

The Role of Place for Rural School Leaders in Appalachian Virginia

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This qualitative inquiry examines the multifaceted role that the concept of place holds in the professional identities and administrative practices of rural school leaders in Appalachian Virginia. These educational settings often are marked by distinct challenges, such as geographic isolation, resource limitations, and a perceived disconnect from macro-level policy decisions. Through a basic qualitative inquiry involving 12 school leaders across six southwestern Virginia divisions, the study explores how rural leaders perceive and address such complexities through a place-based lens. I utilize a researcher-developed tripartite theoretical framework of *active aspects of place as practiced space*, which includes *mētis*, or local or place-oriented practical intelligence; *terroir*, the socio-cultural connection derived from place; and *bricolage*, the creative repurposing of place-bound assets when formal resources are scarce. The findings indicate that place-consciousness is fundamental to rurally responsive leadership, as participants leverage community history, local culture, and rural capital to implement educative initiatives. These efforts enhance students' sense of belonging and make academic learning more relevant. Despite obstacles related to state standards and funding, leaders employ deeply relational community partnerships and improvisational praxis to make decisions and engage community-based assets. Ultimately, the study suggests that a place-conscious approach is essential for sustaining successful leadership and educational practices in rural communities.

Keywords: *bricolage, mētis, place-based education, rural school leadership, terroir*

The concept of place is multidimensional with profound theoretical implications. It has been examined across many disciplines, such as geography, sociology, anthropology, and environmental psychology. Far from being static, place emerges as an active province of ideas shaped by the interplay of physical environments, personal interactions, and social experiences. Physical attributes of a space influence the nature and depth of social connections, which, in turn, imbue the environment with meaning and significance. These layers of interaction are further enriched by subjective experiences—emotions, memories, and personal narratives—that forge a deeper and more personal connection to place, making it both a physical and emotional anchor in human lives.

Understanding place is crucial to how school leaders approach decision-making and problem-solving. K-12 schools, regardless of how rural or remote, are not isolated or insular entities; they exist as part of broader ecological systems, intricately tied to their spatial and temporal contexts while remaining subject to external influences. The physical setting of a school, coupled with the social interactions among

students, educators, leaders, caregivers, and the surrounding community, actively shapes its culture and learning environment. These interactions, enriched by the subjective experiences of individuals within the rural context, inform how stakeholders navigate both external pressures and internal challenges. As a result, the dynamics of a school environment emerge as a unique synthesis of these interconnected elements, fostering an educational setting that reflects and responds to its broader context.

Applying the concept of place to rural K-12 schools offers valuable insights into the unique characteristics, challenges, and opportunities these educational environments face. Rural areas are often defined by distinctive geographical attributes—expansive landscapes, natural features, and lower population density—that profoundly shape the experiences of those who learn and teach within them. The physical setting of a rural school not only influences how teachers and students engage with the natural environment but also fosters a unique sense of place that permeates the broader educational experience. This connection extends beyond the classroom, encompassing the interactions and relationships of all stakeholders who contribute to the school's cultural and ecological identity.

Recognizing how the physical characteristics of a place shape the rural school environment can provide valuable insights into how leaders identify and leverage local assets and resources. In close-knit rural communities, where relationships and social cohesion often play a central role, the social dynamics of leadership are deeply influenced by these connections. Community engagement, shared values and worldviews, a strong sense of relatedness, and local traditions and histories become integral to the identity of both the school and its leaders. These elements not only shape the culture of the rural school but also inform the leadership approaches of principals and superintendents, particularly in fostering public relations, strengthening parent partnerships, and navigating external community relationships. In this way, the unique social fabric of rural communities becomes a critical driver of collaborative and place-conscious leadership.

Place, when expressed as a rural setting, holds profound cultural and communal significance. Rural K-12 schools often serve as the heart of their communities, hosting everything from sporting events and family gatherings to homecomings and cherished cultural traditions. The school building, the Friday night football field, and the surrounding landscape become living symbols of historical, cultural, and ecological importance. For students and educators alike, these settings cultivate a unique sense of belonging, shaped by shared memories and deeply personal connections to the community. Effective school leadership recognizes and honors these ties, leveraging them to foster an environment that reflects and respects the socio-cultural and personal identities of those it serves. By doing so, leaders create spaces where students, educators, and communities alike can thrive, woven in the rich tapestry of their shared selves—what Dewey (1916/2001) called one's "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience (p. 91)".

With that in mind, the purpose of this study is to explore the multifaceted dimensions of place as practiced space within a rural school context, examining how rurality as place shapes and challenges rural educational leaders. In short, this means interrogating the roles that both place and sense of place play in school leadership practice in rural settings. A nuanced understanding of place enables educational leaders

to address issues such as limited resources by tapping into local assets and to reframe perceived isolation through the strengths of community and culture. The central questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. How do rural educational leaders construct their professional identities in relation to the multifaceted dimensions of place (i.e., the active aspects of place)?
2. In what ways does a rural leader's understanding of place influence their administration of the school-community environment—specifically regarding their “place-thinking, place-doing, and place-knowing”?
3. How do rural educational leaders navigate the practiced space of rurality to leverage local assets (opportunities) while addressing resource limitations and isolation (challenges)?

