Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success With Policy Gaps

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Abstract

This study describes a qualitative exploration into rural school success in Nova Scotia and the prioritization of its rural youth in educational policy. Case study methodology was used to conduct research using interview and text analysis methods. Factors of success and their key components that rural school personnel perceive as priorities in their buildings and the representation that rural school youth in Nova Scotia receive were explored from a developed conceptual framework using High-Performing High-Needs (HPHN) rural schools (Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005a; Canada Without Poverty, 2019). This thesis describes the important roles that key components such as community support, student well-being, teacher and student retainment, performance pressures and lack of policy play in the future of rural school success in Nova Scotia. The study concludes that the lack of Canadian, more narrowly Nova Scotian, rural education policy puts rural youth at a disadvantage in their quest to obtain a quality and equitable education. Recommendations are provided to narrow this policy gap, and strategies that rural school personnel deemed effective are shared. These strategies are recommended as guidelines into best practices in policy development to ensure that youth in rural Nova Scotia, and indeed other jurisdictions, have an equitable voice in their pursuit of an equitable and quality education.

Key words: Rural Education, Nova Scotia, Prioritization, Educational Policy, Rural Youth, Poverty and Vulnerability, Rural School Effectiveness, Policy Gaps

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And finally, to the rural youth in Nova Scotia, may you be a priority and receive the quality and equitable education that you deserve.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CCL	Canadian Council on Learning
EDI	Early Development Instrument
GBG	Good Behavior Game
HPHN	High-Performing High-Needs
IYFF+10	The International Year of Family Farming
McREL	Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning
MECY	Manitoba's Education, Citizenship and Youth Organization
NLSCY	National Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth
NSDEECD	Nova Scotia's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
NSTU	Nova Scotia Teacher's Union
NSVS	Nova Scotia Virtual School
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PATH	Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies
PISA	*Programme for International Student Assessment*
SAC	School Advisory Councils
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SES	Socio-economic Status
SORC	State of Rural Canada
SSP	Student Success Plan
SRDC	Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC)
UEY	Understanding the Early Years
WCC	World Coordinating Committee

1. Introduction

It has long been recognized that education is key for the health and well-being of rural communities (Kannapel & Deyoung, 1999; Stern, 1994, Corbett, 2014b). When benchmarked against their urban peers, rural schools have always faced a complexity of issues. They are threatened with consolidation, teacher retention, access to equitable programming, high youth vulnerability rates, and economic despair (Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987). A recently published study stresses the need to prioritize rural youth in the political agenda by strengthening a comprehensive approach at the institutional level tailored to the needs and demands of rural youth (FAO & IFAD, 2019). There is a need to influence public policies to promote youth's attachment to rural areas by guaranteeing rights and services such as health, social policies, education, communication networks (internet and infrastructures), tax incentives and other measures, including facilitating access to markets and productive resources (FAO & IFAD, 2019).

Reflective of the necessity to address rural needs in education and the likely need for rural centric school reform, there are rural schools that actually exceed expectations in achievement. These high performing rural schools are striking exceptions to the pattern of low income/low performance (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), 2005a). These rural schools counter the belief that low socio-economic status (SES) and rural context are a deficit: they exemplify the school effectiveness literature that background of the student body are sole determinants of achievement. These small rural schools, by many accounts "beat the odds" (Good & Brophy, 1986). In Canada, there seems to be a gap in the literature regarding rural school policy supporting achievement in rural schools, and more specifically in Nova Scotia which currently does not have policy or strategy regarding rural education. A case

in point contrasting the perceived link between our conventional understanding of low SES and the rural context to student achievement; Nova Scotia was recently cited by Statistics Canada (2019) as the only province where child poverty rates have *increased* while student performance was maintained and actually increased relative rankings in the PISA's (2019) reading, writing, and math tests. In this thesis, as a contribution to the apparent gap in current research surrounding rural educational policy development, performance in rural schools, and the prioritization of rural youth in Nova Scotia will be discussed.

A Rationale for this Study

From a personal perspective, I, the researcher, have always been a proponent of rural education. I grew up in rural Nova Scotia and have taught in rural contexts in this province since 2008. During this time, I have witnessed many changes to the educational system. Many of these changes became evident in 2016 during a bitter dispute between the Nova Scotia Teachers Union and the provincial government over classroom conditions. Teachers voted in favour of work-to-rule job action, performing no more than the strict minimum of their contractual obligations, which resulted in many months of cancelled extracurricular activities. In early 2017, work-to-rule ended and a new collective agreement was signed. At this same time, the provincial government called for a commission on inclusive education, and enlisted a consultant to create another report on the administrative aspects of education in Nova Scotia. In response to these reports, Nova Scotia's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (NSDEECD) dismantled elected school boards (except for the French Board), appointed individuals to represent regions in the province and reorganized the responsibilities of School Advisory Councils (SACs). So, what does this mean for me as the researcher, and this research?

The non-representation of rural areas is worrisome to me, because all of our representation now comes from a centralized urban demographic. In 2018, I sat on a provincial committee reviewing the Nova Scotia Grade 8 Reading and Writing (RW8) Standardized Testing and Lessons Learned document. It became clear very quickly that the needs of youth in rural areas were not being prioritized in our education system here in Nova Scotia. With this realization in mind I attended the 23rd Annual Congress on Rural Education in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in the spring of 2019, hoping to learn what other provinces are doing to prioritize rural youth. Additionally during this time, a report from Statistics Canada on Youth and Childhood Poverty Rates revealed that Nova Scotia was the only province whose numbers of youth living in poverty had not only increased, but increased by a statistically significant 3% in one year, suggesting that poverty rates in Nova Scotia are vastly on the incline, when all other provinces are actively reducing their poverty rates (Statistic Canada, 2019).

These facts inspired me to complete a proposal through the Nova Scotia Teacher's Union's (NSTU) Article 60, a professional development fund, and present it to my region's Professional Development Committee for educational leave for one year to pursue my question: to what degree are the needs of rural youth being prioritized in the province's current educational policy?

I began by looking into performance in rural schools, and the levels of vulnerability and poverty that rural schools in Nova Scotia face. This led me to further research addressing rural school success and the concept of High-Performing High-Needs (HPHN) rural schools. Through my review of the literature I discovered that Canada does not have a federal framework on rural school policy, that there are very few provincial rural school policy frameworks available, and that Nova Scotia in particular has never formally developed a policy or strategy on rural

education, even though over 40% of our population is rural. My next step was to review rural schools' Student Success Plans (SSPs), visit rural schools in Nova Scotia, and listen to what is being said about prioritizing the education and well-being of Nova Scotia's rural youth.

Problem Purpose Statement

This qualitative case study research explores factors perceived by rural school personnel to contribute to the prioritization of rural youth in schools across Nova Scotia. To support the research and analysis in the research questions, this study uses a conceptual framework that I have created using factors of rural school success and their key components from the literature (Canada without Poverty, 2019; Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005) that contribute to the effectiveness of rural schools. For the purposes of this study, rural schools refers to schools whose location is situated in a rural community, as defined by Statistics Canada (2007) and the OECD (1994).

A review of the literature reveals that little is known surrounding the concept of prioritizing youth in rural schools in Nova Scotia. It is important to note that I have not been able to find published studies in Canada regarding school effectiveness and what a high-performing rural school looks that also take into account vulnerability and other socioeconomic factors. This study will narrow that gap and share strategies that rural school personnel deem effective. These strategies can be used as guidelines into best practices in policy development to ensure that youth in rural Nova Scotia, and indeed other jurisdictions, have an equitable voice in their pursuit of a quality education.

Research Questions and Purposed Methodology

Using case study methodology, this qualitative study explores and identifies a set of variables thought to contribute to rural school success. Through a focus of inquiry, this study seeks to answer the following primary research question:

1. What characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia?

This primary research question will be answered by investigating two secondary questions:

2. What do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings?

3. To what extent does current educational policy prioritize rural youth in Nova Scotia?

According to Creswell (2002), case studies are a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. They are bound by time and activity, and researchers obtain detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time.

Reflective of the research purpose to highlight both benefits and challenges facing rural schools and the policy gap within which they operate, I chose a "purposeful sample" of schools of this context to yield data that are "information rich" (Patton, 2001). As such, those selected were engaged in a two-stage approach to data collection. Data were collected from personnel from two rural schools, through an initial interview with the school's principal, semi-structured on-site interviews with school educators, each schools' SAC members acting as a representative from the community, as well as a text analysis of each schools' Student Success Plan (SSP).

Delimitations to the Study

For the purpose of this study, the following delimitations were used. I chose to create a conceptual framework (Appendix G) as a way to help me explore indicators of rural success and organize the data as it was collected. The seminal pieces that I used to develop my own

framework (Canada without Poverty, 2019; Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005) were chosen based on their contributions to rural school policy development, prioritization of students, and effective school planning examples which is the focus of inquiry in this thesis. Existing frameworks that I used in the development of my conceptual framework focused on education. Health and economics were not observed, only education. The study considered the perspectives of school personnel, but not student perspectives due to the timeline and extra ethical checks that are needed when working with students. Only schools who wished to participate were included in the case study research.

This introduction has provided an overview of this research. A rationale for this study into the prioritization of rural youth in Nova Scotia, research questions were provided and answered, and the methodology has been introduced. In the next chapter, a review of the literature will be presented, including the Nova Scotian context on rural educational policy, rural youth, and rural school effectiveness will also be examined.

Organization of Thesis

This thesis is organised into six chapters. This chapter has introduced the study's context, approach, purpose, significance, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations. The research questions and focus of inquiry methods were also identified. The outline for the remainder of the study is as follows:

- Chapter Two-Literature Review: A review of the literature related to the areas of study, specifically the context of rural education, rural youth, and school success in rural Nova Scotia.
- Chapter Three-Research Methodology: A description of the research methods used in this study.
- Chapter Four-Findings and Interpretations: A presentation of the findings of this study.
- Chapter Five-Discussion: Emergent themes as they relate to the literature.
- Chapter Six-Conclusions: An overview of the study, with summary, discussions, and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

Rural education research, both current and past, has emphasized its uniqueness and importance to the rural communities that they serve. The communities are unique and important and thus shape the research that serves them. This literature review will identify and explore research regarding rural education in Nova Scotia in the area of prioritization of rural youth in policy development, as well as in research regarding characteristics of rural school success as a way to uncover factors that rural school personnel perceive as priorities in their buildings. The purpose of this exploration of rural education research is to discover if rural school youth in Nova Scotia are provided with equitable opportunities in their attainment of a quality education.

The first section provides literature surrounding what characteristics describe a successful rural school. The purpose of this was to discover factors of rural school success so that I could explore some of the unique factors that apply to rural education. This section begins by providing a Canadian rural education context, then offers literature surrounding the topic of rural school success, and finishes by exploring topics of rural school reform. Linked to this are school performance pressures and the potential barriers and facilitators of rural school success. School performance context is then explored with the concept of High-Performing High-Needs (HPHN) rural schools, and gives particular emphasis on what we can learn from HPHN rural schools in rural school effectiveness.

The next section examines literature about what rural school personnel perceive as priorities in their buildings by looking at rural perspectives on educational priorities, school student success plans, and the well-being of rural youth in Nova Scotia. The well-being of rural youth in Nova Scotia is then reviewed using vulnerability and childhood poverty indicators to assess markers of potential prioritization gaps in rural education policy development.

Finally, the literature review explores the extent to which current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova Scotia, by providing contexts of rural education policy and policy development. The educational policy section also presents an overview of the history in educational policy development (Mueller et al., 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development. Secretariat, 1974; Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development, & Council of Ministers of Education,1975; Canada, 1978), educational policy reform specifically in Canada (Burns, 2017; Mayor & Suarez, 2019; Wallin et al., 2009; Brochu, 2014) and then more narrowly in Nova Scotia (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, & Canadian Electronic Library, 2010). It also considered the lack of attention that rural youth currently receive in school reform in Nova Scotia and suggests gaps in rural education research in Nova Scotia. The conceptual framework (Appendix G) used in this study comes from the literature reviewed in this chapter.

Characteristics of Rural School Success

In this section the literature surrounding characteristics that describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia was explored. The literature review first sought to discover characteristics by discussing the classification of rural schools in this study, then by examining the context of Canadian rurality and rural education in Canada. Next, rural school success was explored through the concept of HPHN rural schools, then equitable and quality education effectiveness reform. Finally, this section provided context to what school success looks like in rural Nova Scotia.

Rural School Classification

Schools were classified as rural according to the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation of Canada's definition, being "communities with a population of less than 1,000 and

outside areas with 400 people per square kilometre" (SORC, 2015, p.65). For this study, rural schools were defined as schools whose location is a rural community as defined by Statistics Canada (2007) and the OECD (1994). Statistics Canada (2007) defined rural as the population living outside settlements with 1,000 or more population with a population density of 400 or more inhabitants per square kilometre. The OECD (1994) defined a "predominantly rural region" as having more than 50% of the population living in rural communities, whereas a "rural community" has a population density of less than 150 persons per square kilometre. In Canada, the census division has been used to represent "regions," and census consolidated subdivisions have been used to represent "communities". In terms of educational policy development serving communities that meet the above criteria, there is a shortage of reform, policy, and framework into Canadian rural schools, highlighting the question of how rural school performance can be progressively evaluated without proper policy and procedures encompassing their needs. Next, I reviewed policy development and educational reform in Nova Scotia as a historical timeline over the last two decades.

Canadian Rurality

Active, productive rural communities are integral to Canada's sustainability and prosperity (Khan, 2011). Consequently, for rural communities to survive, prosper, and be the innovative places and spaces that Canada requires, it is essential that those who live and work there have access to high-quality education, training, and post-school options and pathways (Halsey, 2018; Corbett, 2014; Teghtmeyer, 2013; Bauch, 2001). There are many ways to quantitatively and qualitatively define rural or rurality in the literature. The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (2019) suggests the concept of rural is quantitatively defined by

distance or density between populations of people, and qualitatively contributes elements to what constitutes 'rural,' with a focus on the cultural and relational dimensions of places and people.

In Canada, terms are commonly used to denote locations and associated characteristics that are considered to be 'other than urban.' These include country, regional, the bush, remote, and isolated. Mulcahy (2017) uses vernacular such as 'the back of beyond' and 'the sticks'. There is an old saying among rural development practitioners that if you know one rural community …then, you know one rural community. This speaks to the diversity of rural Canada that exists for any given degree of rurality. Thus, I have discovered that there is no single rural Canada, only many manifestations of it, and this makes rural policy development incredibly challenging. Nevertheless, it needs to be done (Mulcahy, 2017).

Rural Education in Canada

Corbett (2014) suggested that rural communities occupy an essential place in the Canadian educational landscape. Given the economic, political, and cultural challenges they face, he advocated that rural schools may produce higher quality educational outcomes than are generally attributed to them based on traditional school effectiveness strategies (Corbett, 2014). In his study into the importance of rural education in Canada, this Nova Scotian sociologist, rural advocate, and professor at Acadia University stated that "given the economic, political, and cultural challenges they face, rural schools may produce higher quality educational outcomes than are generally attributed to them" (Corbett, 2014, p.1).

Current literature has also suggested there is little to no significant difference in educational outcomes for students from rural or urban schools (Bæck, 2016; Howley & Howley, 2004; Srivastava & Joshi, 2011; Walberg & Walberg, 1994). The field of rural education in Canada is significantly underdeveloped (Corbett, 2014). Halsey (2018) suggested that little is

known about the gaps in achievement, barriers or challenges, and their impact of educational outcomes; the appropriateness and effectiveness of current modes of education delivery; and the innovative approaches to support regional, rural, and remote students to succeed in school and in their transition to further study, training, and employment. Much of this variability comes from the fact that Canada is one of the only developed countries that does not have a national education strategy (Halsey, 2018). Corbett (2014) also suggested that this is due to the vast demographics of Canada and that education in Canada is administered provincially, proposing that the country lacks collaboration and research into rural school reform due to expense, bureaucracy, and traditional adverse views.

The literature on the topic of contemporary school effectiveness models and HPHN rural schools is presented below. Connections are then made as to how both can be used as factors of rural school success and as benchmark practice in rural Nova Scotian schools.

High-Performing High Needs Schools

When benchmarked against their urban peers, rural schools in Nova Scotia have always had to punch well above their weight because of the perception that being from a smaller community means fewer resources, representation, and advocacy. Without a rural education policy, Nova Scotian rural schools are threatened with issues of consolidation, teacher retention, access to equitable programming, high youth vulnerability rates, and economic despair (Corbett, 2014). Despite these school reform issues, however, a crop of schools does continue to exceed expectations in achievement (Barely & Beesley, 2007). In this section, the topic of high-performing high needs (HPHN) rural schools is discussed, including what they are, what makes them successful, and why I am using them as benchmarks for best practices in rural school

reform. This section of the literature review next discusses the lack of study surrounding rural education reform in Canada, then strategies to further build rural school success in Nova Scotia.

Historical Research into High-Performing High-Needs Schools

Good and Brophy (1986) coined the term “beat the odds status” in their *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. Beat the odds status was given to schools who academically achieved above what was predicted by their socioeconomic standard status. At the time of this handbook, 30 years ago, less than 10% of the schools in the United States held this status. It is important to note that in a Canadian context, I have found little research conducted regarding schools that achieve high-performance status who are also looked upon as being vulnerable from any of the vast rural geological demographics that Canada boasts.

Effectiveness of schools research generally only examines academic success, and not the relationship between the achievement of learning standards (Cotton, 1995; Creemers, 1994; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), socioeconomic status (Brookover et al., 1979; Marzano, 2000; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Teddlie et al, 1989), and the geography of one's school (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). It is my objective in building my conceptual framework using this above seminal research to include the geography, socioeconomic status, and achievement of learning standards to address rural school success. In the next section, I began doing this by exploring the concept of High-Performing High-Needs schools and looking at factors of rural school success.

In 2009, Masumoto and Brown-Welty conducted a case study to identify dominant leadership practices and school-based factors in HPHN rural schools. They found educational leaders in HPHN rural schools "established multiple formal and informal linkages with institutional entities outside of the school to accomplish their missions" (p.1). Students made

significant improvements in achievement with educational leaders actively involving parents, and the mobilization of other external and community resources.

What Constitutes a High-Performing High-Needs School?

In their American study, Johnson and Asera (1999) expanded on a body of literature that focused on the study of effective schools and, more narrowly, on the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools (Lein et al., 1996; Reyes et al.,1999; among others) describing the characteristics of these schools, and explaining how these schools managed to transform themselves. Instead of focusing on schools that merely did better than other high-poverty schools, Johnson and Asera's (1999) study examined high-poverty US schools that performed better than the average for all schools in their states, thus helping lay the groundwork on what would become high-performing high-needs schools.

To help distinguish what designates an HPHN school in the Canadian context, I will also refer to US sources, such as Kannapel and Clements (2005), who conducted a study wherein they denoted the following as indicators: a) achievement scores between low- and middle-income students; b) progress on standardized tests; and c) range of types and locations of schools, such as urban/rural and geographic areas. It should also be acutely noted that all of the studies mentioned above, which are primary sources regarding HPHN schools, are American. Although there is Canadian research on both the effects of socioeconomic status in education and school, there is little Canadian evidence articulating rural school performance reform (Wallin et al., 2009; Maynard & Howley, 1997).

