforma política deslocalizada

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Resumo

Este artigo explora as crenças das lideranças escolares e comunitárias sobre as reformas baseadas em normas estandardizadas bem como os objetivos das comunidades locais sobre a escolarização em uma zona rural no oeste dos Estados Unidos. Este estudo realizou 11 entrevistas com líderes comunitários e escolares em uma comunidade rural. Os entrevistados buscavam um equilíbrio entre servir os interesses locais e as normas extra-locais de estandarização. Esses líderes estão preocupados com os alunos a quem atendem, com o lugar onde vivem e com a própria avaliação do processo de ensino, indicando que as políticas estaduais e federais têm tido pouca influência construtiva. Os resultados desta pesquisa analisam o conceito de "consciência crítica do lugar" como uma ferramenta útil para que os educadores rurais prestem atenção às intenções das reformas baseadas em normas estandardizadas ao mesmo tempo que procurem garantir que cada aluno tenha sucesso escolar e atendendo as necessidades das comunidades rurais.

Palavras-chave: responsabilidade; educação rural; liderança educacional.

Why Shouldn't Rural Kids Have It All?[1]

When asked how he thought standards-based reform fit in Mountain School District (RSD), Taylor, an administrator, said, "like a square peg in a round hole."[2] In this scenic rural area, more than a decade of state and federal education reform policy had neither produced practices that could support the purported goals of standards-based reform—ensuring equity, excellence, and powerful learning experiences for all students—nor responded to historical rural problems such as out-migration and community health and well being. In this article, I describe a case study of 11 school and community leaders' beliefs about standards-based reform and the purposes of local schooling in a rural community in the western United States. Leaders interviewed clearly cared about both the students they serve and the place they inhabit; moreover, their own assessment of the educational enterprise indicated that state and federal policy had had little constructive influence on either. Most leaders professed support for standards-based reform, but they acknowledged that long-standing practices continued in the district such as tracking and ability grouping, low expectations for some students, and conflating acceptable ("good") behavior with academic learning when assigning grades.

Educational equity and increased intellectual rigor have been identified as the intent of standards-based reform (Massel, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997). Most rural educators would profess to value these aims for rural schooling. However, reform in rural contexts has focused to a greater extent on inequities between rural and suburban/urban locales than on equity between individual students or groups of students (Kannapel, 2000). From the perspective of some rural education scholars, standards-based reform is thought to erode local control (Kannepel & DeYoung, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Smith, 2003), lack rural sensibility (Howley, 1997), detract from local concerns (Harmon & Seal, 1995; Kannepel & DeYoung, 1999; Smith, 2003), and narrow the purpose of schooling to the preparation of a competitive, global workforce. Scholars claim that such schooling begets individualism, competition, a consumption-obsessed culture, and a disconnection from the places students live (Gruenewald, 2003; Theobald, 1997, 2006). While raising important questions regarding who should control rural school curriculum and whose interests rural schools should serve, critics of standards-based reform tend to minimize any benefit that might be realized as a result of standards-based reform policy and often fall short of providing suggestions that are practicable in the current context.

The case study described in this article illuminates the need for leaders who understand the reciprocal relationship between ensuring educational equity and intellectual rigor and developing a citizenry capable of sustaining viable communities. I suggest that leadership oriented toward critical place-consciousness is needed to refocus rural educators' attention on the intent of the standards-based movement, as well as to ensure that schooling supports individual student success and the needs of rural communities. Why shouldn't rural kids have it all?

Three perspectives frame this inquiry. First, leaders acting from various vantage points within a system can influence conditions that support student, professional, and system learning (Knapp et al., 2003). Their actions are guided by theories of professional practice, which are often largely unexamined (Argyris & Schön, 1974). By virtue of their professional training and socialization, educators "tend to reflect and represent a special set of professional and universalistic values which introduces a nonlocal influence into the community" (Boyd, 1982, p. 1124). Consequently, this study sought to examine how 12 years of state-level reform policy had influenced rural school and community leaders' beliefs about the purposes of local schooling and local practice: whether they viewed this policy as unresponsive or counterproductive to that which they held as important; the nature of their concerns and interests; how they viewed their place; and whether school leaders thought like "rural inhabitants" or whether their professional training had prepared them to lead from the perspective that leadership in one place need not be any different from leadership in another.

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[1] This article was accepted under the editorship of Sherman Dorn.

[2] Persons and places are pseudonymous.

Second, the demands of standards-based reform have increasingly caused urban districts to acknowledge the limits of their internal capacity and the need for external support organizations to assist in their reform efforts (Fullan, Bertani, & Joanne, 2004; Kronley & Handley, 2003). Case studies have demonstrated that in particular circumstances, intermediary organizations with geographic proximity to the local school district can form relationships with and among local actors and can enhance available internal resources (Honig, 2004). External support is likely no less needed in rural contexts, yet rural districts may be more hesitant to access external support. Many rural residents view externally-driven reform initiatives with skepticism and have been suspicious of "outsiders who promise that rural folk can be more or have more if they will embrace the opportunities for change" (Seal & Harmon, 1995, p. 120).

Third, research in rural contexts too often focuses on cosmopolitan ideology and suffers from a general lack of "rural sensibility" (Howley, 1997; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Having lived or worked in rural places nearly all of my life, I began this study curious about the disconnect between my lived experiences in rural communities and the literature, lectures, and university-based discussions about standards-based reform and the issues of equity and social justice, all of which which seemed to reflect a primarily urban perspective. Rural scholars critique standards-based reform as the latest urbanized, one-size-fits-all approach to improvement that has been at best unresponsive to, and at worst counterproductive for, rural places (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Smith, 2003). I knew from my work in a regional service center encompassing 41 small and rural school districts and the communities they served that leaders did not commonly use the vocabulary of reform (e.g., world-class standards, academic achievement gaps, equity and excellence). Neither did this vocabulary appear in much of the literature on rural education. Did improvement in rural schools require a "logic quite different," as Craig Howley (1997) has suggested, and what was the nature of such logic?

