

THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT
IN A RURAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The superintendent's leadership role in a professional learning community was examined with a primary focus on its relationship to distributed leadership. The role of the district leader in a rural community was also investigated. This qualitative case study concentrated on three rural districts. Information was gathered during one-on-one interviews with superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders. The questions addressed in this research are: What role does the superintendent have in the distributed leadership of a professional community? How does the superintendent's role affect the development of distributed leadership and help to support a professional learning community? How does the superintendent's role compare to that of the principal or teacher leaders in districts that believe they operate as professional learning communities? Looking through the lens of a rural school district what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community? The findings of this research indicate that the role of the superintendent is equally important to that of the principal and teacher leaders in a professional learning community. It further demonstrates the need to examine the relationship between professional learning communities and traditional authority roles within a system with distributed leadership.

Key words: professional learning communities, distributed leadership, superintendent, principal, teacher leaders, rural schools, leadership, leadership roles, leadership practice, vision, mission.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Professional learning communities have been widely researched. A professional learning community is a highly successful means of supporting students to meet academic success (Newmann and Wehlage, 1995). Bryk, Camburn, and Lewis (1999) defined professional learning communities as follows, "...we use the term professional (learning) community to refer to schools in which interaction among teachers is frequent and teachers' actions are governed by shared norms focused on the practice and involvement of teaching and learning" (p. 753). DuFour (2004) stated, "To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results" (p. 6) A professional learning community incorporates active and professional teacher participation, exceptional principal leadership, parent and student involvement, a commitment to professional development and rigorous academic programming (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999).

Many authors have attempted to define professional learning communities. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) expressed concern in giving professional learning communities (PLC) a specific definition but acknowledged that it needed clarity. Their definition was used for this research.

The very essence of a *learning* community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it. In order to achieve this purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organization must become in order to help all students learn. They make collective

commitments clarifying what each member will do to create an organization, and they use results-oriented goals to mark their progress. Members work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle, and extend and enrich learning when students have already mastered the intended outcomes (p. 3).

Current research poorly represented the role of the superintendent in the development of and sustaining the work of a professional learning community. A significant amount of research indicated that a supportive principal and increased teacher involvement were essential for academic gains (Bryk et al., 1999; Liebman, Maldonado, Lacey, & Thompson, 2005; Mitchell, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Wright, 2008). One body of work posed that success for a professional learning community may reach beyond the building principal, "The district office is ideally positioned to initiate process to develop district-wide principles" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 68).

In their school districts, superintendents carry responsibilities similar to that of a chief executive officer (CEO) in a private corporation (Houston & Eadie, 2002). Similar to a CEO, a superintendent is responsible for strategic decision-making and vision for the organization (Bennis, 2003; Bennis & Nanus, 2003). Equally, as DuFour (2003) discusses, a superintendent, like a CEO, pursues initiatives allowing for the autonomy of administrators and teacher leaders. Developing professional learning communities demands significant skill and talent in the role of the superintendent (DuFour, 2003). Beyond the vision of a school district or a corporation, the leader must possess the ability to move forward with sustainable change (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2002; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith,

Dutton & Kleiner, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Sustainability is defined as the capacity to endure (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008). Many studies in the corporate world recognize the need for the CEO to promote plans leading toward sustainable change that are inclusive of employees at varied levels (Frayne & Callahan, 2004; Kraut, Pedigo, McKenna, & Dunnette, 2005; Lotti, Mensing, & Valenti, 2007). Initiatives and changes that are worth the effort, such as professional learning communities, should also be sustained.

Distributed leadership has been widely defined by researchers in the field of education. The definitions differ greatly across many studies. For this literature review, the definition by Spillane (2006) describes the concept of distributed leadership as a practice that is “a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, followers, and aspects of their situations such as tools and routines” (p. 3). Distributed leadership as leadership practice is located in the relationships or interactions between leaders and followers that define the organization’s culture (Hargreaves & Fink, 2008; Spillane, 2006). It is a practice of leadership that recognizes leading and managing schools as involving multiple individuals including those who are not formally designated leaders (Spillane, Camburn, Pustejovsky, Pareja, & Lewis, 2008).

Distributed leadership may be critical to the development of a professional learning community; yet research has not drawn a direct connection. Distributed leadership requires the collaboration of administrators and teachers (Spillane, 2005b). Spillane writes that effective leadership is in the *practice* of the job. Professional learning communities thrive when there is ongoing, positive interaction among administrators and teachers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). These writings establish a potentially important connection between professional learning communities and distributed leadership. That connection lies in the ability of the superintendent to facilitate the collaboration between teachers, teacher leaders, and other administrators to develop district

initiatives that promote student learning. Many in the corporate world have recognized the need for the CEO to promote plans leading toward sustainable change that is inclusive of employees at varied levels (Frayne & Callahan, 2004; Kraut et al., 2005; Lotti et al., 2007).

Many researchers have documented the role of principals and teachers in a professional learning community. Ross and Gray (2006) found that when teachers participated in and had a high level of commitment to the practices of a professional learning communities their students had higher achievement levels. Bryk, et al. (1999) wrote that students' engagement improves when their teachers have a higher level of professional engagement. Barker (2006) found that a principal's work influenced the support and commitment of faculty toward a promising, productive, professional learning community.

Strategic action of the superintendent to support distributed leadership may lead to the sustainable change created in professional learning communities but this connection has not been explored. What impact does the superintendent have on student learning? What does the superintendent do to sustain systematic change efforts? Is the superintendent's role different in a rural school district? While documentation supports the role of the teacher leader and the role of the principal in professional learning communities there has been limited research on the role of the superintendent. The role of the superintendent in a rural district could be different from those leaders in larger districts. This research examines the role of the rural superintendent as the leader of a professional learning community, as a facilitator of distributed leadership, as a collegial partner with other leaders.

Statement of the Problem

There are currently more than 330 rural and small schools in the Rural School Association of New York, (RSA, 2009). Instituting and sustaining change may prove to be even

more challenging for superintendents, principals, and teachers in rural school communities because they often deal with issues such as declining enrollment, low tax base, a low rate of staff retention, consolidation efforts, and inexperienced leadership (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; RSA, 2009; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Sher & Thompkins, 1976; Stern, 1994). In addition to those issues, leaders in small districts often serve in combined formal and informal leadership roles.

This body of research focuses on the role of the superintendent. It further views the connection between distributed leadership and professional learning communities and how the superintendent affects their success. The role of the principal and that of teachers in the establishment and sustainability of professional learning communities has been researched by many authors. On the other hand, the impact of the superintendent on professional learning communities lacks documentation. In addition, as a superintendent attempts to establish a culture of distributed leadership and that of a professional learning community, the leader may further discover the constraints of working in a rural community.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What role does the superintendent have in the distributed leadership of a professional learning community?
2. How does the superintendent's role affect the development of distributed leadership and help to support a professional learning community?
3. How does the superintendent's role compare to that of the principal or teacher leaders in districts that believe they operate as professional learning communities?
4. Looking through the lens of a rural school district what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community?

Significance of the Study

Limited writing and research has been done regarding the role of the superintendent in the development and sustainability of professional learning communities while much has been written regarding that of principals and teacher leaders. This research provides a look into the role of the superintendent as compared to other district leaders.

Many components of a professional learning community may be similar to those of distributed leadership. This research looks at some plausible links that should be further examined. Finally, the research provides rural superintendents insights on what they specifically can contribute to learning communities in their districts.

Limitation of the Study

The limitations of this study include the small sample size of three districts and twelve participants. This research is not generalizable beyond the region where it was conducted. Some of the districts chosen for the study did not fully participate despite previous commitments to do so. The superintendents of each district selected the teacher leaders. The researcher expected involvement from the superintendent in the development of a professional learning community and in any form of distributed leadership.

One of the limitations of this research is the lack of a singular definition for professional learning communities. It was assumed that there would be negative comments regarding the work of leaders in a small, rural school district and that there would be fewer positive comments.

Definitions

Co-leadership

Co-leadership is defined as two or more leaders working collaboratively to lead a group.

The partnership of the leaders may be formal or informal. For the purpose of this research, co-leaders function within a school district. The positions of the leaders may be superintendents, principals and/or teachers.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership is defined as the practices, which a leader performs in his or her position, and how that leader interacts in interpersonal relationships with other formal and informal leaders in the organization.

Professional learning community

A professional learning community is defined by the commitment of all members to the learning of each student. The educators work to establish high levels of learning through a clear vision of how this purpose will be achieved. Each member takes responsibility for the success of the academic organization. In this commitment, the members take charge of continually developing their own skills through professional development and a relentless need to improve through change, evaluation, and refinement of curriculum.

Sustainable change

Sustainable change in education is a change that made in a school district that stands the test of time. A sustainable change is measured by its ability to positively affect academic programming.

