

Chapter 5

Leadership in Rural Central American Villages

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ABSTRACT

Educational leaders in rural schools across the world face distinctive challenges. In this chapter, the authors report the findings of two studies examined through narrative inquiry conducted in a Garifuna and Ketchi Mayan village in Central America. The case studies explore the role of the principal as a strategic leader to improve the education system, and the impact of these leaders in their communities. By sharing these stories, the authors illustrate the importance of strategic thinking, as well as both transformative and servant leadership to promote change.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders in rural schools across the world face challenges that are often unique to their communities. Regardless of the needs of each community, the leadership skills necessary to successfully lead rural schools transcend communities, states, and countries. Rural school leaders must be strategic, dynamic, and resourceful in improvement efforts when faced with the complexities of socially and geographically isolated communities.

The region of Central America studied has historically been considered the “forgotten district” due to the remoteness of the villages and schools. While accessibility has increased since the construction of a paved road into the district’s largest town, the educators are accustomed to serving their communities with limited resources and support. Access to the villages is difficult and unpaved roads make it challenging to access the schools; hence, the school principals, who often have teaching responsibilities, must be strategic in their efforts.

In this chapter, the authors report the findings of two studies examined through narrative inquiry conducted in a Garifuna and Ketchi Mayan village in Central America. The case studies explore the role of the principal as a strategic leader to improve the education system, and the impact of these leaders in their communities. By sharing these stories, the authors illustrate the importance of strategic thinking, as well as both transformative and servant leadership to promote change.

Narrative inquiry was used to acquire an in-depth understanding the principals’ experiences, improvement efforts, and beliefs regarding the education system in their villages (Lewis, 2015). This was done through interviews and observations conducted during the visits to the villages from 2016 until 2018, resulting in an analysis about the principals’ roles as community leaders and change agents. The findings reported in this manuscript focused on two experienced principals that serve in remote primary schools in Central America. Their stories are analyzed and cross-analyzed to understand the work of school principals in the region.

Conceptual Framework

Principal leadership in Central America demands strategic planning to accomplish the goals of the schools. Effective leadership within these schools recognizes that there are unique characteristics to working in village schools. This is true in part because the lack of resources within the schools creates situations where non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often fill gaps; thus, the development of a strategy that both utilizes and buffers the influence of both community and outside partnerships is needed (Bryson, 2017).

The NGOs in Central America are often international, so communication may be lacking due to both distance and poor technology. Assistance that is not aligned with the goals of the school may be ineffective, so the principal must create the relationship that can provide the strategic discussions to develop positive impact (Hickey, 2015; Hickey, Achtem, & Nuner, 2012). Building these relationships is an important component to being a transformational leader within the schools of Central America.

Transformational leadership is recognized as an effective style for changing schools in foundational and systemic ways. Through this style of leadership, the leader exhibits specific behaviors including individualized consideration of the follower’s need; idealized influence of high ethical behavior and

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