To guide this exploration, I establish a framework for understanding the critical aspects of place, followed by an examination of how traditional ideas can inform new conceptualizations of place. My discussion then turns to rural place matters, emphasizing its unique cultural, social, and ecological significance. Study discoveries are organized around key themes: the impact and importance of place, place-based educational initiatives, community connection and involvement, student sense of belonging, local challenges and support systems, and leadership praxis and partnership building. The paper concludes with a discussion on rural responsiveness in educational leadership, advocating for a place-conscious approach that promotes the transformative potential of school leadership in rural communities.

Aspects of Place

Place is “the social, built, and natural context in which individuals are situated, and to which they ascribe meaning” (Armstrong & Stedman, 2019, p. 95). As a scholarly concept, place provides a critical lens through which people interpret their locally-defined social experiences and cultural worlds (Cresswell, 1996; Tuan, 1977). Cresswell (1996) acknowledged a significant gap in the social sciences, observing that connections between place and people are often overlooked: “Class, gender, and race are often treated as if they happened on the head of a pin” (p. 11). Similarly, Azano (2011) asserted that rural schools are too often merely framed as places that are “fraught with poverty [with] limited access to educational equity” (p. 8). This oversight is especially relevant in education, where concerns about class, race, and gender are deeply intertwined with how individuals understand and experience place (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Hallinger & Liu, 2016).

Active Aspects for Conceptualizing Place

I propose that place can be examined through three critical lenses of place-conscious practice: *bricolage*, *métis*, and *terroir*. These frameworks—bricolage (Jenlink, 2006; Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019), *métis* (Scott, 1998; Yahn, 2017), and *terroir* (Howley & Howley, 2014)—can be applied as active, place-based ways of thinking and doing. Originally, these concepts were conceived in isolation as separate, unintegrated notions with no specific typology in mind. However, I argue that, taken together,

mētis, terroir, and bricolage offer a nuanced perspective on theorizing place-based leadership, especially within resource-limited, remote rural schools.

Bricolage has been well established as a way of understanding how school leaders adapt and innovate by “making do” with available means and materials, treating them as assets when formal resources are scarce. Mētis (a Greek term, distinct from the Canadian Indigenous people with this name) refers to the practical, local intelligence that one draws upon for place-conscious decision-making and problem-solving. Terroir, borrowed from viticulture, emphasizes the socio-cultural *essence* of place. It informs leaders’ responses to the unique challenges of their schools’ contexts. By combining these concepts, informed by years of work and study in rural schools and place-based thinking, I offer an original theory that intersects with leaders’ praxis of reflection and action, cultivating responsive, ecological, and improvisational approaches to problem-solving and community engagement.

Bricolage

Lévi-Strauss (1966) defined bricolage as *making do* with the assets and resources that are *at hand*, a concept that has garnered interest in organizational management and leadership (Perkmann & Spicer, 2014) as well as education (Jenlink, 2006). Bricolage refers to the creative repurposing of existing materials to solve problems, often in situations where resources are limited (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Perkmann & Spicer, 2014). Unlike standardized approaches, bricolage relies on improvisation and situational adaptability (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). It is particularly relevant in contexts marked by environmental constraints (Baker & Nelson, 2005), evolving societal needs (Zollo et al., 2018), and complex, uncertain conditions (Eddy-Spicer et al., 2021).

Jenlink (2006) argued that bricolage is especially fitting for understanding educational leadership, where school leaders face “a myriad of complex problems—problems that reflect the increasing diversity of a changing society, the press of political agendas, and the expectations of a public that is more and more concerned with the quality of education its children receive” (p. 60). He reframed the school leader as a bricoleur, emphasizing their need to navigate uncertainty and equity-related challenges using an improvised “toolkit” of skills and support systems. In this context, bricolage does not demand groundbreaking innovation but instead highlights practical, adaptable responses to immediate challenges (Jenlink, 2006; Gojny-Zbierowska & Zbierowski, 2021; Lui et al., 2018).

The realities of school leadership often reflect fragmented, rapid, and improvisational work. Lunenburg (2010) described it as “fragmented, rapid fire, voluminous, allowing little time for quiet reflection” (p. 5). Leaders frequently employ cognitive and technical skills to address uncertainties, plan under constraints, interact with diverse stakeholders, and organize accessible resources. For instance, studies on school principals’ responses to the crisis illustrate bricolage in action (Hess & Lowery, 2021; Lowery & Hess, 2022; Lowery et al., 2023). Principals expressed feeling unprepared and lacking financial or human resources to support students and staff affected by trauma. Yet, they *cobbled together* responses by

leveraging whatever resources were available to meet school-community needs, exemplifying bricolage as a means of *patchworking* solutions (Hess & Lowery, 2021; Lowery et al., 2023).

