

Reconceptualising leadership as a place-responsive practice in rural and remote contexts

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Romina Madrid Miranda¹ , Leslie Blake-Davis² ,
Elizabeth AC Rushton¹, and Pauline Walsh³

Abstract

This paper challenges context-neutral assumptions in educational leadership by examining how rurality and remoteness constitute leadership practice. Drawing on 11 semi-structured interviews with headteachers, deputy headteachers and local authority leaders in a Scottish island context, the study uses an exploratory case study design and reflexive thematic analysis to consider *how rurality and remoteness constitute school leadership, and what this reveals about leadership as a relational and place-responsive practice*. We argue that leadership is ontologically inseparable from the relational, spatial and material conditions within which it emerges. From this perspective, rurality and remoteness are not simply contextual variables but generative conditions that constitute leadership enactment, practices and purpose. This reconceptualisation positions rural-remote leadership not as an adaptation of urban-normative models, but as a distinct and valuable form of practice. Three interrelated themes capture leadership as place-responsive practice: (1) leadership as place-based relationality; (2) leadership as systemic mediation of structures and (3) leadership as a boundary-spanning practice. Leadership is enacted through rich relational networks, high levels of social visibility and ongoing negotiation across organisational and community boundaries. The study contributes to educational leadership theory by advancing a situated and relational understanding of leadership, with broader implications beyond rural contexts.

Keywords

Rural and remote leadership, place-responsive leadership, school leadership

¹Faculty of Health, Sport & Society, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

²Education Department, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, North Adams, MA, USA

³Renfrewshire Council, Paisley, UK

Corresponding author:

Romina Madrid Miranda, Faculty of Health, Sport & Society, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK.

Email: romina.madrid@stir.ac.uk

Introduction

Rural schools play a vital role in national education systems, yet leadership in these contexts remains underexamined, particularly beyond North America (Corbett, 2014; Schafft and Jackson, 2010). More fundamentally, dominant approaches to educational leadership continue to treat context as a variable that influences practice, rather than as constitutive of what leadership is and how it emerges (Eacott, 2015; Niesche and Thomson, 2017). This assumption reflects broader urban-centric norms embedded within the field, including expectations around organisational scale, professional infrastructure and clearly bounded school–community relations (Azano and Stewart, 2016; Budge, 2006).

These premises are particularly problematic in rural and remote settings, where school leaders navigate distinctive relational, spatial and material conditions, including geographic isolation, limited resources and heightened visibility within closely connected communities. While often conflated, rurality and remoteness introduce different yet overlapping challenges, such as constrained connectivity and restricted access to professional networks (Corbett, 2014; Sahlberg, 2011). At the same time, these contexts can enable forms of leadership grounded in strong relationships and community engagement (Galton and MacBeath, 2008; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). However, prevailing frameworks continue to position such practices as adaptations to context, rather than as expressions of leadership constituted through place.

Although critiques of these universalising tendencies are well established, less attention has been given to developing alternative conceptualisations that take rurality and remoteness seriously as integral to leadership practice. Concurrently, shifts in leadership scholarship towards distributed and relational perspectives (Gronn, 2002, 2008; Spillane, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006) have created opportunities to reconceptualise leadership as emerging through interaction rather than residing in individuals or roles. Yet these perspectives have largely been developed in urban and suburban systems, where dense professional networks and institutional supports shape leadership enactment (Honig, 2004).

Rural and remote contexts, by contrast, produce distinct relational and spatial configurations of leadership. Geographic dispersion, small organisational scale and blurred school–community boundaries reshape how leadership is enacted, distributed and sustained. These conditions do not simply constrain leadership; they generate qualitatively different forms of practice.

Recent scholarship has extended these debates by exploring distributed and relational leadership in rural contexts (Azano and Stewart, 2016; Harris, 2013; MacBeath et al., 2006). International studies, particularly in North America, highlight how geographic isolation, limited professional networks and policy constraints shape leadership enactment (Azano and Stewart, 2016; Schafft and Jackson, 2010). In the Scottish context, work by Dowling (2009) and Constantinides (2026) foregrounds relational and community-engaged approaches to leadership in small and remote schools. Despite this, few studies theorise rurality and remoteness as generative conditions, rather than contextual challenges, leaving space to reconceptualise leadership as emergent, place-responsive practice.

This paper therefore moves beyond questions of adaptation to ask: *How do rurality and remoteness constitute school leadership?* Drawing on an exploratory case study of a Scottish island, we examine how leadership emerges within these conditions and what this reveals about leadership as a place-responsive practice. The paper is organised as follows. First, we outline the conceptual framework, *Place as Constitutive of Leadership Practice*, followed by a discussion of rurality and remoteness in Scottish education. We then present the study context and the methods employed. Next, we present the findings, organised around three dimensions of place-responsive leadership: structural contingency, relational embeddedness and boundary-spanning practices. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for educational leadership in rural and remote contexts.

Place as constitutive of leadership practice

Leadership emerges from the interaction among actors, relationships, material conditions and place-specific histories and futures (Gronn, 2002, 2008; Spillane, 2006). Drawing on Schatzki, we understand leadership practice as shaped by the ‘site of the social’ – the configuration of practices, material arrangements and understandings constituting a particular organisational and geographic setting (Schatzki, 2002: xi). This practice-theoretical perspective situates leadership as emerging from the entanglement of human agency with material conditions, spatial relations and institutional arrangements. In rural and remote contexts, these entanglements take distinctive forms: geographic isolation shapes possibilities for professional collaboration; small organisational scale collapses conventional role boundaries; resource constraints necessitate improvisational practice and community embeddedness intensifies relational accountability.

