

Through the Lens of the Rural Lifeworld: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Rural School Principalship

by

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Abstract

With a total of 97,400 students in British Columbia's public education system attending rural schools in the 2010/11 school year, it is worthwhile to examine the role of school principals in these schools. This study focuses on the opportunities and challenges of the principalship in British Columbia's rural schools.

This study explores the lifeworld of rural school principals through a series of phenomenological interviews. Several themes emerged through this process, including the significant inter-relatedness of the rural school with the community, increasing role-multiplicity, sense of isolation and difficulty accessing sufficient resources, the importance of place and the intensity of the relationships that develop among the principals, colleagues, and community members. The participants in this study spoke of the challenges, joys and opportunities related to these themes.

The findings of this research are very consistent with those of the limited literature available regarding the rural principalship is very consistent with the findings of this research. Despite the wide diversity of rural settings there are consistent themes that suggest possible directions for policy involving connecting rural principals with meaningful professional development opportunities, the development and practice of phronesis (practical wisdom) in balancing the lifeworlds of rural communities with the systemsworld and reconsideration of the funding of rural schools at a government or school board level.

Keywords: Rural, principal, principalship, phenomenology, lifeworld, systemsworld, British Columbia, phenomenological interview, Habermas, Sergiovanni, phronesis, community.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to Mary, Isaac, Jonah, and Naomi. You are all evidence that dreams can come true.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

As I was reflecting on a conversation that I had had with a prospective candidate inquiring about the rural principalship I would soon be vacating, I shared with my wife that I thought this person really “got it”. He understood the unique aspects of leading in a rural school in a small community. Just what is it that he understood? Are there unique characteristics of the role of school principal in rural communities? How do rural school principals regard the nature of their roles in respect to their official functions within the school and school district and their position and roles in the rural community? Does the role of school principal in a rural setting utilize skills and characteristics unique from the set proposed for effective performance for urban or suburban principals? The purpose of this research was to investigate these questions by interviewing and sharing the stories of seven rural principals in British Columbia. In addition, the utility of the lifeworld for this study both as a philosophical framework and methodology is explicated to determine whether the concept of lifeworld can be considered as beneficial for research into the rural principalship.

British Columbia is Canada’s westernmost province covering a vast geographical area of 944,735 square kilometres, an area larger than every U.S. state except Alaska. Bordering the Pacific Ocean, the province ranges from temperate rainforests to ice fields and arid deserts. Despite the significant size and geographical diversity of the province, over 60% of the population resides in the Lower Mainland, an area that includes the City of Vancouver and the region immediately surrounding it. Of the slightly over 4 million residents of British Columbia, 15% live in rural places (BC Statistics, 2011). Rural as defined by STATSCAN refers to areas outside centres of population with fewer than 1000 people and with a population density of less than 400 people per square kilometre. Qualitative aspects and a closer examination of ‘rural’ as used in this research will be explored in Chapter Two.

In the 2010/11 school year, 649,366 students were enrolled in BC schools. A total of 97,400 (or 15%) of these students were registered in a rural school. In 2002, then Minister of Education, The Honourable Christy Clarke, appointed a task force to review the many challenges facing students, educators, and parents in rural British Columbia (Clarke, Imrich, Surgernor, & Wells, 2003). They made a total of 20 recommendations in an effort to ensure students in rural and remote communities across BC have access to quality education as well as addressing the bridge between urban and rural student achievements. The task force's investigation into the challenges of rural education in British Columbia sets the stage for this study.

The task force found that many rural communities in British Columbia were reliant on one sector or one employer, usually resource-based. The effects of a "drop in commodity prices, trade barrier, mine closure or a series of poor salmon runs can be economically devastating for small rural communities" (Clarke et al., 2003, p. 2). As a response to these types of downturns in global economic markets, declines in student enrolment in rural areas of British Columbia have been more severe than the declining enrolment experienced in urban and suburban areas of the province (Clarke et al., 2003). In British Columbia, funds for schools are primarily determined by per-student funding. Hence, declining enrolment results in declining school board budgets. Decline in enrolment is having an impact on both urban and rural districts in British Columbia; however, the enrolment "decline is most severe among the 270 schools located within the smallest communities" (Clarke et al., 2003, p. 3). Between 2002 and 2010, 176 public schools were forced to close with the majority of these schools being in rural and remote districts.

Rural schools in British Columbia are situated in a wide variety of unique contexts. Some are so remote and isolated that they are accessible only by plane or boat. Some schools have less than 10 students spread across many grades. Clarke et al (2003) further described the difficulties associated with declining enrolment in British Columbia, particularly in small multi-grade, multi-age classrooms where it became apparent as the "task force toured the province, school community after school community spoke in defense of the virtues, benefits, and values of rural education" (p. 4). The family atmosphere of these schools was cited as making the environment a

welcoming and safe one. In many communities, the task force heard the rural school described as “the heart of the community” (Clarke et al., 2003, p. 2).

For many rural communities the school is a vital link in the sustainability of the community. Therefore, the school is a key component in the development or maintenance of vibrant rural communities. As leaders in these schools, principals play a visible and important role in the rural community, a role that often goes beyond the walls of the school, a role that this research will examine.

Personal Context

A few years ago I was presented with an opportunity to lead a small K-10 school on Cortes Island, one of the Discovery Islands located on the South Coast of British Columbia. I applied, was successful, and so began my rural journey. As a doctoral student at the time of the appointment, I turned to literature and was surprised to discover that despite the availability of literature related to the school principalship there was very little research that focused specifically on the challenges associated with leading rural schools (Alvy & Coldarci, 1985; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Clarke & Wildly, 2004; Nolan, 1998). It is my hope that this project will add to the limited research in this area as well.

The majority of the writing and research for this project was conducted during the 2 years I was principal of Cortes Island School, a Kindergarten to Grade 10 School with approximately 100 students. Cortes Island is located in the northern reaches of the Salish Sea (formerly called the Georgia Strait) and is part of the Discovery Islands chain. Cortes Island is one of the most beautiful of the Discovery Islands. It lies approximately 20 kilometres off the eastern coast of Vancouver Island, roughly opposite the City of Campbell River, and is approximately 160 air kilometres from the City of Vancouver.

According to census data (Statistics Canada, 2012), Cortes has a population of 1,007 permanent residents. The island of Cortes offers interesting geographical diversity and a varied topography, a diversity that holds true among those who call Cortes Island home. With no formal local government and no Royal Canadian Mounted Police on the island, some residents come for the “more independent and casual lifestyle free from many of the troubling complexities of modern existence. This island

lifestyle attracts an eclectic mix of free spirited individuals” (Cortes Island, 2011). One of the significant employers on Cortes Island is Hollyhock, an internationally renowned center for learning and wellbeing, which offers diverse programming that is often reflective of the music, rest, play, and spiritual interests of many island residents (Hollyhock, 2011). Exploring the Hollyhock website as well as the locally hosted Cortes Island website (www.cortesisland.com) gives a small sampling of the “flavour” of the local Cortes Island community.

It is estimated that during the summer, the population on Cortes Island increases between three and five times that of the winter months. In *Tidal Passages: A History of the Discovery Islands* Jeanette Taylor (2008), noted that islanders who call Cortes home year round require “a deeper commitment to alternative living to stay year round [but] those who do stay gather rich rewards in a place of shared values, where people pitch in and support each other in a dynamic working community loaded with eccentric charm and grace” (p. 146).

Moving from Maple Ridge, a bedroom community of Vancouver and part of the Greater Vancouver Regional District, to the relative remoteness of Cortes Island was a dramatic shift both personally and professionally. As parents of a 3, 5, and 6-year-old at the time of the posting on Cortes Island, my wife and I considered it to be an exciting opportunity to experience rural living, something that we had intended for some time. Along with others, we made the assumption that raising a family in a rural location was a desirable goal (Bonner, 1997).

The dramatic shift we experienced was a result both of what we moved to and what we had moved from. Having started my journey into school-based administration in a large secondary school (1500 students) and, at the time of the Cortes posting, working at a secondary school with a student population of 1000, moving to a K-10 school with a student population of just over 70 was quite a change! Moving from a suburban center close to the city to a rural acreage with a view of the ocean and a dozen chickens also added up to a significant transition as a family and as a school leader.

Our assumptions and views of what constitutes the “rural” had a major influence

on the decision my wife and I made to make the move from British Columbia's densely populated and urban Lower Mainland region to a relatively remote Discovery Islands location. Our move was motivated by a composite of stereotypes about rural schools, rural communities, and rural life styles. While my original ideas of rurality impacted my first impressions of leading in a rural context, I quickly became aware that small does not mean simple and was surprised that many of the issues that face rural youth are the same issues I was dealing with in the metro Vancouver communities of both central Surrey and Maple Ridge. Since it is likely that the reader has images and ideas connected to the term rural and what constitutes rural places, I will dedicate some space in Chapter Two to uncover some stereotypes of rural and to clarify how the term will be used in this study.

Overview

There are four questions that the data from this study are intended to inform. The primary research question: what are the challenges and opportunities related to the role of school principal in rural communities, as well as three sub-questions: 1) Are there unique characteristics of the role of school principal in rural communities? 2) How do rural school principals regard the nature of their roles in their official functions within the school and school district and their position and roles in the rural community? 3) Is the philosophical and methodological framework of the lifeworld constructive for research into the rural principalship? In order to answer these questions, in depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with seven rural school principals. The methodology is explored in Chapter Three: the results of the interviews themselves are presented in Chapters Four through Nine. The final chapter presents suggestions, limitations, and recommendations for future studies. For the purposes of this study Chapter Two provides a definition of rural and situates the existing research about the rural principalship against a very broad and concise summary of the extensive literature about the role of principals in general.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

The literature pertaining to the role of school principals is extensive. In order to contain the scope of this literature, reviewing it is limited to the research specific to the rural principalship. In order to situate the context of rural, four propositions of understanding are articulated as well as a general discussion of the research relevant to rural life and communities as it relates to the role of the rural principal.

The construct of lifeworld as a framework for the investigation and understanding of the role of the rural principal is briefly explored.

What is Rural?

The idea of rurality is entrenched in popular discourses about space, place, and society in the Western world (Cloke, 2006). According to Cloke (2006), the rural represents both an imaginary space that has all kinds of inherent cultural meanings that range from idyllic to oppressive as well as being viewed as a material object of lifestyle desire. Considering the significance of both the material and imaginary meanings of rurality, rural education research often lacks an adequate understanding of how the idea of rurality should be defined and made relevant (Howley, 2005). Ben Anderson (pseudonym), one of the rural school principals who participated in this study, felt that one of the challenges of leading in a rural school was related to how people viewed the “rural”. In particular, he observes there have been significant changes in the,

Rural school climate over the last couple of decades. Just as we recognize some schools in communities in urban centers have changed, we need to recognize that the same is true with some rural areas. Often, because rural schools are rural, we don't pay as much attention to them. I think that sort of idyllic sense that we are all, that everyone living in the country is happy and well-fed, grass-fed, and milk-fed and everything is fine. I think the message has to be dispelled and folk have to be really aware that the challenges in those rural schools are really significant.

Abram (2003) described the act of viewing the rural landscape as more complicated than it might initially seem. She developed the idea that “looking is the active organization of what we see, and what we see is socially organized, structured through our internal interpretation of the visual stimulus” (p. 31). This idea of a systemic way of seeing was conceptualized by Foucault (1976), who was primarily concerned with a medical gaze and used mental illness to demonstrate that until the 18th century mental illness was not understood in and through a medical orientation but rather it was seen through a spiritual lens. People with mental illness were perceived as possessed.

Woods (2011) described Urry’s work, which drew upon Foucault to propose the notion of the tourist gaze. Urry’s description of the tourist gaze proposed that what a tourist sees is largely a product of their social conditioning. Woods contends that Urry’s claim was that our idea of what is scenic and what is not and what we judge about authenticity and naturalness are all “shaped by social and cultural norms and influences, by our education, by the prompting of guidebooks and brochures, and by the images that we have consumed through film, television, art ... and other media” (Woods, 2011, p. 103). Particularly compelling in Urry’s concept of the tourist gaze is the fact that the tourist gaze informs our selective viewing of landscape, meaning that we often do not see the people who live and work in the landscape, or the poverty that lies behind the door of a picturesque but run-down cottage (Woods, 2011).

Abram (2003) expanded on the concept of Foucault’s gaze as a way of exploring how people see rural places. Abram observed that the tourist gaze and the rural gaze converge to frame a nostalgic view of rural places. Abram (2003) noted that the “tourist gaze upon the rural landscape is one and the same as the rural gaze which aestheticizes the land uses in a nostalgic way in an attempt to distance [the land] from contemporary capital and globalizing processes” (p. 35). The rural gaze, however, goes beyond the tourist gaze as it is formed by “deeper cultural experiences and collective knowledge” (Woods, 2011, p. 108).

This concept of the rural gaze, though not fully developed here, is helpful to the reader’s understanding of both my professional and personal reasons for applying to a rural principalship and moving with my family to a rural place. So often our collective gaze of the rural is a romanticized view, often referred to as the rural idyll. Cloke and

Little (1997) noted that

Idyll-ised landscapes and places are favored for study at the expense of less glamorous subjects and things which are woven within landscape tapestries. 'Ordinary' other places can become shadowed out by the privileging of special landscapes, with the result that the 'messiness' of rural space is sometimes lost. (p. 11)

Recognizing that even though I will provide a set of propositions to determine how rural is used in this study; understanding of the term is largely a result of a collective rural gaze that is subjective in nature.

Further Investigation of the Term Rural

Rural schools and rural communities represent a wide range of unique community aspects and identifiers; in short, usage of the word "rural" can represent a great range of meanings as found among different communities. Because "rural schools and communities are quite diverse, rural education researchers acknowledge it is difficult to establish a universal set of characteristics to describe or define rural schools and communities" (Budge, 2006, p. 23). The multiplicity of potential interpretations creates an inherent difficulty in discussing the rural principalship due to the considerable ambiguity in the meaning of the word rural. Despite the call by some for a consistent definition of rural (Helge, 1992), there are significant differences found in the usage of the term. Literature illustrates that usage of the term rural is complex and multifaceted (Barter, 2008). Farmer (1997) observed,

there is no singular or multifaceted definition that will suffice to satisfy the research, programmatic and policy communities that employ the concept ... the diversity of purposes for which the measures have been and will be used will likely assure that no universally applicable definition or measurement will be developed. (p. 623, 625)

It is also clear that "despite the difficulties in establishing some degree of universal meaning, definition, in each context, matters and needs to be taken into consideration when trying to understand how or why rural is the way it is" (Barter, 2008, p. 470).

The difficulty in defining rural has led to a wide variety of approaches in dealing with this term. Some rural education researchers have simply ignored the multifaceted aspect of rural and have carried on their studies with no attempt or recognition of the

various interpretations or meanings. Others have employed a simple quantitative observation of rural. Both of these options are problematic, warranting further discussion of the term.

Coldarci (2007) described the rural problem not as a result of the absence of consensus regarding what the term rural means, but rather “the problem ... is that rural education researchers, in their reports and publications, typically fail to describe the context of their research in sufficient detail” (p. 2). To give the reader insight into the context of rural, it is worth considering how Williams (1973) attempted to describe rural;

Thus at once, for me, before the argument starts, country life has many meanings. It is the elms, the hay, the white horse in the field beyond the window where I am writing. It is the men in the November evening, walking back from pruning, with their hands in their khaki coats: and the women in headscarves outside their cottages, waiting for the blue bus that will take them home, inside school hours, to work the harvest. It is the tractor on the road, leaving its tracks of serrated pressed mud: the light in the small hours ... it is also the sour land, on the thick boulder clay, not far up the road, that is selling for housing ... In the field with the elms and the white horse, behind my own present home, there are faint marks of a ninth-century road, that resists the posts being driven today, for a new wire fence. This country life then has many meanings: in feeling and activity: in region and in time. The cobbles under the field are older than the university to which the bridle track leads, five miles under thin, worn hedges across the open and windy fields, past Starvegoose Wood. The foot of earth over them is a millennium. (p. 3-4)

Many definitions of rural take into account easily quantifiable considerations and allow for formal classification structures such as “population size, population density, proximity to an urbanized area, type of economic activity, income and educational-attainment levels, commuting patterns, and the many other empirically ascertainable factors” (Coldarci, 2007, p. 2). The definition of rural used by Statistics Canada’s *Census of Population* has changed over time (du Plessis et al., 2002). Currently the definition of rural, as provided by *Statistics Canada*, includes populations outside settlements with a population of 1,000 or more and a population density of 400 or less inhabitants per square kilometre. While all principals interviewed in this study meet this definition it is insufficient to conceptualize and encapsulate what I considers to be significant in the intent of the use of the term rural and ruralness.

In working towards an understanding of rural as used in this paper, it is important

to recognize that the rural in rural is not most significantly the boundary around it, but the meanings that are inherent in rural lives, wherever lived (Howley et al., 2005). Howley, Larson, Andrianavio, Rhodes, and Howley (2007) argued that the holy grail of research in rural education lies in what Alfred Schutz referred to as “the lifeworld” (Shutz & Luckmann, 1973). It is in the recognition of what Charles Taylor (1991) referred to as the affirmation of ordinary life that rural education research begins to make sense of issues.

The idea of a completely bound unique rural culture is problematic. Television and the Internet ensure that “urban norms stretch well beyond conventional urban boundaries because ‘urban’ often defines the framework and agenda of the economic, educational, social, and political systems” (Troughton, 1999, p. 22). Because of the porosity of the boundary between the rural and the urban it has been proposed by some that a better description of small communities might be to use the term rurban rather than simply rural (Bonner, 1997). Clearly, conceptualizing rural is problematic but Bell (1992) made it clear that rural residents’ belief that they are distinct has a significant influence on their lives in terms of their sense of identity, social status, and entitlement. In order for rural to be meaningful, it is necessary to explore the individuals’ lived experiences (Bonner, 1997). The rural lifeworld, therefore, becomes an important consideration in exploring the role of the rural principal.

As a researcher situated in rural life, I understand this rural lifeworld both as motive and meaning for this work. While living in a rural context is helpful, it is difficult to bring rural meanings into a formal academic context. Is it possible to define rural life as not needing to lock the doors to your car except at the farmers market and only then so as not to be gifted with too many zucchinis? With the advancement of the social, political, and media of urban centers, the systemsworld often trivializes and obscures the meaningfulness of the rural lifeworld. Schutz and Luckmann (1973) have observed that a wide gulf separates the lifeworld and the usual forms of academic engagement. Further consideration of the implication of the lifeworld construct is discussed later in this chapter.

Rural education of most worth takes context as the principal defining condition (Howley et al, 2005). In fact, Howley et al (2005), asserts that, “we might as well *not*

have rural education research, nor rural education for that matter, that fails to center itself on rural cultures and ways of engaging life” (p. 22). In fact, a claim could be made that any form of curriculum or schooling that dis-authenticates or ignores the lives of those the curriculum is intended to engage, is not legitimate. In fact, schooling is often seen as a form of fix for the lives and experiences of at least some students and communities. For rural school principals, this is an important consideration as the schooling agenda is often driven from a system perspective that may be incongruent with rural lifeworlds.

Propositions

The preceding discussion articulates the multiple meanings and complexity in dealing with the term rural, however, it is helpful to clarify how rural is used in this dissertation by offering a set of propositions. The first proposition is a straightforward definition of rural, as defined by STATSCAN. The second proposition explores a list of commitments that begin to bring to light the interrelated aspects of the rural community with the school. The third proposition briefly explores and rejects a deficit description of the term rural. Lastly, the fourth proposition strongly links the school to the community. The purpose of these propositions is to clarify for the reader the filter through which this study has been conducted.

Proposition One: Statistics Canada defines rural as settlements that do not exceed 1000 people and municipalities with fewer than 400 people per square kilometre. All the principals interviewed in this study held positions in communities that met this quantitative description of rural.

Proposition Two: The term rural has often been used as a description of without or away from. For example, defining a school as rural is sometimes determined based on the distance away from the central school district office. A town can be considered as rural because of its distance from a larger urban center. Rather than use a deficit description for the purpose of this study, rural describes some of the consistent challenges and strengths found in rural places. Relying solely on quantitative measures, it is relatively easy to define rural. However, for the purposes of this study, I have accepted Howley’s (1997) proposal to describe rural as a list of commitments that help

to capture the issues of the local rural circumstance, as follows:

- the relationship between school and community;
- curriculum that is connected to the physical setting and that cultivates appropriate local meanings, knowledge, and commitments;
- small-scale organization in rural schooling and community;
- community engagement in rural schools; and,
- rural community and educational stewardship. (p.

Proposition Three: In the public discourse, rural is often associated with disadvantage (Williams, 2005). Theobald and Wood (2010) shared a story about a group of administrators, teachers, and students who had gathered for a day of conversation about rural education in a pastoral setting in western New York. At the end of the day, an adolescent serving as a spokesperson for the students shared the view that as rural youth they were “well aware that we don’t have the best schools, we don’t get the best teachers, or the best education. We know we’re going to have to catch up when we go to college” (p. 17). Despite the fact that the students’ opinions should have been, at the very least, mildly insulting to the educators present, based on the response in the room it seemed as if the “adults themselves found this sentiment accurate” (p. 17). Somewhere along the way rural students, rural parents, and rural educators have accepted that living in “a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds—an educational deficiency in particular” (Theobald and Wood, 2010, p. 17). Monk and Haller (1986) found that rural staff and students generally limit their educational aspirations more than those in urban areas.

I have heard this view and am aware that the assumption of deficiency is present in many discussions of rural places and rural education in particular. Often this assumption of deficiency is made apparent through the use of humor and through the portrayal of rural people in the media as unsophisticated, backward, hicks, and country bumpkins. At no time in this project is the term rural used with a deficit assumption.

Proposition Four: The school is at the heart of rural communities. The rural school fosters “a stable pattern in the social life that binds individuals together. It is what makes a community something more than an aggregate of people” (Miller, 1993, p. 92).

The school has “strong community connections in rural areas and is the most important step in establishing a ‘sense of place’ for rural students and in maintaining the success and survival of rural schools” (Khattri et al., 1997, p. 92).

Situating Rural Principalship Research

Despite the extensive background of research pertaining to the role of principal, there is limited research that has focused on the rural principalship. This is a significant omission in light of the many principalships that are considered rural (Alvy & Coldarci, 1985; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Clarke and Wildly, 2004; Nolan, 1998).

Although many rural school leaders are eager for information about research-based interventions and strategies that enhance student success in rural communities, finding such information is difficult because of a lack of high quality research conducted in rural settings (Arnold et al. 2005). A comprehensive review of all journal articles published between 1991 and the summer of 2003 on the condition of research on rural education by Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning (a private non-profit, non-partisan group of researchers and education consultants) found only 20 articles related to educational leadership in a rural context. Further, these 20 articles were not limited to the principalship in that one of the studies examined changes in teacher leadership roles while another examined school board minutes to better understand the leadership roles of the local boards of education. Clearly, research pertaining to the leadership role of principals appears to be limited. This finding would suggest the need for research that examines the leadership role of the principal in rural context.

The Rural Public School Review completed by Arnold, Gaddy and Dean (2004) described a lack of information about the professional development needs of rural public school administrators. Arnold et al, (2004) called for studies that seek to discover what knowledge and skills are most needed by rural administrators. This dissertation presents the results of an investigation into the challenges and opportunities for rural principals. It is hoped to add to the limited research in this field.

The Rural Principalship

As a rural school principal, I chuckled when I read an article in the British

Columbia Principal and Vice-Principal Association's magazine, *Adminfo*. In the article the author, Simon Blakesley (2009), described a field trip he attended after having recently arrived in a northern British Columbia community. The principal asked him to bring along his rifle to protect students against any four-legged competition while they picked blueberries. In the same article, Blakesley shared that

the relative absence of research grounded in [rural] settings limits the current knowledge base of educational leadership from including rural, northern, and cultural perspectives ... [which] hinders us from understanding not only 'what' rural and northern school administrators do but, as important, the 'how' and the 'why' they do what they do to make schools special places for their children, parents, and communities. (Blakesley, 2009, p. 14)

Rural schools are not simply smaller representations of their larger city counterparts. Rather, the context of rural has "its own set of community identifiers that make rural schools dramatically different from their metropolitan counterparts ... [and the] goals and purposes of schooling and educational renewal processes appropriate for urban and suburban schools may be inappropriate for rural schools" (Bauch, 2001, p. 204). For many years, educational research has supported a view that quality school leadership is essential for rural school success (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty 2005).

