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Reflections on Rurally Responsive School Leadership in Appalachian Virginia: A Co-constructed Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the intersections of identity, place, and leadership through the co-constructed autoethnographies of three female doctoral candidates and one male doctoral professor in educational leadership from rural Appalachia. Through reflective writing of the self and writing of culture, we examine the socio-cultural influences shaping our leadership identities, decision-making processes, and responses to socio-political challenges in our rural school communities. We engage in our reflections by integrating personal narratives with cultural, gendered, and place-based dynamics, and then turn a reflective gaze on ourselves to illuminate the significance of what we collectively have come to consider rurally responsive school leadership. Our narratives and analyses emphasize the importance of rurally responsive practices that address the complexities of gender, geography, and community as rural educational leaders in Appalachian Virginia. Ultimately, our self-study contributes to the broader discourse on educational leadership in rural educational contexts and, as we hope, offers insights and implications for responding equitably, inclusively, and meaningfully as school leaders in rural schools.
KEYWORDS: co-constructed autoethnography, decision making, educational leadership, place, rurally responsive leadership

Although current scholarship details the context-laden demands of rural school leadership, most studies lack the first-person voice of school leaders from within rural Appalachian communities (Zuckerman, 2020). Even investigations that do adopt autoethnography tend to

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feature a single author's narrative and seldom attend to the textured dynamics of leadership socialization, leaving the tensions and co-constructed accounts by these leaders mostly invisible (Ramsey & Ricket, 2020). Recent work on leaders in rural Appalachian schools underscores how place-based orientation, socio-cultural background, and gendered norms collide to shape leadership aspirations, yet calls for deeper, reflexive analyses of how leaders perceive and actively negotiate those entanglements in real time (Stone et al., 2024).

Such identity-centered leadership research rarely treats place as an analytic frame in its own right. Often, the socio-cultural richness of place stands as a mere backdrop or geographical context rather than a creative, cultural, and cognitive force that shapes how leadership is imagined, situated, and enacted (Armstrong & McCain, 2021). Consequently, we still lack a nuanced understanding of how personal history, community perceptions, and socio-political contexts merge to inform and define responsive leadership practice, particularly when rurality is a factor (Hayes & Locke, 2024). Our inquiry addresses these gaps by offering a dialogic, co-constructed autoethnography that centers three Appalachian doctoral candidates as both storytellers and analysts of their leadership becoming.

This study explores the intersection of place, identity, and leadership among rurally responsive educational leaders in Appalachian Virginia through a co-constructed autoethnographic approach. It reflects on identity, gender, community, local culture, and place to illuminate how personal narratives and sociocultural dynamics shape leadership identity and decision-making in rural educational settings. Our insights move us toward understanding what it might mean to practice a rurally responsive leadership, one tailored to the unique needs of education within our rural Appalachian communities.

Rurally Responsive Educational Leadership

To understand rurally responsive school leadership, consideration of identity, community, and the journey of becoming a place-conscious leader in rural schools is essential (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Netolicky, 2020). Leaders of rural schools face unique challenges influenced by the socio-cultural context of these communities (Corbett, 2021; Ramsey & Lowery, 2022). Therefore, rural responsiveness encompasses not only school leadership (Preston & Barnes, 2017) but also context-responsive leadership (Bredeson et al., 2011) and school-community relations (Casto et al., 2016; Walls & Zuckerman, 2023).

Scholars highlight the need for leaders to understand how their cultural context shapes their development and practices (Armstrong & McCain, 2021). This is true of all schools. However, rural values are often rooted in kinship, a sense of place, and self-reliance (deMarrais, 1998). Effective leaders in these locales must leverage local assets (which are not always obvious), foster partnerships, and promote place-conscious education that enhances student outcomes and local identity (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Zuckerman, 2020).

Identity plays a crucial role in leadership development, as aspiring leaders reconcile their backgrounds within the rural context (Irby et al., 2017). Authentic connections with the community can build trust and inspire positive change (Henderson et al., 2019). The dynamic nature of rural leadership necessitates navigating complex social networks and overcoming systemic challenges (Glass, 2017). Leadership programs tailored to rural educators' experiences can empower them to drive meaningful change (Miller et al., 2015).

Rurally responsive leadership intersects with culturally responsive leadership (Genao, 2021), but its focus shifts to place-consciousness, considering community-rooted patterns, perspectives, and practices. It acknowledges the unique historical, geographical, and sociocultural

realities and rituals of rural communities (Azano et al., 2023). These can include resource-constraint resilience, long-standing gender norms, and close-knit family structures. In this manner, rural responsiveness goes beyond meeting institutional demands to addressing local cultural logics and enduring challenges embedded in rural marginalization (Hesbol et al., 2020; Iruka et al., 2020).

Intersectionality of Appalachian Identity and Rural Community as Place

This co-constructed autoethnography is situated at the intersection of our Appalachian identity and the concept of place for us as rural educational leaders (Azano et al., 2020; Pfrenger, 2024). We attempt to confront the dynamics of development honestly and authentically. Our individual Appalachian and rural identity development is complex and emphasizes recognizing the diverse stories and lived experiences within our unique Appalachian communities. It also includes challenging stereotypical representations and promoting a more nuanced understanding through our collective rural Appalachian themes (Campbell, 1994; Cooper et al., 2010).