A Case Study: Mountain School District

Because of the nature of the questions to be explored in this study, all of which concerned an analysis of rural leaders' perspectives, perceptions, and beliefs, a case study approach was chosen. Case study facilitates an analysis and rich description of a particular phenomenon from the participants' point of view within the context in which it occurs (Merriam, 1998).

The Case

River School District (RSD) is located in the Beartooth Valley. The further one drives from the nearest metropolitan area, one cannot fail to notice the beauty of the region despite the indications of rural poverty that begin to appear. The valley bottom is sparsely dotted with homes. Many are tucked away in the forests of Western Hemlock and Douglas Fur and most evidence the effects of years of economic hardship.

The area is considered to be remote and isolated by many, including those who live there. Rates of unemployment and poverty higher than statewide averages are characteristic of this part of the county. Timber-based enterprises have been the major industry in the region. Like many other rural areas in the nation, this place is shifting from a natural resource-based economy to an economy largely dependent on trades and services, a shift that has caused a significant decline in living-wage jobs.

A single elementary school serves all the communities due to recent school consolidation. Facilities at both the elementary school and the junior-senior high school are aging and in poor condition. RSD serves a predominately white student body of which more than 50% qualify for the free or reduced price meal program. Just prior to the loss of a major employer in the region, the district enrolled 930 students, at the time of this study the student enrollment was 566, representing a decline of 40% over a period of seven years.[3]

Data Sources and Analysis

Three sources of data were used: audio-taped semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and field notes taken during site visits. In addition, member checks were conducted to enhance validity and cross-check emergent findings. Eleven leaders were interviewed: two school board members, three administrators, four teacher leaders, and two parent/community leaders. This purposive sample was selected using a snowball technique. Beginning with recommendations from the district superintendent, leaders who had particular knowledge related to state and federal reform and had demonstrated leadership in the district were contacted and invited to participate. In particular, the participating parent/community leaders had been highly involved in school district improvement initiatives since the inception of the state's standard-based reform movement. Additional leaders were recommended by those initially interviewed. Such a mix of informants from various vantage points throughout the system provided an opportunity to gain a holistic understanding of those leaders' perceptions regarding the implementation of extralocal policy. The 11 leaders' tenure in RSD ranged from 4 to 37 years, with an average of 21 years. Sixty to 90-minute interviews were transcribed verbatim and data was collected and analyzed by means of a constant comparative method. Twenty-one different kinds of documents were reviewed, such as student assessment data, newsletters, improvement plans, websites, handbooks, local newspaper articles, various internally- and externally-generated reports, publicly accessible records, budgets, and community partnership publications. Pattern matching and thematic-conceptual matrices were created to assist in development of findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A case study method required my acting as the "primary instrument" for data collection and analysis. My rural upbringing, working-class girlhood, career experiences, gender, and racial identity (White) influence my worldview and the assumptions I make regarding rural schooling and rural communities. My own schooling experiences inadequately prepared me for college and an intensely felt sense of scholastic inadequacy in the world of higher education was for long period of time a part of my lived experience. Echoing the fears of others who have grown up in rural places, I worried about not being smart enough (Ley, Nelson, & Beltyokova, 1996). Nonetheless, my rural roots are inextricably linked to my identity. The physical geography of my home place (mountains, lakes, rivers) richly enhanced my childhood and contributed to a sense of personal identity with the place that continues to mark how I conceptualize who I am in the world. These lived experiences, together with my role in an educational service district, allowed me to be viewed as a trusted insider with an outsider's perspective. To enhance internal validity, I clarified biases at the outset of the study and used reflective journaling throughout to reveal assumptions that might influence my analysis of data and conclusions. In the subsequent section, a discussion and analysis of four themes offers a glimpse into these leaders' values and beliefs, providing an initial understanding of the policy-to-practice connection in this rural context.

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[3] Information was gathered from the state department of education website.

Considering Standard-based Reform: Out of Place?

In the early 1990s, the legislature set in motion the most comprehensive education reform effort in the state's history. Mirroring policy in other states, the purpose of the legislation was to set higher expectations for all students by establishing content and performance standards "set at internationally competitive levels." This law set forth four learning goals, called for the development of broad content standards that were eventually further specified as grade level expectations (GLEs), and led to the development of the state's standards-based assessment. With such state-initiated reform well underway and the passage of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the historical tension over the purposes of rural education and schooling was being played out in RSD during the data collection for this study.

Going Against the Grain

Nearly every leader interviewed described his or her role as walking a tightrope between teachers who were resistant or slow to change (whose resistance was perceived to be mirrored by a resistance to change by a faction of the community) and state and federal mandates for uniform levels of test score improvement on a specific timeline. These leaders appeared to have adopted an approach to reform at a pace that was geared to two perceptions of staff readiness for change. First, reform was a hard sell. Externally imposed accountability systems were not viewed as motivating teachers to improve, and participants say that they may have encouraged increased resistance. Charley, an administrator, commented, "It [standards-based reform] all went against the grain initially." Carson, a community leader, asserted, "Change is difficult… a lot of times in a smaller community, and in particular this one, you have to do a good sell job ahead of time."

Second, leaders framed local discourse of performance as one of effort. Leaders spoke of a strong work ethic for themselves, staff, community members, and students. In contrast to meeting professional standards of practice, good teaching was equated with working hard and doing one's personal best. One administrator stated, "Our teachers, I think, are working incredibly hard, and I refuse to put any kind of pressure on them to think they're not doing well." Kirby, a teacher-leader, stated with clarity the understanding conveyed by administrators: "The administration has been real supportive… They say, 'I know you're working hard and I know you're doing well.'"