CHAPTER II

Review of Related Literature

Distributed Leadership

Practice defines distributed leadership, it is not just how the school leaders perform their jobs, but why they choose specific jobs and the circumstances of the tasks at hand (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 1999). Spillane et al. (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of research related to the topic of distributed leadership examining how and why leadership happens. The research of Spillane et al. reviewed distributed leadership practices that sustained change and defined those practices for further review. Spillane and colleagues reported, “Leadership practice (both thinking and activity) emerges in and through the interaction of leaders, followers, and situation, in the execution of leadership tasks” (p. 37). The research examined the means by which leaders solved problems, including metacognitive interpretations. There was further interpretation of how the interaction of leaders and followers in a particular situation at any given time, affects the way the leaders confront issues. The conceptual framework for the research of Spillane et al. related to current theories in psychology, social contexts, and their influence on responses. Their research studied leaders in their own setting or practicing framework as opposed to outside their work world. The work of Spillane et al. gave the opportunity to review the relationship between situations encountered by leaders and the tasks that surround those situations. Finally, it set the stage for greater exploration in the area of leaders and their levels of experience.

Leaders have the ability to take charge of situations, develop a vision for their company or school, and formulate plans for improvement (James, Mann, & Creasy, 2007). The research of James et al. (2007) came out of England and looked at the changes from a traditional model of

leadership to a shift that expects leaders to demonstrate a more distributed model. The pilot project included three settings with the purpose of finding a model that would teach leaders the methods for using a more collaborative framework. The researchers chose to model after the Collaborative Leadership Learning Group in partnership with Cranfield School of Management in Britain. In the pilot project, the participant leaders worked with tutors to determine the knowledge they had, knowledge that came from outside of their organization such as best practices, and knowledge the group collaboratively shared. The tutors then coached participants to reflect on what they were learning. The results demonstrated a greater need for looking at the skills required to be a collaborative leader. Leaders need to know how to cope with the emotional aspects of releasing control to move their staff toward a distributive model.

The distributed model of leadership does not look toward a singular leader but rather the shared responsibility of leadership as a professional practice (de Lima, 2008). De Lima's work focused on department heads in schools and their role in distributed leadership. De Lima looked at the department chairpersons to determine how they engaged their peers toward a more professional attitude that affects student achievement. The research, conducted by survey, examined the affects of colleague input into each other's professional development. Research conducted in twelve departments in two schools utilized a rating scale to determine the level of a chairperson's involvement. It showed that distributed leadership does not happen in every case of shared work. In this research, department chairpersons needed to work toward the goal of distributed leadership. The research further discovered that to encourage professional leadership, embedded professional practice must be in the teachers' work setting.

James Spillane and others at Northwestern University have conducted a collection of research projects on the practice of distributed leadership. The Distributed Leadership Study

conducted a variety of individual research projects in urban schools. Spillane et al. (2008) investigated the relationship between principals and their leadership teams (comprised of teacher leaders). The principals of two mid-sized urban schools completed a web-based survey and the staff answered questions on leadership. This mixed methods design research, used an experience sampling method log and questionnaires. The results pointed toward the importance of the leadership teachers provided, and the benefits of informal teacher leaders.

Goldstein (2004) conducted an embedded single case study of 28 schools in an urban California school district. In the one-year study, she focused on consultant teachers examining the practices of teacher leaders and peer reviews. The district identified the teachers for their excellence and released them from full time teaching to assist as consultant teachers for two to three years. The sample consisted of ten consultant teachers with nine other teachers and administrators. The researcher collected data through observations, interviews, and surveys. The results indicated teachers viewed themselves as leaders and have similar expectations of their peers (Goldstein, 2004). The results demonstrated that the use of consultant teachers to assist in the evaluation of their peers was a successful means of shared leadership. However, Goldstein found initial disagreement among teachers and administrators over who should ultimately be responsible for teacher evaluation. Over time, all came to gain approval by using the consultant teacher method.

Distributed Leadership, a book written by James P. Spillane (2006), details the practice of distributed leadership. Chapter 3, *The Practice Aspect* (Spillane, 2006), defines three levels of interaction among leaders in co-leadership practice: collaborated distribution, collective distribution, and coordinated distribution. Collaborated distribution is the work of two leaders side-by-side on the same project, an example of this could be two leaders co-facilitating a faculty

meeting. Collective distribution is two leaders working in a different time and setting but interdependently; an example of this could be two leaders working on a curriculum project. Finally, the third example of co-leadership practice is coordinated distribution. This is the ability to work on projects that must be performed in a particular sequence; an example of this could be planning for a professional development opportunity. All three levels of co-leadership practice could exist in any school or district simultaneously.

Professional Learning Communities

One definition for professional learning communities comes from the work done by Bryk et al. (1999), “ we use the term professional (learning) community to refer to schools in which interaction among teachers is frequent and teachers’ actions are governed by shared norms focused on the practice and involvement of teaching and learning” (p. 753). Others have referred to the collaborative nature of professional learning communities, as needing to be philosophical in design, allowing them to grow and change in terms of structure (Graham, 2007; Bullough, 2007; Mitchell, 2007).

Mitchell (2007) looked at five schools in California to determine if their professional learning community practices helped to improve student achievement. The researcher conducted surveys with ninety-two teachers and eight administrators in five elementary schools. The surveys reported on best practices for student achievement used in professional learning communities. This study reported greater success in sustaining student achievement by utilization of common goals, commitments, and professional practice.

Graham (2007) reported the results of a mixed method case study that looked at professional learning communities and teacher improvement. The research conducted in a southwestern school included teacher-survey, follow-up interviews, and a review of school

documents. The results were analyzed, and descriptive statistics were used to identify features of a professional learning community and changes that impact teacher knowledge, skill, and instructional practice. The results showed a complex relationship between components of a professional learning community and teacher improvement. Teachers learned more from their work in teams than from outside sources of professional development.

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found benefits for student learning in a professional learning community. Research conducted in 24 large, urban schools examined restructured school environments. The study, completed over a three-year period, examined low socioeconomic schools with diverse populations. The researchers conducted interviews, narrative reports, and the results of student achievement on teacher assigned, authentic assessment. Their report on school structuring emphasized that the collaborative efforts of a professional learning community increased the likelihood that a common vision guided the school changes and increased students' academic success.

Andrews and Lewis (2002) researched the success of a whole-school change process in Australia. Their data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and document examination in a high school of 400 students and 37 teachers in an economically stable, rural community. The two visits to the school occurred six months apart. The teachers in this school had recently engaged in learning about the Innovative Design for Enhancing Achievement in Schools (IDEAS). The authors measured the changes of three groups: those in the target group received the training, the administrators, and those who were not directly involved in the process. They interviewed teachers who were involved in a process to develop greater leadership skills. The research measured the sustainability of the training, the impact on the school, and the outcome on student learning. The teachers trained in IDEAS sustained the feelings of

engagement in leadership of the schools even after six months. Those relationships continued to support students in the classroom and the teacher led initiatives have met with success.

Giles and Hargreaves (2006) looked at schools with innovative programming in three urban and suburban schools in Ontario, Canada and New York State. This four-year study incorporated interviews of current and past employees of the schools. The data collected represented the history of school change over three decades and the ability to sustain those initiatives through shifts in staff and administration. The data reported staff satisfaction, the positive and negative impacts of program and leadership changes on student achievement, and program sustainability. The results showed the need for succession plans and a process to sustain the schools' vision.

Wright (2008) studied 20 schools and the distributed leadership practices of their principals. This collective case study approach conducted in Canada with 18 administrators measured the principals' constructions of distributed forms of leadership. It closely looked at how Spillane's work with distributed leadership influenced school organization and decision-making. The information gathered through interviews with administrators, focus groups, and field observations resulted in recommended changes. Wright recommended greater exploration of leadership programs, time for administrators to be reflective, a need for both top-down and bottom-up approaches and the recognition that the role of the principal required greater work with the school community to develop distributed leadership.

Bryk et al. (1999) found that students who were educated in a professional learning community made significant progress in learning. This research focused on social factors in a professional learning community and reviewed what impact it had on student learning. The participants in this research were 5,690 Chicago teachers in 248 elementary schools. A survey

was conducted to collect the data. The study documented essential features existing in professional learning community elementary schools, such as reflective dialogue (discussing teacher practice and student learning), deprivitization of practice (teachers share instructional practice), and peer collaboration (shared work). When these features occurred, it allowed for a supportive environment that resulted in greater student learning. The survey measured teacher commitment, student engagement, and teacher professionalism. Changes in school culture and other professional practices developed over time. The staff was then encouraged to adopt best practices, thereby improving the rate of student learning when the three conditions existed.

A clear and purposeful statement that will sustain the progress of the professional learning community must articulate the vision of a school (Huffman, 2001). Huffman (2001) analyzed the data collected on vision statements and the success of building professional learning communities. The University of North Texas conducted a five-year study on professional learning communities. Researchers interviewed principals and teacher leaders from eighteen schools and analyzed the results with the work of others on professional learning communities. They examined the elements which made professional learning communities successful, ranked the participants by the number of elements found in a school, and found a connection in developing a vision. It found that when there was a shared vision and the faculty embraced it, student learning was positively impacted.