Attempting to definitively label Appalachia is complex, in part because regional identity is not always tied neatly to geography (Cooper et al., 2010). Appalachian identity scholars posit that individuals from the Appalachian region develop a unique sense of identity shaped by cultural heritage, historical experiences, and social perceptions (Batteau, 1979; Foster et al., 2021; Gottlieb, 2001). Subjectively, we find this to be true. Recognizing and reflecting on our Appalachian identity has been integral to understanding the social and political structures and materials that can shape the expectations we have confronted in our development and now face in our practice, such as gender expectations and regional stereotypes (McCallister & Young, 2015; Peine et al., 2020).

Reed emphasized that people's identification with a region often extends beyond cartographic boundaries, reflecting cultural, historical, and emotional affiliations (Reed, 1983, 2018). While the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) offers a formal geographic outline stretching from New York to Mississippi, scholars argue that Appalachian identity is more nuanced and deeply rooted in lived experience than such definitions suggest (Cooper et al., 2010; Satterwhite, 2010). Reed (2018) noted that the most strongly held Appalachian identities tend to emerge from the Southern Appalachian subregion, including eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southern West Virginia. Reed stressed how identity varies across these locales.

Satterwhite (2010) pointed out that personal diversity challenges generalizations. However, it can also deepen our understanding of what it means to be Appalachian and rural. Because there is little consensus on who or what constitutes Appalachia, multiple and overlapping identities flourish, underscoring the importance of ongoing research into the lives and voices of Appalachian people. Little c culture narratives not only resist the oversimplified stereotypes imposed on the region but also assert the dignity and complexity of its people and communities (Obermiller, 2010; Steele & Jeffers, 2020).

These dynamics get at issues of identity, structures of feelings, power asymmetries, and gendered perspectives (Bernard et al., 2023; Shah, 2023; Williams, 1979) that we have encountered as rurally responsive educational leaders. Rurality encompasses a range of factors influencing educational experiences and outcomes and varies greatly in agrarian, post- or non-agrarian, and rural industrial areas (Pfrenger, 2024; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Terman, 2020). As with Appalachian identity, rural identity presents sociological, cultural, and personal domains. The concept of rural education often includes limited resources, geographic isolation, and socio-economic disparities (Iruka et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2014). Being rurally responsive, then, underscores the need for educational leaders not to be deterred by perceived deficits but to respond

reflectively and resourcefully to the contextual realities of their rural communities. This implies being equipped to recognize and leverage local assets and foster regional partnerships to promote educational equity and experience (Hartman & Klein, 2023; Zuckerman, 2023).

Structures of Feelings and Status Quo

Structures of feeling refer to the lived, emotional dimensions of social life that shape how people make meaning in specific cultural contexts (Corbett, 2021; Williams, 1979). In our study, these emerge in the emotional moments of personal leadership development influenced by community ties, connection to the land, and intergenerational values, highlighting the unique experience of educational leaders in rural Appalachia.

Status quo asymmetries describe the entrenched power imbalances that determine whose voices are valued and what knowledge is recognized in rural educational settings. These imbalances often intersect with factors like gender, geography, and class. Rurally responsive educational leadership involves navigating systems where urban-centric narratives and stereotypes about rural communities persist (Bernard et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study uses a co-constructed autoethnographic approach (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012), which allows participant co-researchers to accurately represent the complexities of relationships in rural educational leadership. We (three doctoral student authors, Leanna, Ashley, and Jessica, and one professor mentor, Charles) engaged in individual reflective journaling and dialogue, focusing on personal narratives that relate to our identities as educational leaders in rural Appalachia (Chang & Bilgen, 2020; Quade et al., 2026; Snoeren et al., 2016). Our design emphasized the transformative potential of self-reflection in teaching (Alderaan, 2026; Luna et al., 2023; Slade et al., 2020) by exploring life stories and experiences pertinent to our leadership development. Scholarly readings on autoethnography guided our reflexive writing, highlighting both personal and cultural dimensions of our narratives (Chang et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2011).

Each co-researcher produced a personal narrative reflecting on moments in their growth as leaders, addressing prompts about how our rural backgrounds influenced their leadership styles. These narratives averaged 1,200 to 1,800 words and were refined through feedback in debriefing sessions. Analytical deliberations resulted in a body of work exceeding 15,000 words. This was reduced and revised to become their storied vignettes and, additionally, their analytical reflections. This structured yet adaptive process allowed for a deep exploration of professional leadership and personal identity within rural contexts, culminating in a collective critical analysis of our experiences, which were ultimately categorized into themes (Ramsey & Ricket, 2020). Charles' narratives were reworked to provide an arc for framing in the co-researcher voice (Alderaan, 2026; Quade et al., 2026). The emergent themes related to the leader's relationship with community, socio-cultural influences, and social and personal challenges in rural Appalachia (Hayes & Locke, 2024; Ramsey & Lowery, 2022).

The Narrative Reflections

Ashley's Vignette

The annual Teacher of the Year in my division is an award that is peer-recognized. I was uncharacteristically late to the luncheon due to a mandatory professional development that my department had to attend, and it was located at the farthest school from the park. A professional development that none of my colleagues or I understood the reasoning for our participation, until I asked the question of what this training is for during the middle of the session. A young, recent collegiate graduate tried her best to explain why we were all there, and between the stammering and her unsure public speaking, we deduced that our county was included in a grant, and we would be gathering the data.

My disheveled entrance to the luncheon was met with concerned looks and questioning of my whereabouts by my principal. After the prayer and line had formed, the Assistant Superintendent came to ask how the professional development was, which sparked a quick response of "What did you sign us up for?" A bewildered look stared back at me for a second, accompanied by a quicker response of "Let's talk after." My lovely meal of chicken was not as delicious as it looked due to the utter regret I had in the pit of my stomach because I had opened my mouth, which was notoriously unsuccessful in previous encounters with Superiors.

