Instructional Leadership in a Rural State: How Position and Rurality Influence Supervision, Professional Growth, and Evaluation

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Abstract

This mixed methods study examined the perceptions of teachers and principals in a rural northern state regarding supervision, professional growth, and summative evaluation practices. The following five research questions were developed for the purpose of the study, namely: 1) What are teachers' perceptions of the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals?; 2) What are principals' perceptions of the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation they provide to teachers?; 3) How do the perceptions of teachers and principals differ regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals?; 4) What are the perceptions of rural educators about the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals based on NCES locale codes?; and 5) How can the perceptions of educators regarding supervision, professional growth, and evaluation practices be used to help enhance teacher performance? Results provide implications for rural state policymakers, future research, practitioners, and rural facing education preparation programs.

Keywords

rural education; instructional leadership; supervision; instructional supervision; rural educational leadership; spatiality

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Introduction

Rural principals have complex leadership responsibilities that differ from the experiences of administrators who serve in towns, suburbs, and cities, specifically the multiple roles they must take on that result in increased professional demands (Klar & Huggins, 2020). The challenges of a rural principal vary greatly and include but are not limited to lack of resources, professional isolation, overwhelming workload expectations, economic challenges within the community, and lack of professional support (Hansen, 2018; Klocko & Justis, 2019). There is a growing amount of research that examines the instructional leadership responsibilities of rural principals, specifically shifting away from a managerial mindset to one of an instructional coach, supporting the development of reflective stances among teachers, providing school-wide focus on increasing student engagement in every classroom, and developing a culture and climate that values teacher input that leads to greater retention and development of instructional expertise over time (Burns et al., 2015; Colson et al., 2021; Fairman & Mette, 2017; Frahm & Cianca, 2021; Wells et al., 2021).

To influence improvement of teaching, researchers posit instructional leadership can be applied through three distinct processes, namely supervision, professional growth, and evaluation (Zepeda. 2017). The application of these processes should focus on the communal development of a school building, one that capitalizes on teacher expertise and promotes democratic principles of collective school leadership (Glickman et al., 2018). However, there is considerable evidence to suggest instructional leadership is often maligned by top-down accountability policies at the federal and state level that assert hierarchical control through high stakes teacher effectiveness processes as a way to manage education systems (Wieczorek et al. 2022; Donaldson et al., 2021). As such, there is great need to understand how the pressures of accountability policies impact and influence the behavior of instructional leaders in rural schools, as well as the professional growth outcomes that result from these policies and practices (Carrier & Whaland, 2017; Hazi, 2019).

Supervision, by definition, is the formative feedback process of instructional leadership that focuses on the "concepts and techniques that help teachers examine their teaching and student learning" (Glanz & Hazi, 2019, p. 2). Progressive views of supervision focus on intrinsic motivation to improve reflection of teaching, as well as empowering teachers to engage in action research to drive improvement efforts (Cormier & Padney, 2021). Additionally, instructional leaders are expected to enact a vision for teaching and learning by developing and cultivating a collaborative school climate to best meet the needs of the community a school serves (Waite, 2021). For rural principals, this means providing supervision that not only supports teachers increasing their own instructional efficacy, but it also means focusing on feedback that leads to increased retention to help stabilize the rural education workforce (Tran et al., 2020). For rural principals, this can be accomplished through regular classroom visits that lead to collaborative interactions with teachers (Frahm & Cianca, 2021).

Part of instructional leadership, particularly in rural settings, is to engage teachers in their own professional growth through increased ownership of their teaching practices (Wallin et al., 2019). By providing solution-focused strategies, instructional leaders can empower teachers to drive their own improvement through reflective practices and become decision-makers about how to best improve outcomes for students (McGhee & Stark, 2021). Many rural schools lack financial resources to drive instructional improvement with outside assistance, and as a result these rural

schools must utilize teacher expertise to target efforts that lead to professional growth (Courtney, 2020). Given the lack of ruralcentric professional development available, it is all that more important to capitalize on the expertise of rural educators to improve their own efficacy, which can include peer observations, professional learning communities (PLCs), peer led professional development, and co-teaching, among others (Colson et al., 2021).

