8-2021

Portraits of Meaning Attached to a Rural School Through the Community It Serves

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PORTRAITS OF MEANING ATTACHED TO A RURAL SCHOOL THROUGH THE

COMMUNITY IT SERVES

by

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A Dissertation to the Faculty of the

Doctor of Educational Leadership Department

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

Doctor of Education

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

August, 2021

"PORTRAITS OF MEANING ATTACHED TO A RURAL SCHOOL THROUGH THE COMMUNITY IT SERVES," a Doctoral research project prepared by DENA JO PALMAYMESA in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the meanings that one community, in an isolated part of a Northwest town in the United States, associated with their remote school. This study applied, in part, the portraiture method within qualitative research, inspired by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot. Narratives were constructed in partnership between the participants and the teacher-researcher to illuminate themes such as community relationships, trust, being known, communication, family involvement, and challenges associated with living in a rural, remote setting. Educational challenges currently face many students and families as the effects of COVID-19 influence them. One such impact is mobility within the United States. As of February 2021, nine million people in the United States have relocated. As employers offer opportunities for employees to work remotely, families are choosing to relocate to less populated areas such as suburban areas with larger homes equipped with home office space and larger yards for their children. Lower population density is highly sought after by those shifting to rural communities. The advantages of the slower pace of life and natural social distancing are measured against limited educational opportunities for children in settings with small school budgets. There is an opportunity for research into the future of rural schools in light of this migration, and innovative ways to serve students in rural communities again. More exploration is needed into family perceptions, expectations for their involvement as they relocate to these rural communities, and the preparedness of teachers and administrators where the rural landscape may be shifting.

Acknowledgments

Many have walked by my side on this long journey. First of all, I am grateful to George Fox University for investing in me. At the age of seventeen, I dreamed of attending George Fox one day. That dream would not begin for another twenty-eight years.

Dr. Linda Samek you have inspired and supported me since I began my master's program. Later you spoke the silent dream within me to move forward in pursuit of my doctorate. Your belief in me helped me take that first step. You have remained in my corner every step of the way. Thank you for meeting for tea, taking time to help me process, and always responding to emails and messages with promptness and care, sharing the exact advice and direction I needed.

Dr. Ken Badley, thank you for sharing Hebrews 11:8-10 on that second day of my first doctoral course. Unbeknownst to you, I was full of self-doubt. Your words of encouragement, and this verse, empowered me to continue to move forward. I have held this verse close ever since.

To my committee members, Dr. Gary Sehorn and Dr. Linda Samek, thank you for supporting me on this dissertation journey with your experience, wisdom, and honesty.

I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. Karen Buchanan. After my health setback and time off, you reignited in me the passion for my topic and population. Thank you for not only believing in me but for appreciating my circumstances and challenging me to uphold a standard of excellence of which I could be proud. Your guidance is a gift I will forever be grateful to have received.

To the families in this remote setting who I have been privileged to share life with, and especially to those who agreed to share in this study, your perspectives have added richness to my life and teaching.

Stacie Hofmann, I have depended on your keen eye and critical mind often. You know my voice, and my trust in you runs deep. Your love, support at any hour, I can never thank you enough for or repay. Your friendship is among God's best gifts in my life. I am abundantly grateful our paths crossed on that rainy day in June 2006. I love you dearly, Friend.

To my teaching partner, Kerick Adams. No teacher has ever been as blessed as I to work with someone who is as supportive, generous, and encouraging as you are. Thank you for your integrity and professionalism. I am honored to serve with you.

Dr. Liz, thank you for always checking on me and encouraging me to keep moving forward. One day, in eternity, I will see you again and rejoice with you.

With gratefulness to my family, siblings, in-law siblings, parents and in-laws, for their encouragement and grace on this long journey. Thomas, my son from afar, thank you for your faithful prayers over the many miles. Adam and Chelsea, you were just eight and six years old when I became a college freshman. During my educational journey, you motivated and inspired me more than you may ever realize. I will always treasure those early days and our homework sessions together around the fire in that little house in Tennessee. I cherish memories of taking you with me to Saturday classes, and those precious study dates. That space I shared with you at the local coffee shop: lattes, scones, cocoa, learning in your presence. I am abundantly proud of the people you have grown into and I delight in seeing you now as lifelong learners yourselves. For this final degree you and your spouses, along with your children have enhanced that

motivation. To my grandchildren, Bellagrace, Stella, Samuel, William, Gloria, Coramae, and Ava, I look forward to being more present.

Finally, to my husband, best friend, biggest cheerleader, source of comfort, my respite, and my rock, Bill Palmaymesa. Your encouragement, enthusiasm, and support every step of the way mean more than I can ever express with human words. I am here because you have held me up. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Historically, one-room schools served as the foundational structure of American schools. Yet, as opportunities led to outmigration, these initial models for teaching America's citizens decreased. School-community partnerships have been at the heart of this educational model from the beginning. This research project investigates this central tenet of early schooling. This chapter provides the background and inspiration for this ethnographic study of a remaining one-room school and the relationship between it and the families served by the school.

Background of the Study

From the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, rural, small schools were the standard educational model in the United States (Webb, 2006). Numerous factors contributed to the steady decline in the numbers of these small schools between 1913 and 1960. Consolidation, the concern in progressive education for efficiency, propaganda supported by the New Deal portraying small schools as inadequate to larger schools, and the promise of new opportunities lead to a steady migration from rural locations to larger towns and cities reduced the number of such schools. By 1960, only one percent of American schools resembled their roots (Kauffman, 2009). By 2005, in a special series on National Public Radio, journalist Neenah Ellis reported that there were fewer than 400 one-room schools still in operation at that time. In the early days, the school was the hub of the community (Rose, 1995). School buildings served many purposes and provided a gathering place for events such as boxed socials, church services, dances, and various meetings and community gatherings (Zimmerman, 2009).

The subject of this study, a K-8 School, is one school in a larger district within a remote Northwest town. The school is situated within the community of a nonprofit employer, where most community members are employed. The community is over an hour from the nearest town or any services. The community the school serves has a population of less than 200 residents. This school has been in operation for twenty years. Of those twenty years, I have been in service as the teacher for thirteen years, the first seven years teaching grades K-8 as the lone teacher. The school expanded after that to two teachers. For the past six years I have served as the teacher for grades K-5, as well as special education.

Community involvement is primarily provided by families of current students. While the school holds a yearly fall Open House, as well as a few other functions open to the community, most residents do not participate unless they are directly involved with the school. That is unless they have a child in attendance.

Educational Problem of Practice

Works on small, rural schools and their communities offer little more than an overview of the history of multi-grade schools, and the subsequent decline of both rural schools and rural communities, as small schools were absorbed into larger districts. The literature speaks to the complexities in relationships that continue to face educators, and community members alike, in the few rural, one-room learning structures that remain (Ellis, 2005: Miller, 1991; Hellsten, McIntyre & Prytula, 2011; Zimmerman, 2009).

Much of the information offered in the literature regarding existing one-room schools and the communities they continue to serve, is a shallow and disconnected look at what has been my experience: describing deficits in materials, retaining qualified teachers, or a comparison of academic achievement between rural and urban education. What I perceive as

beauty in the simplicity of rural school and its community is a richness of learning, and an equally rich partnership with community families. And so, I wondered, is my experience unique to my circumstances? To add depth to this connection are the social interactions that have been forged, possibly due to the remoteness of both school and community. It is these intricacies I credited to turning my intended one year, into over a decade of service. Not to say all interactions have been positive, far from it. However, each experience has meaning and contains some value.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to construct a narrative regarding the particulars that one community of participants assigned to their rural, one-room school utilizing the qualitative research, inspired by portraiture. This method was appropriate as I attempted to create narratives revealed through participant accounts and rich descriptions, to illuminate how families/participants constructed the meaning of their one-room schoolhouse, as revealed through partnership portraiture with their rural teacher-researcher. Portraiture is a purposeful way of understanding what is worthy and strong in the research topic (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The use of a portraiture lens in this study permitted the exploration of the minutia within the *meanings* participants assigned to the relationship between the rural school and their community. This perspective allowed me to, "…look across families – not for comparative evaluation or judgement, but rather for greater depth and complexity" (Tieken, 2014, p. 30). By focusing on my setting, and in selecting participants with diverse experiences to both the community and the school, I was able to look closely at how participants

authentically described the relationship between the school and the community, and the meanings participants assigned to their reality.

Research Question

This research attempted to create narrative representations of families of currently enrolled students in a small, one-room school in the Northwest region of the United States, to illuminate, *how do families describe their meaning, or assign value, of their one-room schoolhouse, as revealed through a partnership portraiture with a rural teacher-researcher?*

Significance

As the partnerships between this small community, the school, and the larger district continue, and especially in light of the current global pandemic and distance learning as a potential threat to this small school's existence, my findings may support community efforts to preserve small schools in an era when such a model is threatened by consolidation and online learning models. The school in this study, in its twentieth year, continues to serve grades kindergarten through grade eight. Where once students who graduated from this K-8 school had only homeschool as an option for high school, there is now a bus provided by the district to transport high school students to the in-town school, over an hour away. Parents, although grateful for the opportunity for their older students, often worry. At some point, will their community school find the same fate as so many one-room schools of days gone by, absorbed into a larger district?

I expect the research to contribute to the importance of the community, family, and school partnerships, as well as to academic opportunities available to students educated in classrooms such as mine, with students of various ages being exposed to content that is a review, as well as new and challenging. In such an environment, where a student is known

and feels safe, there is an opportunity to learn, grow, lead, follow, take risks, fail, and become more human due to the diversity of groupings. It is the supposition of this researcher that those opportunities outweigh the potential pitfalls of being absorbed into a larger school setting through consolidation.

Definitions of Terms

Bracketing: A method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process (Creswell, 2009).

Consolidation: The merger of two or more existing districts to create a new district, which is empowered to close and merge individual schools. https://www.ericdigests.org/pre-925/school.htm

Critical Friend: A critical friend is a research tool used in a qualitative research project to support researcher integrity (Appleton, 2011).

Member Checking: Also known as informant feedback or respondent validation. It is a technique used by researchers to help improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of a study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Multi-grade: Refers to a classroom comprised of two or more grade levels. *http://www.multigradeteaching.com/*

New Deal: A series of programs launched by Franklin D. Roosevelt during his presidency. The New Deal included unemployment and social security. https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Deal

Out-migration: To leave one region or community in order to settle in another. https://www.dictionary.com/browse/outmigration

Portraiture: Is method of social science inquiry distinctive in its blending of art and science, capturing the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

Rural: A rural area is a geographic area that is located outside of major towns and cities and having smaller populations and limited services compared to towns or cities.

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rural

Voice-centered: A method of psychological analysis that draws on voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the human psyche (Gilligan, C., Spender, R., Weinberg, M. K., Bertsch, T., 2003).

Limitations/Delimitations

There are limitations to qualitative research. Qualitative and quantitative research methodology, "…answer very different types of questions at very different levels of analysis" (Butin, 2010, p. 74). Qualitative research uses words and stories to uncover the *how* and *why* questions. Whereas quantitative research seeks to explain *what, where*, and *when*, backed by theory and empirical data. Portraiture, a form of qualitative research is not bound by theory or empirical generalizations. A participant researcher leaning into this type of qualitative research must practice, "…self-awareness, reflexivity, and the explicit identification of the researcher's own perspective within the portrait" (Golsteijn, 2013, p. 311) as they interpret a likeness of the lived experiences of others. As I engaged with participants in an examination of our shared learning environment, it was important to be cognizant of my own interpretations, yet accurately interpreting and expressing the reflections of participants with their intent.

Other possible limitations in this qualitative project arose as we worked together to shape the narratives, where I, the researcher, had a relationship with participants. The narratives (portraits) were shaped through dialogue, rich with meaning. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Participants were encouraged to honestly share and respond during interviews, setting aside our relationship as much as possible, even when negative experiences were shared and or described. During an informational meeting, participants were given an overview of portraiture philosophy: Portraiture does not attempt to identify and offer solutions to a problem, but through narrative, attempts to illuminate the goodness within participants' stories and perspectives. However, goodness can be subjective. It was up to me, the researcher, to tease out the goodness as I co-constructed each narrative. Sharing this in the initial meeting was necessary to reduce fear or hesitancy when responding to questions, and encouraging participants to contribute to discussions with the degree of honesty within each one's level of comfort.

Even for this researcher, the tendency to identify a problem or to compare settings was at times instinctive. This project was limited to one particular one-room, turned two-room, school with a limited number of participants.

Critical Friend

The qualitative method being employed here is one in which the researcher was visible within the study. In order to remain on point, and to protect the relationship of researcher and participants due to the nature of the project, the use of a *critical friend* was used (Appleton, 2011). This individual was included in reviewing initial interview questions, as well as follow-up data, and assisted in recognizing when conversations or questions might begin to steer away from the intended boundaries of this qualitative study.

This study concentrated on the experiences of participants of a one-room, turned two-room, school community and the meanings they assigned to their unique educational setting. In addition to the subjective nature of qualitative research, and more specifically, portraiture, meaning making exists in the mind. Expressing perceived meaning was dependent upon participant voices and the researcher's ability to beautifully weave words, body language, memories, description of the physical environment in a style that stirs the senses. "The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3).

Conclusion

This chapter offered an introduction to this ethnographic research, informed by phenomenological ideas, of a remaining, one-room, turned two-room school in the Northwest where the researcher studied with participants in order to describe the meaning participants assigned to the community and school relationship. A review of the literature is presented in chapters two and three.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

Family/Community Engagement; A National Perspective

When regions such as rural south, deep south, northeast, suburban, and urban are mentioned, assumptions or preconceived images often come to mind. This is true even when talking about various school settings and populations. Yet, one consistency across all settings is the importance of family and community involvement in the education of children. I will explore the literature around family/community engagement in the following two chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature as it pertains to an understanding of the importance and complexity of family involvement in the education process. Then, the chapter that follows will share family and community involvement, as it is woven into the characteristics of a rural setting, which is the subject of the study.

Importance of Family/Community Engagement

Section two of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* states, "Each SEA (State Educational Agency) must engage in timely and meaningful consultation with stakeholders…." These stakeholders, "… must include the following individuals…parents and families…" (http://www.doe.in.gov./essa, p. 21). Families and community have widely been viewed as valuable stakeholders. In fact, their involvement is often a contributing factor to student success. However, many schools struggle to find programs appropriate for their population in order to strengthen the relationship between schools and these valuable stakeholders who promote student success (Wood & Bauman, 2017).

Parent/community involvement/engagement is a very broad concept and it comes in a variety of approaches, such as homework support, in person volunteering, participating in parent groups and organizations, or keeping in consistent communication with the

school/teacher. Regardless of the form of involvement, it is a critical variable in home school relations and most importantly, student achievement (Conway & Houtenville, 2008). However, there are conflicting views (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Redford, Huo, & McQuiggan, 2019) regarding how families can and should be involved, as well as many barriers to their involvement.

In reviewing U.S. Department of Education statistics on school practices to involve families from 1998 through 2019, data appears to show an increase in family participation by schools who provide opportunities for families and the community to be involved (Retrieved on March 2, 2021 from http://nces.ed.gov/pub98/980321). In the 1998 U.S. Department of Education Parent Involvement report for years 1995-1996, 90% of all schools held activities to involve families. The most common barrier to involvement reported by families was lack of time, 87% (Carey, Lewis, & Farris, 1998). Findings from the 2002-2003 Parent and Family Involvement in Education survey, provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics, indicates that 38% to 40% of families reported being involved in some capacity in their child's education (Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005).

Of those involved in the 2002-2003 survey, the higher the parents' education, the higher the level of involvement. Ninety-three percent of parents who answered questions regarding attendance at school meetings had a graduate level education. (Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005). Attendance at parent-teacher organization meetings rose from 78% in 2006, to 89% in 2019. Attendance at a school event increased from 74% in 2006, to 79% in 2019, whereas attendance at parent-teacher conferences fell from 76% in 2012, to 75% in 2019. However, home school communication rose from 54% of families in 2006 who reported receiving some form of written communication, notes home, or emails from the school, to 89% receiving

these same types of communication in 2019 (Herrold & O'Donnell, 2008; Hanson & Pugliese, 2020).

In a meta-analysis, Fan and Chen (2001) identified four scopes of family involvement: Communication with the school or maintaining consistent contact with teachers, attendance at general meetings and parent-teacher conferences, being present at a school or class event, encouraging educational aspirations at home through supervision and homework support, and on sight volunteering. Their findings indicate that, regardless of the area of involvement of the family, these students exhibited a 30% increase in academic achievement. Joyce Epstein, as cited in *Framework of Six Types of Involvement* on the Organizing Engagement website, states:

> The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students. (Retrieved on March 2, 2021from http://www.organzingengagement.org)

Lacy Wood and Emily Bauman report that several programs they studied were found to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Wood & Bauman, 2017). One program where family participation corresponded with increased math and reading scores was the Collective Parent Engagement (CPE) program. Participants in the CPE program were in a Title

I school. The goal of this program is to empower families to work together to identify needs, design and implement solutions. By empowering families, the program builds trust within the community, as well as relationships among families, families, and school staff (Wood and Bauman, 2017). These studies seem to indicate that engaging families in the education of students, from low SES and minority populations, can lead to stronger academic achievement and improved relationships with the schools. In a review of 51 studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) discovered that regardless of a family's SES, students who had families involved in their education at some level, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, have better attendance, better social skills, graduate high school and go on to college (Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

Forms of Involvement

An integrated literature review, conducted jointly by Linda Halgunseth and Amy Peterson from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), along with Deborah Stark and Shannon Moodie from *Pre-K Now*, found that Joyce Epstein developed one of the most influential models for family-community engagement in the early 1990s. The School-Family-Community Partnership, as it is often referred to, involves six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community (Halgunseth & Peterson, NAEYC, 2009). In a school learning community, Epstein's action plan uses a research-based framework to help schools reach their goals. These collective partnerships between community members, teachers, families as well as students address various challenges in student outcomes, and strengthen community school relationships (Epstein, J. & Salinas, K. 2004).

The question of whether Epstein's model can work in high poverty, high minority populations was asked by Bower and Griffin (2018) in a case study. Their work concluded that in high poverty, high minority schools there are three additional factors to consider when implementing the Epstein model: strategies employed, frustrations, and engagement. Bower asserts that the Epstein Model, "…may not fully capture how families are or want to be involved in their children's education…" (Bower & Griffin, 2018, p. 84). She also emphasizes the need to consider race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of the local school community when selecting models to enhance family involvement. When these culturally relevant factors are ignored, it further alienates families, especially those of poverty, from involvement.

Barriers to involvement: Trust and Communication

Trust is a necessary ingredient in any working relationship. Lack of trust is one of several barriers to school involvement. Parents attribute a lack of trusting relationships to their low attendance at parent-teacher conferences or other school meetings (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Stefanski, Villa & Jacobson, 2016). *Family and Schools Together* (FAST) promotes school and community relationships that lend to building trust and positive student outcomes (Wood & Bauman, 2017). FAST empowers families to meet together in a setting with children present. Meetings are family-led and families spend time playing and interacting following each meeting. Two years post completion of the FAST program, teachers connected to schools that implanted this program reported students having higher academic scores and fewer behavior issues (Wood & Bauman, 2017). Trusting relationships between students, staff and families, according to a study of eighteen community schools in Tulsa Oklahoma, were, "…stronger predictors of math and reading achievement than the schools' SES" (Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016, p. 150).

Cori Brewster and Jennifer Railsback, in a report produced by the Northwest Educational Laboratory, examined issues of trust as it pertains to family involvement. Five factors of trust help educators understand the meaning of trust to a greater degree. Trustworthiness involves: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness, revealed through a pilot study conducted by Wayne Hoy and Megan Tschannen-Moran. "If families are to trust teachers and other school staff members…they must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair, and dependable, and have their child's best interest at heart" (Brewster & Railsback, 2003, p. 3).