Immediately after the mandatory picture that would be posted on all social media, I was summoned back upstairs by the Assistant Superintendent. The parental inner speech of "you should've kept your mouth shut" and "this is what you get for opening your mouth" was on constant repeat as I climbed back upstairs. Walking over to the end of the long banquet hall table, opposite the two main individuals responsible for representing our county in public education, I was asked what had happened at the meeting. Over the next 30 minutes, I began to explain the confusion, misleading guidance for implementing the new curriculum, and what expectations this outside group was placing on our department. The longer the meeting went, the realization hit me that I was speaking for the group and not just myself. My audience was listening and negotiating with me on how to make this work for our department, while keeping in line with the grant that would provide for our students.

The following month, I was approached by my district Superintendent and was asked to work with an outside non-profit on a substantial partnership and grant opportunity. After I agreed, the next 18 months were a series of learning as you go and all the ins and outs of federal grants, non-profit sector, and public education. I was able to secure an $80,000 grant while working with individuals within the community to make up a board that met once a month and communicated daily via email. The result was that a female in a patriarchal field was able to successfully maneuver to get students' materials by speaking up when it mattered. As a female in a mostly male-dominated teaching field, I was tested early in my education by those who wanted me to succeed. A collegiate men's basketball coach taught me that I needed to speak out and up, to make sure I had a place at the table. I would also have to work harder because I was a woman and because society had placed stereotypes on not only my sex, but also where I came from.

Reflecting on this, I understand that my superiors saw a characteristic trait during that luncheon, something my grandparents referred to as "sass" as an attribute for students in our community. This ability to speak out, mostly for equity, has led to numerous opportunities to demonstrate at the school level as a building leader, at the district level with responsibilities for students at all schools, regional level as an advocate for equity by participating in leadership

committees and state level by helping develop ways to help gain positive incentives for public education with selective committees with the Virginia Department of Education.

The negative experiences I had growing up as a female in rural Appalachia and knowing that I was just as good, if not better than, the boys who were being given opportunities, led to the outspoken leader I am today. Bringing attention to the ability, the success, and hard work that is being done by the individual and not to the societal beliefs, such as those that plague females in educational leadership roles. The beliefs that male leadership is more effective and geographic location can provide insight into intelligence. Looking back, the luncheon provided an opportunity for a literal seat at the table to be heard, and fortunately, I was heard. I am grateful that my leadership in our district understands that my outspoken demeanor is an asset for our students and community. I have been given more leadership roles since this luncheon and, fortunately, have been successful in making sure the needs of our students have been met, regardless of gender or any other category society wants to divide them into. Being a leader means inspiring students, community members, and colleagues to speak out to get a seat at the table.

For me, this illustrates how rurally responsive leadership is about a deeply rooted form of rural embeddedness, where social intimacy and informal and grassroots social exchanges offset limitations on institutional infrastructure. I don't see these as features observed by and large in more metropolitan school districts. These kinds of neighborly contributions are not practical and down-to-earth. However, they also reflect a relational ethic grounded in shared history, mutual recognition and respect, and place-based reciprocity that is emblematic of rural Appalachian community life.

Jessica's Vignette

As I consider a single, formative event that led to becoming an educational leader, I think about my childhood in Southwestern, Virginia. My great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents, though I didn't realize it at the time, were poor farmers and laborers who made just enough to put food on the table. These folk worked hard their entire lives, but didn't have much to show for it. In my family, school was something you did until you graduated from high school and got a job. College and higher education were not something my family thought was an option open to them. I think about the labels we, as educators, place on families like my own and the treatment of those families that don't fit the middle-class norm. My mother, a teenager when she had me, heard words like "low socioeconomic status," "at-risk," or "free and reduced lunch," that evoke a sad, pitying image of a child with the odds stacked against them. These words feel weaponized, created from a deficit-based model, and used to separate us from them in public education. The words make us feel less than, like a second-class citizen.

I never felt that less-than until I entered public school. Painfully, I remember this feeling of not being good enough through the treatment of my third-grade teacher. To this day, I still remember the feeling of trying to win this teacher's approval by giving her a Christmas pin as a gift when I noticed my classmates doing the same. My gift came from the local dollar store because we didn't have any money. I will never forget the feeling of shame when it broke while she tried to put it on. In that moment, though she didn't say anything, her attitude and demeanor told me exactly what she thought of me and my cheap gift. Fortunately, I also had some positive experiences with my favorite teachers who showed me that there are adults who care in the world, such as my elementary principal who drove me home when I missed the bus or a Reading Specialist who took an interest in me in the second grade and helped me grow my love of reading.

There were not many positive male role models in my life, except for my maternal great-grandfather. He walked with a cane; a long-ago broken hip resulted in one leg several inches shorter than the other. He wore custom-made shoes, every step slow and purposeful. As a child, I did not know him by the label he would have today. Disabled. I was told he wanted to join the military but couldn't because of his disability. He joined the civilian conservation corps instead and worked hard for his entire life. His hard work ethic and commitment to doing for others are a legacy he passed down in my family.

My grandfather's different abilities prepared me for Albert. Albert was from the Philippines and joined our third-grade class. Albert was autistic and used vocalizations and gestures to communicate. It was the unheard-of/revolutionary, inclusive model of special education that began at my school in southwestern Virginia that led me down a path of advocating for our students' needs as a teacher and then as an administrator. The special education teacher collaborated with our class and taught us about Autism and how to communicate with Albert. Eventually, we were told he was returning to the Philippines, so we threw him a going-away party in class. I will never forget the sheer joy he radiated when we all celebrated him. I remember Albert when I am planning with teams around students with significant needs in the classroom.