Case-embedded analysis revealed tension among and between leaders related to support for standards-based reform. Teacher-leaders voiced the strongest support and believed administrators did not understand the reform, merely gave it lip service, and viewed teachers who were enthusiastic as "zealots." In spite of this, teacher-leaders viewed their role as one of supporting reform by "stepping up to the plate" in their own practice, verbally encouraging others, and serving as models and mentors. Administrators appeared to be more conflicted regarding their support for standards-based reform, and at times they seemed simply resigned to implementing it. As an administrator, Charley's comment is illustrative. "(K)ids are in different places and it [standards-based reform] doesn't take into account where kids are. So, I tend to be more in favor of a continuous progress approach, but that's not what we're dealing with now-a-days." On the other hand, he spoke of "people finally getting on board."

With the passage of NCLB, high-stakes testing and sanctions took on greater meaning, and members of the district's board registered their hesitancy about the implications for state-level reform. Dana stated, "I fundamentally agreed with the direction it [standards-based reform] was going, but now I'm very concerned for what it will end up being." Mason described administrators and teacher-leaders as "making reform fit" and described reform as "big political hoopla… designed to prove we can finally beat the Japanese." He expressed his concern about high-stakes testing and accountability to entities outside the local community when he said, "These are very proud people. If they find themselves publicly being exposed for underperforming when they think they're doing just fine, I think that that's going to drag us down even further." In his view, a clear intention of the reform policy was to exert such pressure.

While agreeing with administrators and teacher-leaders that standards-based reform was not well-understood or embraced, community leaders viewed both parties as sharing responsibility for the state of affairs. As a community leader, Carson's comment elucidates this viewpoint.

> I don't believe there's a consistent message or effort [by administrators] to say these are the strategies I should be seeing in every single classroom… I don't think that they [teachers] make the connection to the fact that we are moving to where the goal is for us to have all our children at a standard.

One of the intended goals of standards-based reform—that all students meet defined standards of performance—received far less traction than a belief strongly held by nearly all leaders, that an important aim of schooling was to help students realize their personal best. Charley, an administrator, explained: "I think there is a great deal of appreciation for our efforts to make kids be the best they can be. That's a little phrase I put in almost every newsletter. Our goal is to make kids be the best they can be." This view was broadly held and seemed at odds with a central principle of standards-based reform. In some sense, such a view may have been another way of saying students in RSD cannot be expected to meet state performance standards, or some students cannot be expected to do so.

The mix of a "standard of personal best" with a "uniform, state-determined standard of performance" appeared to create cognitive dissonance within leaders. Several contradictions surfaced. As a teacher-leader, Kirby's response to the question about the purposes of schooling is representative of other leaders who discussed both reaching one's personal best and meeting a predetermined standard.

> I know not all these kids are going to be college graduates. And so, you know trigonometry may not be the most important thing for them. But helping them to use the skills—to develop the skills and concepts—helping them be the best they can be and do something they enjoy is the purpose [of local schooling].

When asked if the skills she referenced included those encompassed in the state standards, she continued,

> Oh, that's tough [pause] because we still want them to be able to have the skills that are in the grade level expectation (GLE)… I just—in looking over the past they're not all going to graduate from college. They're going to have other jobs. So, I [pause], yes, I want them to have what the GLEs suggest.

Arguably, underlying the reform policy was the recognition that because of changes in the world, and specifically in the world of work, the current system of schooling may no longer serve students' future economic needs. Such changes were being acutely felt in RSD. Still, echoing Kirby's hesitancy, Peyton, a teacher-leader, expressed doubts about the applicability of state-determined levels of performance.

> I think for as many students as we have, being successful is different for every one of them… I think it's so tied with, "what is success?" I think that's different for me than it is for you than it is for every student… I don't know if we can really identify success in one overall statement.

Yet, Peyton spoke highly of the benefits of standards-based reform and of making progress toward its implementation. She suggested, "Before I was hearing more defense… it has taken a few years to get to the stage where it [the atmosphere] is not so defensive about what we've been doing. I think those are the little steps we've achieved."

Others reflected this seeming contradiction. Taylor, an administrator, described the purpose of local schooling as helping students to "reach the benchmarks and to see that they have potential beyond what we have been providing them." He proclaimed, "I believe whole-heartedly in the standards and GLEs and I think the state assessment is a great thing." Later in his interview, when asked about the fit between state and federal reform policy and local practice, Taylor stated,

> I think it's really easy from an outside perspective to just say go do it and expect that this school district and every other school district in this state or the nation is going to be able to implement a plan that gets everybody over the bar. What's not taken into consideration is the baggage that each child brings.

Making the Grade or Meeting the Standard

The leaders believed that for the most part, the central tenet of standards-based education reform—that all students can be expected to meet more challenging academic standards—was not embraced by educators and the community in general. Distribution of achievement was thought to predictably reflect a bell curve, in contrast to the notion that all students could meet more rigorous academic standards. Kelly, a community leader, implicitly recognized resistance to standards-based reform in her statement, "I don't think there truly is an effort to have all kids achieve academically." Teacher-leader Peyton echoed such recognition of resistance: "I'm not sure in this district that there's a uniform belief that all students can achieve." A report produced by an external study team as part of the junior-senior high school's improvement planning process provided further confirmation. The report stated, "There does not appear to be a belief that all students can be successful and can be held to high standards… and use of the standards were not evident as the norm." This sentiment was expressed by Jackie, a teacher-leader, when she asserted, "Not a lot of people are teaching to a standard around here… and they still want to track… you know put the buzzards with the buzzards." Kelly, a community leader and parent, expressed the following concern:

> I don't think my daughter is performing at a level that's where she could be and part of that is no one knows what they're capable of. No one knows what it might look like if she was succeeding at or achieving at a certain standard.