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), in a quantitative analysis, sampled 50 teachers in 50 schools within five states. Of those schools, half had a reputation for high conflict. They used a 48-item survey in their pilot study. Initial assumptions were that trust would be positively related to teacher efficacy and negatively related to self-esteem, a sense of powerless, and the interpreted degree of conflict. Their findings revealed trust to be a concept with many faces. First, trust requires the ability to risk or to be vulnerable. All facets of trusting relationship included benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty and openness. The researchers also tested their premise on how faculty trust was related to their willingness to collaborate and involve families. "The greater the faculty trust in clients (community), the more influence teachers say families have in making important decisions" (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 204). Equally powerful is the reciprocity of trust. "When teachers of an elementary school trust the families, that is tantamount to trusting the kids; and when teachers trust the students, they also trust the families" (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 205). The researchers, while conducting a quantitative analysis, offer that due to the complexity of trust, quantitative studies on this topic are in order (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999).

Trust is a recurring theme within the literature involving family and community engagement. Schools that succeed in engaging families and community focus on building trust, respect, and addressing family issues and needs. They embrace a philosophy of partnership and shared responsibility for student success with school families and the local community.

A study by Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy included in the Brewster and Railsback report, examined 47 elementary schools in the Midwest. Their findings indicated, as in Henderson and Mapp's results, that schools where greater trust was reported also experienced higher student achievement. Likewise, improving communication between home and school was found, in a survey of nearly 1,500 families and teachers in a large suburban school, to be foundational in building family-school trust relationships (Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

Communication is one of the biggest barriers to family involvement and lack of family trust (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Other barriers include lack of time, problems with transportation and childcare, poor communication from the school regarding meetings and events, schools not making families feel valued or welcomed, language barriers and lack of translators, feelings of inadequacy due to parent education levels, and frustrations over finances (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Stefanski, et al, 2016; Redford, et al., 2019). Of this list Redford, Huo, and McQuiggan (2019) share the four most common family-reported obstacles in a National Center for Education Statistics report on barriers to involvement: 33% of families state that meetings are scheduled at *inconvenient times*; 48% express they are unable to attend meetings or functions due to *work hours*; another 17% list not having adequate *childcare* which limits their ability to be involved; and 12% claim they do not receive information about things in which they might want to be involved.

Concluding Thoughts

Research demonstrates the relationship between family engagement and improved student outcomes. Families involved in education make a difference in the educational experience and success of the child. However, many schools do not tap into the rich resource that is family and community involvement as much as they could. For example, reaching out to local businesses to offer students real world opportunities, as well as promoting social capital, impacts student achievement and community relationships (Stefanski, et al., 2016). Rather than looking at family involvement through the lens of the deficit model (Finders, 1994), teachers and administrators may need to explore the reasons for low involvement and employ unique models to engage families. Assumptions are often made regarding lack of family involvement. The most common, and often inaccurate, assumption is that families just do not care (Finders, 1994). Educators and school leaders will do well to take into consideration the individual and cultural needs of their school families: economic and time constraints, language barriers, a parent's past personal experiences with schools, and factors that hinder trust. By consistently and openly communicating with families, empowering families, and appreciating a community's diverse needs and abilities, schools may find an involvement model that works best for their population in order to help students reach their potential.

CHAPTER THREE: Literature Review

Characteristics of Small Rural Schools: Family/Community Engagement

The purpose of this section is to examine research surrounding the common characteristics of remaining rural, one-room schools including information on family and community engagement. "Americans like to believe in an idyllic picturesque rural America" (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014. p. 734). Of those idyllic attributes, smaller class size, higher student and teacher engagement, and the close bond between these rural schools and the communities they serve are high on the list of their defining characteristics. And while these images may hold true for many rural areas, they are not free from the importance of family and community involvement at a more purposeful level. Especially as it contributes to academic outcomes, attitudes towards school, and aspirations for a students' future learning (Sanders, Epstein, & Conners-Tadors, 1999).

After nearly two decades in my rural, remote setting, I find many stereotypical assumptions about rural America persist. Simultaneously frustrating and affirming, are that others are aware of these continuing myths surrounding rural communities and the schools that educate a fifth of American schoolchildren and 51 million rural residents (Tieken, 2014). Mara Casey Tieken articulates this relatability in her book, *Why Rural Schools Matter* (2014), at least to this rural educator and researcher.

Stereotypes and assumptions about rural communities and people are laced throughout popular culture and perpetuated by mainstream media, and can even creep into research and reform. Two somewhat contradictory myths dominate. The first is about deprivation and decline: "rural" is backwoods, and provincial, its communities little different than those portrayed in the movie *Deliverance.* The second myth draws from a

romantic nostalgia: lost golden age, an image, that, while kinder, is no more accurate

that the first…These myths serve to ensure that status of rural communities as either

relics or wretches in the public imagination, and they obscure rural complexities and

realities… (p.7).

The role rural schools play in their local community extends far beyond the classroom.

However, "…because of their small size, rural schools are often overlooked by researchers

and policy analysts" (Retrieved on April 2, 2021 from www.http://publicschoolsfirstnc.org).

The reciprocal relationship between rural, one-room schools and their local community can

positively impact students, strengthen community bonds, and may shape the meanings

proponents of small schools assign to their local educational environment. While vulnerable

to change, small, rural schools continue to have a powerful impact on students, as well as the

local community from education, social gatherings, shared values, to community employment

opportunities (Budge, 2006; Herzog, 1995; Kearney, 1994; Lowe, 2006).

The relationships between these foundational school settings, rural residents, and

communities, matter, asserts Tieken. "These schools are hardly inconsequential" (Tieken,

2014, p. 8). With the current climate and more awareness and need for diversity, equality, and

now functioning in the middle of a pandemic, these schools are a reminder that

"…educational equity shouldn't be circumscribed by a city's limits" (Tieken, 2014, p. 9).

Background

One-room settings laid the groundwork as our country's education model. Enrollment in

small, rural, one-room teaching environments is documented as far back as the early 1900's.

These small schools provided education to 70.8% of students enrolled in American public

schools at that time (Miller, 1991). As of 2013, the National Center for Educational Statistics

reported 14.39% of public-school students were served in a rural school setting (Retrieved on March 1, 2021 from http://nces.gov/survey/ruraled/tables/a.l.a.-3_2.asp). Others report, just one year earlier, this number to be as high as 20% of the United States' 9.6 million public schools serve students in rural communities (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer & Reeves, 2012).

John Dewey's writings indicate that he believed that schools should consider the needs of the whole child in their approach to teaching and learning (Webb, 2006). Dewey believed that learning was a lifelong process. This philosophy remains popular in education today. Current educators use the phrase, "lifelong learner," and programs in contemporary schools are focused on meeting the students' social, emotional, and physical needs, as Dewey maintained was essential to the effectiveness of schooling.

The rural school was once the hub of the community (Rose, 1995). Early school buildings served many purposes and provided a gathering place for events such as boxed socials, church services, dances, various meetings, and community gatherings. Where earlier schools were the venue for community events, today's small schools rely on the contributions from the community for school maintenance, community volunteers to teach special subjects such as music or physical education, or act as a recess attendant. The need for a cooperative spirit between the one-room school and the community it serves remains vitally important (Tieken, 2014).

Foundationally, educating America's children was built on the basis that every child would be provided an education and experience learning as a direct result of input from families combined with the involvement of the community in which the school served. This is the same standard that would later lay the groundwork for No Child Left Behind (Zimmerman, 2009). Literature illuminates the unique intricacies that continue to define what it is to be a small, multi-

grade, or one-room school in the rural school and community (Miller, 1991; Jenkins & Cornish, 2013). Over time, many small schools, by virtue of decreased population or out-migration, have been absorbed into larger school districts (Webb, 2006).

Recent literature, however, offers little by way of unpacking the minutiae within the complicated relationship shared by currently operating rural schools, and the communities they serve. Contemporary literature on small, rural, multi-grade or one-room teaching environments in North America is scarce. This may be attributed to the reality that these learning structures are equally scant. Approximately 400 operational multi-grade schools remained in the early 2000s (Ellis, 2005). That number continues to decrease each year as out-migration in rural communities continues.

Common Characteristics. Rural schools, and small rural schools do not share all of the same characteristics. However, two shared features, location and social capital, seem to emerge. Location contributes to the number of students, which in turn contributes to student-teacher ratio, student engagement, interpersonal relationships, and school culture and climate. Social capital in schools may explain how the local community impacts student success. It is within social capital, defined as, "…a network of supportive relationships and resources that make goal achievement possible…" (Stefanski, Villa, & Jacobson, 2016, p. 138), where an understanding of how individuals construct meaning of school and community relations may be teased out (Stefanski, Villa, & Jacobson, 2016).

Location. The location of rural schools matters for many reasons, one being that in 2003, 40% of the nation's students attended rural schools (Bouck, 2004). Mara Casey Tieken (2014) addresses the rural rationale in her book, *Why Rural Schools Matter*. According to Tieken, as of 2014, rural schools educated a fifth of American students. Many of these students

are in small, isolated, rural communities. Transportation is a necessary service for many school families and a large portion of a district's overall budget. And while costs are high nationwide, "rural school districts, serving one in five students who reside in rural locations, receive just seventeen percent of a state's education funding" (Retrieved on April 2, 2021 from http://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org).

Transportation expenses and other financial issues tend to be the focus of proponents of school consolidation. "School consolidation is likely to remain a threat to many rural communities in the decades to come" (Lyson, 2002, p. 2). Those in favor of consolidation need to recognize the "…mounting evidence that rural education is becoming a bigger and even more complex part of our national educational landscape" (Johnson; Showalter; Klein; Lester, 2014, p. 28). The isolated location of many rural schools has its advantages. Those in favor of small schools, such as one-room or two-room schools, boast the benefits of these small learning environments. The benefits include greater student participation, community involvement, low student/teacher ratio and higher morale, cooperative learning and cross age grouping, which lends to strong interpersonal relationships, lower dropout rate, fewer student absenteeism issues, and teachers keenly aware of students' progress and individual needs (Bauch, 2004; Kearney, 1994; Miller, 1991).

Not all small rural schools are one or two-room schools. Most are not. Of all the schools in the US, according to the November 9, 2020 edition of *Education Week*, there are 130,930 public schools. Of these schools, 39.6% are located in suburban areas, 30.4 % of schools are within city limits, 19.1% in rural locations, and only 11.0% in towns. Isolated rural schools are connected to towns, and account for a margin of that 11.0%. (Retrieved on March 1, 2021 from https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/education-statistics/index.html).

The location of a school, regardless of how urban or rural, impacts various aspects related to education. Rural communities experience many of the same financial hardships as those schools in urban settings. The location of a school is associated with the socio-economic status of the community the school serves, whether it is urban or rural. Poverty is typically associated with urban schools. However, many rural schools likewise suffer the detrimental effects of poverty (Bouch, 2004). The school's SES level is measured by the number of students receiving free and reduced meals. Those schools with higher levels of poverty consequently have fewer dollars per student to spend on education (Anyon, 2003; Kozol, 1992). Yet, rural schools can greatly impact their local community economically. Author, Tim Adist (2012), of *Small Schools, Education, and the Importance of Community,* asserts that small rural schools benefit their communities by providing many social activities as well as employment to their rural setting.

Poverty is a significant factor in reduced family involvement in countless rural areas. Numerous families must work, and their hours of availability frequently do not coincide with school hours (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Too often, according to Finders and Lewis (1994), authors of *Why Some Parents Don't Come to School,* educators look at family involvement through the lens of a "deficit model." Educators mistakenly assume that if families, and or, community members are not involved in local education it is simply because they do not care. However, there are many barriers to school involvement. Location to jobs and services impacts one's ability to be involved. Blending the logistics of location and proximity to employment, the feasibility of attending school functions, not to mention volunteering during school hours, is unlikely. Therefore, families who are employed in geographic locations outside

of the local school and community have limited opportunities to contribute to their child's

education apart from homework support (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Semke & Sheridan, 2012).

　　　　Educational opportunities. There is a lack of equity in available curriculum and courses

offered in rural locations (Monk & Haller, 1993). Most rural schools have limited elective courses,

if any, to offer students. Likewise, advanced placement courses for higher achieving students are

limited. The location of a rural school has a significant impact on educational opportunities.

Stringfield and Teddlie (1991), in their analysis of rural schools' effectiveness, found "that rural

schools were more conservative in terms of education" (Bouck, 2004. p. 39). While this

conservative approach often reflected community norms, it hindered students from participating in

content that would have provided them with the necessary tools to compete academically

(Stringfield & Teddlie, 1991).

　　　　Student achievement. Despite the lack of equity regarding curriculum and limited

choices for courses, several studies link student-teacher ratios to increased achievement. Being

known is considered a strength in small, rural schools. Teachers in isolated locations are able to

give students individualized attention. "Students are not allowed to fall through the cracks of

the educational system" (Kearney, 1994, p. 4). When a teacher works with a student year after

year and gives more individualized attention, due to smaller class sizes often found in rural

locations, students have higher graduation success than their peers in other locations. Students

in rural districts experienced higher graduation rates than their peers in districts within cities

and towns. The average freshman graduation rate was 77%, as reported in *The Status of Rural*

School, May 2013, for the 47 states providing data. Graduation rates in rural areas were 80%,

higher than in cities and towns, but just under suburban rates of 81% (Retrieved on March 1,

2021 from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_tla.asp).

Family and Community engagement. The close bond between communities and their schools has become a defining characteristic of rural education (Kearney, 1994; Miller, 1991; Lock, 2008). This bond between the school community and a teacher's familiarity with her students is often interpreted as a benefit to isolated, rural schools. Yet, there are those who question how one teacher can adequately serve students in various grades and keep students engaged and motivated (Miller, 1991). Miller's review of multi-grade schools' effectiveness includes an early study, conducted in 1983, of a midwestern rural two-room school where two teachers served 35 students. The research revealed five positive environment characteristics that favored rural schools in terms of classroom climate and school-community relationships despite their limited teaching staff. Of those, school routines, group learning, interdependence, independence, and community involvement emerged. These findings were echoed nearly a decade later in an article in the Alberta Journal of Educational Research, by Hernan Cuervo in 2014. Cuervo (2014) states, "Small schools are often the hub of many rural communities. In the school space, a multiplicity of social, economic and political relationships is sustained, which enhance the vitality of the community" (p. 643). Cuervo (2014) goes on to add, "Rural small schools are commonly viewed as critical organisms of the health of their communities" (p. 644).

The network of relationships (social capital) between individuals who live and work in a common area may be one of the most powerful natural biproducts of isolated, rural communities. "Parents' involvement in their children's education has been identified as an important predictor of student success" (Bauch, 2001, p. 213). Isolated rural schools have more opportunities for families and non-family community members to be involved. Communities associated with isolated rural schools contribute to the daily life of the school, impacting staff and students and influencing school decision-making, which benefits the community in general (Bauch, 2001).

While investigating how rural families are involved in their local school, McBride (2002) found that teachers in rural settings limit family involvement. Parent or community volunteers are assigned to tasks that involve helping students with basic needs or duties that are clerical in nature. McBride (2002) also found rural families talked with their children less about school, attended more school events, but fewer regular school meetings than families of urban or suburban families. It appears then, based on these conflicting sources, that Howley and Keith's summation of not being able to predict family involvement based on setting, is worth noting. It is also worth noting that Semke's identification of issues involving researching rural phenomena may apply here. Were these studies rural in nature or considered rural in context (Semke, 2012)?

Social Capital

A school's location impacts its poverty level and sense of isolation. However, many of these locations are communities with powerful relationships, a shared history, and a connectedness to their community influenced by older community members and community functions (Bauch, 2001). "Individuals enjoy social capital by virtue of their membership in a family or community" (Bauch, 2001, p. 212). People from rural areas tend to be less mobile. Community social capital is related to a sense of place, and a sense of place is strengthened out of a rootedness in one's area (Howley, Harman, & Leopald, 1996). Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), in their research of five small communities, say that "Social capital is present where there is participation in networks, reciprocity, trust, social norms, the commons (shared ownership over resources), intergenerational closure, and society agency" (Bauch, 2001, p. 212).

As previously discussed, isolated rural areas typically have increased family involvement, "Researchers suggest that the small size and tightly knit social structure of rural communities foster increased family involvement in all aspects of their children's lives, including education"

(Bauch, 2001, p. 213). Research proposes that this willingness to contribute to the education of local students is based on community social capital and on their sense of place. A study by Sun, Hobbs, and Elder (1994) found that families of rural school children were more likely to be involved in their children's education than families in other school community types (Bauch, 2001). Parents of rural school children consider the close ties between teachers, students, and families as one of the defining characteristics of rural schools. This welcoming partnership cultivates a willingness for family involvement (Kearney, 1994). However, in the 2007 National Household Education Surveys Program, only 54% of rural families reported being satisfied with interactions between home and school (Herrold, K. & O'Donnell, K, 2008).

Partnerships between schools and local businesses are another example of the social capital that lends to a rootedness in a school's sense of place. These meaningful partnerships between rural schools, businesses and local industries provide resources, volunteer services, and school to work programs. They strengthen the connectedness of a community and contribute to community sustainability, as well as provide students with opportunities, skill, and motivation to succeed academically (Miller, 1995).

What Rural Schools Mean to Parents

As this project seeks to understand the meanings families attach to the small, rural, one-room school their children attend, it is important to explore how people determine what aspects of school are meaningful. Robertson, O'Reilly, and Hannah (2015), in their work, *Finding Meaning in Relationships: The Impact of Network Ties and Structure on The Meaningfulness of Work*, adopted a social network theory to explain how this theory produces meaningfulness in an individual's work. Within this theory, the researcher found that meaningfulness could not only be attributed to "high-quality connections" but those connections that have a level of intimacy and

resilience and long standing, reciprocal relationships with regular interactions. It may be this *rootedness* in one's community that forms the foundation, and begins to give shape to meanings families of rural students assign to the relationship between school and community.

Starting school, whether it is in an urban or rural setting, presents many of the same challenges regardless of proximity. Parents in any educational setting consider the importance of class size, school and local community relations, experience of the teachers, and social interactions with peers, to name just a few of the commonalities. Sue Docket (1999) and her colleagues note in their study, *What Do Early Childhood Educators and Parents Think Is Important About Children's Transition to School,* that there are several important factors necessary for successful entry to school. Aside from a child's physical and cognitive development, being known was a significant aspect disclosed by both families and teachers. In rural settings the local school is often a central part of social and community life, albeit limited.

Social interactions outside of school for those in urban settings, according to feedback on Docket's survey, were not reported as important to successful school transition. This aspect is seen as a natural part of everyday life in urban settings. Limited opportunities for interactions with peers outside of school is, however, a reality for many in rural locations. Rural families often travel long distances to ensure their children have social opportunities. Peer relations, in and outside of the school, were determined to be of value to rural participants (Docket, 1999).

Other meaningful factors or benefits of rural education discovered in Docket's work included parent-teacher relationships and open communication. However, not all rural locations experience the same perceived benefits. The rural landscape is changing, and unlike their families and grandparents before them, not all rural students have the multi-generational influence upon their daily lives (Lin et al., 2014). With an increase in migrant families, as well as the prevalence

of more families with limited education in rural communities, educators need to work harder to promote family involvement and strengthen communication practices with a population that is learning how to navigate community norms (Lin et al, 2014). "Rural schools and educators should think about how to capitalize on the community's assets and how to build partnerships with the community for the well-being of all children" (Lin et al, 2014, p. 53).

Concluding Thoughts

This review explored works surrounding the topic of rural schools, their history, and realities, as well as family and community engagement. Much of the research surrounding family and community engagement has been conducted in urban areas. To make researching rural and small rural schools exponentially more challenging is differentiating rural from rural-remote. "A problem with rural education research in general is that poorly framed research questions fail to establish research from rural in nature" (Semke & Sheridan, 2012, p. 34).

CHAPTER FOUR: INVESTIGATIVE APPROACH

This chapter discusses the research design, as well as the method of data collection. Correspondingly, the setting, data sources, and the rationale for the researcher being visible in the project due to the nature of portraiture are offered. Ethical considerations and the use of a critical friend, as well as a timeline, are specified.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this project was to co-construct a narrative within my remote, one-room school setting to possibly bring to light the meanings participants assigned to the relationship between the one-room school and the families the school serves. In ethnographic inquiry, this research was conducted with the use of the qualitative inquiry method influenced by portraiture, from personal accounts and rich description, to attempt to answer: *How do families/participants describe the meanings they construct of their one-room schoolhouse, as revealed through a partnership portraiture with their rural teacher-researcher* (Berg, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Van Manen, 2014).