School leadership is second only to classroom instruction in influencing student achievement (Winn, Erwin, Gentry & Cauble, 2009). In addition to school success, the concept of the rural school as the heart of the community is intertwined with the fabric of sustaining the rural community as a whole: in effect, rural school principals are both educational and community leaders.

Principals of small rural schools are likely to spend a much larger percentage of their time teaching cross-age, multi-grade groups of students (Starr & White, 2008). The time and energy in preparing for and fulfilling teaching obligations can have a detrimental impact on the administrative responsibilities that enable the school to run smoothly. The demands of administration on rural principals who also spend substantial time in the classroom results in the so-called double load, a term used to describe the tension that arises between the professional concerns of teaching and the demands of management and leadership (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Many times the support staff is part-time so it is not uncommon to have a rural school principal answering the phone, teaching, dealing

with maintenance issues, and working on a district initiative in the same afternoon. School administrators everywhere feel pulled in many directions but the differentiation of roles in a rural school along with the isolation can have a significant influence on the lifeworld of the rural administrator as explored further in Chapter 6.

According to data collected by the American National Center for Education Statistics at three-year intervals in 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94, “rural principals tend to be younger less experienced, have fewer years of professional training, and are paid less than their non-rural counterparts. There is also some evidence of greater desire for job change, which may account for higher turnover” (Buckingham, 2001, p. 27).

While principals of rural schools face a myriad of challenges, Starr and White (2008) have identified a number of the most commonly raised concerns amongst rural administrators. These themes can be summarized as: “work proliferation, educational equity issues, the re-defined principalship, escalating role multiplicity, and school survival” (p. 3). These challenges are exerting a significant influence on the lived experience of rural school principals.

Rural principals are generally paid less and are asked to assume a greater number of responsibilities and often face greater scrutiny than their urban and suburban counterparts (Arnold, Gaddy, & Dean, 2004). Recruiting and retaining quality principals is a challenge for rural schools (Winn, Erwin, Gentry, & Cauble, 2009). As an example, Becky Rowe (pseudonym), a participant in this study, is the fourth administrator in a span of two years at her current rural school. With the stability of administration being linked to student achievement retaining quality principals is an important area of consideration (Partlow & Ridenor, 2008).

In making a comparison between rural and urban areas, Natchitgal (1982) contended, “In urban areas, true communities are more vaguely defined, if at all. School governing structures and communities tend not to coincide. Tight social linkages are missing and, thus, the latitude for schools to function apart from the community is greater” (p. 272). Natchitgal implied that the relationship of the rural school to the rural community is a strong one. Bauch (2001), observing this close connection, stated that the rural “school-community partnership model requires a different kind of school

leadership, a type of leadership that will let go of traditional behavioral models and embrace those that are relational and can build on the school community's own sense of place" (p. 205). Research suggests the principal of the rural school plays a vital role in ensuring the sustainability of the school-community linkage (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, & Mulford, 2003).

Through the phenomenological lens, educational leadership is viewed as a "unified experience, a state of being, which can be known by direct awareness, intuition, reflection, imagination, valuing, guiding, hoping, and intending" (Mitchell, 1990, p. 19). Focusing on this state of being should happen by examining how leaders interact with others in a specific context (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). Many accounts of educational leadership fail to take into account the context in which the leadership is conducted. This absence of context can "overlook the rural school [and] lead to the erroneous assumption that all school leaders behave in the same manner regarding the operation of their schools" (Chance & Lingren, 1988, p. 23). Howley, Chadwick, and Howley (2002) argued that school administrators in rural communities need to learn how to be data-based managers, instructional leaders, and change agents.

While research indicates that most administrative preparatory programs do not address any of the unique aspects of the rural principalship, rural schools are where many administrators take on the role of the principalship for the first time (Hurley, 1992). High turnover rates in many rural schools make it more likely for rural school administrators to be new to their jobs (Howley et al., 2002). In many rural schools, principals work in isolation without other administrative help, which led Jacobsen and Woodworth (1990) to state that the problem in many rural schools is not poor administration, but rather under-administration. New administrators working in isolation and often with little administrative experience may overly rely on policy when problems arise, policy that often does not reflect the unique context of rural communities.

Having been a school administrator for a relatively short time, I have come to an early understanding that one of the key characteristics of effective educational leadership is the capacity to make appropriate judgments. Making appropriate judgements is an essential aspect of effective leading in any context, it is particularly imperative in a rural school. Thus, the appropriate judgment may be informed by a very

unique community context, a context that is far removed from district office. In order to exercise appropriate judgment it “requires perceptiveness in one’s reading of a particular situation as much as flexibility in one’s mode of ‘possessing’ and ‘applying’ the general knowledge” (Dunne, 1999, p. 710).

Arendt (1998) warned “society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (p. 40). Benhabib (2002) reminded us that ideologies that deny a plurality of perspectives are repressive in that they foster conformity and homogenization, where everyone is treated the same. Today, the complexity of student behavior, the homes and communities from which students come, and the impact of their actions on their peers need the response of caring individuals who have developed the capacity to act wisely and to exercise judgment appropriately. School leaders in rural settings often have to work within policy frameworks that have been designed for use in urban centres and therefore need to develop and exercise sound judgment in order to take into account the policy mandate along with the unique context of local circumstance.

One of the exciting reasons for enhancing one’s understanding of leadership in rural schools is the positive impact that a principal can have on both the school and community. Clarke & Wildy (2004) suggested that “principals of small schools are...important to the day-to-day running of their schools ... because of the more intimate way the small school community relates to its leaders” (p. 556). Southworth (2004) argued that the principals of small primary schools tend to have a direct and powerful influence on the quality of teaching and have more significant opportunities than their larger school counterparts to bring about change and improvement.

Rural School and Community

The notion of community has long been synonymous with rural life (Woods, 2011). In rural places it is somewhat simpler to recognize the interdependence of children, their families, schools, and communities. As rural sociologists have sought to distil the essence of rural society, attempting to describe it as distinct from urban society, they have repeatedly returned to theorizations that linked rurality to various forms of

social interaction based on a stable and structured community (Woods, 2011). This work is strongly influenced by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and his description of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* as two alternative forms of social organization. Rural sociologists have utilized this typology to better understand the different experiences one has in a rural versus urban environments (Falk, 2000).

Gemeinschaft is a primary group held together by intimate ties that regulates itself through the force of tradition and opinion (Bell, 1973). It refers to a community that is based on mutual bonds, a feeling of togetherness, and collective goals (Woods, 2011). The three levels of *gemeinschaft* are kinship, neighborhood, and friendship corresponding to the essential will. The outward forms of *gemeinschaft* include, for example, house, village, and country town (Falk, 2000). Its general concept is “the people, united by internal bonds of language, custom, beliefs, as well as the (in principal, universal) bond of religious community” (Falk, 2000, p. 48).

Gesellschaft is the large impersonal “society of secondary associations regulated by bureaucratic rules tied together by the sanctions of dismissal” (Bell, 1973, p. 383). It is described as being based on individualism, as a society supporting action that benefits individual objectives (Tönnies, 1963). It is manifested and associated with external bonds where people associate for trade and personal benefit and is closely associated with cities and urban centers (Falk, 2000). *Gesellschaft* is where we find aspiration, calculation, and consciousness. *Gesellschaft* is often identified with urban structures and ways of being which has led to the association of *gemeinschaft* with more traditional rural structures (Mellow, 2005; Woods, 2011). Tönnies (1957) described the differences between the two relations:

All intimate and familiar living together is understood as: Life in community (*gemeinschaft*). Society (*gesellschaft*) is public life, is the world itself. When in community with one’s own, one finds oneself from birth connected through good and bad fortune; one goes into society as a foreign country. The youth is warned against “bad company” (*gesellschaft*), the expression “bad community”, however, rings false. (p. 3-4)

Gemeinschaft and *gesellschaft* are often presented as a dichotomy. Tönnies did not believe these ideal types existed as pure forms of people’s lived experiences; rather he saw them as interwoven. Tönnies (1957) stated

It is not to understand these bases belong fundamentally and persistently either to the one or the other category, that is, of natural will or rational will. On the contrary, a dynamic condition or process is assumed which corresponds to the changeable elements of human feeling and thinking. The motives fluctuate so that they are now of one category, then of the other...*Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are found interwoven in all kinds of associations. (p. 249)

As cited in Falk (2000), Tönnies indicated that all social bonds are shaped by both types of will and are “thus analogous to chemical elements that can be combined in different proportions” (p. 49).

Sergiovanni (1994), examining the impact of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* on schools, recognized that schools possess characteristics of both. Too much *gemeinschaft* and progress is blocked; too much *gesellschaft* and there is a profound loss of community. The proper balance is essential to the role of leading in a rural school. Peter Drucker (1999) stated,

Society, community and family are all conserving institutions. They try to maintain stability and to prevent, or at least to slow, change. But the modern organization is a destabilizer ... it must be organized for the systematic abandonment of whatever is established; customary, familiar, and comfortable ... In short, it must be organized for constant change (p. 96).

A small rural community, Castells (2004) claimed, emerges from resistance to organized large-scale attempts by both bureaucracies (*gesellschaft*) and organized capitalism to form identities and to control life. Looking at small rural schools, in light of this tension, “should help to explain why they are often such contested and ambiguous spaces” (Corbett, 2007, p. 63).

Many rural communities refer to their neighborhood schools as the heart of their community. The impact of the interactions of the rural school, on its community and its students, is largely dependent on the educational leadership at the school.

Lifeworld and School Leadership

Sergiovanni (2000) has made a case that Habermas provides the theoretical framework and language system for understanding the requirements of school-based administrators for both management and authentic leadership. Sergiovanni demonstrated that “leaders and their purposes, followers and their needs, and the

unique traditions, rituals and norms that define a school culture compose the lifeworld” (p. ix). Many definitions of school culture demonstrate a significant similarity to Habermas’ description of the lifeworld. School culture has been defined as the “deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of the school’s history” (Deal & Peterson, 1990, p. 3). Polischuk, (2002) described school culture simply, as: “The way we do things around here” (p. 1). Unlike definitions of school culture, however, is the understanding that the lifeworld has its basis in communicative action, which is not addressed by Sergiovanni and is critical to understanding its importance.

It is my intent to provide the reader with a simplified understanding of what Habermas introduced us to in the use of the terms “systemworld” and “lifeworld” and how this framework situates this study. In order to do so, it is necessary to provide the context of Habermas’ lifeworld within the context of his theory of communicative action. I found Eriksen and Weigård’s (2003) *Understanding Habermas* to be particularly useful.

Habermas can be situated in critical theory. The concept of critical theory has ideological roots in the so-called Frankfurt School, which is rooted in the Marxist tradition. The Frankfurt School “was inclined to claim that there is no neutral description of social phenomena, that social theories will either be critical or obscure suppressive conditions” (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003, p. 5). Critical theory “aims to dig beneath the surface of social life and uncover the assumptions and masks that keep us from a full and true understanding of how the world works” (Johnson, 2000, p. 67). Critical theory isn’t interested in simply explaining how society operates; rather the purpose is “to uncover the unseen or misrecognized ways in which society operates to oppress certain groups while maintaining the rights of others” (Allan, 2011, p. 364).

Habermas (1989) developed the theory of communicative action by engaging with Karl Marx, George Mead, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Talcott Parsons. He appropriated the parts that he believes “still have something to say to us” (Habermas, 1989, p. xlii). Communicative action aims to integrate central insights from a series of sociological and philosophical schools in order to create a general social theory. In this undertaking, Habermas developed communicative action “to explain or provide an understanding of a wide spectrum of social conditions, which means that it is of very

general character. At the same time it aspires to provide a profound understanding of these relations, among other things, by putting the different phenomena into a larger context” (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003, p. 10). Recognizing that communicative action is a significant sociological and philosophical framework, I will focus only on the key components as they relate to understanding the lifeworld and systemworld.

Every speech act aimed at mutual understanding contains three validity claims, although one is usually dominant in a particular act of speech (Habermas, 1984). The three claims of speech found in speech act theory, where Habermas’ theory of communicative action is based, are implicit in speech acts. These three claims are:

- a) that the statement is *true*
- b) that the speech act is *right* in relation to the current normative context, and
- c) that the speaker’s manifest intention is *meant* as it is expressed

(Habermas as cited in Eriksen & Weigård, 2003)

Each of these claims links to different worlds: truth, or the external or objective world; rightness, or the intersubjective social world; and, truthfulness, or the internal subjective world (Thomassen, 2010). In order to differentiate the different speech acts, Habermas utilized Austin’s categorization or descriptions of speech as locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts. Locutionary action lies in the fact that something is said, a simple expression of the state of affairs. An illocutionary action is an action that is carried out by expressing the particular words such as a promise or a warning. Lastly, a perlocutionary action is the action that is taken through, or by, making an utterance, such as an insult or when we say please. The perlocutionary aspect of speech is, therefore, the effect that it has on the hearer and how it impacts the condition of the external world (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003). Distinguishing between these types of language is important because this distinction corresponds to “Habermas’ distinction between a communicative, understanding-oriented, and a teleological, success-oriented use of language” (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003, p. 39). It is likely that speech acts in rural communities are less oriented toward success, or perhaps success is defined differently than their urban counterparts.

Further, distinguishing these speech acts is important because “language and action take place against a shared and implicit background which Habermas calls the lifeworld” (Thomassen, 2010, p. 66). In fact, anyone “acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated” (Habermas, as cited in Eriksen & Weigård, 2003). This vindication occurs in the commonly held beliefs, culture, and understanding of the individuals involved in the speech act. In other words, the speech act can only be validated by the lifeworld. Habermas (1984) described this validation:

We understand speech acts when we know what makes it acceptable.
From the standpoint of the speaker, the conditions of the acceptability are identical to the conditions for his illocutionary success. Acceptability is not defined here in an objectivistic sense, from the perspective of an observer but in the performative attitude of a participant in communication. (p. 297, emphasis in original)

Habermas has developed the theory of communicative action as an expression of hope for social progress and equality (Allan, 2011). Describing the rationalization of modernity, a modernity of efficiency, Habermas developed communication as the “hope”, or the paradox of modernity and rationality, communication based on validity claims that inherently rely on reason and reflection. Habermas demonstrated that communication has the power to enable the reaching of consensus and rationally guide our collective lives (Allan, 2011). In order for communication to be the answer to the rationalization effect of modernity, indeed to the malaise of modernity, there must be a strong lifeworld as represented by Habermas’ concept of the civil society, a civil society that prevents the colonization of the lifeworld.

Outside of this idea of consensus and an attitude of mutual understanding are success-oriented behaviours. These behaviours are represented in multiple locales within modern society such as the market economy or Habermas’ welfare state. It is within these areas that “we do not have to justify our actions through good reasons” (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003, p. 86). It is within these *systems* that behavior can largely be autonomous, rather than communicative action, which relies on consensus and mutual understanding. It is the theory of communicative action that led Habermas (1984) to conclude

that society will inevitably disintegrate if we do not make room for actions oriented to reaching *understanding*...therefore we must, alongside the system areas, operate with a lifeworld which is communicatively integrated, and which also establishes the necessary symbolic foundation upon which the system is built. (p. 86)

The lifeworld consists of three different structural components: culture, society, and personality. This corresponds to cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization. The complementary function of communicative action with the lifeworld is best left to Habermas (1987) who wrote:

Under the functional aspect of *mutual understanding*, communicative action serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge; under the aspect of *coordinating action*, it serves social integration and the establishment of solidarity; finally, under the aspect of *socialization*, communicative action serves the formation of personal identities ... Corresponding to these processes of *cultural reproduction*, *social integration*, and *socialization* are the structural components of the lifeworld: culture, society, and person. (p. 137, emphasis in original)

The lifeworld is in opposition to the subsystems of economy and power. It is “the reservoir of taken-for-granted and shared knowledge that we as members of society all have a part of, and which ensures that we see things in more or less the same way” (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003, p. 47). It is a “store-house of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed upon patterns of interpretations for use in interpretive efforts” (Habermas, 1990, p. 135). Further, the “lifeworld is the intuitively present, in this sense familiar and transparent, and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, i.e., valid or invalid” (Habermas, 1987, p. 131).

Understanding Habermas’ lifeworld is particularly meaningful in investigating the role of the rural school principal. Part of this meaning comes through Habermas’ thesis of the colonization of the lifeworld. Habermas sees the tendency in modern society for the lifeworld to become increasingly colonized by the state and the economy (money and power). Colonization occurs when the “systematic imperatives drive out communicative action and reason from lifeworld domains” (Thomassen, 2010, p. 76).

Colonization of the lifeworld can take various forms and have different effects that are linked to communicative action.

Colonization can first lead to a loss of meaning; that is, a breakdown in the cultural reproduction of the lifeworld. Second, it can lead to anomie; that is, breakdown of social norms and, hence, the social integration of society. And, finally, colonization can lead to psychopathologies in the context of the socialization of individuals and their personality. (Thomassen, 2010, p. 76)

The system colonizes the lifeworld “by the functional imperatives of the state and economy, characterized by the cult of efficiency and the inappropriate development of technology” (Fleming, 2010, p. 305). The lifeworld construct also has implications for rural schooling but more importantly for the rural school principal. Corbett (2007) asserted that “rather than support place-based ways of knowing and established social, economic, and cultural networks in rural and coastal communities, the school has typically stood in opposition to local lifeworlds” (p. 10).

Sergiovanni (2000) described Habermas’ system as the systemworld, which he believed is composed of “the management designs and protocols, strategic and tactical actions, policies and procedures, and efficiency and accountability assurances” (p. ix). According to Sergiovanni, schools are described as flourishing when the lifeworld is the generative force for determining the systemworld and eroding when the systemworld is the generative force for the lifeworld. When the systemworld in schools, for example provincially mandated standardized assessments, start to determine the values and beliefs of the individuals in schools than the lifeworld is being colonized.

In examining the role of the state in preserving the social practices and institutions that best meet the requirements for the appropriate development of the human person, Benhabib (2002) addressed the underlying assumption that is made. Without additional normative assumptions, the

Individual can be seen to have a ‘right’ - that is, a morally justifiable claim of some sort - to the recognition by others of structures of interlocution within which he or she articulates her identity, only if it is also accepted that each individual is equally worthy of equal treatment and respect. (p. 56)

If this moral premise is missing in schools, it follows that “the aspiration on the part of the self toward self-realization and the pursuit of authenticity cannot generate reciprocal moral claims upon others to respect such aspirations” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 57).

The distinction between system and lifeworld and the tension and reliance of the one on the other is an important consideration in school-based leadership (Sergiovanni, 2000). I argue that this is highly applicable in rural schools. Often ministry or even district-driven school improvement initiatives or policy objectives do not take into consideration the unique attributes and characteristics of rural schools. District policy can often act as an alienating force in certain rural contexts. Enforcing, or upholding district policy can put a rural school leader in a situation that is problematic and needs to be skilfully navigated to maintain the District's standards while at the same time keeping the trust of the community. In some British Columbia communities, such as Cortes Island, the local public school is the most formal representation of the government (system) and is often viewed as a deep bastion of bureaucracy. Local residents, although supportive of the children in the community, view the school with varying degrees of suspicion and distrust.

A school community needs to be sustainable, viable, and meaningful. It must take into consideration the local lifeworld and relate this lifeworld phronetically with the system. For rural schools, the legitimacy of the system depends on the lifeworld. The legitimizing of the system occurs in one direction only. It is the lifeworld that legitimizes the systemworld, not the system legitimizing the lifeworld. When the systemworld imposes on the lifeworld, it can put the lifeworld in state of crisis.

Linking this idea of the lifeworld and the systemworld in rural schools another possibility emerges. Observations Habermas (1989) makes regarding the increasing acceptance of the transformation of the citizen into a client of the state apply equally well to the increased tendency to consider educational issues and schools through a mindset as consumer. Schools are increasingly viewed as service providers, not as sources of shared identity. When this happens, the systemworld becomes parasitic of the lifeworld. As in all parasitic relationships, the concern is that the systemworld has the potential to completely destroy the host, or as Habermas (1989) refers to it, the systemworld colonizes the lifeworld.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

*To look at any thing
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say
"I have seen spring in these
Woods", will not do—you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
The leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very place
They issue from
-John Moffitt (cited in Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 395)*

The Lifeworld and Phenomenological Methodology

*Three passions have governed my life:
The longings for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for suffering*

*Love brings ecstasy and relieves loneliness
In the union of love I have seen
In a mystic miniature the prefiguring of vision
Of the heavens that saints and poets have imagined*

*With equal passion I have sought knowledge.
I have wished to understand the hearts of man.
I have wished to know why the stars shine.*

*Love and knowledge lead upwards to the heavens,
But always pity brought me back to earth;
Cries of pain reverberated in my heart
Of children in famine, of victims tortured*

*And of old people left helpless.
I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot,
And I too suffer.
This has been my life; I found it worth living
-Bertrand Russell*

I have appreciated James McConnell's (2002) investigation into the lifeworld of beginning leadership as his dissertation informed the direction of my own research. While there are some distinctions, my investigation into the lifeworld of rural principals is similar to how he approached his investigation into the lifeworld of first year heads. In particular, his utilization of the phenomenological interview provided clarity around an effective and appropriate methodology for investigating the lifeworld of rural principals.

Recognizing the lifeworld as a key concept in understanding and defining the word rural, it also directly relates to phenomenological inquiry. The link between the concept of the lifeworld and a phenomenological methodology is clear. "A phenomenological perspective includes a focus on the lifeworld, and openness to the experiences of the subjects, a primacy of precise descriptions, attempts to bracket fore knowledge and a search for invariant essential meanings in the descriptions" (Kvale, 1996, p. 38).

Phenomenological inquiry attempts to portray and uncover the meaning of lived experience within the everyday lifeworld. Valle and King (1978) stated:

[Phenomenology] seeks to understand the events of human experience in a way, which is free of the presuppositions of our cultural heritage, especially philosophical dualism and technologism, as much as is possible. When applied more specifically to each human psychological phenomenon, [phenomenology] has become that psychological discipline which seeks to explicate the essence, structure, of human experience and human behavior as revealed through essentially descriptive techniques including disciplined reflection. (p. 7)

The focus of phenomenological inquiry is to examine details and seemingly trivial aspects of lived experience that may be taken for granted, with the goal to create meaning through achieving a sense of understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Polkinghorne (1983) identified this focus as an attempt to understand the meanings of human experience as it is lived. Husserl (1970) described the lifeworld as that which we

experience pre-reflectively, without resorting to categorization or conceptualization, and often including those things that are taken-for-granted or are common sense.

Phenomenology is an attempt to study these phenomena, to return to our taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and or forgotten meanings. The emphasis of phenomenology is for the inquirer to observe and report the meanings made by those observed.

In order to investigate further, the researcher must be engaged in the lifeworld as a participant.

The object domain of the social sciences encompasses everything that falls under the description “element of the lifeworld” ... the social scientist has no other access for lifeworld than the social-scientific layman does. He must already belong in a certain way to the lifeworld whose elements he wishes to describe. In order to describe them, he must understand them; in order to understand them, he must be able, in principle, to participate in their production; and, participation presupposes that one belongs. (Habermas, 1984, p. 108)

So the challenge then is not to deny or ignore one’s preconceived notions and bias, but rather to use them transparently.

We carry expectations within us and, to an extent, we make what we meet conform to those expectations ... a raft of largely undetectable assumptions and preconceptions affects the way we perceive and behave in a place. Our cultural baggage – our memory – is weightless, but impossible to leave behind. (Macfarlane, 2003, p. 145)

To a phenomenological researcher, it is the lived experiences of the principals, those involved in the process, this is of the most importance (Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 2006). Contrary to treating the everyday, the lifeworld, as mundane, Schutz believed that exploring the “constitution and organization of the lifeworld provides a fresh and authentic grasp of human understanding” (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, p. 4).