DuFour and Eaker's (1998) book, *Professional communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*, suggested the role professional learning communities could have to enrich schools. The authors identify the characteristics of a professional learning community: shared mission, vision, and values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, continuous improvement, and results orientation.

Role of the Superintendent

Most of the research done in professional learning communities has focused on the role of principal and that of teacher leaders; little reference was previously made to superintendents. However, many books discuss the role of the superintendents and their key position in change initiatives, relationships with school boards, and policy-making (Bennis & Nanus, 2003; Bolman & Deal, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Houston & Eadie, 2002; Marzano et al., 2005; Reeves, 2002; Senge et al., 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Alsbury and Whitaker (2007) investigated the demands on the superintendent, such as school improvement, a democratic community, and social justice. The research focused on superintendents' responses to change over time. This four-year study used qualitative methods to examine the views of 15 superintendents who had been organized in two focus groups. The superintendents represented medium-sized urban districts and small rural districts. The research found common themes of superintendent practice, such as social justice, job stability, accountability, and collaboration. The research demonstrated that superintendents were ready to deal with issues of social justice. Their definitions of minority cultures needed to expand to include the local culture. Overall, the findings showed that the practices of the superintendent have not changed dramatically but that the environment had changed. Superintendents needed to focus more on political realities and spent more time working with school boards.

Another area for potential concern with distributed leadership is that of collaborative decisions between groups where anxieties and conflicts may occur. These can be difficult decisions that may be more problematic for a leader practicing distributed leadership to keep under control (James et al., 2007). From the data, the authors purported the supportive role of the superintendent in distributive leadership is critical and must remain strong. Distributed

leadership may make the job even more complicated as superintendents attempt to avoid conflict and work with psychological factors, such as fear of change and the opportunity for failure. The role of the superintendent is critical to the planning process within the organization with key staff and outside of the district with stakeholders.

Role of the Principal

The commitment of the principal is essential in professional learning communities and in distributed leadership (Wright, 2008). In Wright's (2008) work the support of the principal was found to be critical in the initial stages of implementation and during critical learning points. The principal's support must be sustained even after they establish routines of leadership.

The work of Sheppard and Brown (1999) examined changes in two school buildings in Newfoundland, Canada, specifically having examined how principals dealt with innovations. A total of thirty-four principals and teachers from two high schools participated in interviews, surveys, observations, and teachers maintained journals. These schools had dealt with complex change working with experienced leaders. The research examined the nature of change in schools in regards to Fullan's work of transformational leadership. A transformational leader is described as one who creates positive change. Some of the indicators used for this research to define transformational leaders were decentralized, visionary, change oriented, collaborative, and goal oriented (Sheppard & Brown, 1999). The findings demonstrated that the principal played a significant role in the initiatives that were successful. The schools maintained consistent improvement and change with collaborative efforts of distributed leadership.

Barker (2006) found that some professional learning communities were unable to maintain success due to changes in leadership. This research viewed the singular leader role and the impact the principal had on sustaining positive change. Barker researched one school in

England and its changes in leadership over time. He conducted a historical, qualitative study using interviews and examining seventeen years of archival documents that chronicled the rise and fall of the school. While the researcher's results were subjective, efforts were made to match the comments of those interviewed with artifacts. The findings demonstrated that some principals were more successful than others in sustaining positive change. The conclusions reflected the successes of transformational leadership, such as committed staff, mentoring, and increased leadership capacity.

Liebman et al. (2005) found it was necessary to have the principal's support to move forward with the development of a professional learning community. This qualitative study collected interview data and examined supporting documentation from a school where the principal helped to establish professional learning teams. Five administrators and fifteen department heads and team leaders provided the information for the research. The results were analyzed using descriptions, categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, and establishing patterns to identify the leaders' abilities to recognize leadership skills in others. Continued support was needed from the principal for established teams and informal leaders to further develop mission, vision, and strengthen the professional learning community.

The research of Ross and Gray (2006) viewed the work of the principal who supported the growth of teachers. This role of a transformational leader was compared to a transactional leader. A transactional leader works on goals without supporting the development of personal satisfaction and commitment. This research looked at the effect that a supportive principal had on teacher efficacy. They used survey results from two large Canadian school districts to confirm the direct link between leadership and student success. The interviews collected data on two relationships: the effects of school leadership on the teachers' commitment and the relationship

between school leadership and the teachers' belief they can influence student achievement. The transformational leader role had positive impact on the teachers' leadership and the way it influenced students.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers provided with the opportunities to make the change to a distributed leadership model or professional learning communities have positive feelings about their experiences (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Ross & Gray, 2006). They found that in schools where teachers helped to sustain a professional learning community, there was more collegial dialogue about their work practice and the changes they were processing.

Bryk et al. (1999) found that teachers in professional learning communities were more reflective about their work with students and the practices that supported student accomplishments. They collected data from 5,690 teachers in 248 elementary schools in Chicago by implementing a survey. The purpose of this research was to examine teacher perceptions on the environment of the school, academics, parent involvement, and the teachers' professional life. The results showed that teachers in these professional learning communities worked collaboratively to find solutions to issues, were more successful when they worked in a supportive environment, were more likely to take risks, were reflective about their work, and were more confident about their ability to affect students.

Goddard (2006) wrote about peer collaboration and concluded that when teachers are firm in their beliefs about what they teach and it is part of their personal, professional fabric, they work together as a staff with common goals and collective efficacy evolved. Collective efficacy was described as the teachers' perception of confidence about their ability to achieve desired goals and initiatives. De Lima (2008) wrote that this leads to a trust in one another. De Lima

researched in two Portuguese schools with thirty-three staff members. They responded to a social network questionnaire, which inquired about their professional development within the department, and collaborative efforts. The survey instrument gathered data on shared materials, joint planning, and jointly developed materials. The results showed that collective efficacy was a greater predictor of personal efficacy. It further demonstrated that there was an impact on individual teachers when they were part of a group that had a high level of collective efficacy. The group that shared leadership tasks was more satisfied with their professional development efforts and collaboration than the teachers in the other groups were.

A sense of empowerment has proven to impact student achievement (Marks & Louis, 1999). Marks and Louis researched schools that participated in widespread restructuring. His sample included twenty-four schools in twenty-two districts through sixteen states. A multi-method research design surveyed 910 teachers. The researchers compared the attempts at educational reform with the realities of differences in students' lives, teachers' perceptions, administrators' reflections, governance, and decision-making. The research showed that with greater participation in decision-making the staff felt more empowered and more willing to take on greater roles.

Brown and Sheppard (1999) found similar results when working with teachers and sharing models for professional leadership roles in change. In this research, their purpose was to look at distributed leadership and leadership practices. They looked at 312 teachers from three school districts in Newfoundland attempting organizational changes. All were recognized as successful. Surveys were used to measure; school leadership, the process of professional growth, and classroom practices as they progressed as a professional learning community. In addition, the authors conducted interviews, document analysis, observations, and viewed teacher journals.

This research found that when teachers took on leadership roles the staff benefited from a greater understanding of team leadership. It was most successful when the principal supported team leadership but also with district level support.

Rural Schools

Rural schools have had a long history of struggling with many issues (Sher & Thompkins, 1976) including the rural economy, the efficiency of educational program, and the equality of education. Sher and Thompkins's research is historical and has similarities to current issues. This research used available government data to analyze whether changes in school structures benefited the issues that exist. At that time, many small schools were consolidating to answer issues of economy, efficiency, and equality. Sher and Thompkins found through their research of documents that consolidation did not guarantee help with the issues studied.

DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) reported similar issues in a position paper. While this is not peer-reviewed research, they reported in *Viewpoints* that many issues related to population size and limited resources still exist. They found that schools in isolated areas with fewer students also face issues of limited programming for gifted and talented learners and often have transportation difficulty.

The Sterns' (1994) report also takes a lengthy look at the data collected by the government on schools and the issues school leaders must face. They found that the factors such as small population, economic hardship, and geographic isolation were all major issues. This nationwide research gathered information from schools and communities of all sizes. The outcomes of the research added another factor to the problems that rural district leaders must face. Rural school leaders have difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. Teachers in a rural school may have fewer students in their classes but often must teach a greater variety of classes and

therefore may need more instructional preparation time. The principals hired are generally younger and less experienced. Often they have more autonomy in their roles but they must perform a greater variety of jobs within the system.

Another factor not often considered in school closings or consolidation is the choice of the community. Many times the community wants to maintain control over the school their children attend (Seal & Harmon, 1995). In their research done in rural Appalachia, Seal and Harmon (1995), found many families would rather have their school stay open than to relinquish their rights to another community. In the 55 counties that were part of the research, some people did not appreciate others' opinions about their way of life and how best to educate their children. They felt teachers influenced their children to leave the area and go away to college. Some educators who reported the best and brightest might be taken away from a struggling community shared this opinion.