However, professional preparation and policy often proceed from what Massey (2005) identifies as a ‘power-geometry’, in which metropolitan perspectives are universalised while place-based knowledge is marginalised. This produces epistemological displacement, in which rural-remote leaders are trained to enact practices developed for urban settings and equipped with conceptual tools that presume fundamentally different conditions. Understanding how the material and spatial conditions of rurality, remoteness, small scale, geographic dispersal and resource scarcity actively constitute what leadership is and can be in these contexts requires moving beyond frameworks that treat such conditions as mere constraints or enablers of predetermined practices.

Place-conscious leadership foregrounds place, the intricate mesh of a community’s geographic, cultural, historical, social and ecological characteristics, as a constitutive element of leadership practice rather than a neutral backdrop (Azano and Stewart, 2016; McHenry-Sorber and Budge, 2018). Drawing on place-based education and critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003), this approach situates leaders’ decisions within the lived realities of specific localities, highlighting how rural contexts shape values, priorities, identities and strategies. At its core, place-conscious leadership calls for attunement to the dynamics of the places in which leaders work, especially in rural contexts where geographic isolation, community networks, cultural heritage and socio-economic conditions are deeply interwoven with schooling and community life.

Critical place-conscious leadership explicitly links place awareness with equity, power, policy and community wellbeing (Azano and Stewart, 2016). Rural leaders become not only interpreters of local context but also mediators between community values and external policies, leveraging a nuanced understanding of place to advocate for locally relevant solutions and strengthen ties between schools and broader community networks. This mediating role becomes particularly significant given that rural-remote leaders face multiple accountabilities: to students and families within relational networks characterised by high visibility and intimacy; to communities whose viability may depend partly on the school’s health; to local authorities and national policy frameworks often premised on urban assumptions and to professional standards that may not fully recognise the legitimacy of place-based knowledge and practice.

Recent Scottish scholarship has extended place-conscious leadership to emphasise community stewardship, positioning leaders as custodians not only of educational provision but of the broader social and institutional fabric of rural communities (Constantinides, 2026). In small, isolated areas where schools functioned as community anchors, leadership practices became inseparable from local histories, identities and relationships. This might be understood as a stewardship orientation, one in which leaders perceived their responsibilities as extending beyond organisational management to encompass the care and sustainability of community resources, relationships and collective capacity. Yet stewardship also carried tensions: between preserving community traditions and pursuing educational change; between serving collective community needs and supporting individual students whose aspirations reached

beyond their local context and between adapting pragmatically to resource constraints and advocating for more equitable provision. Furthermore, ideas of stewardship can imply that humans are set apart from place. Another way to consider place in the context of education is through place-responsive education, where people and place are, ‘reciprocally enmeshed and co-emergent’ and ‘people learn through making embodied responses to differences’ (Mannion and Gilbert, 2015: 231). The concept of place-responsive education provides a lens through which school leadership in remote and rural contexts can be understood as emerging through the reciprocal relationship between people and place.

Rurality and remoteness in Scottish education

In Scotland, around 33% of schools are in rural areas, including both mainland and island communities (Scottish Government, 2013, 2025). Rurality is formally defined in Section 14 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which requires Scottish Ministers to maintain and publish a list of rural schools. This classification is derived from the Scottish Government Urban Rural (SGUR) classification, a spatial methodology that categorises every postcode in Scotland using two key criteria: settlement size and accessibility, operationalised through drive-time analysis to settlements of 10,000 people or more. Rural schools are those located within Accessible Rural, Remote Rural or Very Remote Rural areas, reflecting increasing degrees of remoteness rather than a simple urban–rural divide. Remoteness is defined by travel time, with areas within 30 min of an urban centre, 30–60 min away and over 60 min away. The 2025 Rural Schools List, based on SGUR Classification 2020 and School Roll 2023 data, identifies approximately 33% of schools in Scotland as rural, including around 40% of local authority primary schools and 18% of secondary schools. Schools within 500 m of urban settlements are excluded, except for small primary schools, to ensure that rurality reflects lived and functional remoteness rather than proximity alone (Scottish Government, 2025).

Context of study: the rural and remote community of Tibia

This exploratory case study was conducted on the Isle of Tibia (pseudonym),¹ a remote island off the west coast of Scotland. Tibia’s economy historically centres on agriculture, fishing, whisky distilling and tourism, with distilling particularly prominent: the island hosts multiple Scotch whisky producers that attract international visitors and contribute to employment and export value. Investments in local enterprise, including tourism infrastructure and small-scale manufacturing such as breweries, aim to retain jobs and sustain economic activity in the face of geographic isolation (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2023).

Despite these strengths, Tibia faces challenges typical of remote island communities: population retention, limited local services, high transport costs and lack of housing. Connectivity remains a structural constraint on economic diversification and access to wider labour markets, with ongoing infrastructure planning aimed at improving ferry capacity and reliability (Scottish Government, 2022).