Academic achievement was best understood and celebrated in the community through the use of traditional letter grades, although students who scored well on the state's standards-based assessment were publicly recognized. The traditional honor roll continued to be the primary means by which the district communicated students' academic achievement and had greater significance for the community than did a student's performance related to standards. As Jackie, a teacher-leader stated, "[N]obody cares about our state assessment scores… everybody understands the honor roll. It doesn't matter if it means something."

Locally-held constructs for what it meant to be a well-behaved student were conflated with academic performance. Appropriate work habits and consistent attendance were reported as a measure of academic success in RSD, as is exemplified by Carson, a community leader who said, "[I]f a kid – a student—is willing to be at school, do the work that's asked of them, then they will do well in school. I don't know that I believe that there's a real push for high standards." Shelly, another community leader, affirmed students would likely be viewed as achieving, "if they were passing their classes and they weren't standing on the street corner smoking. I mean they weren't providing a visible negative mark on the community."

In the past two decades, issues related to social justice have increasingly come to the forefront in public education. Educational equity and academic excellence have been identified as fundamental principles of standards-based reform (Massel, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997). One aspect of the discourse related to social justice is a focus on academic underachievement as a predictor of future disadvantage and as a target for reforming educational systems. While terms such as social justice, achievement gap, equity, and excellence are commonplace in the literature on standards-based reform, this vocabulary of reform was not commonly used in RSD. All leaders in RSD agreed that the term academic achievement gap, as it is commonly defined—test score gaps between groups of students based on race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status—was not used in RSD. As Charley, an administrator explained, "I don't care for the term much." Given the racial and ethnic homogeneity of the students in RSD, leaders may have viewed the disaggregation of achievement test scores on the basis of race or ethnicity as irrelevant. Nevertheless, disaggregating test score data based on the socioeconomic status of students also was deemed to be unnecessary, as Taylor stated:

> We don't use the term [achievement gap]… I think it's a good thing. We say we have a lot of impoverished kids, but we don't when we look at the test scores say, these are the affluent and these are the non-affluent. We look at it as a whole rather than breaking it out into parts.

Leaders ascribed different meaning to the academic achievement gap(s) than to underachievement; nearly unanimously they ascribed underachievement to student and family dispositions and aspirations. Specifically, leaders believed underachieving students had the ability or potential, but were unmotivated to achieve to a level to which they were capable. Leaders presumed something other than students' ability presented a barrier to achievement.

Caring: Praxis or Proxy?

Leaders mentioned family circumstances far more often than factors related to schooling as the cause of underachievement. Most leaders viewed the community as encompassing two groups of people. One group comprised those who valued education, understood its importance to the future of their children, and believed in the need for school to be different from the past. To leaders, the other group valued the credential more than what was learned, believed school should be the same as when they attended, and wanted the schools to "fix" their children. These two groups were distinguished primarily by perceived socioeconomic status or longevity in the valley. Most leaders used words and phrases such as transient, hiding out, and working the system to depict families typically thought of as less educated, on welfare, or having limited income. Quinn, an administrator, captures leaders' viewpoints:

> [T]he cost of living is a little bit lower here and it's a place for people to hide. We have a steady population for the most part, but we also have that piece that is very transient… When the mill shut down we lost an awful lot of our professional people and I don't mean that as a put down. I truly mean that your

> professional people value education and people that are 'working the system' don't and we have a blend of that.

Leaders noted that changes in the economic health of the community were a contributor to underachievement. As an administrator, Taylor's lament of the community's loss of stable, working-class families was shared by many leaders. He explained:

> [W]e've lost the old logger families. Those were tough families in that kids were raised to respect and the kids, if they did wrong, the parents came right down and cracked down on them. Now we get a lot of transient… We're in East Jefferson county… people come here to hide.

Mason, a member of the district board, claimed,

> Everything starts at home… the more of these kids that come from those 'don't care households,' I'm not trying to throw everyone on welfare into one class, but we, in the outlying districts, are starting to get the dregs of the earth."

Nearly all leaders attributed underachievement to limited aspirations on the part of students or families. Quinn said,

> I wish that our students, if they were asked the question, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' would have some idea, a goal. That is one of our biggest challenges to get them to look ahead at some kind of goal.

As a teacher-leader, Jackie's comment is illuminating. "We put too much emphasis on sports… Parents come in here and if their son is getting a D they don't care as long as he is eligible to play in the next game." Low levels of student motivation were consistently cited as another cause of underachievement, as Taylor, an administrator stated, "There is an extreme amount of apathy here… kids aren't motivated."

Leaders believed a variety of factors may have contributed to what they perceived as students' limited aspirations and low levels of motivation. These included generational family patterns of timber-related employment and a concomitant student-held perspective that education and schooling were irrelevant to their future. The isolation of the area was thought to contribute to this perspective because students had little exposure to career possibilities outside the valley. Furthermore, leaders' explanations for underachievement included internalized stereotypes of life in this end of the county.

It should be noted that four leaders alluded to school-related policies and practices as contributing to underachievement. These included tracking, pull-out remedial approaches, lack of teacher preparation to work with students living in poverty, and an inability to address different learning styles. Students perceived to be motivated, prepared, and living in supportive families, some leaders asserted, were likely to be held to higher standards than were those students not viewed as possessing these assets. The external study team's report (referred to earlier) affirmed this likelihood, stating that "stakeholders do not hold a common vision for how all students can be successful. High expectations are held for 'those who are motivated.'" As a teacher-leader, Jackie's statement characterizes the dominant perspective: "A lot of people blame the kids."