High-Performing High-Needs Rural Schools. At the 2004 US National Rural Education Association conference, researchers gathered to discuss the then-unpublished McREL (2005a) study of high- and low-performing schools. They asked for a follow-up study regarding high-

performing high-needs rural schools. This call to action created the origin of HPHN rural schools and became a precursor to compare high- and low-performing high-needs rural schools.

Barley and Beesley (2007) conducted an exploratory study using the same four components of success marked by the original McREL (2005a) study. In their introduction, they discussed the hardships faced by many rural small schools such as consolidation, declining economic bases in communities, and the pressure to achieve 100% proficiency in core subject areas. Barley and Beesley (2007) postulated that because there was an expectation for students to achieve proficiency, there is a value on school-level factors that are associated with school success. I chose to use the school level factors from the Barely and Beesley (2007) study as a template in my own conceptual framework because it considers school, community, and outside agency factors in successional planning and their prioritization in rural school success, which is what I aimed to explore in this thesis.

Factors in Rural School Success

A long history of research has identified factors deemed critical for school effectiveness. Sinay and Ryan (2016) were commissioned by the Toronto District School Board to complete a review of the literature surrounding encompassing over 150 studies into school effectiveness and improvement. Although this is an urban review, its recommendations and findings help exemplify trends in Canadian school effectiveness models. While the school effectiveness movement seems to have a long-standing, positive legacy in understanding schools as well as their “effectiveness” within various contexts (Brundrett, 2000), I have found that there is a lack of rural research on the relationships among these factors. This leaves educators with little to go on when considering how best to reform rural schools to ensure the success of all students from

rural communities. Traditionally, based on the literature, students in high needs schools are not expected to achieve at high levels (Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

In the early 2000s, the McREL conducted a study, mentioned above, to identify ways in which high- and low-performing, high-needs schools are similar and ways in which they differ. Using these similarities and differences, the McREL's (2005a) line of inquiry was to identify "beat the odds" schools using designators from Good and Brophy's (1986) book, research high-needs schools that were having success with improved student achievement, and then compare them with low-performing high-needs schools. From this study, McREL was able to identify four critical components of success: instruction, school environment, professional community, and leadership. These components will be used to structure my framework and categorize my factors of rural school success.

I used the findings from their research to provide educators with key components they can attend to improve student achievement. By demonstrating strong correlations among the school factors, the McREL (2005a) study also provided evidence that schools do, indeed, operate as systems. Thus, "school leaders should recognize these interconnections when planning and implementing school improvement using these best practices and take a systems approach to help their schools beat the odds" (McREL, 2015a, p.10). It is essential to mention that the purpose of this exploratory thesis study was to provide educational leaders with best practices to create strategies to ensure rural youth in Nova Scotia receive an equitable and quality education. Those four key components are explained below and will be used, in part, as a conceptual framework for this study.

Instruction. McREL (2005b) provided an ″Insights" report on the McREL (2005a) study's findings, pointing out the finding that although individualized instruction and opportunity

to learn undoubtedly shape the effectiveness of classroom instruction it was the extent to which the goals and expectations for learning were clear to students that differentiated high- and low-performing schools. Those schools that provided their students and communities with clear learning targets and school performance goals reached greater success.

Stelmach (2011) provided a review of educational issues and responses which described three systemic levels of problems. This review is adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and synthesizes macro, mezzo, and micro-systemic levels of issues in rural education. In her synthesis review, Stelmach (2011) describes daily operations such as curriculum and their importance to rural communities. Overwhelmingly, the literature reports the importance of making curriculum relevant for children in rural communities (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1999; OECD, 2004; Siddle Walker, 2000; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995; Wright, 2003, as cited in Stelmach, 2011, p.38). Moreover, Stelmach (2011) agreed with recommendations by the United Nations (2010a) report suggesting that if parents are unconvinced of the relevance of schooling, they do not encourage attendance.

Consequently, place-based education has become an essential instructional strategy for improving rural education (Budge, 2006; Bryden & Boylan, 2004; Hodges, 2004). Its grassroots philosophy relies on local expertise and decision-making, embraces flexibility and innovation, and has as its goal the development of an appreciation for and commitment to one's surroundings. An emphasis on place in curriculum requires teachers to engage with local culture and community, and to incorporate its values and resources into the curriculum. Premised on "community-identified forms of knowledge" (Frisby & Reynolds, 2005, p. 380, as cited in Stelmach, 2011, p. 38), curriculum developed around a sense of place alerts students to the

importance of developing personal identities within the context of their lives, and confirms their value and worth in relation to where they come from.

Curriculum relevance is perceived as essential to improving education for rural Indigenous populations because ethnically marginalized groups tend to be most impoverished and least engaged in formal education. Place-based education may be a powerful tool for dealing with the macro systemic cycles of poverty, as mentioned above, and out-migration, which stem from a lack of schooling and have egregious effects on Indigenous groups. When curriculum addresses local needs and circumstances, and is tailored to the cultural views of the community, student attendance, students' self-identity improve (Stelmach, 2011). A central finding in the literature was that capacity building is the heart of education among rural and Indigenous groups because collective learning and collective problem-solving are prioritized.

School Environment. School environment represents school-level factors that affect instruction but cannot be ascribed to a particular position (e.g., to teachers, curriculum coordinators, or principals). These factors reflect policies created at the school, district, or community level that impact the entire school faculty, parents, and students. Four sub-components of an effective school environment were examined in the McREL (2005a) study: orderly climate, assessment and monitoring, parent involvement, and academic press for achievement.

Importance of parents and community. The effectiveness of parental involvement in improving academic outcomes has been supported by an extensive empirical base including several meta-analyses synthesizing the results of more than 100 studies and producing findings that include moderate to large effect sizes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). Many authors also echo the importance of community as part of the rural lifestyle (Azano

& Stewart, 2015; Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Canada Standing Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 2006, 2008; White & Reid, 2008).

Semke and Sheridan (2012) completed a literature review of 18 empirical studies pertaining strictly to rural schools and family involvement intended to provide the research community with a synthesis of the research agenda, and to explore the state of science in this field of education. They found that much research has been completed surrounding the importance of family-school involvement and partnerships in rural schools for both rural schools and the communities they serve. Parental involvement (Keith et al., 1996, as cited in Semke & Sheridan, 2012) and participation in intervention programs for improving the home-school connections (Dalton et al., 1996; Owens et al., 2008, as cited in Semke & Sheridan, 2012) were paramount in the successful development of relationships between rural schools and families. Many studies also emphasized the importance of the connection of the school with the rural communities that they serve. For example, following interviews with community members, teachers, parents, students, principals, and administrators, a close, collaborative relationship with the community was identified as critical to school success (Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; all as cited in Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Much of the data collected in this study mirrored the same results, strengthening the validity of this research.

In a similar Canadian study, Wallin and Reimer (2009) completed research into the congruence of priorities of the Manitoba Government with rural community stakeholders using the Manitoba Government's Kindergarten to Senior Education Agenda for Student Success (KS4) and the priorities of local stakeholders to examined each division's capacity to achieve them. The topic of community support in the interviews was prominent and had a similar dichotomy to the results of this study. The relationship between school and community was also

perceived to be not only very important, but also very complex, suggesting that links to the community are often created of out practical desire to share services, facilities, and resources while offering opportunities for students to learn and become involved in community life through citizenship programs (Wallin & Reimer, 2009). The complexity of these relationships was also discussed during data collection. Participants provided evidence of strong community support, as well as the challenges that rural schools face in supporting their communities with few resources.

Importance of student well-being. The Michael and Jameson (2017) researched-based collection of mental health strategies that are specifically linked to rural youth mental health issues, mirror this despair and postulate that rural areas face unique mental health challenges, including more significant impairment among youth and difficulties providing adequate care to those in need. "Even after controlling for socioeconomic factors, youth suicide mortality rates are significantly higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas, with this gap becoming larger in recent decades" (Singh et al., 2013; as cited in Michael & Jameson, 2017, p. 4).

This is particularly true for students with internalizing issues such as depression and anxiety, and suggests that youth may be identified earlier in schools and that schools are reaching youth who may not otherwise receive care (Michael & Jameson, 2017). For instance, in a study of rural high schools across America with suicide attempts double the national average, the majority of the students assessed for suicidal or homicidal threat (79%) had never received mental health services before the crisis. In this study, on-site school mental health efforts resulted in students receiving formal mental health intervention support, and students being matched to an adult assigned to monitor wellness and safety (Michael & Jameson, 2015, as cited in Michael

& Jameson, 2017, p. 5). It is important to mention that these are American statistics. At the time of this thesis study, there are Canadian statistics available on poverty, housing, food insecurity, and general vulnerabilities, but I could find none on the mental health of specifically rural youth at either the provincial or national level. This speaks to the gaps in rural youth research, and thus the gaps in policy that affects them.

A wealth of studies points to the effectiveness of early intervention programs, many implemented in the school setting, at improving child and adolescent social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (Rust, 2009; Mytton, et al., 2006; Greenberg et al., 2001). There is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that comprehensive school mental health programs are effective in reducing mental health problems and improving student emotional and behavioural functioning. Buildings with school-wide programs resulted in significantly fewer mental health difficulties, improved behaviour, less functional impairment, and greater mental health knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural intentions in their students (Walter et al., 2011; Hoagwood et al., 2007; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007; Hussey & Guo, 2003).

School-based prevention programs have achieved similar positive results. In a review of 40 studies of the Good Behavior Game (GBG), Tingstrom et al. (2006) suggested that the GBG (a classroom-wide behavioural intervention for preschool and elementary school children) has made impressive reductions in disruptive, aggressive, and inattentive behaviours in the classroom. Another prevention program focused on social-emotional learning (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is related to increases in emotional understanding and prosocial behaviour (Gibson et al., 2015). Kurt and Jameson (2017) also discuss the positive impact of school mental health programs and interventions on students' psychosocial and academic outcomes, including programs in rural areas. They described a study by Michael,

Albright, et al. (2013) which found that adolescents' (ages 14–18 years) program participation was related to positive mental health outcomes throughout treatment. Other studies have also demonstrated that having established mental health and social-emotional learning programs in rural schools is related to positive academic outcomes (Schmidt et al., 2014; Becker et al., 2013; Welsh et al., 2001; Zins et al., 2004; Bruns et al., 2004; Lehr et al., 2004).

One component of comprehensive school mental health that has been linked more consistently to academic outcomes is social-emotional learning (SEL) programs (e.g., Catalano et al., 2003). For example, students in SEL programs, on average, rank ten or more percentile points above their average peers. They also show better attendance, more positive classroom behaviour, enhanced self-regulatory capabilities, better grades, and are less likely to be disciplined (Payton et al., 2008).

Professional Community. Skyhar (2020) suggested that the question of how rural divisions in Canada might go about constructing local teacher professional development models that draw on local strengths, mitigate local challenges, and support teacher professional growth is critical to the provision of quality education for rural students, and to what Reid et al. (2010) refer to as rural-regional sustainability. Hargreaves, et al. (2015) suggested that rural school educators are often isolated and have few opportunities to learn from neighboring schools or colleagues. This is an especially daunting challenge for low-performing rural schools faced with implementing significant reform efforts. In her preliminary research on high-performing high-needs schools, Lauer (2001) identified both formal professional development and informal teacher learning opportunities as essential influences on student performance in HPHN schools. The Education Trust's (1999) study found that high-poverty schools that exceeded expectations spent "proportionately more money on teacher professional development compared to other schools"

(p.16). Taylor et al. (2000) studied 14 schools that were "beating the odds in teaching all children to read" (p. 1) and suggested that it was the dedication of staff collaboration that helped in their success. This study that later lead to the larger McREL (2005a) study. Lauer (2001) noted that ongoing teacher professional development, such as yearlong workshops and collaborative mentoring, were occurring in these schools.

According to a study by the Charles A. Dana Center (as cited in Johnson & Asera, 1999), teacher collaboration about instructional issues is an element of teacher learning associated with student success in HPHN schools. Several case studies have demonstrated that a school district's professional development approach resulted in changes in teachers' instructional practices and improved student achievement (e.g., Stein et al., 1999; Harwell et al., 2000). Thus, studies of HPHN schools indicate that teacher professional development is essential to their success.

Other factors discussed surrounding the professional community were teacher retainment. The challenge to retain teachers in rural schools has been perceived as a challenge for as long as the term "rural education" has been around (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Corbett, 2014). In Canada, government reports continue to lament the high turnover of rural teachers just as they did twenty or more years ago (Canada Standing Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 2008). Constant teacher turnover is widely accepted in the literature to be an important contributing factor to the general underachievement of rural schools (Brasche & Harrington, 2012; de Feijter, 2015; Dykstra, 2014; White & Reid 2008; Yarrow et al., 1999).

On top of teacher retainment and turnover issues, a less obvious but pertinent problem associated with turnover is that it signifies a greater malaise in teacher attitudes. In his research into the role that communities play in teacher commitment, Wilson (2017) developed a model used to differentiate between duty-oriented and retainment-oriented educators and to sort their

varied opinions about community school connections. He suggests that wherever high job turnover exists, there are likely some teachers who are still employed but ambivalent or even resentful about their rural teaching jobs (Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Campbell & Yates, 2011; as cited in Wilson, 2017). These uncommitted teachers have great potential to impact student learning negatively.

Leadership. Mulford et al. (2008) suggested that world-wide poverty is a significant issue, and that there is a nexus between poverty and education. A common characteristic of the schools in this study was successful, high-performing leadership.

Carter (2001) postulated that there are common traits that principals in high performing, high vulnerability schools demonstrate. Among these were: principals must be free to make sound financial and hiring choices; effective principals use measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement; and principals work actively with parents to make the home a center of learning (p. 18-21). There is a general assumption, Southworth (2004) noted, that the larger the school, the more there is to manage and the higher the levels of responsibility and complexity. However, there appears to be some considerable problem with this assertion. Dunning (1993) suggested that school complexity is not in direct ratio to size, and that leaders of small schools face both similar and different challenges to other school leaders. Two main obstacles appeared evident: the challenges of the administrators of small rural schools, and how they overcome student vulnerability to help students to increase their achievement.

In terms of leadership in the context of rural schools, Anderson (2008) postulates that rural schools that have a transformational teacher leader approach, in fact, provide "highly interactive decision-making and communication styles" (p.8) where "teacher leaders have a mutual and reciprocal relationship between themselves and the principal" (p.12). It is this style of

leadership that creates open and trusting channels of communication among staff, which spills into the rural communities that these schools serve. Using this rural school context, Anderson (2008) also explored the concept of teacher leaders as a third transformational leadership prototype, which builds on the two transformational leadership prototypes of Leithwood et al. (1999).

This new understanding of rural schools and their highly interactive decision-making styles, where teacher leaders are a source of creativity and the development of unique forms of leadership, further provides evidence of the importance of this key component of rural school success. If researchers focus on teachers as leaders in rural schools, specifically those who operate outside of traditional leadership roles, coupled with retainment- oriented goals, there exists a promising area of new understanding for rural educational leadership as transformational teacher leadership (Wilson, 2017; Anderson, 2008).

Equity and Quality in Education Effectiveness

To collate school effectiveness strategies, Burušić et al. (2016) presented their findings in a chapter in a larger body of work by Nikša and Josip (2016). They suggested that "researchers in the field of educational effectiveness are faced with a socially delicate issue pertaining to the question whether education should aim at excellence, or whether the primary goal of education is to reduce educational inequality and achieve educational equity" (Burušić et al., 2016, p. 8). Achieving educational equity would reduce the differences in educational achievement between students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and abilities. Contemporary research combines both approaches and has demonstrated favourable characteristics of schools showing improvement in the achievement of students with many barriers (Burušić et al., 2016).

In 2012, an OECD report pointed out that failure to address equity in school reform issues can have lifelong adverse effects on both individuals and society, and should be prevented by assuring both quality and equity in education (as cited in Burušić et al., 2016). The OECD (2012) suggested that "the highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality" (p.3, as cited in Burušić et al., 2016, p.9). The OECD also provided recommendations on how to ensure quality and equity in school reform policy such as having strategies of funding in place that are adapted to the needs of schools and students, and providing support for schools with high shares of vulnerable students before pressuring them to improve (as cited in Burušić et al., 2016).

Burušić et al. (2016) further discussed educational effectiveness research (EER) suggesting that a common goal, directly and indirectly, explains the differences in students' educational outcomes (Creemers et al., 2010, as cited in Burušić et al., 2016). Burušić et al. (2016) also explained that there are different models of school effectiveness, and used a correlation of models to provide several postulates taken from Kirk and Jones' (2004) and Lezotte's (1991) earlier studies (as cited in Burušić et al., 2016):

- Clear school mission developed in agreement between and shared by the principal and the teachers.
- High expectations shared by the school staff that students can succeed and that teachers can help them succeed.
- Effective instructional leaders who reinforce the school mission and vision.
- Students are provided with opportunity and time to learn, and teachers have clear expectations regarding what to teach and adequate time to teach.
- The school environment is safe and orderly, and cooperation and respect are

stimulated.

- Positive home-school relations are fostered, and parental involvement in school is encouraged.
- Student progress is frequently monitored, and the results are used to improve their performance.

Burušić et al. (2016) provided a timeline of pedagogy surrounding school effectiveness models, suggesting that society is entering into a fourth contemporary phase, wherein reformers attempt to explore the dynamic nature of school effectiveness taking into account the changing nature of its components. This contemporary phase explores blending both quality achievement and performance components with equitable policy practices (Reynolds et al., 2014, as cited in Burušić et al., 2016).

An example of Burušić et al.'s (2016) school effectiveness strategy is the concept of value-added systems. Eric Hanushek and Caroline Hoxby (as cited of Burušić et al., 2016) in of the Standford Hoover Institution suggested that to support better school effectiveness, schools should track the performance of individual students, and calculate the value-added by teachers and schools to pupil achievement in each of the tested subjects. The calculation of value-added should use established statistical procedures, and be subject to unbiased verification.

Mathis (2003) suggested in a review of financial challenges, adequacy, and equity in rural schools that rural schools face tremendous performance pressures. The small re-ruralization phenomenon, with pockets of gentrification in popular tourist locations, has not offset the losses in agriculture, dairy, mining, forestry, and other rural occupations (Mathis, 2003). The 20th century, he suggested, has seen a continuous movement of the best and brightest of rural children away from their roots. The result is that the remaining young rural citizens do not have as high a

level of education or income, thus, it also is an economic emigration. The remaining population is less likely to support education. Even if they have the will, they have less capacity. The result is a refined distillation of poverty and low-end jobs, which, in turn, results in greater social inequities (Mathis, 2003).

Rural School Personnel Perspectives and Youth Priorities

This section in the literature review seeks to explore what rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings. The literature presented below first examines rural perspectives on educational priorities, then describes Nova Scotia's current process of success planning for their schools, and lastly reviews current literature surrounding Nova Scotia's rural youth.

Rural Perspective on Educational Priorities

Research by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL, 2006) into the rural-urban performance gap suggested that three influences (school conditions, economic conditions, and the role of government) can be used to improve outcomes for students in rural Canada, and concluded that "there is nothing intrinsic to rural settings that precludes successful educational outcomes" (p.9). Rural schools and communities that take advantage of innovative strategies for recruiting and retaining staff, provide a wide range of courses, and smooth the transition between work and school can bridge rural-urban gaps (CCL, 2006).