Setting

The setting for this study was a K-8 school in the Northwest region of the United States. Most community members are employed through a faith-based company in the area that requires employees align with the company's statement of faith. The community approached the local public school district, that is geographically well over an hour away, more than twenty years ago about the possibility of providing this rural community with a public school. The faith-based community and employer were very clear, they wanted a public school to serve community families. Their partnership enhanced by the faith-based

employers' commitment to support the school by providing employees paid time off in order to serve in the school on a volunteer basis.

This remote K-8 school is one school within a larger, public rural district. The school was once a one-room school, and may likely return to that if and when student enrollment decreases. There are currently two teachers employed. I serve as one of the two contracted teachers. The school is composed of two classrooms, a K-5 classroom, and a 6-8 middle school classroom. There is no paid support staff. Enrichment classes, as well as recess attendants, are covered by family or community volunteers. The school follows curriculum guidelines and standards in keeping with all district-level mandated curriculum.

Research approach

This study was in part, inspired by Mara Casey Tieken's approach to research as used in her book, *Why Rural Schools Matter*, and in keeping with the heart of portraiture developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. I desired to study "…*with* my participants, not on them" (Tieken, 2014, p. 29). I used a similar approach for this research. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociology professor at Harvard University, developed this research technique, "…it is distinctive in that it is the first social scientific methodology that is explicit in blending art and science." She adds portraiture is, "…an interpretive narrative, portraits aspire to being beautifully and evocatively written, deep and compelling stories" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis,1997, p. 3). Her explanation of this methodology resonated with my desire to understand how this one-room school community assigned meaning and/or derived meaning to/from their school in partnership with their teacher-researcher. Using a similar approach rooted in portraiture elements, as with Mara Casey Tieken's study (*Why Rural Schools*

Matter), I expected to reveal some of the complicated meanings participants assigned to their school.

Researcher

I was eager to begin my new teaching assignment in a remote, one-room school. However, I was apprehensive about the remote location, although I had nearly a decade of teaching experience including both public and private schools, a multi-grade setting comprised of two grade levels in rural Tennessee, and short season as a temporary instructor at a state university. This new teaching assignment came at a tumultuous, yet exciting and terrifying time of life. Having earned my master's in education at 42 years old, I was simultaneously facing an empty nest, as well as overcoming a serious illness. My remote teaching environment was unique; that I understood. However, I had no idea just how exceptional it was going to be teaching in a one-room school in the 21st century. Not until listening to an NPR broadcast on one-room schools did I begin to understand that, while rare, today's one-room schools are not found only in history books. After seven years I found this rural remote setting to be professionally isolating. To remedy my feelings of being professionally isolated, I transferred to one of the districts in town schools where I taught in a single grade classroom for two years. Yet, this multi-grade model drew me back in as I pursued by doctorate degree. Upon my return this one-room school turned into a two-room school. Parents as well as administrators realized the importance of students being split into upper and lower grades, as well as the support a colleague brings to a remote and isolated setting.

As I approached the end of my doctoral work with George Fox University, I began to narrow my curiosity concerning this model of schooling. I became increasingly interested in

deep and rich multi-grade learning environments. My attention is now steadfast on how families construct their meaning of our one-room schoolhouse in partnership with me, their teacher and researcher. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's approach seemed like the right vehicle for me to finally pursue this project. This portraiture method empowered me to work within my strengths, retain my voice and create a rich, textured study while holding to the rigors of research (Berg, 2009).

Research Design

For this qualitative inquiry, I collected layers of information from participants, as well as researcher observations, to create a depiction of what this contemporary one-room school means to its families. As this study developed, the inquiry perspective employed permitted me, the teacher-researcher, to co-construct a narrative of the meanings attached to the relationship between school and family, *with* participants, rather than *on* the participants. Portraiture is a purposeful way of understanding what is worthy and strong in the research topic (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Ethnographic research, the task of studying a culture or subculture, permitted this researcher to bring to light situations that are, or have been, "seen-but-unnoticed," or "taken-for-granted" in this setting of this project (Van Manen, 2014, p. 43).

Participants

Participants were selected utilizing maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2013). Working as a qualitative researcher, it made sense to look across the school community and include stories from participants from various family structures and educational experience. "Portraiture is an ethnographical research method, 'designed to capture the richness and complexity…conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those

experiences'" (Tieken, 2014, p. 30). For this project, four families were invited to participate. Each family varied in the number of children and the number of years in the school and community. They represented a diverse range of community involvement and leadership. In this rural, remote setting most community members are employed at a faith-based organization. All families were given a pseudonym. The descriptions that follow describe family participants.

Participant Group One: **Quinn Family**

The father of the **Quinn** family works for the faith-based business in the community. The mother is a stay-at-home mom who volunteers in the school on a weekly basis as a lunch duty attendant, and works from home part-time. They have children in the school and this is the only school their children have attended.

Participant Group Two: **Roth Family**

The father of this family, referred to as the **Roth** family, is also an employee for the local employer. Mom works part-time for separate employer. This family has children who have gone through this one-room school system, with only one currently enrolled. Their older children attended a public school out of state for early elementary years before their enrollment in this one-room school, and are now in college. Mom volunteers one day a week in the school as a recess attendant.

Participant Group Three: **Ellis Family**

This family, referred to as **Ellis**, began as a family of two, a single father and his young daughter. The father has since remarried. They have one child in the school. Both families, father and stepmother, volunteer once per week in the school as recess attendants. The birth

mother is rarely in communication with the school and the father makes all decisions as the custodial parent. The stepmother is now a stay-at-home mom with younger children.

Participant Group Four: Ulrich Family

Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich have worked for the faith-based employer since before marrying. They met in this community and have gone from single adult, to married couple, and now new parents of school age children. Mr. Ulrich works full-time and Mrs. Ulrich works part-time, for the same employer, while also raising her young children.

Demographics

The population of this remote community is just under 200. The community has a median age of thirty-seven for adults over eighteen years old. The community is 86% white with 98% English speaking. Most community members work for the same employer, aside from the two teachers and a handful of other members who are either employed through the local school district or for employers who permit work from home options.

The community this school serves has changed over the course of my career. Where once 90% of the students had only attended this small school, those students are now in the minority. Community residence ranges from singles adults, young marrieds, to families with children, as well as several retired individuals. Families with children include both biological, step, and adopted children. I believe this diversity may add a richness and depth to this study.

The strength of this sample of participants lies in the variety of experiences they bring to the research. They vary in family structure from intact families, those with adopted children, biracial adoption, and those having a step parent. Of the four families included, two have only experienced school in this one-room setting. One family has had their children enrolled in this one-room school, then chose homeschool for a time, and subsequently re-

enrolled. Two of the families have other public and or private school experiences. Education of the families ranged from GED to BA degrees. Ages of families ranged from 35 to 56.

Guarding Against Potential Bias

In order to mitigate the potential for my assumptions and to differentiate between the experiences and interpretations of participants and my own, I included the use of a *critical friend* in the research design (Appendix C). The use of an individual that Creswell (2009) terms a key informant was crucial to maintain trust in relationships, as well as lend to the credibility of this project. Their role was to help safeguard relationships and hold this project to ethical standards. I had many conversations, as I worked to guard against bias, with this critical friend throughout this project. I made every effort to set aside my assumptions by periodically recognizing my assumptions and feelings, writing about them in the research journal (Appleton, 2001; Creswell, 2009). In the research journal, notes were taken during interviews, and a separate column was used to jot down my thoughts, feelings, interpretations and assumptions: my cognitive and emotional responsiveness. This happened at the time of the interviews, as well as when reading and rereading notes as I teased out themes. These notes, as I co-constructed the narratives, contributed to self-discovery of my meanings and suppositions as they were brought to light, those details that were "seen-but-unnoticed," or "taken-for-granted" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 43). This journal was shared with the critical friend, before and after interviews, in order to help guard against bias. This individual was vital and contributed, "…to the integrity of the research process through questioning me, my processes, my interpretations and findings, and by ensuring I engaged in critical reflection" (Appleton, 2001, p. 6).

Trustworthiness & Credibility

Due to my history with participants as the teacher, as well as a community member, prior to this research, and in keeping with the standards of the ethical educator, I have established a relationship of trust over the years. Ongoing transparency was used to maintain trust throughout the project. Participants were given the assurance of confidentiality; pseudonyms for participants and a pseudonym for the setting were used.

Participants were made aware of how materials were stored and safeguarded. These materials are in a locked file cabinet when not in use. To offer participants assurance, a statement of confidentiality was signed and a copy provided to all (Berg, 2009). Following the project, all recorded conversations and data will be destroyed within two years. At any time, participants had the right to discontinue participation with this project.

Utilizing *member checking* (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), notes from interviews in the research journal were offered to participants during each follow-up appointment in order for participant clarification and/or additional comments. This was done out of a desire to incite a richness and depth to this study, encouraged by Taylor & Bogdan. Participants were permitted to comment and expand on interview notes, even if they differed from the researcher's perspective. After follow-up meetings, where participants had the opportunity to offer additional data and review their responses, all follow-up content was discussed with the critical friend. This practice assisted in the continuation of trustworthiness and consistently guarded against bias throughout the evolving project. I submitted and received IRB approval before engaging participants in interviews.

Data-Gathering and Analysis

Data was gathered via stories collected through formal and informal conversations and interviews, as well as opportunities when participants openly shared memories and anecdotes. Due to the current global pandemic, interviews were conducted at a level of participant comfort. That is, some interviews took place face-to-face, maintaining social distancing, while others were conducted virtually with the aid of Zoom. Interview details such as location and placement were noted in the researcher's notebook. The content of these interviews, the conversations and stories shared, were voice recorded, and notes added to the researcher's notebook. Recordings were then transcribed using *Temi*. Participants were made aware of their access to their interview notes, upon request, in keeping with the technique of *member checking (*Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As I read and reread to identify themes*,* participants were invited to attend follow-up conversations. These member checking sessions were scheduled in order to review the contents of the initial interviews as well as to refine and clarify previously collected data. Telling about lived experiences can easily lead to confusion. When describing events, in order to get deep into participant meaning, it was essential to gather and document rich descriptions of their lived experiences in the researcher's notebook, rather than simply having participants talk about an event, which is a much easier and more natural way people share lived experiences (Van Manen, 2014). The second set of interviews allowed for the addition of rich descriptions.

Data Gathering. Gathering data included interview content from participants. Prior to conducting the interviews, I meet with participants informally to share the project with them and invite them to participate. For each family (parents only) interviewed, voice recording

was used to capture informal interviews/conversations where participants were encouraged to tell the story of their relationship/history with the one-room school. A list of interview questions guided each session (Appendix A). This set of questions was used, in whole or in part, in order to propel the conversations. The interview questions were sent to participants prior to their interview appointment in order to allow them time to prepare and think deeply about their responses.

Interviews were conducted by appointment, with two families interviewed each week within a two-week period. Appointment times and location were set by participants based on their comfort. Each family had their own, private interview time. Parents of students were interviewed only; no students were involved in this study. Interviews were voice recorded in order to capture as much detail as possible offered from participants. Interview questions were constructed in such a way as to illicit meanings participants assigned to the relationship between the one-room school and the families the school serves. Participants were not required to bring anything to their scheduled interview.

Data Analysis. Data analysis consisted, in part, of reading and rereading field notes, researcher notebook, interview responses, anecdotes, conversations, and questionnaires to identify themes, and periodic meetings with the critical friend through these processes. During this time, *open-coding* process was useful to help identify further themes and record patterns found within conversations, and then refined into *coding frames.* For example, setting/context codes, situation codes, activity codes, event codes, narrative codes, and relationship codes (Berg, 2009). With the use of coding, Saldana offers the strategy of emotion codes, which focus on mood or tone suggested by participants (Saldana, 2016). Within this qualitative

research, I anticipated the need to refer to this strategy due to the personal nature of this project (Saldana, 2016).

Utilizing the research notebook, codes were assigned to themes and descriptions, and then coded again for individual and collective meanings (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016). Along with these two sources, this researcher referred to Van Manen (2014), as well as Berg (2009), and Taylor and Bogdan (1998) throughout this research process. The researcher notebook was also a source of data used to document my interpretations and address my assumptions, and was then shared with my critical friend. By employing the role of a critical friend to the project, this individual freely offered their interpretations, asked further questions and requested clarification. This skilled colleague was an advocate for the success of this project and one who aided in the guarding of the professional and personal integrity of the researcher and project (Appleton, 2001).

Timeline

This project began following the proposal, IRB approval, and an initial meeting with the critical friend to polish and draft final interview questions. Once the questions were finalized, the timeline was constructed with the committee chair and proceeded as follows: informal meeting with potential participants, identifying participants, scheduling interviews, reviewing interview content with the critical friend, follow-up interviews, constructing narratives, and finally, the submission and defense of the study. Upon conclusion of the informational meeting, those interested were given a copy of consent form (Appendix A), including details of the study.

Once participants were identified, interviews were scheduled for a time and place that was best suited for the participant. Upon completion of the interviews', recorded material was

sent to transcription through the use of the program, Temi. Each transcription was printed and placed in individual participant files. I made contact with my critical friend for some of the interviews when potential identifiable information was shared. Together we assessed its value and made decisions to safeguard participants. For example, omitting names, places, as well as significant identifiable events.

Following each interview, I listened and transcribed initial interviews into the research notebook. Throughout this interview process and data transcribing, I simultaneously worked to identify themes and assigned codes with periodic assistance from my critical friend. The critical friend was brought in through the narrative construction phase and offered feedback that aligned each narrative in consistency with the data obtained. In this step I was directed when and where it was appropriate to add in my responses within the narratives.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Possible *limitations* within this project may have been raised due to the nature of this research approach, where the researcher has a relationship with participants, and the two worked together to shape the narrative. "The portraits are shaped through dialogue…The encounter between the two is rich with meaning…" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). Participants needed to be encouraged to honestly share even those experiences possibly viewed as difficult or uncomfortable.

Conclusion

This chapter shared the critical components of the research design for this study. Through the influence of the portraiture methodology, I attempted to co-construct a narrative, which described the meanings families of current students attached to their one-room school. Meanings were revealed through themes discovered within the participant responses. The

following chapter is comprised of community member narratives. Chapter Six reports the

analysis of data collected through rich and deep narratives of participant stories and

perceptions.

CHAPTER FIVE: COMMUNITY NARRATIVES

Introduction to Narratives

Interviews were scheduled with participants and conducted in a location and time of their choosing. "Interviews are not always best conducted in formal settings…" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 315). Prior to meeting, participants were given a copy of the interview questions (Appendix A) to guide our time; however, these were not rigid, and participants were given the freedom to deviate from the questions and/or add to the discussion to better articulate their position. When discussions did go off script, I used the guide questions as much as possible to bring us back to the topic to uncover the meanings they attach to this school environment. However, within those off-path discussions, many answers to questions were addressed. When that was the case, I moved the conversation to the next prompt. Three of the four families chose to have the interview take place in their homes. Interviews were conducted in the span of thirteen days. Two interviews had to be rescheduled due to work conflicts, both on my part and on the part of a family. One interview was attempted via Zoom; however, the remote location of both the interviewee and interviewer created a break in the flow of the conversation. As a result, a time to meet face to face was scheduled.

The narratives did not follow the interview questions and answers one by one, as these were used as a guide. Rather, the narratives were constructed from the themes that emerged within participant responses and anecdotes, as well as from my reflection of the interactions with participants. Several themes were provided by participants, which shaped the following narratives.

Ellis Narrative

Per parent choice, we met at their home at 3:00 pm on a warm, spring, Sunday afternoon. This meeting time and place permitted families an opportunity to speak with limited interruptions as their younger children were napping. We set up in the living room on a large sectional with natural light and a view of the vast, rolling hills outside of their picture window. Between me and the view of the hills was a warm yard, full of flowers, grazing chickens, and countless toys strewn about. A small dog joined me on the couch as we began. The parents sat together across from me on the other sofa and the interview lasted for one hour and nine minutes.

Within the Ellis interview they revealed how the themes of community, the importance of being known, pros and cons of a small rural school, trust, and feeling valued provided meaning to their relationship with this small rural school. Their narrative follows these themes as they were revealed during our time. However, trust seemed to be embedded within every answer they provided, possibly what then was most meaningful to them in this intimate school setting.

Community

The Ellis family is a blended family. Mr. Ellis came to this community as a single parent. Their situation is another first for this community where families are typically comprised of two families: a working father and a stay-at-home mother. It was not until his second year in the community that he remarried.

> *Mr. Ellis*
> *We are the unique situation. Where we're co-parenting and that can make it challenging on a personal relationship level, where you have to explain and try and explain the schooling system to somebody, Emma's mom, who doesn't understand.*

The former Mrs. Ellis has never visited this community. However, she has attended parent-teacher conferences via zoom. She has expressed her concerns about her child attending a multi-grade school, as well as living so remotely.

To provide a basis for our discussion, I began by asking what, if anything, they knew of the multi-grade, educational school model their child currently attended, upon locating to this community.

Mr. Ellis
Um, this is the only one that I have any experience with. And I would say the only other experience that I've seen or been a part of, was my dad taught at a school that was K through 12 in one building. Um, you know, it's not a one room school, but he would have, once they hit eighth grade, he had everyone in math from eighth grade through senior high. It was still divided for grades, but it was a much smaller school than normal. Um, but as far as one or two room schools go, this is the only one that I've ever seen or been a part of.

I was made aware of Mr. Ellis's situation prior to his child being enrolled in the school. I then inquired further, asking how he felt about a small, rural, one-room school being the only option for his child.

Mr. Ellis
I was excited for her just because in my head I was thinking that it'd be a really neat environment for her to be able to get to know classmates and the teacher on a different level than what she might have with 30, 25 to 35 other kids in a class. I thought it was going to be neat to have really good relationships. And then also knowing that it would transfer into the community and that she would then see them around as well.

In asking the Ellis family what aspects of living in a small community they found difficult and which they found of value, they brought it back to how it impacted Emma.

Mrs. Ellis
I would say the tricky thing with that is while she has developed really good relationships with people in the community, in and out of school, in school she has often been the only girl in her grade group. Which hasn't been a huge problem because she has had friends below and above her a grade level. She has felt that. In a bigger school community kids move too, but she would still have had, 15 other people to play with or hang out with.

Community is who you have in school. So, there's not a separation of that. If that makes sense. Like you don't have neighbors around that you don't go to school with, that would add to that. So as far as the playmate goes, I think the social side is the bigger impact than necessarily the educational side. I've seen not a lot of impact, at least from the parent's point of view, from her not having classmates to work alongside in the same subject matter at the same level, but it's been more of a social thing. That's been harder for her.

I asked the parents if they would like to elaborate on how "harder for her" looked for their child.

Mrs. Ellis
Uh, we had lots of conversations throughout the years when people leave or when things change, I just think change is hard for anybody. And then you take a younger person and it's harder to understand that it's harder to overcome that or see the positive. I think it feels a lot more impactful. Um, at some levels it is really impactful, like right now, um, having lost neighbors that were classmates in three of them, and then due to difference in how schools are run versus health and safety concerns, her other really good friend isn't in the school anymore either. I think that for her was a really hard adjustment. So just kind of talking through those things and luckily, she is very logical person and so that leads to a lot of understanding and she has dealt with all of this amazingly. Um, I haven't, I don't see her acting out or I don't see it having any adverse impacts, but there's conversations, there's acknowledgement of it.

As this school is a multi-grade setting, students do not always have peers in their same grade groups. Relationships are fluid and often span across a several years. This transfers from school to community and vice versa.