Mētis

Educational leadership in rural areas implies having a practical sense of place, requiring leaders to operate within local contexts often outside the bounds of formalized state policies. Scott (1998) defined *mētis* as “practical skills, ...common sense, experience, a knack” (p. 311), emphasizing practical knowledge rooted in a meaning-laden environment, or “indigenous technical knowledge” (p. 313). Similarly, Yahn (2017) described *mētis* as “a form of local knowledge indigenous to place and gained from an intimate understanding of the context and problem” (p. 65).

Mētis encompasses “practical skills and intelligence” applied in response to dynamic natural and human environments (Scott, 1998; Yahn, 2017). It requires leaders *to read* (decode and comprehend) their situations and act with informed, context-specific decisions that balance intuition with experience. This adaptability is central to success in complex and changing scenarios. As Scott (1998) noted, “making the best out of limited resources” involves skills that are difficult to codify as rigid disciplines (p. 315).

Beyond individual action, *mētis* also applies to social interactions, manifesting in both competition and collaboration as a “practiced responsiveness born of experience” (Scott, 1998, p. 314). It bridges intellectual knowledge (*episteme*) with skillful application (*techne*), offering a framework for decision-making and problem-solving in context-rich environments. At its core, *mētis* captures the interplay between local, practical knowledge and universal principles, aligning conceptually with *bricolage* (Scott, 1998).

Terroir

In viticulture, *terroir* refers to the geographical indications of a wine, shaped by factors such as location, climate, and especially soil, which influences grape flavor more than other fruits (Howley & Howley, 2014; Meloni & Swinnen, 2018; Pellechia, 2018). The term is both contentious and complex, often used to describe qualities that are otherwise inexpressible or indefinable (Meloni & Swinnen, 2018; Pellechia, 2018). Craig and Aimee Howley (2014) first applied this term to rural educational research, calling such place-oriented research “an act of *terroir*” (p. 7). They linked this concept of *terroir* to research as an art and a conversation with place, both an act of transgression and an act of engaging in a shared reality. According to the Howleys, *terroir* was what gave research in rural settings its unique flavor. Rural educational leadership can also be labeled as “an act of *terroir*,” a praxis of conversing and sharing with others through a sense of place (Azano, 2011; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). School leaders frequently engage with intuitive, place-defined approaches rooted in place—one might say, in the location, climate, and soil of the rural school. These “gut” approaches depend on instincts that are more than mere reflex.

In education, *terroir* can be seen as the socio-cultural background and professional wisdom shaped by one’s connection to place over time. Teachers often attribute exceptional instructional moments to intuition, but such actions are likely the result of ingrained habits and skills developed through practice and experience (Pretz, 2011; Sanger, 2010; Sipman et al., 2019; Sipman et al., 2021). For school leaders, this

professional wisdom manifests as socio-culturally informed habits of thought and decision-making, drawn from their repertoire of experiences. These habits enable leaders to solve complex problems in ways that reflect the unique “flavor” of their community and environment, grounding their actions in the rich context of place.

Why Rural Aspects of Place Matter

Rural schools face unique and often accentuated challenges (Azano, 2011; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Billmayer et al., 2020; Black et al., 2000; Bolton, 2017; Corbett & Tinkam, 2015; Showalter et al., 2019). These include perceived “cultural” limitations, difficulties in leadership for quality assurance, school closures, challenges in coordinating interschool collaboration, and the management of systemic change (Dowling, 2008; Slee & Miller, 2015). Billmayer et al. (2020) emphasized that “the equality aspect is especially accentuated in rural areas which, unlike metropolitan regions, often have significant difficulties related to long distances between schools, lack of qualified teachers and problems filling the classroom due to diminishing birthrates” (p. 1). Rural schools, particularly on an international scale, often lack access to resources such as libraries, museums, science centers, mental health services, advanced medical care, and robust social networks, which are viewed as more readily available in metropolitan areas (Hallinger & Lui, 2016; Hossain, 2016; Miller et al., 2019; Mulkeen, 2005).

Moreover, rural school leaders are often more vulnerable to external pressures, including a disconnect between macro-policy decisions and the local realities of rural education (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Lavalley, 2018; Papastephanou, 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021; Wei & Tse, 2021; Weston, 2022). As Samoff (2013) explained, “education necessarily reflects, and simultaneously is in tension with, the structure of the national political economy” (p. 58). These tensions shape how leaders address educational challenges and work to foster equity amidst far-reaching policy controls (Beech, 2019; Sanchez & Rivas, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019; Stadelmann-Steffen, 2012). Even with shifts toward local or state-level control, such as the shift from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in the U.S., the lingering effects of centralized policies may continue to influence rural education mindsets.