It was my high school teachers who inspired me to go to college, they showed me that education can open doors to opportunities I may not have been born into. I did not immediately gravitate toward education, as I did not have the best experience. It was through a work-study job with the United Way that I started working with students in an educational setting. My job was to read to preschoolers as an initiative to combat the high illiteracy rates in Stillwater, Oklahoma. I enjoyed being with children. After that experience, and a couple of major changes, I received my undergraduate degree in elementary education. I'm a firm believer there is a greater purpose, a greater plan, and when I didn't get hired as an elementary general education teacher, but as an elementary special educator, I walked in my purpose. I continued working as a special educator for over 10 years until a mentor suggested an administration program when I began leading my department. Educational leadership wasn't something I had considered as an option for myself until I realized it was the next step in doing good and serving other teachers like me, from similar backgrounds and communities What keeps me going when things get hard are those students that need someone to believe in them, someone to have high expectations of them, someone who won't give up on them, or make assumptions about what they can or cannot do because of their circumstances.

When I think of my work as a rurally responsive leader, I think of those students who need someone who understands their raising (where they come from) and yet someone who still maintains high expectations of them. I have to be someone who won't give up on them or make assumptions and excuses because of their circumstances. In a rural school community, experiences are not just personal—they are deeply shaped by the geographic and economic isolation I see in the rural Appalachian region of my state. These experiences are also shared. In rural contexts like mine, labels tied to socioeconomic status often come with fewer support structures and longer distances—literally and figuratively—between families and the resources they need. This results in distinct school-community dynamics where leaders must act not only as educators but as community liaisons, advocates, and brokers of possibility for students who might otherwise be overlooked in their sometimes tucked-away corners of the world.

Leanna's Vignette

My vignette presents an experience that has significantly influenced the understanding of how my rural identity has impacted my personal development. This ethnography examines the intersection of personal and professional lives, highlighting how they often affect one another. Through an analysis of these interconnected narratives, it explores how experiences related to Appalachian or rural identities are intricately woven into individual and professional identities, shaping the development of both personal and professional selves.

It is a tradition in my family that at the age of five, everyone learns to make biscuits, and this is when I fell in love with education and the power we have when we discover new things. Imagine it: a five-year-old girl, her grandmother, who is 70 years her senior, and a tub of flour. My grandmother, Granny Kitty, slid a chair next to the bar for me to stand on to teach her secret biscuit-making process, and I was eager to learn. I remember her words fondly, "Me not know, me not tell," and it starts to make sense. There are a thousand different ways to create the same product, and we each have the power to make it unique. This may be the most significant lesson my grandmother ever taught me because it has set an example for me ever since.

Biscuit-making wasn't a long-standing tradition in my family, but it has unexpectedly developed into one as I have grown older and embraced my Appalachian heritage. My grandmother used biscuits as a way to share stories. She made them with simple ingredients: buttermilk, cold butter, self-rising flour, and Crisco. These biscuits reflected her character—she had no desire to impress anyone and instilled those same values in her children and grandchildren. Biscuits were a staple on our family dinner table. Whenever someone stopped by for a visit, my grandmother would quickly whip up a batch, ready to share in just a few minutes. They were what we savored while conversing, what we looked forward to every Sunday, and they remain a significant connection to my grandmother and my family roots. She taught each of her children and grandchildren her simple biscuit recipe, passing down the legacy of her role as the family matriarch.

You may be asking how biscuits are related to a future in school and educational leadership, and the answer is quite simple. My Granny Kitty taught me that being a leader is about wanting to learn and creating a comfortable space for people to make their own "recipes." Leadership in the school setting is meant to be a partnership with teachers and students to create a positive and safe learning environment for all. I stood on a chair next to my grandmother, and now I remember her advice on how I would mess up my biscuits a million and a half times before I got them right. Much like my grandmother's guidance in learning to make biscuits, school leaders have a vital role in developing and encouraging learning and growth and in providing support. Positive leadership is being someone who can be a listening ear, offer thoughtful advice, and do all that is possible to achieve success for students. It is also about making mistakes and learning from them. As an educational leader, I am passionate about this idea: when we are courageous enough to make mistakes and brave enough to inspire innovative learning.

Granny Kitty was the first example of a leader I experienced, and she taught me the value of caring for others, being our best selves, and doing what our heart leads us to do. My experience with strong leaders allows me to admire their patience, desire to help others, their role in building positive relationships with students, staff, and parents, and being someone who can be relied on for academic, instructional, and personal growth. It all started when I first made biscuits with my grandmother at the age of five because I learned from my grandmother what leadership means: the patience to aid in the development of another, be it with making biscuits, sharing stories, or offering advice.

Appalachian identities tend to be negatively stereotyped and marginalized. Be it through media sources or people's assumptions that Appalachia and how Appalachian counties have recently voted in elections, commonly against their interests, a simplistic and singular identity structure for Appalachians tends to exist, failing to celebrate or even recognize the complexities of Appalachian identities. Although I am aware that multiple identities exist and that Appalachian identities and cultural norms are diverse, I often simplify my experiences and identity, attempting to discover commonalities in who I am and what has influenced my development as a person and educational leader. The insights from my autoethnography emphasize how my Appalachian identity and background shape my leadership development. One key understanding is the significant role that people—such as family, friends, and educators—play in our lives and stories. Still, every time I prepare to make biscuits, I remember my granny's kitchen in Southwest Virginia. I thank her for shaping my identity as a learner, a leader, and a proud Appalachian woman.