Remoteness also shapes access to education and skills development. There are currently four primary schools on the island of Tibia serving its rural communities. Primary schools are small (between 20 and 60 pupils) and community-oriented, typical of rural and island contexts. These primary schools feed into one secondary school, Tibia High School, which is a non-denominational comprehensive school for pupils aged 11–18. Tibia High School tailors its curriculum model to a remote context, with pupils having broad personalised course choices that maximise local staffing resources (Argyll and Bute Council, n.d.).

Schools on Tibia are deeply embedded in their communities, strengthening local identity and participation in education. Some of the challenges faced are related to geographic isolation and

small pupil populations, which shape educational provision: the limited number of schools reflects the island's population (~3000 residents) (Argyll and Bute Council, n.d.).

In the broader context of island and rural schooling within the local authority where Tibia is located, resource allocation and accessibility are perennial challenges. Schools may not receive the same levels of Pupil Equity Funding as mainland settings, prompting targeted, strategic support to address poverty-related attainment gaps (Scottish Government, 2023). Teacher and school leader recruitment is also challenging due to the lack of housing. In addition, students with *additional support needs* (ASN) on remote islands have traditionally faced challenges in accessing local specialist resources. However, recent investment plans, such as dedicated learning centres at Tibia High School, aim to improve access to enhanced support without requiring off-island travel (Argyll and Bute Council, 2023). This context requires school leaders to be aware of these challenges and act strategically.

Methodology

Research design

The methodology of this study was designed to develop a comprehensive understanding of how school leadership practices are shaped by their context. More precisely, the researchers aimed to identify themes related to leadership practices, identities, orientations, strengths and tensions within a rural, remote area of Scotland. A case study approach was chosen because leadership roles and responsibilities are often defined not only by context but also by the interwoven social constructs and the complexities of professional identity within a bounded social context (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

The researchers sought to conduct an exploration that generated knowledge to guide school leaders, policymakers and stakeholders invested in enhancing educational opportunities for students in rural and remote areas. Additionally, we sought to elucidate the complexities leaders face working in these circumstances, thereby highlighting opportunities to examine and influence planning, decision-making and policy development concerning rural education and school leadership.

Research questions

This study is guided by one primary research question, followed by two sub-questions.

Primary research question. How do rurality and remoteness shape school leadership, and what does this reveal about leadership as a relational and place-responsive practice?

Sub-questions. How do rurality and remoteness shape school leaders' practices, including decision-making, values and relational approaches, in contexts characterised by geographic isolation, small school size and resource constraints?

How do rural and remote contexts challenge or extend dominant conceptualisations of school leadership, and what alternative understandings emerge from leaders' place-responsive practices?

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and online by authors one and two. Questions were intentionally designed to foster a co-constructed understanding between researchers and participants and to address the research questions, whilst enabling participants to expand on the interview topics. The researchers developed interview questions informed by the study's conceptual focus on

Table 1. Participants of the study.

No.	Name (pseudonym)	Role	Location	School level
1	Fraser	Headteacher	Island	Primary
2	Mary	Headteacher	Island	Primary
3	Anna	Headteacher	Island	Primary
4	Emily	Headteacher	Island	Secondary
5	Sarah	Deputy	Island	Primary
6	Liz	Deputy	Island	Secondary
7	Rob	Deputy	Island	Secondary
8	Amelia	Local authority	Mainland	Primary and secondary
9	Katie	Local authority	Mainland	Primary and secondary
10	Sophie	Local authority	Mainland	Primary and secondary
11	Olivia	Local authority	Mainland	Primary and secondary

place, rurality and leadership practice. Questions included: Can you describe your role as a headteacher/local authority representative and your experience working in rural schools? What are the unique challenges and opportunities of leading a school in a rural community? During the interviews, memos and annotations were recorded by the researchers, focusing on topics such as school size, remoteness and community characteristics, to develop a comprehensive understanding of how context influenced the conceptualisation of the school leaders' role in Tibia. Memos were also recorded following the interview process to document initial ideas and reflections and to monitor potential researcher bias (Birks and Mills, 2015). Transcripts, notes and memos were stored in NVivo 14.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants with relevant knowledge of educational leadership in the island context. With the support of the fourth author in her role as Education Officer for the local authority, all headteachers in Tibia (4) were invited to participate. Headteachers were also asked to identify other school staff with leadership responsibilities who could contribute to the study, resulting in the inclusion of three deputy headteachers. In recognition of the close relationship between schools and the local authority, key local authority professionals were also invited to participate. Potential participants received information about the study and were invited to attend an online information session before providing consent. Table 1 provides an overview of participants' roles, school level and location.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2021) was the qualitative approach that guided the analytical process. RTA was selected because it positions researcher subjectivity not as a source of bias to be managed but as an active and necessary resource in the interpretation. Given the research team's distinct professional and cultural standpoints, spanning rural school leadership practice in the United States and Scotland, and local authority experience in Scotland, RTA provided an analytically coherent framework for making those perspectives productive rather than incidental to the analysis.