The lifeworld construct also has implications for rural schooling but, more importantly, for the rural school principal. Corbett (2007) asserted that “rather than support place-based ways of knowing and established social, economic, and cultural networks in rural and coastal communities, the school has typically stood in opposition to local lifeworlds” (p. 10). Howley and Howley (1999) suggested that commitments rather than contracts may best characterize and serve the rural lifeworld of schooling.

Lifeworld and systemsworld are both substantive concepts and methodological perspectives, giving both an explanatory and investigative framework for this study on rural principals. These concepts are meant to account for phenomena as well as providing a methodological perspective for the researcher (Thomassen, 2010). By utilizing the lifeworld construct, it is possible for the researcher to take on the perspective of a participant (lifeworld) or of an external observer (systemsworld). This study on rural principals lends itself well to taking on the perspective of a participant through an orientation in the lifeworld of rural principals in a phenomenological methodology.

Discovery

I remember well the feeling and experience that came with my first pair of glasses. The excitement of discovering familiar objects with a new clarity and focus made me wonder if it was possible that others could actually be seeing these same objects with the same focus and clarity as I now had. The thrill of seeing individual leaves blowing in the wind and the millions of blades of grass that composed the field, the crisp edges of light at night, and the beauty of the distant mountain peak. I remember it well, indeed. My new glasses opened up a familiar world and made it a new world of discovery.

As a novice researcher, my journey into the beginnings of an understanding of phenomenology has paralleled the experience of putting on my first pair of glasses. It has shifted or, more accurately, transformed my knowledge and way of knowing and, while doing so, has infused a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement as I rediscover and re-explore what once was familiar. The scope of this paper is such that the intent is not to plumb the depths of phenomenology, but rather to grant the reader insight into phenomenology and why a phenomenological methodology was an appropriate approach for this study.

Investigating the lifeworld of rural principals lends itself to a qualitative research approach. Qualitative and quantitative research represents two distinctly different approaches to understanding the world--that is, the phenomena being researched (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). While recognizing that phenomenology represents a school of philosophical thought that underpins all qualitative research, there are specific tools or

inquiry techniques that differentiate it from other forms of qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Phenomenologists are interested in investigating complex meanings through an attempt to deal with experiences that are largely un-probed aspects of everyday life. Indeed, the key element of phenomenological research study is that the researcher's attempt to understand how people experience a phenomenon from the person's own perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The goal of the research is to understand the lived-world of the participant in such a manner that it becomes possible to understand their perspectives and experiences as they relate to the phenomena being studied. In short the phenomenological researcher is attempting to discover the unique sense and meaning making of persons as they experience a phenomenon.

Pathway to Phenomenology

*"Philosophers, as things now stand, are all too fond of offering criticism from on high instead of studying and understanding things from within."
-Edmund Husserl*

As a principal of a rural school to investigate the experiences of other rural school principals employing a phenomenological methodology enabled an "opening of vision ... in the subject matter rather than limiting the researcher to the traditional mode of observation or data gathering at a discreet distance" (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, p. 3). Phenomenology is a methodology that is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive practices that make the world visible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Both Husserl (the father of phenomenology) and Heidegger (a student of Husserl) reminded us that we arrive at our investigations full of preconceived ideas and concepts and that we project these understandings onto our enquiries, the questions we ask, and the research goals we pursue (Wilson, 2009). It is equally important to recognize that this is not necessarily problematic, in fact, it is likely unavoidable.

All positivist scientific inquiry assumes the notion that through observation we can gain an increasingly accurate reflection of the world. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) challenged this idea of the human mind as a mirror. Instead, he argued our minds were designed for creative interpretation of the world, not the objective reflection of it (Wilson, 2009). In this study the description of what the rural principals perceived to be the

opportunities and challenges of the principalship is the central purpose of this methodology.

In its classic usage, the term *phenomenology* means the study of modes of appearing in, from the Greek word *phenomenon*, meaning appearance. Phenomenology presumes that through dialogue and reflection one can understand the meaning or essence of an experience from the perspective of those experiencing it (Creswell, 1998). The position held by phenomenological researchers is that experiences can be described as a relationship between a person and his or her worldview (van Manen, 1990).

Husserl, the father of phenomenological philosophy, intended phenomenology to be a science of consciousness and “concentrated its investigations on descriptions of these essential structures that are inherent in consciousness” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 42). van Manen (1990) reported that Husserl viewed consciousness as a *dialogue* between a person and the world.

A primary goal of phenomenological research is to “produce clear, precise, and systematic descriptions of the meaning that constitutes the activity of consciousness ...how objects are present to the various modes of conscious experience and how meaning presents itself in experience” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 45). As Keen (1975) explained:

Its task is less to give us new ideas than to make explicit those ideas, assumptions, and implicit presuppositions upon which we already behave and experience life. Its task is to reveal to us exactly what we already know and that we know it, so that we can be less puzzled about ourselves. (p. 18)

Phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience of the lifeworld (van Manen, 1997). This method of inquiry asks, “What is this experience like to the perceiver?” as it attempts to unfold the meanings that are present in everyday life (Lavery, 2003).

The words of Van den Berg, translated by van Manen (1997), capture the purpose well:

[Phenomena] have something to say to us – this common knowledge among poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologists. Or rather, we are all born phenomenologists; the poets and painters among us, however, understand very well their task of sharing, by means of word and image, their insights with others – an artfulness that is also laboriously practiced by the professional phenomenologist. (p. 41)

The tendency in natural science is towards taxonomizing natural phenomena, to systematically and analytically explain the behavior of things; whereas, “human science aims at explicating the meaning of human phenomena (such as historical studies of texts) and at *understanding* the implied structures of meanings as in phenomenological studies of the lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Taxonomizing literally means to develop a common language to enable communication and the sharing of meaning.

The Role of Language

“A different language is a different vision of life.”
-Federico Fellini

Phenomenology focuses on meaning and a shared preoccupation with language as the primary vehicle of understanding (Osborne, 1994). van Manen (1990) suggested that “to do research in a phenomenological sense is already and immediately and always a bringing to speech of something. And, this thoughtfully bringing to speech is commonly a writing activity” (p. 32). It is worthwhile to briefly investigate the critical role of language as it relates to both thought and understanding, and the act of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process (Vygotsky, 1978). Simply put, the task of the phenomenologist is to allow the voices of those with whom they communicate to be heard authentically.

One of the defining aspects of what it means to be human is the ability for people to create meaning with language. It is language that inducts us into an understanding of self and of the other. Relying on Taylor’s (1989) inquiry into the sources of modern selfhood, *Sources of the Self*, the self needs to be understood as that which is essential to human personhood. We are only selves in that an individual’s identity is essentially defined by those things that have significance, those things that are held to be of personal importance. Essentially the self is distinct from an object in that:

We are not selves in the way that we are organisms, or we don't have selves in the way we have hearts and livers. We are living beings with these organs quite independently of our self-understandings or – interpretations, or the meanings things have for us. But we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good. (Taylor, 1989, p. 34)

Indeed, the study of persons is to study beings that exist, or are constituted, by a specific language.

It is this language that needs to be maintained within a language community where answers are formed to the questions of self-definition – “Who am I” (Taylor, 1989). It is this question that is answered as a result of an interchange of speakers:

I define whom I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out. (Taylor, 1989, p. 35)

Understanding human behavior is only possible by being inducted or initiated into a language. It is by being brought into conversation where we begin to discern moral and spiritual matters. It is through these conversations and not modern cultures' conception that the individual finds his or her own bearings independent from others, an independence from the webs of interlocution that originally formed the self. It is important to recognize that language cannot simply be narrowed to only include text and speech. Language also incorporates the rich tapestry of the arts such as music, graphic arts, dance, and the like.

Heron (1981) pointed out that the original paradigm of human inquiry is conversation where people engage in asking and answering questions of each other. He stated:

The use of language, itself ... contains within it the paradigm of cooperative inquiry; and, since language is the primary tool whose use enables human constructing and intending to occur, it is difficult to see how there can be any more fundamental mode of inquiry for human beings into the human condition. (p. 26)

In phenomenology, an indissoluble relationship between the investigator and the focus of the investigation is formed. Both are said to co-constitute one another, with the basis of co-constitutionality being dialogue and disclosure (Spinelli, 2005). Individuals and their world are constantly in dialogue with one another.

Lived-experience, or the lifeworld, is soaked through with language (van Manen, 1990). It is because of language that we have the ability to reflect and to recall lived experiences. Indeed “human experience is only possible because of language” (van Manen, 1990, p. 38). Language is so central to our experience of humanness that Heidegger (1971) proposed that thinking, language, and being are one.

Essences

“It is not what I know and what you know; it’s something that happens between us that’s a discovery ... you can’t make this discovery alone. There is always the other.”
-Goncu and Perone, 2005, p. 144

Phenomenological research is not just intended to study the variant structures of experience. During the course of this research, as individual principals shared their leadership experiences in rural schools some commonalities of experience, or invariant structures, began to emerge. In phenomenological research these invariant structures are referred to as essences. According to Patton (1990), phenomenological research is based on “the assumption that *there is an essence or essences to shared experience ...* the experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (p. 70, emphasis in original). This search for essences of phenomena is one of the defining characteristics of phenomenology as a research methodology.

As phenomenology is ultimately the study of essences, van Manen (1990) made an important clarification in explaining that the term does not imply a mysterious entity or discovery; rather, essences “may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon” (p. 39). He continued, that a good description of an essence should be “constructed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way” (p. 39). This act of describing an essence is similar to an artistic endeavour that is a creative attempt to capture “a certain

phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (p. 39).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

In all research there comes a point where researchers communicate in writing what they have been up to. This is often referred to as the “research report” a term that “suggests that a clear separation exists between the activity of research and the reporting activity in which research is made public” (van Manen, 1990, p. 125). This emphasis on the scientific reporting of the data collected leaves little room for thinking about writing as part of the actual methodology or the research itself as a writing activity (van Manen, 1990). Barthes expressed a warning in looking at the writing as separate from research:

Some people speak of method greedily, demandingly; what they want in work is method; to them it never seems rigorous enough, formal enough. Method becomes a law ... the invariable fact is that a work which constantly proclaims its will-to-method is ultimately sterile: everything has been put into the method, nothing remains for the writing; the researcher insists that his text will be methodological, but this text never comes: no surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the great scrap heap of abandoned projects than method. (quoted in van Manen, 1990, p. 125)

The description of the essences that emerge from this research are required by the reader to understand that phenomenological text cannot be read the same as a story line, a scientific description, or even as a story. Rather it would be prudent to consider the warning of van Manen (1990), who described the requirement of the reader to be attentive to what is said in and through the words. Using poetry as an analogy, if one read a poem as if it were prose, the reader would be closed to the deeper discourse and likely miss the meaning of the poem. The reader needs to recognize that “research and writing are seen to be closely related and practically inseparable pedagogical activities” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). The purpose of the writing is

to transform lived experience into a textural expression of its essence in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (van Manen, 1990, p. 36)

As van Manen (1990) articulated, “phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life, and semiotics is used here to develop a practical way of writing or linguistic approach to the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics” (p. 4).

Bracketing

Few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups ... that he or she or they are in sole possession of the truth ... It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right ... and that others cannot be right if they disagree.

-Isaiah Berlin (quoted in Spinelli, 2005, p. 128)

One further phenomenological step needs to be discussed before the aspects of phenomenological interviews are addressed. The step of bracketing, also known as phenomenological reduction, or epochê, refers to the setting aside of the researcher’s previously held positions, and/or theories. It implies a systematic method for suspending judgment, a process that asks the researcher to step outside preconceived notions about how the world works in an effort to gain greater insights and better understanding. There are three stages of epochê. The first stage requires an unprejudiced openness to the details of experience, whereas the second stage requires analysis of the process that makes experience possible in the first place. The third stage constitutes a systematic approach to a phenomenon where and when, after wrestling long and hard with difficult problems, the solutions come while engaged in very different activities (Erickson & Roth, 2009).

It is through this process of bracketing that the researcher begins to see things as they are in an intuitive sense. Bracketing provides a way of exploring lived experience, the actuality of experience, from the inside rather than from the natural science perspective of observation and measurement (Osborne, 1994). Bracketing is further explained by Ashworth (1999):

The procedure has the purpose of allowing the lifeworld of the participant in the research to emerge in clarity so as to allow a study of some specific phenomenon within the lifeworld to be carried out. The researcher must suspend presuppositions *in order to enter the lifeworld* ... two main categories ... should be bracketed: those to do with the temptation to impose on the investigation of

the lifeworld claims emanating from objective science ... and those to do with the imposition of criteria of validity arising outside the lifeworld itself. (p. 708-709, emphasis in original)

In order to initiate bracketing, researchers must first make their prior assumptions as explicit as possible (Spinelli, 2005). In order to understand and articulate my own assumptions I began the study as a participant myself, answering the interview questions that I proposed as a frame for my research. The answers were recorded, themes identified. My intention in this was to ensure I did not lead participants in the interview process toward articulating my own presuppositions. During this process, researchers are more likely to discover unsuspected assumptions that are underlying their initial assumptions. Once isolated, these two types of assumptions are bracketed as much as possible. Because the process of bracketing is never final, the possibility of truly objective observation and research is never fully realized. "The challenge of the epoché is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see, with new eyes, in a naïve and completely open manner" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). The researcher's capacity to suspend judgment while bracketing "only becomes possible through our experiences and prejudices; denying them or suppressing them can only distort the communication process and our ability to interpret others" (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 238).

As a rural principal I was aware that I needed to carefully bracket my own assumptions. In an effort to bracket preconceived ideas I was very attentive to avoid using leading questions, nor steer participants in any direction that they themselves did not initiate. By strictly following the prepared questions I attempted to ensure that any themes that emerged did so authentically.

Hycner (1985) described bracketing as the researcher's openness to whatever meanings emerge, a necessity to delineate between our interpretations of the participant's meanings and what the participant actually says or writes. Phenomenological interviews permit an explicit focus on the researcher's personal experience combined with the experiences of the interviewees. Educators frequently apply phenomenological interviewing in a general manner to obtain the multiple meanings of an experience (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

As indicated earlier I have my own rural gaze and have experiences as a rural school administrator. In an effort to bracket preconceived ideas I was very deliberate in not using leading questions that would direct participants towards the sharing of experiences that would reflect some of my own beliefs or bias.

Phenomenology vs. Other Qualitative Research Methods

“Experts often possess more data than judgment.” -Colin Powell

Qualitative research methods share some general characteristics, as they are based on meta-theories, that are associated with an emphasis on discovery, description, and meaning rather than on natural science criteria of prediction, control, and measurement (Osborne, 1994). While phenomenology is an underpinning for a number of qualitative research methods, it is worthwhile to make some brief comparisons with two other methods that were considered for this study; namely, ethnography and grounded theory.

Ethnography is one of the most popular approaches to qualitative research within the field of education (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defined ethnography as a branch of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of individual cultures. Wiersma and Jurs (2009) defined ethnographic research as “the process of providing holistic and scientific descriptions of educational systems, processes and phenomena within their specific contexts” (p. 273). Ethnographic designs are procedures “for describing, analyzing, and interpreting a culture-sharing group’s shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time” (Creswell, 2002, p. 481). There are numerous types of ethnographic designs but each is informed by cultural anthropology.

Recognizing that there is methodological overlap between ethnography and phenomenology, there are also some distinctions that are worth noting. Phenomenology, like ethnography, can be used in the field; however, most phenomenological studies use personal accounts of experience as a database. Phenomenology is focused on the conscious experience of the participant attempting to understand and describe the phenomena, based on how the participant experiences it. Ethnographic methods rely much more on observation and the interpretation of a

participant's behavior, or the phenomena being observed; whereas, in phenomenology, the researcher is attempting to see the phenomena through the eyes of the participant. While "phenomenological research looks for the essential structures of meaning, ethnographic research is concerned with predictable patterns of thought and behavior, thus implying the use of inductive empirical procedures" (Osborne, 1994, p. 181). In short, ethnographic research focuses on the experiences of a group while phenomenology can be applied across a group. Its primary focus is the individual and the attention to specific phenomenon. As this study is primarily concerned with a principal's conscious experience and perspective of leading in a rural setting, phenomenology was a better fit for this study.

In the earliest considerations of this study I was particularly interested in grounded theory. "Grounded theory is a *general methodology* for developing theory that is grounded in data and systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). Both grounded theory and phenomenology are exploratory methods; however, central to grounded theory is the understanding that "the researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind ... rather the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). As a rural school principal who has lead in both rural and urban school locations, I am aware of very distinct leadership differences in these different contexts (as well as some striking similarities). Entering into research with preconceived notions, I was aware that I would have to carefully deal with the tension between what I expected vs. what the participants described. I carefully created a list of questions that were not leading and would allow for participants to share their individual stories without influencing the directions that their stories would take. At the time of the research I was also a principal of a rural school and I was very interested in hearing their individual stories and to determine through their lifeworlds what essences might emerge as related to the challenges and opportunities of rural leadership. As I explored deeper and became aware that the lifeworld is a phenomenological construct, it became clearer that phenomenological methodology lent itself well to this research.

However, studying and researching the rigor of grounded theory and its emphasis on data while not interpreting data through preconceived notions has informed my study. Recognizing the importance of experience as the generator of theory and the

importance of bracketing to minimize the researcher's bias are important outcomes of my time spent working with grounded theory texts. Lewins (1992) provided a distinction that informed my study: "Compare, for instance, two common statements from medical practitioners: 'I think the patient has hepatitis but I will need to do some tests to confirm it'; and, 'I think we will need to do some tests to see if we can establish why the patient is ill'." (p.vii)

The second question Lewins (1992) asked is much richer and parallels a sub-question in this study – Does the concept of a rural lifeworld provide explanatory power in the examination of the roles performed by rural school principals?

Phenomenological Interview

There are significant reasons why the model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing is well suited for this study. The following description of the interview process made by Kvale (1996) links the interview to the lifeworld, a concept central to this study.

The qualitative research interview has a unique potential for gaining access to and describing the lived everyday world. The attempt to obtain unprejudiced descriptions entails a rehabilitation of the Lebenswelt – the lifeworld – in relation to the world of science. The lifeworld is the world as it is encountered in everyday life and given in direct and immediate experience, independent of and prior to explanations ... the qualitative interview is a research method that gives a privileged access to our basic experiences of the lived world. The descriptive focus on the lived interactions of the human world may counteract a technological colonization of the life world that reduces qualitative diversity to isolated facts and variables and that transforms intentional human interaction to a means-ends rationality. (p. 54)

At the heart of the phenomenological interview is "an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). Indeed, with the "focus of the interview on the experienced meanings of the subjects' lifeworld, phenomenology appears relevant for clarifying the mode of understanding in a qualitative research review" (Kvale, 1996, p. 53).

As mentioned earlier, McConnell (2002) utilized the phenomenological interview in a similar study that investigated the lifeworld of first year heads of four different private

schools. His study lends merit to the investigative power of the phenomenological interview in the investigation of the lifeworld of school leaders.

This study followed the phenomenological interview process as described by Seidman (2006). One of the most distinguishing features of this model is that it involves a series of three separate interviews with each participant. Each interview ranged in length from 15-60 minutes. Seidman (2006) conceded that the three-interview process provides a much greater context than a single meeting, which treads on thin contextual ice. Schuman (1982) designed the three-interview approach in an attempt to enable the researcher to delve deeply into the phenomenon being studied and to place it in context. The three interviews are purposefully organized to investigate “what was experienced, how it was experienced, and finally the meanings that the interviewees assigned to the experience” (McMillian & Schumacher, 2006, p. 333). The first interview is intended to establish the context of the participant’s experience. The second allows the participant to reconstruct his or her experience within the context established in the first interview. Lastly, the third interview is designed to enable the participant to reflect on the meaning that the particular phenomena held for him or her. It is worthwhile to examine this structure in greater detail.

First Interview: History

Yow (1994) introduced interviewing techniques by stating “interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door is a world of secrets” (p. 55). The first interview is designed to gather as much context as possible in light of the phenomena being studied. This includes questions that are intended to have the participants “reconstruct and narrate a range of experience that place their participation” in the principalship of a rural school into the context of their lives (Seidman, 2006, p. 17).

The first interview asked participants to respond to the following questions:

- Describe in detail the professional and personal path that has lead to your position as a principal of a rural school.
- Why have you chosen to live and work in a rural community?

- What has the impact of your position been for your family?
- Do you consider the context of rural to be unique from urban?

Second Interview: Details

Following Seidman's (2006) interview structure, the second interview concentrates on the "concrete details of the participant's present lived experience in the topic area of study" (p. 18). In relation to this study, this interview will focus on what the rural principalship entails; focusing on what is actually involved in performing this role. It is here that novice researchers often miss a key aspect of phenomenological research, that opinions are not considered to be experience (Osborne, 1994). In this interview I asked participants to talk about their relationships with their school community, wider community, district administration, students, and staff. I also asked the principals to reconstruct a day, in the attempt to elicit stories about their experience as a way of gathering details (Seidman, 2006).

During the second interview I asked participants to respond to the following questions:

- Can you share a story/experience that you would consider unique to leading in a rural school?
- What are some of the challenges of being a principal in rural school?
- What are some of the joys/opportunities of being a principal in a rural school?
- If you had to summarize the key attributes necessary for successfully leading in a rural school, what would you say?
- I would like you to describe/recreate a "typical" day.
- Please share about your relationship with your school community, wider community, district administration, students, and staff.

Again, clarifying and probing questions were asked as responses warranted.

Third Interview: Reflection

Continuing with Seidman (2006), the third interview is designed to allow the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. The intent is to address “the intellectual and emotional connection between the participant’s work and life” (p.18). This meaning-making process requires the participants to look at their “present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs ... the combination of exploring the past ... and describing the concrete details of their present experience establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives” (p. 19).

The third interview is organized around the participant engaging in a meaning making process. During this third and final interview I asked principals to respond to the following:

- What lessons would you share about leading in a rural school with a newly appointed rural school principal?
- What is a source of joy/pride as the principal of a rural school?
- In what ways have you grown or developed as a result of being the principal of a rural school?
- Looking into the future what do you identify as significant challenges for rural schools?

At the completion of this interview I was able to express my gratitude for the interviewee’s participation as well as ask any final follow-up questions.

Interview Strategy

It is important to recognize that in-depth interviews are a collaborative venture. This collaboration, warned Yow (1994), does not necessarily mean that the two people, interviewer and participant, feel equal. She cautioned that “in any interviewing situation, a vague awareness of the power relationship impinges, and the power relationship is based on age, race, class, status, ethnicity, gender, and knowledge” (p. 117). Seidman (2006) also added linguistic differences and elites as concerns that require careful monitoring by the interviewer. While recognizing that these differences can be overcome to some extent the interviewer needs to give ongoing attention to these aspects of the interview relationship (Yow, 1994). Seidman described interviewing as a

relationship, addressing the importance of establishing a strong rapport while maintaining a warm professional relationship, a relationship that “is not a friendship” (Yow, 1994, p. 137).

These important cautions emphasize the importance of proper technique during the phenomenological interview. Some of the techniques addressed by Seidman (2006, p. 78-94) include:

- Listen more, talk less
- Follow up on what the participant says - pursue interesting developments
- Ask questions when you do not understand
- Ask to hear more about a subject
- Explore, don't probe
- Avoid leading questions, ask open ended-questions
- Follow up, but don't interrupt
- Ask participants to reconstruct not remember
- Limit your own interaction
- Explore laughter
- Follow your hunches

Recognizing the importance of technique in an interview, the most important characteristic that the researcher can demonstrate is genuine concern and interest in the participant (Seidman, 2006).

Participant Selection

The definition of rural as used in this study was an important consideration in determining the appropriate participants for this study. Of the seven participants in this study, six were rural principals in small towns along the coast of British Columbia. Despite this commonality, there were significant differences in the context of these communities as each rural community had unique contextual factors. With a phenomenological interview the purpose is to understand the experience of the participant, not to predict or control that experience (Seidman, 2006). Since the basic

assumptions of an interview study are different than an experimental study, the way in which participants are selected is approached differently.