Mrs. Ellis
I think for her, from what she reports, she leans into hanging out with the little kids a lot more. I think she misses that and craves that. And I, she recognizes how much those older girls really impacted her. I think she's just really excited to be that to these younger girls. Now she has a designated time to hang out with these younger girls, every Thursday afternoon. They do a craft or they bake or they do a project or go on a walk. And so, I think without having a multi-grade class, I don't think that those relationships would be something that she would naturally have. But because you have older kids work with younger kids sometimes, like in Buddy Reading, it's shown her how to relate on different levels and play with different ages of people. And it's something that's unique to the classroom, but also translates into outside of the classroom. That's one of the things that I've loved witnessing the most out of that whole experience.

Mr. and Mrs. Ellis shared that life for them might be easier in many ways if they did not live so remotely, especially as they co-parent and spend a good amount of time traveling for visitations. When asked how or if the school impacts their willingness to continue living and working in a remote setting, the parents admitted that life for their family would look very different if there were not a school for their children.

> *Mr. Ellis*
> *Having a school here…if this school wasn't an option, I think life would be much different. I think the ability to lean in to the job and making a life out here would be much different. I don't know that it would work for as many families as it works for if not for a school being here. I feel like the school opportunity that we have here is the best of both worlds. I think it is the resources and, um, most like the resources and I'm, don't know what the other word I'm searching for of a public school, but you get an education and a community and relationships that feels much more of what you would get, I assume, at like a private school. I feel like you're blending the two and I think it's a really cool learning environment. It's amazing to have a teacher that knows who you are and you don't have to be relearned by a new teacher each year.*

Continuing with the theme of familiarity with the teacher, Mr. and Mrs. Ellis were invited to share their thoughts and expectations on how important it was for them to see their teachers involved in the community outside of the school.

> *Mrs. Ellis*
> *Obviously, we see you. I think that it has a lot to do also with you as the teacher and recognizing the role that you play as the teacher in the community as well. But you are busy too; so not being at all community functions is understandable. We appreciate when we do see you. Like when the principal showed up to watch the kids at the recital. She has her own family, but she goes also because she wanted to support the students from her school. And it makes me a little teary-eyed, but it was just really sweet and those kinds of moments here are really cool.*

Being Known

In a small single school room versus a larger public school when a student needs services or additional support of one kind or another, it is not only impossible to hide this from other students, but to do so does not even come to mind. In such an environment this is simply

teaching to the needs of the students. Students, while aware of their surroundings, including what other students may be working on, accept this as a natural flow of a day.

When the Ellis's child needed some extra support for speech, as many young children do at that age, her classmates ended up contributing to her care. When asked about what changes to the program or resources they would like to see, the families explained how, while yes, there are limits to such an environment, there are also unexpected strengths due to being known and familiar with others.

> *Mr. Ellis*
> *Um, knowing what would have happened in a public school and seeing like personally working in public school or not public schools, this is a public school, but in a larger public school, hey, it's 2:30, I need so-and-so to come with me. We're going to go work on like speech. Or I remember growing up, kids would just leave the classroom and we never know why. Some kids were just pulled out of your classroom. Others start to notice all those types of things. But in our case, she would do her practicing in the classroom. No big deal. Everyone would hear what was going on. And then later her and her friends would be playing outside and she would say something and one of the older kids go, 'Oh, remember you need to put your tongue on the top of your mouth, great job.' They didn't make fun of her. It was like, hey, this is something she is learning in school. Let's work on it together. She was never embarrassed by it.*
>
> *And the exposure of what she was going through to the other kids, I think was huge and great for all of them. I am so thankful for this school and the way she got through that stage as opposed to yes maybe having face to face resources in town, rather than over the internet. I think that's one of the biggest things for me looking back on this school is that had the biggest impact of her being known in this school.*

Mrs. Ellis shares how, "…a level of familiarity brings comfort…" to them as they think about their younger children who have dietary restrictions and allergies. "Knowing the teacher, I feel comfortable with the school environment for them. I trust my babies will be well cared for because you know us in and out of the school."

Trust

Comfort and trust came into play, according to the Ellis's with the recent addition of a teacher. Students moved from having one teacher for all students to being divided into two

grade-groups. The Ellis's child was among students who were moved to a new classroom with a new teacher. This news came late into the summer with little room to plan or process for some families. For the Ellis family, this came on the heels of close friends moving out of the community as well. However, Mrs. Ellis stated that due to the trust and comfort they experienced with the school, this transition was, "for the most part," seamless.

> *Mr. Ellis*
> *And it all has to do with her just being comfortable within the schoolroom. Being with those older kids. I think back when I was a kid, when I was in first grade, I can't name a single fifth or sixth grader that was in my school. I remember there was one time in third grade that the sixth graders came down and taught us how to play chess. But other than that, it was so separate. So, knowing that there's those crossovers and interactions for her between the groups helps.*

> *Mrs. Ellis*
> *I think it speaks to the trust and the comfort she has with the school. If it were a bigger school or having to change buildings or anything else, that would be a bigger change. I think that would be hard. But even though this teacher has never been her teacher, she always was comfortable since this teacher is a known person in her community.*
> *So I think just the comfort and the trust was invaluable in that change.*
> *The news of her being moved to a different class and with a different teacher, honestly, it didn't even phase me. It wasn't, Oh, no! It just made sense. And I trusted the school to make that choice and I trusted you, the teacher, to have it happen. I wasn't concerned and didn't worry about things like, what is this going to look like? Or, what's the impact moving forward? What's the curriculum going to look like? Or, what can we expect? Instead, I just think that trust transcended into us too, because we're so familiar with the teachers and the environment that I didn't feel uncomfortable.*

When asked how they shared the news with their daughter, and if they interpreted the same level of comfort from her upon hearing she would be moving to a new teacher after having had the same teacher for five years, the parents again came back to trust.

> *Mrs. Ellis*
> *I think her comfort came from having repeated exposure to the same teacher over and over again. So now, there's two teachers you can know about them and feel comfortable with them. I remember as a student not knowing who the teachers were, let alone my families knowing who the teachers were. And then you're supposed to pick one or you get placed in a classroom where there's so much unknown. I guess they just trusted in the institution. But we didn't have to put our trust in the institution. We trust in the teachers. I*

trust the actual teachers, their abilities and intentions to teach my child.

Benefits and Deficits

With recent changes to the community due to COVID-19, a handful of longstanding

families have relocated. This created, for some, a season of loss. Parents were asked to share any

perceived advantages or disadvantages to their children attending a rural, remote, small school.

They spoke about how typical life events were often magnified due to the small size, and that the

school and the community are intermixed. "The school is the community."

> *Mr. Ellis*
> *Again, when you have limited number of friends, and then they are not in school with you*
> *anymore, or they have moved, it hits really hard because there are already fewer options*
> *for relationships. When someone leaves that is a really hard adjustment. And it is felt in*
> *and outside of the school day.*

> *Mrs. Ellis*
> *With various ages for friends, what we've talked about a lot is how to adjust to the*
> *difference in ages and how to get along with and hanging out with different ages, I will*
> *tell her to remember when you were the same age as the kindergarteners, what were the*
> *things that you liked to do? Now she is inviting some of those younger kids to come over*
> *and play and remembers what she liked doing. We have then had to talk about spending*
> *time with older friends. When you go and hang out with someone that's in seventh grade*
> *or eighth and you sit in their room and all you do is listen to music and draw. Well, at*
> *that age that's hanging out. That's just what they like to do at that age. That's not them*
> *being bored of you or them not wanting to be your friend. She just doesn't have a lot of*
> *options.*

In a small setting, such as this community, limited options are felt in areas other than

relationships as well. These options, or lack thereof, were not something the Ellis family initially

considered about their children attending school in this location.

> *Mrs. Ellis*
> *My memories of what school was like for me versus what it is here are very different.*
> *Like, the lack of field trips or abilities to go somewhere quick, like a library trip or like*
> *we used to have bowling reward parties or pizza delivery award in school.*

Mr. Ellis
I would say the one thing that pops into my mind is the lack of outside experiences. But I feel like there's a flip side to that too. Here the students get to go down to the stream and measure things. Or, it's a beautiful day outside, let's go on a walk and take our learning and do it face to face with the flowers. Those types of things that you wouldn't get to do maybe if you lived in town. So, there's other things that counterbalance those limited options. And I think are a much more enriching and valuable than something conveniently located.

Mrs. Ellis
And you might say, okay, well, they don't get specials the same way that other schools get specials, but you get to have a more enriched version in a lot of ways because it's your friend's mom or your neighbor down the street coming to teach art. And you're getting to do things that are outside of a school curriculum because it's people who have passion in those topics coming to teach it in a different way. And they're not teachers they're volunteering those services and it can look different and it can be a good difference. So, the negatives that I think of aren't really something that I really think is that negative. If there is something our children want or need, like volleyball, soccer, or dance, we just say, okay, it is important so we drive to town so they can attend those types of activities.

Mr. and Mrs. Ellis were asked to share any final thoughts or what they valued about the

school, as well as what actions or practices communicate that the school values its families.

Mrs. Ellis
I have heard through other people about how hard virtual learning has been and distance learning has been, and the obstacles that you're facing with children who aren't in well supported homes or have those kinds of barriers to learning and how that's been really on the frontline of reality and this whole COVID-19 situation. Knowing that our child was moving up to the older classroom, yet knowing that the school would be there to support her in that. And it was just a really, it was another layer to show the different kinds of support and positives to a smaller school. She may go to a larger school someday. She'll be okay, but I'm just really thankful for this school at this time. There's so many positives and it's hard. I don't want that to be like all rah, rah cheerleader. I'm trying to think of things that might be poking holes, but it's really hard to think of them. We do feel valued.

One thing, I've heard people talk about all day kindergarten, and that's never something I've ever had experience. With our younger children and allergies, and maybe that's a bigger conversation. But my mama's heart doesn't hurt as much thinking about sending them to all day kindergarten with health issues, knowing what they are going into, because I know who their teacher is.

Quinn Narrative

The initial plan was for our interview to take place via zoom, but we experienced difficulty with the internet connection while the Quinn family was enjoying their time away on vacation. As a result, I was invited to drive over to visit them at their destination and conduct the interview in person in a peaceful, retreat setting. I arrived early, around 8:30 am. The children were still in bed, and Mr. and Mrs. Quinn and I began our interview with some hot coffee and blankets in front of a warm fire.

Mr. Quinn thanked me for coming to them for the interview. He shared that taking time off from work to get out of the community is important since he is in somewhat of a leadership position with the local employer. They shared that being able to get away helps them maintain important boundaries between work and home. During their interview, boundaries were among several of the meaningful aspects, or themes, that came to light, along with the benefits and deficits of a small, rural school, and community and school relationships.

Community and Relationships

Recognizing the significance of Mr. Quinn's statement about the importance of getting away from work and the community from time to time, I thought it was appropriate to begin the interview with what they observed as the possible advantages or disadvantages of this small community and the rural school that serves families.

Mr. Quinn
I kind of have to separate from being a parent to being a leader for the employer. And so, I didn't always think through a parent lens first. Because co-workers also have kids in the same school as my children. I have really let Mrs. Quinn do that. I just kind of separate from the school.

Mrs. Quinn
I knew it was key to us continuing to live in the area, having a school that is. I could not do what you do or homeschool. I needed the school to continue to live out here. I have always worried about the security of the school. And I think one of my underlying themes

of my time here has been wanting the best experience for everybody. I felt very responsible for keeping it and people connected and happy.
If I help in the school and the teachers are happy, then the kids will be happy and then there'll be learning and then the families will be happy and then they'll stay, they won't leave.

Mr. Quinn
There was then pressure at home in some of those decisions made at work. I would get questions, like, what's going on? What do you think, what's happening? She always had this fear that the school would go away if we lost too many kids out here.

Mrs. Quinn
Yes, he is right. I just remember that was stressful. I felt like if people were going to leave, or if people aren't happy with this school, I think people will leave the area. And I was afraid my kids' friends or people I got close to were going to leave.

Both parents have served on the school's parent committee for site council meetings between the community and the school district. Mr. Quinn has taken an occasional recess duty when Mrs. Quinn has been unable to serve. Mrs. Quinn has volunteered as a weekly recess attendant, as well as a substitute educational assistant. Because of the remoteness of the school, a few families with a four-year degree were encouraged by the district to apply to be a substitute assistant or substitute teacher. This has been beneficial as the proximity between the school and other substitutes is too far when there are urgent needs. In these incidents, when one teacher is out, the other teacher oversees both groups with the help of an assistant.

When asked what events or experiences have led them to feel welcome, or not welcome, in the school, Mr. Quinn returned to the topic of boundaries.

Mr. Quinn
The school, it's always nice to go see what the kids are doing. But, it's like that fear of someone's going to come up to me and talk to me about this or that at work when I don't want to talk to them about this or that right now. That's for work time. Sometimes even at a school function someone will come up to me and ask, "Hey, can we talk about this or that. I know it is not work, and I am sorry…" But they will still keep going. It's like, well, if you're sorry, then don't do it. Wait, send me an email, call me tomorrow. I totally got that and I never wanted to put that expectation on you, the teachers in that way at other community events away from the school.

Mrs. Quinn
I just really like being there when I can to help with recess or whatever you need, like helping organize the work room. I have always felt welcome. Oh, and definitely my opportunities to substitute. The monthly site council meetings have been so good. I just always felt like we were heard and that the district values us even out here. The other things too that you do, like the school celebration and music programs always spoke to me. I appreciated how the school tries to give our kids what they can.

Subsequently, I asked the families how comfortable they were in approaching teachers regarding issues in the school. There had been conflicts between the families and the district with the addition of a new teacher.

Mrs. Quinn
I think that was really hard for people when the new teacher came. There was not the same level of communication as we had before. But the district and the school listened to us and we saw results.

I can remember two times where I've been in, not a yelling match, but a very firm, strong conversation with the principal. That is when we were fighting for two teachers. I felt like, I was battling for the school, the school families were battling for you, and for those students who needed special needs resources. I wasn't sure if the principal understood the complexities of a small one-room school community. But we could not be ignored. And I think that when we're looking back going, we aren't in it for self. We all have the same passion about this community. We actually really do love this community, this school.

Back to the communication piece. At first, when the new teacher came, it was not really addressed. I think it was kind of shoved under the rug. But as more families began to ask about the same types of things, like wanting to see more graded work come home, just some communication, was really the biggest thing. But out of that came those meetings that we started having monthly. We'd been used to a calendar and those kinds of things, and those things just weren't happening. I think time was needed to adjust, to teaching so many different grades. Because after a while, we all saw how great it was to have two classrooms, and the new teacher had new ways of doing things.

The Quinn's were asked how they see the teachers involved within the community functions, related to the school or not. They were also asked if they have expectations of the level of teacher involvement in the community.

Mrs. Quinn
I don't know if teachers are always at community functions because they want to be. I am sure it is a hard line to walk between being a community member and a teacher. I always

want the teachers to attend more only so more people would get to know you like families know you. I know you have done things, but there's those that haven't gotten the chance to know you more. I just think generally speaking when you're not as involved as others is just, you are so wise, you've got so much and I am just wishing that people have more access to you. But also knowing I don't work full time like you do and teach these kids all day. And so, I've always respected that even though I wish that I could see you more.

Mr. Quinn
I get it though. I try to not place expectations on people. Yes, you notice who is in attendance at this or that. I totally understood if I didn't see the teachers at a function. Like I understand, it is just what they need. It's like, I just knew that you guys get up really early and you're with students all day. It's like I said before, fearing someone from work would want to come and talk shop. I think as a teacher, you face that too.

Mrs. Quinn stated, "As leaders, you both have a fine line to walk." She then brought up an email I wrote, as a community member, regarding dogs in the community. For some time, there had been an issue with several dogs being left out on hot days. They would bark for many hours. We have a community email group. This has come in handy when someone runs out of a needed ingredient for dinner, or needs Tylenol for a sick little one, for example.

On one occasion I had written an email to the community, from my personal account, and volunteered to walk, water, or feed these dogs to help reduce the barking and provide care for the dogs. However, I received no response. I wrote a second email, again from my personal account, to remind neighbors of my willingness to help. Finally, as the situation continued despite my offer to help, I wrote a firm email stating that this issue must be addressed and that we as community members need to be responsible pet owners and considerate neighbors. Mrs. Quinn brought this up at this point in the interview.

Mrs. Quinn
I am sure it is hard for teachers to walk that school community line. Some families who saw that email questioned, "How does this person run the school? If this is how she writes an email about barking dogs, is it safe to send my kids to school?" But I was able to say to them, the email does not match the person that I know. Your children are so safe with her. But there is a history with us. And it is more than a surface friendship. We were friends before our kids entered the school. I mean, we are friends with both of the teachers, we have a kind of deep friendship. I want to keep you both happy in the school.

I want people to be happy in what they are doing. And so maybe I am being all sunny, but as far as relationships go, I feel like we had a genuine relationship.

Mrs. Quinn had expressed her need to facilitate community relationships in her previous responses. I asked her if she felt that was a lot to carry. I questioned if she felt the need to facilitate friendships or relationships with or for the teachers.

Mrs. Quinn
Well, again, I think also for me, even making their kids happy. I want to make kids happy. So, if kids are happy, then families are excited and they want to stay here. I want to just go back to our friendship. I think we had an established relationship before. I've never had to take care of you in the community, you know? Our relationship is more reciprocal. I mean, maybe you haven't always been super involved in the community. I mean, you've been in the community, but you're not at all the events. But I don't have to create something for you to keep you happy. Like I have felt like I had to create for other people. Like the Valentine's thing. But I never felt I had to create something for you.

Deficits and Benefits

Loss is at the top of the list of deficits for this family who have experienced much of it and at a different level than others possibly have.

Mrs. Quinn
Loss is the most difficult aspect of living here. And as adults we often know before our kids when someone is leaving. The situations that impacted us more than just in the community, or at work, when the parents of my daughter's best friend decided it was time for them to move on. That loss was felt in all those areas. It was hard to watch her go through that.

Loss seemed to produce feelings of anger too, as seen when one teacher moved on from this school. I would say that there was just an abundance of sadness and loss. And I think the anger was directed at the new teacher coming in…misdirected. Sadly, that person received the brunt of our feelings of loss.

The Parents had the opportunity to describe their experience with their children continuing with the same teacher over multiple years. They were asked to include what the perceived pros and cons might be associated with a small, multi-grade, learning environment.

Mrs. Quinn
The word that keeps coming to me is, lifeline. I think this school is a lifeline to this place, because there are significant people like ourselves, who would not be here without it.

Mr. Quinn
Even in those difficult times, adjusting to a new teacher, our kids learned resiliency.
Having to fight through stuff, having to change, you know, there were some things that I
think in the long run benefited them. Having one teacher, the same teacher, they thrived.
But, with adjusting to two, they had to fight and figure it out.
I think there were some good things about those challenging times. But there's also great
benefits in consistency. With the same teacher, you know them, they don't have to change
classrooms all the time.

Mrs. Quinn
I certainly enjoyed, in my school years, being able to do sports, after school stuff, even
band. For them, not having that opportunity even to explore those types of things, not that
they're going to be graded. The things they do have here, like art have been great but
limited, you know? But they get to live in a place where they get to explore and see
things, they wouldn't anywhere else. They are in class with older kids they can look up to.
For our daughter, she's got these relationships with high school girls and girls in
college, and she sees these women who live here now and their influence on her, those
are huge benefits.

You know, or you've seen girls in bathrooms, you know, talking about themselves or what
they wish were different about their bodies, and those kinds of things. And so, you know,
maybe that's looking at it sunny, but I think that is a gift that this community has brought
to our kids. They are not self-critical. While there are maybe more sports and
extracurricular opportunities elsewhere, we don't face bullying issues here.

Mr. Quinn
I would agree. I've observed the older kids, when you are little and you're brave enough
to take risks around older kids and then have that positive feedback from an older kid,
that is a huge confidence builder. Our son always talks about character.

Mrs. Quinn
That is important, character in school too. And for our kids, they talk about what they
want to be. Getting to spend time with younger grades makes them think about maybe
being a teacher or working with kids in some way. This learning environment has
fostered that.

Because there's older and youngers together and at recess, I think they can just foster
more creative play and to keep some of the olders from not getting big too fast. I think
that there's some sweetness in this environment that lets kids be kids.