Charles' Vignette

As an educator, whether in the rural schools where I taught and served as a school principal or in the Appalachian-based universities where I have served as a professor, I have always remembered my mother's instruction. Momma taught me, above all, "Love your neighbor as yourself." My earliest memory of this was her trying to teach me something about the Bible. Perhaps she said, "Jesus said…" But I don't recall. But I do remember her teaching me the idea. Momma didn't go to church—neither of my parents did—but they had church-influenced sensibilities. It was much later when I recognized these weren't necessarily church values but were instead community values. It would be many years before I made an academic connection to the idea of social and cultural cohesion being a feature of rurality.

Momma instilled in me something that I carried with me into the classroom, into the principal's office, and later into the lecture hall–to love others as myself. Maybe I failed at times to tell others or show them adequately, or maybe sometimes it was my daddy's tough love filtering through. Daddy was not so much a love-your-neighbor fellow. He tended to follow the Apostle Paul's dictum, "If any would not work, neither should he eat." Daddy's love was rooted in self-reliance (of course, mixed with community interdependence, especially when the fence needed mending) and old-fashioned dirt-road resilience. Dad was not a stoic, but his love was marked by an asceticism that no doubt stemmed from growing up in resource-constrained settings.

Looking back on my time as a classroom teacher and a building principal, there may have been as much of that gravelly grit as there was chalk dust in the educator shoes I wore. So, my upbringing, forged by my momma's ethic of care and my daddy's sense of responsibility, formed the basis of my own responsive leadership. These were not just values passed down to me; they were ways of being that translated into how I taught, how I led, and now, how I teach others to lead. In rural and Appalachian schools, love must be more than sentiment—it must become practice. Love is a praxis of reflection and action. Responsibility–or one's ability to respond–is not abstract. It is lived out bodily and emotionally, often under constraint and bound to place. This is the substratum of what I think of rurally responsive leadership—an orientation that blends cultural attunement, engagement, and resourcefulness.

As a professor of educational leadership in rural-facing and Appalachian-based universities, I now present this ethos to aspiring rural school leaders. We talk often of cultural responsiveness, but rural responsiveness calls for something additional: a deep attentiveness to place, to historical and geographical hardships and hopes, to the identities formed through resilience, structures of

feeling, and memory. At its core, rural responsiveness is an educational commitment grounded in care, context, connection, and community.

The Analytical Reflections

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay between place, identity, and leadership within rural Appalachia. Therefore, we organize our analytical reflections into thematic units. These themes are leader connectedness to community, rurally responsive leadership strategies, sociocultural influences on decision-making, and addressing personal predicaments and place-based problems. This analysis is intended to provide insights into fostering more inclusive and effective leadership practices in rural educational settings.

Leader Connectedness to Community

Ashley. Deep socio-cultural dynamics of gender and regional identity have shaped my leadership style and my ability to connect with others as a leader. Growing up as a female in a male-dominated field, I always felt like I had to work harder and speak louder to be taken seriously. The moment that truly solidified this for me was during my time at college, when I took an activities class with the Men's Basketball Coach. He wasn't only teaching me basketball; he was teaching me how to navigate a world that had simply not been accepting of women like me. When I received the grade for his class, I was shocked to discover he had given me a D. I quickly contacted the coach to which he replied that I need to set up a meeting to come and speak with him about my grade and I needed to bring in any work I had received from him.

The coach explained that he wanted me to come in to speak with him because he wanted to discuss what it would mean for me to be a woman in a male-dominated field. He elaborated on the fact that my gender would be the main reason I would not be as successful as those who had less experience or didn't have the work ethic I did. The coach was not from Appalachian, but he saw the value in teaching me and others how to challenge gender norms and advocate for equality across leadership roles. At that luncheon, I realized that my leadership wasn't about securing a grant or resolving a departmental issue—it was about modeling the kind of leadership that challenges the status quo. I spoke up because I had learned, through my socio-cultural experiences, that staying silent only reinforces inequities. My ability to connect with others as a leader—whether it's my students, my colleagues, or the community—is rooted in my understanding of how socio-cultural dynamics impact our lives and our opportunities. I strive to lead in a way that recognizes those dynamics, pushes back against them, and creates a more equitable space for all.

Jessica. Like Ashley, my reflections delve into the societal labels and experiences I encountered as a student from a low socioeconomic background. The connections of my sociocultural background to leadership didn't happen overnight. I wasn't even sure that higher education was meant for someone like me. College simply wasn't in the cards for most people in my family, and the assumption that you'd finish high school and find a job was the norm. But a few high school teachers made me think differently, giving me a glimpse into the possibilities education could unlock.

Even though I didn't immediately see myself becoming a teacher, a work-study job at United Way, where I read to preschoolers, started opening my eyes to the power of education. As I transitioned into education leadership, I realized that my background—the labels, the struggles, and the triumphs—weren't just obstacles I had to overcome. They were the foundation of my leadership philosophy. Every child, no matter their background, deserves someone who sees them,

someone who believes in them. That's what drives me. I carry with me the lessons I learned from teachers who believed in me and, for that matter, those who didn't. Those experiences taught me the importance of never giving up on a student, no matter what society might say about their chances. As an educational leader, I strive to be the person who refuses to place limits on what someone can achieve, because I know firsthand how transformative it can be when someone believes in your potential.