The CCL (2006) described the role of government using Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) evaluations of post-secondary education pilot projects supported by the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation in Manitoba, New Brunswick, and British Columbia, concluding that all three projects promoting student access to post-secondary education inform policy decisions concerning how best to target funding to improve

educational outcomes for struggling rural students. The CCL, however, only suggested that governments address post-secondary access concerns and does not address equitable and quality access to P-12 education. Wallin (2008) looked into the congruence of educational priorities of rural education systems between stakeholders and the government and their capacity to achieve them. Her findings coincided with Howley's (1997) earlier ideas that "reform efforts [still] tend to essentialize schooling across contexts, for reasons that do not always reflect local purposes, interests, and capacities" (as cited in Wallin, 2008).

In conjunction with the CCL and Manitoba's Education, Citizenship and Youth Organization (MECY), Wallin (2009) also completed a review of the rural education system in Manitoba, providing the following summation:

> However, as evidenced in this study, there are three elements that will significantly support this work: (a) the energy and commitment to leading renewal and quality education already exists within the rural and remote schools in Manitoba; (b) Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth have established rural education a priority; and, (c) there exists a wealth of policy and practice innovations already undertaken in other jurisdictions in areas that face Manitoba schools, such as distance education, recruitment and retention, culturally sensitive programming, and career and vocational programming. Rather than having to begin anew, Manitoba can learn from these jurisdictions to create models of service that support the Manitoba context. In doing so, it will increase the access, quality and choices of rural and remote students, educators, and communities for educational services respectful of both provincial mandates and community needs. (p.109)

At the time of the completion of this thesis, reviews such as those mentioned above, into the rural education system in Nova Scotia could not be found.

While not Canadian, yet arguably relevant to our rural Canadian schools, Mette et al. (2016) peel back the political onion in a rural context, as a way to prepare leaders in education when thinking about school policy, reform, and community improvement efforts. Mette et al. (2016) suggested that there are many factors to consider when looking to reform schools in a rural area. "Traditionally, rural schools have played an important role in community development, not only serving as a center for community events, but also contributing to the ongoing health of the local economy (Howley et al., 2012 as cited in Mette et al., p.3).

Consolidation and closure have extremely negative impacts on rural communities. In terms of consolidation, Lyson's (2002) study speaks to this, suggesting that school consolidation has also adverse effects on property values: rural school systems are often the community's largest employer, so school closure can have substantial negative economic impacts on rural communities as well (Woods et al., 2005). Research also suggested that rural students who are academically high achieving are influenced by their perceptions of the strength of the local economy regarding their future decisions to remain in their communities (Petrin et al., 2014), thus maintaining a local rural school system can help reduce the outmigration of the educated population (Foster, 2017; Barkley et al., 2005).

Equitable Distance Education (E-Learning)

In the following section, discussion surrounding the literature on challenges in distance education and e-learning is provided as a call to action for the development of priority policy for rural e-learning students.

Literature of e-learning in rural schools. Nicholson (2007) proposed that "it is important to note that there is no single evolutionary tree and no single agreed definition of e-learning" (p.1). Instead, he suggested e-learning has evolved in many different ways and sectors such as business, education, the trades, and the military. In the school sector, 'e-leaning' refers to the use of both software-based and online learning, also known as blended learning (Nicholson, 2007). Historically, technological innovations introduced an unprecedented opportunity whereby people could communicate and collaborate despite differences in time and place. These innovations became key to a social, economic, and educational paradigmatic shift. E-learning in the field of education seeks to level the playing for small rural schools that are limited in their programming and resources, but are not caught up on policy surrounding the quality and equity of its access.

E-Learning in Canada. It is not surprising that Canada, with its vast rural geography, was an early leader in distance education and the use of technology to support universal access to learning for all students, particularly those in isolated rural communities (Barbour, 2013). Technology-supported education continues to expand in many countries as educators use online and blended-learning to increase education access, quality, and student engagement. In comparison with some countries, Canada boasts the highest per capita student enrolment in online courses and programs of any jurisdiction in the world (Barbour & LaBonte, 2015; Barbour, 2013). Online courses that integrate distance e-learning (DEL) technology tools have had a growing presence in Canada's school systems since the mid-1990s (Barbour & Stewart, 2008).

As of 2015, eight of the 10 Canadian provinces have developed some form of province-wide online DEL program for students in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system. DEL for many students in Canada has been developed from necessity to provide students with access

to courses that, for a variety of reasons, would not otherwise be available (Barbour & LaBonte, 2015; Barbour, 2013).

E-learning in Nova Scotia. Barbour (2013) states that the roots of K –12 distance education in Nova Scotia began in 1920 with the introduction of a correspondence study program (CSP). While this model of delivery continues to exist, the province has seen the use of an educational television program that began in the 1960s. In the past decade, the province has witnessed an introduction of district-based online programs that have evolved into a single, province-wide online application – the Nova Scotia Virtual School (NSVS).

The NSVS provides a central course management platform and delegates to the eight regional centres of education (formally called school boards). The province's French school board, the Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial, has a long history of offering online courses, shared jointly with New Brunswick. The NSVS provides online high school courses to students enrolled in public high schools in Nova Scotia. In general, an NSVS online course should be one of the four that a student would enroll in during a high school semester (Nova Scotia, 2019b). Students must have space in their timetable to take an online course. Nova Scotia teaches e-learning courses by certified teachers using both synchronous (when teacher and students are communicating in real-time through video conferencing or e-chat) and asynchronous (when students can complete activities independently) methods. NSVS teachers have office hours, and students can log in to touch base with them individually. Students can also instantly message or email their online teachers at any time. NSVS online courses use the Nova Scotia Public School Program (PSP) with curriculum and learning outcomes that are identical to those used in a classroom at school.

More recently, Google Apps for Education (GAFE) has begun to make inroads in Canada's K-12 school systems. In Nova Scotia, GAFE was piloted during the 2014-15 school year, then approved for a rollout to all 400 public schools in the province (Julian, 2015). By the end of 2015, GAFE was spreading quickly, and teacher training summits had been held in Ontario, Alberta, Quebec, and British Columbia, as well as in Nova Scotia. In schools across the country, it has become essential for students to have access to the Internet to be successful. Homework, projects, and even information and advice from teachers are now transmitted online (Frost 2015). For example, as of 2018, Google Apps for Education is available to all Nova Scotian students, teachers, and administrators.

Governance and Regulation. In Nova Scotia, the Learning Resources and Technology Services division of the Public Schools Branch of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development manages distance education (e-learning) programs. The policies of distance education continue to be governed by the 11 provisions included in the agreement between the government of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union.

Within the 11 provisions, all online instructors are certified as NSTU teachers, employed by one of the eight boards/centres for education. These teachers are essentially classroom teachers who teach online and have been trained in the NSVS platform. Distance education is treated as a regular in-school program, with supervisors, dedicated facilities space, and class groups limited to 30 students. A distance education committee, with teacher union representation, exists to address "issues surrounding distance education" (Nova Scotia, 2019). Finally, a provincial advisory committee creates a formal mechanism allowing for consultation between distributed e-learning program operators and the union. During the 2017-18 school year, updates to the clauses in Article 49 recognized the changes and advances in technology and

possibilities through learning online (Nova Scotia, 2019). Essentially e-learning is run through policy in its administration of the program, not the equal accessibility to the rural students who it historically served directly. In the next section, student success planning is discussed to illustrate characteristics of student success in Nova Scotia.

Student Success Plans in Nova Scotia

In 2016, a Student Success Plan Policy Framework was developed by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (NSDEECD) to be used as a guide or template for schools, regional centres, and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, to create a learning team culture throughout the public education system in Nova Scotia.

Student Success Planning (SSP) begins with a review of data to help determine where the school appears to be effective and where improvements are needed. This evidence is used to assess student achievement goals. Goals outline what will be measured to demonstrate improvement in student achievement. They need to be specific enough to be measurable, and broad enough to be inclusive of all students.

All schools develop student literacy, mathematics, and safe and inclusive achievement goals. In the Student Success Planning Framework, learning teams work together to identify how they can contribute to the overall success of school improvement by focusing on improving student achievement in their classrooms. Under the leadership of the principal, the school community works collaboratively to develop the improvement plan. Using provincial templates, Student Success Planning relies on effective distributed leadership between and among teachers, and shared commitment of support staff, school advisory councils, parents/guardians, students, and community members. Student Success Planning engages teachers in an ongoing cycle of

reflection and action within a learning team culture. The core work of student success is focused on the classroom with current implications for assessment and instructional improvement. School-based collaborative learning teams examine classroom assessment results and reflect on strategies they will use to ensure students are achieving the desired curriculum outcomes.

Research into school effectiveness and assessment is an abundant source of income for educational think tanks, but topics such as rural education and vulnerability receive limited review (Corbett, 2014; Mulcahy, 2007). None of the research has denied that rural education reform in Canada lacks priority. What research has suggested is that there is a segment of the population in the education system who are surpassing expectations due to their strong community ties, progressive instruction, and dedicated teachers and school leaders. There is a real untapped potential for the future of rural Canadian school reform.

Rural Youth in Nova Scotia

Parts of rural Nova Scotia most distant from urban areas in the province tend to be the most economically disadvantaged. Corbett (2006) discloses two interesting Global statistics supporting this statement. The first is that the combined wealth of the world's 350 billionaires at the time of publication was equal to the most deficient 45% of the earth's people (Baumen, 2001, as cited in Corbett, 2006); the second is that as the global urban-rural balance tipped in favour of cities, more people now live in cities than in rural areas of Nova Scotia (Corbett, 2006). Poverty in Nova Scotia is not on this global scale, but the connection between rurality and economic disadvantage is clear.

Life experiences in Nova Scotia differ between the capital region of Halifax and the rest of the province (Corbett, 2006). Rural communities have struggled to adapt and remain resilient in the face of the changing economic circumstances of the late 20th and 21st centuries (Brown &

Schafft, 2011; Sherman, 2014). One outcome of these changing economic circumstances has been growing economic distress in the rural Americas over the past several decades, with incidences of poverty outpacing those of urban areas, particularly since 2008 (Lichter & Graefe, 2011; Sherman, 2014). Childhood poverty, as well, continues to be higher in rural areas than in urban areas (Sherman, 2014). In his 2007 manuscript "Learning to Leave" Corbett explained that communities often struggle to reverse out-migration trends as migration patterns undermine their efforts to rebuild local economies, and young people continue to out-migrate from rural places to find work or continue their education elsewhere.

More recently, Karen Foster, Associate Professor of Dalhousie University, and Canadian Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Futures for Atlantic Canada developed a knowledge thesis report which outlines three findings and their policy implications in youth outmigration patterns, suggesting that:

> 1. Rural youth outmigration is driven by much more than purely economic factors. Young people from rural areas, like their urban and adult counterparts, move for a complex mix of subjective, personal reasons and objective, structural, economic reasons, 2. What is good for the community might not be good for the individual, and 3. Dominant cultural narratives tend to frame rural places as "failed" and "failing" elements of a world that is moving toward urban lifestyles and standards; rural young people who stay in their home communities are characterized as failures too. (Foster, 2017, p. 2-3)

Dr. Foster's CRC current research, supported by her CFI-funded Rural Futures Research Centre, focuses on the sustainability of rural life in Atlantic Canada, with a particular emphasis on how government policy and everyday life intersect illustrates the need for healthy rural youth policy development and advocacy.

There are often barriers to accessing the social safety nets that are formally available to people experiencing poverty in rural areas. Although rural areas are often idealized in the media and popular imagination as tight knit, racially and socioeconomically homogeneous communities, such depictions often mask patterns of social exclusion within small communities, particularly with regard to poor individuals and families (Corbett, 2007).

Research suggested that there is a social stigma of taking advantage of relief benefits, which discourage eligible families from enrolling in these programs (Sherman, 2009, 2013). Rural youth vulnerability and the effects of childhood poverty on education, more narrowly in Nova Scotia, will be discussed next.

Vulnerability

In 1998, the Offord Centre for Child Studies (then the CCSCR), in a partnership funded by Human Resources Development Canada and administered by Magdalena Janus of McMaster University, developed a project to study young children's ability to meet age-appropriate developmental expectations at school entry. This project served as a prototype to the Canadian federally funded Understanding the Early Years (UEY) initiative beginning in 1999. The UEY implementation included a battery of measures from a National Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth (NLSCY) on a representative sample of the same 5-year-old children, together with a community mapping study (Janus et al., 2007). Reporting on vulnerability is based on the premise that small modification of risk for large numbers is more effective in producing change than large modifications for small numbers. Vulnerability provides a glimpse into the groups of children who are vulnerable to problems in later childhood. It casts a wide net, including all children who may benefit from universal programs. Children with more risk factors have more

complex problems and require more interventions, both before and during their formal education (Janus & Offord, 2007).

From this partnership, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) became a population-level research tool used to various degrees in all Canadian provinces and territories. Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Quebec collected data at the provincial/territorial-level, and Nunavut has collected data on some of their children. The EDI is designed to increase the mobilization of communities and policymakers in order to bring a positive impact on children's development in their local areas. "Understanding the state of children's development at the level of the population, that is for *all* children, is foundational to mobilizing stakeholders towards change" (EDI, 2016, p.3).

Current findings from the administration of EDI in Canada show that in most jurisdictions, 25% or more of children entering primary are vulnerable in at least one aspect of their development. Further research linking EDI findings to later educational data demonstrates that, on average, primary vulnerability predicts ongoing vulnerability in the school system, and suggests that numerous studies have shown that early vulnerability predicts much about a person's lifelong health, learning, and behaviour (EDI, 2015a).

What does this have to do with the children and youth in rural Nova Scotia? In Nova Scotia, the first province-wide implementation of the EDI was completed during the 2012/2013 school year. These data are considered to constitute the Nova Scotia baseline and were used to determine the 10th percentile cut points for subsequent reporting. The second provincial collection took place in the 2014/2015 school year. This was the first year that the Nova Scotia baseline was used as a comparison for reporting purposes. In terms of vulnerability, on average,

25.5% of Nova Scotian children were classified as vulnerable in one of the five indicator domains, and 12.6% were vulnerable in two or more. In the 2017-2018 results, percentages of vulnerability increased again to 30% for one domain of vulnerability and 14.7% for vulnerability in more than one domain. When placed against the Canadian normative values, children in Nova Scotia have higher rates of vulnerability (EDI, 2015b) (see Figure 2.0).

Figure 2.0 Canadian and Nova Scotian Comparison of Vulnerability

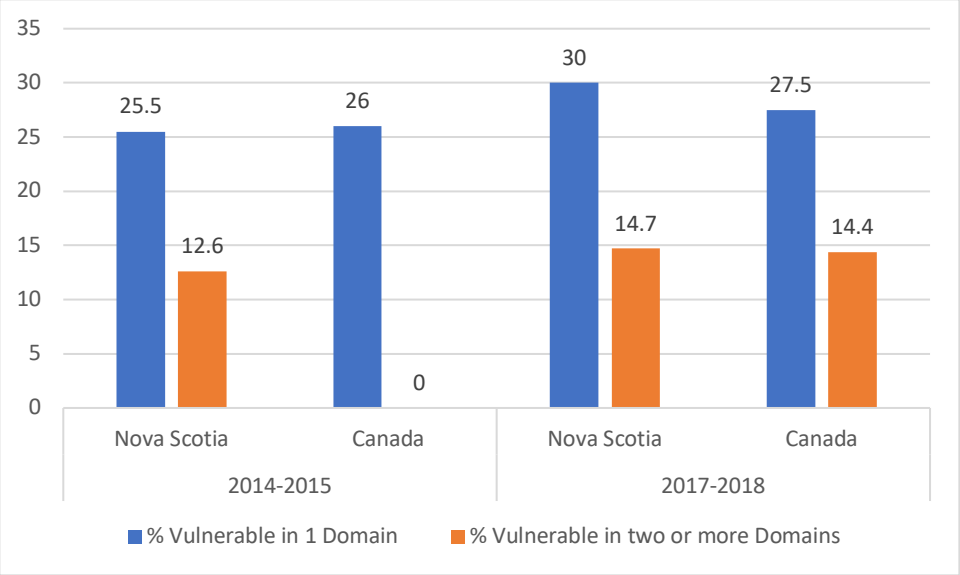


Figure 2.0 Adapted from EDI (2018). Summary Report: Primary Students in the province of Nova Scotia- School year 2017/2018. *EDI Descriptive Report*. https://www.ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears/documents/EDI-report-2018-en.pdf and EDI, (2015b). The Nova Scotia Early Development Instrument (EDI) Report 2013-2015.McMaster University. Offord Centre for Child Studies. https://www.ednet.ns.ca/earlyyears/documents/EDI-report-2013-15.pdf. Note: 2014-2015 Canadian data for more than one domain of vulnerability was unavailable.

Compounding this fact, when looking at the different geographies throughout Nova Scotia, the counties with rural demographics had higher amounts of childhood vulnerability (see Figure 2.1, p.27). In some areas such as Cape Breton, Queens, Lunenburg, and Yarmouth counties, vulnerability rates climbed as high as 40% in one domain of vulnerability and as much

as 25% for more than one domain of vulnerability. All of these rates are higher than the provincial base of 25.5% and 14% (EDI, 2016). These are some of the highest rates in Canada. At the national level, the Canadian Institute for Health Information suggested that vulnerability in Canadian children has increased from 25% to 27% (EDI, 2016). Nova Scotia experienced an increase in vulnerability from 2015 to 2018, which is statistically significant. The results in 2013 and 2015 indicated that one in four Nova Scotian children (25%) were vulnerable to one or more domains of the EDI. By 2018, this percentage had increased to 28.8% (NS Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019). Currently the provincial average, based on the Canadian Institute for Health Information (2020), is 30%. In the 2013-2015 Nova Scotia EDI Report, the following is discussed on the topic of developmental health at school entry:

> Children are born ready to learn. A child's neuro system is pre-programmed to develop various skills and neuropathways, depending on the experiences it receives. While a majority of Canadian children grow up in positive, loving, and nurturing environments, a considerable percentage enter Grade 1 with developmental skills that make them vulnerable for embarking on sub-optimal life trajectories.
>
> During children's' early years, developmental domains are closely intertwined with each other, and skills, behaviours, and abilities that contribute to children's successful school adjustment reflect the child's health. What once has been narrowly called ‘school readiness,’ is now understood as a broader concept, encompassing all developmental areas. Children with optimal developmental health are those who adjust well to new situations, are in good physical and mental health, enjoy learning at their own pace, and have good peer relation. (p.3)

This is an important indicator and demonstrates the current need for quality and equitable rural educational policy development in Nova Scotia to help protect the vulnerable populations of students that we are entrusted with educating.