CHAPTER III

Research Methodology

This case study explored the relationship between the leadership practices of superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders as they affect the development of professional learning communities in three rural school districts in New York State. Four research questions drove this study.

1. What role does the superintendent have in the distributed leadership of a professional learning community?
2. How does the superintendent's role impact the development of distributed leadership and help to support a professional learning community?
3. How does the superintendent's role compare to that of the principal or teacher leaders in the district?
4. Looking through the lens of a rural school district what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community?

Design

This qualitative research took form as a case study (Creswell, 2008). Creswell describes a case study as, “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in-depth a program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals. Cases are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time” (Creswell, 2008). In addition, Miles & Huberman (1994) defined a case study as, “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). This form of research used to fully explore the dynamics of a professional learning community, drew comparisons to distributed leadership, and learned about the superintendents' role as well as

challenges presented in a rural community. DuFour (2004) spoke of professional learning communities as having three key components: ensuring students learn, developing a collaborative learning community and collaboration existing for the purpose of the improvement of the school. Specifically, this research compared the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community to that of other leaders in the district.

Setting and Population

This research was conducted in three rural school districts in upstate New York. Districts that have students in grades Kindergarten through twelve were chosen as subjects. The districts of the defined region were ranked in size from largest to smallest in student population. The selection of districts to participate was taken from those districts that fell in the bottom half with respect to population size. The final selection eliminated any suburban or city school districts and used the three smallest rural districts in the region. Interviews were conducted with the superintendents, principals, and two key teacher leaders from each of the three districts.

Instrumentation

In each of the districts, the superintendent, principal or principals, and key teachers selected by the superintendent were interviewed on their views of leadership roles and how they affect the development of professional learning communities. Face-to-face interviews were conducted on an individual basis. Semi-structured, open-ended questions similar to those modeled in the surveys in the research by Liebman et al. (2005) were used but revised for the purpose of this research. The interviews were conducted during the school day with the approval of the superintendent. The fifteen interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection

For the purpose of confidentiality, the identities of the districts and the individuals interviewed are not mentioned in this study. Following the completion of the interviews and their transcription, the responses were coded and cross-coded for development of themes. Finally, these themes were analyzed for the identification of key findings and potential questions for future research.

A document review was conducted in each of the three districts to support the findings. A document research was conducted concurrently during the interview process, for evidence of elements of a professional learning community. The documents included schedules, minutes from professional development team meetings, lists of professional development activities, evidence of student achievement and other pertinent documents offered by the district.

Analysis

The data collected during the interviews were crosschecked for coding reliability and categorized into themes. Information was triangulated using district documents and the questions were sampled in a pilot district which was not included in the research results. The information gathered to answer the first research question was categorized utilizing the work of DuFour & Eaker (1998) that lists the characteristics of a professional learning community. Accordingly, the responses were sorted by interview questions and divided into DuFour and Eaker's (1998) categories: shared, mission, vision, and values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, continuous improvement, and results orientation.

The second topic of distributed leadership had been identified through the work of Spillane (2006) and then categorized by his sub themes, leaders' practice, collaborated distribution, collective distribution, and coordinated distribution. A comparison of the

collaborative work between superintendents, principals, and teachers was then labeled as positive or negative by the comments given. Finally, comments regarding the role of leadership in rural communities were subjectively categorized by the researcher as positive or negative to reflect the respondents' overall impressions and issues of working in a rural community.

A limited number of documents were collected from respondents to support statements made during interviews. The documents included schedules, information about goals set during professional development meetings, and policy changes that reflected the work of special interest groups (attendance committee, advisory committee).

CHAPTER IV

Analysis and Discussion

This case study explored the relationship among the leadership practices of school leaders as they affect the development of professional learning communities in three rural school districts in New York State. District leaders voluntarily participated in individual, face-to-face interviews within each district. The leaders' professional roles are superintendent, principal, and teacher leader. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Interviewees reviewed the completed transcriptions to check for accuracy and to allow them the opportunity to clarify or to make additional comments. Documents from the districts provided a further means of verification.

The following are the list of research questions developed for the purpose of this study. These questions helped to form interview questions and the themes and codes that emerged from them. Two separate coding documents divided the statements into district responses and responses categorized by profession. Comments re-sorted by themes and sub-themes were cross-referenced to related questions from the interviews.

1. What role does the superintendent have in the distributed leadership of a professional learning community?
2. How does the superintendent's role affect the development of distributed leadership and help to support a professional learning community?
3. How does the superintendent's role compare to that of the principal or teacher leaders in districts that believe they operate as professional learning communities?
4. Looking through the lens of a rural school district what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community?

The research focused on three rural school districts in upstate New York. All districts chosen for this process have students in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12). Additional selection criteria ranked student population size from largest to smallest. The districts chosen were in the bottom half in population size. Districts whose students did not attend K-12 classes within their own district were eliminated from the selection process. The three participating districts fell in the bottom half of the districts considered with respect to student population size. The three districts shall be referred to as Evergreen Central School District (ECSD), Mountainside School District (MSD), and Oak Valley Schools (OVS). These names are pseudonyms and do not represent the district names in any way.

Table 1.

Participants of the Study

Schools	Superintendents	Principals	Teacher Leaders	Did not participate
ECSD	1	2	1	0
MSD	1	2	2	0
OVS	0	2	1	2

The collected data were hand coded and categories developed as they emerged throughout the research. Those categories support the research questions. Comparisons between documents and interviews supported the findings. Four pilot interviews and twelve reported interviews were completed. The respondents' districts were the sites for all interviews. There were fifteen questions in each interview, taking thirty to one hundred twenty minutes to complete. Four interviews piloted the reliability of the questions and assisted in the formulation of themes and codes. These four interviews from the researcher's own school district are excluded from the findings. Table 2 illustrates the respondents that completed interviews, two

superintendents, six principals, and four teacher leaders. One superintendent and one principal (both from Oak Valley Schools) did not complete interviews as planned due to personal conflicts. All of the principals in each district were asked to participate and only one principal did not. Teacher leaders were selected by superintendents' recommendations.

All three of the districts have similar demographics. Each of the districts are currently in good standing with the New York State Education Department's District Report Card. The three districts range from 13 to 80 square miles in size and serve one or more rural communities. The Evergreen Central School District (ECSD) has one building and the Mountainside School District (MSD) has an elementary school and a middle school/high school building. The Oak Valley Schools (OVS) have one building at each level, elementary, middle school, and high school. Table 1 presents the participants of the study.

Table 2 represents the additional demographics of the three districts. A range of responses was used to protect the identity of each district. There is very little difference in the three districts other than Oak Valley Schools is somewhat larger than the other two

Table 2.

District Demographics

	Number Of Students	Economically Disadvantaged	Caucasian Students	Attendance Rate	Suspension Rate	Number Of Teachers
ECSD	600-700	20-30%	95-100%	90-95%	5-10%	50-75
MSD	600-700	20-30%	95-100%	95-100%	5-10%	50-75
OVS	1000-1200	10-20%	95-100%	95-100%	5-10%	75-100

The Superintendent in a Professional Learning Community

This specific theme of superintendent in a PLC was analyzed using DuFour and Eaker's (1998) model. These sub-themes (Table 3) determined if the districts' actions were in line with that of professional learning communities and were used in the examination of the superintendents' practices. Eleven out of the twelve respondents felt that their district operated as a professional learning community. One of the participants from The Mountainside School District felt the schools operated as a professional learning community but the district did not.

Many participants struggled with a definition of professional learning communities. The following sub-themes developed from key words used in responses, as well as some by positive or negative responses to the questions. Those sub-themes (Table 3) of professional learning communities are shared mission, vision and values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, and continuous improvement. The table below contains the sub-themes and their definitions.

Table 3.

Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

Characteristic	Definition
Shared mission, vision, and values	Collective commitment to guiding principles articulate school beliefs
Collective inquiry	Relentless in questioning, seek new methods, test methods, reflect on results
Collaborative teams	Share a common purpose and build the school's capacity to learn
Action orientation and experimentation	Turn aspirations into action, visions into reality, willingness to develop new theories, test, and evaluate results
Continuous improvement	Persistent discomfort, constant search for a better way
Results orientation	Improvement must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions

Shared Mission, Vision, and Values

In a professional learning community, there are common values stated by its members and there is a collective commitment to them (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Participants responded whether they could identify the vision of the district. Ten out of the twelve respondents could articulate the district's vision. Both of the respondents who could not discuss the district's vision were from the Evergreen School District. The responses in the vision statements varied greatly and often related to goals and values in the district. Crosschecking of district documents confirmed these facts. At the district level, participants in the same district did not have agreement in what the vision contained. While only one superintendent reported that there was a district vision, nine out of ten principals and teachers discussed the details of the district's vision.

They further disagreed about the current annual goals of the district and how goals were developed (Appendix B). Seven of the respondents reported what the current goals were and how they were defined. Two responded that their school districts did not have defined goals. Three shared the goals, but the respondents were unclear how the goals were developed. The goals reported were a variety of activities such as curriculum alignment, technology, and reading initiatives. Many respondents discussed the role of professional development instead of vision and/or goal setting in response to questions two, four, five, and six.