Responding to what might be viewed as a deficit-oriented analysis of families, another purpose of local schooling emerged: to love, care for, nurture, and provide parenting for students. As an administrator, Taylor's claim that RSD had "no throw away kids" was consistent with the moral norm of caring for students expressed by nearly every leader. One leader who had no children of her own proclaimed, "I raised lots of kids here." Kelly and Carson, both community leaders, viewed such a claim with skepticism. Kelly wondered, "Could a kid with a pierced tongue—a really-big-holes-in-their-ears-kind-of-kid— academically succeed here, or would they have gotten rid of that kid because they didn't look like they could be an academic success?" Carson asserted:

> Those kids that traditionally buck the system [in terms of behavior] are at times very quickly written off, so they don't have to deal with them… sometimes it's some very bright kids but they just don't come to school. When they do come to school, they're in trouble a lot.

Nonetheless, given the family circumstances of many students, these leaders believed schools must meet students' basic needs, such as food and safety, and provide activities before and after school.

It may be that "caring for" students served as a proxy for quality instruction in RSD. Although it was not the intent of this inquiry to examine the quality of instruction, the external study report previously mentioned stated, "In many classrooms, students did not demonstrate deep levels of conceptual understanding." Moreover, most leaders expressed concern that teachers were not teaching to high standards. In addition to working hard, caring for and parenting students were the only other factors used to describe good teaching. Other leaders echoed the sentiment in board member Dana's claim: "We have a great staff. They really care about kids." It was not uncommon for teachers to buy books for students who otherwise would not have been able to purchase personal copies, or to ensure that every girl in need of a dress for the prom had one. Without exception, leaders viewed the community as an extended family and a place where people cared about each other.

Misplaced Interests and Displaced Youth

Leaders described the valley as a place where people "pulled together" in the tough times and where friends and neighbors "picked you up when you were down." As Taylor, an administrator, described, it was a place where people helped each other financially. Such, he quickly pointed out, "was not commonplace everywhere." Leaders frequently, and with great sadness, described the valley as dying. They lamented the loss of living-wage jobs, young families, and community cohesion. A community leader, Carson's comment is illustrative:

> The school was often the place where vital information was shared and ideas were hatched about how to help those in need. With the closing of the schools and the mills, people have been forced to look elsewhere for jobs and have lost that sense of place within our community. I fear that as residents leave or travel great distances for work as I do that we will lose the ability to stay in touch with what is happening in our area and will not know about those in need.

The physical geography of the valley—mountains, pristine rivers and lakes, close proximity to a national park and miles of publicly owned land—provides inhabitants with abundant and convenient opportunities for recreation and renewal. Privacy and a slower pace of life contributed to leaders' portrayal of life in the valley as living the good life. Without exception, leaders participating in this study, clearly articulated their own attachment to place. In spite of this heart-felt expression of their personal sense of place, most leaders believed it was probable, if not inevitable, that most students would leave the valley when they completed high school. Ironically, again without exception, leaders said an important purpose of local schooling was to prepare students for the future by building their confidence and informing them of options for employment and educational opportunities primarily outside of the valley.

Leaders were aware of the dilemma confronting students who may wish to remain in the community, but who were compelled to leave because of economic, educational, or career considerations. Former students, leaders explained, felt connected to the school years after they completed high school. Those who had left the area returned to the community because they wanted to raise their children in the valley.

When asked if students had experiences in school that would prepare them to live in the local community should they decide to do so, leaders seemed confused by the question. As an administrator, Taylor's reaction provided a good example of this confusion. He asked rhetorically, "What are some of the things *we do* that connect kids to living in this place?" and identified a technology-based curriculum that provided students with opportunities for advanced placement courses. Later in the interview, Taylor referred to a service-learning program in the junior-senior high school; however, he acknowledged it was fair to say that local schooling did not provide many opportunities for students to learn how to live well locally.

Leaders cited the development of skills and dispositions to be a productive, contributing member of society as another purpose of local schooling. Most leaders did not focus solely on the local community; rather, they deemed these skills important for the broader society regardless of where students choose to live. In fact, only two leaders mentioned developing citizenry for the health and well-being of the local community.

Protecting the Local: A Square Peg and a Round Hole

In RSD, it appears that state and federal policy that pays scant attention to the particularities of place, even after several years, has not served to support leaders in challenging the status quo. Resistance to standards-based reform is strong. Several factors are likely to be contributing to this resistance. Only in a limited manner did leaders appear to grapple with the inconsistency between the beliefs and assumptions underpinning their professional practice (their theories of action) and the central tenants of standards-based reform. A deficit-oriented analysis of some students and families and the absence of terms such as social justice, achievement gap, and equity with excellence may indicate that most leaders had not wrestled with constructs central to standards-based reform. Many leaders express skepticism (either their own or others) about extralocal policy, viewing it as unnecessary, out of touch with the challenges faced in the school district, potentially humiliating for the community, or motivated by interests other than improving student learning. There is a palpable sense that something is being done to, rather than for, the school district and the communities it serves.

Teacher-leaders' perspectives, for the most part, are the exception to such skepticism. Four of the five teacher-leaders participate in extensive professional development provided by state and regional entities and were viewed, at least by the other leaders who participated in this study, as not only leading the way locally, but also as leaders at the regional or state level. In general, these teachers deemed their colleagues as slow to "buy into" reform. For instance, they point to their peers' beliefs that academic achievement must predictably fall on a bell curve and that not all students were held to high expectations.

Most of the teacher-leaders interviewed believed administrators had branded them as "zealots" for attempting to advance reform. Three had been instrumental in creating and launching a system of locally-developed assessments that mirrored the kinds of test items found on the state-mandated test. Although subtle, tension appears to be building regarding the use of these locally-developed assessments, tension which administrators attribute to professional jealousy among the teaching ranks rather than resistance to reform.

Leadership from any vantage point is an important consideration in the success or failure of an innovation. Those in formal positions of authority have a particularly vital role to play. Administrators and school board members appear to be more conflicted about implementing standards-based reforms than do teachers or community leaders. They ascribe underachievement to factors related to students and family far more than to schooling.