Methodology

Research Design

This study is framed as a basic qualitative inquiry (Ellis & Hart, 2023) aimed at understanding how rural educational leaders construct meaning within their professional roles. While the study draws on ethnographic techniques—such as prolonged engagement through fieldnotes and journaling—to capture the cultural nuances of the rural setting, it is primarily a multisite qualitative study rather than a traditional bounded case study, though elements of case analysis were considered (Fusch et al., 2017; Jones-Hooker & Tyndall, 2023). According to Kahlke (2014), basic qualitative studies often use this type of methodological mixology, “draw[ing] on the strengths of established methodologies while maintaining the flexibility that

makes generic approaches attractive to researchers whose studies do not fall neatly within a particular established methodology” (p. 39). The bounded system of the inquiry can then be understood as regional, defined by an existing consortium of rural schools located within the Appalachian region of southwestern Virginia.

Participant Selection and Case Definition

This study examines rural schools in southwestern (Appalachian) Virginia, exploring the perceptions of 12 school leaders regarding how a sense of place influences educational decision-making and problem-solving. Participants included five superintendents, one assistant superintendent, five principals, and one assistant principal. Purposeful sampling was employed to select “information-rich” cases that effectively illustrated the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). This meant recruiting participants who could speak directly to rural school leadership as a place-based practice. Key informants, or “gatekeepers,” were engaged to help identify suitable participants and provide additional cultural and contextual insights (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews and in-the-field observations. Semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions and probing follow-ups, enabling an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Tailored interview protocols were developed for each participant group, with confidential sessions lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted on-site or at a location chosen by participants for their comfort and convenience. Field observations during multiple school and community visits enriched the qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015), including impromptu interactions and guided tours with school leaders lasting 45 to 120 minutes. Observations were documented through detailed field journaling and note-taking. Additionally, participants shared relevant documents, such as principal meeting agendas, leadership memoranda, and local newspaper articles, which provided critical context and supported data triangulation (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved multiple coding cycles: open, axial, and selective coding. This multi-cycle coding process (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018) used an initial inductive cycle to capture emergent participant meanings, followed by a deductive cycle aligned with the active aspects of place as an emerging theory, to illustrate the framework’s conceptual depth. Open coding was used in the inductive cycle to identify key ideas and categories, using process, values, and in vivo coding techniques (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Axial coding, drawing on deductive reasoning, was employed to refine and connect these categories, uncovering commonalities across interviews and observational data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Selective coding synthesized these patterns into overarching themes, offering rich descriptions and emergent explanations (Gibbs, 2018).

Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software facilitated the organization, labeling, and comparative analysis of data (Patton, 2015). This tool proved essential for managing the coding process and synthesizing my discoveries (i.e., findings) into cohesive themes. Analysis combined inductive and deductive methods, organizing emergent codes into thematic units aligned with the framework of Active Aspects of Place as Practiced Space. These thematic units included *bricolage* (place-thinking and place-doing), *mētis* (place-knowing), and *terroir* (place-being).

The final analysis resulted in six discoveries, which I present as themes: 1) Impact and Importance of Place, 2) Place-Based Educational Initiatives, 3) Community Connection and Involvement, 4) Fostering Students' Sense of Belonging, 5) Local Challenges and Support Systems, and 6) Leadership Praxis as Partnership Building. These themes provide a community-oriented understanding of how place influences educational leadership and decision-making through *bricolage* (place-thinking and place-doing), *terroir* (place-becoming and place-being), and *mētis* (place-knowing).

Discoveries

Impact and Importance of Place

When asked to reflect on their understanding of *place* in an academic sense, rural school leaders described it as a concept deeply integrated with their identity and practices. They emphasized that a thorough understanding of their community's history, culture, and environment empowers them to make decisions that serve not only the school but the broader community. This type of place-thinking or *bricolage* demonstrated a heightened sense of place that shaped their leadership identity and informed their practical framings for addressing challenges and fostering meaningful connections, or what could be called "place-doing." Place was integral to their decision-making process. As one principal asserted,

Place is crucial. It's the context within which we operate, and it shapes everything we do. Understanding the community's history, values, and needs helps me make informed decisions that benefit our students and the community. For example, we've implemented place-based education projects that utilize local resources and knowledge, which has been very impactful.

This response suggested that school leaders' understanding of their community's historical and cultural context impacts their practice and can even drive educational initiatives.

Another principal discussed *place* in terms of incorporating local history and geography into the curriculum. He stated,

Our community's values, history, and environment shape our school's identity. We integrate local history and geography into our curriculum to make learning more relevant to our students. We also collaborate with local organizations to provide resources and support that align with our community's needs.

In some ways, this illustrates how school identity was intertwined with the local context. This leader's response also hinted at how leveraging community resources enhances educational relevance and support for students.

One superintendent in the study reflected on how their understanding of place influenced personal relationships with others within the school-community setting. They shared,

I grew up in a rural area myself, so I understand the unique challenges and opportunities that come with it. I've always felt a strong connection to rural communities. Being a part of this community allows me to build strong relationships with students, parents, and local organizations. It's about more than just the school; it's about being an integral part of the community.