This last response reminded me of an observation I made during my first year in this

setting. A similar observation was made just a few days before the Quinn interview.

Over the course of one particular week in my first year as the teacher, the students created dinosaurs out of rocks during recess. I was impressed that children found enjoyment and creativity playing in the dirt with rocks. At that point, the school did not have much by way of recess equipment other than the tetherball. For an entire week, morning and noon recess were spent with students working on their creations, younger and older students altogether. They told me I couldn't go to the patio area until it was finished. I watched all week as students came out from the patio area in search of rocks, judging their finds, and looking for the next one that would be symmetrical. When they were finished, they asked me to take pictures and they walked around looking at each other's creations and giving out praise and compliments.

When all the new playground equipment arrived, I wondered if I would ever see this type of play again. One treasured week during this research, I observed the most precious scene. Under the new dome play-structure, the students had made nests. For a couple of days, I watched them collect moss, sticks, and rocks. Each one carved out a little section in the wood chips to make individual gardens. Again, yet many years and new faces later, they wanted to keep the creation from me until they were finished. As the multi-age group worked, the older boys would help by using the Tonka Trucks to carve paths for the younger students to work. These boys were hailed the heroes and their skills and generosity were in high demand.

Our time ended with the addition of two observations made by Mr. and Mrs. Quinn. In their view, they stated that their children having the opportunity to grow up and learn around kids of various ages, and even those with some special needs, meant differences did not stand out. "There is less of a stigma in some respects because they are always together. They trust each other."

Mrs. Quinn
I think the last thing I think I'll say is the site council meetings, and their value, are a huge benefit. Yes, the value of continuing these just continues to build trust. I think we're seeing a new season. There was a season with a new teacher and changes, there was a lot of mistrust and a lot of skepticism and criticism. And we moved beyond that. I think it is due partially to the teachers and partially part of it was that process of the site council. It helped, having a chance to express our voice. And I think that continuing to do that will help build on the trust that's already there.

Roth Narrative

I met with Mr. and Mrs. Roth in the schoolhouse. We sat at the kidney-shaped reading table in the main classroom. The three of us have met may times over the past fifteen years. A handful of meaningful threads emerged from our time: relationships and community, loss, deficits and benefits, acceptance/being known/trust, involvement, and feeling valued. These themes are presented in the narrative in the order in which they were uncovered.

Community and Relationships

Unlike the other families in the community, their older children arrived having attended school elsewhere. The Roth's were unique in this way. Typically, families in this small community arrived to the *company town* when the business began. At that time, most residents were all about the same age and stage in life. Many residents were newly married or young families. Together, they learned how to function and often, how to parent. Families shared many of the same philosophies and parenting styles, which made things easy for the children as they played between the yards of one trusted home to the next. It was not uncommon for children to run into a nearby home not their own, without knocking, for a quick drink or bathroom break. Over the years many families have come and gone, but the Roth's are among the handful of long-standing residence.

The Roth's freely shared aspects of this remote community that were difficult to adjust to, initially.

Mrs. Roth
I think the thing for me that the, the benefits (of living in a small remote setting) and the hard things are the same. You are with the same people because it's a small community. So, you can't hide from them. You can't, um, you, you enjoy them, you know, because they're there, rain or shine. So, I think that the good things are exactly the same as the hard things. There they are. Your neighbor, your coworker, your kid's best friends, families, they're your friends. I mean, it's a small community and that's why we love this place because it is a small community and it's, where you can really dive deep and live real life with people. And the school just is a part of that. It's, you know, it's an extension of that. We get to share in each other's congratulations for each other's kids. We get to help each other parent each other's kids, you know, a little bit.
It's a little bit of that sharing…not the responsibility, but sharing of the helping, sharing in the caring for one another. On the positive side, it's the continuity, the same people, day in and day out, year after year. You're known, your strengths and your weaknesses are known. They (neighbors) can see you growing. They know what you were like last year and what you've grown into this year.

Mr. Roth
I feel like conflict in this small group, that's both a pro and a con. You have to resolve it. So, it's a good, it's a good life learning tool, learning to resolve conflict. But, um, there's also, you know, sometimes when you just don't want to deal, you don't really have that option. You can't avoid people. You can't, you can't go play with different friends. Cause there's just this limited set of friends. So yeah, same thing with ages, you might not have friends your own age, you might have older and younger and that's good in terms of stretching you and growing you, but hard when you just want somebody that feels the same.

Loss

Unlike their older two children, their youngest was brought home from the hospital as a newborn, as were many children in this community. This is the only home he knows, the only form of school he has experienced. He has grown up with his friends since they were babies, "…like siblings," Mrs. Roth states. They began their school journey and measured life's milestones together. Sadly, as of this year, all of his buddies have moved.

Being stretched in relationships, as Mrs. Roth shared, is natural in this small setting. And, it can take its toll. The couple offered that they bonded to their neighbors. It is common place to share meals throughout the week, sit out on the lawn with morning coffee, take walks, pick up

needed items for one another in town, or enjoy an evening visit around a camp fire. When asked

about what aspects of living in a small community are difficult, the parents both returned to

relationships. "There has been a lot of loss for our kids. Especially this year."

> *Mrs. Roth*
> *This year has been tough, because he's lost his best friends. He's the last in his class that started out here. He's the last one that's here. Everybody else has moved away. And so, you know, that camaraderie, the history is not the same as it used to be because they've moved away because of jobs, which is part of the bad part about a small community.*

> *Mr. Roth*
> *Yeah. He's kind of lost all those his age, all of his best buddies have moved this year, which has been hard.*

At that moment, Mr. Roth reached for the box of tissue, handing one to his wife. He

watched her intently, holding back his own tears. He reached for her hand, wrapped it up in his

own and held both in his lap. His eyes glanced down as he gently brushed hers in an attempt to

bring her comfort.

> *Mrs. Roth*
> *He still has Brett, and Kerrie, which I'm thankful for, but I know they are a lot older, and he only has one more year. That's hard to think about. But…we'll get through it. I'm sure good things will come, but yeah, that's hard and there's just not a lot you can do about it when you're out here.*

> *Our community is somewhat transient lately as people come and go with their jobs. And so, as that happens, it's hard sometimes to let new people in because you don't want to let them in just to have them leave. It may be even harder for kids. Unfortunately, a new person coming in usually means that somebody you love has left.*

Deficits and Benefits

The difficulty of living more than an hour from services does not escape the Roth's.

While neighbors often pick up items at the grocery store or a needed prescription for each other,

a trip to town for appointments and errands normally consumes an entire day. When asked how

having a small school in this remote community impacts their decision to remain, the parents

responded with unity and certainty. They shared challenges as well as perceived benefits.

Mr. Roth
We've talked about it and I mean, that's the tough part about this, our kids don't have a choice in it, unfortunately, you know, cause we're here because I work here, we live here because I work here. And I'm not even sure that in town middle school is the answer. Middle school is so hard. I don't want to add to all those layers of difficulty at his age. I don't know that that would be any better. It is just hard here in different ways.
Um, some of the drawbacks, I would say, some of the opportunities are kind of limited just because we're so small, like sports and clubs and theater or those kinds of opportunities you might get in a bigger community are hard to come by out here.
But, here his teachers and his neighbors, they know him and know what he's lost. They can appreciate that and help him through some of that, which is great. He does, however, like having some connection to other people in the day. If we lived in town or he was only doing online school then he would be all by himself all the time.

Mrs. Roth
The school is our constant. It is a trusted partnership. It feels very supportive. Parents support the school; the school supports the families. It's a teamwork thing. It helps in times of transition and change in the community. He typically likes to stay out of the spotlight. But now, because he is the oldest, the younger students love playing with him more since his buddies have left. He tells us that he loves reading with the younger group at school or playing with them at recess. But getting him there is sometimes hard. Heading out to school each day is a reminder of who is no longer there.

 Their comments, "The school is our constant…a trusted partnership", remind me of a comment made to me in my first year in this setting. During a community social event some of the students were roughhousing in the middle of the gathering. One older gentleman from the community asked me, "Hey, Teach, whatcha gonna do about those boys?" In a lighthearted response I replied, "I am off the clock." To which he spoke something I understand to this day, "Didn't anyone tell you? You are never off the clock out here, Teach."

In an attempt to steer the conversation away from the topic of loss and expand on their last statement, I validate their feelings, "You are right, there are some hard aspects of living in a small community, like you mentioned, the impact of loss when neighbors leave." I then asked, what are some positive aspects of living in this community, as it pertains to the school, as well as everyday life?"

Mrs. Roth
Yes, deficits are just one accepted aspect of living in this remote location. There are
limits, yes. But one of the biggest benefits for kids is, they can't get lost. 'I see you'. You
are known.

All the different grades together, it seems to work. I think it's great because it stretches
them, not everybody's the same age, older kids are having to adjust how they are talking
to younger kids, how they are treating them. Cause the younger you are, the more
delicate your feelings are. So as a bigger kid, you don't want to hurt their feelings. So,
you adjust and you flex. I think students can become more aware of what's going on with
classmates. That aren't the same age as you, true. Older kids are in a kind of the big
brother, big sister role. They step in if kids are being unkind. We hear that out in the
neighborhood. There's no place for it. It's hard for bullying behavior to hide out here,
which is good.

Taking the parents back a few years to when we had a medically fragile student in the

school, I reminded them of the dear classmate who had undergone a very difficult surgery and

was wheelchair-bound for several weeks before moving to a walker. As the teacher, I was

overwhelmed by what I did not have to say to my students, what I did not have to ask of them.

The three boys in her class jumped in, they moved desks and chairs to accommodate for her

wheelchair, brought school supplies to her, sharpened her pencils when needed, delivered her

water and snacks, held the door, volunteered to stay inside during recess to play a game with her,

always of her choice, when she was not up to going outside. It was truly a beautiful thing to

witness, and it all happened naturally. "Yes. So good. They took care of her because you, the

teacher, taught them that character is important as well as academics."

I remember feeling that their care for her was not necessarily a testimony of what was

taught in school, but evidence of the power of the people around them. The fact that they were so

secure with each other, that they had known each other since they were babies, like brothers.

Together, as "brothers," they were taking care of their sweet friend, their sister. She knew them;

she trusted them at her most vulnerable moments.

Acceptance/Being Known/Trust

Being known continued to emerge in their responses during our time. When asked how

they managed their children being known by the same teacher year after year, the Roth's

immediately responded, "Oh, this is absolutely a benefit."

Mrs. Roth
We know the teacher; they know us, our kids. As families we are allowed to have input
and we just trust that what needs to happen will happen. Yes, the pro is that they are
known, their learning habits or their learning styles are known by you as a teacher.

Mr. Roth
I think it gives the teacher more, for my perspective, anyways, more insight on how to
deal with the things that trip students up. You have learned those little niches. Like okay,
we're not going to approach it this way because that doesn't work with this student or
that student. At the same time, they don't get to learn from multiple teaching styles. Each
teacher has their own kind of style of how they teach. And sometimes that drove me nuts
in school because I didn't learn the way that teacher was teaching. But knew next year I
wouldn't have that teacher and I would learn different way. But out here there's not that
option.

Having several children in the school I wanted to explore if this was consistently applied

to all of their children. I then asked, "Do you feel this to be the case with all of your children? Or

was this more noticeable with one or the other?"

Mr. Roth
A little of both. I think kids are a little bit less adept at changing their learning style as a
teacher is changing their teaching style. So, I think it would be more change on the
teacher's end of things. Or like trying to tweak things to make it work better for the kids.

One of the Roth children had undiagnosed learning disabilities. It took us a while to

identify the areas of need. When asked if this small setting, where their child was known by the

teacher and peers, had an impact during the years we worked to find strategies to help their child

be successful, Mrs. Roth stated, "I think well of the community, of the school. I think it was the

best thing the smallness that is. Because our child was known and the kids stepped in and helped

as a friend and they did not tease." When asked how comfortable they felt approaching the

teachers about student needs and if they felt heard, they stated: "Pretty comfortable? I mean, I

think when things weren't working, when issues came up, we could discuss it and try to make a

plan."

> *Mrs. Roth*
> *Like with our one, you know, trying to fumble our way through that. But even before that, like the adjustments that needed to be made, it felt pretty easy. We could say, I'm having a hard time with this thing or that, we could ask about it or what can we do? What can we do from home? What can you do from school to work on this or that?*
>
> *We definitely felt heard, because the issues were such a roadblock because it was a bigger hiccup than we realized it was going to be. And so having the school's assistance and having somebody to connect us to the resources and help bridge that gap. I think what most stood out when because of learning difficulties, um, coming to the parent-teacher conferences and talking about different ways of doing things or trying this and trying that it didn't feel like it was hard. It felt like a relief, like, cause you the teacher could see where our child has been over the years, that there were struggles and then made a plan. It was good. It felt like, okay, we took a step, we did something. Maybe this will help.*

Being further from resources and staffed with only one teacher at that time, I asked the

Roth's if they felt that this school was equipped to handle the needs of a child with learning

disabilities.

> *Mrs. Roth*
> *Yes. Like I said, our child was known. Friends might step in and help, not tease. In a bigger school it could be like, 'You're different than me, so I'm going to tease you' rather than, 'Hey, you're having a hard time with this, let's work at this together'. Our child, here, was just accepted. No biggie.*
>
> *Mr. Roth*
> *Yeah. I do wonder if there, you know if we were in town, if there had been like tutoring or just some other techniques. If there was somebody, you know, specializing that may have brought some new things to the table to help that we just didn't have access to. But in that situation, you know, we made it work. I think with more intense, special needs or different kinds of special needs, in town would have provided some different resources because that just might not work here with just one teacher, right?*

Involvement

When this school first came to the community there was an understanding between the faith-based employer that employed most families and the local district. The employer let their employees know, in order to have a school parents would need to support the school by way of volunteerism. The local district agreed to place a school in the community, however, funding would not include provisions for support staff beyond one teacher. In order for students to have special classes such as art or music, local community members would need to offer up their talents and serve in those special class areas. These volunteers would also need to commit to taking a lunch duty in order to give the teacher a daily break. This partnership was the cornerstone of the school-community relationship. The Roth's were invited to describe how, or if, they felt encouraged to continue with this partnership, and how they feel their involvement has impacted the school. Mr. Roth was the first to respond.

> *Mr. Roth*
> *I don't volunteer recess or, you know, or interact with the kids because I am at work. So, I don't feel like I have a ton of impact. I mean, the kids are in my neighborhood and I talk to the kids and I say hi to the kids outside of school. So, but they are still the same kids that are in school.*

Mrs. Roth summarized that she has taken recess duties each year, but as far as impacting the school, "…probably very little."

Mr. Roth has helped with painting the school and other maintenance issues that have come up over the years. Mrs. Roth takes one 15-minute recess break a week. They have served in this capacity for over a decade. Mr. and Mrs. Roth were asked to share any final thoughts or what they value about the school, and what actions or practices communicate the school values families.

Mrs. Roth
Basically, maybe sharing a cup of coffee during my recess duty. It was nice to check in. I mean, just to, you know, how is your day, how are the kids? Just to look at your day. Having the freedom to do that.

Oh, and definitely the parent-teacher association that was like, number one, I'd say on feeling like the school was asking the right questions of like, how can we do better? Um, what are the things that are needed? Here's what the school needs, you know? Being able to give input.

It is nice to be able to do things for the school community as a whole and volunteer and just, you know, whatever is needed.

Ulrich Narrative

The decision to invite the Ulrich family to participate in this study was made due to their position in the community, as both are parents worked for the local employer. Likewise, while this family has lived in the community for many years, they are a new family to the school, as their children have only recently become school age. In my objective to explore how families describe their meaning or assign value to their one-room schoolhouse, it was important to hear from families of varying ages and experiences, as well as varied family structures.

I met with Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich in their home. The interview took one hour and twenty minutes. Although their children were at home, we were not interrupted. Parents were able to speak freely as their children were in another room watching a movie. During our time, Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich revealed several meaningful aspects of this learning environment: community and relationships, trust and being known, as well as deficits and benefits of this small setting and school structure, and feeling valued. Their narrative follows.

Community and Relationships

Being a fairly new family to the school, I began the interview by asking Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich what, if anything, they knew about the school prior to their children being enrolled. Mrs. Ulrich shared that because they have lived in the community for many years, they have heard a

lot about the school from other community members with children in the school. However, she

also offered, "Until you are really a part of the school it is hard to truly know it."

> *Mrs. Ulrich*
> *We've been here for so long that we've just seen the school from afar. I feel like I had a good idea of what to expect from other families. I mean, granted our small community and other families that I've been close to, I just have their perspective. But now that I know, I feel like there's a lot I didn't know. Now that we're in it I mean, I wouldn't have ever known the structure of the day, or what curriculum you taught. When we first started, I felt like, actually I didn't know what's going on. I had no reason to know before how you taught so many grades. There's a lot that I either assumed or, from the experiences of other people, but I really did not fully know.*

> *Mr. Ulrich*
> *I think the things that I knew, or thought I knew, is that the teachers cover multiple grades at one time and juggling at least some way, the logistics of that. Other families told us that their students get a ton of personable interaction with their teacher. From what we heard, it seemed like logistically that was being handled successfully.*

Expanding on the influence or input from others in the community, I asked Mr. and Mrs.

Ulrich what aspects of living in a small, remote setting they found of value and what aspects did

they perceive as difficult.

> *Mrs. Ulrich*
> *I love that we have a close community. I tell everyone that the best thing and the hardest thing, are the same. You can't get away from people, but you can dive in so much deeper, in a sense, relationally too. You also can't let things fester because it's right in your face a little bit more than if you were in town. You also have to work through kid issues right away, or faster than you might have to, or even might know about in a different place. It was harder this year with COVID-19. It took a lot longer to get to know the new family that moved in and the two new families in the school. I didn't know their parenting style or like anything about them. And when we could then start playing together, I just assumed that level of trust. Trust is just part of our community.*

> *Mr. Ulrich*
> *I feel like proximity tends to be both sides of that coin. Due to how close you are with each other you are forced to deal with issues when conflict does arise. Living in close community, and then having another layer of multiple roles in those relationships, it's tricky. Your neighbors can also be your supervisor and the people you go to church with and socialize with. And so, there's just all these unique dynamics that make it tough to navigate at times.*

Mr. Ulrich
But I think that is what makes this place great. We are forced to encounter those situations and deal with them in our relationships. We get a better sense of our shared humanity through that. Or even though on the surface, that person might feel really different than me, we can work through conflict and journey life together. We can see through those times, like maybe we have a lot more in common than we think we do. Which then can lead to some really deep relationships. It can take relationships to a level of depth and intimacy. It is tough to get into that depth, but worth it.

Mrs. Ulrich serves on the hospitality committee within the community. Recently two new families enrolled their children in the school. While they live somewhat outside of the community, Mrs. Ulrich has offered her services to arrange transportation and supervise after-school play dates for the new students and their families in order to cultivate strong community relations. She admits that she has expectations of other community members as it pertains to community involvement, boundaries, and relationships. "I feel like I personally have an expectation; that you're going to try to be present in the community if you're living here in the community." Mr. Ulrich does not share the same expectation, "I just trust you are doing what you need to do."

When asked if those expectations extend to the teachers, both shared that while they enjoy seeing the teachers at functions, they also understand when attendance is not possible. "We get it. You work all day with the kids. I assume sometimes you are just done and after a long day you need to check out for a bit."

Mr. Ulrich
And I imagine that different people need different amounts of space created in order to navigate the dynamics of relationships in a way that's healthy. And so, I don't have any expectations. I expect that the teachers create whatever distance they need. But I do feel like I've seen, you know? And you advocate for this community in very creative and present ways. I feel like you teachers give life to this community in surprising and yet, consistent ways.

Mrs. Ulrich
I respect our teachers as part of our community. And like community members that I would want to hang out with, go to church with, be in community with. I think there is a

little bit of fear, if I'm honest. I wanted to be friends before we started having kids in the school. Then I wondered, are we not going to be able to be as good of friends when they go to school?