Collective Inquiry

Collective inquiry is a consistent process of looking to improve the team, by using reflection, shared meaning, joint planning, coordinated action, analysis, and revisiting the process (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Question two of the interviews (How would you define a professional learning community?) inquired about the consistent process of improvement in the school district. Responses captured the efforts of collaborative planning, joint planning, or the

value of working together. Nine out of twelve responded positively that there was evidence of working collectively. One of the three districts had complete agreement that working together is necessary to have a professional learning community.

Collaborative Teams

Collaborative teams are those that meet with common purpose and work jointly to build new skills with a focus on continuous improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The responses to this sub-theme came from question eight (What structures are in place to support the work of a professional learning community?) and question ten (What demonstrations of a collegial community are evident? How do teachers share their work or ideas, collaborate, or reflect on their practice?). A positive response for either question exhibited collegial or collaborative practices.

Responses to question eight demonstrated that all twelve respondents felt there was some level of structure in place to help staff to work collaboratively. These supports ranged from specific teams (Shared Decision Making Teams, Professional Development Committee) to regularly scheduled meetings (faculty meetings, superintendent conference days) to leadership practices (scheduling, substitutes, and embedded staff development). Individual respondents did not articulate many instances of structured support for collaborative work.

Question ten showed that most people viewed a “collegial community” opportunity as structured times. Nine out of the twelve generally cited that they saw collegiality as part of a formal group or meeting. Three of the twelve noted that they were able to share in a less formal manner; all three were from the teacher leader group.

Action Orientation and Experimentation

Action orientation and experimentation refers to the continual practice of reviewing work, trying new ideas, and evaluating outcomes (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The results of interview questions two (How would you define a professional learning community?), five (What are the current annual goals for the district?) and six (How were these goals defined?), looked for evidence of sustained attempts at improvement that were collaborative and supported by some discussion of assessment. Most district members were able to articulate initiatives they were trying that were new or evolving under their goals for the district or building. At some level, all the districts reported the use of data to inform decision making for the future.

In question five, many participants shared several new initiatives they were working on. Some examples were project based learning skills, 21st century skills, and an entry plan for starting the new school year. Many were new and popular initiatives, but some were older, more traditional ones, such as curriculum mapping and improvements in the reading program. The sustainability of the plans was not part of the data collected.

In question six, the participants defined how they formulated goals. In this question, the respondents identified the committee or group that developed the goals or referred to use of assessments. Only one response to this question contained references to assessments and/or data collection. Fifty percent of the respondents stated they were part of a group that formed the goals.

A more extensive review of supportive documents may have helped to prove that the conditions of continual review of work, trying new initiatives, and consistent evaluation exist in the three districts. The documents shared were inconsistent to support that these conditions fully exist. While all three districts shared some form of a schedule, none of the districts shared any

professional development committee meeting minutes or program assessment. Several of the people interviewed shared some paperwork developed during professional activities, but no one had documentation available that analyzed their success or failure. This does not mean the documents do not exist but those interviewed did not share them.

Continuous Improvement

The respondents demonstrated the knowledge that their job is one of continuous improvement. Continuous improvement requires routine acts to improve student achievement and a collaborative effort toward the district's vision (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The evidence of continuous improvement was gathered when question ten prompted respondents, "What demonstrations of a collegial community are evident? How do teachers share their work, ideas, collaborate, or reflect on practice?" All twelve people interviewed gave a response that indicated they collaborate and/or work together collegially. All respondents saw some form of scheduled event to accomplish this goal. Although some viewed their response to the question in an informal manner, such as teachers planning together during lesson preparation time, others saw it as a more formal event such as faculty meetings. However, all stated the importance of working together on a routine basis.

Results Orientation

DuFour and Eaker (1998) recognize the value of using on-going assessment. Question 11 (What specific practices indicate that the primary focus within the district is on student learning?) provided information for this sub-theme. Each district cited the use of on-going assessment to justify that student learning is a primary focus of the district. In New York State, students in grades three through twelve generally take some form of annual state assessment to demonstrate knowledge of the content at a particular grade level or high school course or content

area. These mandated assessments are part of the on-going assessment process; however, this response was not given. There was a greater variety of responses given, such as, attendance data, Response to Intervention committee work and Academic Intervention Services data, informal conversations about student progress, and teacher evaluations. This response could suggest that these three districts employ multiple strategies to assess student needs.

Table 4 shows the percentage of success in demonstrating evidence of professional learning communities using the responses to survey questions. The characteristics of professional learning communities are from the work of DuFour and Eaker (1998). The results are an average of the responses given to a variety of questions and are referenced in Appendix B.

Table 4.

Evidence of Professional Learning Communities Characteristics

	ECSD	MSD	OVS
Shared Mission & Vision	50%	80%	100%
Collective Inquiry	50%	100%	67%
Collaborative Teams	100%	80%	67%
Action Orientation & Experimentation	50%	80%	100%
Continuous Improvement	100%	80%	67%
Results Orientation	100%	100%	100%

Distributed Leadership

The second research question was *how does the superintendent's role affect the development of distributed leadership and support a professional learning community?* The second theme of this research explores the practice of distributed leadership. Spillane et al.

(1999) found that “Leadership practice (both thinking and activity) emerges in and through the interactions of leaders, followers, and situation in the execution of leadership tasks” (p. 37). In this theme, the sub-themes developed mirror the work of Spillane (2006). The sub-themes sort through the practices of distributed leadership: practice, collaborative distribution, collective distribution, and coordinated distribution. Distributed leadership is defined by the practice of leaders. Professional learning communities focus on the professional practices of school communities. The similarities of practice and leadership support a relationship between distributed leadership and professional learning communities.

Practice

Within a distributed leadership model, leaders in various roles are interdependent. There is co-leadership in the practices that develop and sustain a professional learning community (Spillane, 2005a). The focus of the work is on learning (Spillane et al., 1999). Spillane (2006) referred to the tasks of leadership and management as practice and therefore potentially doable by informal leaders. Interview question twelve addresses issues of practice (What other staff members do you identify as integral to the success of this professional learning community? What specifically makes them successful in your mind?) The responses to this question were broad and inclusive. Each of the people interviewed was a district leader or identified as a teacher leader by the superintendent. If the interview respondent identified another person as a leader (based on their knowledge of that leader) then the potential for interdependence and co-leadership practice was determined to exist by this researcher. This vision of shared leadership is an example of distributed leadership. In each case, the twelve interviewees identified several people as integral to the success of the professional learning community. At this level of distributed leadership, it appeared that all leaders worked with other leaders. Some of the integral

members mentioned were teachers, superintendents, principals, team leaders, guidance counselors, school nurse, union president, mentor teachers, teaching assistants, and committee members.

Collaborated Distribution

This practice of leadership is shared among many in a distributed model. In this form of distributed leadership, leaders work in the same place and at the same time. To illustrate the authenticity of collaborated distribution the district leaders responded to three interview questions. The respondents replied to interview question thirteen (How does the superintendent support the goals and vision of the district?), question fourteen (How does the principal/s support the goals and vision of the district?), and question fifteen (How do teachers support the goals and vision of the district?). In coding the responses, positive comments demonstrated that each leader member (superintendent, principal, and teacher) was working with another leader in the same place and time. All three districts cited examples of working together in co-leadership roles at each level whether superintendent, principal, or teacher. They talked about collaborating for curriculum meetings, professional development, goal setting, monthly planning, teacher evaluations, and other committee work. The frequency of collaborative work increased when the superintendent worked with the principal or when the principal worked with the teachers. The examples given by respondents demonstrated that collaborated distribution could be successful at any position whether it be one of formal or informal leadership.

Collective Distribution

Collective distribution is a form of distributed leadership that requires two or more leaders work interdependently in different locations (Spillane, 2006). Collective distribution does not require that co-leaders work at the same time. This sub-theme used the responses from

questions thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. In each category of superintendent, principal, and teacher leader, a statement of co-leader practice was sought. Examples exist in each of the categories: staff members trained to lead new projects, superintendents provided support (materials or training) to do a task which someone else completed. Boards of education developed goals and then other staff members helped to take action. At the Oak Valley Schools, the principals had more difficulty defining this aspect of co-leadership and the teachers viewed other teachers as part of their collective distribution.

Coordinated Distribution

Spillane (2006) describes coordinated distribution as multiple leaders working on interdependent tasks in a sequential order. This particular form of co-leadership had the fewest number of examples given. Using questions thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen to gather information from individual respondents, only four examples were shared that could be described as coordinated distribution. Any example of Coordinated Distribution was counted as evidence that it exists. Student data as well as outside technical data support services are reported as a driving force for collaborative work between the superintendent and principals in the Evergreen Central School District. The Mountainside School District did not have any examples of coordinated distribution. The Oak Valley School cited ways in which principal and teacher work in a co-leader fashion with curriculum mapping and their mentor teacher program. This is a highly subjective analysis since there is little specificity in questioning and no documentation from work examples collected in the districts.