Understanding how rural principals evaluate teachers, and specifically how formal, summative evaluation through a prescriptive observation process impacts improved teacher outcomes, as well as the culture and climate of rural schools, is of critical importance (Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Mette et al., 2019). While there is a plethora of research detailing the perceptions of how teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of teacher evaluation differs from the perceptions of principals (Finster & Milanowski, 2018; Frasier, 2021; Reid, 2020; Smith et al., 2020), little research exists on the implications for the practices of training and retaining rural educators (Eady & Zepeda, 2007; Gilles, 2017). Previous research on evaluation in rural schools suggests formal measurement, as prescribed by a principal regarding the performance of a teacher, is what produces improved instructional outcomes (Wells et al., 2021). However, this reinforces a technocratic view on teaching and prescriptive improvement practices that detail 'deficiencies' in education (Glanz, 2021). A more nuanced perspective about evaluation is the important human resource function it can serve, not tying evaluation to student achievement, but allowing evaluation to function as a gate-keeping mechanism to inform human resource decisions about teaching that is harmful to students (Hazi, 2020). Using this definition, evaluation does not imply it can be used to improve teaching (which is developed through supervision and professional growth), but rather asserts evaluation should be used to make hiring decisions about personnel regarding their ability to engage in professional improvement.

In addition to conceptualizing how instructional leadership functions in rural education settings, it is important to also be clear on the definition of 'rural.' The most traditional form of defining rurality is the use of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) locale codes, although some methodologists have suggested including school size as an additional metric (Kettler et al., 2016). Often, rural schools that exist in close proximity to towns, suburbs, or cities experience different demographics than rural municipalities that are located further away from population hubs (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). While NCES locale codes focus on proximity to population centers and do not provide the sole classification system of what is 'rural' (Coladarci, 2007), NCES locale codes do provide a system to study how rural schools function and allow researchers to examine nuances of what it means to be 'rural' (Brenner, 2016).

The definition of what is 'rural,' and how that varies in a variety of social and geographic aspects, is particularly important in the context of this study. The state selected for the study is one of the most rural in the United States (US) (US Census, 2010). Many rural communities in this state, and others, face immense challenges regarding the recruitment and retention of rural educators (Rhinesmith et al., 2023), which is especially critical given the fact that almost 30% of public school systems are identified as rural (US Census Bureau, 2019). However, since distance from urban areas produces various challenges for rural education systems, particularly as it relates to population density and thus access to funding (Biddle & Mette, 2017; Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023), it is critical that research focus on better understanding the nuances of rurality and spatiality (Mette et al., 2023a). One of the easiest ways to do this is by using the NCES locale

codes to inform and expand upon how schools are classified and the implications this has on providing supervision, professional development, and teacher evaluation.

Due to the instructional leadership challenges rural principals face, particularly the struggle to retain teachers and grow personnel using internal resources, it is important to study and understand how instructional leadership is perceived throughout the rural US. Rather than focusing on achieving compliance (Donaldson et al., 2021), perceptions of rural instructional leadership should be studied to better understand the success and challenges of supporting teachers to improve their instructional capacities. This study helps to understand how supervision, professional growth, and evaluation are implemented in one of the most rural states in the US.

Research Design and Methods

This mixed method study sought to understand the perceptions of teachers and principals in a rural northern state regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. Additionally, data were gathered to inform how supervision, professional growth, and evaluation practices could be improved to help enhance teacher performance. The following research questions informed the study, specifically:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals?
2. What are principals' perceptions of the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation they provide to teachers?
3. How do the perceptions of teachers and principals differ regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals?
4. What are the perceptions of rural educators about the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals based on NCES locale codes?
5. How can the perceptions of educators regarding supervision, professional growth, and evaluation practices be used to help enhance teacher performance?

The study utilized a mixed methods design to ensure the perceptions of teachers and principals could be analyzed and presented clearly. Specifically, the study sought to provide perceptions of both teachers and principals, present statistically significant differences if present in the data, and describe the strengths and opportunities for improving the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered through an online survey instrument.