Mr. Ulrich
I think there's a level of intimacy in the community, which is part of the longevity of this place and us being here for as long too. I think the expectation of that is just because of living and being in this community too. I put an expectation on everyone that's living in this community that you have to be okay with doing all the things with all the same people, or you're not going to succeed here.

And I think I could also differentiate, like, I don't feel like I have an expectation of you as a teacher. I think that's where I would have more understanding and grace, you probably need space and time if you're not at a community event. You're a teacher and you've been with kids all day. And so, them screaming around at an event, a community event, is that what you want to do?

Mrs. Ulrich
The expectation is just that, well, you signed up to live and work in this community. If you live here, you should be present in the community.

Trust/Being Known

Mrs. Ulrich shared a recent conflict involving her child and another student outside of the school day while attending a community gathering. As shared previously, conflict is not something they shy away from, but believe addressing issues when they occur is beneficial to positive community relationships. Mrs. Ulrich offered that due to the situation they are, for now, giving extra supervision while the children work to repair their relationship. Mrs. Ulrich stated that while some aftermath may seep into the school day, families are not concerned due to their trust in the teachers.

Mrs. Ulrich
I would say, even though we are doing more supervising during play dates, for the time being, I feel comfortable with them in your classroom because I do trust you and trust the supervision that you have in place. I know, and I have told others who maybe concerned about kid relationships, she (the teacher) is not going to let things go sideways. She has great control of the classroom.

Mr. Ulrich
The space you host in that school just feels like a safe space. The way you care for others.
I trust that space.

New families, as well as others who are not familiar with a multi-grade learning environment, are often unsure as to how so many grades are managed within the same space. The recent addition of a colleague has positively contributed to more supervision and the ability to go deeper in grade-level content. Students can freely participate in age-appropriate activities within separate grade groups. Previous to having two teachers in the school, the challenge was how to create a space where students could, freely and without hesitancy, discuss or participate in grade-level content. Hesitancy might have entered in due to content being too advanced, or too primary to hold student interest. Parents would question, from time to time, the middle school content that was exposed in earshot of the younger groups. While some health subjects or current events, for example, are appropriate for upper grade groups, they were not always suitable for the lower grades. Lower grade-groups do not have the same cognitive or emotional maturity to process upper-grade information, let alone participate in or process casual middle school conversations that take place between teenaged peers. It was a delicate and limited dance trying to care for each group at their individual developmental level, yet serve all students well.

These concerns were evident at the beginning of the recent school year when, as a result of COVID-19, we began with online classes. The Ulrich family, new to the school and unaware of classroom routines and practices, shared concerns many families had who, due to COVID-19, found themselves in uncharted territory: helping their children navigate online learning. Despite their concerns, Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich maintain that shared history with the teacher supported their trust in the school.

> *Mr. Ulrich*
> *I feel like you've earned trust with me throughout the decade plus that we've interacted. What I got from you was just genuine person. I knew, she cares, she cares a lot, and to a point where I have complete confidence in how you will host your classroom. So, when we were having those online discussions about what does school look like on the front edge of COVID-19 in the fall, of course we wondered how will you serve all grades, but separately? Trust comes from mileage. We have that mileage with you.*

When asked how they have dealt with school related issues or conflict.

> *Mrs. Ulrich*
> *I think, you know, getting an email home about a behavior has been maybe the biggest so far. But it was a very teachable moment for our child. Because I have a level of trust there and I think that helps knowing you ahead of time and trusting you before school too.*

Parents were invited to provide their thoughts regarding children having the same teacher for up to six, or possibly nine years depending on staffing from year to year. Presently, the student-count supports two teachers in this school. However, that can change year to year. With two teachers, students can be divided into K-5 and 6-8 groupings.

> *Mr. Ulrich*
> *Yeah, I would pay money for that to happen, for them to be with the same teacher year after year. I would cut a check for that. Because again, like, you know them. It feels like just a wonderful space for learning, it's nurturing. It's strong and it is full. It's safe. I feel like safety helps students relax and when they can relax, I feel like they can learn. They're more malleable in some ways and more curious. They have long relationship with peers year after year as well. That sounds great because it's one less thing that they have to navigate or reestablish each year.*

Deficits and Benefits

After hearing several times from the parents during the course of their interview how they perceive deeper relationships as a benefit to this small community and school setting, and their feelings of trust as well as safety, they were asked to elaborate on further perceived advantages and/or disadvantages of attending a small school multi-grade school.

> *Mrs. Ulrich*
> *The relational part of it, as we have said several times is clearly the front runner for benefits. That's a hard one because in normal, post COVID-19/pre COVID-19, I could be*

in the classroom, you know, helping with a reading group or helping to prep for a craft or something. I don't know what volunteering looks like but when it is a normal year, I would hope to be an asset in helping you in the school. I will be a parent volunteer. I want to play a part in helping cultivate that learning environment, or even just for a recess duty and getting to know the other kids.

I do appreciate the four-day school week and I love that we have shorter days. I know shorter days were because of the year we have had. But I would still love to see school the way that it is supposed to look. Next year! There's involvement in there that I would hopefully be a part of. You typically have special classes in the afternoons. I would love to be a part of that maybe teaching PE.

Mr. Ulrich
Looking ahead, at middle school and high school, we both grew up going to larger public high schools. And I think about our kids and future opportunities, as far as like extracurricular activities. They don't have that out here. We both played sports and that was pretty pivotal to our experience too. And I think maybe we come with the expectation, false or true or not, that there's a certain amount of life experiences that kids can miss out on from being out here. Maybe both, both is good and bad, you know? Like the bullying dynamics that you hear people must navigate in town. That is not our concern.

Parents were asked if the school impacts their decision to remain living in this setting.

Mrs. Ulrich
I feel like we were so in a place of living year by year. Before we had kids, we said at some point we'll stay here until our kids would have to go to school. And then we said at some point we're never going to drive our kids to extracurriculars in town. And now, we are doing both of those things. It doesn't mean that things won't change and we won't say, well, yeah, we're going to do weekend soccer or we're going to do other opportunities. So, I think as long as we found the right opportunities to match what we feel our kids need, we will do what we need to do.

The only school available in this setting is this remote, now a two-room K-8 School. After grade eight, typically students and families choose to homeschool. However, over the past few years several high school-age students and families have carpooled to attend the high school in the nearby town. This is an hour and a half drive, one way. It has been a commitment for the families. Due to COVID-19 and educational funds associated with COVID-19, transportation is now provided for high school students to attend school in town. Having this resource has allowed many community members to reevaluate plans for older students.

Mrs. Ulrich
Before I had kids and before we were married, I remember having conversations with some of the families in the community. I would ask them, what is it like having sheltered kids. And they'd be like, our kids aren't sheltered. Now, I appreciate being able to shelter ours some. And now that I'm a parent, I can be like, well, I am doing what I can to make sure my kid isn't sheltered. It doesn't mean that they aren't sheltered. In a lot of aspects of this place and how it's different, they are. We want our kids to have life giving experiences that might be here. I feel like I have to say that for myself so it doesn't bite me in the butt later. I won't say absolutely, our kids will go to high school while we're here. Even though I'm like, I don't know if I want to do that. You know, who knows?

Finally, the Ulrich parents were given the opportunity to express any final thoughts or

what they value about the school and what actions or practices communicate the school values

families.

Mrs. Ulrich
The communication we have with the school is a great. I feel valued. Maybe there was that one period early on where it didn't feel like we were on some email list. And so, it felt like there was some communication that was missed. But it was because, for some reason, the school didn't have our correct email. But that was corrected.

Mr. Ulrich
While this year we have not been rolling at one hundred percent, it feels like this district is trying to communicate well. It feels perfect at this point. I would say we do feel valued. We don't know otherwise yet, but how things have gone this year, yes, I feel valued as a family.

Mrs. Ulrich
I would affirm too that in this COVID-19 year, the school figured it out and made school lunches work for all kids in the community. It just felt like the district and the school were caring for our family beyond the school kids.

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In this study I sought to explore the particulars, the meaningful aspects one community of participants assigned to their rural, one-room school utilizing qualitative research, inspired by portraiture. Portraits were co-constructed into narratives to present participants' accounts of their experience in a small community with a multi-grade learning environment. To co-construct the narratives, participant transcripts were used along with my embedded commentary and analysis, including background information and various details. The influence of portraiture for this study was appropriate to bring to light participant accounts of how families/participants constructed meaning of their one-room schoolhouse within this remote, rural setting; leaning into what was worthy and strong (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

This chapter includes researcher context, including background information and experience within the community, both as a community member and as the teacher in the multi-grade school that serves participant families. These roles formed the lens that contributed to the co-construction of the narratives. Following the narratives are details of how interviews were conducted, the process of collecting the data and forming the narratives through discovered themes within each, how the data was connected to research on small schools and community involvement, the implications for not only rural teachers but for administrators, as well as my practice as a rural, multi-grade educator. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research in this area.

Researchers' context

Having been a member of this community and the teacher in this setting for equal years, nearly two decades, shaped my lens. The experience of being in this community and then stepping out for a season to teach at an in-town school for two years, enhanced my ability to recognize the growth and change in the community upon my return. The same holds true of the school. The school was in its early years when I came to be the lone teacher for the nine grades. Most families only had this school to draw on for their educational expectations and norms. Stepping back in to this school as it grew into a two-room learning environment, permitted me to recognize, to a greater degree, that as a one-room teacher for nine grade levels, I often spent my teaching time in the shallows. With two teachers, students are served at a deeper level.

It was foreign and unsettling to walk into a classroom as the teacher and be the new addition to the room. Typically, students are new to the classroom environment each year and rely on the teacher to help acclimate them to their new surroundings. In my situation, it was the opposite. All students, sans one blonde little boy, who was my ray of sunshine in those first months as a one-room school teacher, were existing students. This little ray of sunshine had no one to compare me to and welcomed me as the leader to his classroom. For a handful of years prior to my arrival, students had become familiar with the school layout, they had their established routines, knew where all supplies were kept, how to restart the printer when it acted up, what time to begin their math lessons, and they did not welcome any changes I might bring. For some, my presence was a constant reminder of the loss of the only teacher they had known. When family volunteers came in, per the schedule established by my

predecessor, the students asked them questions rather than addressing me as the authority. Volunteers often spoke over me and for me when students had questions.

We experienced many bumps enroute to finding a system of peace and homeostasis for all. Students freely informed me, daily, that this was not the way they did this or that, that the time for lunch was off by fifteen minutes, or would voice their doubts that I could teach both kindergarten and seventh-grade math. It was not long before I realized the power, I had given them by asking questions.

I was determined to show them, and myself, that I was up to the challenge of a multi-grade teaching assignment. Instead of asking questions, I did a thorough inventory, several times, to memorize where supplies were kept. I read the manual on the printer and took math books home daily to remain at least two lessons ahead of my oldest students. Rather than compromising my style of classroom management and rid myself of someone else's ill-fitting shoes, I gave a heads-up. With the support of my principal, who was well over an hour away, I let my students and families know that after the first grading period, I would be making some changes. These changes would help us all function more successfully and with a new sense of unity. While initially this was met with resistance by the oldest group of students, parents gladly welcomed the changes and provided me with daily verbal support. I asked families to pause their volunteering until I firmly established myself as the school leader in order to build rapport with the students, and assess the best way to use their valuable volunteer services to support the needs of the students. Parents graciously stepped back and re-entered with enthusiasm when areas of need were identified.

The students felt more secure as my confidence grew, and their questioning and resistance quickly ended. Rather than dictating how my classroom would run, I decided to

approach students as the "host" of our educational environment. Students were permitted to share how they work best: lights on or natural light coming in, music playing or silence, standing at a desk or sitting, working on a computer for writing assignments or using paper and pencil. I shared a few of my comforts with them as well; soft instrumental music plays throughout the day, and defusing oils help many with allergies or enhance the holidays. Students were encouraged and free to manage their personal needs, allowed to visit the bathroom or get a snack when their body communicated the need rather than submitting to my schedule. This freedom was not abused in my time at the school. Students freely dismissed themselves as needed, to grab a bottle of water or an apple when they felt hungry or thirsty, and students knew they could shift their working locations, choosing the comfort of a pillow or standing up to complete their tasks.

My expectations were clear, concise and consistent. Students, even at the kindergarten level, could recite them. *Do it nice or do it twice*. *Always do your personal best. Your work needs to be worthy of my in-basket, not my trash basket*. *In here, we are safe, respectful, and responsible*. When there was an issue, we took time, whether the issue was related to workmanship or behavior, to measure the it against these expectations and made adjustments as needed. Students set quarterly goals and assessed themselves. Behavior issues were rare, and our one-room learning environment consistently remained a four- or five-star school.

As community members, my husband and I lived within walking distance of all of the students. My husband worked with the families of my students. We attended church and other social gatherings within the community. Many of my friends were also families of my students. This was a delicate dance. I attended woman's bible studies with many students' mothers, made meals when a family had a new baby or experienced illnesses, brought over

items when they were in need, picked up groceries for neighbors while I was in town, took care of plants and pets when someone was out of town, or gave rides when someone needed to meet up with relatives. In return, the same courtesies were extended to me.

When lines became blurred, and at times they did, I simply asked that I be allowed to wear my neighbor hat or explained that it was time for me to put on my teacher hat. This was always respected. When there were issues, like someone sharing with a spouse something personal I shared within a bible study, for example, I was reminded of the need to keep short accounts, extended grace, and tucked each lesson away. For the most part, I kept my own space and participated in activities that did not lend to me becoming too personal with anyone. This was met with both understanding and uncertainty.

Within the first year, I realized I was in a unique and extraordinary learning environment. Although I had experience teaching a combined class of two grades, my education had not prepared me to teach multiple grades. Classes on management or curriculum implementation, for example, did not cover how to create blended learning units, establish expectations, or design a classroom layout to span nine-grade levels. Likewise, coursework did not encompass how to manage sibling rivalry or neighbor disputes that would occasionally play out in the classroom. The various roles I served in each day, aside from teacher for nine grades, included school nurse, recess attendant, janitor, registrar, volunteer coordinator and secretary, proved to be both taxing and exhilarating at times. Yet, I knew my students, families, and community well.

While I had gotten to know my students and their families and had established some semblance of normalcy, I often wondered if I was doing all I could or if my approach was the right one. In my second year as the sole teacher for nine grades, I began to research similar

school settings in my region. During one spring break, I set out to visit several such multi-grade learning environments. I found that, by common sense or by the grace of God, I was approaching my role in much the same way as the other small school teachers were. We all found ourselves spinning plates each day as best as we could. This early inquiry was the basis for my current study. The desire to understand the relationships between families, students, and the school increased over the years as both community and student needs changed.

Relationships were deeper with the ability to know my students beyond a single school year, and that saved time each fall with September assessments. Battling the "summer slide" was an easy victory for students, families, and teachers. Summer lessons were prepared at the end of the year and sent home, with the occasional summer check-in for those who needed it outside of formal summer school. Parents oversaw these summer lessons and often requested them. When there were family issues, I was kept in the loop. This insight permitted me the opportunity to offer extra comfort and support to students who were stressed. In other classroom settings I was not always privileged with this kind of personal information.

The addition of a teacher was extremely beneficial to this school, as well as to the community. By adding a teacher, we were better able to focus on specific grade-level content without putting other grade levels on hold for extended periods of time. In the early days of teaching all grades myself, I often felt I was functioning in the shallows. Once we were able to divide the school into two groups, upper elementary and lower elementary, students were served at a much deeper level and with less wait time.

Professionalism was brought to a higher standard as well. Monthly site council meetings began as did consistent monthly visits from the principal. Some families made it a priority to attend school board meetings in town. Having a colleague, while initially not

completely well received by some families due to a difference in communication styles and the new hire's limited multi-grade experience, enhanced the ability to serve students to a standard that mirrors in-town schools while maintaining the uniqueness of a two-room school. Together, we combined our strengths to give this community a well-rounded school setting with an educational experience at the highest level. In addition, having a true confidant and teaching colleague was invaluable and encouraged teacher retention.

Implementation of the research plan

I chose my participants based on their diverse experiences in the school, the community, and family structure. This ensured that stories of participants from a variety of family structures and educational experiences were included. Participants were selected utilizing maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2013). Utilizing this approach "…increased the likelihood that findings will (would) reflect differences or different perspectives" (p. 157). For this project, four families were invited to participate. All families were given a pseudonym. I had two informal conversations with all participants prior to the scheduled interviews. These conversations were opened-ended and guided by the purpose of the meeting: to go over the consent forms, to address any questions they may have, to provide them with the list of guide questions, and finally to explain the meaning of portraiture.

I began the data collection by designing interview questions that would reveal the meanings participants assigned to the relationship between the one-room school and the families the school served. All participants referred to this list of questions and the notes they took during their scheduled interviews. This was not a requirement, but something they did independently. Interviews were conducted by appointment and took place over the span of two weeks. Interviews were voice recorded in order to capture as much detail as possible

offered from participants. I conducted two interviews a week providing time to submit recordings to be transcribed.

The use of the program, *Temi* was employed to transcribe each interview. Each transcribed interview was printed and placed in an individual folder. After reading and re-reading, listening, and relistening to the recordings to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, notes were taken and codes were assigned to emerging themes. Coding began with open coding and then refined into coding frames for setting, context codes, activity, relationship, situation, and emotion codes. Once themes were identified for all interviews and common themes recognized, the process of crafting the narratives began.

The use of a *critical friend*, in order to safeguard relationships and hold the work to ethical standards, was employed. This individual was consulted on several occasions, beginning with the construction of interview guide questions. Following interviews, this informant was conferred with when processing the interviews and while shaping the narratives when my perspective and/or details were added to the narratives. In the first draft of the narratives, this individual was valuable. Initial narratives contained potentially identifiable details. With advice from the critical friend, narratives were reshaped and resubmitted. This effort supported the personal and professional integrity of this study.

It is important to mention that while the literature reveals the importance and complexities of family involvement on the national as well as small community scale, participants within this study, did not address their family involvement or school volunteerism at a deep level. This may have been due to the current events surrounding COVID-19. Parents have not been permitted into the school since March 12 of 2020. Prior to COVID-19, families held consistent volunteer positions in the school. These positions included recess attendants,

lunch duty, music, art, or PE teacher. In a remote rural school, special classes are often only available if there are community members willing to serve in those roles. That has been the case in this setting. Parent volunteers provided daily breaks for the teachers, helped prepare and clean the school, maintained building and landscaping needs, created yearly school photo books, decorated for holiday events, and had been a voice for change at school and district level meetings. However, during the interviews, participants rarely, or only briefly, addressed their contributions to the school. It would appear that the time away, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, impacted their considerations of family involvement and its value to the school.

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Writing the Narratives

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Each narrative was created from the specific themes that participants revealed. In this chapter, I make connections between the literature and the revealed themes, those aspects of this school that are most meaningful, those themes such as community/relationships, deficits/benefits, and trust/being known within the narratives that reappeared often throughout interviews. Due to the intimate relationships within the community, it was difficult to separate participants' views into categories such as home, school, etc. That is, participants often perceived the school and the community as one in the same. They moved freely from home, to school, to the community in their response to particular questions.

Community and Relationships

One of the primary themes that emerged pertained to community and relationships. For two of the participants, the best and most challenging part of living in this setting was the community. Both of these participants also viewed conflict resolution as a necessary and vital part of maintaining positive community relationships. Mr. and Mrs. Roth, having experienced a somewhat tumultuous welcome, understand the complexity of community relationships.

I think the thing for me that the, the benefits (of living in a small remote setting) and the hard things are the same. You are with the same people because it's a small community. So, you can't hide from them. You can't, um, you, you enjoy them, you know, because they're there, rain or shine. So, I think that the good things are exactly the same as the hard things. There they are. Your neighbor, your coworker, your kid's best friends, families, they're your friends. I mean, it's a small community and that's why we love this place because it is a small community and it's, where you can really dive deep and live real life with people.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich experienced this remote setting through the lens of single individuals and then as a married couple with children, and both are employed by the community employer. Their view was one of inclusion while appreciating the complexity of living in a small community.