Analysis proceeded across six phases (Braun and Clarke, 2021): data familiarisation, systematic coding, initial theme generation, theme refinement, theme definition and naming, and written analysis. These phases were iterative rather than linear. During familiarisation, each researcher reviewed

transcripts and memos independently, bringing their own professional and cultural framings to an initial reading of the data. Coding was conducted with attention to the researchers' diverse understandings of what headteacher roles and responsibilities look like across different systems and contexts, differences that were treated as analytically productive rather than resolved prematurely. As initial themes were constructed and refined in relation to place-responsive leadership, the team developed a conceptual map and shared the emerging analysis to participants for their feedback and insights, which were incorporated into subsequent phases of analysis. NVivo 14 was used throughout to organise data, manage codes and support the development and visualisation of the conceptual map, providing a shared analytical infrastructure across the distributed research team.

The researchers' positionality was understood as integral to the analysis rather than as contextual background. Author two has held multiple leadership roles across rural K-12 settings in the United States, from classroom teacher to district superintendent, with doctoral specialisation in education policy and leadership. Authors one and three are academics working, respectively, at the intersection of leadership, professional learning and system change, and in environmental education and teacher identity. Author four brings practice-based knowledge of school leadership from across the local authority in which the study was completed. These standpoints were not bracketed during analysis but were explicitly surfaced across the analytical phases, informing both the coding decisions and the interpretive moves through which themes were constructed.

Study limitations

This study explored educational leadership within a specific island context; therefore, contextual specificity was integral to the research design. The sample reflects the population of school leaders on the island, with all headteachers and local authority professionals working closely with the schools participating in the study. We did not collect data from teachers, students or families, whose perspectives may have offered a more comprehensive understanding of leadership practices. While the findings may not be statistically generalisable beyond this setting, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of leadership practices in a rural and remote context. Findings need to be considered in terms of their potential transferability to similar contexts rather than their generalisability to all educational settings.

Findings

This study examined how rurality and remoteness constitute school leadership on a Scottish island. The analysis indicates that these are not contextual variables influencing leadership practice but are generative, constituting what leadership is, how it is enacted, and for what purposes. Three inter-related themes capture this: (1) leadership as place-based relationality; (2) leadership as systemic mediation of structures and (3) leadership as a boundary-spanning practice (Table 2).

Leadership as place-based relationality

This theme reflects how rurality shaped leadership practice, including decision-making, values and the approaches leaders took. Leadership in these contexts was strategically responsive to place, built on personal, face-to-face trust rather than formal authority. Acting relationally across both schools and communities, these leaders extended their practice beyond institutional management into the broader social life of their localities. Fraser, for example, who travels across the island to lead two schools, described visibility as crucial for families to feel supported, noting that making

Table 2. Leadership as a relational and place-responsive practice.

Theme	Indicative quote
Leadership as place-based relationality	You need to think about how important the social interactions are... You can't expect collaborative practices with people that you don't socialise with, that you don't know, that you don't trust. You need to have that trust there (Anna)
Leadership as systemic mediation of structures	But actually, we're building up capacity and staff as well with volunteers from the community, you know, like they've got skills that we don't necessarily have, like in the recording studio. And we've got people retired that are happy to come in... (Emily)
Leadership as a boundary-spanning practice	I am not always accessible to my staff because I manage two schools. So there is a real element of trust being handed to our principal teachers that might not be handed to a principal teacher in a larger mainland school (Fraser)

the journey even in poor weather was appreciated and recognised by the community. Emily similarly described relational leadership as essential, in part because it mirrored the culture of the community itself. As she explained:

Relationships are a huge thing in a small community school. It is very much triangular, you know, the pupils, the staff, the parents, and the community. I do think we have a very positive ethos, and I think it is about relationships.

Geographic isolation and resource constraints gave shape to this relational orientation, demanding a particular kind of strategic intelligence, one grounded in what might be understood as relational topographies: a deep, situated knowledge of people, place and the connections between them.

As one headteacher noted, leadership required 'doing the best with what we have here', signalling not constraint alone but a place-conscious orientation to possibility. This was not simply a strengths-based attitude but a sophisticated, place-responsive and conscious understanding that effective stewardship requires knowing your community deeply: who it is, how it functions, and where its capacities lie, leading from that knowledge with intention and care. They understood and recognised the critical place that communities held in the life of the school. Their leadership practice was associated with how successfully they connected with them. Mary's engagement with Gaelic culture illustrates this dynamic. By leading a Gaelic choir and participating in local and national festivals, she positioned herself within the cultural life of the community, enabling trust and legitimacy as a school leader. She noted,

I conducted the Gaelic choir for the children, and we used to attend the local Mod. Now the local mod is like a Gaelic festival and then the national mod which is, you know, the whole of Scotland. I ran the choir here, and we participated in every national mod every local mod and were successful. So the local community embraced me as head teacher, I think quite readily, because I had that interest in Gaelic.

She reflected that this shared cultural engagement shaped how the community 'embraced' her as head teacher and described it as central to her effectiveness as a school leader. Understanding her community's interests and values was pivotal to her ability to build influence and bring people

with her. However, she acknowledged that this was particularly demanding given that she led two schools, requiring her to remain attuned to the distinct cultures and expectations of both communities.