It was necessary to select principals within a context as defined by the use of rural in this study. This strategy and the participant selections were made according to purposeful sampling (Wiersma, 2000). Once the individuals who fit the criteria of the study were located, they were approached to participate in the research. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling technique, which may limit the generalizability of the study; however, one of the benefits of utilizing a phenomenological methodology is that the intent of the research is not to “allow for empirical generalizations, the production of law-like statements, or the establishment of functional relationships: the only generalization of phenomenology is this: Never generalize! Generalization of human experience is almost always troublesome in nature” (van Manen, 1990, p. 22).

How many participants are enough? Rather than having a fixed number at the start, some researchers suggest adding participants as the need emerges from previous interviews, a process sometimes referred to as snowball sampling (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Gall and his colleagues suggested, “in qualitative research, much of the research design and procedures are emergent, meaning that your actual experiences in the field affect your plans for subsequent data collection” (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996, p. 56). Seidman (2006) presents two criteria for deciding when a sample size is acceptable. The first is sufficiency, that being sufficient numbers to increase the likelihood that those outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it. The other criterion is a saturation of information, a concept used frequently in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This is the point at which the interviewer is no longer learning anything new. The phenomenological interview “applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (Seidman, 2006, p. 55).

Despite this ambiguity, Boyd (2001) suggested two to ten participants as sufficient to reach saturation, whereas Creswell (1998) suggested “long interviews with up to ten people” for a phenomenological study (p. 65). In this study a total of seven participants were interviewed. This size was sufficient to observe a saturation of information and to find that similar essences began to consistently emerge in the data.

The difficulty of scheduling three separate interviews with busy principals presented a considerable challenge and a number of potential participants who had expressed interest were unable to follow through with the interview requests.

Ethical Considerations

A number of ethical considerations impacted how the data was collected, analyzed and used. *The Belmont Report* (1979) can be summarized as having three basic ethical principles that are intended to guide the work and consideration of research involving human beings. This includes: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. With the Belmont Report as the general ethical framework from which this research was conducted it is worthwhile to consider specific applications while conducting phenomenological interviews.

A central aspect of the ethical consideration of this study was the process of informed consent. Although interviews are not life and death procedures as can be the case in medical research, an interviewee may risk loss of reputation and embarrassment (Yow, 1994). Informed consent is a significant step in minimizing the risks that participants face from being a part of the interview process (Seidman, 2006; Yow, 1994). Seidman (2006) has broken down informed consent to consist of the following:

- *An invitation*: to participate in what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom
- *Risks*: the potential vulnerability or discomfort
- *Rights*: designed to minimize the vulnerability or discomfort (in this case participants will be given the transcripts to review and the right to examine the connections made in the study)
- *Possible benefits*: a modest outline of the possible benefits for the participant and the interviewer
- *Confidentiality of records*: the steps and limits to ensure identity is kept confidential
- *Dissemination*: how the researcher intends to use the participant's words
- *Contact Information*: information that enables a participant to contact the researcher if any questions arise during the interview process

Bailey (1996) set out a very similar outline for informed consent and observed that deception might prevent insight, whereas honesty coupled with confidentiality may reduce suspicion and promote sincere responses. Each participant was aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Collection

In regards to collecting data during the qualitative interview, Kvale (1996) remarked that the interview “is literally an inter view, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 1). It is where the researcher “attempts to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold meaning of people’s experiences” (p. 2). As such, the interview questions that have already been described were in keeping with an open-ended interview, an interview that is not necessarily interested in finding answers but is directed towards collecting and understanding how participants have experienced leading in a rural school. Two of the participants in this study submitted written responses to the questions.

With an open-ended phenomenological interview, it is important to record the interview in its entirety. This was accomplished using an Olympus (WS-500M) digital voice recorder. This enabled me to review what was shared, create transcripts, and study over time the essences that emerged (Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 2006; Yow, 1994). Seidman (2006) cautioned, a phenomenological interview transcript should not read like a factual and non-emotional police report. Instead, the recording of smiles, pauses, laughter, and other important aspects such as non-verbal observations are recorded in the transcribed document. I used the Olympus AS-2400 transcription kit to aid in the transcription process, a process that I personally performed. In addition to the transcription process, I took detailed notes during the interview which allowed me to ask follow-up questions as well as provide additional details to ensure that the context in which the words were spoken was as accurately recorded as possible (Kvale, 1996). Handling the transcription process myself was a time-consuming process, allowing for additional immersion in the data.

Data Explication

Groenewald (2004) cautioned against using the term data analysis, citing Hycner's (1999) warning that 'analysis' has dangerous connotations for phenomenology. Hycner further explained that "the term [analysis] usually means a 'breaking into parts' and, therefore, often means a loss of the whole phenomenon...[whereas 'explication' implies an]...investigation of the constitutes of a phenomenon while keeping in context of the whole" (p. 161).

Hycner (1999) recommended that the researcher listen repeatedly to the audio recording of each interview in order to develop the gestalt or rather a holistic sense of the interview. It is through the process of emphasizing the unique experiences of research participants that these personal experiences are given existential immediacy (Groenewald, 2004).

Delineating units of meaning is a critical stage in the explication of data as statements that are seen to illuminate the researched phenomenon are isolated, highlighted, or extracted (Creswell, 1998; Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999). This process requires significant judgment on the part of the researcher, a judgment that is required for most qualitative research methodologies (Creswell, 2009). In order to determine which meanings should be extracted the researcher "considers [the] literal content, the number (the significance) of times a meaning was mentioned and also how (non-verbal or para-linguistic cues) it was stated" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 19). From the initial reading themes began to emerge from the data. I noted the themes and conducted a second systematic reading of the data, this time looking for confirming and disconfirming evidence to support the initial themes. Confirming evidence was color-coded. The color-coding was helpful during subsequent readings and reviews as it enabled the checking and re-checking of the transcripts to ensure that specific comments fit into the context of the entire phenomena the participants were describing.

The clustering of units of meaning to develop themes calls for even more judgment and skill on the part of the researcher. Colaizzi, (as cited in Hycner, 1999), identifies the need for 'artistic' judgment "particularly in this step is the phenomenological researcher engaged in something which cannot be precisely delineated, for here he is

involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight” (p. 150-51). While a number of computer software programs exist to help with qualitative analysis of text there are none that will help with doing phenomenology (Groenewald, 2004). Indeed the meaning of phenomena “cannot be computerized because it is not an algorithmic process” (Kelle, 1995, p. 3). Despite this caution I did evaluate word frequency, utilizing the word count computer program Wordle™ (www.wordle.net) to verify numerically the frequency of word occurrences in the interview transcripts. Clearly this tool alone is insufficient to determine essences but I found it helpful in verifying the themes I saw emerging. Both Groenewald (2004) and Hycner (1999) emphasized the importance of the researcher going back to the gestalt’ and forth to the units of meaning to find patterns or themes. By personally transcribing each interview I was immersed in the data. Word by word I listened carefully to ensure the written transcripts were in agreement with the spoken word. This process of moving in and out of the data was helpful in determining essences.

The fourth step of data explication involves the summarizing of each interview along with validating it and modifying it where necessary. This summary is intended to capture all the themes that have been elicited from the data. Ellenberger (cited in Hycner, 1999) describes it as:

Whatever the method used for a phenomenological analysis the aim of the investigator is the reconstruction of the inner world of experience of the subject. Each individual has his own way of experiencing temporality, spatiality, materiality, but each of these coordinates must be understood in relation to the others and to the total inner “world”. (p. 153-154)

Having completed the process as outlined by Hycner (1999), the final step was to search for essences and the invariant structures present in the leading of schools in rural communities. These essences are the common themes in most or all of the interviews. It is also meaningful at this point of explication to determine significant individual variations. Coffey and Atkinson (cited in Groenewald, 2004) emphasized, “good research is not generated by rigorous data alone ... [but] ‘going beyond’ the data to develop ideas” (p. 21).

This is consistent with the practice of grounded theory in that the theorizing, however small, is derived from the data.

Results

Before exploring the findings of this research it is worth remembering van Manen's (1990) caution that a phenomenological investigation is not just a report but rather requires both reader and researcher to be attentive to what is said in and through the words. The remaining chapters are organized around what was said by the participants.

Chapter 4 gives some more contextual information about the individual participants. I have attempted to provide the reader enough contextual information without jeopardizing the confidentiality of the participants. Chapter 5 explores the relationship between the rural schools and their communities. Specifically the way in which rural principals honor the local while still navigating the complexity of the school district is examined. The role of the school as the heart of the community is explored. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with several challenges that the rural principals identified, namely, role multiplicity, community scrutiny, isolation, and appropriating sufficient resources. Chapter 8 explores the centrality of relationships and the importance of relationships in the work of the rural principal. Chapters 9 and 10 revisit the utility of the lifeworld and examine the responses of the participants in light of this framework as well as my own thoughts around the limitations, generalizability, and shortcomings of this study.

Throughout this section I have identified the participants' words as follows:

- All places, schools, and participants have been given pseudonyms
- Any similarities to actual names or places is accidental and unintended
- Within a section about a person all quotes are from that person
- In sections that have a compilation of quotes, each quote will be identified through use of the participant's pseudonym.

Chapter 4.

The Participants

This diverse group of principals spoke with enthusiasm and evidenced a high degree of care as they shared the many joys of leading in rural schools. For each of them, the relationships that resulted, and the hope of making a positive difference in the lives of children and their communities, was consistently expressed. While some struggles also appeared consistently in their accounts, the principals I interviewed expressed a great deal of satisfaction from working closely with students, staff, parents, and the community. Despite the demands on their time and expertise, difficult ethical dilemmas, scrutiny from the community, and personal sacrifice this group of administrators are finding ways to navigate the complexity of their position in meaningful and effective ways.

Context is an important consideration in rural school studies as different rural localities often represent significant diversity. The purpose of this chapter is to provide sufficient information that pertains to each of the participants such that the reader is able to get a general context for the participants' responses. While the primary intent of this chapter is to give the reader facts rather than reflections, part of understanding the context of the individual participants requires hearing their voice in such a way that it may facilitate an understanding of who they are, not simply limited to where they lead. It is, however, a challenge to provide sufficient context without jumping ahead to presenting results. As such, I have attempted to carefully navigate this distinction in this chapter.

Although the context of each school was unique there were some consistent unifying characteristics. All but one of the participants' rural school experiences occurred in small coastal communities in British Columbia. These communities are located on both the mainland and Vancouver Island. School configurations varied from K - 6, K - 8, and K -10, each with a student population under 100. One principal was the

administrator of a high school, grades 9 - 12, with a student population of just over 100 students. As the participants are introduced in more detail, specific school information is included without jeopardizing the confidentiality of the participants.

All participants had significant experience as teachers; their school-based administrative experience ranged from 3 to 23 years. Although not all participants held a rural school principalship at the time of the interviews, they all shared the experience of having had a rural setting as the site of their first principalship. Of the seven, one principal had recently retired at the time of the interviews.

I am thankful to each of the participants for sharing their expertise, insight, and time with me.

Ben Anderson

Ben Anderson has been involved in education for 24 years, during which he performed a variety of different roles and positions. Eight of those 24 years have been as school principal, a position he currently holds. During the time of the interviews, Ben held the position of principal in a K - 6 school with just under 100 students. Before this assignment, he had worked as the principal of two rural schools both located in Vancouver Island coastal communities. One of the schools had a student population of approximately 70 students and is located in a resource-based community, currently home to about 400 people. It is an Oceanside community, surrounded by hills and mountains and offers abundant outdoor recreational opportunities. There are some families that have been members of the community for several generations. The community has struggled economically, with a decline in demand for its resource-based industry. Just prior to his experience in this community, Ben was the principal of a Gulf Island school.

Ben grew up in a family where both his mother and grandmother were teachers but, as he stated, education was “a profession that I came to in a roundabout way,” a profession with which he saw as “a natural fit.” Before taking on the role of principal, he worked in the school district office as a professional development coordinator and, through that position, had the “opportunity to go to a number of rural schools and do

some work there. Various workshops. Staff-training things.” During these drop-ins, Ben developed a

utopian view [of rural schools], everything is great, everyone is working together here. There are only a few of them [staff] and they are doing wonderful things for these multi-age groupings and it is all great and so keeping that little piece I was like, wow, this is cool.

Ben’s appointment to a rural principalship enabled him to “skip over the vice-principal role at elementary”, which he considered “the most thankless job out there in our profession”. Having decided to pursue the principalship, Ben was in a school district with very few administrative opportunities. Thus, before his appointment to a rural school “the last opening [for a principalship] was 3years previous”.

Reflecting upon his years as a principal, Ben indicated one of the greatest joys related to his position:

I have made a point of trying to intervene with students, at least one student in particular in every posting I have had, and as nearly as I can say that absolutely with anyone I’ve managed to make that connection with and to make a difference in that child’s life opportunities and that feels really good.

Ben’s obvious passion for students and his belief in the significant role of the principal were evident in each of the three interviews. In his role as rural school principal, he recognized he “can take some small part of the credit for how successful the [students have] been. I have been able to spend an hour or two directly with that student, doing something that made all of us feel a little better.”

Thomas Welton

Thomas Welton is a retired educator whose career in education spanned 34 years, which included 18 years as an elementary school vice-principal. For the final two years of his career, he took on the principalship of a K - 10 school with approximately 45 students. The school was situated on an island located in British Columbia’s Salish Sea. The Salish Sea is a large body of water protected from the open Pacific Ocean by the mass of Vancouver Island. The island has a unique culture with many families that have lived there for generations. During his tenure as principal, the school experienced steady growth and had reached enrolment of 60 students at the time of his retirement.

From the very first question, Thomas emphasized the importance of relationships. In his words, “I guess what I have always thought from very early on in my career, I have believed that relationships are the basis.”

Having worked in both rural and urban settings, his appreciation for rural places was evident. He reflected on his experience as an educator in rural places and concludes:

That’s the parts of my time that as an educator, really you know, in town there is lots of joy too, but there is lot of neat, a lot neater things in rural. People who don’t have the experience or who find it really difficult to adjust may find a rural school really stifling. I found it just the opposite. I found you had so many more opportunities to do things as an educator.

The rural principalship for Thomas Welton was an opportunity that “had I not taken the position in a rural school, I wouldn’t have had a chance ... to be a principal before I retired. I would have always questioned whether I could run a school.” Having acted as the interim principal at the school for a few months, 8 years prior to his appointment, he had the opportunity to discover that he “really loved that school.” Because of his experience as an interim principal “he hit the ground running” and helped create an environment that was the “best it had been in the past 20-25 years.”

Despite his retirement, Thomas’ enthusiasm for his time as a rural principalship still was evident as well as a sense of pride in the ‘turnaround’ that the school experienced while he was there. As he reflected on the rural principalship, Thomas declares “for me it was a labor of love.”

Leslie Brown

At the time of the interviews, Leslie Brown was in her fourth year as principal of a rural high school. The school’s population at the time was just over 100 students. Located in a resource-based town that is facing out-migration and a continuing decline in enrolment, the school Leslie leads has a “significant number” of special needs’ students and “approximately 40% First Nations students”.

Leslie grew up in the urbanized Lower Mainland of British Columbia, but moved to a coastal rural community as a result of her husband’s career. Thinking that she was

“only going to be [t]here 2 years” she has been in the community for over 41 years. Leslie worked as a certified management accountant while her kids were growing up, which allowed her to work from home. It was important to Leslie to be a stay-at-home mom, believing that, “unless people have to have money to survive then they should be staying at home with their kids. Their kids are a lot of our problems in our schools. If you are going to have kids you better be a parent.”

She observed that “there really was not a lot of places for me to work here,” which lead her back to school where she finished her Bachelor’s degree in Education. This was quickly followed with a Master’s degree in Educational Administration and Computers. Having spent 17 years as an uncertified Teacher-on-Call (TOC), Leslie landed her “first real job” as a “.4 [meaning a part-time teaching position equivalent to 4/10 of a full-time assignment] working in the afternoon at the elementary school” and then half a year later “[I] moved to the high school and have been there ever since.”

Leslie Brown’s path to becoming the principal of the high-school was not an easy one and she stated that she is “only in administration because the superintendent changed. It would have been nice to get it [the principalship] way back. I couldn’t get in because the superintendent at the time wouldn’t hire women. No way.”

It was apparent very early in my interviews with Leslie that she is candid and possesses a no-nonsense attitude. This was evidenced by her reflections on some of the joys and satisfactions from leading in a rural school. She experienced satisfaction,

When kids are successful, they phone back to the school and say ‘we wanted to call the school and make sure that you are aware’ that they are successful because somebody took the time to do things, bend backwards, and do special things. They know they can come and see me and we will get things done one way or another. If we have to bend a few rules or do whatever, we are going to make it happen.

Sue Colbeck

At the time of the interviews Sue Colbeck had been an educator for 31 years; 23 of those were as a principal, all of them in a coastal community in British Columbia. The start of Sue’s career in education coincided with her parent’s retirement. As a result, when a teaching opportunity came available in the coastal community her parents had

recently retired to, she applied and has lived in the community ever since. Sue started her career in education by working as a Special Education Teacher. She soon recognized that in her school district “it was a segregated situation” and “quickly moved to integrate the students into class.” Sue was encouraged to apply for the principalship early in her career and has spent the last 23 years working in that capacity in various rural schools. She speaks about “one particular superintendent [who] really stands out for me. He became a mentor and key supporter. After he retired, he took on more of that role and coached me ... and encouraged me to go after a post-graduate degree. My career was enriched tremendously by this relationship.” Having had the opportunity to observe Sue at her school and the strong relationships she has with her staff, her students, and the community I have no doubt that others would claim the same of her.

Sue is a child-first educator whose deep connection to others is obvious as “whenever I have changed schools, the grieving is deep and long.” Reflecting on some of the joys of being a principal she shares that a source of joy for her is “a school made up of people that love it and want to be there, the hugs from the kids and their successes.” In her role as principal, she has had to deal with significant issues including taking on her first principalship at a school where a “pedophile had abused several children.” Not afraid to take on issues, Sue moved into the role of principal partly because she “was horrified about the lack of student-centeredness in schools and particularly amongst a number of the school principals.”

Becky Rowe

At the time of the interviews Becky Rowe was in the third year of her first principalship in a rural coastal town on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Most of her background was in teaching primary grades, specifically at the Grade 1 level. Over time teaching led Becky to take on a district position as literacy support teacher and during the tenure of this position she experienced “significant in-service” and “a huge professional growth spurt.” Her initial reflections offer insight into how she perceives the role of the principal:

At first, I felt like a big imposter. Eventually I learned enough to no longer be an imposter but really was that person that the superintendent had asked me to be.

And so, I did become an instructional leader and I had a superintendent and assistant superintendent who really believed that the first and foremost requirement for administration was that you should be an instructional leader.

Becky next accepted an elementary vice-principalship of a school with approximately 250 students “and then when my husband got a job in a different district I went back to the classroom in order to move [with him].” Although she moved back to classroom teaching in order to facilitate her family’s move, she desired to return to administrative leadership. When a principalship opened at the rural school (where she currently works), Becky went for it and committed to stay for a term of 3 years as she “was the fourth principal in 2 years to come to the school. They were screaming for some consistency.”

Having grown up in a resource-based community on Vancouver Island, Becky Rowe identifies strongly with the community. We learn about both Becky and the community she is leading in where she has,

watched a very wealthy little community become very, very socio-economically challenged. It is sad to watch the steady downhill slide. Well, the community here has mirrored that experience. Very much like where I grew up. I have a real affinity and identification ... it used to be a rich little town. Full and vibrant. Lots happening. Now most of my families are struggling for work ... my families are moms and kids living by themselves with dads that show up the odd weekend here and there. I think that it reminds me so much of where I have come from. That’s kind of made it easier.

Becky’s school enrolls approximately 50 students, Kindergarten through Grade 7. Her perception of the school when she first arrived was that,

the school was total and complete utter chaos. I sound flip when I say this but I mean, in all seriousness, my first goal coming into this school was to decrease the amount of daily bloodshed. It was very violent...I couldn’t begin to teach. I first had to get control...it is hard for anybody, even those that are not my biggest fans, to deny that this is a much better school now. Children are learning. Children are safe.

I found Becky to be open and informative about leading in a rural setting. The interviews with her were consistent and in line with her own observations that “by nature I am an open book.”

Bob Jones

At the time of the interviews, Bob Jones had been a principal for 23 years. Previous to his appointment as principal, Bob taught in the classroom as a grade 2/3 teacher for 7 years. The rural school experience that he speaks to in his interviews was his first principalship. Bob is the only principal whose rural experience was not in a rural coastal community. His rural experience took place in a small community in central British Columbia. The opportunity for him to take on his first principalship arose when

the original principal transferred out and was replaced by a fellow who did not want to be in such a small community. Rather he felt it would be a stepping-stone to a 'bigger and better' job. He found his bigger and better job at Christmas in his first year at the school. The staff, which included my wife and I, along with the community, was not pleased that our new principal had left after such a short period. I was complaining to my wife about this and I stated that even I could have done a better job than the previous guy. My wife challenged me and said why don't you "GO FOR IT"?!...as it turned out, I had a good interview and acquired the new role.

Bob chose to live in the community,

for one reason only: it was the first job offer I was given and I was eager to start teaching, anywhere. I made a number of close friends, found some excellent recreation opportunities; great fishing holes, great skiing, a new wife. After a few years, I found out I really enjoyed the community and remained there for a total of eleven years.

When Bob reflected on his 3 ½ years of being a rural school principal, one of the highlights was "knowing that you are a key player and have made an incredible difference in the lives of children." I had the opportunity to visit Bob at his current school and was not surprised at the numerous pictures and mementos in his office that celebrated both his role as principal and the many positive relationships he has established.

Hans Bergmann

Hans Bergmann has experience in rural schools both in the BC interior as well as in several small coastal communities on Vancouver Island. Hans started his teaching career in a small interior town "to just get experience as a teacher and ended up really liking it. One thing with small towns is I think you have a lot of opportunity come your way." His path to administration

just kind of opened up. The minute I got into a [masters] program, they were interested. Right when I got my degree I had a vice-principalship in a small little rural school. I was the vice principal but really I was the only on-site administrator...I taught and was the vice-principal. That is how I got into admin. It kind of just flowed.

He took on the role of elementary vice-principal after 5 years of teaching.

After several years as a vice-principal in two different districts, including 3 years as a multi-site vice principal, he eventually took on the principalship “of a small school of 80 students at its peak. [He] was also the principal of a boat access only, one room school house”, which he travelled to “once a month on a boat”.

Chapter 5.

Rural Schools and their Community: Honoring Places and Activating Multiple Connections

“Migratoriness has its dangers...I know about this. I was born on wheels, among just such a family. I know the excitement of newness and possibility, but I also know the dissatisfaction and hunger that result from placelessness. Some towns that we lived in were never real to me. They were only the raw material of places, as I was the raw material of a person. Neither place nor I had a chance of being anything unless we could live together for a while”

-Wallace Stegner

Introduction

The close connection between rural schools and their communities is well established in literature, as mentioned in Chapter 2, and is consistently described by the participants in this study. In fact, as I immersed myself in the data, community or aspects of community were intimately connected to the experience of the rural principalship and was a central aspect of the lifeworld of the participants. While resource scarcity and role-multiplicity were also emergent in the accounts gathered in this study, they emerged *within* the context of community. The close living that often occurs in rural communities was found to foster both challenges and opportunities. The participants described the role of leading a rural school as a complex task with high expectations requiring a broad range of expertise. They described the intimate way in which the school and the principal connect with the larger community as making the role of the rural principal complex.

It was apparent from the interviews that the participants felt their role was not to replicate the role of the principal in an urban school, but rather to take advantage of the close connection that the school has with the community. In this chapter the principals share the joys and challenges of involving community members in an effort to increase

educational opportunities for students. They also speak to how they anchor and honor learning outside of the classroom and find ways to embed the curriculum in the locale.