The leader's deep personal connection to the rural community shapes not only their relationships within the community but also their ability to connect locally with others.

A high school principal shared that the geographical and historical context of their community would often guide his leadership decisions. In his words,

Place is a fundamental aspect of our approach. It shapes our identity and informs our decisions. We've implemented various initiatives that leverage local resources and knowledge. For example, we have a program that involves students in local environmental projects, which not only educates them about ecology but also fosters a sense of stewardship for their surroundings.

This example demonstrated how the notion of place-becoming and place-being are inherent to place-based initiatives. The educator and educational leader's sense of being in a place undergirds and informs the educational endeavor of allowing students to engage in becoming connected to the place—as their responsibility and a source of resources. In the view of this school leader, it not only enhanced educational outcomes but also instilled a sense of moral obligation and connection to the local environment.

Overall, the importance of place was deeply ingrained in rural educational leaders' administrative practices. By understanding and leveraging the unique historical, cultural, and environmental context of their communities, these leaders create more relevant, supportive, and impactful educational experiences for their students. Their understanding of the emotional and psychological attachment people, including the self, have to specific locations was essential to their lived experience as a school leader and an educator. It provided a foundation, whether spoken or unspoken, to personal and communal connections, memories, and identities tied to their particular geographic environments.

Place-Based Education Initiatives

Participants implemented a variety of place-based education projects, including local history initiatives, environmental stewardship programs, and partnerships with local businesses. By leveraging local resources and knowledge, these projects made education more relevant and engaging for students. Leaders noted that these initiatives not only enriched academic learning but also instilled a sense of pride and responsibility in students, strengthening their connection to the community.

One principal shared an innovative approach to integrating local agricultural practices into the curriculum, explaining, “We’ve partnered with local farms to create a curriculum that teaches students about sustainable farming practices. Students visit the farms, learn directly from farmers, and even start their own small garden at the school.” This hands-on learning experience not only connected students to their community’s context but also tied their education to the region’s economic activities, enhancing its relevance and engagement.

Another rural Appalachian principal shared a project focused on environmental stewardship. She stated,

Our environmental stewardship program involves students in various activities like tree planting and river clean-ups in collaboration with local environmental groups. These projects teach students about conservation and sustainability while fostering a sense of responsibility towards their local environment. It’s an excellent way to integrate local issues into the curriculum and make learning more meaningful.

Projects like this exemplify how leaders perceive the importance of place, demonstrating how students not only learn about conservation and sustainability but also develop a sense of responsibility toward their local environment. By embedding local environmental issues into the curriculum, these programs make learning more meaningful and impactful.

A superintendent shared a successful place-based project that connected students to the community’s historical heritage, explaining, “One of our most successful projects is our local history initiative. We collaborate with local historians to develop a curriculum that includes field trips to historical sites and guest lectures.” Through this initiative, students gained a deeper understanding of the area’s history and its influence on the present, enriching their historical knowledge while fostering a sense of pride and connection to their community.

A principal described how she enriched the curriculum by integrating local cultural traditions into the school’s arts program. She explained, “We invited community artists to teach workshops and collaborate with students on projects....It’s been incredibly beneficial in making the arts program more vibrant and connected to the community.” This approach offered students hands-on experience in various art forms while deepening their understanding of cultural heritage. By further connecting the school with the community, the program not only revitalized the arts curriculum but also fostered a stronger sense of connection and pride among students.

These place-based education initiatives exemplify the effective use of local resources and community knowledge to create educational experiences that are both relevant and impactful for students. Such activities embody the concepts of *métis* (place-knowing) and *bricolage* (place-thinking and place-doing), demonstrating how educational leaders understand and are aware of the temporal, cultural, and pedagogical needs of their students. By implementing practical and innovative solutions, these leaders enhance students’ education and strengthen their connection to the community.

Community Connection and Involvement

A recurring theme across the interviews was the importance of community connection. Community connection and involvement are central to the concept of *mētis*, or place-knowing. Leaders emphasized the value of intimately understanding the needs, values, and histories of their communities, which informs their decision-making and helps build robust relationships with students, parents, and local organizations. This intimate knowledge allows them to navigate and influence the socio-economic fabric of their communities effectively.

One principal emphasized their lifelong connection to the community and how it shapes their understanding and leadership. She stated, “I’ve lived in this community my entire life, so I know the families and the local culture very well. This connection helps me understand the needs of our students and how to best support them.” The principal’s deep-rooted knowledge of the community, including socio-cultural background and moral frames, helped them tailor educational practices to better support students and utilize local resources effectively. In the words of one middle school principal, “It’s just making connections, constantly making connections that can support your school.”

Ongoing engagement with community organizations showcases a comprehensive view of the local social fabric and leveraging it to benefit the school. A superintendent reflected on how their personal connection to the community influences their leadership and decision-making. She reflected on how this manifested for her during the COVID-19 pandemic, affirming,

The community’s support has been crucial in overcoming educational obstacles. During the pandemic, we had to find new ways to ensure students received their education and basic needs. The local businesses and community members stepped up, providing resources and assistance. This collaboration reinforced the importance of strong community ties and how our school can be a central hub for support and learning.