Leanna. For me, my reflection on my upbringing and the influence of my grandmother, Granny Kitty, highlights the importance of familial and cultural traditions in shaping my understanding of leadership. The experience of learning to make biscuits from scratch symbolizes the values of learning, partnership, and resilience that inform my philosophy as an educational leader who still embraces my rurality regardless of the context in which I lead or the community in which my school is located. Viewing leadership as a recipe indicates that there may be different methods to achieve effective leadership. My first understanding of leadership did not come from the educational setting but instead from my grandmother and the patience and care that she provided in this experience of making biscuits. This ultimately became one of my first learning experiences, and the trust I had in my grandmother allowed me to learn and informed my understanding of building relationships and a sense of connectedness in my leadership practices.

Socio-Cultural Background Impact on Decision-Making

Ashley. Reflecting on how my culture and influence from people who have impacted my decision-making as a leader is straightforward. My childhood was mostly spent at the homes of others as my parents worked full-time and we were low-income. I learned from spending time watching the dynamics of other families how a "one size fits all" method of determining how things are done would never be the answer. For example, watching my best friend's mother and grandmother argue over the best way to make mash taters (potatoes). The grandmother swore you had to mash them in the water they were boiled in, the mother said you had to use a rice masher, and meanwhile, I never knew there was another way other than with a beater. Being in leadership means that over the years, there have been many methodologies for solving issues and being open to those different styles of learning.

The biggest impact for decision making has come from my first-hand knowledge of farming. As a leader, I translate the lessons from the farmer who understands that seeds bloom at different times and require the right climate to grow into how our students learn and succeed. Taking the resources that you have to harvest your crops and making use of what is available to lead schools are themes that leaders in today's education system consistently use. More importantly, it means taking care of your neighbors and your community, especially when tragedy hits. In a building, this means covering when a teacher leaves to take their sick child to the doctor, or there is an emergency, or a simple text check-in to let them know you are there if they need anything.

Jessica. Reflecting on my sociocultural background, I can see how deeply it has influenced my decision-making as an educational leader. Growing up in a low-income, working-class family in rural Southwestern Virginia, I became acutely aware of the labels that society placed on me. These labels weren't descriptors; they were limitations imposed on what I was expected to achieve. The deficit thinking behind them framed my life as a set of challenges to overcome, but rarely as an opportunity to excel. I internalized these messages and learned early on that society expected less from people from my background.

These early experiences planted the seed for how I lead today. As an educational leader, I am constantly reminded of the impact that such labels and assumptions can have on students' sense of worth and potential. I consciously make decisions that push back against deficit-based models of education, always asking myself, "How do we elevate students rather than diminish them based on their circumstances?" I know firsthand how isolating it can feel when someone assumes you're incapable because of where you come from, and I refuse to let the students in my care experience that. Moreover, my great-grandfather's perseverance despite his disability taught me that labels like "disabled" should never define what a person can contribute. His example informs the way I lead and the decisions I make regarding students with different abilities. Therefore, I always work to create an environment where every person—regardless of ability, background, or circumstance—feels valued and included.

Leanna. My reflection on family traditions and cultural heritage has informed my leadership approach and has had a significant impact on how I make decisions. I have centered that approach on the ideas of partnership, relationships, and innovation. The experiences I had learning from my grandmother, growing from her guidance, and respecting her approach to care are all foundational to how I view my leadership role. I place a great deal of importance on allowing my staff and myself to embrace mistakes, and I try to foster a supportive learning environment like my grandmother had. I value feedback for my staff, encouraging them to try new things and not to fear punitive consequences if a mistake is made or if a lesson does not work. Instead of viewing mistakes as a negative, my leadership focus places a deep trust in my staff to educate and to support them as needed. This defines my role as an educational leader, treating my staff as professionals and celebrating their desire to continuously improve and update their practice as educators.

Strategies for Rurally Responsive Leadership

Ashley. Rural values are integral to who I am, not only as an educator but also as a contributing member of my community. My vignette brings out how the educator in me overcame setbacks and perceptions of others by being nurtured by people within my rural community—people who supported me in various ways. Sometimes it was with materials I needed for my classroom; other times it was with encouragement to be as influential to others as they were to me. These values included reaching out to others and being generally supportive of everyone. Leadership brings to bear all the experiences within the community and the strategies I utilize to draw from those experiences. Being a rurally responsive leader means listening more than you speak and observing more than reacting. This is one that I learned from local "old timers" who go for coffee every morning at the local gas station.

As a rurally responsive leader, I recognize that the older generation has valuable skills and life experiences, and that it is important to have them come and eat breakfast during the community days. It means that you know their skill sets and that you have them as a resource. For example, when our school had a playground that needed to be graded and to have holes dug, it was two of the gas-station welcoming crew who had the time and the tractors to do it. This was all done for the cost of a sausage biscuit and a brief conversation. This sense of community and place comes through as a reality in rural Southwest Virginia. Society has stigmas of our people being uneducated, lazy, and—thanks to big corporations—home to drug-seeking Americans. This sense of geographic discrimination is something that I have dealt with throughout my entire career. My reflection on outspokenness is part and parcel of my rurally responsive leadership. The communities do not have the resources readily available like more urban areas do, but the

willingness of the individuals within the community to step in and show up is what makes the difference. So, I speak out and speak up for them.