Evidence of distributed leadership was measured by the responses in each category of distributed leadership (collaborated, collective, and coordinated) from the total number of responses to each question (13, 14, and 15) from each district. Any response determined to be

positive by the subjective comparison to the definition of that category was taken as evidence that the practice occurs. The Evergreen Central School District was able to list the greatest number of examples of distributed leadership per respondent.

Table 5.

Characteristics of Distributed Leadership

	ECSD	MSD	OVS
Practice	100%	100%	100%
Collaborated Distribution	100%	100%	100%
Collective Distribution	100%	100%	100%
Coordinated Distribution	100%	0%	100%

Role of the Leader

This theme looked at how the superintendent’s role compared to the principal or teacher leaders in districts which believed they operated as professional learning communities. The literature offered evidence to demonstrate the successful role of the principal and teacher leaders in supporting a professional learning community (Barker, 2006; Liebman et al., 2005; Ross & Gray, 2006; Sheppard & Brown, 1999). The role of the principal and teacher leader helped to define the success of a school. But where does the role of the superintendent come into play to define the ways in which a professional learning community is developed and nurtured? The development of this theme takes into consideration whether the respondent viewed his/her own role as valuable in the development of a professional learning community at the district level. It also considered if the superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders valued the role others played in fostering the values of a professional learning community. These comments were

analyzed through the use of question three (How has your leadership within the district helped to define the development of a professional learning community?), as well as questions thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen, which addressed the impact of the positions on supporting the goals and vision of the district. These comments were analyzed using the following sub-themes and coded by positive comments made about others in that position.

Role of the Superintendent

In each district, the superintendents were asked what role they had in the development of the professional learning communities in the district. The superintendents interviewed felt they had contributed in the development of professional learning communities. They cited actions they had done that supported the progress that had been made such as working with data, setting expectations, hiring processes, and focusing on the progress of student achievement. While these may be routine tasks completed by a rural superintendent, the superintendents were asked to respond in the context of operating as a professional learning community.

The principals observed the superintendent's value in the development of the district's vision and goals. Six out of six reported positive responses to what the superintendent does for the district. Comments included, "sets direction for the district", "supportive", "works with the Board of education", "manages fiscal resources" and "trust."

The teachers observed the superintendent's value in the development of the district's vision and goals. The teachers valued the superintendent's role but gave less specific answers as to what the superintendent does for the good of the district. Primarily, their answers were more about resources and allocation of funds. Some examples were "financially backed us," "brought in trainers and substitutes," and "provides support staff."

Role of the Principal

The principals interviewed accepted their role in the development of the district's professional learning community. Four out of the six principals interviewed took ownership of helping to promote a professional learning community in their district. The comments taken from question three elicited their direct input. One respondent deferred comments due to a lack of clarity on district goals and vision.

The superintendents were asked about the role of the principals in their district. The superintendents from the Evergreen Central School District and the Mountainside School District saw the value in their principals' support of goals and vision for their district. The superintendent of Oak Valley Schools did not participate in the research. The two superintendents stated they saw value in their support in decision-making, school management, teacher evaluations, initiatives, and work on curriculum.

The teachers valued the principal's role in the district's development of vision and goals. They saw their principals doing many positive things as well. They saw them as sharing new information, being organized and enthusiastic, and communicating.

Role of the Teacher

The teachers took credit for their role in the district's development and in promoting a professional learning community. They view themselves as a support to other staff particularly those who are new and perhaps less experienced.

The superintendents commented on the value of the teachers' support of the goals and visions of the districts. They appreciated the teachers' work on projects, committees, professional development, with parents, and their high level of commitment during challenging

times. Overall, the superintendents saw the value of working with their staff at all levels to support the process of developing a professional learning community at the district level.

The principals noted the teacher’s value in the district’s development of goals and vision and an appreciation for their work. However, some did not seem sure that teachers always knew the district’s goals and the vision. The positive comments made about the teacher leaders’ impact included their ability to challenge the students, work on their own professional goals, be supportive of principals, and work with new initiatives.

The results shared in Table 6 show the recognition that leaders in all three districts have for each others’ leadership roles. These results show there is interdependency and a level of co-leadership on all levels. The results are an average of responses to various questions (Appendix B).

Table 6.

The Role of the Leader

	ECSD	MSD	OVS
Role of the Superintendent	100%	100%	100%
Role of the Principal	100%	100%	100%
Role of the Teacher	100%	100%	100%

Rural Schools

The final theme addressed the question *looking through the lens of a rural school district what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community?* The data collected was not from a direct question in any part of the survey but rather

from unsolicited comments made throughout the survey and sorted into positive and negative categories. The information gathered represents what the respondents identified as strengths and weaknesses of working in a small and/or rural school district. Eight of the twelve leaders (75%) interviewed made nineteen comments about the impact of being small and/or rural. There were ten positive comments and nine that were negative. Many respondents offered comments regarding tough economic times. However, during the interviews there were as many positives told as negatives about working in a rural district.

Positive Comments

During the interviews, several comments were made of a positive nature. While they do not directly speak to the superintendent's role, they show some of the issues superintendents face. Some comments showed regret but still had an optimistic spin, such as, "Building principals are key, without department heads they are our instructional leaders." Another superintendent hailed the luxury of a small district, "One of the beauties of a small district is that you can make something like technology go a long way" and "It takes longer to get new initiatives done in a larger district." One of the key elements noted by several respondents was that in a small district there is an opportunity to know each other better.

Negative Comments

The majority of negative comments were about staffing needs. In small districts, the level of administrative leadership is usually one-deep, one superintendent without an assistant and one principal at each level without an assistant principal. This level of staffing also influenced the sharing of support staff. These facts were noted as they had the potential to affect the role of the superintendent in the execution of his or her job. The percentages represent an average of positive and negative comments that were made throughout the interviews (Appendix B).

Table 7

Comments about Rural Schools

	ECSD	MSD	OVS
Positive Comments	50%	60%	67%

CHAPTER V

Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of the superintendent in a rural professional learning community. The research reviewed demonstrated that few studies examined the superintendent's role in developing or sustaining the work of a professional learning community. By contrast, several pieces of research discussed the role of the principal in developing and sustaining professional learning communities. In addition, several articles gave credence to role of the teacher leader in the development of a professional learning community.

Among other qualities, a professional learning community is a collaborative, collegial, and cooperative learning environment. This is also true of the environment that exists when there is distributed practice of leadership. An examination of the practices of the superintendent and other leaders in this research qualified their roles as distributed leadership.

A third key examination of this research looked at the role of formal and informal leaders. The research studied the relationships between superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders to see if they valued their counterparts' leadership. The premise was they would need to value each other's roles to be collaborative for a professional learning community and/or for distributed leadership.

All three districts lie in small communities with a small number of students. All three had several demographic factors in common. Information gathered during the interviews helped to draw conclusions on the impact of size to the role of leadership. It did not seem to matter if districts had more or less than 1000 students, nor did they identify any distinct or new issues aligned to the superintendent's role in a rural school district.

The superintendent is the executive leader in a school district; despite that fact little has been written on his or her role in a professional learning community. It was unclear how the key components defined by DuFour and Eaker (1998) could exist without some knowledge and involvement of the superintendent. The components examined were shared mission, vision and values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, continuous improvement, and results orientation. An initial assumption was that a superintendent had a role in major decision-making in small school districts. Similar factors between the practice of leaders in professional learning communities and the roles of distributed leadership spirited further comparisons. The essential research questions were as follows:

1. What role does the superintendent have in the distributed leadership of a professional learning community?
2. How does the superintendent's role affect the development of distributed leadership and help to support a professional learning community?
3. How does the superintendent's role compare to that of the principal or teacher leaders in districts that believe they operate as professional learning communities?
4. Looking through the lens of a rural school district what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community?

This qualitative research was a case study investigating the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community.

Findings of the Study

The task of establishing a professional learning community comes with hard work and mutual understanding of the district's vision and practice. Establishing distributed leadership comes with careful examinations of shared practice and reflections on how to improve practices

over time. Both of these share the qualities of mutual respect, collaborative processes, collegiality, and a focus on student learning. These factors combined with additional challenges of declining enrollment, limited resources, and a struggling economy in a rural setting, all of which demand the skill of good leadership. This research suggests the superintendent has a role in the process.

In the three districts researched, there was no common thread of how or if the vision of the district was defined. In not one district were respondents able to articulate a similar view of the vision or the goals. However, despite the inconsistency in their reporting they were able to state that their superintendent made decisions and shared leadership. They further reported the presence of professional learning community elements in the initiatives of their districts. They agreed they are a professional learning community even when they are not completely sure of what that means. Furthermore, they shared a variety of instances to demonstrate the practice of distributed leadership exists; they valued each other as leaders; and they felt a rural education had many benefits.