Study Participants

Participants of the study were selected using a random representative sample of teachers and principals from across a rural northern state. Using NCES locale codes, the random representative sample was created. This allowed the researcher to gather representative information about the rural northern state being studied without overwhelming the entire educator population in that state. To ensure anonymity, data were deidentified to help protect participants and increase response rates.

The online survey instrument gathered data from teachers and principals across the rural northern state being studied regarding their perceptions of supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. Based on the random representative sample selected for teachers and principals, 556 teachers completed the survey (29% response rate), and 282 principals completed the survey (39% response rate). In total, teachers and principals were asked 16 questions regarding supervision (five questions), professional growth (six questions), and evaluation (five questions) provided by principals. All responses were recorded electronically through Qualtrics, and participants were sent three reminders over the course of one month to ensure a high response rate.

Instrument

The online survey was constructed to better understand the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals to enhance teacher performance. A Likert scale was used (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree) to create 16 survey items. The first section included five questions which addressed supervision, including items such as feedback used to provide individualized support, feedback used as a growth tool, and distinguishing between formative and summative feedback. The second section included six questions which addressed professional growth, including items such as the use of professional learning communities (PLCs), funding and time to attend conferences and trainings, and peer mentoring programs. The third section included five questions which addressed evaluation, including items such as addressing targeted improvement areas, utilizing a variety of evidence, and using multiple observations to evaluate teachers. The fourth section of the instrument included two open-ended questions that asked 1) What is working well with your school district's supervision, professional growth, and evaluation system? and, 2) What are the biggest challenges with your school district's supervision, professional growth, and evaluation system?

As part of the survey development process, and to help ensure content validity, the survey was reviewed by two additional content experts beyond the author with an additional 45 years of experience researching and writing about the field of instructional supervision. Additionally, the survey was shared with two practicing administrators with an additional 30 years of administrative experience who conducted their dissertations on supervision feedback processes. Using the framework of Zepeda (2017) as a starting point, feedback about the construction of the survey from the content experts and the administrators was used to improve content validity. The survey was then distributed electronically to teachers and principals to gather their perceptions of supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. Overall, the Cronbach's alpha for the entire survey was 0.90. For all the subscales, the reliability coefficient was acceptable (supervision = 0.90; professional growth = 0.69; evaluation = 0.93). The final section of the instrument gathered demographic data that included position of educators, NCES locale codes, assigned educator grade level, student enrollment size, and free and reduced lunch percentage.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. These included means and standard deviations, as well as

independent *t*-tests to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in perceptions between teachers and principals regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. An ANOVA was used to determine if there were statistically significant perceptual differences between rural educators based on NCES locale codes.

Qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analyzed through several rounds of coding. The first round of coding based on the theory of Zepeda's (2017) framework. Additionally, an open-coding process was used in the first round of coding to determine the themes that emerged and remained flexible throughout the coding process (Saldaña, 2021). From this, thematic analysis was used to link qualitative and quantitative data to corroborate paradigm differences (Miles et al., 2020), specifically identifying categories and themes regarding how to best improve teacher practices through the feedback processes of supervision, professional development, and teacher evaluation. Using Zepeda's (2017) framework, the findings in this article highlight the theory of feedback processes for educators and how perceptual differences occur between teachers and principals, as well as by level of rurality.

Findings

The findings of this study are presented with respect to each research question. Analyses revealed significant differences between teachers and principals as well as between locale codes. After the findings are presented, a discussion section synthesizes the information provided in this section.

Research Question One

The first research question in this study asked, "What are teachers' perceptions of the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals?" The survey instrument asked 16 items to help answer this question. Using means and standard deviations, calculation results are presented in the table below (see Table 1).