Figure 2.1. Provincial Comparison of Vulnerability 2017-2018

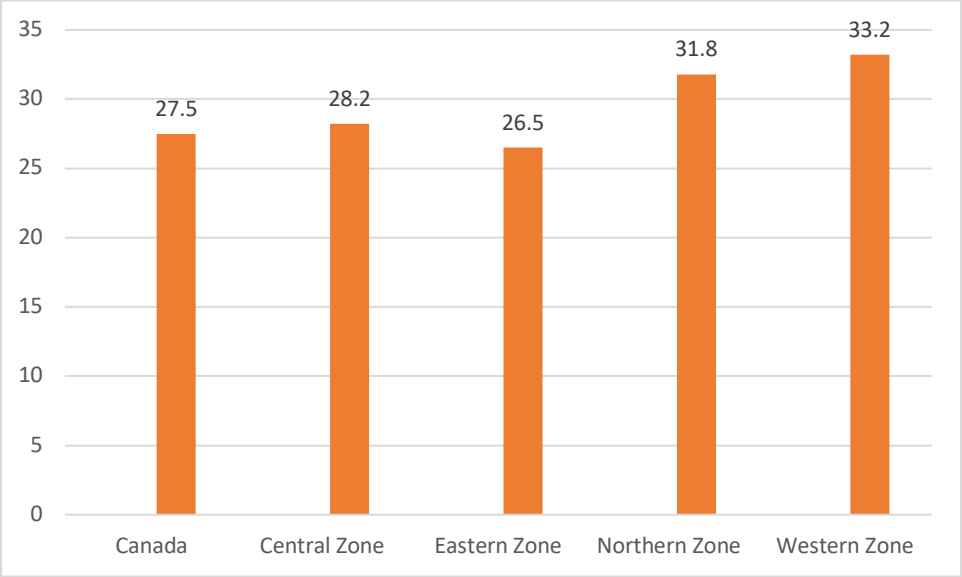


Figure 2.1. Adapted from Canadian Institute for Health Information. (2020). Children Vulnerable in Areas of Early Development: Interactive Map: Children Vulnerable in Areas of Early Development (Percentage). https://yourhealthsystem.cihi.ca/hsp/inbrief.#!/indicators/013/children-vulnerable-in-areas-of-early-development/;mapC1;mapLevel2;/.

Childhood Poverty

Rothman (2007) completed a scathing report regarding childhood poverty rates in Canada, suggesting that Canada faces steep, yet surmountable, challenges in significantly reducing child and family poverty. Despite continued economic growth, Canada's record on child poverty was worse than it was in 1989 when the House of Commons unanimously resolved to end child poverty by the year 2000.

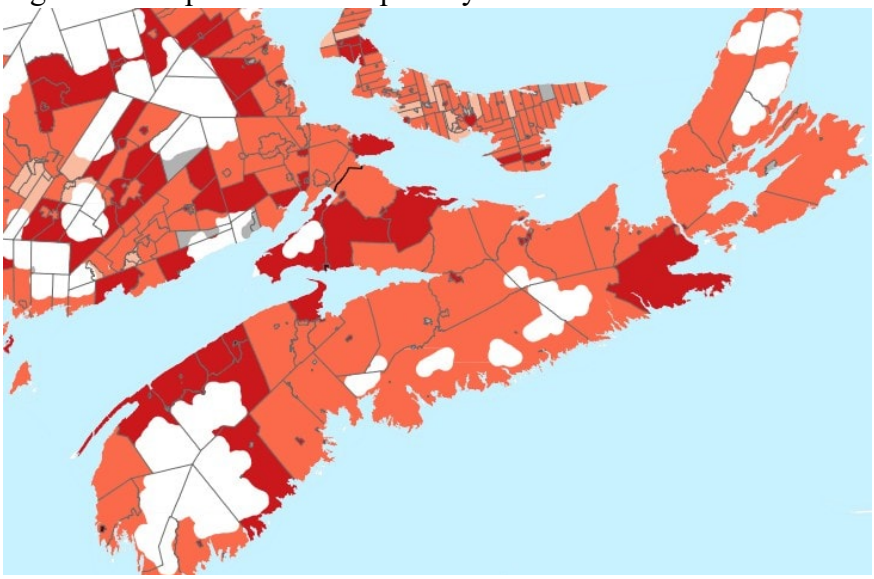
Many Canadian studies of youth and childhood poverty have been completed, and many have concluded that students from rural areas tend to suffer from poverty and vulnerability the most (Rothman, 2007). The Conference Board of Canada, in their 2019 report of Child Poverty, stated that "children who experience poverty, especially persistently, are at higher risk of suffering health problems, developmental delays, and behaviour disorders. They tend to attain lower levels of education and are more likely to live in poverty as adults" (para.1). Desapriya and Khoshpouri (2018) agreed that there are ethical reasons for reducing inequality in Canada. They asserted that "reducing the number of Canadians living in poverty, including vulnerable children, should be a social policy priority" (p.1). Although the theme of child poverty in Canada has grabbed much public, media, and political attention, according to recent statistics 4.8 million Canadians lived in a low-income household in 2015, of whom 1.2 million (nearly one in four) were children (Desapriya & Khoshpouri, 2018). Recently, the World Health Organization concluded, "[s]ocial injustice is killing people on a grand scale" (as cited in Desapriya & Khoshpouri, 2018, p.2). There is a rationale for taking action to improve the lives of those living in poverty.

A current United Nations Children's Fund Report Card examined a children's well-being index, looking at the average of 26 indicators across five dimensions: material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviours and risks, and housing and environment. Canada's overall rank was 17th of 29 wealthy developed nations. It ranked 15th in material well-being, 27th in health and safety, 14th in education, 16th in behaviours and risks, and 11th in housing and environment (as cited in Desapriya & Khoshpouri, 2018, p.5).

The Canadian Paediatric Society (2012) suggested that all stakeholders and governments at all levels work together toward eliminating child poverty in a way that incorporates the

following evidence-based solutions: income support measures, education and job training, and quality childcare programs. It also encourages provinces and territories to pass legislation to reduce poverty levels and develop antipoverty strategies.

Figure 2.2 Map of childhood poverty in Nova Scotia.



Note. 20.0% to < 30.0%, Medium red; 10.0% to < 20.0% Light red; < 10.0% Beige. Adapted from Statistics Canada (2017). Percentage of children below the after-tax low-income measure in 2015, by 2016 census subdivision (CSD). *Atlantic Region Source: Statistics Canada Census of Population, 2016*. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/geo/map-carte/ref/thematic-thematiques/inc-rev/files-fichiers/map-carte-4/2016-92173-004-100-008-02-eng.pdf.

Provincially, areas in the Annapolis Valley, Guysborough County, parts of Shelburne and Queens Counties, Cumberland County, and Guysborough have 30% or higher poverty rates. In terms of childhood poverty in Nova Scotia (see Figure 2.2 above), some of the highest rates of poverty exist in these rural areas.

Rural youth in Nova Scotia also post some of the highest childhood poverty rates in the country. In a 2019 report by Statistics Canada, Nova Scotia was the only province in Canada whose childhood poverty rates have increased. In 2015, Nova Scotia boasted the second-highest rates in the country with 15% of its youth under 18 living in a low-income situation (Statistics Canada, 2019). Two short years later, when every other province had reduced their childhood poverty rates, Nova Scotia's increased to 17%, higher than any other province has experienced (see Figure 2.3, p.31). In response to this report, Lynn Hartwell, deputy minister of Community Services within the Government of Nova Scotia, said during an interview that "[w]e've been watching a decades-old trend of child poverty being on the decrease. And so, to see such a sharp reversal of that in a concise period of time is concerning" (Gunn, 2019). Hartwell stated that the province is "working with Statistics Canada to try and shed more light on the populations that are most affected," so the province knows where to target future programming (Gunn, 2019). She also pointed out that the province is two years into a four-year, $20 million poverty reduction blueprint aimed at getting to the root causes of poverty. "We want to make sure we understand what it is that's happening there so that ... we can make sure that the investments that we're making are getting to the right folks," (Gunn, 2019).

Figure 2.3. Percentage of Low-Income Youth Provincial Comparison

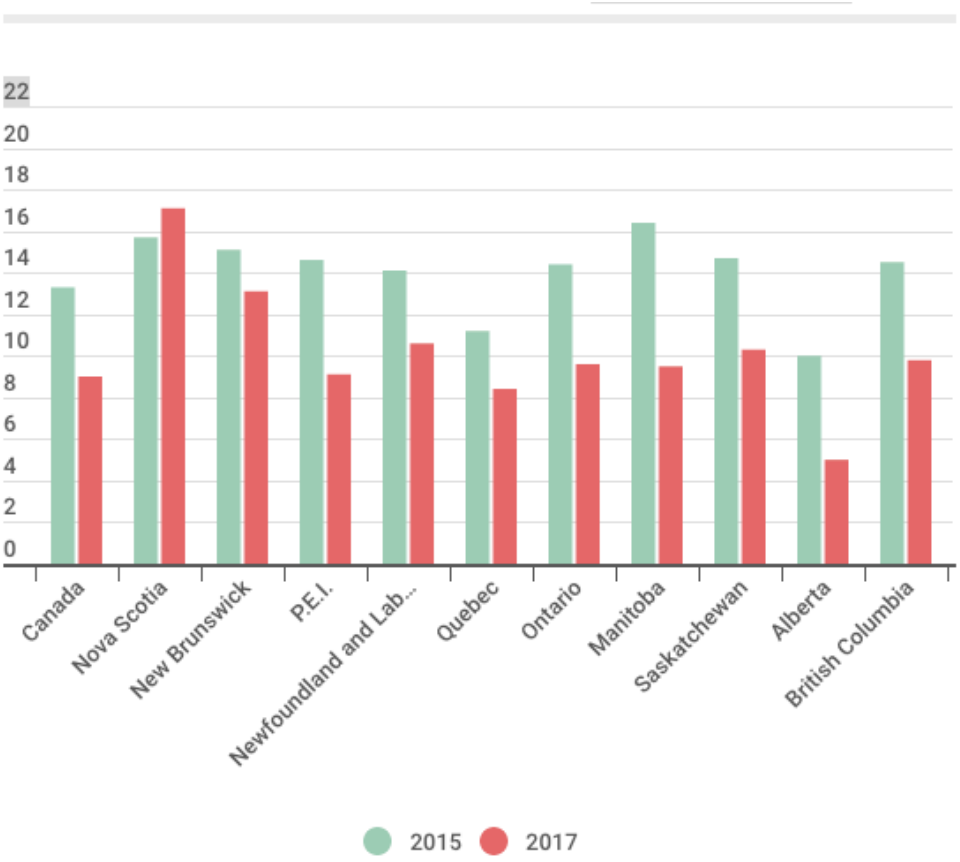


Figure 2.3. Percentage of Canadian people under 18 in a low-income situation. Adapted from Statistics Canada (2017) Census in Brief: Children living in low-income households. Statistics Canada Census of Populations. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016012/98-200-x2016012-eng.cfm.

Nova Scotia Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard, who for a decade served as the director of the Dalhousie School of Social Work, suggested in an article by Gunn (2019) that policymakers in the province need to have a hard look at why Nova Scotia is being left behind, with a particular focus on marginalized populations and demographics that disproportionately feel the effects of poverty. She adds, "[t] here's no such thing as child poverty if children are living in poverty. It's because parents are living in poverty" (as cited in Gunn, 2019).

In their report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Frank and Saulnier (2017) suggested that the high rates of child poverty in rural communities throughout Nova Scotia mean that interventions should focus on the broader policies and issues that create these disparities and perpetuate poverty, and also ensure that they address differences at the community level (for example using a rural lens to ensure that adequate services are available no matter where you live). They noted that there are many actions that federal, provincial and local governments can take together to work towards this goal, and that such a strategy will require collaboration at all levels of government, including Indigenous governments and organizations, as well as with other non-governmental organizations, including people living in poverty (Frank & Saulnier, 2017). While the most recent Statistics Canada figures are dismal, Christine Saulnier, Nova Scotia director with Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said their annual child poverty study, which uses income tax data, paints "a slightly different — albeit still disappointing — picture" (as cited in Frank & Saulnier, 2017).

Poverty and Education. Rural poverty is a persistent macro systemic issue related to rural education (Stelmach, 2011). Although Bankston and Caldas (2002) describe it as non-discriminatory, rural poverty intersects with geographic location, race, and ethnicity (United Nations, 2010a). Nonetheless, education is implicated in rural poverty. First, education is used to address the antecedent conditions of poverty. Second, where poverty contributes to absenteeism, attempts are made to eradicate conditions that require children to take up paid work instead of studies. Joint partnerships, such as the "Education for Rural People" between the Food and Agriculture Organization and UNESCO under The Global Action Plan: Improving Support to Countries in Achieving EFA Goals (United Nations, 2007) exemplify comprehensive approaches to improving "the specific learning needs of rural people, in terms of access, quality, the

environment and outcomes of learning…and to improve institutional capacity in planning and implementing education for rural people" (p. 21).

Poverty shapes attitudes toward school. Since race and ethnicity often intersect with socioeconomic status, poverty rates are higher among ethnic minorities. Mills and Gale (2003) argue that the dominant values of school misalign with some students' cultural values such that they start to identify themselves as outcasts and reject the legitimacy of school. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that African American students viewed schooling as a subtractive process: African American students experience one-way acculturation with an unachievable expectation to "act White." Canada's First Nations communities physically and geographically share these experiences of being "outside" the dominant culture of schooling (Agbo, 2007). Given that poverty is arterial to multiple factors that impact education (e.g., health, and gender equity), the proliferation of goals targeting the elimination of poverty among international social, economic, and political agencies is unsurprising.

The Context of Rural Educational Policy

This last section of the literature review examined the extent to which current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova Scotia. This literature suggested that there is a gap in exploratory study into Canadian rural schools and a lack of cohesive rural school reform policy.

Policy Development in Nova Scotia

Particularly in Nova Scotia, there seems to be a relative lack of research within rural educational contexts, as mentioned throughout this review. The next section of the literature review examined documents regarding policy surrounding rural education in Canada, more specifically Nova Scotia, as well as documents that outline best practices for rural education reform. It was not the intent of this literature review to describe in detail all the initiatives

undertaken in rural areas, but to provide an overview of the priority that educational policy gives to rural youth in Nova Scotia.

There are limited research endeavours in rural areas of educational systems (Corbett, 2014). Wallin (2007) suggested that rural education policy typically encompasses a generic framework surrounding concerns like the provision of specialized services, facilities, electronic learning, inter-agency cooperation, and staffing. She noted that most of the policies created are not specific to rural contexts (Wallin, 2007). Phil Cormack (2013), and Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2013), in their discussions on contemporary education policy, pointed out that there is nothing in most contemporary education policy or curriculum that prevents teachers from modifying general expectations and outcomes to local conditions. This form of educational governance puts considerable pressure on teachers and other lower-level system players to adapt standardized expectations to local conditions, and to "close the gap" (as cited in Corbett, 2014, p.7).

In 2009, under the New Democratic Party, the Nova Scotia government commissioned Acadia University's then-president, Ray Ivany to perform a review of the province's finances. In his evaluation Ivany noted that over the past 40 years, P-12 enrolment in Nova Scotia had dropped by nearly 40%, suggesting that the current school system no longer enjoys "economies of scale advantages" (Ivany et al., 2014, p.1). The review revealed that there are too many schools operating below optimal enrolments in both rural and inner-city areas, and that the cost of maintaining this infrastructure drains resources away from improvements in quality education. Ivany et al. (2014) also suggested that rural communities in particular struggle with the stresses of schools closing and longer bussing routes. The commission hoped that efforts to improve the school review process would result in an enhanced willingness and capacity across the province to find the right balance between community needs and the efficient use of resources to deliver

high-quality learning opportunities. They also suggested that there would not be a "one size fits all" solution, and acknowledged the special role schools play in how communities see themselves, particularly at the lower grade levels (Ivany et al., 2014).

In 2014, the year that the Ivany report came out, the government changed hands to the Liberals. The newly appointed Minister of Education, Karen Casey, also ordered a complete review of the education system, resulting in a report by the Minister's Panel on Education (Nova Scotia, 2014). This review was a societal response to both the Ivany (2014) report and the publication of the government's earlier white paper, Education Horizons (1995). A period of restructuring followed, with significant changes to the Education Act to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of key players such as school boards, staff, parents, and students within the system.

In response to the earlier Education Horizons (1995) review, school boards were amalgamated from 22 to seven regional boards, and services for French First Language were harmonized through the creation of a single provincial board. School advisory councils (SACs) were established in many schools. The government suggested that it was time to re-examine whether our education system has kept pace with forces that are reshaping the world students experience and will face in the future (Nova Scotia, 2014). In this policy review, the concept of rural equity was revealed in terms of technology (Distance e-Learning) and educational funding:

> Technology can be particularly beneficial for Nova Scotia's rural communities. Many rural schools struggle to access specific courses and content, and course offerings vary dramatically among schools. Technology has the power to bring a specialized curriculum to rural Nova Scotian students by embracing online learning (Nova Scotia, 2014, p.23).

The review acknowledged that improvements to access to programs and services are needed, especially in small rural schools. That same year, a restructuring of the current distance education and correspondence platform called the Nova Scotia Virtual School was held.

Education in Nova Scotia met with a challenging year in 2017. As part of the Provincial government's mandate to streamline and reform education in the province based on the recommendations of the Nova Scotia (2014) report, they hired an educational consultant to review the administration of education in the province. Avis Glaze, an internationally recognized education consultant, was commissioned to the province's public education administration in October 2017. Her report set forth over 22 recommendations to help shape the landscape of educational reform in Nova Scotia (Glaze, 2018). Her first, and probably most contested recommendation, was a complete restructuring of the governing body. Glaze recommended that the eight locally elected school boards in the province be dismantled and replaced with appointed advisory bodies, thus streamlining the administration of education in the province. The province included this recommendation in its response plan, thus eliminating the English elected school boards, keeping the French Board, and appointing a representative from each region, which narrowed the local advocacy and representation of rural communities (Nova Scotia, 2018). The reduction of local boards has squeezed out local representation in Nova Scotia: in less than ten years the province went from 22 local boards to eight, and are now down to one plus a French Language Board.

The following are recommendations of the Glaze's (2018) report into rural school policies. It is important to note that only two focussed on specifically rural school issues: the 19th, surrounding infrastructure utilization, and the 22nd, surrounding the development of a rural education strategy. In her 19th recommendation, Glaze suggested targeting specific challenges in

the current system, including the development of a rural education strategy, as well as a strategy for students living in poverty:

> Nova Scotian students, families, and communities must be entitled to the same quality and variety of opportunities, from curriculum-related courses to health care access and social services. These strategies must be developed collaboratively with other relevant departments, agencies, and key stakeholders.
>
> If we are to provide excellence in education, we must have equity – and that means we must do our best for every student from every background. Regardless of where they live, what language they speak, their family situation, students must have equitable opportunities and supports to thrive (p.38).

No development related to this recommendation is currently being pursued.

In her 20th recommendation into the capital funding process of schools, Glaze (2018) suggested developing an objective set of space criteria to identify excess space in schools, by engaging an independent reviewer to ensure the appropriate use of any non-school activity. She added that increasing efficiency and effective use of spaces is not a push to close rural schools. Due to declining student enrolment, a significant number of schools have excess capacity, therefore a mechanism to ensure excess space is identified would enable better control of facility costs. Some schools, Glaze stated, "are substantially underutilized, operating at about 50 percent capacity in some cases" (p. 39).

The only other mention of the prosperity of rural youth in her commission is the following quote from a parent survey Glaze conducted, which explicitly reflects only the top performers from rural areas of the province:

> We need more teachers and less overhead. Save money at the top and put it where it needs to be-in the classroom. Rural areas shouldn't have their top students taking courses online, just because they do not have the numbers to offer those courses in the classroom (p.18).

There is no denying that rural education in Nova Scotia has met significant economic challenges over the last decade. On the topic of lack of rural school priority in Nova Scotia, Corbett (2006) suggested there is trepidation to develop coherent rural education policy, and because of this inattention "many rural schools in the province remain very traditional in structure in orientation, educating the elite minority for outmigration and success in other places" (p.3).