Research Question One

The first research question investigated the role of the superintendent as significant in the process of the distributed leadership of a professional learning community. All research participants shared his or her own vision of the role of the superintendent. The expectation of this researcher was that all superintendents are involved in any major initiative within a district and especially in forming a culture of a professional learning community and in demonstrating the practices of distributed leadership. While one superintendent stated that he/she felt his/her district operated as a professional learning community, both superintendents interviewed shared their accomplishments and detailed the work that sustained practices of professional learning

communities. The superintendent of Mountainside School District shared, “I do run my district level meetings, the staff development advisory committee, I run along that philosophy [professional learning communities] the learning piece and working together, and identifying and solving problems together.”

One of the principals of the Evergreen Central School District commented on the role of the superintendent, “The superintendent [supports a professional learning community] in many, many ways, the allocation of resources, making the really hard decisions and then recommending them to the board [of education], at the school level to implement and follow the law, that is the superintendent’s job, because if your leadership team is falling apart, bad things happen for children.”

Most of the principals and teachers felt their districts were moving toward developing as professional learning communities. District leaders agreed that elements of professional learning communities exist in their districts. These components were collegiality, sharing of time, resources and professional development, and shared leadership practices in collaborative efforts. The superintendent of the Evergreen Central School District, shared the following, “The conversation is all about student performance, and I don’t think our teachers would miss those meetings...I really do very little, but what I do right is, I know how important it is and I make sure that we are doing it...that we have the resources... and I pay very close attention.”

The principal of the Mountainside School District shared the support of the superintendent to provide resources for the professional learning community. This principal stated that the superintendent was sure to supply, “literacy consultant, data person, shared decision making, scheduling, dedicated professional development, liaison committee.” A teacher at the Mountainside School District said the superintendent, “financially backed it, paid for

substitutes, providing us with the time and conference days to meet with each other.” Then the teacher went on to state, “[The superintendent] does listen.”

Research Question Two

The second research question examined the superintendent's role and his/her affect on the development of distributed leadership. Respondents gave many examples of distributed leadership in their responses to the interview questions. It was clear all three districts worked collaboratively on a wide variety of efforts. Some were under the direction of the superintendent, and others were side-by-side in efforts with the superintendents. In all cases there was evidence the superintendents supported a variety of practices that allowed multiple parties to participate in the decision making processes.

One teacher from the Mountainside School District said, “I volunteered to be on the professional development committee. Wherever our discussion goes is how we develop our professional development. They [superintendent and principals] bring an idea forward and kind of float it and sometimes we are receptive and sometimes we are not.”

The superintendent of the Evergreen Central School District said, “It [shared leadership] was working when I came here, it wouldn't be very prudent on my part to change it if it is working. I am glad I came into a place where it is working.” A principal from the same district shared the following response related to professional development with staff, “some people who wanted to do their own goal [had] a collaborative group project or team project, we are supportive but not always pushing.” Finally a teacher from Evergreen stated, “...from top down, we are all professionals, we are all well trained and trained beyond what we need to be trained to be doing.”

At the Oak Valley Schools, one of the principals gave the following comment on the leadership of the superintendent, “Giving us ownership, responsibility. [The superintendent] doesn’t say this is the way it is going to be, this is what we are going to do. It is a team approach. We all contribute to it.” In the same district a principal commented on the leadership of the teachers, “How do you know the teachers buy into it? You actually see them practicing the professional development.” One of the Oak Valley School’s principals commented on the superintendent, “I think that [the superintendent] recognizes that [she/he] doesn’t have all the answers. One of the things that [the superintendent] tries to get us to do is think about solutions.”

A teacher leader further commented on the role of Oak Valley’s superintendent, “[The superintendent] will come to some of the meetings, [he/she] had already seen what it is that we would be working on and had already given [her/his] feedback, not [his/her] direction, but just [her/his] feedback, have you thought about this, have you thought about that? [He/she] is not a micromanager and I think that is really cool.”

Research Question Three

The third research question compared the superintendent’s role to that of the principal or teacher leader. If the work of the professional learning community is collegial, those in leadership roles should be as well, whether they are a formal leader such as the superintendent or principal or an informal leader such as a teacher. The superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders in all three school districts valued the work of each other. It was clear that as leaders they saw meaningful input from each other.

The superintendent of the Mountainside School District spoke on her/his own role, “Model the expectations, articulate the expectations, provide the resources to achieve those expectations, be visible, supportive, meet with the instructional leaders to give feedback.” The

superintendent also said his/her role was, “Encouraging appropriate people to appropriate workshops and conferences, making sure that people share that again.”

Mountainside’s superintendent commented on the teachers’ roles as a “willingness to share what they’ve learned through professional development.”

The Oak Valley Schools’ teacher leader stated that the superintendent “is absolutely visionary, goal setting and implementing that, making it real so that it is not some thing on paper.” A teacher leader at Oak Valley went on to speak of the role of the principals in the district and said, “There is a lot of collaboration and I would say that each supports in his or her own role.” An Oak Valley principal replied, “We have evolved out, as obviously all the New York State schools do around what the standards give us, but it doesn’t define us here. I think that it really drives the way we do things, because we can have a meeting where there is a lot of different ideas tossed about and in the end the question always comes back to what is best for kids. That’s for the board of education, the superintendent right on down and this is the message that we are pretty clear on, pretty strong on.”

At the Mountainside School District, the principal commented on the role of the teacher, “My teachers are great, supportive, implementing RTI (Response to Intervention), changing IST (Instructional Support Teams). Before it was one or two, and now I felt like basically everybody knows the directions we are going in.” Further, a teacher at Mountainside said the other teachers demonstrated, “the willingness to participate in new things, the willingness to change.” The Mountainside School District principal commented and said the superintendent was, “supporting initiatives, being part of it, making sure we have an opportunity-more than an opportunity, set aside the time monthly to work on articulation meetings.” While a teacher leader at Mountainside said about the principal, “[The principal] is really enthusiastic, willing to listen and

learn. [The principal] is organized [and] somebody has got to be the person, who says, ‘we are doing this’.”

At the Evergreen Central School District, the superintendent remarked that the principals, “really hold onto everything that was put into place and fight to keep it in place.”

In the Evergreen Central School District, a teacher leader said the superintendent, “is helping to create and develop goals and vision. Another really important thing is that the [superintendent] listens. [He/she] has a vested interest in listening to people’s concerns, what people want, what the community wants, where to go, what teachers need to improve their skills.” While the superintendent said, “The pushback comes directly from the classroom teachers...they give me a full-blown justification for doing things that they know work.” Finally, one of the Evergreen principals talked about the district’s teachers, “I get goose bumps when I talk about this, I have staff members who never cease to strive for how they can teach children better.”

Each interviewee consistently reported an appreciation of each other’s work. They were able to share specific examples of the ways in which they individually contributed as well as others. Most importantly, for the purposes of this research they shared knowledge of how the superintendent positively affected the development and/or sustainability of a professional learning community. It was clear that all three positions, those of superintendent, principal, and teacher leader, were valued by those who were interviewed.

Research Question Four

The final research question looks through the lens of a rural school district and examines the inferences that can be made on the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community. Leaders of these small, rural districts share issues similar to larger ones of difficult

economic times, declining enrollment, and limited resources. However, the leaders' unsolicited comments concerning their work were generally positive.

The superintendent of Mountainside School District stated, "We should maximize the fact that we are small and that as being small we have small class sizes. We can have kids that can excel or at least participate in athletics, music, and clubs, as well as be successful academically and that does not happen in a larger district." That superintendent also commented, "This is one of the problems with being a small district. We don't have department heads, we do have curriculum coordinators, but they have not any real structures that allow them to really be truly a leader."

A principal from Mountainside School District commented on rural schools, "Differentiation is what they get in a very small district like ours, because in any given classroom you would have kids that in a larger district would be in self-contained classrooms, and you have kids that would be in an honors class. We have neither of those."

While the Evergreen Central School District, superintendent stated that, "as a small district we can't, we don't have an assistant superintendent for instruction. We have to do our best to be instructional leaders, as well as everything else."

The superintendents interviewed shared both challenges and rewards of their work in rural school districts. The superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders reported many positive features of their work. There were no specific questions asked about working in a rural district. The comments made were taken from responses to other questions. The comments used were specifically about the size of the district or the rural location. The respondents volunteered comments about working in a rural district. The comments made from superintendents,

principals, and teacher leaders support that there are differences between larger and small rural schools; however, the position does not appear any more difficult for a rural superintendent. In conclusion, a teacher leader from the Oak Valley Schools summed it up best, “We are small, but we are mighty.”

Conclusions

Four research questions formed the basis for this research. The conclusions were framed by the research questions that were considered.