Overall, all statements had a mean higher than 2.50, meaning that teachers agreed with all 16 statements regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. Regarding supervision, teachers agreed most that their administrator provides formative feedback to help them grow ($M = 2.85$, SD = 0.64) and least that their administrator supports teachers with individualized feedback ($M = 2.53$, SD = 0.75). In terms of professional growth, teachers agreed most that their administrator supports professional growth by funding training and attending professional conferences ($M = 3.16$, SD = 0.64) and least that their administrator supports professional growth through PLCs ($M = 2.79$, SD = 0.60). When examining evaluation, teachers agreed most that their administrator evaluates teachers using multiple observations ($M = 2.85$, SD = 0.68) and least that their administrator evaluates teachers using a variety of evidence ($M = 2.67$, SD = 0.74).

Table 1
Teachers' Perceptions of the Supervision, Professional Development, and Evaluation Provided by Principals

	M	*SD*
Supervision Items		
My administrator provides formative feedback to help teachers grow	2.85	0.64
My administrator provides instructional coaching to meet my instructional needs	2.69	0.61
My administrator provides formative feedback that is not tied to summative evaluation	2.65	0.71
My administrator distinguishes the difference between supervision and evaluation	2.64	0.72
My administrator supports teachers with individualized feedback	2.53	0.75
Total Supervision Subscale Score	2.75	0.49
Professional Growth Items		
My administrator supports professional growth by funding training & professional conferences	3.16	0.64
My administrator supports professional growth through individualized growth plans	3.05	0.65
My administrator supports professional growth by funding advanced coursework	2.96	0.77
My administrator supports professional growth through peer observations	2.89	0.67
My administrator receives district training to support the development of teachers	2.83	0.85
My administrator supports professional growth through PLCs	2.79	0.60
Total Professional Growth Subscale Score	3.01	0.41
Evaluation Items		
My administrator evaluates teachers using multiple observations	2.85	0.68
My administrator addresses areas to improve and assess teacher instruction	2.80	0.69
My administrator evaluates teachers accurately	2.72	0.71
My administrator evaluates the effectiveness of teachers	2.70	0.72
My administrator evaluates teachers using a variety of evidence	2.67	0.74
Total Evaluation Subscale Score	2.75	0.61

Note: Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

Research Question Two

The second research question in this study asked, "What are principals' perceptions of the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation they provide to teachers?" Again, the survey instrument asked 16 items to help answer this question, specifically through the calculation of means and standard deviations. Results are presented in the table below (see Table 2). Overall, principals agreed with all 16 statements regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation they provided teachers, as all statements had means higher than 2.50. Regarding supervision, principals agreed most that they provide formative feedback to help teachers grow ($M = 3.27$, SD = 0.64) and least that they provide instructional coaching to meet the instructional needs of teachers ($M = 2.96$, SD = 0.65). In terms of professional growth, principals agreed most that they support professional growth by funding training and attending professional conferences ($M = 3.42$, SD = 0.59) and least that their administrator supports professional growth through

PLCs (*M* = 2.63, SD = 0.65). When examining evaluation, principals agreed most that they evaluate teachers using multiple observations (*M* = 3.26, SD = 0.62) and least that they evaluate the effectiveness of teachers (*M* = 3.11, SD = 0.64).

Table 2
Principals' Perceptions of the Supervision, Professional Development, and Evaluation Provided by Principals

	M	*SD*
Supervision Items		
I provide formative feedback to help teachers grow	3.27	0.64
I distinguish the difference between supervision and evaluation	3.11	0.63
I provide formative feedback that is not tied to summative evaluation	3.07	0.68
I support teachers with individualized feedback	3.00	0.68
I provide instructional coaching to meet the instructional needs of teachers	2.96	0.65
Total Supervision Subscale Score	3.11	0.48
Professional Growth Items		
I support professional growth by funding training & professional conferences	3.42	0.59
I receive district training to support the development of teachers	3.26	0.73
I support professional growth by funding advanced coursework	2.99	0.81
I support professional growth through individualized growth plans	2.95	0.68
I support professional growth through peer observations	2.78	0.69
I support professional growth through PLCs	2.63	0.65
Total Professional Growth Subscale Score	3.03	0.41
Evaluation Items		
I evaluate teachers using multiple observations	3.26	0.62
I address areas to improve and assess teacher instruction	3.17	0.63
I evaluate teachers using a variety of evidence	3.13	0.66
I evaluate teachers accurately	3.12	0.64
I evaluate the effectiveness of teachers	3.11	0.64
Total Evaluation Subscale Score	3.16	0.58