She saw her deep personal connection and understanding of the community as foundational to this willing involvement. Because she saw herself as “known by them” and she also knew them they shared a common sense of place—the school community. Together they could forge meaningful relationships and confront local challenges effectively, sharing the same concerns.

Likewise, a principal in the study discussed ways of leveraging community knowledge to support student needs during times of challenge and crisis.

We faced significant challenges during the winter storm [last year] when many families were without power and resources. Our school became a hub for distributing food and supplies, and we partnered with local businesses and community members to ensure everyone had what they needed. This experience reinforced the importance of our strong community ties and our role in supporting each other in times of crisis.

Responses such as this provide insights to the leaders’ intimate local knowledge and hint at how their place-based wisdom enabled them to devise creative solutions that addressed immediate challenges and also personally benefited students with certain needs.

The rural school leaders in this study consistently emphasized the interplay between community connection and their knowledge of place as central to their work. By recognizing and leveraging the unique social, cultural, and economic systems of their communities, these leaders were able to design educational experiences that were more relevant, supportive, and impactful for their students.

Fostering Students' Sense of Belonging

Data revealed that place-based education initiatives positively impact student engagement and perception of self. Place-conscious leaders view it as a moral responsibility to develop students' sense of *becoming* and *being* a part of the community, seeing education as a means of connecting students' lives to their locality. Place-conscious projects and initiatives have the potential to cultivate valuable skills and a deeper appreciation for heritage in students. Although responses focused on students, this acknowledgment revealed how leaders themselves sought out ways of fostering a strong sense of place as a shared reality and a site of mutual dialogue and experience. In that way, these responses reveal something about their own *place-becoming* and *place-being*, or sense of terroir.

One principal made a connection to how a place-based restoration endeavor had influenced students' connection to their community: "When students see how their education connects to their community and its history it makes their learning more meaningful." Therefore, students' involvement in renovation projects, revitalization activities, and engagement with local history enhance their sense of community and foster feelings of belonging.

One of the rural principals shared how place-based ideas can reinforce student engagement through socio-ecological justice. He characterized it this way: "Hands-on projects not only teach them valuable ecological skills but also instill a sense of responsibility towards their local environment. Students become more engaged and motivated when they see the tangible impact of their efforts on their community and [fellow] citizens." Similar to the previous theme, environmental stewardship programs were viewed as extremely impactful. Students participated in activities like tree planting and river clean-ups. Rurally responsive leaders sought ways to integrate these activities relating to conservation and sustainability into the curriculum and campus culture.

Rural school leaders viewed environmental projects as a means to help students develop a deeper connection to their local selves, enhancing their sense of responsibility and engagement. As one superintendent reflected, place-based education projects influenced students' perceptions of both community and self:

Students start to see the value in their community and develop a sense of pride and responsibility through place-based education projects. For instance, our local agriculture curriculum has students working with local farmers, learning about sustainable farming practices. This hands-on experience connects their education to the community's economic activities, making their learning more relevant and engaging.

This quote underscores how forming a link between education and local economic activities can help students recognize the relevance of their learning and fosters belonging and an awareness of place in their community.

One principal shared how rurally responsive projects impact students' engagement and perception: We incorporated local cultural traditions into our arts program by inviting community artists to work with students on various projects. These activities not only teach students about their cultural heritage but also give them hands-on experience in different art forms. It's been incredibly beneficial in making the arts program more vibrant and connected to the community. Students develop a deeper appreciation for their heritage and are more engaged in their learning.

Integrating local cultural traditions and community members into the curriculum enhanced student appreciation in students for their heritage and increases their engagement in learning. Such place-based initiatives positively impact student engagement and self-perception.

Connecting education to the local community as a practiced space and mobilizing local place-based assets, capital, and resources, students develop a civic sense of self, seeing the relevance of their education to their own lives and situations. Leaders saw creating spaces for these projects as integral given the way these experiences help students gain valuable skills and a deeper appreciation for their heritage.

Local Challenges and Support Systems

Despite the positive outcomes, leaders acknowledged several challenges in implementing place-based initiatives, often requiring significant innovation and improvisation. These challenges included identifying and mobilizing assets, securing capital and resources, aligning projects with educational standards, and gaining buy-in from diverse community stakeholders. Nevertheless, the strong community support and clear benefits for students made these efforts worthwhile. Rural school leaders frequently drew on their understanding of *place-thinking* and *place-doing* to navigate and overcome these obstacles, making do with assets and resources at hand (i.e., bricolage).

One secondary principal in the study discussed the need to secure resources for place-based projects, even when difficult. He stated,

One of the biggest challenges we face is finding the necessary resources to support our place-based initiatives. Funding is always tight, and we have to be very creative in how we allocate our budget. We've managed to get some grants and community donations, but it's a constant struggle to ensure we have what we need to make these projects successful. But we can't afford not to.