I love that we have a close community. I tell everyone that the best thing and the hardest thing, are the same. You can't get away from people, but you can dive in so much deeper, in a sense, relationally too. You also can't let things fester because it's right in your face a little bit more than if you were in town. You also have to work through kid issues right away, or faster than you might have to, or even might know about in a different place.

Throughout the interviews, families discussed the school and the community almost synonymously; the school was the community. Mrs. Ellis interpreted community in this way, "Community is who you have in school. So, there's not a separation of that. If that makes sense? Like you don't have neighbors around that you don't go to school with."

Blurred lines caused some to be more cognizant of boundaries than others, likely due to their position in the community or with the local employer. Mr. Quinn, in his interview returned often to the theme of boundaries. For both personal and professional reasons, he has taken a step back from being involved with the school. However, he has been a voice for the collective community with the district when it pertained to the overall school needs in this company town. His ability to maintain boundaries gave him credibility with those at the district level. For example, he negotiated to obtain new play equipment as an expense shared between the community employer and the district. He was also a voice for the community when

constructing a school calendar that would fit the needs of the families of the local faith-based employer.

Bold lines, in intimate settings such as this, can have their downfall. If I, as the teacher, were to draw firm bold lines between my position in the school and my neighbors, I would miss out on life-giving relationships. For example, I attributed the strong bonds with students and families to the many hats I have worn on any given day. Because I have been the one who tended to skinned knees, cleaned up when a little one had an accident, or provided snacks when a student was without, we connected on a familial level. I often heard during a school day, "I love you" from my students, especially younger students. Former students and or families who have moved away continued to make contact by way of pictures, Christmas cards, text messages, or phone calls. Some reached out to say hello. Others wanted to share what they were doing in college or careers, or how their children adjusted to homogenous classrooms after leaving this setting. While I kept professional lines and never contacted a student without involving the parents, the effort to maneuver boundary lines in ways that respected my employer and community relationships was challenging, yet cultivated relationships. It was a long journey to establish a workable balance between those lines and understanding how boldly to draw them. While I did not attend all social gatherings, and felt I kept a comfortable and workable distance, it appeared, based on relationships, this was enough to support healthy relationships. It was these relationships that often swayed me to remain when, at times, I considered moving on.

It is worth noting here that while Mrs. Ellis stated the community was linked to who was in the school, the Ellis family had very little community involvement. "Community is who you have in school." While relationships with grade-level peers varied from year to year based

on enrollment, established friendships and community bonds were certain. "I would say, the tricky thing …while our child had developed good relationships with people in the community, in and out of school, in school they have often been the only one in their grade level."

It appeared community relationships were driven by school relationships for the Ellis family. This begged the question, was their interpretation of community directly linked to the school because school was their main interaction with others who lived and worked with in this setting? Or, because this setting was so small and most residences had children in the school, did the school satisfy their need for rootedness or a sense of place, both factors of social capital (Howley, Harman, & Leopald, 1996)?

Unique challenges of small schools

Limited opportunities

Several common challenges came to light during the interviews. Each of these had to do with limited opportunities for students in rural-remote settings. Of these, lack of advance placement courses and opportunities for extracurricular activities topped participant lists. During one season, the temporary absence of communication was discussed and noted as a deficit. However, this led to a greater awareness of the importance of clear and open communication between families and school.

Most families recalled, with some level of sadness for their children in this small setting, their own middle and high school experiences. They noted concerns and were cognizant of their children missing out on what they interpreted as, rich experiences that come from being part of a team or a club. Mrs. Ellis pointed out how different school looks for her children in this setting compared to her years in school. "My memories of what school was like for me versus what it is here are very different." Of those memories, the opportunity for field

trips and large school assemblies, incentives such as a pizza party or bowling rewards made an impact on her.

Mrs. Quinn shared how much she enjoyed the busyness of her middle and high school years. "I certainly enjoyed in my school years being able to do sports and after-school stuff, even band." Mrs. Quinn even found value in adjusting to a different teacher for each subject during middle school, which is not a reality for her children.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Ulrich recalled growing up in a large school setting where they were involved in sports and various extracurricular activities. "…that was very pivotal to our experience." With the lack of opportunities in this setting, and their own positive experiences with sports and other extracurricular activities, the Ulrich family admitted they take their residency year by year.

Proximity to sports or other activities was evident to the Roth family throughout their years in this remote setting and in the lives of all of their children. One of the drawbacks to this small school within a remote setting was the lack of consistent opportunities for their children who are interested in sports or even drama. Fewer options for relationships are included in the lack of resources for students beyond the classroom. And while this community has had seasons of transition, welcoming new friends can be difficult. "Unfortunately, a new person coming in usually means that somebody you love has left."

Communication

Interviewees revealed the lack of communication during one particular season of change as a clear deficit. The deficiency of expected communication replaced trust with fear and doubt when a new teacher entered the school. To the teacher's defense, the initial practices

and level of communication were common in their previous teaching setting, a larger

homogenous classroom.

> *It wasn't because he/she was a bad person. It's just because of their limited experience*
> *here. There was an issue with trust I think was hard. I mean, there was such a deep trust*
> *with the existing teacher. But someone not experienced with a multi-grade situation, I*
> *mean, there wasn't a lot of communication in the beginning.*
> *So, there was a lot of questioning of their abilities. I wrote down some words today, trust*
> *and competency. I think, due to lack of communication, there was a lot of questioning.*

Lack of communication, in this case, led to a lack of trust in the teacher's abilities. Trust

is one of the biggest barriers to family involvement (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). I would add

it is also a large hindrance to overall family support. Until the issue regarding the teachers' lack

of communication was handled, the new teacher found families to be challenging. In turn,

families perceived the absence of communication as evidence of the teacher's inability and

limited consideration for families. With increased communication practices, families

discovered the teacher's competency, the true dedication to students and families, and how

his/her presence enhanced the school's overall program. "We had to realize; communication is

different in other schools." "We also soon saw what a strong teacher he/she really is and how

well the older kids were set up for online learning because of him/her." As evident in the

literature, this situation demonstrates the importance of cooperation between a small, rural

school and the family community (Tieken, 2014). "It just took time for everyone to get to know

everyone."

Benefits

Being Known

While all participants were quick to describe the deficits they experienced in this small

school, they were equally as fast to share positive characteristics. One perceived tradeoff was

being known by the teacher due to small class size and increased attention from the teacher,

"You can't hide in a small class." Likewise, not having to navigate the world of bullies, or getting to know a new teacher and classroom routines every year, or change classes for every subject, were viewed by most as positive. While the lack of choices in relationships remained listed among the deficits, those few long-standing, intimate relationships were viewed as distinctive of this setting. Mr. and Mrs. Roth described some of the day-to-day interactions between families, such as sharing meals, taking walks, looking after one another's children, vacationing together, or sharing holidays. As they often functioned as a family, feelings of loss were magnified when community members left the school or moved away from the community. And while loss was felt at a deep level, most agreed it was worth the risk to open up to community members and school friends. Mrs. Ulrich pointed out that the best and worst part of living in this community and her children attending a small school are one in the same, "I tell everyone the best and hardest things are the same…you can dive in so much deeper…relationally…"

Mrs. Roth, even after a somewhat slow and rough welcome into the community, was able to articulate the depth of relationships that develop over time. The reality of the multiplicity in relationships within a small setting, such as this, means that community members accept the difficulties of others while giving space for growth. Mrs. Roth noted that the school was just one factor in building those deep relationships.

> *Your neighbor, your coworker, your kid's best friends, families, they're your friends. I mean, it's a small community and that's why we love this place, because it is a small community and it's, where you can really dive deep and live real life with people. And the school just is a part of that. It's, you know, it's an extension of that. We get to share in each other's congratulations for each other's kids. We get to help each other parent each other's kids, you know, a little bit. It's a little bit of that sharing…not the responsibility, but sharing of the helping, sharing in the caring for one another. On the positive side, it's the continuity, the same people, day in and day out, year after year. You're known, your strengths and your weaknesses are known. They (neighbors) can see you growing. They know what you were like last year and what you've grown into this year.*

Peer Relationships

Working with peers of various ages and abilities was viewed as a true benefit and an opportunity to be organically immersed in diversity. As the teacher, this was one of the most valuable aspects of teaching in a rural-remote, now two-room school. Without the pressure of unknown peers, older and younger students freely engaged with one another. Mrs. Quinn for example, viewed the interactions between age groups as productive to relationships, as well as to character development, and these interactions allowed their children to maintain some of their innocence a little longer. "Our son always talks about character…because there's older and youngers together…I think they can just foster more creative play and to keep some of the olders from not getting big too fast."

Over the years I observed younger students naturally encourage older students to play more than they possibly would if in a larger school setting. Older students in return empowered younger students by supporting and encouraging them. Opportunity for this happened often within the day. Peer tutoring took place when I was temporarily occupied with another grade group. This provided a chance for students to persevere and risk trying another approach as they waited, or to welcome an older student's assistance. Older students reviewed previous grade level content or polished their communication skills during these interactions. Even more powerful was the opportunity to exercise acceptance, sensitivity, inclusion, patience, and kindness as they experienced first-hand differences in learning styles.

Involvement

Teachers and families frequently boast the school was supported by 100% family involvement. When it came time for parent-teacher conferences, all families attended. The same was true for other school functions such as back-to-school night, open house, end of the

year celebrations, or holiday music performances. School site council meetings were also well attended and families willingly volunteered for the roles of family-spokesperson or secretary. Participants revealed that being welcomed into the decision-making process, as well as various volunteer duties, communicated that the school and the school district valued families. Mrs. Ellis offered, when asked what school practices or actions communicated that the school valued families, the "layers" of support found in this small school were of value, "There's so many positives, its hard…We do feel valued."

Interestingly, possibly due to this project being conducted during COVID-19, and families and volunteers not being permitted in the schools due to state policies, interviewees presented little in their responses regarding their interpretation of the importance of their involvement in the school. However, from the perspective of this teacher, and one recipient of their volunteer time, families faithfully served in some capacity daily and weekly as recess attendants or special class instructors for art, music, or PE which enhanced the program. Students and teachers felt the absence of volunteers profoundly during the pandemic. Mrs. Ulrich, who witnessed her neighbor's involvement in the school and now has children old enough to attend, looks forward to contributing in some fashion in the future. "There is involvement in there that I would hopefully be a part of…I would love to be a part of that maybe teaching PE."

Trust/Being Known

It would appear by participant responses that the most meaningful characteristic families assigned to this learning environment was trust. Most families expect to trust the school where they sent their children. Trust is foundational in relationships in general. It, "…is a key element of social relationships and a foundation for cooperation" (Retrieved on April 2,

2021 from http://www.psychologytoday.com). And yet, to trust consist of being vulnerable. Trust and belonging, or being known, were reoccurring themes within the literature pertaining to families and community engagement, and was also prevalent in participant responses for this study (Bauch, 2001; Brewster, & Railsback, 2003; Budge, 2006; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016). Interestingly, aside from the isolation of living and teaching in a rural multi-grade school, trust was the hardest aspect of this teaching environment for me. Innately, I wanted to trust, but my defenses continued to keep others at a distance that felt more professional, safe, and manageable. This setting and this community were deeply important to me. I did not want to risk these relationships by becoming too known, *familiarity breeds contempt,* as they say.

Separating the school from the community, or the community from the school, was difficult for all participants. In this rooted community, social capital was powerfully evident. "Social capital is present where there is participation in networks, reciprocity, trust, social norms, the commons (shared ownership over resources) …" (Bauch, 2001, p. 212). Participants consistently spoke of these factors within the community and school.

Mrs. Ulrich stated that in this setting, "…trust is assumed". However, according to Mr. Ulrich, it also comes with mileage. "It is just part of our community." The Ellis's interview revealed their feelings of assumed trust upon first settling into this community. Parents have trusted in their neighbors, their co-workers and the school. "…trust transcended into us…because we're so familiar with the teachers and the community."

An element of trust was implied when discussing conflict resolution. Keeping short accounts and sharing in the responsibility for others children implied a level of trust within community and school relationships. Both the Ulrich and Roth families echoed this sentiment.

You can't let things fester. But you can dive so much deeper, in a sense, relationally too. Due to how close you are with each other you are forced to deal with issues when conflict does arise. We are forced to encounter those situations and deal with them in our relationships. We get a better sense of our shared humanity through that.
I feel like conflict in this small group, that's both a pro and a con. You have to resolve it. You can't avoid people. It is a good life skill, learning to resolve conflict.

Many interpreted conflict resolutions as a way to strengthen community bonds. According to Mr. Ulrich, "We get a better sense of our shared humanity through resolution. We can work through conflict and journey life together."

Participant perspectives on trust gave credence to the literature. One powerful barrier to family involvement was the lack of trust in working relationships (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Stefanski, Villa & Jacobson, 2016). Within this setting, where students trusted other students and families trusted the teachers, I observed students more willing to take risks at any age. The support of older peers to encourage and set the example within the multi-grade environment supported students' freedom to take risks, ask questions, and persevere when challenges arose. This set the stage for endless exploration.

Due to the complexities of remote life and the nature of the community faith-based employer, many defined this community as "transient." "Our community is somewhat transient as people come and go with their jobs," offered Mrs. Roth. Their children suffered loss as an outcome. The community as a whole has felt loss at one time or another. "As that happens, it can be hard to sometimes let new people in because you don't want to let them in just to have them leave." This sentiment was shared by two of the four families. "Unfortunately, a new person coming in usually means that somebody you love has left." The school was viewed as a source of comfort during times of loss. "The school is our constant. It is a trusted partnership…it helps in times of transition and change in the community." Mrs. Ellis echoed

this when addressing perceived deficits and benefits, "When someone leaves that is a really hard adjustment. And it is felt in and outside of the school day."

As a result of feelings of trust and comfort, families, as well as students, accepted a recent change in the school structure. As in the example provided by the Ellis family, when it came time to divide the school into two grade groups, their apprehensions gave way to trust. "The news of being moved to a different class and with a different teacher, it honestly didn't faze me…I trusted the school to make that choice and I trusted you, the teacher.".

Possibly due to trust and the bonds formed out of that trust, some loss was met with anger. For example, when I chose to transfer into town after teaching in this school for a number of years, my decision was met with anger by several school families. Acceptance and understanding came after a time, but anger was the initial response. Likewise, when a long-standing family decided to take employment opportunities out of state, the community responded with a sense disappointment and pain in that decision. Starting with the Ellis interview, they explained how an already reduced class size, because of student enrollment and the few options for friends, meant that loss was magnified. "…it hits really hard because there are already fewer options for relationships. When someone leaves that is a really hard adjustment." Evidently, according to the Quinn interview, loss seemed to produce feelings of anger, as in my transfer to an intown setting. Mr. and Mrs. Quinn offered two examples of these mixed emotions they experienced during that season.

> *Mrs. Quinn*
> *I would say that there was just an abundance of sadness and loss. And I think the anger was directed at the new teacher coming in…misdirected. Sadly, that person received the brunt of our feelings of loss.*

> *Mr. Quinn*
> *Loss is the most difficult aspect of living here. And as adults we often know before our kids when someone is leaving. The situation that impacted us more than just in the*

community, or at work, when the parent of my daughter's best friend left. That loss was felt in all those areas. It was hard to watch her go through that.

Another meaningful theme participants shared was the importance of being known. This was significant in areas of conflict resolution, student needs, and family input in school decision-making.

The example provided in the Ellis interview took me by surprise. Having a small school with limited space for privacy, as well as the expectation to keep all students within line of sight and sound, when one student needed to meet with a specialist, it was likely evident to other students. Yet, this parent shared how positive this was for their student. Their child was encouraged and supported by peers who saw or heard, from time to time, how they worked with the speech therapist. Unbeknownst to me, peers reminded their child in a supportive way how to pronounce sounds. Other students modeled techniques they heard the therapist give and provided praise when gains were made. "Oh, remember you need to put your tongue on the top of your mouth? Great job!"

This same supportive, peer-to-peer behavior was included in the Roth narrative when sharing the value of being known as their child dealt with some potential learning issues. "Because our child was known and the kids stepped in and helped as a friend and did not tease." This acceptance of diverse needs, due to the longevity and familiarity of the students with one another, seemed to lend to a level of intimacy or possibly was a natural outcome of living in close proximity to one another in a small setting. Mrs. Ulrich stated as much in her interview response, "I think there is a level of intimacy in the community, which is part of the longevity of this place…"

This intimacy was important to participants when considering conflict resolution. Mr. Ulrich perceived this to be an opportunity for growth rather than a potential strain in

relationships. "We are forced to encounter those situations and deal with them in our relationships. We get a better sense of our shared humanity through that. It can take relationships to a level of depth and intimacy. It is tough to get into that depth, but worth it."

That familiarity was also viewed as valuable between families and the teacher. Because families knew the teacher, there was a level of comfort, that proved to be both valuable and challenging. Due to comfort, families openly shared their views about various school needs, changes, and policies. "We know the teacher; they know us, our kids. As families we are allowed to have input and we just trust that what needs to happen will happen."

Knowing the families beyond one year was very beneficial when dealing with conflict or student issues. Due to familiarity, I was able to customize how I conducted a meeting according to what I knew of each family. Having that shared history allowed me to avoid potential pitfalls with word choice, determine how much detail families needed, or what support or resistance to expect. This, of course, was discovered by trial and error and with a great deal of grace extended by all parties.

The downside in knowing one another at this level was we knew details of each other outside of school and work, beyond the *need-to-know* information. I observed this level of intimacy to come with undefined boundaries. As Mr. Quinn noted in his interview, time and place are not usually respected in this remote-rural setting. Any time together was the *right time*, at least that appeared to be the mentality. Just being together opened the door for conversations. Privacy was not disrespected out of malice; it was simply not realized as necessary due to the closeness of relationships and the assumption others had of a given situation.

Within this knowing were assumptions. For example, as Mrs. Quinn shared in her interview how she feared that if community members in and outside of the school were not happy, they would leave the area. This was why, according to her, that she assumed she knew the needs of others and the burden to facilitate community relationships and or create events to bring community members together. "I want to make kids happy. So, if kids are happy, then families are excited and they want to stay here." Sadly, her efforts did not keep the families of her children's closest friends from moving away to pursue employment and the convenience of a larger community. While relationships and being known were important, according to all participants, this factor did not appear to supersede individual family needs that were known only within that particular family.

Assumptions as to what a student from another family needed were equally open to interpretation. These discussions were often brought to the attention the teachers, and usually outside of professional hours. As an educator I operate on a need-to-know basis and in keeping with district policies regarding confidentiality. However, families were not required to do so. For example, one spring during registration, several families heard of a family that considered enrolling their children in the school. Knowing what they knew of this family, and with good intentions, thought it was important to bring some concerns to my attention. Not only did they suggest how I should deal with this potential new student and the parents, they gave insights into how their children would be permitted to interact with this potential new student within the school day. This included where I was allowed to seat children. Meetings between the families took place, and suggestions as to what steps the school should take, and how families would respond to these steps were discussed. In dealing with this my, *matter-of-fact, need-to-know* responses were often depicted as cold and distant. However, over time, and again due to

building strong relationships, I validated concerns while maintaining confidentiality, as well as

advocated for my own respected space and position. In keeping with community norms and

values such as keeping short accounts and addressing conflict, the situation worked itself out.

What parents needed most was the opportunity to be heard, which put their fears to rest.

Connections to the literature

The purpose of this study was to explore the particulars one community of participants assigned to their rural, one-room school utilizing the qualitative research, inspired by portraiture. I attempted created narratives, revealed through participant accounts and rich description, that illuminated how families/participants constructed the meaning of their one-room schoolhouse. With a review, first of the national perspectives on family and community engagement, and then a more focused examination of small rural schools similar to the one in this project, interview questions were fashioned to illicit participants' offerings of meanings through areas of importance and value within the school, their community, and relationships. Participant responses flowed easily between school and community and it was often difficult to differentiate between the stimulus of their response, community, or school.