What role does the superintendent have in the distributed leadership of a professional learning community? The results of the first question viewed the significance of the superintendent in a leadership role. It examined how the superintendent supports development and sustains change in a professional learning community. The three districts reported knowledge and exhibited elements of professional learning communities. While there was little agreement on the vision and goals of districts, the respondents shared examples of what they felt was evidence that a professional learning community exists. The districts’ respondents shared examples of collective inquiry, collaborative teamwork, action research, attempts to improve instruction and a quest to improve results. Superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders felt that the role of the superintendent helped to shape and/or support the successes of their districts’ professional learning communities.

How does the superintendent’s role affect the development of distributed leadership and help to support a professional learning community? This question looked at distributed leadership and the superintendent’s role. This research further suggests that there is a connection between the characteristics of professional learning communities and those of distributed leadership. In both theories of practice, there is an interdependence of roles and co-leadership

through collaborative efforts. Comparisons drawn from the information gathered exhibited the existence of distributed leadership.

Spillane et al. (1999) suggests the best evidence of distributed leadership is in the practice of leaders. Examples gathered in the three districts demonstrated leaders shared responsibility for decision making in a variety of ways. All cited ways they worked with the superintendent on initiatives (collaborated distribution), or conducted interdependent activities (collective distribution) but few examples were found of interdependent tasks in sequential order (coordinated distribution). All participants in the interviews saw value in the work they did and the leadership of others (superintendents, principals and teacher leaders).

How does the superintendent's role compare to that of the principal or teacher leaders in districts that believe they operate as professional learning communities? Individual responses were analyzed to compare the roles of superintendents, principals, and teachers' skills in developing and sustaining professional learning communities and distributed leadership. The respondents answered questions about their efforts and that of other leaders to support the vision of the district. In each district, the respondents shared collegial respect for the work others' did to support the district's vision.

Looking through the lens of a rural school district what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community? The final analysis of the comments viewed the role of the superintendent as a rural district leader. The data collected was categorized as positive or negative when respondents offered comments on their work in a small rural district. These comments were not in response to any particular question in the interviews (Appendix A). The unsolicited comments were used to categorize the strengths or drawbacks that the respondents identified to working in a small district.

Recommendations

The results of the interviews conducted indicate most leaders of the three districts felt they worked in a professional learning community with a vision statement. They further indicated their districts were collaborative, collegial, invested in improvement, and committed to sustained results. However, there was no consistent statement of vision in any of the districts. Based on current research, if the districts are to continue to support the values of a professional learning community they should work toward the development of a vision statement that truly drives decisions about student achievement. The vision statements should be developed collaboratively and include stakeholders from the district such as, superintendents, administrators, teacher leaders, students, community members, and parents.

These districts have stated that they operate as professional learning communities and that they have a vision. Based on those facts, is it necessary to have an articulated vision statement or is there any evidence that the culture of a learning community and the efforts of its leaders form an unstated vision? Further research should be done to explore this question.

Professional development to adopt the tenets of professional learning communities should be conducted for greater implementation. Pre and post data should be collected in each of the districts to determine if forming a vision and additional professional development had an impact on student achievement.

This research only took the opinions of formal and informal leaders into consideration. Further exploration of the opinions of all staff may be important to develop professional learning communities and to achieve collaborative practices. A definition of professional learning communities was not a part of the interview process. A collective perspective on a definition for

professional learning communities may be important for further district developments and initiatives.

The role of the superintendent is still an enigma in this research. While this research begins to demonstrate that the superintendent is a part of a professional learning community it is still not clear what specifically his or her role might be. What specifically does the superintendent do that sustains the growth of a professional learning community? What prepares the superintendent for a role that sustains this culture? Once the characteristics of leadership are defined, what leadership preparation is necessary to achieve those qualities? Is there a connection between the perceived success of a professional learning community and the perceived success of its leaders?

Each of the respondents felt superintendents had a role in the development and sustainability of professional learning communities. Each district further demonstrated practices of distributed leadership. This research suggests that there may be a connection between professional learning communities and distributed leadership. This should be examined with a larger sample to determine if a connection does exist. In addition, the role of the superintendent in distributed practice should be more fully examined for both benefits and challenges.

The school districts that took part in this research demonstrated examples of utilizing formal and informal leaders. School districts should enhance co-leadership by developing methods to train teachers and other informal leaders to assume leadership roles.

The interview questions focused on professional learning communities and did not directly discuss distributed leadership. All district stakeholders may benefit from discussion of the practices of distributed leadership and the potential impact for school districts. Professional development surrounding the benefits of distributed leadership may be beneficial for all

superintendents. Additional means to co-lead may benefit the overall success of the academic program and coordinated efforts of day-to-day operations in a school district.

It was noted in one case in this research that the frequency of collaboration increased when the principal directly worked with staff on a project. How does co-leadership between formal and informal leaders help to improve the success rate of initiatives?

Co-leadership was evident in each of the districts included in this process. What programming might be developed to encourage co-leadership? What are the characteristics of successful co-leadership? If co-leadership is important, how can we help district leaders learn to work with this concept? What are the specific skills that superintendents need to be effective co-leaders? Do traditional authority roles inhibit the success of co-leadership? What does a superintendent do to sustain distributed leadership?

All participants equally valued the role of the superintendent, principal, and teacher leader. Interview responses demonstrated all contributed to the development and sustainability of professional learning communities and distributed leadership. How can these relationships be further developed to sustain a shared leadership practice? In addition, the districts should fully embrace their collegial relationships and explore ways to build on them.

Research on leaders of professional learning communities suggests that when leaders leave their districts initiatives such as professional learning communities may fail. What information do districts need about succession plans for their leaders? How can districts sustain enthusiasm and productive work habits over time?

This researcher has suggested a link between the attributes of a professional learning community and distributed leadership. Both contribute to shared leadership, collegial work, and scholastic achievement. Researchers should conduct inquiries to further explore the

relationship between professional learning communities and distributed leadership. The superintendents showed they valued the leadership roles of both principals and teacher leaders. Investigating this link may assist in promoting greater shared practices of leadership.

In all three districts, it was reported that they had a vision while no one could clearly articulate what it was. Questions should be considered for future research related to this topic. Is the culture of a rural community part of the vision? Is it easier to have a collective vision when the community is smaller? Is co-leadership more successful in a small or rural community? Does the size of a community more easily adapt to the characteristics of a professional learning community? What leadership skills are required for the superintendent of a small community?

The limited research of rural and small schools has stated that districts have difficulty hiring qualified, experienced staff and then maintaining them. Small districts would benefit from promoting the use of informal leadership to make the role of superintendent or other administrators easier to manage.

Research is limited on the topic of rural schools. The participants of this research voluntarily offered comments about work in and leadership of small school communities. This research does not adequately measure whether it is easier or more difficult for small, rural schools to operate as professional learning communities or to practice distributed leadership. Many aspects of the rural experience in education command further investigation. It would be beneficial to have a more widely researched study of leadership in rural districts.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Do you feel that your district functions as a professional learning community?
2. How would you define a professional learning community?
3. How has your leadership within the district helped to define the development of a professional learning community?
4. How would you define the district's vision?
5. What are the current annual goals of this district?
6. How were these goals defined?
7. How were these goals shared with the staff, parents and the community?
8. What structures are in place to support the work of a professional learning community? These may include items such as; schedule provisions, the position of classrooms, teaching roles, professional organizations and the level of staff participation.
9. What social and human resource conditions demonstrate the support of the concept of a professional learning community? These may include items such as; trust, professional attitudes, and supportive leadership.
10. What demonstrations of a collegial community are evident? How do teachers share their work or ideas, collaborate, or reflect on their practice?
11. What specific practices indicate that the primary focus within the school is on student learning?
12. What other staff members do you identify as integral to the success of this professional learning community? What specifically makes them successful in your mind?
13. How does the superintendent support the goals and vision of the district?
14. How does the principal support the goals and vision of the district?
15. How do the teacher leaders support the goals and vision of the district?

Appendix B

Questions Used for Themes

Research Question	Topic Themes	Questions
What role does the superintendent have in the distributed leadership of a professional learning community?	<i>Distributed Leadership</i>	
	1. Practice	12
	2. Collaborated Distribution	13, 14, 15
	3. Collective Distribution	13, 14, 15
	4. Coordinated Distribution	13, 14, 15
How does the superintendent's role affect the development of distributed leadership and help to support a professional learning community?	<i>Professional Learning Communities</i>	
	1. Shared Mission, Vision, and Values	4, 5, 6
	2. Collective Inquiry	2
	3. Collaborative Teams	8, 10
	4. Action Orientation and Experimentation	2, 5, 6
	5. Continuous Improvement	10
How does the superintendent's role compare to that of the principal or teacher leaders in districts that believe they operate as professional learning communities?	<i>Role of the Leader</i>	
	1. Role of the Superintendent	3, 13, 14, 15
	2. Role of the Principal	3, 13, 14, 15
	3. Role of the Teacher	3, 13, 14, 15
Looking through the lens of a rural school district, what inferences can be made regarding the role of the superintendent in a professional learning community?	<i>Rural Schools</i> Unsolicited positive and negative comments regarding leadership in a rural district were used.	All 15 interview questions