Given their positions of formal authority, administrators and school trustees likely feel greater pressure to balance the tensions between local concerns and extralocal mandates than do other leaders interviewed. Still, absent a culture of high expectations or a valuing of the cultural capital all families bring to the table, a standard of "personal best" appears to be a slippery slope to mediocrity. Additionally, in lieu of ensuring that students learn, working hard and loving students serves as the professional standard for good teaching. This tacit agreement between teachers and administrators about what it means to be a good student and a good teacher may best explain why many teachers did not embrace standards-based reform.

Given the declining economic opportunities in the communities served by RSD, it is not surprising that these leaders pointed to the loss of local jobs as a reason for supporting the reform movement. They used it to leverage community support for a localized version of higher standards—helping students to become their personal best and building their confidence to enable them to access employment or educational opportunities primarily outside the valley. Connecting the erosion of the traditional economy, which had supported generations of logging families, to the need for school reform might have been risky in some rural communities. It had the potential to aggravate the tension between local interests and externally-driven mandates because it connected local schooling with learning to leave the community. This did not appear to be the case in RSD. Decline in the local economy was seen as a major factor in the devolution of the community into two factions: one relatively supportive of reform and the other relatively indifferent. Paradoxically, in spite of their personal attachments to the valley and enthusiastic descriptions of the quality of life it offered, leaders' beliefs about the purposes of local schooling were not linked to the health and well being of their local communities. All leaders appeared to be resigned that most students would leave the area and that schooling should prepare them to do so.

The leaders who participated in this study do not appear to have confronted the long-term implications for their communities if formal education does not support young people in learning how to live well locally. They care about both the students they serve and the place they inhabit and have an abundance of goodness of heart; though, this may not result in serving the best interests of all students or the needs of the community.

Findings from a single case study of 11 leaders' perceptions cannot be generalized to other rural leaders or rural places. Still, this inquiry elucidates the connection between rural leaders' theories of action and beliefs about purposes of rural education as they engage in the balancing act between serving local interests and satisfying extralocal mandates. Leadership oriented toward critical place-consciousness might facilitate the integration of standards-based reform constructs and critical place-conscious practices to promote a rich, relevant education that is equitable, just, and responsive to community viability in places like RSD.

"A Logic Quite Different"

Resistance to reform is not unique to RSD. Imperviousness to sustained, large-scale change in the structures and processes of public schooling—that which Tyack and Cuban (1995) call "the grammar of school" (p. 85) and Metz (1989) refers to as the "real school" (p.81) script—has been well documented. Thus, neither is resistance a uniquely rural phenomenon. Howley (1997), however, has argued against a cosmopolitan orientation to rural school reform, suggesting that cosmopolitan interests in reform and rural interests are so different as to be antithetical. He has suggested "a logic quite different" is needed to improve rural schools. Although he refrains from explicitly prescribing the nature of such logic, one can deduce that his logic arises from a conviction that reform should actually benefit rural communities rather than subverting them. He is certainly not alone in this assertion. From a rural scholarship perspective, standards-based reform presents three intersecting and significant liabilities: loss of local control, lack of "rural sensibility," and delimited purposes of local schooling.

Constructs of Standards-based Reform

Before addressing Howley's argument, it is important to understand two broad aims of standards-based reform—a more equitable and just system of public education and increased intellectual rigor of curricula and pedagogy. Panasonic Foundation Assistant Director Scott Thompson (2001) drew a distinction between what he termed "the authentic standards movement" and its "evil twin." He defined the evil twin as "high-stakes, standardized, test-based reform" (p.358) and asserted it was a "politically warped" variation of reform in which standardized test scores are inappropriately used as the sole measure of success or failure of students and systems. In contrast, he stated, "[a]uthentic standards-based reform is fundamentally concerned with equity. It departs radically from the tracking and sorting carried out by the factory-style schooling of yore" (p. 358). Its aim is to hold high expectations for all students and to improve the instructional core—curriculum, teaching, learning. He cautioned the intent of standards-based reform would be compromised if it became too closely aligned with its "evil twin." In the eight years since the passage of NCLB, it has arguably become too closely aligned with the evil twin that Thompson (2001) warned against. This is the context in which rural school and community leaders now find themselves.

Loss of Local Control

Standards-based reform is thought to erode local control (Kannepel & DeYoung, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Smith, 2003). The Rural School and Community Trust (2000) takes a strong stance on standards, saying that setting genuinely high standards linked to assessments that measure intellectual growth, the quality of teaching, and school effectiveness "will move mountains in the effort to restore confidence in our schools." While the Trust maintains standards should be determined locally and rooted in "local wisdom, experience, and place" (p.6), because of the mandates of No Child Left Behind, in most schools state-determined standards and assessments are likely to drive the reform agenda.

The question of who determines what is important for students to learn and how their learning should be demonstrated goes to the heart of whose interests schools should serve. Proponents of local control worry that externally-driven policy may result in schools as "agencies of social control" with "state-determined correctness" of what is to be learned (Rural School and Community Trust, 2000, pp. 4–5). However, just as locally developed standards do not necessarily result in isolationism or provincialism, state-developed standards do not inherently serve politically exploitative purposes, nor are they necessarily inappropriate to local places. Scholars' apprehension about narrowly targeted, potentially exploitative state-determined standards provides a persuasive argument for integration of such standards with place-conscious pedagogy. Concern for the local does not require local standards; rather state-determined standards can be contextualized in locally responsive, rich, relevant curriculum.

Gruenewald (2003) claims the current emphasis on standards and testing is simply another form of standardization by which "educators are handed, and largely accept, the mandates of standardized 'placeless' curriculum and settle for the abstractions and simulations of classroom learning" (p. 8). However, standards-based reform does not mandate accepting placeless curriculum and placeless practices. In studying the relationship between place-based education (education grounded in the local place) and standards-based reform in Vermont, researchers did not find instances where standards drove out place-based curriculum, nor did standards inhibit the development of new place-based initiatives. Rather, they found resources generated through standards-based efforts helped teachers to achieve their place-conscious objectives, suggesting the conflict between standards and place-based education is "more rhetorical than real" (Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005, p. 63).