Jessica. I see that my upbringing in a rural community has deeply shaped the strategies I use as a leader, particularly in terms of being responsive to the unique needs of rural schools and students. Growing up in Southwestern Virginia, I experienced firsthand the challenges rural communities face—limited resources, economic hardship, and the persistent feeling of being overlooked by larger, more urbanized areas. These experiences inform every decision I make as an educational leader because I understand that rural schools require strategies that are uniquely tailored to their specific contexts.

Therefore, for me, a key aspect of rurally responsive leadership is resourcefulness. In rural schools, as in rural homes, when a school needs a specialist or specific maintenance, help isn't always around the corner. There are often no nearby alternatives. Instead, many rural communities develop a cultural ethos of "making do" and "DIY" that is tied to generational labor practices—forestry, farming, fence building, food storage—where self-sufficiency isn't just a value, it's a survival tactic. Rural leadership has to draw on this tradition in ways that are not just economic but deeply place-based and relational. Growing up in a family where we had to make do with very little taught me how to be creative in the face of limited resources. In rural schools, funding and access to materials are often major challenges.

As a leader, I have learned to make the most of what we have and to seek out opportunities for collaboration and partnership to fill in the gaps. Whether that means applying for grants, forging partnerships with local businesses, or leveraging community volunteers, I'm always thinking about how we can stretch our resources and make the most of our assets. I believe that rural schools, despite their limitations, can be centers of innovation when leaders are willing to think outside the box. Being a rurally responsive leader means understanding the deep value of relationships, resourcefulness, visibility, and community-centered decision-making.

Leanna. For me, reflection puts a premium on my responsibility to create a comfortable space for others to learn and grow. This idea mirrors my grandmother's approach to teaching me how to make biscuits. This keeps me focused on the value of empathy, patience, and inclusivity—all factors that define my rural sensibility in responding to the needs of others. In large part, this is critical to fostering a positive and responsive learning environment and engaging in collaborative leadership. As an educational leader in my rural school setting, I lead through a helpful approach—a praxis of responding to the needs of others. My motto, one I often share with my staff, is that I will never ask them to complete a task that I would not be willing to do myself. Much like the metaphor of my grandmother teaching me to make biscuits, I often find myself in classrooms working with students individually or in small groups, supporting teachers as an instructional leader, building relationships, and being present.

I also attempt to understand the value in the lived stories of my students and staff. Whether through time spent in classrooms and hallways or through reviewing cumulative student files, I am always trying to glean as much information as possible to be better responsive. Likewise, I am always checking in on staff when they have been absent to demonstrate my care. I desire to create a comfortable atmosphere in which I remain positive and willing to listen and learn. To me, this approach is informed by my rural upbringing—by my grandmother's biscuit making. It is my way of being rurally responsive.

Personal Predicaments and Place-Based Problems

Ashley. My experience with divisive social and personal conflicts came at the beginning of my educational career, as I was passed over for a promotion for a job that I was already performing. The opportunity was given to another individual who was less experienced and qualified, for reasons that I was told had nothing to do with my current position. It was due to social ties. The recurrence of this type of behavior has become a stereotypical theme due to the numerous occurrences that have taken place. This idea is represented throughout my vignette. A culture of social power structures, where individuals are privileged based on who knows them or what community they are from, presents a prevailing problem. This is based on how cultural norms around hierarchy are often viewed in many communities, which are often very small. Understanding the social factors in the community, such as gender and historical social power structures, is essential when approaching situations to promote change within it.

Jessica. As a leader in rural Virginia, I have witnessed firsthand how divisive social and political conflicts can deeply affect communities. These divisions often stemmed from misunderstandings between individuals or groups within the rural community, economic pressures, and deeply ingrained beliefs. My experiences navigating these tensions as a child have profoundly shaped my approach to leadership, especially in addressing the inevitable social and political controversies that arise within schools and communities. As an educational leader, I've learned that addressing these conflicts requires a deep commitment to empathy, open communication, and an unwavering focus on the well-being of students. I have seen how labels and assumptions can create divides between people. Terms like "low socioeconomic status" or "at-risk" carry an implicit judgment, setting people apart and often creating a sense of "us versus them." These same divides exist today in our schools, where social and political issues—whether it's debates over curriculum, policies around equity and inclusion, or larger societal tensions—can polarize a community. Having lived through the effects of those divisions, I know how important it is to approach leadership with a commitment to bridging gaps, rather than widening them.

Leanna. My written reflection on the negative stereotypes associated with Appalachian identities highlights my desire as a leader to challenge the problems stemming from misconceptions and to celebrate the diversity of rural communities. My experience of reclaiming my Appalachian identity and embracing my cultural heritage represents conflict on a personal level. It reflects my commitment to promoting inclusivity and cultural belonging in educational settings, even in the face of social (and sometimes political) adversity. It was not until I moved to college that I first understood or came to embrace my Appalachian identity. Instead of viewing that identity in a negative context, I took Appalachian studies and literature courses to more fully understand what being Appalachian means and to help me reclaim my identity and understand it not through a more nuanced and positive lens—a view counter to the stereotypes typically associated with Appalachia. Through continued reflection and my desire to celebrate my Appalachian identity, I attempt to promote practices that ensure everyone feels a sense of belonging in my school. I do this by fostering an environment where everyone can celebrate the diversity of identities in the rural school setting and by maintaining an open-door policy to support all students and staff regardless of their status or situation.