Beyond the school gates, these leaders demonstrated a systemic orientation through their active involvement in the wider community, thinking beyond school boundaries and recognising local networks of relationships, resources and possibilities as essential to their role rather than supplementary to it. Anna and Emily, for example, described involvement in local initiatives supporting individuals with additional needs and young people, extending their leadership into community-based provision. Furthermore, Anna described ‘absorbing’ responsibilities typically associated with social workers, frequently intervening in family crises that extend beyond the school’s remit. Her account underscores how geographic isolation constrains access to both child and adult social services, positioning headteachers to engage with whole-family needs, often shaped by unmet adult vulnerabilities and illustrating how systemic service gaps reconfigure the boundaries of educational leadership.

These examples highlight how rurality produces leadership identities that are relationally embedded and community-facing. Our evidence shows that in small, closely connected settings, the boundaries between school and community can be porous. Leadership, therefore, becomes a practice of place-based relationality, where educational aims are inseparable from broader commitments to community wellbeing and sustainability.

Leadership as place-based relationality in Tibia was not enacted from a distance but through forms of highly visible, embedded practice. Leaders operated within small, closely connected communities where anonymity and role separation were geographically impossible. As a result, relationality extended beyond formal organisational responsibilities, positioning leaders simultaneously as educators, organisational leaders and community members. This embeddedness enabled the development of trust, legitimacy and strong relational ties, conditions that were essential for sustaining collective work and shared responsibility. At the same time, high visibility intensified accountability, as leadership actions were subject to continuous examination within the community.

Leaders, therefore, engaged in ongoing negotiation across multiple relational spaces, mediating between competing expectations, community interests and the distinct identities of different school sites. In this sense, the place-based relationality was not only about care for place, but also about navigating the relational and moral demands of being *of* that place, requiring sustained relational labour to maintain coherence, trust and equity across interconnected contexts. This multiplicity blurred distinctions between professional and personal domains, requiring leaders to navigate complex and often competing expectations across different relational spaces (Budge, 2006).

Leadership as systemic mediation of structures

Remoteness created distinct structural conditions that required leaders to serve as mediators of resources, opportunities and system-level constraints. Geographic isolation, limited staffing and restricted access to services necessitated a form of leadership oriented towards orchestration rather than implementation, positioning leaders to actively *mediate* between wider system structures and local needs.

Rural school leadership was shaped by intersecting conditions of geographical isolation, constrained resourcing and limited institutional presence, each of which required leaders to mediate between local realities and wider system structures. Logistical barriers such as unreliable transport and extended travel times disrupted access to meetings and services, while funding formulas that insufficiently weighted rurality constrained staffing, support roles and curricular breadth. Recruitment and retention were further challenged by high living costs and the perceived

marginality of rural experience, resulting in small staff and restricted subject offerings. Local authority professionals showed adaptability and creativity in reaching the island context; however, the intermittent pattern of engagement constrained the continuity of support. In parallel, students' relatively limited exposure to life beyond their communities may continue to influence their confidence when approaching post-school pathways. These conditions did not operate in isolation but intersected to produce a context in which structural constraints were continuously negotiated at the school level.

To lead in these conditions, school leaders had to think systemically about their contexts. This systemic orientation meant thinking beyond school boundaries, mapping their communities and local networks as systems of relationships, resources and possibilities, and recognising these as foundational to the school's capacity and sustainability. This approach involved mobilising local assets, reconfiguring roles and creating alternative pathways to ensure equitable learning opportunities. For example, Emily described drawing on community volunteers and local expertise, such as retired professionals and creative practitioners, to extend curricular provision. As she noted, significant effort was required to ensure that 'none of our pupils feel like in a [mainland] school they would have a better experience'. Similarly, Liz outlined how staffing limitations required flexible deployment of teachers, including leaders taking on teaching roles and staff working across subject areas.

These practices were not framed as temporary adaptations but as routine and necessary features of leadership in remote settings. Ensuring parity of opportunity with mainland schools emerged as a persistent concern, particularly in relation to curriculum breadth and wider achievement.

As systems thinkers in resource management, school leaders discussed a variety of scenarios and strategies they used to create learning opportunities for their school communities, often in response to challenges posed by remoteness and resulting issues of resource accessibility. Liz outlined how staffing limitations required flexible deployment of teachers, and therefore, a much more fluid definition of roles and expectations (leadership team needs to teach as well; staff work across subject areas). Liz reflected on a structural challenge her school faced in offering the broad range of courses she considered essential to equitable learning, comparable to what students on the mainland could access. 'The challenge for us was how to get our staff fully utilized to deliver the wide range of courses that the kids deserve'. Rather than treating this as an insurmountable limitation, she took a systemic approach, developing a comprehensive plan that redistributed teaching responsibilities across the school. This involved Liz stepping into a teaching role herself when needed, while other staff expanded their repertoire through additional training. Through this coordinated, whole-school response, she broadened the curriculum without adding new resources, turning a structural constraint into an opportunity.

Similarly, Emily expressed high ambitions for what she could offer her students and described taking a proactive approach to resourcing those ambitions. Rather than relying solely on what the school could provide internally, she looked outward, actively pursuing outside funding and cultivating partnerships with local businesses and community volunteers. As she explained:

We put in applications for outside funding ... particularly for residential trips, but it's trying to get enough resources so that none of our pupils feel like in a [mainland] school they would have a better experience. We're really working hard this year on wider achievement... We're also building capacity and staff through community volunteers. They've got skills that we don't necessarily have, like in the recording studio. And we've got people retired who are happy to come in.