The Importance of Place

In an effort to situate the participants' responses in regards to the importance of place, it is helpful to briefly examine literature as it pertains to place-based education. It is possible to argue that incorporating a strong sense of place as part of the way in which the curriculum is delivered takes into account the local lifeworld. Craig Howley (1997) made the case that:

Rural places in the contemporary world may suffer more than other places from the lack of such research and from the misguided effort to build up widely applicable and reliable procedures for school improvement ... Too few pay attention to rural circumstances, and too few offer anything to fortify the will of those who would see rural schools improve for the benefit of rural community. (p. 132)

Looking at the rural lifeworld in context of the manner in which contemporary schooling is often conducted also enables a deeper understanding of the importance of the response of the participants in relation to their recognition of incorporating the local lifeworld into the system of public schooling.

Corbett (2007) indicated that contemporary schooling is "a massive, coordinated, bureaucratic, social project that up until recently has appeared so firmly entrenched that schooling has become almost synonymous with modernity, civilization, and progress" (p. 63). In rural communities, schooling can often result in the out-migration of rural youth into urban centers and can act in opposition to the local lifeworlds of rural communities. Theobald (1997) observed that in North America, schools can lead to an inevitable crippling of rural communities, warning that "when a society openly embraces political, economic, and education theory that hinges on an individualistic and anthropocentric conception of human nature, community disintegration is logical and predictable" (p. 66). He continued that schooling has become merely about students' future economic roles rather than their roles as citizens who will participate in the economy, democracy, and community (Theobald, 2009). To counter this view of autonomous individualism, Theobald's (1997) pedagogical vision is a model that incorporates both place-based education along with service and responsibility to others. It would seem that despite the

growing “political, economic, and cultural literature describing how reclaiming the local might mitigate against the potentially harmful effects of globalization, little writing exists on the role of education in this process” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xiv). In addition, Corbett (2009), relying on Anthony Giddons, remarked that formal education “has been and continues to be ... a key institution of ‘disembedding,’ loosening ties to particular locals and promoting out-migration from rural places” (p. 1). Bunce (2003) recognized that “the values that sustain the rural idyll speak of a profound and universal human need for connection with land, nature, and community; a psychology which, as people have become increasingly separated from these experiences, reflects the literal meaning of nostalgia; the sense of loss of home, of homesickness” (p. 380).

Jones (1995) studied how young people develop what she calls “socio-spatial identities” which she described as individuals forging identity with respect to place. Bauch (2001) argued that it is through a sense of residence, or place, that individuals form their worldview, an understanding of others as well as themselves. As Gallagher (1993) confirmed, it is our behavior, emotions, dispositions, and thoughts that are “indeed shaped not just by our genes and neurochemistry, history, and relationships, but also by our surroundings” (p. 12).

But the term place is as challenging to define as the term rural. Hayden (1995) suggested “place is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid” (p. 16). As the scope of this discussion is intended to provide context for the participants’ responses, it is worth noting that the “concept [of place-based education] appears to be more pervasive in literature on rural schools and communities than urban and suburban places” (Budge, 2006, p.). A concise definition provided by Gussow (cited in Knapp, 2008) captures my intent for the usage of the word place: “a place is a piece of the whole environment which has been claimed by feelings” (p. 5).

This definition has a high degree of utility as it is not limited in only applying to rural places. While the focus of this study is indeed rural places it is important to note that many urban people have a significant attachment to their local neighborhoods and that the application of place-based education may also have important considerations in suburban schools.

While recognizing that this may hold true for many urban inhabitants' literature, it is clear that many rural inhabitants have a salient attachment to place (Bauch, 2001). Ross (cited in Jennings, 2005) brought together the concept of self and its relation to place:

The more I understand about myself and my immediate place, the more I understand the outside world and the better I can interpret it. We grow outward, like a tree, increasing our growth rings from the tight center of "I", which has a home, a town, a state, a country, a planet. From that center we reach out to understand the ever-expanding circles of experience. But first we need to start in those places closest to our hearts. (p. 1)

The study of place-based education has established a significant paper trail in its young life as an educational movement (Knapp, 2008). As the positive impact of incorporating place-based education is gaining attention, many authors are making the case that the current trend of schooling moving away from place needs to be reversed (Budge 2006; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Knapp, 2008;). Place-based education is largely influenced by the rural school principal and, during the interviews, it became apparent that rural principals consider situating the curriculum in place as a key component of engaging students and the local community. Integrating people from the community into the school was a turning point for the school Thomas Welton led.

That is where the school failed in the past. Anyone who is going to be successful in a rural school has to understand that the opportunities are there...The school can become important in the life of the community and draw from the community for support and resources too.

Not only was Thomas Welton involving community members, he was rooting the curriculum as much as possible in place.

If you are talking about marine life in grade 8 science you can take students down to the beach. You can actually have them pick up oysters and clams and look at them. So, you know, I guess, if you are talking about trees you can just go outside and look. There's that aspect of it. That you have lots of opportunities just by walking outside the schoolyard. You walk 300 yards and you are boom in the middle of a science lesson.

He saw the importance of recognizing that:

This is these guys' world. When you take them out, they know stuff already about it. What you are doing is you are sharpening their knowledge. Sometimes

they know enough because their parents are involved and they can tell you stuff. The other thing, too, is some of these kids have levels of expertise because they are so involved in how their parents are doing things. For example, kids whose parents are running an oyster lease can tell you about tides and harvesting oysters and what you have to do to make sure the oysters are good quality and stuff like that because they live that. You know everybody likes to feel like they are smart. In a rural school, you have the opportunity to, I think in many ways, define things that kids can be smart.

While the focus of this study concerns itself with rural places, these comments indicate that schools could potentially benefit by finding various ways to appreciate and acknowledge the knowledge that students bring to class.

Budge (2006) identified six habits of place and, depending on how they are practiced, they can have a significant impact on student learning. These include (a) connectedness, (b) development of identity and culture, (c) interdependence with the land, (d) spirituality, (e) ideology and politics, and (f) activism and civic engagement. As Sobel (Cited in Knapp, 2008) summarized place-based education as

the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. (p. 7)

Participant Becky Rowe shared that integrating an "outdoor adventure curriculum is probably a career highlight." She continued,

It is so exciting. It is because we have this beautiful, beautiful facility that you would never find anywhere in town. With the kind of people who are hugely outdoorsy, with a passion for nature. The kind of people you wouldn't find in the city. There is a real strong farm ethic out here. That, I mean, it combines I don't know how many farmers you have known but that's what I term salt-of-the-earth people. It combines rather uniquely with the redneckedness and kids who know how to clean out a chicken coop and are close to animals and gardening. I don't know if the kids would be as keen on the greenhouse if it was in town. Maybe they would; I don't know. I haven't done it in a place like that. Those kinds of things are really, really supported here.

She talked further and at length about some of the joys she had experienced in integrating this outdoor education program into the school. She describes it as “21st Century learning,” and described a lesson as honoring and rooted in place. She worked with her staff to begin,

taking learning out of the classroom. That is absolutely essential, like let me tell you about our day yesterday ... you know the kids who don't work in the class are the stars out there. The excitement and the enthusiasm and the stuff they come back with, like kids who don't write come back and will write 2.5 pages in like 20 minutes. Where, until now, to get three sentences out of that kid was a real struggle. But you know because they have these common experiences, because you know they are just so excited about it and it's you know, First Nations and socials studies and science and team building and then, you know, after the activities they have to debrief. How did you support each other? How did you encourage each other? Just watching, yesterday was a highlight, watching how kind they were to each other. That's a career highlight. You know, I mean every child isn't perfect all the time, I mean they still do nasty stuff to each other but for the most part that particular day it was a source of pride.

By centering education within the local context it is possible to develop a rich sense of citizenship and civic action. Theobald (1997) developed this possibility:

Beginning at the elementary level, students must be socialized into the practice and habit of researching and deliberating answers that vex their communities *at the moment*. Schools can become places that live and work in the present, with no more attention paid to the past or future than the amount necessary to add substance and depth to students' increasingly complex understandings about the world and the place of their community within it. (emphasis in original, p. 134).

Rural schools can play a significant role in this process of negotiation. Students anchored in place who respond to issues within their communities are likely to be well prepared for a future in either the country or the city. Effective school-community relations raise student persistence and achievement (Agbo, 2007; Nieto, 2004). Nieto (2004) makes the case that student achievement is positively impacted by high levels of parent involvement in schools to the point that schools with this involvement outperform schools that have lesser degrees of participation. Perrone (1989) argued that “every community has persons with experience who could further enrich life in schools ... [however many schools have] depended on teachers alone [and as a result have] been limited by the experience base that teachers bring to their classrooms” (p. 19). The limitation of not involving the community in meaningful ways is even more apparent in rural schools where staff often consists of just a few adults. Relying solely on the

expertise of a few staff members limits the access to potential elective and enriching opportunities for the students. This likely holds true for urban and suburban schools as well, though often the number of staff is significantly larger and may represent a greater diversity of interests and specialties than some rural schools, which often have very few staff members.

Inviting and incorporating community members exposes students to more additional learning opportunities while potentially strengthening the relationship between the school and community. In addition, parents and others from the community often center the educational opportunity in place. The activity, lesson, or skill has local value and honours both a curriculum, or learning objective, and local values. This creates a win/win situation benefiting both students and community perception of the school.

Hans Bergmann indicated this possibility:

Also I think just tapping into the resources in the community in the shops and things like that. Just, you know having, drawing people to come in and share their expertise. It usually is quite easy in a rural community; at least, in the ones that I was in. It was really nice and so that let people know that you are willing to work; it sends the message out into the community that you are willing to try and make the education as valuable as you can for their children.

During another interview Hans Bergmann expanded on this idea:

Also trying, of course, to align the education to the needs of the community when you can do that. So an example of that is in the one community I had was very resource and trades based. I really advocated for our shop in the school to, you know, to, stay open because we had such a small population base. Then I used the experts from the mills and things to come in and share the resources and that worked out quite well. So I would say know your community, take your time, and get involved.

For Thomas Welton, the involvement of community members was a key way of increasing opportunities available for students:

One of the things about a rural community is that if you can identify sources of expertise, you also can identify whether they would be appropriate to be in the school. So you can enhance the educational opportunities for kids but also by screening, because of the knowledge available in the school, you can also have the parents see that as a positive thing for their children even though these people are not teachers. If you have a guy who creates his own bio-diesel and does a lesson, for example, and the parents know this guy and think it pretty cool that he came and did that for you, where else would you get a Grade 6 class, for

example, that would actually make bio-diesel? There are some real opportunities in a rural community, educational opportunities that kids in larger schools would not get ...Yet in a rural community you know who they are.

The principals who participated in this study claimed that honoring the local, both by bringing in the community to the school through active participation in the classroom and by taking learning out of the classroom into the community, was important. For some rural schools it was the intra-dependence of school and community that inevitably brought about some of the greatest learning opportunities

Rural education of most worth takes context as a principal defining condition (Howley, et al., 2005). In fact, Howley and colleagues (2005), asserted that, “we might as well *not have* rural education research, nor rural education for that matter, [if it] fails to center itself on rural cultures and ways of engaging life” (p. 22).

Celebrations

Part of the manifestation of the rural school as the heart of the community is evidenced by the significant involvement of the community in school celebrations, activities, and performances. These events often demonstrate the impact and interest of the local community because members of the community who do not appear to have any direct link to the school will still attend performances and events. Ben Anderson described the sense of joy hosting school events.

Just the large family sense you get when you do celebrations. When you do celebrations in rural schools they are a big deal. I mean, you get lots of parents turning up for assemblies. You get lots of extended families coming for various things. You even get people who are simply community members who are not really attached to the school other than friends of the friends of the friends. They'll show up for things. It is kind of a neat feeling to see the impact that your school has on the life of the community. That is a huge joy.

Thomas Welton echoed the sentiment of the school being the life of the community.

When something happens in the school everybody shows up. When you have the Christmas concert it is not just the parents who show up, it's the aunts and uncles, grandparents, and even just people who went to the school 40 years ago who just want to go to the concert. The other thing is you can do things, like we

did pancake breakfasts, wienie roasts, and stuff like that. People who came were really appreciative that the school had provided a way for them to get together. Those kinds of things, as well as highlighting the school and thanking the community, were always a way for people to get together and to have a real positive experience connected with the school. It is very difficult to do that in town. We invited the community. There is a lot more community support than in an urban setting.

As Hans Bergmann reflected on the positive aspects of his rural experience he concludes that:

Some of my greatest joys ... I think, in some of my extremely small schools was just how important things like a Christmas concert are. We had one little school where we had seven kids put on a two-hour presentation and the whole little community came out to watch. It was the school's gift to the community, which is how it was presented and people loved it.

Celebrations are a way that rural schools form part of the tapestry of the local lifeworld. The leadership provided by the rural principal in supporting celebrations appears to have a significant impact on their schools and the community as a whole.

Chapter 6.

Role Multiplicity, Community Scrutiny and Isolation

Introduction

In an article titled, *In Rural Schools, the Principal's Motto should be: "Be Everything to Everybody all the Time,"* Buckingham (2001) put into perspective the constant challenge associated with the wide range of roles and diverse expectations on the rural principal. Role-differentiation and the complexity of diverse tasks entailed while leading a rural school were identified as persistent challenges by the principals in this study. This is consistent with the limited research available regarding the rural principalship. Starr and White (2008), for example, identified work proliferation and escalating role multiplicity as on-going challenges for many rural school administrators.

This chapter explores the diverse roles performed by rural administrators, such as building maintenance and community involvement, as well as professional and educational leadership demands and the resulting social and professional isolation which can result. Being "center-stage," rural principals shared how they needed to demonstrate expertise in a wide range of areas, ranging from building maintenance to providing medical advice as well as needing to be positive role models for teaching and leadership.

With all the challenges and opportunities, I discovered that there were two sides to each challenge. As role-multiplicity emerged it also became apparent that the challenges of meeting a wide range of expectations under the close scrutiny of the community was a source of pride and joy as well as a source of personal and professional growth.

Role-Multiplicity

Becky Rowe thought the diverse and demanding roles placed on her as a rural principal was one of the most significant challenges of the assignment. She indicated that

Everything is in your ballpark. Absolutely everything. Things that in another place might be picked up by other agencies. It sort of seems like, here, if I don't put together soccer no one will. Or, if they don't get music at the school they don't get music anywhere.

She also recognized the importance of flexibility, a necessity "because you have lots of different boots to wear. Yeah, you have to be a jack-of-all trades. People have, I think, different expectations from you, maybe than they would in town."

Sue Colbeck described "the demand to wear many hats" as "it is the principal who is the one that takes care of the hallway displays, computer lab, and recycling; coaches the sports teams, etc. All this on top of the administrative and leadership activities that one needs to do." Bob Jones, who now works in a more urban setting, reflected with a chuckle:

During the three and a half years I was the principal, I gained experience through a number of unique, often comical, events. One of the things that stood out was the need to do everything. If the furnace stopped working, through trial and error, I figured out how to get it going again. If students missed the bus and their parents did not have a working vehicle, I knew where they lived and I could provide a ride home.

Ben Anderson articulated the pressure of being seen as the person who has the answers or a solution to any given problem.

Because you are isolated and if there is an issue arising the sense is that somehow, because you are the educational leader in the school, the staff will often assume that you are going to step in and solve or have solved and sorted out physical plant issues ... I'm not a heating/air-conditioning person. I am not a skilled plumber, I am not a skilled electrician and you get called on just by, just by virtue that you are the principal. You get called on to do things that really fall outside of what you would consider to normally be your realm, and in a school in a larger community you would simply pick up the phone and pass that issue off, and while you have to do that, while you have to pass those issues off even in a rural school there is still a lot more pressure to, for you to be seen doing something. So I find in this school and my other previous rural schools that if I

have my head poked inside the electrical panel that seems to be (laughs) ... they want me to do that. They want me to fiddle with a dial or a gauge. They want me to flip a switch and see what happens ... that when there are problems that you are the person they go to who will attempt to resolve it.

Hans Bergmann echoed what he perceived as the many diverse tasks he was responsible for.

First of all I think you do everything. You definitely do everything. When I mean everything, you teach and you do know, you do all the administrative stuff. The managing of the building and then, also trying to do the leading, the professional development and that kind of stuff. You feel, I felt like I was kind of all by myself.

Many of the tasks that principals take on in rural environments are very different than those of their city counterparts. In fact some of the school maintenance issues that are normally handled by union employees may be just dealt with by rural school administrators. An example of this recognition comes while Hans Bergmann reflected on all the

stuff I would do for maintenance around the school. There would be 25 grievances in town but it was just expected that I would do it. You know so sometimes I would go out and if the playground needed woodchips spread out so that it would meet requirements ... it would be me who would spread it out.

Hans Bergmann also was sought out for counselling, to advocate for community services on behalf of needy children and families, and, even on occasion, dispense medical advice.

So, yeah, a lot of people would ask about stuff. Counselling. Yeah you were kind of the go-to-guy for advocating. A lot of the parents would come to you and say, you know for other things in their children's lives. You were definitely a go-to person to talk to see what you could do and who would they talk to. To find out where would they should go if they needed some extra help or supports? Where would I go to do this or that? Yeah, and then for medical needs. Now we were fortunate enough to have a doctor in the community. When he arrived that piece was kind of removed.

Each of these diverse challenges is often undertaken under the very public scrutiny of a close community.

Visibility and Community Scrutiny

The rural principalship is a high-visibility, center-stage position in small communities. Bob Jones recognized that:

Being the principal of the only school in the community means you're in the spotlight at all times. Everyone seems to know everyone else's business ... It is an important deal. It is an important position in a smaller community. They will, the community members, parents often look for things from you that they wouldn't necessarily bother you with in a larger community.

Leslie Brown commented that "Everybody knows everybody; you are not, you are not an invisible person. If you do something in the community everybody in the school knows. So their citizenship in the community becomes part of who they are at the school". Part of the complexity of the role of principal in rural schools is the limited delineation between their role in the school and their role outside of it. Cloke, Stevens and Wildy (2006) noted that,

rural communities expect teachers to understand and relate to rural life (notwithstanding that their rural teaching appointment may be their first venture beyond city life), to live in the community and participate in local organizations, and to act as role models and maintain an appropriate standard of behavior, professionally and socially. (p. 76)

An Australian publication, the *Teaching Principal's Guide* (1999), is "explicit in its recognition that the nature and extent of relationships between parents, community members, and a school are likely to be highlighted in a rural context, where the active interdependence between the school and its community is one of fundamental significance" (Clarke, Stevens & Wildy, 2006, p. 76). Ironically the high visibility and scrutiny can lead to a sense of social isolation.

Jenkins (2007) asserted that the greatest difference between the practice of an urban and rural superintendent is the transparency in the leadership and the visibility of the superintendent in a rural community. While this may or may not be the greatest difference between an urban and rural principal, it certainly is a significant factor that contributes to the complexity of leading in a rural school. Fiore (2000) stated: "Educational leaders receive a great deal of criticism due to the precariousness of their positions atop the hierarchical structure of many American schools" (p.11). Based on

the interview responses of the participants in this study I suggest that the complexity of the position of rural school administrators pertains not only to their high visibility within the school but also their continual visibility in the wider community.

Jenkins (2007) claimed that, "Small school superintendents are exposed to the public more than large school superintendents. Pig shows, parades, pow-wows, and community meals are a way of life...this type of environment can give one the feeling of living in a fishbowl" (p. 29). Ben Anderson brought up the importance of being visible as a point of advice for other rural principals and exhorted them to:

Look for opportunities to do community activities. If there is a parade, if there is a fair, if there's a dinner of some kind that you are able to attach to early on then take the opportunity to be visible; you don't have to be a major participant but you have to be visible. That's an acknowledgement that the community is valued and that you are interested in their lives. I would make a point of doing that.

Hans Bergmann made an intentional effort to be visible in the community and would:

show up at some community forums just to show that I did care. To be seen visibly at 8 o'clock at night even though they would expect me to be back home, that was, I think that was very important. People living in a rural community are very passionate about their community and they want always what is best for it. They want to know they have somebody who cares ... that is why I always tried to do as much as I could ... people liked to see that you cared.

Thomas Welton also felt that being visible in the community was an important role as leader. He "always tried to make [him]self visible and available and take part in things. I took part in the market, that sort of thing." Participant Sue Colbeck saw the role and complexity of the rural principalship as a double-edged sword:

Although there is a lack of anonymity, there is a close community; the opportunities are more limited, especially to specialize, but the experience more broad, meaning if you wear lots of hats you will learn lots of roles. The opportunities for professional development are limited so we often rely on our own expertise and as a consequence, the local capacity grows.

Ben Anderson noted that "sometimes quite a dichotomy exists between the people in the community towards structured employment. But your job, they will really

respect people who are observably working hard for them and being there is an important role.” He explained further that:

You get a lot of mileage out of being present. So that means being there first and leaving last. That may not be necessary all the time but it is noticed in a small community. I would have casual comments made to me like “Oh yeah, I saw you there at 5 o’clock or I saw you there at 7 in the morning” and there is a level of respect attached to work.

Thomas Welton noticed that despite the laidback “free lifestyle” of the people in the community, he:

had parents come up after a couple of months and tell me that they appreciated the fact that I came to school with a shirt and tie...that whole thing about the community being full of counter-culture people but they appreciated when their principal dressed formally.

The scrutiny of the community and caring for the building worked to Hans Bergmann’s advantage. Despite the time demands and difficulty of dealing with such a diverse range of expectations, he discovered:

One of the positives is that, like I felt that especially in one community that I got accepted into the community by showing great care for the building, which is in the center of the town. You know I was always picking up garbage. For example, on Halloween everyone would light off their firecrackers on the field and I would always clean it up and you know, just to take pride in that. I think it showed people, people could see you doing that and then also doing things in the community.

Rumor/Communication

Living close with the community is a reality given the small populations of many rural areas. Unfortunately, this can become problematic for principals. The feeling of being “on-call 24/7” (Ben Anderson) created an awkward guarded premise that surfaces regardless of the interaction, time of day, or location. In the community where Becky Rowe was school principal, members of the community “certainly all know what is going on with each other. Well connected, sounds more positive than it is. There are groups of people and families and there are no secrets around here.” It seems, according to Thomas Welton, that parents “just wanted reassurance. They wanted that connection and I just made a point of listening.”

This lack of “secrets” brought Ben Anderson to consider small communities as “huge rumor mills” which required a “clarity of communication” from the principal. This clarity is “vital because whatever you say will be interpreted in a number of ways, the clearer you are the easier it is to go back and reference that for the next person who comes along challenging whatever it is that you happen to be saying.” For Hans Bergmann, the sharing of information was one of his biggest challenges in a rural location. He believed that his “biggest challenge was the rumor milling. It required you to have trust and develop those good relationships and you try to show again the caring piece.” Maintaining boundaries was key for Hans Bergmann. In addition to parents delivering information, Hans Bergmann found

that community organizations would sometimes share information with me that I did not necessarily need to know. You know that impacted things. I had to be careful to ensure that I was not participating in gossip. I didn’t like that and had to be careful not to fall into that trap.

Thomas Welton described this fluidity of information as unique to rural settings. “If somewhere in town, if people say the school is doing this - then yeah, so what? But, if people in a rural location say this, word gets around. People talk. They know each other, right?” Ben Anderson spoke to the kinds of conversations that take place in rural communities:

Standing outside, and in the rural communities you do hear those intense conversations and there is, in some respects they are very private people, there is a lot more sharing of stuff that you wouldn’t expect to hear. And so, in that way, I think the complexity of dealing with a small issue is not that it is a small issue, it is that it has its tentacles in ways that we can either, we can either ignore in bigger schools or because the people are more engaged in other activities they ignore. A conflict with my neighbour in a sub urban setting is quite a bit different than my conflict with a neighbour in a rural setting if that is my only neighbour; right? And that’s my social interaction. Everywhere I go I am going to see that person.

The kinds of intimate information that Ben Anderson would overhear had an impact on his decision-making. He described it as

impacting the decision-making often. A lot. Because you know what the background is. One of the advantages that I had that I’ll call an advantage in not living directly in the community is that I could plead ignorance ... So I could, I could know about, I could know about a particular conflict, a fight or a breakup or a relationship issue in the community and, and then speak to a person and sort

of plead ignorance. Oh, I wasn't aware it was that this was, so what I am dealing with is this particular issue. I don't know anything about the other piece. Where in truth, of course, I know a lot about the other piece but because I am not acknowledging it and having to take sides I can ... you know, the small downside is they often think you are a complete idiot.