A Narrative Integration

Charles. In our narratives, we attempt to shed light on the complex interplay between identity, place, and educational leadership practices in rural Appalachia. Ashley, Jessica, and

Leanna's reflective analyses provide rich insights into the socio-cultural influences, decision-making processes, and responses to divisive social and political tendencies among educational leaders in rural and small-town Appalachia. My vignette, inspired by what was written by the students, served to provide a reflective summation and was inspired by their stories, but still, my personal voice on leading with responsiveness. Together, our narratives offer perspectives on the complexities of identity development and leadership within unique contexts, informing efforts to promote responsive and contextually grounded leadership practices in rural educational settings. We have opted to call this being rurally responsive. By exploring our narratives and turning a reflective gaze on our own experiences in analysis, the themes that emerged offered us potential insights into our experiences as a moment rooted in both responding and being responsible to the unique and textured communities in which we each work.

One significant theme that surfaced from the data is the influence of sociocultural backgrounds on leadership connectedness. We reflected on how our cultural values, experiences, and identities shape our ability to connect with diverse stakeholders within the school community. For example, Leanna's reflection on her grandmother's teachings and Charles' reflection on his parents' role hint at the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment, where leadership is characterized by empathy, patience, and a commitment to fostering growth and learning. Ashley's experience at the Teacher of the Year luncheon highlights how women leaders in rural schools must often rely on assertiveness and self-advocacy to address conventional gender norms. These traits help rural women leaders lead with courage while challenging local expectations and traditional worldviews. These insights suggest that educational leaders in rural Appalachia draw upon their personal and cultural resources to establish meaningful connections with students, staff, and community members, thereby contributing to the development of positive school climates and student outcomes.

Another prominent theme is the strategies employed by educational leaders to foster rurally responsive leadership as a practice. Each author reflected on their efforts to navigate the intricacies of different rural communities and develop inclusive practices that address the needs at hand. Jessica's experience with inclusive classrooms highlights the transformative potential of education in challenging rural stereotypes and fostering understanding and acceptance of diverse identities in rural settings. Ashley's advocacy for equity and inclusivity demonstrates the proactive stance taken by educational leaders to address systemic barriers for rural education and promote social justice within their often conservative communities. These findings suggest that rurally responsive leadership may promote equitable learning that reflects the cultural values, geographic realities, and resource constraints of rural communities—while also cultivating a sense of belonging among students whose identities may differ from traditional local norms.

Discussion

This autoethnographic study underscores the role of identity and place in leadership practices and emphasizes the value of rurally responsive leadership in fostering equitable learning environments. Our reflective data revealed how the sociocultural backgrounds of rural Appalachian educational leaders see the past's influence on their present and future decision-making, prioritizing, and responsiveness. For example, Leanna's and Ashley's narratives show how personal values—resilience, perseverance, advocacy, and strategic planning—shape responses to local challenges, immediate pressures, and the pursuit of educational equity. Jessica's narrative speaks to how future efforts should continue to explore how leaders can harness their personal biography and cultural backgrounds to develop leadership responsiveness in rural schools.

Implications

The implications of this study extend to both research and practice for reflective educational leadership in rural settings. By underscoring the impact of autoethnography as a reflective and reflexive teaching tool, this study contributes to scholarly practice by exploring the first-hand complexities of leadership identity and practice in rural settings. Practically, the insights gleaned from this study inform leadership development programs, policy initiatives, and professional growth. Such development should include reflexive writing that helps aspiring leaders examine how identity, culture, and place shape their practices, much like the co-researchers in this study. Policy should support localism and place-based decision-making, recognizing the informal networks and assets vital to rural schools.

Likewise, professional development for rural leaders should move beyond technical skills to address rural deficiency narratives and stereotypes, community trust, and gendered leadership norms. For instance, workshops could guide rural leaders in reflecting on tensions between community roles and institutional demands or designing context-sensitive, relationship-driven strategies. Asset awareness and mapping exercises can be integrated to increase place-oriented responsiveness. Ultimately, rural responsiveness should be embedded as a foundational leadership orientation, not an afterthought.

Concluding Thoughts

Additionally, this study underscores the need for doctoral and master's programs to provide training and support in rurally responsive leadership practices, particularly in the context of underserved and resource-constrained communities. Students should be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively navigate the complexities of diverse school environments and promote equity and social justice in their leadership roles. This may involve coursework, mentorship opportunities, and field experiences that emphasize the importance of building relationships, advocating for underrepresented groups, and addressing systemic barriers to learning.

Author Contributions

C. L. Lowery conceived the study and developed its theoretical framing and methodological design, and authored the introduction, conceptual framework, and methods sections. All authors (C. L. Lowery, A. D. Cannon, J. M. Muniz, and L. Rippey) generated the reflective writings and field notes that served as the data for this co-constructed autoethnography, independently and collaboratively analyzed those data to arrive at the organizing themes, and each authored their own narrative vignette. All authors jointly wrote the discussion and contributed to revising the manuscript. C. L. Lowery provided overall supervision and project administration as lead author. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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This study was determined not to constitute human subjects research requiring IRB approval, as it is a self-study (co-constructed autoethnography) in which the authors are the sole participants.

Informed Consent form

As a co-constructed autoethnography, this study's participants are its four authors, each of whom consented to the generation, analysis, and publication of their own reflective narratives through their participation in and approval of the manuscript. Other individuals referenced within the authors' recollections were not research participants; pseudonyms have been used and identifying details minimized to protect their confidentiality.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable beyond the material presented in this article. Because this is a co-constructed autoethnography, the underlying data consist of the authors' personal reflective writings, which cannot be anonymized without losing their meaning and are therefore not available publicly to protect the confidentiality of the authors and the individuals described in their narratives.

Conflicts of Interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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