One of the fundamental problems with educational policy generally is that it is not aimed at the margins (which are inner-city youth, rural communities, aboriginal communities, and Acadian communities for example). Discussions about how school and community are to be structured have occurred around affected communities, but have not included members of those communities in their development. Rural places have been railroaded into adopting and accepting solutions that other people have designed for them based on a set of interests that are not necessarily supported locally (Corbett, 2006). He also suggested, for example, that schools are consolidated because they are supposed to be cheaper to administer and that this is typically accomplished "over the howls of community members" based on the flimsiest kinds of pathological and physical evidence (Corbett, 2006, p.113).

It seems that all people deserve to be involved as partners with professional educators and researchers in charting and planning the feet of their communities, yet local community representation and professional educational knowledge are lacking in policy development and decision making at governmental levels. A study commissioned by the United Nations (WCC

(World Coordinating Committee) of the IYFF+10, 2018) stresses the need to prioritize rural youth in the political agenda by strengthening a comprehensive approach at the community institutional level, tailored to the needs and demands of rural youth and their communities.

The next section will examine school success in rural Nova Scotia, and provide strategies to help establish policy guidelines that ensure rural youth receive an equitable and quality education.

Benchmark value: What can we learn?

Why should contemporary school effectiveness models and HPHN rural schools be used as benchmarks for the promotion of rural school success? The small rural school is an essential element in rural communities, and the community's support makes [HPHN rural] schools' success possible, often with fewer fiscal resources, suggesting that just throwing money at a problem cannot predict positive results (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). These are the strong relationships and commitments between HPHN rural schools and their communities that drive achievement and performance.

Many of the barriers faced by rural youth are similar to those mentioned in the OECD (2012) report on equity and quality education. Burušić et al. (2016) called for further action towards the equity of current school effectiveness reforms, suggesting that there are significant differences in academic achievement between schools in urban and rural areas. Burušić et al. also questioned why school success is rated solely on achievement measures. Schools in more socially and economically developed areas proved to have substantially better performance achievement on standardized tests compared to those located in less developed areas. Educational effectiveness research is largely criticized for its narrow focus on the measurement

of school knowledge. Burušić et al. (2016) summarized four approaches to measuring school effectiveness:

- Raw Teachers or School Effects: calculate the average results of students in a class or a school and compare it to an existing standard of achievement
- Teacher and School Effects Based on Unpredicted Achievement: form a regression model that includes student background characteristics and use the remaining unexplained variance (residual score) as a measure of school achievement
- Teacher and School Effects Based on Learning Gain: calculate the difference between achievement of students in two points in time and use it as a measure of achievement
- Teacher and School Effects Based on Unpredicted Learning Gain: from a regression model that controls the effects of student background characteristics on achievement and compare the difference in residual achievement scores in two points in time

Teachers in rural schools also are recognized as some of the most direct influences on student learning. Greater value needs to be placed on teachers' knowledge of their students and the community. Furthermore, educational leaders of HPHN rural schools also believe in the value of extra-curricular programs for rural youth (Masumoto & Brown Welty, 2009). Being in a small school allows students more opportunities to be involved. These supports provide students with increased school connectedness and goal achievement. Having rural schools with leaders and teachers who are capable of engaging others to address goals and student needs "create synergistic solutions" that extend resources often resulting in outcomes that surpass expectations (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p.14).

Concluding Thoughts on the Literature and Its Relevance to this Study

As indicated in the introduction, the literature review provided a foundation on which to frame this study. I first contextualized characteristics that describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia. Throughout this section, I identified many unique challenges for rural schools, provided factors to rural school success, and specified opportunities to use best practices in developing equity and quality education models.

In the second section, research was provided to explore what rural school personnel perceive as priorities in their buildings. I reviewed educational priorities with rural perspectives, reviewed current methods of school success planning in Nova Scotia, and explored indicators of well-being for Nova Scotia's rural youth. The literature reviewed surrounding the well-being of youth from rural areas of Nova Scotia recognized several factors such as childhood vulnerability and poverty as being imperative to the success of rural youth as they navigate the current education system. This led me to a discussion on school effectiveness and rural school performance in Nova Scotia, including when faced with multiple barriers, and concluded with strategies that educational leaders could implement in small rural schools and their communities to address the obstacles and help further drive educational practices.

In the third section in this literature review, I explored the extent to which education policy in Nova Scotia prioritizes rural youth. The importance of past, present, and future rural school policy development was explained, showing that areas that need to be addressed provide context for the current state of rural school success, equity, and quality in Nova Scotia. The education policy review revealed little evidence that rural youth in Nova Scotia are a top priority. It also showed that local representation and advocacy have diminished in Nova Scotia's education system over the past decade.

The literature reviewed in this chapter paints a dark picture of the challenges to prosperity for the youth living in rural areas of Nova Scotia. There are gaps in the literature, lack of exploratory study, and minimal places of reference in educational policy. I sought to fill these gaps by choosing to complete this qualitative study using rural Nova Scotian schools, their personnel, and their school success documents to better understand factors of rural school success. A call to action is also summoned in the province of Nova Scotia surrounding policies to protect the well-being and education of rural youth. Overall, a lack of peer-reviewed published Canadian research caused me to broaden both the geographic and temporal scope of the literature review to other similar countries. This literature review provided a clearer understanding of the current issues that impact rural youth in Nova Scotia's education system, and insight into the lack of attention students from rural demographics receive. Using the literature, I have demonstrated a lack of Nova Scotian context. This research study aims to expand knowledge of rural school success in Nova Scotia by further exploring research questions raised the presented literature. Through the above focus of inquiry, then, this study seeks to answer the following primary research question:

1. What characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia?

This primary research question will be answered by investigating two secondary questions:

2. What do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings?

3. To what extent does current educational policy prioritize rural youth in Nova Scotia?

In the next chapter, the methodology, I will create my conceptual framework and explain how I will attempt to answer these questions.

3. Methodology

This chapter provides the methodology used in this study to explore the research questions created from the literature review into the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova Scotia. This chapter first outlines why qualitative case study research methods were chosen, then describes how the research will be conducted to answer the research questions. Then research validity and ethical considerations are explained, and the thesis management plan and timelines used in this research are outlined.

Qualitative Case Study Research

Broadly defined, methodological approaches are the strategies of inquiry we use to understand a particular problem (Creswell, 2002). Qualitative case study methodological approaches were used in this study.

Qualitative Research

The qualitative paradigm is described, and reasons for specifically choosing this research paradigm are given. The qualitative methodology approach was used for two key purposes in this study. The first is that qualitative methodology enables researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of intricate phenomena within some specific context (Yin, 2002). In this study, the lack of prioritization of rural youth in educational policy is the intricate phenomena under investigation. ualitative researchers "place a high premium on the idiosyncratic, on the exploitation of the researcher's unique strengths, rather than on standardization and uniformity" (Eisner, 1998, p.170). Secondly, the qualitative research methodology was used because it allowed the philosophical beliefs or paradigms that individuals hold to be discussed (Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

In addition to helping educators become better practitioners, Creswell (2002) suggested research also provides information to policymakers when they research and debate educational topics: "Policymakers may range from federal government employees and state workers to local school board members and administrators, and they discuss and take positions on educational issues important to constituencies" (p.6). For these individuals, research offers results that can help them weigh various perspectives. When policymakers read research on issues, they are informed about current debates and stances taken by other public officials.

Qualitative research is interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Qualitative research has been described as the following:

> An effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there are. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting, what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting, and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting. (Patton, 1985, p.1, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p.13)

Case Study Research

Case study protocol is a formal document capturing the entire set of procedures involved in the collection of empirical material (Yin, 2009). It extends direction to researchers for gathering evidences, empirical material analysis, and case study reporting (Yin, 1994). Consistent with common characteristics of case study research, an interpretive case study

approach was utilized in this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Strauss, 1987). Case study method was used to develop a greater understanding of rural school success in Nova Scotia and the prioritization rural youth receive in educational policy. According to Merriam (1998), educational case studies are conducted to identify and explain specific problems of practice; in this case, the stories of rural school personnel are told, which can influence future practice, policy and research. Some strengths of the case study include its "flexibility to be used to study almost any topic or type of phenomenon, with an entire range of data collection and analytic methods" (Gall et al., 2007, p.447).

Case study can also provide detailed and information-rich data that are obtained by watching people in their territory and/or interacting with them in their language, on their terms (Kirk & Miller, 1986). A case study is appropriate when the objective is to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of a program and to convey a holistic and rich account of an educational program (Kenny & Grotelueschen, 1980). Merriam (1998) believes that case studies help to understand the processes of events and programs to gain insight on an issue rather than focusing on outcomes or confirmation. In case study design, the research should also be conducted in a natural setting to the participants and focus on their perspectives and meaning of the issue (Creswell, 1998).

Given my desire to understand what is being done to mitigate the challenges and barriers that rural youth are facing in their education, case study design was a logical approach to use in this study. This study meets the three characteristics of a case study outlined by Merriam (1998) as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. The study is particularistic because it focuses on a specific situation, the prioritization of Nova Scotian rural youth in educational policy; it is descriptive as I will illustrate the what typical rural schools look like in Nova Scotia through the

use of vignettes of my own first impression, providing an end product that contains a rich and complete description of the educational factors that affect rural youth success; and the study is heuristic as it gives the reader insight, a new understanding, or new meaning on how much effort or prioritization is given to rural school youth in Nova Scotia.

This research aimed to tell stories of rural schools by listening to rural school personnel discuss what they feel is being done to ensure that rural youth are provided with equitable educational opportunities. It continued with an analysis of meaning, and ended by presenting conclusions based on the data. A large case study (Rural schools in Nova Scotia) was utilized in this study with a population of schools selected from within that case. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) said qualitative researchers "study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). This study was well-suited for a qualitative method of research because the researcher described the perspectives and experiences that educators have regarding teaching rural school youth and looked to see if these experiences are represented in educational policy. In short, this thesis focused on exploring the prioritization of rural Nova Scotian youth in educational policy with the aim of utilizing effective rural school practices to better serve rural youth and their educational needs.

The Role of the Researcher

The importance of myself as the sole researcher in this qualitative case study research cannot be undervalued. According to Merriam (1988), the researcher is the primary instrument in both data collection and analysis. Therefore, the relationships and interactions I established with the participants, and the plan that I adopted for the processing and interpretation of data will influence the clarity and the quality of the data. Due to the type of data being collected, and my own background as an educator, the expertise of my supervisor to create the research questions,

plan the collection methods, and analyze the findings was paramount. While there are some checks and balances which will be discussed below, I was aware of my role as the sole researcher in this study and the biases that this can create.

I contacted the participating schools and all participants, facilitated the interviews, and collected, transcribed, and analyzed all data. In qualitative research, researchers must also take particular measures to be aware of their assumptions and biases and the influences of these throughout the research process (Merriam, 1998). For this reason, I maintained a reflective journal to record informal discussions, meeting times, dates, thoughts, intuitions, feelings, and perceptions throughout the study. The use of the journal will allow me to recall and reflect upon the decisions I made and provide insight into the rationale behind them and any other changes throughout the process. The disclosure of my role was made to help build rapport and put participants at ease during observations and interviews to ensure genuine and natural participation (Gall et al., 2007).

Conducting the Research

In this section, using Qualitative Case Study Methodology, questions as to what characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia, what rural school personnel feel are priorities in their building, and the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural school youth were answered using the following sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods.

Sampling

As this research aimed to share a specific and underrepresented area of knowledge, “purposeful sampling” was used to select schools and participants for interviews and case study. A purposeful sample is a non-probability sample, selected based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. With this type of sampling, "researchers intentionally

select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2002, p. 194). Participants for this study were deliberately recruited to better serve to answer the research questions through discussions with colleagues who met the criteria. Because this research will not be generalized over a large population, random sampling was neither necessary nor appropriate. A non-random purposive sampling allowed me to choose participants who filled a variety of requirements. The first requirement was that the participants be employed in a small rural school. Schools were classified as rural from the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation of Canada's definition of rural, being "communities with a population of less than 1,000 and outside areas with 400 people per square kilometre" (SORC, 2015, p.65). Principals of these rural schools were contacted and interviewed using the Principal Interview Form (see appendices C and D).

Next, educators were chosen based on their experience within the school. I selected the participants by emailing educators via the schools' administrative assistants using a formal letter of invitation (appendix B), after receiving confirmation of school participation by the administration and after approval of the schools' Regional Centres for Education (see appendix A). After identifying several individuals through the above means, I conducted a brief discussion with each to verify their interest and willingness to participate in this research. From those who met the initial requirements, a selection was made. Those educators who have long-standing relationships between the school and community were interviewed using the Educator Interview Form (see appendix C). Interviews amongst community members through the school's School Advisory Committees (SACs) were also conducted via the schools' administration (appendix C). The selected group represents a range of grade levels and specializations. Both genders were

represented. Another requirement of the participants was that they expressed interest in the study.

Data Collection

While there are good practices, as Eisner (1998) describes it, there is no standard set of procedures, formulas, or rules for doing qualitative inquiry. This is because qualitative researchers "place a high premium on the idiosyncratic, on the exploitation of the researcher's unique strengths, rather than on standardization and uniformity." (Eisner, 1998). Additionally, since qualitative research often takes some time to conduct, it is not possible to predict the ebb and flow of events and new conditions as they unfold. Thus, qualitative researchers must aim for flexibility, and be able to adjust their methods as they go along. In terms of sources of data, because qualitative researchers are most interested in understanding the complexity of human interaction in particular social settings, they must collect data that are thick and rich and diverse. The focus of inquiry was to help paint a picture of rural school success in Nova Scotia and prioritization of its youth, so according to Eisner (1998), making sense of schools, students and classrooms requires our attention to what people do and say and how they do and say it by engaging in "living" in a situation.

In terms of the research topic, I initially completed an exploratory study during the literature review (chapter 2) to discover the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova Scotia. I wanted gain knowledge of the current status of rural education policy before collecting data to study the specific needs and barriers that youth in rural Nova Scotia face, examine the policies and procedures that frame our education system in Nova Scotia, and ask rural schools and communities whether we are doing enough to further achievement and performance in our rural schools. Data collection took place in two phases. Tite (2019) postulates

that there are two methods of qualitative data collection, interactive and non-interactive, and suggests that having both increases the validity in the research. Interactive methods, she suggests, are participation observation, interviewing, and focus groups (Tite, 2019). For purposes of this research, text analysis was used as a non-interactive data collection method and interviewing as an interactive qualitative method that will also be conducted. Triangulation of data collection took place in two phases, first through a text analysis of their School's Success Plan (SSP), and secondly through interviews with the rural school personnel.

Interviewing. Interviewing in qualitative research presents itself as primary data collection for a phenomenology, a grounded theory study, case study, and narrative research. Ribbins (2007) believes interviews provide the opportunity to obtain in-depth information about a participant's thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations, or feelings about a topic. With so many different approaches, beliefs, challenges, or factors potentially impacting or shaping curriculum implementation, interviews provided a way to obtain detailed views for different contexts and participants, thereby gaining a rich understanding of individual perspectives (Kervin et al., 2006).

Le Compte and Preissle (1993) point out that qualitative interviews may be categorized by the type of person being questioned, and by the structure of the interview. As such, the key informants of the interviews were administrators and educators of schools because of their knowledge of education that the researcher was interested in obtaining, their status within the community, and their communication skills. Members of each schools' SAC were selected because of their role and knowledge within both the school and community. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D) were conducted for interactive data collection.

The purpose of the research determines the nature of the interview (Gall et al., 2003). Because I wanted to probe for answers and explore what Barley and Beesley (2007) suggest are factors of rural school success, the interview format was semi-structured. I asked a series of open-ended questions and, to obtain additional information, asked additional questions relating specifically to the participants' answers. This semi-structured interview reflected an in-depth conversation specifically about rural education. Having the freedom to ask points of verification or "sub-questions" of the participants' answers allowed me to gain a greater depth of understanding. Also, these semi-structured interviews help the participants express their views on their terms (Gall et al., 2003). Because the questions are conducive to conversation, the tone is more relaxed and personable. Each visit included an interview of school staff, and an interview with community members which included questions about each participant's role in the school, what characterizes the school, satisfactions, dissatisfactions, the role of the community in the school, past change efforts, important school aspects, and key elements of success (see Appendix D). The questions in the interview will be categorized and coded using the following conceptual framework that I created using the literature reviewed for this research.

Conceptual Framework

Data analysis will use the following conceptual framework of rural school success. (Canada without Poverty, 2019; Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005). The four key components (Leadership, Instruction, Professional Community and School Environment) are based on earlier research on High-Performing High-Needs schools. Factors of success are then explored that comprise these four components and the relationships among them.

The grouped by key components and their factors are:

Leadership: 1) shared mission and goals, 2) principal as a change agent, and 3) principal as instructional leader.

Instruction: 4) individualization of instruction, 5) instructional resources, 6) alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, 7) programs for special needs students, *8) Culturally responsive teaching* and 9) instructional supports for learning (such as academic policies and the organization of the school day).

Professional Community: 10) teacher recruitment, 11) teacher retainment, 12) professional development, 13) teacher collaboration, and 14) teacher involvement in leadership.

School Environment: 15) use of student data, 16) high expectations for all students, 17) parent and community involvement, 18) safe drug free school, 19) *Outside agencies,* 20) *Multi-Tiered Systems for Supports* and 21) *Social Emotional Learning*.

The shaded factors are the original factors used in the original HPHN study (McREL, 2005a). Factors 1, 6, 7, and 10 were selected from the original Barely and Beesley (2007) study. Factors in italics, 8 and 19-21, are new factors added based on current experience teaching in rural school in Nova Scotia, and from a report on childhood poverty in Canada (Canada without Poverty, 2019). Site visits were conducted during February of 2020 (appendix G). Interviews were tape-recorded, then transcribed into a word processing program to create a set of idea statements from transcriptions.

Text Analysis Method. Using Marshall and Rossman's (1999) list of potential data sources, a text analysis was conducted on the Schools' Success Plans (SSPs) as a means of demonstrating school performance and priorities in the building. Focusing the text analysis, while collecting data in a range of settings and under a variety of circumstances, ensures coverage of pertinent issues faced by rural youth in Nova Scotia. Field notes were also used as a method of data collection. Coding of ideas generated in the school's SSP were collected in common categories based on the four factors of rural school successes previously mentioned in the conceptual framework (appendix G). Using the structure and organizational method of

collection allowed me to generate reoccurring themes in the data. These data represent the meanings given by participants to their actions, words, and records.

Within research, I coupled the text analysis methods of data collection with the rural school interviews to help build a case study. The case study provided an intensive analysis of a multitude of specific details that might be overlooked with a single method of data collection.

Data Analysis

The defining features of qualitative analysis, Lofland et al. (2006) suggest, are that findings arise through an inductive data-driven process, where the essential analysis tool is the researcher, with a process that is highly interactive between researcher and data, and that it is pursued persistently and methodically. In order to first develop the qualitative case study, the researcher qualitatively analyzed the data collected between the two schools before, during, and after site visits (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The intent with the analysis phase was to "tell the story" of a group of rural schools that are facing pressure to achieve with rural youth who are underrepresented in the policies that drive our educational practices in Nova Scotia. Analysis for this study followed these principles and consisted of four key stages: familiarization, categorization, summarization and interpretation.

Schein (1992) and Merriam (1988) state that the analysis of the qualitative data from all sources must focus on the identification of recurring regularities, evidenced by "repetition or response, same behaviours, values and assumptions that clearly are shared and continue to be used in new situations" (Schien, 1992, p.177). These triangulations in the following four stages are provided by researcher observations, interviews and text analysis should permit the discovery of shared underlying assumptions, if they exist.

