Elementary School and Middle School Principals' Theories of Action in Two Rural School Districts

Lisy-Macan, Lynn.

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This dissertation was designed to answer the following question. What are elementary and middle school principals' theories of action in two rural school districts? Sub-questions included the superintendent-principal relationship and its influence on the principal's theories of action and the extent to which rural context impacts principals' theories of action.

The design was a two-site case study with multiple methods and with a purposive sample of two rural school districts. Methods included a fixed-response survey, individual interviews with superintendents and principals, focus groups with teachers, student support professionals, and support staff and document reviews.

This study found important differences between the two districts, named District A and District B. In District A, the superintendent's theory of action is influential in the principals' theories of action, in part because this superintendent emphasizes alignment mechanisms and also because these principals were handpicked by this superintendent. The superintendent dismisses the rural context as a key factor and thus can be viewed as a cosmopolitan leader.

District B, in contrast, is influenced by the rural context, in part because its superintendent hails from rural background and emphasizes it. Also in contrast, District B's superintendent is less directive and specific with his principals. One consequence is that the theories of action of B's principals vary. Six conclusions were derived from the findings. First: Superintendent's theory of action is pivotal in the development of their principals' theories of action. Second, teachers' view of principals' biography, especially the principal's teaching experience, influences their expectations for, and relations with, their principals. Third, rural classification of a school and district is not as influential on principals' theories of action as initially assumed. Fourth, state education department policy has become the de facto theory of action for principals as mediated by their superintendent. Fifth, principals' theories of action are developed and amended in policy and practice crosscurrents, reflecting the influence of diverse constituencies with competing goals. Finally, principals' underspecified and underdeveloped theories of action make them vulnerable to external actors, influences, especially state policy requirements.