Note: Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

Research Question Three

The third research question in this study asked, "How do the perceptions of teachers and principals differ regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals?" Teachers were compared to principals using an independent *t*-test. When comparing the total supervision subscale score and the total evaluation subscale score, both produced statistically significant differences between the perceptions of teachers and principals. There was not a statistically significant difference in the total professional growth subscale score between teachers and principals. Table 3 details the statistically significant difference between teachers and principals. Specifically, teachers were statistically significantly less positive about supervision provided by principals than were principals, *t* (581) = -8.84, *p* < 0.001. Additionally, teachers were statistically significantly less positive about evaluation provided by principals than were principals, *t* (670) = -8.36, *p* < 0.001. Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated for both

supervision and evaluation, and both effect sizes for these differences could be interpreted as medium to large effect (Diener, 2010).

Table 3
Perceptions of Supervision, Professional Development, and Evaluation Provided by Principals Based on Position

	Teachers		Principals		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Supervision Items	2.75	.49	3.11	.48	-8.84	< 0.001	- 0.76
Evaluation Items	2.75	.61	3.16	.58	-8.36	< 0.001	- 0.68

Note: Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree

Research Question Four

The fourth research question in this study asked, "What are the perceptions of rural educators about the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals based on NCES locale codes?" Using NCES local classification codes, survey data were organized by three unique codes as it relates to rural status, specifically the delineation of a) rural remote, b) rural distant, and c) rural fringe. For the three constructs of supervision, professional growth, and evaluation, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test if there were statistically significant differences between these three groups.

For supervision, there was a statistically significant difference between rural educators regarding their perceptions of supervision provided by principals as determined by a one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 362) = 10.304$, $p < .001$). An LSD post hoc test revealed that rural remote educators were statistically significantly more positive about supervision provided than rural distant educators ($p < .05$) and rural fringe educators ($p < .01$). Table 4 details the statistically significant difference between rural locale classifications. As such, rural remote educators perceive the formative feedback provided through supervision as more positive than their rural distant and rural fringe counterparts.

Table 4
Perceptions of Rural Educators Based on NCES Locale Classifications

	Rural Remote		Rural Distant		Rural Fringe		F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Supervision Items	3.09	.50	2.91*	.52	2.72**	.52	10.304

Note: Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree
* $p <.05$, **$p < .01$

For professional growth, there was a statistically significant difference between rural educators regarding their perceptions of supervision provided by principals as determined by a one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 295) = 5.394$, $p = .005$). An LSD post hoc test revealed that rural fringe educators were statistically significantly less positive about professional growth provided than were rural remote ($p < .01$) and rural distant educators ($p < .05$). Table 5 details the statistically significant difference between rural locale classifications. As such, rural fringe educators perceived the

support they received for professional growth as less positive than their rural remote and rural distant counterparts.

Table 5
Perceptions of Rural Educators Based on NCES Locale Classifications

	Rural Remote		Rural Distant		Rural Fringe		*F*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Profession Growth	3.16**	.41	3.06*	.39	2.94	.41	5.394

Note: Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree
* *p* <.05, **p < .01

For evaluation, there was a statistically significant difference between rural educators regarding their perceptions of supervision provided by principals as determined by a one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 412) = 5.760$, $p = .003$). An LSD post hoc test revealed that rural fringe educators were statistically significantly less positive about evaluation provided than were both rural remote and rural distant educators ($p < .01$). Table 6 details the statistically significant difference between rural locale classifications. As such, rural fringe educators perceive the educator evaluation process as less positive than their rural remote and rural distant counterparts.