Her approach reflects a creative and outward-looking strategy for expanding what her school can offer, drawing on the strengths of the wider community to enrich the experiences available to her students.

Remoteness also shaped leaders' engagement with the wider education system. Transportation constraints, including ferry schedules and associated costs, limited participation in professional networks and decision-making forums. Transversally, they described the additional demands placed on staff required to travel extended hours, while also highlighting difficulties in accessing supply teachers.

Fraser shared his thoughts on the issue of transportation, 'I don't feel like as a head that I'm disadvantaged by being in a rural setting. The only difference is the logistics and the finances because of the back-and-forth due to ferry costs and scheduling'. One participant described it this way, 'It's all about showing value and confidence in our leaders of small settings as people whose voices are important. But the barrier is that it's quite a long distance, and I'm having to ask my staff, who usually work seven hours, to work nine hours on those days. I also have difficulties securing supply staff.' She explained that participating in certain functions central to key decision-making can be difficult due to transportation.

These spatial and temporal constraints of the context positioned leaders as intermediaries between national policy expectations and local feasibility. In this sense, remoteness generates a distinctive form of systemic leadership: one in which leaders continuously negotiate between local realities and external demands, reassembling resources and relationships to sustain educational provision under constrained conditions.

Leadership as a boundary-spanning practice

Rurality and remoteness shaped leadership practice in Tibia as distributed and boundary-spanning. Leadership was enacted across multiple sites, with limited personnel and high contextual variability; it could not be contained within formal roles. Instead, it spanned boundaries and emerged through relationships, trust and shared responsibility.

A central feature of this enactment was the necessity of distributing leadership across individuals and sites. Leaders consistently described how physical absence, resulting from multi-school responsibilities, required them to rely on others to sustain day-to-day operations and decision-making. As Fraser explained, 'you have to be able to slightly let go and distribute that leadership', particularly when it was impossible to be present in all locations simultaneously. Participants described this to fully leverage their resources and make daily leadership tasks more effective and manageable. Distribution in this sense was not a strategic choice aligned with improvement agendas, but a practical response to structural constraints. Trust, therefore, functioned not simply as a normative ideal but as an operational condition for leadership to occur.

This boundary-spanning and distributed practice was deeply relational. Consistent with the first theme of leadership as place-responsive relationality, leaders invested significant effort in building and maintaining trust with staff, often positioning this work as foundational to school functioning. Relationships enabled leaders to mobilise teacher expertise, support autonomous decision-making and sustain coherence across geographically dispersed contexts. In this sense, relationality operated as both a cultural resource and a coordination mechanism, enabling leadership to span boundaries and sites in the absence of formal oversight. Boundary-spanning work also reached beyond staff to include families and the wider community. Leaders described the need to balance accessibility with clear boundary-setting, particularly where expectations of availability were high.

Mary described a common scenario in which families would bring an issue to her attention, even though she was not on site as the headteacher. She described her approach as twofold: relying on the principal teacher's expertise and communicating her response in this way:

I'm hearing you. I'm listening to your problem. But I cannot see you in [in person] until such and such [a time]. Because here needs me just now. And they've [families] become really accepting of that. That has taken a while. It's a good system.

By combining transparency about her availability with reliance on local staff expertise, she was able to establish a system that, while initially contested, became accepted over time. This highlights how relational leadership in these contexts involves not only responsiveness, but also the active negotiation of expectations and roles.

At a broader level, leadership was enacted through school collaboration. Participants described close-knit clusters in which headteachers engaged in shared professional learning, reciprocal feedback and joint school improvement activity. These locally embedded networks functioned as an important relational infrastructure, compensating for limited access to external support and enabling collective sense-making. School leaders emphasised the need to practise relational leadership with staff and other educational leaders in Tibia to build collective efficacy. Anna described the professional learning community in Tibia among school leaders this way: 'The Tibia cluster is a fairly close cluster. And we get on really well as a cluster. We are doing the self-improving schools pilot together'. She further explained that they arrange for reciprocal feedback to strengthen their school improvement plans, which she believed were essential. Emily, a secondary school headteacher, spoke about building relationships and collective efforts for school improvement through reflection and feedback among her staff. She scheduled regular meetings throughout the year to examine identified school improvement points. 'It's about self-evaluation or self-reflection for self-improvement. And it's building a calendar of activities throughout the year that staff know. At key transition points, we can monitor how we're doing'. Emily believed that revisiting key areas for improvement throughout the year with the whole staff was crucial for buy-in and progress. These descriptions reflect how such networks foster both professional trust and shared accountability. Here, leadership extended beyond the boundaries of individual schools.

Within schools, leadership was frequently distributed, shared and reliant on teachers as leaders. It was common practice for school leaders to share responsibilities across schools, and using teachers' expertise had become an essential component of everyday management and teaching and learning support. Amelia, for example, stated,

We created a leadership team between the two schools. The reason was that my team had a significant disparity between those who were quite experienced and those who were very new. So we decided to do it through the senior leadership team, so we could sort of arbitrate the feedback.

School leaders discussed how part of their role was to encourage and develop teachers' expertise so they could share knowledge and skills with their colleagues. Mary discussed how she had relied on teacher leadership in relation to school nursery education. Because multiple areas across her two schools required pedagogical expertise, she employed a teacher leader to facilitate collaboration to enhance nursery practices.