Teaching and Leading

Many rural school principals have a significant teaching component as part of their assignment. The demands on the “doubly loaded,” or rather principals that must divide their time between the demands of both teaching and leading the school may result in “role conflict” (Law & Glover, 2000). An example of this was a recent principalship where Sue Colbeck explained that her position (assignment) consisted of “.6 teaching library, PE, grade 4/5 Socials, Science, Art, and French; supervising most recesses and all lunch hours.” Recent increases in demands from the British Columbia Ministry of Education in regard to monitoring and reporting have resulted in an “emphasis on proving rather than improving” (Clarke & Wildy, 2004, p. 558). Clarke and Wildy (2004) proposed conceptualizing the role conflict and the complexity of rural principals' work through the use of dilemmas. For example:

Principals are confronted with the dilemmas of providing both strong and shared leadership; using resources effectively while working collaboratively; being responsible for decisions made by or with others; and being responsible to local needs within a framework of system priorities. (p. 558)

Dempster, Freakely, and Parry (2001) take this idea of role conflict dilemmas further, proposing the concept of “values dualities.” These values include local versus systems priorities, loyalty to teachers versus parents, self-determination versus social responsibility, the rights of the individual versus the right of the majority, and compliance versus professional autonomy. These dualities are present in both urban and rural environments but the stage on which these dualities present themselves is under greater scrutiny in rural locations. Becky Rowe explained:

Something about you know the things that make it the hardest are also, the things that are the biggest challenges are also the things that make it the easiest. For instance, you have lots and lots of flexibility in terms of how you do things in a rural school ... well I do anyway. Because the staff is small it is a whole lot easier to get consensus. The student population is small and you can get to know everybody a whole lot more intimately and to keep kind of track of how they

are doing academically and socially and who their friends are. But, that same smallness that gives you the flexibility also means that you have to work so much harder.

In addition to the complex building, maintenance, and classroom obligations the educational leadership demands are significant. Thomas Welton described the dual obligations as follows:

[You have] to have a strong educational background. You have to have wide knowledge of stuff. Like you have to know how the school district operates and who to contact and stuff like that. You have to have a wider knowledge of curriculum. When you are a rural school principal you have to have a wider subject area because you often have a larger range of grades ... It is quite possible that at one point you are dealing with a kindergarten kid and two hours later you are dealing with a grade 9 kid who has done something that they shouldn't have been doing. That's a pretty wide range.

In addition to addressing educational leadership and administrative aspects, the principals articulated that issues needed to be handled sensitively and in consideration of other potential concerns present in the wider community:

You have to acknowledge at times that your role is more that of a counsellor or someone who is offering some sage listening than as a real educationally focused leader. Sometimes those educational issues slide back farther on the priority scale not because you want them to but simply because the needs of the staff are that intense in that environment. That's ... a funny feeling to be in that position occasionally. Because you know you get into the job thinking that we are going to be making a difference for children. We all experience and I think everyone who has gone into the administrative role is partly there because they don't like the frustration of being in a classroom and then not have something work for them. So when you get into the leadership role (laughs) what you really want to do is, is improve the kids' life chances and then you find yourself in sort of the agony at for lots of things that go on. It takes a while to adjust to. (Hans Bergmann)

In rural communities it can be very difficult to work through conflicts. Ben Anderson described this complexity:

In a small community those [conflicts] are, can be, extreme. In the sense that you've got people who are in conflict in a very small community where sides have been taken by the community at large and you are trying to referee and smooth over and in some more extreme circumstances solve in one way or another, those sorts of conflicts ... and even the nature of the lack of resource in small community in terms of providing support for those folks, you tend to take on those kinds of, you know, you are social worker, chief cook, and bottle washer. You are a spiritual advisor, all sorts of little things that you get thrust into that you

don't really anticipate ... I go to pick up a jug of milk and I will see them. I am going to get on the highway or get on the ferry and I'm going to be sitting there beside them and so the way of handling those conflicts is a lot different. In a bigger community you can ignore each other. In smaller communities, it's terrible; it's terribly hard to ignore each other.

The idea of the interconnectedness of issues was expanded on by Thomas

Welton:

I think the uniqueness of the rural piece is around the interconnected nature of the community and the issues you deal with. In a rural setting when I am dealing with a discipline issue between students it's often more of a familial problem ... Again, because it [the school] is the social center of the community ... you know there is almost always one family member that is around the building on a fairly regular basis and so your contact with them is fairly intense. You're listening to them talk about their relationships in the community. You're hearing them talk about things that are fairly intimate. That you maybe wouldn't, well I know working in bigger schools that they are conversations that you would never hear ... And so in that way I think the complexity of dealing with a small issue is not that it is a small issue; it is that it has its tentacles.

Hans Bergmann's description of a "typical" day demonstrates some of the potential day-to-day conflicts that results from the dual load of teaching and leading:

I think a rural principal's role is one of many. A typical day might start off by taking care of things in the building, things that just need to be taken care of. There wouldn't be maintenance or anyone around so you would do as much as you could do to maintain the facilities. Start off your day like that. Of course, in any day, I would always be teaching at least 40 to 60% of a day. So, in that you are kind of always walking in the door prepared. Just the 50 other things that could go on. And then, because again in the rural setting what I found is usually you are the center of the community so you'd be quite involved in a lot of the other community things. So any given day you will first of all be taking care of the building and then you are taking care of all the students. With that, the discipline pieces, as well as the educational needs, and special needs and all of that. So advocating to try and get things for your school, trying to network with agencies. You'd be busy on the good old telephone because we didn't have many people come. They would not usually come in. Then, and then of course, teaching and then also there is the, you know, what I found a little bit more draining was the initial politicking of the smaller community sometimes. I found some days you'd have to try, you know just, for some people the rumor mill would be a piece of what they did. It wasn't for me. I would always try to remove myself from that, was always very cognizant of being professional.

Part of the complexity of the rural principalship assignment is that for many the rural school principalship was their first administrative experience. Ben Anderson recognized this, commenting:

One of them is that it often is the first administrative posting because it is a smaller location. I think that perhaps, traditionally, that was viewed as a good place to get your feet wet. To not be overburdened by masses of problems. The distinction that was told me was that your problems tend to come at you one at a time so you have a chance to deal with something until it was off your desk and then comes another one. Whereas, in a larger school they may come cascading. You are dealing with several at once. I wouldn't deny that, although I think over the last couple of decades as schools have changed and communities have changed. I don't think that we are acknowledging necessarily the skill set, that for putting somebody brand new into some of these places, is as adequate as it used to be because those schools, while they are much smaller than some of the other schools, they bring with them a set of dynamics that are ... that are really complex and I think it takes, you know, the right kind of person to be able to deal with it effectively.

Advantages of Role-multiplicity

The many challenges and diverse roles that Bob Jones encountered as a rural principal left him with the confidence to be a “jack-of-all trades” having “worked as a teacher in all elementary grades and in pretty much every capacity.” He was able to develop this capacity “in an environment where I could become a risk-taker with no real consequences other than those I imposed on myself. I could be creative: in fact, that was a prerequisite for survival. I could truly say “I did it my way.”

For Becky Rowe, there was a responsibility, realization, and recognition that she had the capacity to “change school culture.” She explained:

I have taken a place that didn't have a very nice tone when you walked into it. It was chaos; it was scary. Now it is just joyful. You know? I take a lot of credit for that because it has been such a transitioning staff that there is only one other person who has been here with me the whole time.

Ben Anderson shared that the pressure of being isolated and responsible for “making decisions on issues that most colleagues in town settings don't have to make the ultimate decision on” has become a growth opportunity. He expressed appreciation at what he had learned as a result of the rural principalship. He shared that the rural principalship:

gave me an opportunity to be a lot more thoughtful about why I was making those decisions because they were impacting so many other people. I think that really helped me grow, because I know when I have somebody come to me with a situation that my mind is on the broader implications of that rather than just narrowly focusing on the issue.

For Ben Anderson the rural principalship gave him the next layer of questions such as, “How do I acquire resources? Support students? Support families? Make things happen? Keep the school functioning and moving forward? I know inside me that it [the rural principalship] has helped me be better at my job today”.

Ben Anderson also expressed a sense of pride he had as he reflected on the “really powerful positive connections with people in the communities themselves where I have been.” Taking on the many roles of the rural principal offered him the satisfaction of establishing:

really good strong community connections that enabled me to drive forward some of those agendas that we need to do around early learning and around ah, differentiated learning and, sort of, not necessarily a seismic shift but you could feel the seals popping and the whole machine lumbering forward a bit. That’s, that’s a very, very neat feeling because in the rural setting it is you that is doing it. It is not the collective education system; it is you on the spot almost willing that to occur.

The feeling of “contributing to make a difference, both toward individuals and the school community at large” were seen to “compensate for a lot of other things.” (Ben Anderson)

The challenges of the wide range of roles and responsibilities of the rural principalship was reflected on by Hans Bergmann with a sense of gratitude. In his current position in a suburban elementary school he

draws on those [rural] experiences more than I ever thought I would because you are kind of “it.” Being “it,” forces you to kind of, again, be thoughtful and reflective...I learned not to react to everything as quickly, to take time and think, to make a thoughtful decision. That was invaluable for me.

Social and Professional Isolation

Another complicating aspect of life for rural school administrators is the experience of social isolation. This isolation occurs as a result of the prominent role of the principal in the community. As Ben Anderson explained:

There is a social isolation that comes from working as an administrator in a rural community. You don't have, you can be friends with a lot of people in town here that have nothing to do with your school but in a rural community you have to be really careful that your circle of friends is essentially restricted in some respects to the people you work with, you know, and that kind of limits it.

Thomas Welton stated that he “never forgets [his] role. [He is] always the principal.”

Miller (1981) noted “compartmentalizing roles is difficult for professionals in rural areas because their personal lives are subject to close scrutiny by the community” (p. 146). The social isolation Thomas Welton described is directly connected to his belief of always acting in the community as the principal regardless of whether the issue or event is directly connected to the school.

The other thing I suppose is really important is, I've always kept this in mind in every school I have worked, I can be friendly but not friends, in terms of people that I have to work with. Parents and students and stuff like that. I am friendly but not friends with any of them. That's the thing about being an administrator living in a rural community. It is a real mistake to step over that line of being friendly to friends in the community. Because it can compromise your position when you have to deal with things that you know are probably difficult for the parents or the students. You know when a child gets into a conflict with another child, if that child happens to be the child of a friend and that's known in the community, then if you make a decision that favors that child that has no connection whatsoever with friendship you have to deal with the whole accusation, that you did that because you are friends with the parents. That is one of the things.

The social isolation that Thomas Welton experienced had a detrimental impact on his family.

It was one of those things that really affected my wife; [she] was really feeling like an outsider because people in this, this is a very closed community in terms of friendships. They already have their friends so it is hard to break in. That was one of the things. For me, for example, the long hours I was working it was pretty difficult to meet people outside of the school settings.

In part, the tension of integrating into the community and establishing strong intra-personal relationships, but doing so as a professional was described by Becky Rowe:

I wouldn't say I am integrated into the community. I would say I am integrated into aspects of the community but I am not one of them. I have more acceptance from some than others. I think because I don't live here. I mean it is probably my greatest strength and my greatest weakness. I think too much familiarity, I don't have that problem. I have lots and lots of relationships; they're good but they are professional and they are arm's length.

Ben Anderson identified the potential isolation of his teaching staff as a critical element of the role of the rural principal. He spoke to this tension of being a professional in a small rural community as a pressure that existed both for him and for his staff.

So it's that whole professionalism piece that I have a role to play here and, whatever my personal feelings might be about that, I have to keep that part at the forefront of my mind. It is, you know, it varies for every person. Every person who teaches has different ways of handling that. But in those rural communities, that can be a very tough thing to handle. I think as a leader that is something that you really have to watch. Like you have to be aware of where your people are emotionally around their work and the community and, and do as much as you can to support them in maintaining that professional, um, outlook on what it is that they do. So, I found that certainly a unique thing in that in a larger urban or sub urban kind of setting that that is more of a given. That people are not as deeply attached to community issues that interfere with the learning. That it is more about the learning conditions. That those are the things that excite people.

Ben believed that part of the role of the rural principal was helping to guide and mentor his staff in terms of their relationships with the other members of the community. Living and leading in a small community often puts the principal at the forefront of issues that impact children and families. These issues are

there 24 hours a day and, again as a school leader, you often, and because they get drawn into some of those, as you inevitably do, when you are living there, that, that even peripherally you are attached to it. Even though you don't have any particular commitment to one thing or another. That, that you end up having to work really hard as leaders having to support those folks in their professional lives. Like you are doing more counselling around, or more support things around, who they are as professionals as opposed to what I do as a professional. (Ben Anderson)

Mellow (2005) claimed that rural life problematizes notions of professionalism; and, that “professionals are drawn into a *gemeinschaft-gessellschaft* gavotte as they try to reconcile their experience of rural society with the standards of professional work that emerge from urban settings” (p. 30-31). Although Mellow focused on rural clergy and nurses, it would appear that the same concerns apply to the work of the rural principal.

Considering this tension further, it is useful to examine a study of rural social workers. Martinez-Brawley (1986) reported that rural workers are more likely to find themselves in dual relationships due to the relative isolation and small size of rural populations. A dual relationship exists when there is a relationship that exists outside of the professional context, that is “a further meaningful relationship with clear role expectations and obligations, such as employer, friend, family member ...” (Brownlee, 1996, p. 498). The reported experience of rural social workers appears to resonate with that of the rural school principal.

In addition to the challenges of social isolation and the difficulty of maintaining professionalism, some of the principals in this study expressed a sense of isolation from other administrators and district office. Bob Jones identified this isolation as one of his greatest challenges:

Contact with my colleagues was rare! I remember feeling truly excited about going to an admin. meeting. The other principals thought my enthusiasm for meetings was a bit odd but I really enjoyed being in the company of other principals and discussing issues with them. Getting some advice from a fellow principal meant a long distance call instead of a friendly chat in some pub. Being a new principal without an established group of colleagues meant that I was a bit reluctant to making all those long distance calls.

One of the challenges of being isolated is that “you are the person doing all the organizing in many cases. Creativity, because you are alone. If you sort of rely on the spark of others to be creative you can struggle” (Ben Anderson). Thomas Welton added:

I guess one of the things is that because of the distance and stuff you don't, when you live in a rural community you can pick up the phone and talk to somebody but sometimes it is nice like in town to go to another school and just sit in the office with somebody else that you have respect and regard for. You can say this shit is happening here. It is not the same on the phone. That stuff that you get that connection, or that back-up that you get, you are really on the

end of the branch, you know; you are sort of tap dancing at the end of the branch. There is no safety net in a rural school, or the safety net is not nearly as strong. You can't call somebody in the board office, for example, and say I have an emergency down here; can you come down here and sit with me while I meet with this parent because I am ... that kind of thing.

The physical distance between rural schools and the district head office can also create a feeling of isolation. Ben Anderson was aware that the distance could also create an interesting dynamic between the rural principal and district administration.

The district administration one can be trickier; because you are rural, you tend to get left alone unless there is something going wrong. You have to be sort of wary and careful that the only time you have contact is when you have a problem. I think that is a real, real danger. You know everybody is busy and we're small. They don't particularly want to hear about, or they don't ask about, when or how things are going when they are going well. You tend to have contact with them when things are not going very well. So, just again, having a thicker skin around that to just being aware that if things are going, if you are doing something really neat you are not necessarily going to get or expect lots of, lots of praise and communication because they are not aware. So that's, that's a thing there; so keeping contact with them is important because if you do fall off the radar it takes that much longer to get their attention again, without being negative about it.

Becky Rowe also experienced a sense of isolation both as a result of the difficult and diverse challenges that she experienced and the feeling that she had to deal with them on her own.

I was being hit with things that I had no expectation of dealing with. And the other part around the isolation for them was that I also came to understand fairly quickly that I was also very isolated in terms of support. That the casual interactions that you would have with itinerant professionals, for example, when you are in a town school can't happen in rural schools. Their time is scheduled when they are working on a specific thing. And the scheduling itself was a bit strange. You'd have somebody scheduled and then weather would intervene and they would not arrive. You'd go weeks on end waiting for the speech language, or the psychologist, or a techy, or anything else, an HVAC [heating, ventilation and air conditioning] person, and trying to just sort of carry on without having that, that support. That was unusual. I was used to having, having worked out of the board office on the pro-d thing, I was used to having all kinds of conversations with all kinds of people pretty much at the drop of a hat. You could puzzle through and bounce things off folks. While you were doing one thing, you would be solving three or four other things at the same time. And that, and it, all of that stuff disappeared once I crossed a certain road leaving the city on my way to the rural school. So that was, that was a big, big shock for me.

Ben Anderson was aware that the isolation he felt was a reflection of the lack of exposure his long serving staff had towards new ideas and openness to change. He spoke of the difficulty in finding someone who understood the particulars of his rural context and the isolation he felt in bringing new ideas to staff.

I worked with people who had been teaching at the school for 25 years. I mean I came in at the end of their careers and that was, that was really kind of unique because they had this perspective about the way things functioned and I had my thoughts about how it goes and so we'd sit down and try and work through what the modern world was bringing to them and the sense of isolation was something that really struck me very quickly. That in those particular, and I am going to say those, because I followed that rural principalship up with another rural school and the situation was very similar, very long serving teaching staff that had not turned over because the schools were shrinking so no new people were coming in. It was, it was very, very interesting. Once the first week was done, to realize how in an isolated area where you would expect people to feel they had lots of freedom to do lots of different things how, how rigid the processes were in the building. That was a real surprise to me. So that was a huge learning curve that I had to overcome. I was coming in with, not even with expectations, but just certainty of knowledge that this was the way that we, you know, just mother and apple pie things. So, yeah, we all do this or we all do that; now I mean people don't do this any longer. Going up there and realizing that in a sense I was in a bit of time warp and people did do that and that there were community expectations about certain things going on that hadn't existed in the larger community in a long time. So that was, for me, a culture shock; it was huge. So that was a, that was a steep learning curve and not a lot of, not a lot of resources to draw on for that.

A solution for Ben Anderson was in establishing a strong relationships with other leaders in the community:

Making connections with people who are the other leaders, who are playing leadership roles in the community. Fire department, ambulance, police, if there is a village council. People who run the store. Those sorts of folks are important to know and to have a bit of a relationship with. You can contact them and have conversations with them about what you are trying to do.

For Sue Colbeck, it was not isolation from colleagues, but the difficulty she experienced when her colleagues differed in their orientation of what is important and valued.

Another one is when the administration in the district take on a particular "tone" or slant and it is not your tone or slant, it can be a bit lonely. For example, we

have really lost our climate of collaboration and shared leadership. Directives come from above and we are expected to run our schools accordingly. Over time, many of the principals have begun to reflect that tone in their schools. When another perspective is voiced, it can be pretty lonely.

Despite being a constant challenge, isolation was also described favorably by Becky Rowe. She felt that, “As a first time principal there is something to be said from being able to figure things out without being the center of the universe. It is a little bit of a nice place to learn ... that you can muddle along and figure things out by yourself and have lots of privacy to do this.” It seems that Becky Rowe’s observation that all the “things [that make the rural principalship] difficult are all the things that make it easier” is more than just an optimistic perspective as the participants in this study consistently demonstrated that the challenges they faced also created positive opportunities for their own role as principal and for the benefit of the learners in their schools.

Chapter 7.

Resources

The rural principals in this study consistently described accessing sufficient human and material resources as a challenge. The resource pressure was often a reflection of declining enrolment, insufficient recognition of the complexity of multi-age multi-grade classrooms, and the economic downturn experienced in many rural resource-based communities. Thomas Welton felt that as a rural principal, “you constantly have got to be supporting your teachers in getting resources.” His belief in the importance of advocating and getting support for the school is clear in the following comment. “Ultimately the school survives because of the support from the community so if you don’t have the skills to get that support from the community you are not going to have a school.” The interviews of participants in this study indicate the importance that rural principals assigned to their roles in advocating and gathering resources as well in soliciting support for the school.

As mentioned in the first chapter, many rural communities in British Columbia are experiencing dramatic declines in population and student enrolment. Enrolment decline is most severe among the 270 schools located within the smallest communities. During the 2010/11 school year, these schools experienced an average six percent decline in student enrolment. Lower district enrolment creates a drop in the funds generated by the provincial government per student funding, and a decline in the total school board budget. Since the enrolment declines are spread throughout a district among different communities, school boards must decide how to reallocate fewer resources to best accommodate for the needs of the district as a whole, as well as for each community. Complicating these decisions is the reality that regardless of whether a school is operating at capacity or not, there are certain fixed operating costs. As student numbers drop, the financial viability of the school can be called into question. At the secondary level, the range of secondary courses offered further complicates these challenges. Often a Board must make decisions that will affect the diversity of course options offered in their secondary schools (Clarke et al., 2003).

Sue Colbeck saw declining enrolment as hitting “particularly hard in rural settings.” In these settings, she noted, “Schools are often spread geographically and so the approach is either to close schools or to significantly cut budgets. When budgets are cut, principals are often teaching more than they are leading.” Discussing the challenges of his role, Thomas Welton added,

another thing is the resources. Some of the challenges about being a principal is you are always scrambling for resources. You have a greater need because you don't have; the school has to provide so many of the resources for the community that the community itself provides in a larger setting. You know, like your school library is it. You don't get to go to the public library ... you don't have an internet connection ... until you get to school.

Hans Bergmann felt that one of the responsibilities of the rural principal was to advocate for resources. Recognizing that rural schools often have unique needs, he described the challenge:

Advocating and resources. Sometimes, yes, we allow for some extra funding for rural schools but honestly I think it is not enough. The challenge will always be to deliver a valid and applicable program to the students so that they can move on and grow. I think for some rural schools, like a rural school up in Northern BC will be a lot different than Northern Vancouver Island. So I think you know, politically, we have to really look at that. But I think the challenge will always be resources. I think the challenge is how do you keep new things coming in to what may be perceived as a closed community. Like, I was in some schools where there hadn't been change for 15 to 20 years. How do you bring that change in there? Not only for the principal, but for the school district. With rural schools they really have to look at that and say how do we do this? You know again, in a thoughtful way because it is, you know, some of the rural schools would be really open and some wouldn't be and I'd say that's a challenge. Always with a rural school it is usually resource based and the economy sure impacts the school so they are up and down like a yo-yo with their enrolment. One day you might have 30 and the next day you might have 15 or you know 45. I had to restructure a school - at Christmas time. That was a real challenge. That political bill does not fit rural schools. So things like that.

Leslie Brown recognized the issue of resource scarcity as a significant challenge both for her role as principal and in the community itself.

We don't get, when the ministry does things, they don't look at the actual geography they just go on the map and pencil things in and away they go. I am sure that happens in other school districts. It is expensive to do anything here. I mean to go anywhere we have no bus service, we have no cell-service. They assume we can have cell phones. The other thing is Internet. Oh, yeah, it is

going to be great for the rural schools; well guess who is last to get it? The ones who need it the most. All the cities get it ... we had to pay extra to get long distance so we could have dial-up internet just a few years ago ... So those kinds of things. Like, like we are too small.

The link between the limited resources of the community and the pressure it puts on rural schools was described by Ben Anderson. He identified scarcity of resources as an ongoing challenge.

Ah, fewer and fewer families with resources in those communities. Personal resources, monetary resources, we see families struggling at a more intense level than they used to. The flip side of that coin is the resource scene for rural schools. Our resourcing is based to a large extent on our numbers and our categories [students with special needs designation] which in rural settings are less reflective than they are in other places. Two or three issues or students in a small school setting have a much broader impact than two or three students in a larger setting. Conveying that message is sometimes difficult; so, that's a big challenge.

The limited resources in the community can increase the demand for resources on rural schools. In some cases "you are often the only support service those families have" (Ben Anderson). Access to mental health and other community services is often limited and the school (and principal) take on a number of roles likely to be supported by other agencies in a more urban or suburban locale.