Familiarization. Creswell (2002) highlighted the importance of becoming familiar with the data, before attempting to gain deep meaning from it, through full word-for-word transcribing, reading and re-reading, and getting an overall sense of its content and what may be necessary. The audio-to-word transcripts for each interview were completed using voice recognition software and Microsoft Word to speed up the process. After transcribing was completed, participants were invited to read and approve the transcribed interview. Through reading and re-reading of the collective interviews, initial thoughts, insights and themes were recorded, a process recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2003).

Categorization. The second stage will involve more formal categorization of the data. The constant comparative method of analysis will be used to make connections between data collection methods. Each interview was read, and as regularities, patterns and topics became apparent, a code will be created using the factors and themes mentioned above (appendix G). Ary et al. (2006) suggest that this refinement serves to strengthen initial codes while reducing their number, making data more related and easier to manage. These categories and sub-categories form the basis for the summary and interpretation of the main findings.

Summarization and Interpretation. Summarization and interpretation are the point at which theories about data are formally generated, tested, and applied (Creswell, 2002; Watling & James, 2007). In this study, summarization involved exploring relationships or patterns across the different categories to understand the findings in-depth and whether these findings were replicated for the three participant groups at each school. The eventual result was the identification of a small number of overriding emergent themes for each of the research questions. These themes are presented in the results chapter (chapter 4). The final stage, interpretation, was adopted from Watling and James's (2007) approach. Their four-pronged

process of evaluation was used alongside the research and conceptual literature from chapter two to confirm established research and understandings, to critically examine and refine these understandings, to apply established understandings to the context of the prioritization of rural youth in educational policy, and to illuminate possible new insights that are currently missing. The results of this process are found in chapter five, the discussion.

Research Validity and Ethical Considerations

Validity considers the quality, rigour, worth, and value of research (Keeves, 1997). While there is considerable debate regarding the applicability of validity to qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2007), Busher and James (2007) believe qualitative researchers should be as vigilant as other researchers in pursuing validity. Within the aims of this study, trustworthiness and credibility will be discussed.

This is a way of assuring the validity of the research through the use of a variety of methods to collect data on the same topic. In this research, because I was conducting on-site visits to the rural schools, anonymity was held in high regard and all ethics checks between Memorial University and the Regional Centre's for Education where the schools are located were completed before data collection occurred.

Trustworthiness. Providing context for trustworthiness in this qualitative research study will be achieved by determining and adopting several strategies to enhance the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ensuring a clearly defined purpose, question, framework, and careful consideration and planning of the collection process, analysis, and interpretation of data also will increase the trustworthiness of this study. Various sources of data were used and compared to broaden the depth and scope of

understanding of the research case study in order to verify conclusions and strengthen the study's usefulness to other settings (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Credibility. According to Merriam (1998), credibility deals with the question, "How congruent are the findings with reality?" (p. 213). To increase the credibility of this study, many measures were established, addressed, and followed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the research method for this study was carefully considered and investigated to ensure the correct method for the selected question of wonder was chosen. Second, effort was made to develop an early familiarity with the chosen case site before data collection, to understand the organization, and to create a rapport with the participants. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this strategy is known as "prolonged engagement" (p. 85). Triangulation helped increase the credibility of this study. Triangulation involves the use of different methods of during data collection. Interviews, text, literature reviews, and personal field journal reflections form the primary data collection strategies for this case study (Shenton, 2004).

During data analysis in this study, the constant comparative method was used to identify similarities and differences that cut across all pieces of data collected. According to Guba (1981), the use of a variety of methods concurrently compensates for their limitations and demonstrates their benefits. Another strategy used to increase the credibility of the data collected was to offer each individual an opportunity to refuse to participate in the study or withdraw from the study, without penalty, before the combination of data, as well as approve their interview transcriptions. This strategy helps increase the credibility during the data collection sessions as only those who were genuinely willing to take part and prepared to offer data freely were involved. Other strategies used throughout this study to increase the credibility are: a) frequent debriefing sessions and check in with my supervisor; b) feedback from participants on the data collection

and analysis throughout the project; c) member checks and approval of transcribed interviews, which Lincoln and Guba (1995) consider the most critical provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility; and d) a reflective journal was kept throughout the study to limit bias in addition to observations (Shenton, 2004).

Finally, according to Patton (1990), the credibility of the researcher is especially important in qualitative research as it is the person who is the major instrument of data collection and analysis. Describing my background, experience, and bias throughout each phase of the study promoted the credibility of the rich information gathered. Disclosing personal information also helped convey the actual situations that have been investigated and the contexts that surround them.

Ethical Considerations

This study will follow the approved research protocol approved by the Memorial University Research Ethics Process as well as those of the school jurisdiction. When working with research participants, it is essential to "show respect for [them], protect them from avoidable harm, and honour their contributions to research knowledge" (Gall et al., p. 69). Moreover, in a qualitative case study, "ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge at two points: during the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings" (Merriam, 1988, p.179). Approval was also granted by each schools' Regional Centre for Education in Nova Scotia before case schools were even formally contacted (Appendices A and B).

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation associated with qualitative study is related to validity and reliability. As Wiersma (2000) noted, "because qualitative research occurs in the natural setting it is extremely difficult to replicate studies" (p. 211). One limitation of selecting case study design centers on

generalizability (Yin, 2014). Simon and Goes (2013) suggest that the limitation of a case study is that it involves the behaviour of one person, group, or organization, but the behaviour of one unit of analysis may or may not reflect the behaviour of similar entities. Within this study, only two schools have been chosen for case study, which can paint a narrow view of the data collected. Limitations in this research are small sample size and their perception of rural youth prioritization. The primary source of data collection is by one-on-one interviews, which is also time-consuming. In the personal interaction of data collection, discussions often tend to deviate from the main issue to be studied as participants have more control over the content of the data collected.

Delimitations of a study are those characteristics that arise from limitations in the scope of the study, and by the conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decisions made during the development of the study plan (Wiersma, 2000). Due to the timeline, scope, and being the sole researcher, I only chose two schools as case sites. As a researcher who was also an educator with my own rural school perspectives, I needed to remain objective to ensure the obtained results are accurate. Another delimitation used in this study were personal vignettes of both schools. These vignettes were used to provide information and context about both rural schools, while protecting the anonymity of the participants and their perceptions in this study.

Thesis Management Plan and Timeline

This thesis will be outlined in six chapters (introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion) and will have an appendix of all forms associated with the research. The following is a brief management plan and timetable with dates.

Research Processes:

September 2019: Initial meetings with supervisor, Dr. Kirk Anderson

October 2019: Bi-Weekly Check-ins with supervisor, narrow down research topic, began proposal

November 2019: Completed proposal (first three chapters) for review by the supervisor. Initial contact to the Regional Centre for Education for research approval.

December 2019: Proposal review by Memorial University Research Ethics Committee

Post-Proposal and Ethical Approval Process

January: Text Analysis of schools' SSPs

Mid-February 2020: In field

February to April 2020: Writing

End of April: First Draft submitted to the supervisor; first iteration completed

May 2020: Reviewed internally

June 2020: Externally reviewed, revisions and recommendations made

July 2020: Submitted to Memorial University Thesis Repository

4. Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was primarily to understand what characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia. This was executed using secondary research questions to find the factors perceived by rural school personnel that contribute to the prioritization of rural youth in schools, and to examine the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural school youth in Nova Scotia. This chapter begins by describing the research methodology and analysis of the data, and how the research questions were answered. Vignettes of my own personal impressions of each of the schools are then presented to illustrate the schools' culture and climate while providing anonymity and context to the research questions.

Next, the secondary research questions a) what do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings, and b) to what extent does current educational policy prioritize rural youth in Nova Scotia are answered using the data collected from the semi-structured interviews of the rural school personnel, each schools' Student Success Plan (SSP), and research on rural educational policy provided from the literature review. The conceptual framework (see appendix G) using the key components of rural school success developed in this research was used in these sections to provide not only a framework into the factors of rural school success (Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005a; Canada Without Poverty, 2019) during the data analysis process during the interviews and text analysis, but also provided a ranking guide into the priorities that the rural schools perceive in their buildings (Barely & Beesley, 2007).

Lastly, emergent themes provided by the secondary research questions were used to answer the primary research question of what characteristics describe a successful rural school in

Nova Scotia. These emergent themes were then summarized to be used in a literary discussion surrounding the research questions in Chapter five.

Research Methodology and Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative research is to develop a greater understanding of rural school success in Nova Scotia and the prioritization rural youth receive in educational policy. Case study methodology was conducted to identify and explain specific areas of practice; in this case, the stories of rural school personnel were told, which can influence future practice, policy and research (Merriam, 1998). I selected a qualitative case study design as the best fit to gain information from people with professional firsthand knowledge (Cohen, et al., 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

This section describes how the research questions were answered through data collection and analysis as it relates to the case study attributes displayed in the study's framework. Data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews of rural school administrators, teachers, and School Advisory Committee members (as community resident representatives), as well as through text analysis of each school's Student Success Plan documents. My role as the researcher and a description of the sample were then briefly discussed.

Interviews

During the interviews, data were collected to help answer the secondary research question of what characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia. Transcripts from these interviews were coded for the 21 factors addressed in the conceptual framework (Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005a; Canada Without Poverty, 2019) (See Appendix G). Each factor to rural school success from this developed framework was used as a possible priority in the rural schools in this study. Every time a participant remarked on one the factors, it

was recorded in a quantity table, and was highlighted as a benefit or challenge. The tables were analyzed to determine which factors were most important to the success of rural schools, and the highlighted portions were analyzed to determine what barriers to success rural schools faced. Factor importance, or priority as it is being used in this research, was determined by how often it was mentioned by participants and by the diversity of the respondents who mentioned it (e.g., was it mentioned only by teachers, or by categories of respondents). Between both schools, five of the most important factors were selected for further discussion. The remaining sections of the transcripts were then analyzed for other important themes of success, and any outliers mentioned by the participants not included in the factors were recorded. At the end of each interview, there was also a prioritization of rural youth in educational policy question, which was used to answer the other secondary research question of to what extent does the province's current educational policy prioritize rural youth. The interviews offered rich narratives of the participants' conceptions of rural education and the perceptions of the prioritization of rural school youth in Nova Scotia (see Appendix D).

Text Analysis

During the text analysis, the same framework mentioned above was also used to provide a stronger correlation to emergent themes answering the secondary research question of what do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings. Since the convergence of the pieces of data contributed to the understanding of the whole experience that was the subject of this case study, the researcher began looking for similarities and differences between all types of data collection. As coding was completed, the researcher looked for common and emerging attributes, concepts, and themes across multiple sources through constant comparison (Ary et al., 2006). Finally, descriptive case study pattern matching was applied to link data from

multiple sources to the conceptual framework factors and their corresponding attributes to enhance the construct validity of the research (Ary et al., 2006; Yin, 2014).

Role of the Researcher

I, as sole researcher, developed and executed a qualitative case study design. Within the case study methodology, I played a critical role as the primary collection instrument, creating a deeper understanding of the experience (Creswell, 2002; 2013). During the development and execution of the study, I was a public school educator with 12 years of experience teaching in both rural and urban areas. During data collection, participants were informed that I was a teacher who valued rural education and was seeking to understand how other rural personnel perceive rural education priorities in Nova Scotia. Because I also transcribed the interviews, extra time was taken to get a personal understanding of the data.

Description of the Sample

This case study was conducted between two rural Nova Scotia school locations, based on the previously mentioned criteria for rural schools from the literature review (SORC, 2015, p.65; Statistics Canada, 2007; OECD, 1994). This case study included three participant groups: administrators, teachers, and School Advisory Committee (SAC) members. Participants were volunteers from schools who fit the criteria for the study. Using purposeful sampling, the researcher sought to include participants who identified as rural school advocates and were actively engaged in their schools. See Table 1 below for participant names. A total of four school participant recruitment letters (See Appendix B) were sent out to administrators, and two were answered. School administrators were used as a liaison in that they were the ones who permitted access for research to be done in their schools. Two principals and one vice-principal were interviewed as school administrators. Upon approval to conduct research in their schools,

recruitment letters then went out to all staff of the two schools via email through the school administrative assistants. A total of 12 staff responded between the two schools, and four were chosen to interview. Only four of the 12 respondents were interviewed in order to shorten the timeline as necessitated by the outbreak of COVID-19. Recruitment letters were also sent to members of the schools' SAC and accepted. Although winter weather and the pandemic complicated the timeline for interview data collection, all enrolled participants completed and approved the use of their interviews (see Appendix D).

Table 1.

Research Participants

Administrators	Administrator A	Administrator B	Administrator C	
Teachers	Teacher D	Teacher E	Teacher F	Teacher G
SAC Members	Member H	Member I		

Note: To protect the anonymity of participant volunteers, the researcher chose to not attach each participant to their school during the analysis of the interviews.

Welcome to our Schools: My First Impressions

Within this section, descriptions of my first impressions of each school are provided as a vignette. Interviews within each school were conducted over multiple days, but the first impressions are being used to provide context into what one would observe if visiting a typical rural school in Nova. This helps to answer the research question as it uses Creswell's (2002; 2013) suggestions that allowing the researcher to provide descriptions create a deeper understanding of the experience. Gender neutral pronouns are used in this section due to anonymity of participants.

School A Vignette

At 7:00 a.m. I finished getting ready, wished my kids a good day at school, and said goodbye to my husband. The weather had been snowy over the past couple of days, and I was pleased

because the roads were clear. I had purposely left early that day because I wanted to ensure that I could take my time, gain my bearings, and enjoy my drive. I remember feeling nervous and excited to start fieldwork in this thesis journey. I could not wait to be back in a school setting as it had been a few months.

After several emails and conversations, I was eager to get the fieldwork completed, as it is the heart and soul of any study. Two hours later, I had finally arrived at my destination through snowy roads and icy speed bumps. I was welcomed with the hustle and bustle of morning routines of school. I glanced upon the schoolyard of this P-12 building, filled with toys. Rickety, well-worn, hand-me-downs littered the yard. Busses were pulling in with eager students. Parents were whisking their students in so that they could leave quickly for work, but not before catching up with each other. I finally found a space in the cramped parking lot and was promptly greeted by two teenage boys asking me about my car. They quickly let me know that they would "like to give 'er a drive sometime." Still chuckling about my first interaction on my first day of fieldwork, I walked through the busy parking lot and into the school.

When I got into the little school foyer, I felt welcomed by the student work on the walls. Many of the students and staff who walked by were wearing school clothing. A sense of pride and school involvement was shown by everyone's extracurriculars and their last names stitched across their shoulders. I was greeted by the school admin assistant, who immediately asked me how I was doing. We chatted about the recent weather as people came in and out, asking her questions and signing in their kids. I finally told her why I was there, and she let me know that the principal would be back soon. They were in a grade level team meeting, which occurs most mornings as a way to get updates on the progress of the students. While I waited, it was evident that this office was the hub of the school. The phone was ringing about a late bus, teachers were

asking about attendance and what to do with those students who would be late to write their exams. A boy came in and sat beside me, waiting for a parent coach to come in so he could give her the money he owed for his sports sweater. I was off to the side, quietly observing everything when an interaction between the admin assistant and a teacher caught my ear. A teacher had come in looking for bulletin board paper because the kids did not want to go to the office. This conversation between the teacher and admin assistant piqued my interest because I wondered why kids did not want to go to the office. It turned out that most of the school supplies are stored in the here and kids did not want to go to the office because they would have to pay for the bulletin board paper.

A couple of minutes later, a group of students came down with a mitt full of change to buy some more paper. I thought that it was resourceful that they pooled their money together until the admin assistant sighed and said that they had probably just used their lunch money. I asked her about this, and she told me about how at, “this end of the province,” food insecurity is rampant. This discussion was interrupted by the bell for the start of the day. The admin assistant read the morning announcements about the late bus and began to play *Oh Canada* until it cut out about one-third of the way through. She told me that their intercom system has not worked correctly for a year, but that they “make the most with what they’ve got.”

The principal came whizzing in about 15 minutes late armed with a laptop and a half-eaten banana, apologizing for being late, but, they said, the meeting went into “overtime as usual.” They led me down the hall to their office, which was lined with motivational posters. When I commented on the posters, they chuckled and suggested that sometimes the posters are there for them just as much as they are for the students. I also noticed there were over a dozen red dresses hanging around the office. I knew that a lot of the schools in the area recently were

participating in the Red Dress Campaign to promote inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women. We discussed the campaign while I got the interview materials out.

School A left quite a first impression on me. It was a school with a keen sense of pride and community, warm and welcoming, even with the undercurrent of need and vulnerability.

School B Vignette

I drove up to School B on a cold winter's day, a couple of weeks after the field study finished in School A. I could see three flags being tossed by the wind as I drove up to this 7-12 school, and students running to get out of the weather quickly. It was just after lunch, and students seemed to be settling in for afternoon instruction. I parked in the student parking lot and also hustled to get into the school. I met a student at the front doors who was waiting for somebody. She could tell I was cold, opened the door for me, and showed me where the office was. As I opened the door to the office, I could tell that it had already been a busy day. Two students sat waiting to see an administrator with their heads hung low about something that happened during lunchtime, some students were hanging out with the school admin assistant on their free period, and many students were there to ask her questions and get things printed off. I signed in on the guest register and waited in the queue with the students. She kindly acknowledged me by saying, "welcome to my gaggle," and said that she "would get to me."

Even though there were many people in the small office for different reasons, there was one common theme: laughter. Most adults might have been put off by not being greeted or having their needs met before the kids, but in this office, everyone was equally prioritized. I had more fun listening to the students' stories while I waited, and the humour exuding from the admin assistant was infectious. A couple of teachers came in while I waited and asked if I needed anything, but the truth was I did not want to be expedited. I was happily one of her *gaggle*.

While I walked down the hall to get to my teacher's classroom, I noticed something else: just how clean the floors were. It was almost the end of the day, and usually, in any of the places that I have taught, by this time in the school day they would have had scattered paper, wrappers, and long-lost pencils strewn throughout the halls. I could hear the teachers winding down their lessons, getting ready for the next period, and students talking amongst themselves. The students must have been able to hear to the click of my shoes because a couple of them stuck their heads out of the classrooms to ask me who I was. I passed by the community store that I had read about in the school's SSPs during my text analysis. As I got to the classroom for my first teacher interview, the students were packing up, and the behaviour teacher came in to get some work for some students that they were working with. The teacher took their time to outline what the assignment was, and then the bell sounded. The bell reminded me of the bell in the movie *Grease*, where the school secretary would play the xylophone before the principal spoke.

Everyone here seems to be a priority—that was my first impression as I began my interviews with this school. Before I had even started asking questions, I could see themes emerging between the two schools: the undercurrent of vulnerability and making do and the priority that the schools give to their students. In the next sections, the research methodologies, analysis, presentation of the data and emergent themes are explored.

Answering the Secondary Research Questions

What Do Rural School Personnel in Nova Scotia Feel are Priorities in their Buildings?

The secondary research question of what do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings was answered through the exploration of the factors of rural school success rooted in the concepts that frame this study. As identified in the conceptual framework (see appendix G), the attribute key components of rural school success are a)

leadership, b) instruction, c) professional community, and d) school environment. These were used to organize the collected data. In this section, findings from the interviews and the text analysis are provided to answer this secondary research question.