Lack of Rural Sensibility

Standards-based reform is thought to lack rural sensibility (Howley, 1997) and to detract from local concerns (Kannepel & DeYoung, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Smith, 2003). Urbanized, one-size-fits-all approaches to rural school improvement have given little consideration to contextual factors that shape the beliefs and actions of rural stakeholders (Porter, 2001), and the challenges and strengths found in rural contexts (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Smith, 2003; Theobald, 1997). For instance, the interdependent nature of the relationship between rural schools and rural communities is significant (Collins, Flaxman, & Schartmen, 2001; Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Howley, Pendarvis & Woodrum, 2005; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lane & Dorman, 1997; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Stern, 1994). Yet, scholars claim that 20 years of state and federal reform initiatives have contributed to the shift from a gemeinschaft orientation toward schooling—educating students for membership in their communities—to a gesellschaft orientation—educating students for "a future that is in such flux that it is difficult even to envisage it… (where) individuals may live in such a community without being of the community" (Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005, pp. 22–23). Rural school improvement has focused to a greater extent on community viability than on individual student equity. Considerations of equity have arisen primarily in relation to inequities between rural and suburban/urban locales (Kannapel, 2000).

In a like manner, the discourse on standards-based reform rarely includes any consideration of community viability. It is true that reform policy has called for increased participation of stakeholders (e.g., site councils and shared decision making), but such participation has often been inauthentic, serving as a legitimizing ritual and a technology of control to maintain the status quo (Anderson, 1998). Rather than connecting with community, status quo in urban schools often means keeping community "at arms length" (Schutz, 2006, p. 691).

Curiously, in a comprehensive review of school-community engagement strategies, Schultz (2006) stressed that in urban schools a continued focus on "individual achievement and the nurturing of individual potential" must remain central, but "it is not enough" (Schultz, 2006, p. 703). Because few urban children will leave the central city, urban educators must "find ways to participate in efforts to make the central city a place where one might make a home" (p. 727) and this can only happen if central cities "becomes places with a collective sense of community and shared destiny" (p. 727). Just as a focus on individual achievement is not enough in urban schools, a focus on community viability is not enough in rural schools. Both are necessary.

While rarely mentioned in the current standards-based reform discourse, the virtues and benefits of place-based pedagogies for rural students and their communities is well documented in rural scholarship (Gruenewald, 2003; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Harmon & Branham, 1999; Howley et al., 1996; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996; Smith, 2003; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1999). Rural sensibility is presumably inherent in these approaches since they are rooted in the local context and infused with local meanings. Such pedagogy has been promoted primarily to support such aims as civic responsibility, economic development, or an ecological ethic, rather than academic learning or educational equity. Although some advocates of place-based education recoil at the suggestion that standardized test scores might be used as one measure of the effectiveness of such pedagogies, improved test scores have been correlated with their use (Sobel, 2004), as have more equitable outcomes for students (Williams, 2002). Once again, a compelling argument can be made that integrating content standards into place-conscious pedagogy and focusing on all manner of outcomes (e.g., increased civic involvement, improved local economies, a more salient sense of place, greater ecological care, as well as improved academic achievement) could bring to externally-driven reform a rural sensibility (relevance) which attends to both community viability and individual student equity.

Delimited Purposes of Local Schooling

Standards-based reform, critics claim, perpetuates a century-long "amnesia related to what schools are for," which has reduced the purpose of schooling to preparation of students for future economic well being (Theobald, 2006, pp. 30–31). Producing a competitive global workforce leaves unexamined the dominant-cultural practices, the impact on local economies, and the ecological well being of rural places (Gibb & Howley, 2000; Gruenewald, 2003; Theobald, 2006, 1997). Such schooling begets individualism, competition, a consumption-obsessed culture and a disconnection from the places students live (Gruenewald, 2003; Theobald, 2006, 1997). Drawing on Montesquieu's political philosophy, Theobald (2006) argues, "Man is essentially a social and political being and an economic being only secondarily" (p. 320). He continues, "The dignity of life doesn't reside totally in an individual's ability to affect his economic condition; it also resides in his capacity as a citizen to positively affect the lives of others. In other words, there is a social or communal dimension to life that requires educational cultivation" (p. 329).

In what he calls "Wendell Berry's Tradition," Theobald (1992) elucidates the need for a rural education philosophy to guide the purposes of rural schooling. He describes Berry's call for rural students to receive an education steeped in a liberal arts curriculum as "tempered with a critical edge." In Theobald's words, "Berry wants to see students define the boundaries of a democratic society. To deal with trespasses of such boundaries, he [Berry] would have students develop the courage to take appropriate action" (p. 3). Those students who do receive an empowering education, one that cultivates agency, are often those who have historically left rural communities, in part, to pursue economic opportunities. Committing to the provision of such an education for every student is paramount to developing rural communities where students become citizens who can critique their situation and act on their own behalf to build economically and ecologically healthy places to inhabit. Humans may be primarily social and political creatures and economic beings only secondarily, but they are indeed all three.

Much of the critique has created a false dichotomy between schooling that advances individualism—which is equated with the restrictive purpose of preparing students for a national and global economy and all its concomitant effects —and schooling that serves the common good or community. Individualism is not wrong and community right. Rather, they represent a complementary duality—two good and necessary things. Should not schools (and communities) provide an education that ensures both individual and common interests are served? Foster (2004) alleges:

> Individualism is not necessarily contra community; however, the values and norms of systems can be affected by the way the terms are nested, and for the

> most part in this age, the community concept tends to be nested within a more dominating notion of individualism. (p. 188–189)

An integration of standards-based reform constructs and critical place-conscious practices nests the aims of the authentic standards movement—equity and intellectual rigor—within the broader consideration of the health and well being of community and place. The leadership challenge becomes one of appropriate nesting of the ideals. It is to that challenge I now turn.