I guess to me the big challenges of rural schools are their size, because, I know they try to provide resources for rural school at a higher rate than urban schools, but a rural school has to make do with the resources of the school. Pretty much of the school alone. Especially isolated rural schools. Urban schools have all of the resources of a larger community to draw on as well as to draw on the resources of the educational system. A rural school has the resources with limits, of course, of an educational system but in many cases the resources of a community, of a larger community are not available. Like our kids couldn't go skating or swimming unless we brought them over here. Our kids couldn't really go to a really high quality cultural event unless we brought them over here. You know, like, when there was a performance we would have to travel. (Thomas Welton)

Leslie Brown described the porous nature of the boundary between the community needs and the needs present in her school. She worked hard to address her students and school's needs through connecting community resources her school.

We work very closely with our First Nations community. We have a couple of education coordinators who are basically in the school a lot even though it is not

their job to be here. It just makes it easier for them. So we welcome more of those kinds of people. Mental health people. Encourage them to come in here. We are still working on getting the First Nations counsellors. The kids can't get up there. What they do is, they just don't come for the whole day. If they have an appointment they are serious about keeping. So we are working with the First Nations to get those things changed. So you know you can come in and have these appointments with the kids in the school and then they can go right back to class if they are in any shape to go back. So it is blurring the lines between the health side and the school side. The same with having MCFD [Ministry of Children and Families], same sort of thing. Much more of a seamless thing. Those are the biggest things that are different between a rural school and a big school.

The limited accessibility of other organizations has an impact on how Ben Anderson approached discipline issues now that he is in town and closer to community support services.

I know that if a child is in a very fragile home, where there is likely to be violence attached, that my approach to dealing with a discipline issue with that child will be somewhat different than it would be if I was in this community where even if I knew there might be a violence issue, I also know I have support services at hand. Having service I can call on, that makes a big difference.

Due to the distance that itinerant support staff need to travel in order to visit her school, Becky Rowe felt that the lack of access to support services creates additional pressure on her role and does not meet the needs of students.

At best you have the principal limping along, trying to help you out with absolutely no training or knowledge. I find that really frustrating. Speech has been the hardest one, but services for counselling. Dealing with issues like anxiety and mental health issues. Being what they are, those kinds of services, even though we have small numbers who need them they are no less critical. I don't see using a web-cam to counsel a child in crisis.

The lack of expertise for special needs students was a concern shared by Ben Anderson as well. In an effort to get services for students at his school, Ben was aware of the importance of cultivating and building strong relationships with the people in the district who can provide the services; he noted that need to build strong relationships

holds true for students' support issues. You, you probably need to cultivate relationships; not only the director of student services but also the itinerant staff who are providing those services. Because, in reality, while the director may approve budgeting it is the itinerant staff that makes or breaks the support system. Those things are really important. Again, just in the larger community you tend to take more of that for granted. There is a schedule, they'll show up,

it's done and taken care of; around we go to the next time and, and if I am having an issue around support, I pick up the phone to the student services director and away I go. In an isolated community, because I am only getting random service, while not random, sporadic, every time counts. So making sure that it is ready to go is really key.

Aware of the limitations of her own expertise, Becky Rowe expressed frustration at the lack of student services available to her rural school students.

I mean, I have said to parents, "I am not a speech therapist." The support from the itinerant teachers, who really don't seem to want to come out here; if they do come out, they come out to test. They [students] get designated and what comes of that is really nothing. Well, yes, he has a bilateral lisp and does not say his "s" in any position in a word. OK. That's helpful. No I am not a speech therapist. So I am looking for creative ways of getting around things like that.

Because rural schools are often quite small in comparison to their larger urban counterparts, the complexity of school composition and classroom dynamics is often overlooked. Ben Anderson explained why he thinks this occurs.

That all the resources we pour into those [suburban] schools the recognition that we give. We identify a certain number of schools and we say, "Wow. They're in that community that is in crisis" and we do x, y, and z to alleviate that. I think a lot of those same things that have some urban schools in crisis happen at the same level ... maybe not the same numbers and that has an effect because my rural school is smaller than the other ones so maybe it appears less evident. Or maybe because you are not an urban center people are not standing at the street corners ... they are off on the side roads where you don't notice it. But, I think people need to realize that the rural school experience is more akin to an urban setting given the complexity of the interactions of the people who are living there and the interdependence of their problems.

With the close link between the school and community it is possible that resources for rural school can be obtained in a different manner and a different location than in urban environments.

The school can become important in the life of the community and draw from the community for support and resources...in terms of intellectual resources and support for activities and stuff like that. I think that is not quite the same in [an] urban school thought you have the same cadre of parents who will support what the school is doing while their kids are there and stuff. In a rural setting people will continue to support the school even when they no longer have children attending simply because there is a personal connection that has been made. (Thomas Welton)

Chapter 8.

Relationships

The participants in this study frequently expressed the joy and appreciation of close relationships with their students and the community. Recognizing that building relationships is established in literature as a key component of the school principalship it comes as no surprise that the rural principals identified relationships as forming the foundation from which they led. This chapter explores the participants' responses as they relate to the relationships in which they were engaged.

For Sue Colbeck, like many of the other rural principals in this study, the greatest joy of leading in a rural community came from the quality of the relationships she was able to establish. Sue Colbeck described her appreciation for:

closeness and community. Without a doubt this is the highlight [of the rural principalship]. Depending on the district administration or leaders, there can be more scope to create and to be responsive to your school community. In some rural settings, and at times here, the school I have been principal of is the hub of the community so there is lots happening and lots of people coming together for the kids.

She continued that her experience as a rural administrator led to a “deepening belief in and understanding of the relational aspects of learning. Without it, learning is not going to happen - at least not deeply, happily and significantly.”

The importance of building and maintaining strong relationships was a view shared by other participants. Ben Anderson described the importance of establishing strong relationships as well as offered a caution about some of the difficulties that can result if those relationships are not in place.

You are possibly impacting a lot more people than are visible. Building bridges and building relationships with families is really helpful. More so in a rural context than in a more urban environment. You rely to a large extent on the goodwill of the community members, the family members to function effectively. It doesn't take much in a small school in a rural setting to really impact the learning environment if you have families who are not necessarily outliers in the community, but families who are core members of that community. If they get into a dispute about what is going on at the school it can really damage the

learning environment. So you need to be constantly aware of who your audience is, the message you are giving, and the awareness that it's really important for people to understand.

Participants counted the relationships they established as the primary joy of leading in rural schools. All participants indicated that, although there were difficulties in living so close to community, the payoff was found in the incredible connections they were able to establish with the community, the students, and their staff. As Sue Colbeck dispensed advice for a beginning administrator in a rural setting she underscored the importance of building positive relationships.

I think the points about community and relationship building [are] critical. Don't try to impose "your way" and take the time to learn about the people - their hopes, dreams, history, culture. Ensure that the school reflects that culture – at least its most positive aspects, and is culturally reflective of the people ... ensure that you are building traditions, celebrating the successes, grieving the losses. Reflect what is happening in your community.

Ben Anderson described the joy of the rural principalship as, linked directly to the positive relationships he was able to establish.

The joys are immeasurable. I mean really I have never felt as positive working anywhere as when I have been in rural school settings. The opportunity to really know the people you are working with, both the families, staff, and individual students is intense. If you take the glass half full kind of analogy, it really is a great opportunity to hone your craft as a leader and as a teacher. You feel like you are making a difference when things go right. You are often the only support service those families have. So that feels good. When you take somebody that has a child who is sliding off the rails and the family recognizes it and even the child might recognize it and where you are able to steer them back onto a more productive path. Those things feel just, just incredible.

Hans Bergmann provided a similar description of the joy of establishing strong connections in a rural setting.

One of the joys is just knowing everybody ... I really liked that and, you know, I still bump into people sometimes who are here and they, they totally you know- the "Hi how are you?" There is a bit more of a connection. I quite liked that. Of course you knew the kids so well, their families so well. Where they were coming from and you know it was, it was quite awesome. You know things like that - those are the absolute joys.

For Bob Jones one of the joys of leading is specifically connected to the meaningful relationships he was able to establish with his staff. He explained that:

Some of the joys/opportunities of being a rural school principal would include an extremely close relationship with my staff. We depended upon each other for everything ... our staff was like a family and we visited each other regularly for dinners and special occasions.

When Bob and his wife prepared to leave the community after 11 years of teaching and leading in the school, "The entire community turned up at the local community hall for a grand send off for my wife and I, complete with gifts, cards, and a photo album of families and different sites in the area." The fondness with which Bob Jones recollected this event was an indication of his affinity for the people that were part of the community in which he led.

Ben Anderson recognized that in a rural school one way to help build a strong rapport with staff is through getting them the resources that they require. Taking an active role in honoring the work they do, communicating clearly the goals you have as the principal, and working alongside a small staff were disclosed as key in order to move the school forward. Ben Anderson explained:

In terms of doing something for the staff it also is, is really important. Like, finding a way to support them in their work. Maybe in terms of a little bit of extra funding that you have managed to dig up for them to do some Pro-D, with maybe some kind of supplies that they are wanting that you have been able to find, or able to support them through release or, or coming in and doing a special project, or doing something fun and acknowledging their hard work. All those things are really key. Being standoffish with a small staff in a rural setting ... like being "I am the boss and you are not" is a sure way to bury any prospect of having a decent working relationship. So, being really open and fair, being very clear about what it is you are looking to do.

The close relationship with staff was also a key element for Hans Bergmann who recognized that in a small staff a new principal requires the ability to navigate both a give and take relationship when working so closely with the teachers. He commented:

With the teaching staff, I think that is one of the best parts of a small school, that you really do get to know people really well. It is nice knowing every name. Just knowing about them and their history. It is just such a huge piece. With that comes responsibility. Because they think you sometimes know more than you need. That is people letting you in to let you know and so; but, in that, just being aware of your role. With the teaching staff it was interesting because in some of

the smaller, in some situations it was just fantastic. Some it was, I was brought in because change needed to happen. I had a tough first start. But over time, it got better. You know it was hard on them, too, as much as it was hard on me. They had to change from things being the way they were for a very long time to somebody new with different ideas. Just learning to be patient and taking your time.

Students

An obvious similarity between all participants emerged as principals shared the joy of really getting to know their students and families. Bob Jones stated:

Knowing you are a key player and have made an incredible difference in the lives of children, many of whom don't realize there's a whole world they need to go out and explore. It is a joy to have a school community that seems way more like a family than just part of the job.

Thomas Welton shared how essential the focus on building relationships was to his success in creating a school community that was responsive to students' needs. He reflected on the way in which he made connections with students:

If I didn't meet the bus in the morning, I would have kids come up to me and say "where were you this morning?" You know that kind of stuff. I know that is not educational but, you know, I would even have kids come up to me and give me hugs in the morning when they came off the bus. You don't get that in a town school. You know those connections. So you know those are kinds of things that were important. Just being able to do unique things with kids, you know it was an experience that you wouldn't have had in a town school, I don't think. Even just, there is a lot more, there's a whole thing, like I always tried to make sure [if a] parent came in and wanted to talk with me, I would always make sure my door was open ... So many times the parents would come in and it wouldn't be a big concern. They just wanted reassurance. They wanted that connection and I just made a point of listening. Which you would do in any school but, over the years, or even over a year, you build those connections with people in a small rural school more so than you do in a larger school or even in a town school in many cases. You know that it is not just one story or experience; it is kind of a maybe an overarching theme just about how, how the relationships you build with the students, parents, and the staff really are the basis for what you do as an educator. You know, if you don't have those connections, it really doesn't matter. I always made a point of connecting and letting them know how much I appreciated being there and how much I appreciated them.

Ben Anderson too commented on the importance of establishing a strong relationship with students, however, he also explored a potential vulnerability:

The students have to like you. If they don't like you, you are dead in the water, because they will go home and tell their families and in a small community ... it spreads like wildfire and you get, you get tarred very quickly with, you know, being unreasonable or unfair. That is a huge hole to try and climb out of.

While reflecting on the importance of relationships, Thomas Welton also noted that:

It has always been evident to me how crucial those relationships are. They have served me in good stead in all of my time as a teacher and administrator. Those relationships are so essential in a rural school and I found it easier there to do it. You would have time for each kid.

Although she had no experience in a more urban setting, Becky Rowe remarked,

I feel like because there is so few of them, it's a more, it's a deeper relationship. I think because there is not very many so I know them so much better. You know I don't believe I would know the students as intimately if there were 250 of them in the same way that I do in my school. I mean I know the names of their pets, their moms and dads and sisters and brothers and where their house is and you know, so much more stuff about them. I know the older ones better than I know the younger ones, possibly because I've taught the older ones more. More time with them but, yeah ... you know I have always been in some ways reluctant to leave a classroom because I didn't really think I could spread myself thin enough to have that depth of relationship with a larger number of kids than what a class entails. I have found that I can and I do here. Of course, the same question will be "will the relationship be different in town?" That is one of little niggling worries. You know, is the relationship that I have only possible because we are small? I know now how important it is to make it happen ... Not because you have to but because the sooner you can establish that relationship the sooner you can fly with it.

Leslie Brown expressed a similar perspective as she reflected through the eyes of a student who had recently transferred to her school from a more urban setting.

We get kids who come from big schools who are like, "why does everybody know what is going on?" "Why are you paying so much attention to me?" The kids get such personalized service. The principal knows everybody. I don't have a vice-principal. I do everything. "Like why is the principal paying attention to me." "Well, you're in a small school. Everything is different here. We have teacher interviews at the grocery store."

It is this “knowing” of students that brought Leslie Brown to share her greatest joy of being the principal in a rural school. She stated that the best part of her position was:

Knowing every single kid. I mean knowing what to expect from them. Each kid’s little successes, everybody celebrates it. It can be as much as getting to school on time every day, (laughs) for some kids. One of the kids we have here, we changed his program and now we are getting him here. Those are the kinds of things about a rural school that is good.

Thomas Welton summarized the value of establishing these strong relationships with students as he observes a direct correlation between positive relationships and student learning.

I guess what I have always thought from very early on in my career I have believed that relationships are the basis. A lot of times the kids who are not interested in learning for learning’s sake will do it because they have a connection with you. If they see that you think it is important, sometimes, if they have that connection with you they will buy into it. It is not an ulterior motive. Like it is not like you built the connection with the kids so you can teach them better. It is a nice thing to have the connection with the kids and one of the added benefits of it is after you do that is that sometimes it helps you learn better. It motivates them to learn. It is one more piece of the puzzle.

Relations with the School District

Many rural schools are located a significant distance from the School District offices. While some of the principals identified the possible freedoms associated with this distance (e.g., Bob Jones “I could be a risk-taker with no real consequences other than those I imposed on myself”), all also described the importance of proactively maintaining a positive relationship with their district administrative teams.

Having strong relationships with the district office was a key way for Ben Anderson to access the resources he required to operate the school and meet student needs.

That organizational stuff is important. As a corollary to that, it all begins with your relationships with the board office. You need to cultivate those as well. Who is the person I really talk to when this is happening? I mean, there may be a title attached to that, that may be the person who provides the authority or the budget but it may very well be somebody somewhere else in the hierarchy that has the information I need or the ideas to solve whatever it is and that is true of things

like maintenance issues. It is also true for students' support issues. You need probably to cultivate not only the director of student services but also the itinerant staff who are providing those services. Because in reality while the director may approve budgeting it is the itinerant staff that makes or breaks the support system.

Thomas Welton also identified his capacity to develop strong relationships as a key mechanism for getting things done at his school.

So those kinds of things, just the fact that you'd spend the time talking to the workmen just getting to know them and you know, again, those connections. You know that makes things work. That investment of time and effort pays off and this is true anywhere, especially true in a rural school, if you are prepared to do extra stuff that wasn't on the books, hey is there any possibility that you might check this out even though it is not on the work order. They say sure. Do a work order and send it in but we'll do it right now. So I'd get a work order in for this, this, and this. So I'd go back to them and say to them that the work-order is done. That relationship allowed me to ask. That's the whole thing about the relationship with the whole staff. It is really important in a rural school.

Ben Anderson appreciated that developing a strong relationship with the district can be a difficult challenge for rural principals.

The district administration one can be trickier because you are rural so you tend to get left alone unless there is something going wrong. You have to be sort of aware and careful to prevent the only time you have contact with them is when you have a problem ... so keeping contact with them is important because if you do fall off the radar, it takes that much longer to get their attention again, without being negative about it.

Leslie Brown shared how difficult things became for her when the relationship with her superintendent became strained. Leslie Brown stated that she was delayed in becoming principal because the "superintendent at the time wouldn't hire women. No way. Over the years, this guy sort of fell into positions. The board finally ran him off, once we had a board that knew what they were doing. He would only hire people who would listen to him talk forever and say nothing." Sue Colbeck expressed her concern that,

We have really lost our climate of collaboration and shared leadership. Directives come from above and we are expected to run our schools accordingly. Over time, many of the principals have begun to reflect that tone in their schools. When another perspective is voiced, it can be pretty lonely. I guess, in other words, there is a pull towards conformity that I believe is really unhealthy for people whose job it is to create a shared vision, to lead forward, and to inspire.

For Bob Jones, one of the challenges of the rural principalship was the limited contact he was able to have with his administrative colleagues. For him, “contact with colleagues was rare” and being so “isolated had its down side and was probably my greatest challenge.”

Relations with Community

The strong link between rural schools and their communities has already been established. All of the principals shared similar views of the importance of fostering this link. Ben Anderson spoke to these strong relationships as being a source of pride and the currency he required in order to move the education of the students forward.

The other thing I feel a lot of pride in is having made some really powerful positive connections with people in the communities themselves where I have been. I believe that’s also given me the opportunity to say that given that situation again that, yes, I have the skills and the ability to positively influence attitudes towards education and learning generally. That I can help folks, focus on what makes school important for all of us. Not just that is an institution but that learning is important. That’s, that has felt really good. Really good strong community connections enabled me to drive forward some of those agendas that we need to do around early learning and around differentiated learning and, sort of, not necessarily a seismic shift but you could feel the seals popping and the whole machine lumbering forward a bit. That’s a very neat feeling because in the rural setting, it is you that is doing it. It is not the collective education system. It is you on the spot almost willing it to occur. Putting lots of time and energy and effort into making something positive happen. So I, you know, I don’t know whether I would have that same kind of feeling in a big school in the middle of town, but certainly it has been a great feeling in those two schools that I have mentioned. Just very, you know, when I left both of those places, very proud of what I had done. I felt like I had contributed to making a difference. Both towards individuals and the school community at large and it compensates for a lot of other things.

Hans Bergmann felt the same sense of empowerment and pride in the strong connections that he had made in the community.

Relationships with community are essential. It certainly doesn’t develop overnight but over time it certainly develops. In the smaller communities it develops quicker. I don’t know why, but I think they are used to someone coming

in, so it is kind of established. I was very proud of the relationships that I developed in the community.

Becky Rowe noted how the work she put in to establishing positive relationships within the community had a direct benefit for her students.

I do know key people in key places. I know the people in the village office. The people next door in the swimming pool. A pretty strong relationship with the fire department. The fire chief is a grandpa of one of the kids. They come in and spend a week in the school. Oh, this is another one that would tie in to the advantages of a rural school. People in the community are really involved each year in our school.

Both Becky Rowe and Ben Anderson discussed the time and effort required to overcome the view of them as outsiders. Becky Rowe remarked:

I wouldn't say I am integrated into the community. I would say I am integrated into aspects of the community but I am not one of them. I have more acceptance from some than others. I think because I don't live here. I mean it is probably my greatest strength and greatest weakness. I have lots and lots of relationships but they're good, they're professional, and they are at arm's length. I have a great ongoing relationship with the fire chief and the police chief, not so much with the mayor, but I have enough contacts with the village office.

Ben Anderson extended this theme.

It took a while before they accepted me, and it also, as an underlying theme, you would hear the "and now we are going to be just as we are getting going, going to be pulled out of here." The moment they knew I was leaving, that started right away. The dynamic changes instantly. It is not just lame duck. It's, "you're not one of us anymore." So once you've built that trust it is okay, but building the trust can be quite difficult as an outsider, because they are anticipating being yanked. So the principals that are there for 2 to 2 ½ years, seem to be at the point where they have developed bigger trust relationships with everybody. You are one of us. They don't twitch anymore. You are not a complete outsider at all.

While relationships are central to the work principals do at any school, urban or rural, it is possible that the unique attributes of rural contexts adds some complexity and intensity to the types and depth of relationships that are established. The importance of relationships and the joy that principals derived from them was a consistent theme in the interviews with the participants and clearly was an important, if not critical, aspect of the lifeworld of rural school principals in this study.

Chapter 9.

Lifeworld/Systemsworld: Implications for the Rural School Principal

One of the primary purposes of this study was to examine the utility of the lifeworld concept as a framework in the investigation into the role of the rural principal. James McConnell (2002) investigated the lifeworld of first year private school principals (heads) and concluded, from his similar study, that there is a useful leadership paradigm in the lifeworld/systemsworld tension that exists in the role of the private school head. Similarly, I found this tension to be a fascinating aspect of this study as well as determining that the lifeworld has explanatory power in understanding the role of the rural principal.

In this chapter, I revisit the lifeworld construct. Before reviewing the responses of the study participants it is worthwhile to consider a comment by Sergiovanni (2000).

Let us dig a little deeper into Habermas' theory. Schools grow and maintain their lifeworlds by taking "expressive" and "normative action" ... Key to Habermas' theory is that all enterprises can be *simultaneously* understood as both systemsworlds and lifeworlds. Equally key is that teleological and strategic actions of the systemsworld should be determined by and should serve the expressive and normative actions of the lifeworld. (p. 6, emphasis in original).

Throughout the interviews the emphasis that was placed on incorporating community members and parents, place-based curricula, and strong relationships with all stakeholders reflected an emphasis that the principals placed on the local lifeworld. In all schools regardless of location the systems should be in support of the lifeworld but it is likely that an important role of the principal in a rural school is to be found in determining the balance between the two. It takes deliberate action to ensure that the systemsworld is indeed affected by and serves the local school. Bob Anderson spoke to the importance of the lifeworld in his rural school.

In the rural setting, we had no electronic bell system. We looked at our watches and rang the bell when we felt it was time (occasionally, we were very creative with time). If the superintendent was coming for a visit, we knew ahead of time,

and were ready (we rang the bell on schedule those days!). Not only was this a small community but the school was small too. We had 75 kids in four classrooms. There was never any hassle about whose class you'd go into if you were in Grade 4. We had only one Grade 4 class and that was shared with the Grade 5's. Scheduling was simple. At Christmas, all the students could go to one classroom with the principal for a video (exciting stuff then) while the rest of the teachers could tidy their classrooms and get ready for the holidays. Staff meetings took place in someone's home with lots of snacks and a case of beer. Our school decisions were completely made by the school. We decided when the snow was too deep to open. We were autonomous and we liked it that way. For professional development, we could all get in one vehicle and head to the city. A "road-trip" with the whole staff: Priceless!

Bob Anderson's account clearly shows his school determining their systems through the lifeworld. Class change bells, timetables, and district-driven agenda may all be valuable but need to be evaluated and implemented in terms of the impact those systems may have on the lifeworld of rural schools.

As noted in Chapter 3, Sergiovanni (2000) viewed the lifeworld as an essential aspect of an effective school.

Culture meaning and significance are part of the "lifeworld" of the school. This lifeworld can be contrasted with the "systemsworld." The systemsworld is a world of instrumentalities, usually experienced in schools as management systems ... ideally strengthen[ing] the culture and enhance[ing] meaning and significance. (p. 4)

Culture, meaning and significance are parts of the lifeworld of the school. This lifeworld can be contrasted with the systemsworld. The systemsworld is a world of administrative and management instrumentalities in schools. The systemsworld should be helping schools effectively and efficiently achieve their goals and objectives. This achievement, in turn, ideally strengthens the culture and enhances meaning and significance. When things are working the way they should in a school, the lifeworld and systemsworld engage each other in a symbiotic relationship (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 4). It would seem that some systems developed for urban school renewal or management may not translate into a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship with rural lifeworlds. Becky Rowe spoke to these differences:

The fact that there are so many things that are how you do business in town that are not applicable or different out here. You know I used to always try and find out the right way to do things and I have come to realize that ... there isn't always

a right way ... Here is it kind of ... "Don't ask, don't tell," seems to come into play a little more.