Table 6
Perceptions of Rural Educators Based on NCES Locale Classifications

	Rural Remote		Rural Distant		Rural Fringe		*F*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Evaluation Items	3.01**	.73	2.95**	.61	2.90	.61	5.760

Note: Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree
**p < .01

Research Question Five

The fifth research question in this study asked, "How can the perceptions of educators regarding supervision, professional growth, and evaluation practices be used to help enhance teacher performance?" Three themes emerged from analysis of the open-ended survey items. These themes included 1) rethinking the use of supervision teams to drive instructional improvement practices and teacher reflection, 2) empowering teachers to drive their own professional growth to reduce feelings of disenfranchisement, and 3), engaging in the human resource component of evaluation to serve as a gate-keeping mechanism. The three themes are addressed in the paragraphs below.

Regarding rethinking the use of supervision teams to drive instructional improvement, many educators reflected on the benefits of peer observations. One administrator reflected, "Staff love the peer observation piece and we have incorporated at teacher request [this] approach so teachers each month write down what instructional strategies they will be using during a particular lesson and other staff members are invited to come in and watch them." Educators specifically mentioned how peer coaching supported collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas

across disciplines, allowing for more integration throughout content areas. While informal, the peer observations supported greater teacher reflection among peers and was seen as beneficial and not just "the dog and pony show" of a formal observation, as one teacher phrased it. Another educator shared, "The element of peer observation and feedback, the teacher reflection, goal setting, and job embedded professional development is extremely valuable and effective."

In reference to the notion of empowering teachers to drive their own professional growth to reduce feeling disenfranchised through the feedback process, this theme speaks to the cumbersome process of requiring teachers to document their efforts as required by law in the rural northern state involved in this study. One educator shared, "Teachers do not feel like they have enough time to plan for goals and [Student Learning Objectives] SLOs, self-evaluation, etc. They also reported struggling with being comfortable finding enough or identifying quality evidence to represent core propositions." Reflections like these highlight the tension of top-down policy mandates around efforts to improve teacher effectiveness in the era of accountability. Specifically, many of the comments suggest the system in the northern rural state is neither working for administrators nor teachers. Another teacher shared, "It's a lot of work for the administration. I don't necessarily feel it is leading toward better teaching skills or more helpful information, but it is the law, so we are doing it. I think it is cumbersome and time consuming for everyone." As such, many educators reflected on the tension of needing to document every teaching decision and not valuing the professional opinions of teachers on how they might best continue to grow and reflect as instructors. One teacher astutely stated, "Real growth comes not from punitive evaluations or from hoops to be jumped though, but through time spent well on seeking professional learning, modelling, mentoring."

In addition to valuing the opinions of teachers on how to best improve their own practice, educators did also share the importance of using the evaluation process to drive human resource decisions to serve as a gate-keeping mechanism. Principals reflected on their own training, as well as the need to make the evaluation process more efficient and less time-consuming. One administrator shared, "[We need] continued professional development and understanding about [student learning objectives] SLOs. [We also need]…more effective and efficient action plan steps for underperforming continuing contract teachers who are not demonstrating positive results for students." In addition to streamlining their own evaluation processes, educators also reflected on the need to develop more progressive evaluation measures. Educators commented on their willingness to provide high-quality learning experiences, but clearly stated that the accountability measures being implemented are not making their schools better. "We need the state to allow us to eliminate the [use of] student data. We follow the student learning goal guidance from the state. The process is great in terms of training teachers on formative and summative assessment and really examining the teaching and learning process but tying it to evaluation kills any real learning we might see in it," one principal shared. Given these reflections, the rural educators who participated in the study display the willingness to use evaluation to remove teachers, if necessary, but not at the cost of tying evaluation to student achievement.