Research on both the national and the small, rural level identified family engagement as a contributing factor in student outcomes (http://www.doe.in.gov./essa, Kearney, 1994; Lowe, 2006; Herzog, 1995; Budge, 2006). While national and rural schools are in agreement that their suggestion that strong programs for family involvement yields positive academic outcomes, Joyce Epstein reminds educators that family involvement is a broad concept (Retrieved on April 2, 2021 from http://organizingengagement.org/models/framework-of-six-types-of-involvement). Involvement takes on various forms from attendance at general school meetings, supervision of homework, to on-site volunteer activities (Epstein, 2004; Bauch 2001). Participants within this study each found a niche where their contributions were honoring the school as well as their efforts, in consideration of family time and availability. As seen in the Roth narrative, "As a parent we are allowed to have input…" They were also aware of how they each served in roles that are appreciated and respected for their time and availability. Mrs.

Roth took a regular, weekly, recess duty and Mr. Roth led teams to address various maintenance needs such as painting or repairs to the building.

Mr. Roth seemed to underestimate his contribution to the school in his statement, "I do not volunteer recess, you know, interact with the kids because I am at work." His role, however served the school in a very vital way. The teachers cannot do all maintenance work and to have maintenance staff travel from the in-town district office is often unpredictable and difficult to schedule.

The literature on rural school proclaims small schools are the hub of many rural communities (Cuervo, 2014; Rose, 1995), "In the school space, a multiplicity of social, economic and political relationships are sustained, which enhance the vitality of the community" (Cuervo, 2014. p. 643). This was abundantly true in this setting and it was the trust between parties that fed the relationships. This cooperative spirit between one-room schools, as the one in the community in this study, is vital (Tieken, 2014). Consideration for the families' ability to contribute at a level that works for best for their family, and the manner in which a family's involvement best serves the school, is meaningful to this partnership.

Even though Mr. Roth did not equate his contributions by way of maintenance as important as a consistent weekly recess duty, in this school setting families were not viewed through a deficit lens by this teacher. I had the luxury of knowing my families well enough to recognize that there were potentially work demands that could impact family involvement. The deficit model, as it is referred to in *Why Some Parents Don't Come to School* (Finders & Lewis, 1994), assumes lack of involvement is a result of families who do not care rather than an appreciation for their availability, access to childcare, or transportation as examples. In this

particular setting, there was a reciprocal relationship due to, what the literature offers, shared

values in and outside of the school (Kearney, 1994; Lowe, 2006; Herzog, 1995; Budge, 2006).

There are many barriers to family involvement, even in this small setting. Most of

those were related to work schedules or childcare, as are common with 38% to 40% of families

in other settings (Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005). However, likely due to the intimate

nature of this setting and knowing families' schedules and the demands on their time, there was

a greater consideration for what they can contribute rather than what they do not do. I trusted

that families would serve when and where they could, and they trusted that their contributions

were meaningful. Due to few district paid staff members, the school depended on family

involvement in order to provide special classes for students such as art, music and PE. Faithful

families and or community members filled each of these roles. Their contributions were

reflective of the literature on small school community involvement; Community members

contribute to the daily needs of both students and staff in small settings (Bauch, 2001).

Although, responses from participants and my own long-term experience with family

involvement in this setting did not support the claim by McBride (2002) on rural settings

having limited family involvement. This likely has to do with the proximity of this particular

rural school to the residencies of school families. In many rural settings, families live a great

distance from the central point of their community, the school. However, in this small company

town, although remote from most all other services such as grocery stores and doctor's offices,

the school was in walking distance for all school families.

Trust was not only a significant theme found within the literature, but was expressed by

all participants within this study. Trust comes from being known. Responses were

interconnected regarding trust and being known. While one respondent, Mrs. Roth, remarked

that trust was just a part of our community, Mr. Ulrich asserted that trusts comes with mileage. Due to the multi-grade teacher having served students for longer than a single school year, there was a level of intimacy built and a sense of being known. As the Roth's pointed out, "We know the teacher and the teacher knows us, our kids." I, as the teacher of my well-known students, was able to provide individualized and immediate attention to areas of need. As a result, "Students are not allowed to fall through the cracks of the educational system" (Kearny, 1994, p. 4). This familiarity then cultivated trust during times of change, such as when grade groups were restructured when a second teacher was hired. The assurance families had in the school was evident when approaching parents with this last-minute change just before school was to start one September. Mr. and Mrs. Ellis commented on this, "It just made sense. And I trusted the school to make that choice and I trusted you." This response did not just happen. As seen in the study conducted by Brewster and Railsback "If families are to trust teachers and other school staff members…they must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair, and dependable, and have their child's best interest at heart" (Brewster & Railsback, 2003, p. 3) The confidence in the late-date decision to restructure grade groups was the results of years of cultivated relationships with the school families.

Information on the national level emphasizes that lack of trust is one of the most significant barriers to family involvement. Lack of trust is a lead contributing factor in low attendance at parent-teacher conferences and general school meetings (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Stefanski, Villa & Jacobson, 2016). Likewise, in participant responses, trust, a reoccurring theme, linked their certainty in the open communication between school and home as seen in the Quinn narrative. Mrs. Quinn returned to the topic of communication on two occasions during the interview. "Back to the communication piece."

During this season, initially families felt their concerns were, "shoved under the rug". She offered that their persistence in asking for changes in communication practices were not selfish, but for the good of the community. "We actually really do love this community, this school."

It was difficult for participants to separate the school from the community as they offered their responses. The community's social capital is related to their strong sense of place (Bauch, 2001). The rootedness in their sense of place (Howley, Harman, & Leopald, 1996) and the reciprocity of shared values and norms (Coleman, 1988; Putman, 2000) may have directed participant dialogues to easily move between school and community factors in their responses, as if they were one in the same. For example, when asked how families felt about their children continuing with the same teacher year after year and the perceived pros and cons of a multi-grade learning environment, the Quinn family stated, "The school is the lifeline to this place." When participants were asked to clarify *this place*, they stated, "This community." From there they moved to their positive feelings as school volunteers and the benefits their children experienced having the opportunity for relationships with older and younger peers. Towards the end of their response, they acknowledged the advantages of the physical environment they lived in and the quality of life it brought to their family. Finally, they concluded with how important it was that their children not have to deal with social issues such as bullying in this small school.

Social capital was evident within their relationships and an assumed trust. In this rooted community, social capital was powerfully evident. "Social capital is present where there is participation in networks, reciprocity, trust, social norms, the commons (shared ownership over resources) …" (Bauch, 2001, p. 212). Participants consistently spoke of these factors within the

community and school. It was my experience as the teacher in this small learning environment, that for nearly two decades this school earned a four of five-star school rating. That trusting partnerships between the school and the community may be a predictor of its academic achievement, as was the case revealed in the study of community schools in Tulsa Oklahoma by Stefanski, Villa, and Jacobson (2015). If the factors of trust are benevolence, reliability, competence, honestly and openness, per Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), this community may be correct in their expected and transcending trust, as demonstrated inside and outside of the school.

When it came to communication between home and school, families viewed consistent communication, such as monthly meetings between families and district level leaders, as valuable and foundational to building trust between all parties. Mrs. Quinn asserted that these meetings were an opportunity to be heard, "…the site council meetings, and their value are a huge benefit…the value of continuing to build trust. It helped, having a chance to express our voice. And I think that continuing to do that will build on the trust that's already there."

These partnerships took on a deep and intimate connection between the school and the community within this study. At the national, and even rural level, the literature revealed that deep connections and engagement between home and schools cultivate positive family and community relations, regardless of the form of involvement (Kearney, 1994; Miller, 1991; Lock, 2008; Conaway & Houtenville, 2008). Any level of family involvement, regardless of the school setting, be it on-site volunteering, homework support, regular communication, or participation on committees, has its own level of purpose and contributes to academic outcomes, attitudes towards school, and aspirations for a students' future learning (Sanders, Epstein, & Conners-Tadors, 1999). The challenge for those serving students and families in

rural settings is the priority to seek to understand their unique needs and the culture and climate

of the school community. Relationships in small rural communities are typically bonded.

Community members are proud of their community, protective of their lifestyle, and have

much to offer those who are wise and humble enough to enter in with a disposition of respect,

and an openness to glean from the rural social influences and contribute its future, without

ignoring the history of a rural community.

Implications

Teaching in a rural remote, multi-grade setting is unique. Rural communities make up

20% of the overall 9.6 million public school in the United States (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer &

Reeves, 2012). Teaching rural students, supporting small communities, and pressing through

the challenges of serving multiple grades simultaneously can be a rewarding experience.

Rural Educators

Teachers may want to visit small communities and small schools before applying for

teaching jobs in rural districts. When a rural position has been accepted, new hires should ask

to be introduced to community leaders to get a feel of the local community. New hires may

want to research the area and community values/history. If possible, explore and reach out to

other rural colleagues in similar settings and arrange a time to meet and observe a multi-grade

setting. Before the school year starts introduce yourself to the school families, listen to what is

important to them, their past practices of involvement, and areas they would like to see

expanded. Be prepared to over communicate and involve the community to a level that

matches their needs.

Teachers in rural settings should feel welcome or empowered to reach out to leadership

for consistent contact and support. Advocate for your needs by requesting regular meetings

with the local principal and or leadership. Establish weekly communication to process the week, student needs, family concerns, or address the need to have a sounding board. Have a set plan as to how issues will be managed and a clear set of procedures in place that are established with the school leaders prior to the start of the first school year. Assess these procedures and practices as the school and community become more familiar.

Isolation is a factor in rural teacher attrition. Therefore, finding community within the community, outside of the teacher-role, is important for good emotional health. While establishing and maintaining professional boundaries, it is important to build relationships with those in the community and become a trusted and known community member.

Many of these practices I have established through trial and error rather than proactively. As I worked on this project, I was even more keenly aware of the need to continue weekly communication letters, monthly newsletters, as well as periodic notes. During COVID-19, with families not permitted in the school, it was my practice to send pictures to families of their students working collaboratively, the art they had created, or a short clip of a new reader reading, that I captured throughout the day. Parents appreciated this *fly on the wall* perspective more than I realized. Based on parent feedback, this is something I continue to do.

My Own Practices

While I always attempt to maintain healthy boundaries, I realized through this process that my lines are fairly bold. I am not sure I will reduce my boundaries, as I have found what works for me in this setting. Even still, I do miss out on rich relationships by putting up some walls with the community. As each year the school staffing needs are determined by student enrollment, I am aware of the need to continue to seek the support of relationships with colleagues and maintain in constant communication with the school principal. In this way, I

advocate for my needs and remain healthy for my students and families. This can be a

challenge. Again, due to COVID, many families have made other school choices for their

students. And while many families are uneasy about the constant risk of losing the second staff

member, like those families researched in Mara Casey Tieken's, *Why Rural Schools Matter*,

some of those same families contribute to this threat. "Those that have left often seem unsettled

by their choice, aware that they may be part of the problem" (p. 73). Neighbors who continue to

enroll their children in the school understand the impact that others who choose to homeschool,

for example, have on all students in the community. As for my position, it is a battle to

maintain a confident demeanor that school will go on as usual in the event of staff reduction,

when I know the reality means less for students, and more for me in all areas of the school day.

Rural Administrators

While national information regarding family involvement is included in this work and

some considerations are universal in regards to family involvement, comparing those in

suburban school settings with those in rural settings is as productive as comparing apples and

oranges. Yes, they are both fruit and both round, yet they are different in color, texture, and

flavor. I could make juice from either, but I would never bake an orange pie. The same is true

of schools in urban or rural settings. Both are a place of learning and include students and

teachers, yet their cultural needs and community climates are very different. Trying to do

school out here, I always say, as they do in town will never serve students equally. Equal is not

always fair, but fair is always equal. Leadership would be wise to recognize and promote the

diversity within all of their schools.

As new teachers are hired, incentives for the willingness to take on general hardships

such as travel, should be considered. For example, many rural schools are on a four-day school

week to allow for travel to services such as doctor appointments without taking away from instructional time. Being supportive of the rural setting by visiting the school often will communicate that the teacher is valued. Leadership's presence in the community by attending school functions communicates the same to students and families.

Within the district, leaders can highlight the school's achievements, offer alternatives to deficits such as advanced placement courses by providing adequate technology and opportunities for attending such course online. School leaders can send families information to keep them aware of district happenings or invite families to attend the local school board meetings. It has been my experience that the school board visits our remote school once a year. This is something the entire community looks forward to and even those without school children have attended. When these visits take place the community faith-based employer has provided a meal and a tour of the local facility to further build the school community connection.

Most importantly, many teachers in training have little to no experience with a multi-grade setting. Communicating with area universities to provide, even in the form of an elective, coursework on serving in remote locations or in multi-grade settings would give potential teachers at least exposure of this type of learning environment. If exposure through course work is not an option for new hires, allow flexibility by offering ways new teachers can observe similar teaching settings, or connect teachers with resources on multi-grade instruction. Partnering with other small districts to establish mentorship programs to meet their needs, and respect their time at back-to-school in-service requirements with content that will impact their instructional setting and benefit their rural students. Bottom line, be present as a leader and do not expect remote a multi-grade setting to function as a homogenous school.

Further research

America's schools have experienced a crisis unlike any other in our lifetime. Due to

COVID-19, many U.S. students are working from home. The full impact of lost in-class

learning time on American school children due to COVID-19, and the education system as a

whole, are yet to be seen. "Many families, while working from home, have to take care of their

children with restricted caregiver resources (e.g., grandparents, daycare settings), as well as

support their children's education through home schooling or remote learning provided by their

schools" (Yung-Chi Chen, et al. 2021, p.2). To complicate matters, many families have limited

access to WIFI and the learning curve to help their children navigate this world of technology is

sharp. Those who could, and felt confident with face-to-face learning, pulled their children out

of public schools and enrolled them in private schools. A survey conducted by a group called

CIVIS reports the shift in public to private education (Retrieved on July 5, 2021from

http://www.civisanalytics.com):

> According to their data, 39.7% of K-12 parents have disenrolled their children from
>
> the schools they were originally going to attend this year, and 20.5% of those have
>
> enrolled their children in private schools. With about 56.3 million students enrolled in
>
> K-12 schools, that means 22.4 million will not be attending the school they were
>
> originally slated for, and about 4.6 million of those will go to private schools.
>
> Assuming private schools face the 39.7% departure rate they would lose about 2.3
>
> million students while gaining 4.6 million, or a net 2.3 million addition, bringing the
>
> private schooling total to 8.0 million. That would be a 40% *increase* in private school
>
> enrollment.

Due to many employers finding that overhead is low and employees are capable of working from home, many families have relocated. The way American students learn may be forever altered. Research needs to be done as to where these families are choosing to relocate. As of February 2021, nine million people in have relocated within the United States, and many are seeking low population density areas such as rural communities (Retrieved on August 11, 2021, from http://www.worldpropertyjournal.com).

Will rural areas see a reverse in outmigration as a result of COVID-19? As they do, or if they do, how will the need for increased funding impact these smaller schools and the communities they serve? Currently, "On average nationwide, rural school districts receive just 17% of state education funding, although they comprise half of all districts and serve one in five students" (Retrieved on April 2, 2021from http://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org). Other disparities in funding relate to Title One. Formulas to determine Title One funding are based on the number of students within the district rather than on the number of students within specific schools within each district. While rural schools may qualify for grants, "…if it is awarded based on student population size, the amount awarded may not be significant" (Retrieved on April 2, 2021 from http://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org).

Conclusion

As we navigate this new path in education, more research is needed into community needs, family's perceptions and expectations for involvement, as well as the preparedness of teachers and administrators in rural settings where the landscape may be shifting. For some families, educational recovery from COVID-19 may be sought in the stability of small, rural settings and their bonded communities. These schools matter, and their greatest challenge may be in front of them.

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APPENDIX A: Example of Guiding Interview Questions

What do you know about school structures, one-room, such as the one your family is a part of?

What are aspects of living in a small community you find difficult, and what aspects do you find of value?

How do you describe your child's school to others?

How do you interact with your teacher outside of the school day?

How is your teaching involved in the community, functions, related to the school or otherwise?

Describe your experience with your child continuing with the same teacher multiple years. What do you see as pros and cons?

How does having a small school impact your decision to remain in the remote community?

What events/experiences have made you feel welcome/or not/ at school?

Describe the communication practices from the school/teacher to families.

How have you been encouraged to volunteer in the school?

Describe the interaction with staff while volunteering.

What actions or conversations have you had with the teacher/school administration that made you feel that your input is valuable, or not, at school?

How have you dealt with conflict or issues at school?

Describe a difficult situation with the school and how this was resolved.

What impact have past issues/conflict had on school/home relations?

How have you dealt with conflict regarding issues with school families?

How comfortable are you in approaching others, as well as the teacher, about an issue?

Describe ways you have observed your child's teacher treating students as an individual.

How do you know your child feels known by her/his teacher?

Describe the relationship your child has with his/her teacher?

Describe your relationship with the teacher?

How do interactions with your teacher outside of the school impact family/teacher student relationships?

What do you value most about this school?

How do you feel you impact the school?

What actions or practices communicate how the school values families?

If you have had other school experiences, what do you value about the differences they each offer?

What do you see as an advantage or disadvantage to attending a small, rural school?

What changes, if any, would you like to see within the school/schedule/expectations/resources/practices/anything else?

APPENDIX B: Consent Form

Letter of Consent for School Family Participation in Study

Dear Families,

As your child's teacher, and a graduate student at George Fox University, I am excited to invite you to participate in my final requirement for the Doctor or Education program. This season of teaching in this unique setting, where I live and work in the same community and have known many of my students for years, provides an opportunity to share our story through the exploration of meaning.

Details of the Study

The purpose of this study is to co-construct a narrative that describes meanings families of students attach to our small school in partnership with me, the teacher and researcher of this study. The research methodology used for this study is portraiture. Portraiture is an ethnographic research method that is designed to convey participant's perspectives on their experiences. Portraiture will permit me, the teacher/researcher, to piece together participants' stories to create unique narratives that will illuminate some of the realities of meanings assigned to a contemporary, one-room school. Unlike other research methods where a problem is identified, and possible solutions offered, portraiture does not attempt to identify and offer solutions to a problem, but through narrative, portraiture attempts to illuminate what is good and of value. Each participant will schedule a time to be interviewed. In order to collect as much detail as possible and provide a relaxed setting, interviews will be voice recorded. This will allow me, the researcher, to review the interviews multiple times. Participants will also be permitted to review their interviews.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study and following the completion of this work. The school, our setting, and participants have all been given pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of all involved. There will be no identifiable information within this study. During the project all data will be stored in a locked file, all digital materials are safeguarded with password protection. Following the completion of the project, all data, including voice recordings, will be destroyed within two years of the end of this study.

Risks

The risk of participating in this study is minimal. You are in control of the content you choose to share and will have access to all data collected pertaining to your interview. As we all work to create portraits of meaning, some of the content may include past difficult situations. Yet, even in those, the goal is to bring out what is good and of value, in keeping with the portraiture method. Your participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the project at any point.

Use of this Study

The information collected in this study will be used for dissertation purposes as part of the final requirements for my doctoral program through George Fox University. Upon completion, I am happy to provide you with a copy of this study.

Supervisor Information

This project is overseen by my committee chair, Dr. Karen Buchanan, kbuchana@georgefox.edu or co-chair members, Dr. Gary Sehorn at gsehorn@georgefox.edu and Dr. Linda Samek at lsamek@georgefox.edu

If you grant consent and agree to participate in this research project as outlined above, please

sign below.

Name:

Date:

APPENDIX C: Critical Friend Confidentiality Agreement

Critical Friend Confidentiality Agreement

Researcher, Dena Palmaymesa

Thank you for going on this journey with me. Your history with me, as well as your

experience as an educator, give me the trust and comfort in your participation in this research.

The contents of this study are to be held in complete confidence and in accordance to the IRB

requirements to ensure participants' confidentiality. By signing this statement, you are

indicating your understanding of your involvement and responsibility to maintain

confidentiality during this project, and agree to the following:

*The names of participants as well as the location of the study are to remain confidential and

have been given pseudonyms.

*You will not make any content or information from this study known to any unauthorized

persons.

*You agree to make the researcher aware if there is any breech in confidentiality on your part

or on the part of another.

Consent

If you understand and agree to participate in this study as the confidential, critical friend,

please sign and date below:

Name:

Signature: _____Date:_____