Interview Findings

The data from the participant interviews were analyzed to help answer the secondary research question: What do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings? This was completed by using the factors of rural school success initially described by the McREL (2005a) and Barely and Beesley (2007) studies. Factors were added from the 2019 report by the Canada Without Poverty Organization to address current experiences teaching in rural Nova Scotia to help develop a more up-to-date conceptual framework into rural school success (see appendix G). The 21 factors of rural school success were ranked as priorities, the same way as in the Barely and Beesley (2005) study to discover what the Nova Scotia rural school personnel perceive as priorities in their buildings. The analysis methods used in this research study is mirrored from the data analysis methods used in the Barely and Beesley (2007) study, where they coded and analyzed their factors from interviews and focus groups to determine which were most important to the success of the schools in their case study (p.5). In this section the factors of rural school success were also recorded as frequencies and ranked as priorities in their buildings, rather than referenced or coded by respondent. The justification of using a frequency model to show the number of times a reference to a factor was made demonstrates the priority of that factor to the school personnel. The coded quantities table below (see table 2) shows the priorities in relation to which participants. The ranking of responses from the rural school personnel are then discussed using responses from the participants.

Content analysis of the open-ended responses as well as elaborations of the key components resulted in themes. Having semi-structured interviews allowed me to interpret the context of the priorities while coding the responses, and understand if the factors mentioned were perceived as a benefit or challenge in their building (Yin, 2004). Below (Table 2) is a quantity codes table of the interviews showing the number of times each of the key components was discussed during the interviews and by which participant groups.

Table 2.

Interview Quantity Codes of Factors and Key Components

Key Components	**Factors**	**Research Findings**		
		Administrators	**Teachers**	**SAC Members**
Leadership	1. Shared mission and goals	12	20	7
	2. Principal as change agent	29	19	17
	3. Principal as instructional leader	32	15	9
Instruction	4. Individualization of instruction	21	21	17
	5. Instructional resources	14	21	7
	6. Alignment of Curriculum, and assessment	29	21	23
	7. Programs for special needs students	11	28	5
	8. Culturally responsive teaching	9	17	17
	9. Instructional supports	18	27	9
Professional Community	10. Teacher recruitment	15	15	5
	11. Teacher retention	18	16	11
	12. Professional development	14	28	3
	13. Teacher collaboration	8	18	3
	14. Teacher involvement in Leadership	11	22	9

School Environment	15. Use of data	4	5	3
	16. High expectations of students	18	12	13
	17. Parent and community	16	24	37
	18. Safe and drug free school	10	6	3
	19. Outside agencies	23	13	29
	20. Multi-Tiered systems for Supports	11	12	13
	21. Social Emotional Wellness and Learning	22	35	9

Note: Numbers are based on the frequency each factor was discussed during the interviews by each participant group. These numbers were used to create the ranking of priorities.

Presentation of the Interview Data and Emergent Themes

The presentation of the data and results for the study will depict a detailed description of findings according to the structure of the conceptual framework to understand participant perceptions and provide detailed evidence used to answer the secondary research question. First, I will present the data answering the research question, "What do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings?" by ranking the quantity codes from Table 2.

Next, the results of each key component of rural school success is presented from the conceptual framework as a way to organize the data. All data on narrative participant perceptions are then presented using participant letter coding names, such as Principal A. Finally, the researcher will present a synthesis of findings as they relate to answering the research question.

The top five factors perceived to be very important by the participants (see Table 3) were parent and community involvement (quantity code of 77); alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (quantity code of 73); social-emotional wellness (quantity code of 66); and principal as a change agent, as well as outside agencies (each with a quantity code of 65). In the next section, the four key components (leadership, instruction, professional community, and

school environment) are used to frame the participants' conceptions of rural education and the perceptions of the prioritization of rural school youth in Nova Scotia. It is important to note that the quantity codes are both benefits and challenges discussed in the interviews surrounding rural education. Whether the factor was perceived as both a benefit and challenge are still significant to the priority of the factor in the participants' buildings.

Table 3.

Ranking of Priorities in Rural Schools by Sample Population

Rank	Factor
1	Parents and Community
2	Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
3	Social Emotional Learning and Wellness
4	Principal as a change agent / Outside Agencies
5	Individualization of Instruction
6	Principal as Instructional Leader
7	Instructional Supports
8	Teacher Retention / Professional Development
9	Programs for Special Needs Students
10	Culturally Responsive Teaching
11	Instructional Resources / Teacher Involvement in Leadership
12	Shared Mission and Goals
13	Teacher Recruitment
14	High Expectations of Students
15	Teacher Collaboration
16	Safe and Drug Free Schools
17	Use of Data

Leadership. In terms of leadership, essential considerations are given to the amount of successional planning given to rural schools. The teachers spoke in depth about the fact that in their particular rural schools, on top of having teacher recruitment and retainment issues, the schools have also seen high turnover in the administration of both principals and vice-principals over the last five to six years.

Administrators also discussed the importance of the dynamics of change in providing strong instructional leadership and increasing student achievement, while developing a positive

school culture takes time and is met with intense dips. Between both schools, the topic of communication was significant. On top of the programming needs for all students, having a pulse on all of the events of the days, weeks, and months, administrators are in constant communication. Outside of these regular communication duties, all principals mentioned the essential need for communication with outside agencies and the community:

> I find myself being the centre cogs of communication between a lot of outside agencies, so if I am going into specifics when I am dealing with an individual student or family, I am offering to be the liaison between many health care providers, organizations, that kind of thing. -Administrator A.

All rural school administrators spoke of the importance of collaboration and teamwork between rural school leadership within their Centres for Education, noting that sometimes things come up in their buildings specific to the needs of rural areas. Because the shared network is so small, it further isolates rural leadership staff from other schools within their region. Administrators also stressed the importance of working as a team with their staff within their buildings. One administrator mentioned that,

> [I]n schools that seem to work well, it is that shared responsibility, right, we can definitely share the duties. In terms of burnout, sometimes you can see less burnout using this model, with the shared responsibility for either the principal or the vice principal, but it seems to work well for us. -Administrator B

Principal as a change agent was highly ranked as a priority in the buildings; many of the teachers discussed the amount of support they receive from their administrative teams. It was suggested that rural school administrators will facilitate experiences and opportunities to their staff and students because they develop a climate in the school of trust and knowing their

teachers' and students' interests. Participants mentioned that there are fewer opportunities for rural students, so when one arises, they make sure that they take advantage. One teacher remarked on the amount of support they receive when coverage is needed to facilitate these experiences:

> When I worked at a larger urban school I could not go to my administration and ask for coverage, but at my rural school I know that I can ask for coverage and everyone knows that I would also return the favour, and I think that that is because in the rural schools we can do that for each other. My principals know that when I come to them for something, it is because I have already thought about it and did my research on how it will positively impact the students. -Teacher E.

The participants also discussed school culture and the importance of the role of the administrators in creating a positive learning environment.

> In small rural schools, when you have a small staff, you really work together. You know your kids, you know your families, and you really get to know the community where they live. When you group that with a strong administrator, the whole culture shifts, and it becomes the best school. To both work in, and educate students in. So, I think that the administration can really make or break the school. Also, when I see some of the things that the staff does, at this school, it is amazing. One of the big reasons that I wanted to come here and teach is because this school has such a strong staff. And I am so impressed with what the teachers do in their classrooms. -Teacher G

Instruction. Alignment of curriculum, teaching, and assessment was passionately discussed throughout the participant groups and ranked as the second highest priority in the rural schools. Teachers stressed the importance of having strong instructional practice, having to be

creative with providing and scheduling courses to accommodate their students in their small schools, and having to create their own programs to meet the needs of the students in their community. Numerous curriculums, teaching initiatives, and assessments were discussed. Many of the participants provided evidence of programs that they have received after the larger schools in their area were done providing them. As Teacher G noted, "The thing about rural schools is that we are given what we are given, and we do a damn good job at making it work. We get everybody's hand-me-downs, and we teach that hell out of it."

Participants also talked about the importance of sound programming in their schools. Teachers remarked on the programming and scheduling challenges that rural schools face:

> The size of the school here does limit the number of programs that we are able to offer. So certainly, larger schools, typically more urban schools, might be able to have programming that better serves different students. Courses that might better suit different student abilities and different student interests. At our school we really try to offer what we can. Students sometimes do not necessarily get the courses that they want. It is, they get the courses that fit the schedule based on our staffing. -Teacher E.

> We do use the Nova Scotia Virtual School, but we do not have a staff liaison, so the students are pretty much on their own when taking courses online. I do not really understand how they feel that they can replace a teacher with a virtual program. This does not help our vulnerable population of students. -Teacher E.

Strong instructional practice and the concept of mentorship were also important topics of discussion during the interviews. Participants of all personnel roles from both schools mentioned that their schools were what many described as landing schools where young teachers receive their permanent contracts. Because this happens so often, many participants described their "in

house" mentorship programs that they try to offer young teachers, which, in hopes, becomes a retention strategy to keep these teachers from leaving. The administrators try, whether themselves or by enlisting an influential teacher leader, to mentor the new people in their building on their instructional strategies and programs that they use in their school:

> Everything comes back to hiring good human beings to work in your school. Right, that is what it is all about. And we take hiring very seriously, we hope to have applicants that we can choose from, but giving that teacher their first permanent contract, that is a lot of kids that they are going to influence over their career and to me, that is one of the most influential things. It is about having someone who is willing to learn and grow and wants to have support come into their classrooms, because they want the feedback. -Administrator B.

> I have been at this school for 24 years, and I tend to mentor a lot of the new staff and hires, and I tend to get a good relationship going with them and then let them know they can come see me and ask. There are no stupid questions. If you need anything, come see me, let's work on this together. -Teacher A.

> My biggest job is to be an instructional leader here in the building.-Administrator A

Professional Community. Although the factors from this key component placed lower in the priority ranking, teacher recruitment, retainment, and professional development were also cited as necessary in the development of strong successional rural school planning.

Teacher recruitment and retainment. In regard to teacher recruitment and retention, an administrator commented that:

> [I]n terms of retaining staff, we need to create a building that people want to work in. And you have to create an environment that is empowering to them so that they choose to want to be here and stay in this small community. -Administrator A.

All personnel spoke to the topic of teacher retention, having one school that underwent close to 60% turnover in two years.

The topic of substitute teachers was another issue of discussion:

> We rely very heavily on our retired staff as substitutes in the building, and we are very lucky to have four or five local people that have a bond with the school which speaks volumes to the community in which they work and have been part of for so long. When they reach their number of days, when they are up, we will be in dire straits. So, I already find myself teaching. -Administrator A

The participants mentioned that staff need to have input or autonomy in teacher hiring in rural areas to increase rates of retention. Teacher participants also discussed that having low rates of retention puts an extra strain on all staff, because it is hard to create, monitor, and evaluate school goals when there is so much turnover. Participants also suggested that it is hard to keep programs and events running from year to year when turnover is enormous, and substitutes are scarce. Resident H also remarked that, "[H]igh teacher retention rates are important for the success of the school because it leads to consistency and stability of programs within the building, which will further drive student achievement."

An administrator also provided an example for hiring autonomy for the retention of staff:

> I think that all schools should have autonomy for their hiring practices of what will work best. I have felt that in the last two years that the hiring practices have been completely obliterated and I am not sure I know why I even still conduct interviews for

> hiring staff, because even though I give them a list I still have no control. And even in the interview when I give my report in, hand it in, there are in many cases the candidate that I have chosen has not been the one that I have put in for the job. I think that there is no autonomy at the moment, to give my choice. How does that help longevity planning? I am getting people who are not the best fit for the school. -Administrator A.

Administrators also spoke to the need to recruit more substitutes to maintain programs running in the schools. In the higher grades, administrators said that they were reluctant to cancel classes; instead, cancelling student support services to get those specialist teachers to cover. One administrator mentioned that they have combined multiple classes, placed them in their learning commons room, and made them into work periods for high schools:

> The general public do not see or feel the substitute issue because we try not to cancel classes. What is hard, however, at an elementary level is because so many of the classroom teachers are also specialists, so there are no singular specialist teachers to pull from. In schools that have both elementary and secondary levels, the elementary always takes priority, then middle schools where behaviour tends to flare and then high school. -Administrator A.

Professional development. In terms of professional development, most participants agreed that strong professional development is important to fostering a culture of life-long learning in their buildings and student success. Teacher collaboration times during in-services and early release days for students provide opportunities for teachers to discuss academic, behaviour, and instructional plans for specific students, and to drive their shared mission or goals further.

School personnel also mentioned the use of regional instruction specialists, interventionists, and math coaches, and noted how specialists are helping to provide teachers with current trends and practices on instructional, assessment, and intervention practice, but that their programs are "nearsighted":

> Sound programming takes time and having someone come in for a month while you are trying to teach does not help long term. They inundate staff with all this information and then leave for the next school, if they even get here during bad weather. That does not help us because there is no follow up or true feedback. If we had a couple of really strong teachers on staff and gave them a couple of periods a week to work with staff and help monitor their goals, then that would be a better bang for your buck. These coaches do not want to drive all the way out here, so we need to create our own coaching. - Teacher F

School Environment. The key component of school environment ranked as the highest priority in the participant's buildings. Factors such as social-emotional wellness and learning, parent and community support, and outside agencies were deemed the most significant priorities in rural school buildings. Anecdotes from the interviews are described below as evidence of their importance.

Social-emotional wellness and learning. Poverty and vulnerability of students were passionately discussed. Participants emphasized the need to support the social-emotional health of the students in their communities. When participants were asked about supports for success in their buildings, mental health stood as paramount during this place in each interview.

> Oh, my goodness, there are so many children in this building who have such intense needs that the school system in general just cannot meet. Mental health is number one.

> There are children living in such poverty who have such trauma that I cannot even begin to address it in any long-term type away. I can Band-Aid the situation. I can feed the students, I can help provide clothing, but I cannot heal the trauma that a lot of my students are facing. -Administrator A

> The mental health of my students is number one. I feel that it was very easy for the province to partner education and the Health Authority because the mental health workers get paid only a fraction of what guidance school counselors receive. We need more school counselors here every day, because they know the kids, they are here every day and they already have relationships with the kids and that they can actually work on the things day-to-day. -Administrator C

> Honestly, mental health. I mean we do have some mental health here through Schools Plus, but we have a lot of students who really need it, and it is not being utilized to its full capacity. They only come to the school a couple of times a week and only are able to see a handful of kids. -Teacher A

Parent and community support. A topic that stood out during the interviews was the central role that the school plays in communities. The school remains the central hub of rural communities. The school buildings provide venues to bring all the members in a community together. Participants mentioned that their communities were deeply invested in their schools, whether or not they even had children who attended school.

School personnel commented on the importance of the support from the community, suggesting that a trend in Nova Scotia is the concept of creating community schools. Local municipalities and school boards provide the funding needed to create community centres within the schools. One school spoke to their frustration in being designated a community school

because the local municipality cannot afford to provide their school with this designation, allowing for wealthier communities to have such a designation and limiting access to their facility after hours. One resident also spoke to the frustration of limited community centre access:

> The community school model is really a great way of trying to integrate the school into the community, get the full use of the facility that we have because we realize that we have declining school numbers, so having more of that space being used would be very beneficial. We have not had the best luck with our municipality, but our school board is ready to put up the money and support us. The school board has been supportive and a lot of the provincial agencies that we are going to have also been supportive, we just need the support from our local municipality. -Resident H.

> We have a great learning community around the school and community. -Teacher E

Many of the participants also discussed topics such as strong community support, the importance of extracurricular activities for all students, and the leadership opportunities that come from being in a small school. Transportation was deemed critical to the success of student achievement and the participation in school extracurricular activities; many participants mentioned that transportation is a huge barrier for a lot of students. In a rural school, because the catchment areas are so vast, participants said that sometimes students could live 45 minutes from each other or the school. For students without people who are willing to drive them, school is the only form of socialization. Notes Administrator C, “As much as I would like to say, I will make sure that everybody at the school who wants to play will get home. I just want to drive all of them home myself, everybody deserves to participate.”

Also, back road closure policies were discussed as one of the largest inequities that rural youth and communities face to access to education during winter months. Instead of cancelling school, regional centres put these policies in place, where busses do not run on back roads (dirt roads, side roads, etc.) until the roads are deemed safe. It becomes the responsibility of parents who live on backroads to get their children to school. If parents do not have the ability to do this, it can create inequity in the school because the classrooms continue with their instructional practice. Many participants said that these closures have sometimes been in effect for weeks during winter, and during these weeks, many students are absent from school.

> When you look at our attendance record on days when there is a back road closure plan and when you look at the numbers it is bad, but when you look at the actual kids you are missing, it is the kids whose parents have had a bad experience at school and do not take school as important necessarily, and the more affluent and the people with higher socioeconomic statuses, they get their kids to school even if they live in the middle of a back road. -Administrator C.

> School moves on when kids are at home, right. The basketball games continue to happen, and they are missing out on everything. They are missing out on academics in the social aspects as well. It further isolates them. That is what that policy is doing to them. -Administrator B.

> The problem with those Backroad Closure Policies is that they are created to satisfy the few educational think tanks that we have in this province to are constantly critical of storm day closures, without taking into account the large populations of vulnerable students we have in this province. We have unpredictable weather here in Nova Scotia.

> Christ, that is why we are called the Maritime Provinces. Why should our weather and those think tanks predict who gets an education? -Resident I

Outside agencies. A few participants became emotional when discussing the importance of outside agencies in providing special services and mental health to the schools, noting that they have many students with specific needs (such as mental health, food insecurity, poverty, family dynamics, etc.). Therefore, they point out, consistency of service delivery is crucial to developing trusting relationships between students, outside agencies, and the general community due to the nature of the help and support they are providing. It was suggested numerous times throughout the interviews that being so far away from centralized services put added pressures on both staff and students when outside agencies do not attend consistently. School personnel were very open to having outside support come and assist those students with special or specific needs, but also mentioned the importance of cohesive, long-term plans for their students.

Further, outside agencies such as local employers and partnerships were also deemed very important in providing students with experiences and real-world learning. A lot of these partnership experiences are sought out by rural schools as extensions to their curriculum, which further connect students with their communities. Many of the participants provided positive examples of the projects going on in their schools. They discussed the need for communities to help build social capital through their schools as a way to dissuade out-migration.

> We have [major community employers] in as guest speakers all the time. Many of the employers are also pivotal members of our community. They are parents and community members. That is great because they are offering support in different ways for programming and infrastructure. Places like that have been great in partnering and

writing grant proposals, for example that has been really nice to have those projects. They are great community role models -Administrator A

Text Analysis of Schools' Student Success Plans

A rational text analysis of the schools' Student Success Plans (SSPs) was also used to help answer the second research question in this thesis, "What do rural school personnel in Nova Scotia feel are priorities in their buildings?" From this analysis and based on the previously mentioned framework on Student Success Plans from the literature review (chapter 2), each school used the provincial template and developed three goals: literacy, numeracy, and a safe and inclusive learning environment goal. Each goal is derived from the priorities that leadership staff have found through data collection such as provincial assessments, common regional assessments, surveys, and staff professional development goals. Coding of ideas generated in the schools' SSPs was collected, like in the participant interviews, and placed into common categories based on the four key components of rural school success (leadership, instruction, professional development and school environment) and their factors (Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005a; Canada Without Poverty, 2019). The generation of rural school priorities using school goals and action plans based on the same conceptual framework as the interviews (Table 4) is summarised below.