Discussion

This study used a mixed-methods approach to analyze the perceptions of teachers and principals in a rural northern state regarding the supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. First, the findings help identify that there are statistically significant differences between rural teachers and rural principals regarding their perceptions of supervision and evaluation provided by principals. This is important in that it provides additional empirical evidence about the types of interactions between rural teachers and principals that can lead to more collaborative interactions about how to improve teacher practices that can help to stabilize the rural educational workforce (Frahm & Cianca, 2021; Tran et al., 2020). Second, the findings from this study highlight that there are in fact statistically significant differences between rural remote, rural distant, and rural fringe educators regarding their perceptions of supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals. Given that the research shows rural schools lack the financial resources to improve instruction with outside assistance, this study highlights the importance of how rural remote schools are significantly more positive about the support structures they can internally provide to improve instructional efficacy (Colson et al., 2021; Courtney, 2020) than their rural fringe counterparts. Third, the findings help add to the literature on the practices of training and retaining rural educators (Eady & Zepeda, 2007; Gilles, 2017) and suggests that the same discrepancies that occur between the perceptions of urban teachers and principals regarding the effectiveness of teacher evaluation (Finster & Milanowski, 2018; Frasier, 2021; Reid, 2020; Smith et al., 2020) also occurs in rural spaces. As such, the study adds to the literature on how rural instructional leaders might use evaluation to improve outcomes (Wells et al., 2021) and separate supervision and professional development (Zepeda, 2017) from the gate-keeping mechanism of evaluation (Hazi, 2020).

Given the perceptual differences between teachers and principals regarding supervision, professional growth, and evaluation provided by principals, there are some profound implications to consider for rural educators and rural education systems. First and foremost, there are vastly different perceptions of the perceived value of the instructional leadership efforts in rural schools (Wallin et al, 2019). Not only were rural teachers in this study less positive than the rural principals about the supervision and evaluation provided by principals, but they were more positive than principals about the professional growth opportunities that empowered them to individualize growth plans, use peer observations to drive improvement efforts, and value the work of PLCs (see Table 7). This suggests rural teachers might perceive rural principals as using instructional leadership practices that are seen as hierarchical and controlling (Wieczorek et al., 2022; Donaldson et al., 2021). Moreover, it is in direct opposition to literature that suggests how to improve the efficacy of rural educators, specifically through peer observations, PLCs, and peer-led professional development (Colson et al., 2021).

The statistically-significant differences between principals' and teachers' perceptions about supervision and evaluation provided by rural principals as measured by the results of the independent t-test has important implications for rural principals as well. Supervision, which should be considered the formative feedback that empowers teachers to drive their own improvement efforts (Cormier & Padney, 2021) could be a process that leads to collaborative interactions between rural teachers and principals on how to improve student learning (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). However, based on this study, rural principals need to be more aware of how their

feedback is received by rural teachers. Additionally, rural instructional leaders should engage in an evaluation process that provides summative evaluation and focuses less on a technocratic view of improving the 'deficiencies' of a teacher from the perspective of a principal (Glanz, 2021). As such, there is a great opportunity for rural principals to rethink how feedback and formal measurement of teacher performance, as provided by an administrator as a person of power (Wells et al., 2021), could be reconceptualized to be more democratic (Glickman et al., 2018).

Table 7
Compared Perceptions of the Supervision, Professional Development, and Evaluation Provided by Principals

Professional Growth Items	Teachers	Principals
I support professional growth by funding training & professional conferences	3.16	3.42
I receive district training to support the development of teachers	2.83	3.26
I support professional growth by funding advanced coursework	2.96	2.99
I support professional growth through individualized growth plans	*3.05*	2.95
I support professional growth through peer observations	*2.89*	2.78
I support professional growth through PLCs	*2.79*	2.63
Total Professional Growth Subscale Score	3.01	3.03

Note: Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree; *italicized means* represent higher teacher means