This principal's account illustrates how knowledge of place enabled him to creatively mobilize funding and by leveraging external community support. In this manner, he was able to ensure the sustainability and success of student initiatives, which he viewed as an imperative.

According to a fellow principal, they faced a real challenge in harmonizing place-based projects with educational standards and mandated curriculum. They shared,

Aligning our place-based projects with state educational standards can be tricky. We have to ensure that our initiatives not only engage students and connect them to the community but also meet the required learning outcomes. This requires a lot of planning and collaboration with teachers to integrate these projects into the curriculum effectively.

There was a noted complexity to ensuring that place-conscious and community-based education initiatives meet educational standards while remaining engaging and relevant.

However, this also was exhibited through the leaders' perception of community resistance. As one Appalachian superintendent reflected,

Getting buy-in from all stakeholders [for place-conscious education], especially those who are resistant to change, is a major challenge. Some parents and community members are skeptical about the value of place-based education and prefer more traditional approaches. We've had to work hard to demonstrate the benefits of these initiatives and show how they positively impact student learning and community engagement.

Resistance in rural and socially conservative regions emerged as a significant obstacle. As one superintendent explained, overcoming such hurdles requires a collective effort grounded in effective communication and advocacy to secure support from all stakeholders. Leaders had to know how to take a rurally responsive approach to communicating in terms of the local values and worldviews. This helped to translate the educational benefits of place-conscious educational endeavors.

Conversely, another rural school leader shared how an unwavering community support had been crucial in overcoming locally based challenges. She maintained,

Community support has been absolutely vital in overcoming challenges we face. During a particularly tough financial year, local businesses and community members stepped up to provide funding and resources for our place-based projects. Their support has been instrumental in making these initiatives possible. And successful. Knowing that the community believes in what we're doing gives us the motivation to keep pushing forward despite the obstacles.

Regardless of support or resistance, cultivating community support was a major work of bricolage for these leaders. The rural leaders' ability to navigate these challenges within their local contexts and with the knowledge of stakeholders exemplified their *place-thinking* and *place-doing*.

Overcoming perceived resource limitations and ensuring the success of place-conscious initiatives meant constantly reframing their thinking about available assets and community resources. To implement place-based education initiatives, such as securing resources, aligning projects with standards, and gaining stakeholder buy-in required rethinking and reimagining their respective situation in each rural place. These challenges aside, the general strong support from the community for teaching and learning (though sometimes expected to be traditional) and the perceived benefits for students made their efforts to re-envision learning worthwhile.

Leadership Praxis as Partnership Building

The pragmatic work of school leadership bricolage is evident both explicitly and implicitly in their discussions of place. Rural educational leaders identify as individuals who naturally seek out assets and capital from the local environment to make do, to get by, and to apply to necessary ways—and often in ways beyond the purpose or outside of the normal use of the resource.

Educational leaders described extensive backgrounds in education, transitioning from teaching to administrative roles. This experience equips them for the content- and context-laden aspects of rural education, which are often deeply rooted in the geographic and historical context of their communities. Their career trajectories are deeply influenced by their professional training and leadership styles. Leaders often spoke of making do with available resources and using their skills to navigate the unique challenges of rural education.

A strong personal connection to the place where they work and interact with others had an impact on their awareness of assets and capital. This connection also provided them with a basis for being creative or innovative when needed. This became particularly apparent when participants reflected on decision-making and problem-solving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One superintendent viewed her response to COVID-19 as a “blessing in disguise.” The improvisations and initiatives prompted by the pandemic served as a catalyst for further positive and meaningful change. Consequently, she worked to sustain these programs, recognizing their effectiveness long after the immediate concerns of school closures and masking had passed.

COVID-19 was a significant challenge, but in some ways, it was a blessing in disguise. We had to improvise and find new ways to engage students and support their learning remotely. This led to some innovative solutions that we have continued to use even after returning to in-person learning. For example, we developed virtual learning modules and online resources that have enhanced our educational offerings. These tools have been so effective that we plan to keep using them long after the pandemic is over.

Similarly, another superintendent reflected on the improvisational approaches taken during the pandemic and the continued impact of these changes,

During the pandemic, we had to think on our feet and come up with solutions that were both immediate and long-lasting. One thing we did was set up outdoor classrooms to ensure students could continue learning in a safer environment. This was not only a temporary fix but also an idea that we realized could benefit our students in the long term, promoting more outdoor and experiential learning opportunities. These outdoor spaces have become a permanent part of our school setup.

Leadership ability to innovate and create lasting solutions out of necessity embodies the concept of bricolage. School leaders in rural places often use the constraints and challenges of the critical events like the pandemic or moments of conflict as opportunities to develop new educational endeavors and implementing strategies that they viewed as innovative. In doing so they demonstrate the notion that

bricolage as a praxis of making do with available resources at hand and improvising solutions from what is “within reach.”