Although both the lifeworld and the systemsworld are intimately connected, Sergioivanni made the case that the lifeworld needs to be at the center of the school. He makes this as a general case for all schools, however, based on the responses of the participants in this study, it is likely even more so in rural schools. A school, even a rural one needs a systemsworld in order to be sustained, but if the unique attributes of the local are not recognized, particularly by the principal, the lifeworld is in danger of being colonized rather than sustained by the systemsworld.

The tension between the lifeworld and the systemsworld is an important consideration for rural schools and for rural school principals. Corbett (2007) asserted that "rather than support place-based ways of knowing and established social, economic and cultural networks in rural and coastal communities, the school has typically stood in opposition to local lifeworlds" (p. 10). The school has often been the agent of the systemsworld.

While the concept of the competing framework of the lifeworld and system is evident in the challenges already discussed, there were some comments made from the participants that demonstrated various ways that the principals participating in this study were able to prevent the lifeworld from being colonized by the system. Participants were able to exercise a different degree of autonomy over decision-making, and in so doing honor the local lifeworld. Thomas Welton alluded to the unique aspects of the rural lifeworld that he addressed despite pressure from a policy framework that was established in the district.

One of the things I found I could do in a rural school was that sometimes we could agree without prejudice to quietly circumvent some of the stifling rules that are in place in schools that are closer to the Board office. We could kind of bend the rules a little bit because we were not supervised as closely. We could do that in terms of creating an educational atmosphere that was positive for kids. Always letting the teachers know that 'hey, we are kind of stepping out here but we are trying to make your job a little easier by making things better for kids'. Nobody comes along and says if you are doing it this way here you have to be very careful. Don't be talking to people in town saying we are doing it this way because if the [teachers] union gets hold of it they will say - if they can do it out in my school they can do it in town. Always [be] aware of the union contract but that you had to put your toe over the line a little bit for the good of the kids

because the contract really restricts what you could do. It works in schools where they have the resources to do things more so, so we had to find ways around that so we could offer things to kids that maybe the union contract would kind of stifle. It was always very clear and in the open. I would say if word gets out the Board office is going to be on me. The union will start pushing and I will be in supreme shit here. But you know it is a risk worth taking because I think it is good for the kids ... You have to because you can toe the line all the time but what you do is take away opportunities for children because you have more freedom but you can also be stifled by the rules if you can't say that this one here is for the greater good. It outweighs the proper way of doing things like if I was at a school right by the board office. The other thing was we didn't really have any heavy-duty union activists. We had people who were union members but their priority was focused on a positive, strong educational focus for the children. That really made a difference. They weren't really overly concerned with chapter and verse of the union contract except in terms of practical things like sick days, TOC [teacher on call] days, you know like prep time and that kind of stuff. That was always very important. There were other things where we could say "The contract says this; would you be o.k. if we did this?" There were things like that.

Hans Bergmann spoke to the fine line that a rural principal often walks in consideration of district or Ministry mandates and local circumstance. He realized the importance of relying on multiple sources of information to determine what the lifeworld actually is and how to utilize this knowledge to appropriately navigate the complexity of balancing local expectations and values with system requirements. Hans Bergmann stated:

But I did tell people that we can talk about things but ultimately I have to balance what we are trying to do here with School District policy and what is allowed under the budget and you need to really understand here that having input is not the same as making the decision. There are some things we can decide together and there are other things that I am just going to have to say this is my responsibility as a principal and, you know, I always tried to keep that in front of them, too. The other thing is I was never afraid to ask advice from people. I would ask for advice from some of the staff members and my most, one of my most, one of the really neat things was being able to speak to the secretary. She knew, like, a lot of the community stuff. That was really important, that was a really important source of information. The secretary sometimes, you know sometimes you get really immersed in the education and school stuff and sometimes the secretary or the bus driver brings a real dose of common sense to what you are trying to do. You know they will say something and you'll say whoa, that's really important and I never really thought of that because sometime you don't see the forest through the trees.

Ben Anderson recognized that while the local lifeworld needs to be honored it is also important to introduce change and ensure that the staff moves forward.

I actually did have to know policy and things for the school, even like when you consider volunteers you have to do all the ... follow all the procedures for that, which you would have to do in any school, but you know, you just [are] always being careful and I think you know you are dealing with, even though it is a small school, dealing with the whole array of relationships. There are parents, and teachers. Sometimes, you know, some of the communities or schools that I worked in, were kind of closed and they didn't really have much change. So going through the change process with them was quite interesting. I realized, you know, change can happen but you have to take it slow and carefully and be thoughtful and mindful of the people you are working with. But having said that you also have to stand up for what you believe in. I would have to, like, often say, "I believe this and that is why I think we should do this." Most times people would see and say "O.K., maybe we should give that a try." But if I went in there and said "This is how we are doing it." I wouldn't have gotten anything done. So that is powerful and I learnt that in the school by being the only person there. So it was good.

Becky Rowe found the local lifeworld to be at odds with the values of the system. In her community she found:

Education isn't valued ... You know like most of the parents didn't graduate from high school so for some of them a kind of hopelessness. Like for instance, before we came here we had the DARE [drug abuse resistance education] program and we had the police come in and do a say-no-to-drugs program and they'd go home and their parents are doing drugs. So the DARE program is essentially telling them that their parents are bad people. That happened here. I never had that happen before.

Becky's comment is a reminder to avoid romanticizing the "rural community." For her the challenge was reconciling a different value system between some of the members of the rural community and the agenda of the school.

Thomas Welton was able to navigate the tension between the systemsworld and the lifeworld by establishing positive relationships, which helped to circumvent some of the policy and procedural aspects of the district that were slowing down accomplishing what it was that he was needed to accomplish. These relationships he established are what he perceived "made things work." He saw the "investment of time and effort pay[ing] off ... this is especially true in a rural school."

Phronesis

When the role of the rural principal is examined further, I propose that the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, is worth considering. Phronesis concerns itself with how individuals act based on their interpretation of specific contextualized factors. Phronesis, as described by Halverson (2004), is:

As much a way of knowing, as a kind of knowledge. Embodied in character and developed through habit, it is expressed through particular actions as how individuals “size up” a situation and develop and execute an appropriate plan of action. Phronesis is, above all, a form of moral knowledge that guides us in selecting the features of situations that we choose to act upon. (p. 93)

Phronesis enables leaders to determine which techniques, theories, and policies are appropriate while still understanding the significance of exercising judgment and taking appropriate action. It is:

An ability to recognize cases, or problems, of this kind (which are precisely of *no* clearly specified kind) and to deal adequately with them. A person of judgment respects the particularity of the case – and, thus, does not impose on it a procrustean application of the general rule. (Dunne & Pendlebury, 2003, p. 198, emphasis in original)

The aim, or purpose, of phronesis is not to develop a set of prescribed, pre-determined rules and regulations, but to adjust prior knowledge to a set of particular contextualized circumstances. The person who acts phronetically:

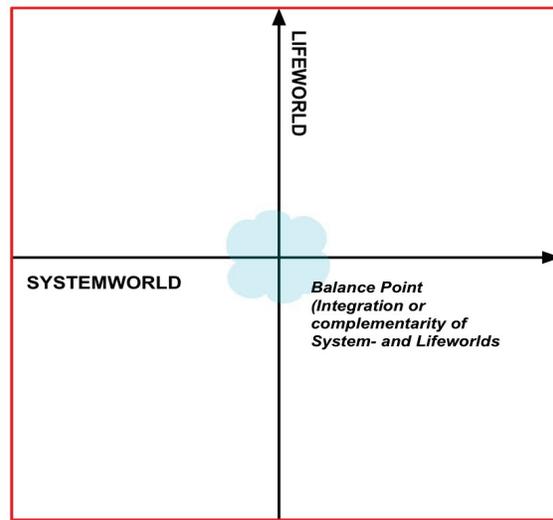
is someone who, as a result of experience, is particularly able to perceive, within a concrete situation, an indeterminate number of potentially relevant factors; and, who is able to select, from among all the possible ways in which he or she could act, the one that is most appropriate for the situation at hand (Kreber, 2001, p. 49)

In an effort to build and maintain relationships, honor the local, and bridge the disparity that often can exist between the local lifeworld and Ministry and school district mandates, one of the requirements of a successful rural school principal is his or her capacity to balance these demands.

Based on the responses of the participants it seems that the theory of the lifeworld has utility as a useful way of interpreting the experiences of the rural principals. Figure one provides a visual representation of the importance of the principal in keeping

their school at the balance point, the point at which the systemworld and lifeworld are complementary of each other. (McClaren, 2012, personal communication).

Figure 1: The balance point of lifeworld and systemworld



An interesting aspect of this diagram is the recognition that consideration needs to be given to situations that may have low system and low lifeworld as well as low system and high lifeworld influences.. Often the focus is on the deficiencies of a school when it has a high system and low lifeworld but I suggest that both quadrants that have low systemsworld are equally if not more problematic.

A school where the systemsworld and the lifeworld have reached a balance point is where both sustain each other. In a school where the systemsworld does not complement or sustain the lifeworld the systemsworld becomes parasitic on the lifeworld. I propose that it is the work of the principal that largely determines whether a school is at the optimal place of integration between the systemsworld and the lifeworld.

Chapter 10.

Reflections

The intent of this concluding chapter is to share my reflections regarding the research described in this thesis and consider the significance of what has been discovered. While the findings will add to the limited research related to the rural principalship, I will leave it to others to determine the importance of these findings. However, I can say this process has had a significant impact on my own understandings. I have learned much through the process of reading, writing, and interviewing. In this chapter I make suggestions for future research as well as offering policy recommendations based on the data collected during this study. Before making those suggestions, it is worthwhile to revisit the original research questions.

Research Questions: A Review

The data from this study were intended to answer the primary research question, specifically, what are the challenges and opportunities related to the role of school principal in rural communities? In addition to the primary research question several sub-questions were also explored. First, are there unique characteristics of the role of school principal in rural communities? Second, how do rural school principals regard the nature of their roles in their official functions within the school and school district and their position and roles in the rural community? Third, can the construct of lifeworld be considered a beneficial philosophical and methodological framework for research into the rural principalship? In this section a summary of the findings is presented in response to these questions.

Looking first at the primary research question, the principals expressed consistent views about the opportunities and challenges in the role of leading a rural school. Without exception the participants in this study expressed resounding joy about the depth and quality of relationships they established with their students, parents, and the community as a whole. However, these relationships also created some significant

challenges. The close relationships that developed in these rural contexts created a level of information sharing that many participants found difficult. The principals commented on the challenges of dealing with rumor, false information, and personal family issues.

The difficulty of isolation and need for role-differentiation required of rural principals were also identified as challenges. Although the participants recognized the necessity to wear many hats, they also expressed joy in knowing their leadership had direct impacts on their schools and communities. Performing a diversity of roles as well as addressing the numerous responsibilities of rural school administration was demanding; however, these aspects of the principal's role were also identified as contributing to a high degree of job satisfaction. Often the distant location and isolation of the schools enabled a sense of autonomy and fostered the belief that these principals were ultimately responsible for their schools, typically with little or no direct supervision from district staff. These conditions also, created unique opportunities for a principal to create meaningful change driven from within. The isolation of the rural communities was perceived as both a challenge and a source of freedom to try things without much fear of reprisal. The participants perceived a correlation between the demands of the role and their sense of professional and personal satisfaction.

As they looked into the future the participants in this study shared a common concern for rural schools. It became apparent that they were of the opinion that, in British Columbia, rural schools and their corresponding districts face ongoing funding challenges as a result of continuing decline in student enrolment. The threat of school closures continues to affect rural communities. The principals strongly echoed a sentiment found in rural school literature that rural schools are indeed the hearts of their communities. Recent studies suggest that, "school survival and community survival are linked: not only does community decline result from school closure, school closure often results from community decline" (Howley, Howley, Hendrickson, Belcher, & Howley, 2012, p.1). The link between school and community survival leads to a policy recommendation made later in this chapter.

As a result of declining student populations, rural principals often have not only the administrative, management, and leadership responsibilities of the principalship but,

in addition, must carry a significant teaching load. With enrolment continuing to decline in many of these locales, the administrative component of a principal's assignment is compressed while the teaching component of their assignment expands. In some locales principals spend more time in the classroom than leading or working on school-wide initiatives. It will be important for districts with rural schools to provide adequate allocations of administrative time in order for school principals satisfy the wide mandate that is often expected of them.

Resource scarcity was also identified as one of the most significant concerns for rural schools presently and, most probably, in the future. The interview results made it apparent that rural principals perceived advocating for resources as a significant aspect of their jobs; garnering resources was a key component in sustaining their rural schools. Participants echoed a general fear that if enrolment continued to decline (and therefore funding decreases followed) rural schools will be in jeopardy.

Although one of the purposes of this research was to determine any unique characteristics associated with the role of school principal in rural communities, I cannot conclude, based on the data gathered, that the challenges and opportunities expressed by the participants in this study can be viewed as unique to rural settings. A complete determination of the uniqueness of leading in a rural environment would necessitate a study comparing the work and roles of rural principals with that of suburban or urban principals. However, with the data gathered in this study along with my own experience of leading in rural and suburban schools, I propose that although the skill sets of rural and suburban principals have significant areas of overlap, the degree to which certain attributes and skills are required or need to be emphasized differs between these contexts.

Although a comparative study might be helpful in determining if rural school leadership requires a different skill set than suburban or urban leadership, this study supports the findings of available research related specifically to the rural principalship. I found the challenges and opportunities described by the participants in this study to be consistent with previous findings of Starr and White, (2008); Arnold, Gaddy, and Dean, (2004); Winn, Erin, Genery and Gauble (2009) and Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, and Mulford (2003). The findings of this study also indicate that rural principals, primarily from small

coastal communities in British Columbia, have challenges similar to those described in studies conducted in rural United States and Australia.

The final research sub-question asked, “How do rural principals regard the nature of their role in the school and rural community?” This question allowed focused consideration of the rural principals’ lifeworld. The very close ties between the rural school and the community, representing almost a porosity of boundaries, creates additional complexity for the role of the school principal. The participants in this study viewed their roles as entailing the discharge of an extensive mandate. The principals perceived the performance of their role as essential for the growth, development, and educational aims of the school. They also saw themselves as being key members of the community. They shared stories of times where they were asked to provide medical advice and offer counselling, and about the school functioning as a primary center for community events. The principals told of having to provide building maintenance, while carrying a significant teaching assignment. Each principal described taking on a community leadership role that was not confined to the school. I would suggest that the role of community leader, while still likely part of the principalship in urban schools, is not as visible, or perhaps is less intense, than it is for principals in small rural communities. Each principal in this study described feeling a sense of pressure (and some pride) at being “center-stage.”

One of the research goals of this study was to determine the utility of the lifeworld as a construct or theoretical frame for research into the rural principalship. Because the construct of lifeworld has both philosophical and methodological implications, its application to the investigation of the role of rural principals was an important decision. I particularly benefited from McConnell’s (2002) research into the lifeworlds of first year heads. His study, as well as the research reported here, indicates that the lifeworld construct is useful for exploring school-based leadership. In particular, the findings in this study support a claim that the construct of the lifeworld is useful in recognizing the importance for rural principals to balance the demands of the systemsworld with the unique aspects of the lifeworlds of rural school communities. The relationship between the lifeworld and systemsworld is a fascinating duality that I believe requires principals to develop ways to prevent colonization of the rural lifeworld by the demands of the systemsworld while still remaining true to the professional responsibilities inherent in the

role of principal, especially in a public school system. In my view, further investigation into the lifeworlds of schools and school leaders and the dynamics of the relationship between the local school and community lifeworld and the systemsworld would provide beneficial understandings.

Policy Recommendations

In light of the perceived threats of school closures and the continued decline in enrolment, it seems timely for rural school principals to share their stories (lifeworlds) in such a way that an understanding of the importance of the rural schools to the communities and the children they serve will become apparent to the people and organizations that set policy. I would urge work at the level of the provincial school system to find creative ways to sustain the futures of these small rural communities. I would also suggest that the British Columbia Ministry of Education examine the way in which funding is determined and allocated in as much as small schools do not have the same economic efficiencies as larger schools in urban and suburban areas.

The principals interviewed for this study spoke of a common sense of isolation from the central office and of the importance of connecting with their school district administration in order to ensure continuity of student services, resource allocation, and professional development. In light of these challenges I would encourage districts that include rural schools to purposefully connect with, and find ways of honoring the work of, rural school principals. Many rural school assignments are filled by principals who are undertaking first appointments as school-based administrators. This was the case for each of the seven participants in this study. Given this context, I would encourage rural principals to find ways of sharing their stories in as public a manner as possible to ensure that successes are celebrated and so that trustees, district leadership, and administrative colleagues recognize the importance of rural schools to their communities and the students that they serve.

Districts with multiple rural sites can benefit by providing opportunities for rural administrators to network, meet, and share best practice. In addition, universities offering programs in educational leadership or administration as extension programs in

rural areas could potentially offer classes that incorporate case studies of some of the challenges typically present in rural contexts.

With the school as the heart of the community, the rural school principal not only performs a school leadership role but also assumes an important role in community leadership. The principals in this study commented on the constant visibility and the continuous public scrutiny that results from this reality. Here again, the principals emphasized the necessity to build strong relationships, navigate the needs and wants of often competing ideologies within the community, and ensure that new initiatives place the needs of children at their core. Performing roles as both a community and school leader can often cause role conflict for a rural principal. The demands entailed by the role of the principal as a community leader also warrants further research.

Reflections on the Methodology

The methodology I chose for this study was the phenomenological interview. I found myself wishing that I could complete the first interview with each participant and then have time to reflect on potential themes before continuing with the series of interviews. In light of the time requirements and the need to schedule multiple interviews with very busy people, I was not always able to reflect on the previous interview with a given participant before moving on to the next session with that person. As such, I was unable to engage fully in the reflection needed to ensure that I sought clarification or probed deeper into the information and views shared by the participants in previous interactions. Instead, I was forced to stick very closely to the questions I had pre-determined, leaving me to wonder what issues I might have missed. Knowing what I know now, I would have budgeted more time between interviews for transcription and reflection on the data. I did find that scheduling three separate interviews with busy school-based administrators was problematic and that the time requirements of this process should be a consideration for anyone considering a similar methodology.

On a personal note, I believe that the process of interviewing has strengthened my practice as a principal. During each interview, I was able to understand the experience as described while bracketing my own biases and preconceived notions, a skill that is imperative not just as an interviewer but also as a school leader. On

occasion, I was reminded of the value of simply listening. In a desire to adhere to the process I was very cognizant of limiting my own voice in the interviews. Often I found myself wanting to interject, support, or agree to an observation made by a participant. Not doing so allowed me to focus fully on the words of the participant as well as trying not to influence where they were going or what they were saying. This attitude represents sage practice for many of the situations that regularly present themselves in my office. I have appreciated my professional and personal growth as a result of the interview method and my new, albeit limited, understanding of phenomenology.

Final Thoughts

I found place-based education to be an area of personal interest both in the reviewed literature and in the participants' responses. I think this area of study has merit for all schools and not just rural ones. It seems to me that place-based education entails an honoring of some of the skills and knowledge students and their parents bring to school. Further, urban students also have local knowledge, although it may have different characteristics than that of rural students. Hence, the challenge for all schools, and particularly for school principals, is to find ways to creatively and meaningfully acknowledge local knowledge regardless of location. This is where a principal can help develop a school that supports and elicits the lifeworld of its constituents rather than colonizing their lifeworlds. In recognizing that prior learning has a measurable impact on new learning, principals need to find ways to empower schools to honor and authenticate what students know. In doing so, the lifeworld is honored, an approach which in many respects will also help facilitate attainment of the educational aims of the school. While the research reported in this study only touched lightly on place-based education, the potential for leadership initiatives here is significant. It is an area I intend to pursue.

Another possibility for future studies would be an investigation of the role of the rural principal as viewed from the perspectives of various stakeholders. I think data from parents, teachers and other staff, as well as community members and students would provide insight into the expectations that others have for the rural principal. It would be very interesting to compare these perceptions to those of the principals, particularly as

they relate to the lifeworld of the community and the possibility of a disparity between the expectations of others and those of the principals.

I found the energy, enthusiasm, and passion the principals exhibited while they shared their stories to be inspiring. At the time of the research I was also leading in a rural context and I appreciated the practical applications that resulted after spending this time learning from other school leaders. Although I am now back to leading in a more suburban area, the lessons I learned from these principals are serving me well.

I believe this study can help to develop understanding of the challenges and joys of leading schools in rural contexts. While the focus of the study was on the rural principalship it likely has some application to other school settings, including urban schools. It is possible that tight-knit urban neighbourhoods with accompanying neighbourhood schools may share attributes of lifeworld (and interaction with the systemsworld) with the rural schools and their communities. It was intended that this research would add to the limited research related to the rural principalship and point to some potentially productive directions for further work. I hope this goal has been reached.

Lastly, I would encourage any aspiring rural school principal to really spend time immersing him or herself in the local lifeworld. While it is sage advice in any new setting, it is essential in a rural school to take the time to really understand the nuances of the school and community before moving ahead with any personal or professional agendas for significant change or improvement.

The previous research reviewed for this report identified the role of the rural school principal as an important one. The participants in this study have echoed the findings of other studies and voiced what they experienced as leaders of small rural schools. In small rural communities, the principal has the dual role and responsibility of both community and school leader. As such, the role of principal becomes important in sustaining rural communities. While larger more suburban school leadership often receives the majority of attention, the rural school and, by extension, the rural principalship, forms an integral part of the tapestry of rural communities and rural lifeworlds and is worthy of continued research.

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Appendices

Appendix A.

Informed Consent

Through the Lens of the Rural Lifeworld: The Rural School Principalship

May 11, 2010

Dear Administrator:

I am currently undertaking a research project involving the rural principalship as part of the requirements for completing a doctoral degree in Education at Simon Fraser University. I would like to conduct three open-ended interviews, lasting between 45-60 minutes, during one-months time. During these interviews it is my intent to explore and better understand the experience of school leaders in rural contexts. The data gathered from this interview will be analyzed to better understand the nature of the rural school principalship. As a newly appointed principal of a rural school I look forward to adding to the literature and to gathering practical information that will assist in my own practice.

Participation in this research will be completely confidential. The identity of participants, their schools, as well as their employable school district will be protected. Since the intent of the interviews are to determine the individuals experience of leading in a rural school, not as a representative of your district, permission from representative districts has not been sought. You will only be representing yourself, not your district or school in these interviews.

The interviews will be recorded and these recordings will be labeled with a code to protect your identity. Recordings will be kept for two years in a secure location on an external hard drive. After two years these recordings will be erased. In short every effort will be taken to ensure that participation is kept completely confidential.

The University and myself subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and to ensure your full understanding of the procedures and benefits of this research. Your signature on this form indicates that you understand the procedures and benefits of this research project, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in this document and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

As your participation is completely voluntary you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that any concerns with the study can be brought forward to Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director, Office of Research Ethics at hal_weinberg@sfu.ca or 778-782-6593. If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the information on the attached permission form.

Thank you in advance for your valuable collaboration.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Morrow

Interview Consent Form

I understand that:

1. My participation is completely voluntary and I may withdraw from the study at any time;
2. I can register any concerns or raise questions about the project at any time by contacting, Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director, Office of Research Ethics at hal_weinberg@sfu.ca or 778-782-6593.
3. Participation in this study involves being interviewed with recording audio equipment (digital voice recorder) these audio files will be stored on an external hard drive in a secure location;
4. I can obtain a summary of the results from Jeremy Morrow at jrm14@sfu.ca or 250-935-8515;;
5. I will receive an outline of the interview questions in advance of the interview, but am aware that the interviewer may seek clarification or ask clarifying questions;
6. My name and location will not appear in any reports or in the research itself.

I consent to participate in this research.

PARTICIPANT'S NAME (please print):

ADDRESS:

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT:

DATE:

Principal Investigator:

Jeremy Morrow

Graduate Student

As required for the completion of a Doctorate of Education Degree

Faculty of Education,

Simon Fraser University