Regarding the statistically significant differences between perceptions of supervision, professional growth, and evaluation between rural educators based on NCES locale codes is important as well. What is interesting about this particular study is how rural fringe educators (those closest to a population hub) were statistically significantly less positive than rural remote and rural distant educators (those furthest from a population hub). Most literature would suggest that the further away from a population hub the school is, and the less populated the school, the less access to resources and personnel there would be (Kettler et al., 2016) to provide human resources to something like instructional leadership. However, findings from this study suggest the more remote and less populated the community of the rural school, the *more positive* the perceptions are of instructional leadership provided – a finding that should be further explored to "better bridge the research-practice-policy gap" in supervision (Mette, 2019, p. 1). There are a variety of explanations that are possible, including a greater sense of community among educators, a school culture and climate that functions on a more interpersonal level and less on economies of scale, and perhaps a counter example of 'the rural problem' (Tieken, 2014) that should be studied in greater detail. A possible reason for this might be that in rural settings with fewer teachers, principals are able to provide pinpointed feedback that leads to teacher growth and development that is more individualized in nature (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Analysis of the open-ended survey items provided three themes. First, participants noted there was an increased use of peer observation to drive instructional improvement practices in rural school systems, something that is consistent with democratic approaches to instructional leadership across schools in the US (Cormier & Padney; 2021; Glickman et al., 2018). While principals were less positive than teachers about this work, they also clearly expressed the need

to shift to this type of instructional improvement based on the time-intensive nature of the state-mandated teacher feedback system. Second, educators commented on the opportunity to decrease rural teachers feeling disenfranchised as a result of the state-mandated system by continuing to empower them to drive their own instructional improvement practices (Carrier & Whaland, 2017). Again, rural educators reflected on the tension between teachers and principals regarding the historic, top-down approach of providing feedback and the burgeoning contemporary approach of empowering teachers to help drive their own professional growth (Glanz, 2021). Third, rural educators recognized the importance of evaluation to serve as a gate-keeping function for teachers who were ineffective as instructors (Hazi, 2020). However, rural educators also commented on the desire to remove the use of student test data in the formal evaluation process that was part of the teacher evaluation system.

Implications

This study highlights how, overall, the perceptions of teachers and principals in a rural northern state in the US have different perceptions about how supervision, professional growth, and evaluation are provided (Zepeda, 2017). Other studies have shown similar differences based on position (Mette et al., 2016; Hvidston & McKim, 2019), however this study is unique in that no other studies about perceptions of rural instructional leadership with an N of this size could be found using JSTOR or ERIC. As rural principals continue to consider and reconceptualize how they provide instructional leadership (Wallin et al., 2019), as well as how their feedback is *perceived* by teachers, there are profound implications for rural-facing leadership preparation programs (Rowland, 2017) as well. Offering increased ruralcentric professional development that directly addresses the challenges faced by rural principals (Hansen, 2018; Klocko & Justis, 2019) would also be important for rural policymakers to consider. Moving forward, it would also be important to expand this type of research to explore other rural states in the US as it is well-founded that the lived experiences of 'rural' varies greatly across geographic regions throughout the country (Rowlands & Love, 2021). Additionally, qualitative studies that examine the lived experiences of rural educators would offer critical insights and help to detail the supports that are needed to better ensure instructional improvement efforts can be identified and replicated across various rural spaces.

What is particularly noteworthy about this study is the highlighted differences regarding the perceptions of rural remote, rural distant, and rural fringe educators. Contrary to other studies that focus on the difference between rural and city or suburban communities, this study highlights nuanced differences experienced among rural educators in one of the most rural states in the US. While there is evidence of stereotypes about rural education (Parson et al., 2016), there is not as much literature available about the perceived differences of rural educators who live in different rural communities based on NCES locale codes, or whether these are the best metrics to determine different lived experiences among rural communities (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). That said, it is possible that educators working in rural remote and rural distant areas are in fact not suffering from 'the rural problem' (Biddle & Azano, 2016), but rather are benefiting from conditions that lead to better perceived instructional leadership.

Conclusion

Instructional leadership has shifted greatly since the inception of No Child Left Behind, and as such rural principals and the teachers who engage in reflective practices around their instruction will have to continue to evolve as well. To contribute to rural education systems that can support the development and growth of rural educators, instructional leadership applied in rural spaces need to consider the practices and approaches that lead to increased retention to help better develop the rural education workforce (Tran et al., 2020). Important aspects of this work include building trusting relationships among rural staff, centering the local needs of communities that are asset-based, and empowering teachers to drive their own instructional improvement efforts (Mette et al., 2023b).

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