Andrea is really managing three nurseries. She does all the training. She does the staff meetings. She makes sure that there's this knitting together of practices. So, for example, she'll make sure that somebody from Gaelic, somebody from each of the other schools are doing the same courses so that there's that moderation across the three settings.

Fraser, similarly, described his experiences when new to managing two remote schools on Tibia, explaining why he felt it was necessary to share leadership roles in a less formal manner.

I think you learn quickly that you have to be able to slightly let go and distribute that leadership to our principal teachers, who are essentially deputising in our absence. And that's where the trust in the staff in the school comes when you're not there. And the two contexts for the schools are very, very different... It's like, in a way, what we were learning about shared headship kind of forced you to think about the distribution of your leadership immediately. Because there's not going to be a way that you are present every time in every place simultaneously.

Relational proximity both enabled and complicated leadership, requiring continuous negotiation and ongoing labour across boundaries. Leaders' roles were often multiple, combining teaching and leadership, particularly in smaller schools, which made leadership embedded within daily practice rather than separate from it. This integration reinforced distributed leadership, but also intensified relational demands, as leaders continuously navigated trust, coherence and expectations across different groups. In Tibia, distribution of leadership was inseparable from these relational and visibility dynamics: it was not merely a strategy for capacity-building, but a response to the social and spatial fabric of the community. Trust and staff engagement emerged from sustained visibility and strong relationships, producing a form of distributed leadership that differs from conventional models, being structurally and socially shaped by rural and remote contexts.

Discussion

Towards new understandings of school leadership as relational and place-responsive practice

This study is grounded on a fundamental proposition: leadership in rural and remote contexts is not a diminished or adapted version of urban leadership models, but a qualitatively distinct practice constituted by the material, relational and place-based conditions of rurality. Together, these perspectives provide a coherent framework for examining how leadership is shaped not only by organisational demands, but also by the lived realities of place (Green and Haines, 2015; Gruenewald, 2003; Reid et al., 2010).

The findings extend this proposition by showing that leadership in these contexts is enacted through rich relational networks, high levels of social visibility and ongoing negotiation that span organisational and community boundaries. In this sense, leadership is not simply situated in place; it is produced through people's entanglement with place (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017; Edwards, 2010; Massey, 2005).

In small and remote communities, leaders operate within highly interconnected social environments where professional roles are inseparable from community membership. This visibility enables trust-building and strengthens legitimacy, conditions that are essential for distributing leadership across staff and sustaining collaboration. At the same time, it intensifies accountability and emotional demands, as leaders must continuously navigate competing expectations, mediate tensions and maintain credibility across multiple audiences. Place-responsive leadership, therefore, is not only about building relationships, but also about sustaining them under conditions of constant exposure and interdependence and through the resources which constitute places (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Gergen, 2009; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Furthermore, the study reframes distributed leadership as structurally and relationally induced, rather than strategically designed. Existing models often present distribution as a deliberate organisational choice associated with capacity-building or school improvement. In contrast, the findings show that distribution emerges as a necessary response to the material conditions of rurality, including multi-site

leadership, limited staffing and geographical dispersion. Leaders are required to rely on others not simply to enhance effectiveness, but to make leadership possible in the absence of physical presence. This shifts the conceptualisation of distributed leadership from an organisational arrangement to a condition of practice, shaped by both structural constraints and relational dynamics (Gronn, 2008; Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006). Importantly, systemic mediation, visibility and distribution are not discrete elements of place-responsive leadership but are mutually constitutive through place. Trust enables distribution, but trust itself is produced through sustained engagement with places under conditions of visibility. Similarly, the capacity to distribute leadership depends on the strength of relationships and the legitimacy of leaders within their communities. Leadership, therefore, emerges through dynamic relational configurations that are simultaneously enabling and constraining (Edwards, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

In addition, the findings highlight the boundary-spanning nature of leadership in rural and remote settings. Leaders routinely operate across schools, communities and informal networks, blurring distinctions between organisational and system levels. Inter-school collaboration, for example, functions as a locally generated form of professional support, compensating for limited access to external networks. At the same time, leaders navigate blurred boundaries between professional and personal domains, as their roles extend into the social life of the community. This boundary-spanning work is not peripheral but central to leadership practice, requiring forms of relational and contextual expertise that are often overlooked in dominant frameworks (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011; Chapman et al., 2016; Muijs et al., 2011).

Three dimensions of place-responsive leadership

Building on these findings, this study advances the concept of place-responsive leadership as an alternative to dominant models which are developed from urban and suburban settings. Rather than adapting existing frameworks to context, place-responsive leadership begins from the premise that leadership is fundamentally shaped by the material, social and cultural conditions in which it is enacted (Green, 2015; Gruenewald, 2003; Massey, 2005).

This conceptualisation is characterised by three interrelated dimensions. First, it foregrounds structural contingency, recognising that leadership practices are shaped, and at times constrained, by contextual conditions. In rural and remote settings, factors such as geographical isolation, staffing limitations and multi-site responsibilities compel particular forms of leadership practice, including the necessity of distribution and reliance on local expertise. This extends existing work on leadership and context by emphasising constraint as well as capacity (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017; Hallinger, 2018).