The Case for Critical Place-Conscious Leadership

At a macro-political level, this study may illustrate the long-standing assertion that a one-size-fits-all policy does not serve rural locales well. At the micro-political level, though, another question is raised: To what degree are school leaders prepared to engage in a critical analysis of extralocal policy in relationship to the unique needs of the schools and communities they serve? Whether or not standards-based reform policy results in loss of local control, defies rural sensibility, or limits the purposes of schooling is more within our control as educational leaders—scholars and practitioners—than we might believe. Despite the encumbrance of Thompson's "evil twin", there is a considerable amount of implementational latitude (wiggle room) that goes unexploited.

Leaders oriented toward critical-place consciousness might be better prepared to engage in the balancing act between local interests and extralocal policy. Such leadership might nurture individual development and appropriately nest this aim of schooling within the broader aim of serving the commons. I am hesitant to suggest that such a notion is uniquely rural. It likely has meaning for school leaders in any context. Nonetheless, it is important for those who lead rural schools to understand that rurality is more a "set of meanings" than it is a "set of characteristics" and rural meanings are "founded on a sense of place" (Howley, 2004, pp. 13, 19). In fact, it is the lack of distinction between the duties that contribute to the school and those that contribute to the community that differentiates rural school leaders from their urban peers (Howley, Pendaris, & Woodrum, 2005). Thus, a critical, place-conscious orientation might most benefit rural leaders and the places they serve. In what follows, I briefly outline three constructs that could provide a beginning point for conceptualizing critical place-conscious leadership.

First, place shapes identity. As educational leaders, place influences our worldview and provides a context for action. Yet it is probable that most leaders only minimally, if at all, understand the importance of attending to the particular aspects of the places they serve, not to mention the way place has influenced them personally and professionally. In terms of leadership formation, Morris (2008) contends:

> Place contextualizes us… [It] affects our sense of problems and priority issues that we believe our primary communities ought to deal with and why. Moreover, place contextualizes what we believe leadership to be and our assumptions about how best to exercise those qualities… Place becomes a teacher that is always, present, no matter how many times we move or relocate… [It] provides the localized opportunity for us to better comprehend the complexities of what leadership means, as well as to become more active citizens and learners with our communities. This learning for action holds the promise that we can, indeed, transform our democracy. (pp. 225, 252)

Because (often implicitly held) beliefs and values determine professional practice (Arygris & Schon, 1974), an understanding of the role of place in shaping leaders' professional identity might inform frameworks for leadership preparation and development so as to help bridge the gap between leaders' theories of action and theories in use. This would require both a close examination of personal beliefs and a critical analysis of actions. Howley (2004) argues, "Rural professionals… are in particular need of such introspection… Like fish, we can't see the water in which we swim. Unlike fish, we've also been trained not to see it. Our professional training has actually helped to blind us to the things that sustain us as rural people" (pp. 14–15).

Second, places are pedagogical. Numerous progressive educational traditions have drawn upon the powerful pedagogical nature of place (i.e., community-based education, service learning, outdoor education, indigenous education). These traditions may be endangered if leaders take a myopic view of standards-based education. As was demonstrated in Vermont, standards-based education and place-based education do not necessarily serve opposing purposes (Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005, p. 63). Leaders, especially those with positional power such as administrators and board members, can either support or inhibit teachers' use of place-based pedagogies. Rather than acting from an abridged understanding of learning as academic achievement only, critical place-conscious leaders would, as Starratt (2005) describes, connect students' "moral agenda of becoming authentic persons who can claim their own identities and their life trajectory to their academic agenda of learning about the cultural, natural, and social worlds they inhabit" (p. 20). Entities that serve aspiring and practicing leaders such as universities, state departments of education, and regional service centers, ought to ensure the inclusion of place-based pedagogies in their discussion of instructional leadership, educational reform, and school improvement.

Finally, a shared sense of place cultivated by the leaders in a community might serve as medium for advocacy and activism. By virtue of their socialization and professional training, educators act from perspectives that are universal rather than particular. They act within a "zone of tolerance" (Boyd, 1982), a compromise between professional expertise and dispositions, on the one hand, and locally-held beliefs and values perceived as nonprofessional and nonexpert, on the other. A universal rather than place-specific perspective often fails to take into "respectful account the circumstances, needs, and local aspirations of families" (Howley, 2006, pp. 432, 436). In contrast, critical place-conscious leadership envisions a more democratic practice that is inclusive and addresses and redresses issues of power. One of the hallmarks of leadership in many community-based and alternative educational settings is the close relationship between leadership, advocacy, and activism. Those involved in leadership development might look to these contexts as models for cultivating a shared sense of place. Rather than teaching leaders to manage the political environment for purposes that primarily maintain the status quo, fostering critical place-consciousness might aid leaders in promoting schooling practices (even standards-based schooling) that are a vital subset of the total educative experience of living in a particular community and place. These leaders would not only engender relationships with the powerful key communicators in a community but also co-create the conditions for understanding the workings of power and privilege and actively reach out to people in the community who have been marginalized and silenced. Such leaders would cease buffering teachers from parents and community; rather, they would engage with parents and other members of the community in discussions about what local schooling is for, their dreams for their children, and their desires for their community.

Orr (1996) has suggested, "Rural communities that are more inclusive, democratic, and economically self-reliant must be imagined before they can be created" (p. 230). Such imagined places will require a new understanding of leadership. Critical place-consciousness is a stance toward leadership practice that makes the abstract ideals of justice and democracy concrete in local places. It has the potential to influence the purposes of rural schooling and education in a manner that serves both the individual and the collective. It may be a part of the logic quite different (Howley, 1997) needed for rural leaders such as Taylor to create a better fit between that round peg and square hole.

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