Participants in this study framed their ability to engage in their work in rural schools in the idea of a bricolage of place. One way in which this was expressed was through the development of local partnerships. Often times in rural places large community or business partners are a limited resource. As one high school principal discussed, this same type of work was critical to building community connections and partnerships. In his words,

I spend a lot of time trying to get involved with the community. Any group that is within reach, we will bring in as a community partner. One year, it was the local newspaper. We recognized them for all their coverage of the athletics and academic success of our students. We have different companies that would come in to say, “Hey, we’re here to support you.” The energy company came to say, “We have a grant here for you for your math and science.” We really appreciate this partnership.

This participant’s response reveals how the leader leveraged community partnerships to supplement relevant resources for the school and support for students, using the existing social capital creatively to address needs and enhance the educational experience.

Overall, these data illustrate the nature of educational leadership in rural settings as that of a bricoleur, where leaders navigate situations with ingenuity and resourcefulness. While these innovations and improvisations may seem modest compared to those in well-resourced districts, they reflect a determined effort to succeed despite obstacles. By leveraging deep community connections to enhance their schools’ resources and capacities, these leaders embody what Lévi-Strauss described as *patchworking*—a hallmark of bricolage—within the context of place.

Discussion

The discoveries from this study highlight the multifaceted role of place in rural educational leadership. My analysis attempts to align the data with the emerging framework of Active Aspects of Place as Practiced Space. This tripartite framework of *métis*, *terroir*, and bricolage provided a lens to focus on the dynamic interplay between place and educational leadership practices, emphasizing the importance of leader perception and place-consciousness in shaping educational aims.

Interpretative Synthesis of Discoveries

The integration of the Active Aspects of Place within rural educational leadership suggests that practitioners do not merely occupy a geographic location but rather inhabit a practiced space that requires a sophisticated synthesis of local intelligence and improvisational action (Cresswell, 1996; Tuan, 1977). Integrating the conceptual lenses of bricolage, *métis*, and *terroir* into the empirical data provides a flexible

and nuanced lens for understanding how leaders transform the perceived deficits of rurality into administrative assets.

To that point, the data illustrate how the constraints of the rural environment necessitate a leadership style defined by bricolage, or the creative repurposing of existing materials and available assets to solve complex problems (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). The data regarding administrative responses to the pandemic and resource scarcity highlight the leader as a bricoleur who navigates uncertainty by patchworking solutions from whatever resources are within reach (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Jenlink, 2006). Rather than viewing a lack of formal capital as a permanent barrier, these leaders treated available local means as assets to be leveraged for student benefit (Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019). This pragmatic innovation demonstrates that rural responsiveness is an active, place-based way of thinking and doing that fosters a unique synthesis of interconnected elements within the educational environment (Eddy-Spicer et al., 2021; Zollo et al., 2018).

The evidence from the qualitative data regarding the implementation of place-based education projects further clarifies the role of *mētis* as a form of local knowledge indigenous to place and gained from an intimate understanding of the context and problem (Scott, 1998). Participants utilized this practical intelligence to navigate the socio-economic fabric of their communities, effectively reading and decoding local situations to build support for school initiatives (Azano, 2011). This place-knowing is not a static intellectual exercise, but a practiced responsiveness born of experience that enables leaders to bridge universal educational principles with specific community needs (Sipman et al., 2019). The study findings suggest that this local knowledge is a primary mechanism through which leaders overcome the disconnect between macro-policy decisions and the grounded realities of rural education (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Johnson & Howley, 2015).

Finally, this study reveals how the lived experiences of rural school leaders engaging in place-based leadership can be theorized as an act of terroir in resource-limited or remote environments (Howley & Howley, 2014). When leaders described their professional identities as deeply integrated with community history and environment, they were articulating a sense of terroir, which functions as the socio-cultural background and professional wisdom shaped by a connection to place over time (Howley & Howley, 2014; Pellechia, 2018). This is inherent in educational leadership as an art, a shared reality, and a conversation within the communities they live and lead. At times, that may even mean for them that terroir is an act of transgression when the educational needs of students push leaders to act both within and beyond the localized and sometimes limiting norms of the community. This framing then allows leadership praxis to be seen as both a reflective practice and an active way of thinking. This reflective action and active thinking take place within a practiced space where decisions are not based on standardized, external protocols but on the unique flavor of the local context (Meloni & Swinnen, 2018).

Conclusion

This inquiry examines the role of place in shaping rural educational leadership. Primarily, my aim was simply to explore ways that rural educational leaders identify and engage with the concept of place and how they consider its influence on their decision-making, problem-solving, and resource leveraging. By aligning discoveries from these data with the Active Aspects of Place as Practiced Space, I hope to clarify how place-consciousness—place-knowing, place-thinking/doing, and place-being—can be integral to responsive leadership in rural education. Future researchers may wish to delve deeper into these dimensions to further examine the intricate relationship between place and educational leadership in rural places.

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