Second, place-responsive leadership emphasises relational embeddedness. Relationships are not merely instrumental or operational but through place, relationships between people and their places are co-emergent and constituted over time. Trust, legitimacy and influence are continuously negotiated through everyday interactions, particularly under conditions of high visibility. This highlights the importance of place-responsive relational labour as a core dimension of leadership, encompassing not only collaboration but also the ethical and emotional work of sustaining relationships over time and in different places (Gergen, 2009; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The third dimension incorporates boundary-spanning practices, acknowledging that leadership frequently traverses organisational, spatial and social boundaries. Leaders operate across multiple sites and communities, coordinating action in contexts where physical presence is uneven, and roles are fluid and multi-dimensional. This requires the ability to navigate complexity, mediate competing demands and sustain coherence across diverse settings (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011; Chapman et al., 2016).

Crucially, place-responsive leadership also recognises the spatiality of practice. Leadership is mediated by distance, mobility and patterns of social interaction that are specific to particular places. The need to lead across distance while remaining socially proximate introduces unique temporal and relational challenges that are largely absent from mainstream models (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010; Massey, 2005).

This alternative conceptualisation of leadership challenges dominant assumptions in the leadership literature, particularly the emphasis on organisational boundedness, role stability and the intentional design of leadership practices. Instead, it positions leadership as emergent, relational and constituted through place, requiring forms of expertise that are often undervalued within urban-centric frameworks (Harris, 2013; Hallinger, 2018; Spillane, 2006).

In this way, place-responsive leadership offers not only a more contextually grounded understanding of leadership in rural and remote settings, but also a broader theoretical contribution. It invites a shift from viewing context as a backdrop for leadership to understanding it as integral to the production of leadership itself. This has important implications for leadership preparation, policy and research, suggesting the need to develop approaches that are more attuned to the relational, spatial and structural complexities of diverse educational settings.

Conclusion and implications for research, policy and practice

For research, the findings contribute to the reconceptualisation of leadership as a place-responsive practice, where place is not merely part of the context but is constitutive of leadership itself. The study also extends distributed leadership theory by demonstrating how leadership distribution in rural and remote settings is often structurally necessitated and becomes a condition of practice rather than solely a strategic choice. In addition, the framework of place-responsive leadership, comprising three interconnected dimensions – structural contingency, relational embeddedness and boundary-spanning practices – provides a conceptual lens for understanding and making visible leadership practices in contexts that have often been overlooked in the literature.

For policy, the study echoes previous research highlighting the limitations of urban-centric leadership frameworks and calls for broader conceptions of leadership effectiveness that recognise relationship-building, community engagement and boundary-spanning work as central dimensions of practice. By demonstrating the importance of inter-school collaboration and system-wide relationships in rural and remote settings, the findings point to the need for leadership policies, preparation programmes and professional learning opportunities that address the distinctive relational, spatial and structural challenges of these contexts.

For practice, the study emphasises the need for context-sensitive approaches to leadership preparation, development and support. The framework of place-responsive leadership provides practitioners and policymakers with a way of understanding leadership as relational, boundary-spanning and deeply embedded within place. It also draws attention to forms of expertise that are particularly important in rural and remote communities, including the capacity to build trust, navigate community relationships and lead across organisational and geographical boundaries. These considerations should inform the preparation and ongoing development of future educational leaders working in rural settings.

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ORCID iDs

Romina Madrid Miranda  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3624-1493>

Leslie Blake-Davis  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1060-0597>

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel prior to the commencement of this research.

Author contributions

RMM: conceptualisation, data collection, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft and writing – review and editing. LB-D: conceptualisation, data collection, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft and writing – review and editing. EACR: conceptualisation, writing – original draft and writing – review and editing. PW: conceptualisation, data collection and writing – review and editing.

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Data availability

The data used in this research are not publicly available.

Note

1. Given the small population size and the close-knit nature of the island community, there is a heightened risk that participants could be identifiable through contextual details. To mitigate this risk and uphold ethical commitments to confidentiality, a pseudonym is used for the island, which is referred to throughout this paper as *Tibia*. Additional care has been taken to limit or generalise potentially identifying information in participant descriptions and quotations.

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Author biographies

Romina Madrid Miranda is a Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership and Programme Director of the MSc in Educational Leadership at the University of Stirling. Her research focuses on system leadership, professional learning, social capital, and education policy, with a sustained empirical focus on Scotland and Latin America, particularly Chile.

Leslie Blake-Davis is an Adjunct Professor at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA). She previously served as Superintendent and Chief Executive Officer of the Central Berkshire Regional School District in Massachusetts. Her research examines how context shapes K-12 educational leadership in rural settings, with a particular focus on principals' influence on instructional quality, policy interpretation, and funding.

Elizabeth AC Rushton is Professor of Education and Associate Dean for Research in the Faculty of Health, Sport and Society at the University of Stirling. Her interdisciplinary research spans education and geography, focusing on teacher professional development, student participation in research and decision-making, climate change and environmental education, and decolonisation and anti-racism in education.

Pauline Walsh is an Education Manager within Children's Services at Renfrewshire Council, Scotland. In this role, she oversees the delivery of educational services and support for children and young people across the local authority, working closely with schools, practitioners, and partner agencies. Her professional interests centre on school improvement, professional learning, and bridging educational research and practice within Scottish education.