Table 4

Text Analysis of Student Success Plans, Factors, Key Components and Research Findings

Key Components	Factors	Research Findings of SSPs
Leadership	1. Shared mission and goals	a. SSPs present a published account of the school's mission statements. b. Present strategies and evaluations of goals.
	2. Principal as change agent	a. Principal has autonomy to make changes to SSP. b. Principal consults to develop goal.

	c. Principal's responsibility to create, implement, evaluate and monitor goals.
3. Principal as instructional leader	a. Principals develops and heads school-based teams to accomplish goals.
4. Individualization of instruction	a. Increase use of number talks and mental math instruction in Mathematics. b. Provide further opportunities for cross curricular instruction in number sense.
5. Instructional resources	a. Use provincial writing rubric (Analytic Scoring Rubric for writing). b. Creation of common approaches to writing research assignments. c. Use of three-part workshop model in Mathematics with focus on time-to-teach, time-to-practice, and time-to-share. d. Explore, model, share and implement best instructional strategies for listening and speaking to improve problem solving abilities. e. Use Google Forms and Google Classroom to collect and analyze data to support student engagement and inform next steps for teaching.
6. Alignment of Curriculum, teaching and assessment	a. Creation of common formative assessments in both instruction and assessment of literacy and numeracy goals. b. Creation of common exemplars for writing school wide. c. School wide writer's and reader's workshops. d. Creation of conventions and common benchmarks to establish consistent writing expectations. e. Increase opportunities for students to create story maps to improve problem solving ability in Mathematics.
7. Programs for special needs students	a. Explore effective technology application to support assistive technology reading. b. Explore and implement best instructional strategies used to differentiate instruction and assessment.
8. Culturally responsive teaching	a. Support outdoor learning projects. b. Provide guest speakers with multiple diversities. c. Place-based/Outdoor education school cohort.
9. Instructional supports	a. Provide opportunities for team and co-teaching teaching. b. Provide coaching and mentoring opportunities for staff both within school and regionally.

Professional Community	10. Teacher recruitment	a. N/A
	11. Teacher retention	a. N/A
	12. Professional Development	a. During Collaborative Learning Teaming, teachers will learn best practices in outdoor education, environmental education, risk management and first aid. b. Staff use school-based in-services and Collaborative Learning Teaming times to in the planning and implementation of school goals.
	13. Teacher collaboration	a. Use collaborative approach to improve classroom management and engagement strategies. b. Use collaborative approach to develop Outdoor Learning Place-based Educational opportunities both on school ground and local community.
	14. Teacher involvement in Leadership	a. Create school-based teams to work on school goals.
School Environment	15. Use of data	a. Use provincial assessment data to explore next steps in school goals. b. Use of provincial Survey Measure for Safe and Inclusive results. c. Use of regionally developed assessment data to support Mathematics programming.
	16. High expectations of students	a. Regional use of 70% proficiency measure on Provincial Assessments. b. Use of common formative and summative practices both school-based and regionally.
	17. Parent and community	a. Provide free store/community cupboard for basic hygiene items, non-perishable foods items and clothes.
	18. Safe and drug free School	a. All staff will promote positive behaviour referrals. b. Use of restorative justice practice approach at all levels of school to increase engagement.
	19. Outside agencies	a. Use mathematics and instructional coaches to support instructional strategies used through schools. b. Provide increased access to School Plus facilitators and Mental Health workers to support well-being in students. c. Provide increased access to local community employers to enhance place-based pilot.

20. Multi-Tiered systems for Supports	a. All staff will engage in Red dot/Green dot monthly goal setting. b. Utilize Outdoor education initiatives to support "red dot" students.
21. Social Emotional Learning	a. Promotion of mental, physical, and emotional well-being of students. b. Explore and implement strategies for supporting student resiliency and regulation. c. Build positive relationships with students that encourages academic risk taking and problem solving across curriculums. d. Implement PATHs curriculum, focusing on resiliency.

Presentation of the Text Analysis Data and Emergent Themes

An analysis of the schools' Student Success Plans (SSPs) revealed many of the priorities in their buildings. The use of the conceptual framework in the text analysis served to organize and collate the priorities described in the documents using the 21 factors of school success, not to inform the ranking from the participant interviews. The text analysis illustrated how the rural schools were determining and developing a plan to further student achievement, and how they evaluated their goals. If the goals were deemed important enough to be included in the schools' SSPs, then they were deemed priorities in the building.

Under leadership, the plans revealed the importance of the principal's roles within their buildings. The roles included the development, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the school goals. Many instructional supports revealed that teachers are using best-researched practices (such as common formative and summative assessments, common exemplars, and multiple forms of student data) to drive their instruction further. Teachers work collaboratively as a school community in the planning and implementation of strategies to support their school goals. Outside of strictly numeracy and literacy rates of achievement, a lot of work is being done surrounding the development of positive school environments to address

the mental health and wellness of students. This is the third goal on the provincial Student Success Plan (SSP) template. These supports, such as the promotion of social-emotional learning, community connectedness, and high academic expectations of the students demonstrate schools who are prioritizing the well-being of their students and their communities. In the following section, the next secondary research question is answered regarding the prioritization of rural youth in Nova Scotia in educational policy.

To What Extent Does Current Educational Policy Prioritize Rural School Youth in Nova Scotia?

The secondary research question of to what extend does current educational policy prioritize rural youth in Nova Scotia was answered during both the interviews and in the literature reviewed in Chapter two regarding current educational policy. Themes that emerged from both the interviews and in the educational policy review in Chapter two revealed that there is currently no rural education strategy in .

In the interviews, participants particularly noted the lack of equitable funding and initiatives provided to their schools from all levels of government, citing the importance of being a “fierce and unrelenting advocate for their schools” (Teacher G). Participants reported feeling underrepresented in quality programs. They noted how hard it is becoming to keep motivated students in their schools, suggesting that if those students have the support to transfer to another school that offers the programs that they want, they will transfer out. Participants mentioned that funding for programs and staff is directly linked to enrollment, which disadvantages rural schools, because if students leave to attend larger schools with more programs then that money is no longer going into the rural school community. Participants noted that once motivated students leave their school to attend a neighbouring centralized school, they are less apt to return to their

home community after graduation, strengthening the rates of community out-migration. Participants also suggested during the interviews that there is currently no talk on a rural school policy to protect the uniqueness of schooling in rural Nova Scotia, and lamented the fact that although the Glaze Report (2018) called for a rural education strategy in the province to ensure that students from rural demographics receive both equity and quality education, to their knowledge it has not been acted upon.

Lack of technology infrastructure was also discussed. Limited internet access in rural areas makes it impossible to create successful distance learning programs and putting rural students at a further disadvantage, in the gulf of the "digital divide."

Access to the Nova Scotia Virtual School (NSVS) was also mentioned. Participants discussed incidences of rural students have a hard time accessing virtual school courses because they lack a priority policy. Participants suggested that enrollment is still on a first come, first served basis. There are still class caps, because teachers still administer the programs, and rural students have the same priority as urban students in schools that already offer the same courses. One participant pointed out that urban students can take a course such as Physics 12, for example, through the NSVS, even though their school still offers it. This means that even though the school offers both courses, it is unwilling to make schedule adjustments for their students and suggests that if they still want to take both courses they can take one through the NSVS. Consequently, a rural student whose school does not offer Physics 12 is given the same enrollment priority as students whose school does offer that course. So instead of the urban school working to accommodate such students in their schedule, that rural student could possibly be unable to enrol because the class is at capacity.

All categories of participants mentioned the lack of supervision and infrastructure that students enrolled in the Nova Scotia Virtual School experience.

> Students are online, essentially trying to teach themselves very dense material on their own. And this happens time and time again, where kids are starting these online courses but they're not finishing them. Because they just don't learn well in that environment, they have no support. -Teacher E

Participants also mentioned the lack of support students receive in when taking online courses, as well as questioned the rates of completion and grades that rural students who register receive.

> I would like to know the numbers of enrollment versus completion statistics for that Virtual School. I heard in most schools; it is the guidance counselor who helps provide support for that. Well in some rural schools they only have part-time guidance counselors because of that whole 500:1 ratio thing. Our school does not have that many kids, so we do not even have a full-time counselor. That is bad for more than just the virtual school support, what about the consoling part too? -Resident I

The topic of rural staff and student representation was discussed during the interviews. Many of the teachers suggested that rural areas are severely underrepresented on provincial committees. When decisions are being made, with no policy to protect equity and quality in the education of rural youth, those from rural areas who are asked to remain on committees are few and far between. All participants mentioned that now that elected school boards have been replaced with provincial advisory boards, the number of people representing rural demographics is very small even though they make up 40% of the population. One teacher commented:

> We have now one person from each centralized region, and they are appointed not elected who is representing our region and even that person in that region who is

> probably not from a rural area and doesn't know our specific needs, how can they know how to best represent us. -Teacher F

Participants also questioned the rates of community representation now that elected school boards have been dismantled.

> People roll into the rural school communities for photo ops of the kids and write little articles highlighting the cool things that the schools are doing, but never ask them for advice or want us to be on their committees. How do you progress as a community without being able to advocate for yourself? I wonder how many rural people sit on that provincial advisory committee? -Resident I

Participants suggested that the lack of rural student representation provincially puts added pressure on rural schools to act as their own public relations firm, and disenfranchises people for wanting to move into their community.

> I have always felt that rural schools are less highlighted and have to work harder to be their own public relations or PR people. When I was at another rural school, which was hugely successful, but I did not feel like anyone knew who we were. No one knew that we even existed up there. We had a nice little reputation. I guess I feel like no one even knows who we are or where you are sometimes. -Teacher G

> Not having representation automatically disenfranchises people from wanting to associate with us because they feel like we aren't part of that so we just kind of do our own thing. It further isolates us. -Administrator C

Infrastructure priority and the lack of transparent policy were also discussed. Participants suggested that their schools were the last to receive upgrades and remodelling, explaining that it is hard to compete with newer, shinier schools in recruiting people to want to live and work in

their communities. Many of the participants interviewed compared the infrastructure of their schools to those in more affluent centralized communities.

> People see our building and call it names. I know they do. I have heard it. They make fun of us. They make fun of our gym and the hand-me-downs that we got from SCHOOL when it got remodelled. It hurts our reputation and makes people not want to live here and send their kids here. And if you are a teacher, where would you rather teach, in a place that is new or remodeled or in a place with leaks and creaks? -Resident I
>
> I would also like to add, I also think that in terms of the physical building, rural schools often do get left behind. We just talked yesterday with someone who was visiting one of the flagship schools in the region. Often, they are usually more in the town centre and the schools there are newer. Such as SCHOOL, SCHOOL, and SCHOOL. And so, as a result of that, the rural schools get left out. One of our feeder schools is dismal, like a war-torn country. It looks like it has been bombed. It is not okay. And we allow that to happen to the school. That same school, is also one of the top schools in terms of its literacy goals in the province. Do people even know this? -Administrator B

Summarizing the Secondary Research Questions

The results of the research analysis presented above showcase the priorities that rural school personnel perceive as important to their building. These priorities were evident both during the interviews and in the Schools' SSPs. Factors revealed as top priorities to the success and prosperity of the rural schools used in this research were environmental components such as the importance of parents, community and outside agencies, and social-emotional learning. Instructional key components such as the alignment of curriculum, teaching and assessment, as well as individualization of instruction and instructional supports were deemed priorities and

heavily regarded in both the interviews and SSPs. In terms of leadership components, the principal as both a change agent and an instructional leader was regarded as a substantial priority to rural schools in this study. Under the key component of professional community, retention of staff and sound professional development were highly prioritized in the rural school buildings.

Outlier priorities, evident but not factors from the conceptual framework, included student retention, which personnel linked to enrolment, funding, and staffing challenges. Longevity planning was another priority revealed in both the interviews and in the Schools' SSPs, as well as the importance placed on retired teachers as substitutes and strong role model mentorship programs.

Newly Discovered Factors of Rural School Success. Notably, a couple of topics outside the 21 factors used to create the priorities rankings of rural school success emerged during the study. The topic of student retention was discussed adamantly throughout the interviews. Participants remarked mainly on the effort to provide students with better choice in courses so that they will not leave for larger schools which offer more opportunities with their programming. Participants commented on the cyclical nature of the stress that student retention puts on rural schools, as enrolment drives funding, which in turn drives programs.

> I think that we need to start cracking down on reasons for student transfers. A trend I see is kids leaving for the larger schools because they offer more programs. If we offered students better selection than maybe we would not have so many leave, which further decreases our enrolment numbers. If enrolment drives our staffing and funding numbers, then it affects rural schools very deeply. -Teacher F.

Successional or longevity rural school planning was also mentioned as a factor to rural school success. Outside of other factors such as having a shared mission or numerical goal of

achievement, it was the actual collective of long-term planning that participants suggested had more influence on the success of their school. Each school has undergone many changes in administration and staff over the past few years, and participants felt that they receive little support and have few connections with other rural schools in their area to help build strong long-range plans. Participants also suggested that they look at quick fixes in their school's SSP to help demonstrate if they are succeeding and to show growth quickly, and that there is little to go by in planning for the long term. As an example, Administrator A spoke specifically of the need for longevity planning in rural schools, stating, "I think that you need to start looking at succession planning in small schools and longevity in terms of your leadership strategies for small schools."

Another possible factor to rural school success discussed was the topic of advocacy. Participants lamented the fact that the province developed a "special interest commission" from a recommendation in the Glaze (2018) report having rural education posted as one of the job descriptions, with no evidence of work being done to support this description.

> A rural school strategy is supposed to be in the works, but I have not seen any work being done. I get the minutes from the Council on Classroom Conditions and each time they meet the rural education strategy is a talking point, but no action is made on it, both on the government and the council's part. -Resident I

Participants also pointed out that Nova Scotia is one of the only provinces in Canada without a special interest council or advocacy group focused on the support of small and rural schools, which reveals the priority and advocacy provided by the province.

Low Ranking Priorities. Many of the factors of rural school success that received high priority ranked are not surprising based on the literature reviewed for this research study. However, there were a couple of factors of rural school success that received unanticipated lower rankings by the

participants. For example, as Table 3 above (see p.87) reveals, the use of data was a factor of school success that received the lowest rank of priority in the interviews, but it is data that schools receive both at a regional and provincial level that administrators use to create their school goals on their published School Student Success Plan.

Shared mission and goals also received lower priorities in the interviews, demonstrating that rural schools are struggling to create or see the importance of goals, shared visions, and philosophies for their schools. This also correlates with the challenges of rural school longevity planning mentioned above that was revealed as a possible new factor of rural school success. Not having a shared goal or mission hinders a rural school's ability to successfully create longevity (long-term) plans for their schools. This lower ranking priority also correlates with the fact that both participant schools have had large turnover of administration and leadership. It is hard to create long-term plans and programs when there is no goal or vision to work toward.

Teacher collaboration placed low in prioritizing factors of school success which was also unexpected, as rural school literature frequently cites teacher collaboration as important to the success of sound programming (Barely & Beesley, 2007; Barter, 2008, 2011; Corbett, 2007; Wallin, 2009). Participants briefly mentioned teacher collaboration that occurs primarily through professional development opportunities but rarely occurs in the classroom with students, with Teacher E suggesting that "we do have some opportunities for things like co-teaching, but I think that we could do a better job of making that happen."

High expectations of students were also ranked low during the interviews, but had high importance in the schools' SSP during text analysis. This once again demonstrates that rural schools in this province are prioritizing quick fixes or more immediate response factors that can be changed from year to year, rather than more long term factors or shared philosophies such as

shared missions and high expectations for their students. Only one participant specifically spoke to high expectations of rural students:

> I think that you have to keep the bar and expectations of students fairly high because I think if you start lowering it that is going to be where they want to meet you. If you keep the bar high, then at least hopefully there is something that they can attain it. -Teacher A

In the next section, the primary research question into what describes a successful rural school in Nova Scotia is answered using the data and information previously mentioned from the secondary questions.

Answering the Primary Research Question

What Characteristics Describe a Successful Rural School in Nova Scotia?

The previous two sections answered the secondary research questions by describing what rural school personnel in Nova Scotia perceive as priorities in their building, and the extent that educational policy prioritizes rural youth in this province. In this section, answers to the secondary research questions are used to answer the primary research question of what characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia. The emergent themes revealed in these questions suggest that it is difficult to provide a singular definition of rural school success because a researched benchmark does not exist. The previously discussed secondary research questions did, however, provide many characteristics and priorities that are important to their buildings.

A successful rural school in Nova Scotia is one that welcomes both parents and community with open arms, one that puts equitable instructional resources in high priority, and one with confidence in the stability of its leadership to succession plan, monitor, and evaluate goals for the school's longevity. Successful rural schools in Nova Scotia put time, energy, and

resources into the well-being of their youth and retention of their staff. Successful rural schools in Nova Scotia are those that engage and actively communicate with outside agencies. Not having a rural education policy puts Nova Scotian rural schools, with fewer resources and greater student vulnerability, under immense pressure to succeed at the same rates as their more urbanized counterparts.

Summary of the Results

The researcher gathered data through two distinct phases using both active and interactive methods of data collection: (a) interviews among three participant groups and (b) text analysis of the schools' Student Success Plans. Through both data collection phases, patterns were gathered as they related to the secondary research questions.

As described in Chapter 2, the conceptual framework for this study (see Appendix G) identifies factors for rural school success and their key components, which were used as priorities to rank their importance in rural schools in Nova Scotia. These components were used to answer the secondary research questions into what rural school personnel perceive as priorities in their buildings. Interview questions and the research into policy from the literature reviews were used to answer the next secondary research question of the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova Scotia. As can be seen from the findings above, the qualitative methods used for this study have provided detailed and comprehensive information for achieving each of its aims.

Several key themes emerged from these findings. The next chapter considers these themes in detail, to further answer the research questions and to suggest future research possibilities both in the literature and in the development of rural education policy in Nova Scotia. The findings describe many of the benefits and challenges of rural school education in

Nova Scotia, and reveal much grey area in the support provided by the province in terms of the prioritization of rural youth. The next chapter further discusses these findings using the literature to help inform future research and practice into the prioritization of rural youth and rural school success in Nova Scotia.

5. Discussion

This chapter presents a synthesis of the results outlined in the previous chapter. As the findings revealed, although the issue is complex and varies between the rural schools and their participants, there are a large number of shared perceptions and beliefs. Chapter four offered a detailed presentation and analysis of the data organized by the conceptual framework attributes to answer the research questions that guided this study. Next, I discussed and evaluated the results using the literature to provide further context to the answers revealed in the results chapter. The first section of this chapter evaluates answers to the secondary research questions:

a) What rural school personnel perceive as priorities in their buildings?

b) What extent does current educational policy prioritize youth in Nova Scotia?

These questions in the research focussed on how rural Nova Scotia school personnel prioritize their buildings to provide quality education to their students from high needs rural demographics, while striving to achieve the same rates of high performance as their centralized or urban counterparts. Looking at the ways that rural schools prioritize their buildings and reviewing the prioritization that rural youth receive in educational policy paints a picture of the current status of rural education in this province. This chapter then combines the findings from the collected data and reviewed literature from the secondary research questions to consider the primary research question:

c) What characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia?

The emergent priorities revealed while answering the secondary research questions in chapter four in comparison to the relevant literature provides a more comprehensive understanding of the status of rural education and what characteristics describe a successful rural school in Nova Scotia.

What do Rural School Personnel in Nova Scotia Feel are Priorities in their Building?

As discussed in the results (chapter 4), many priorities emerged. Of the 21 key components prioritized by the rural school personnel (see Table 3 on p. 87), the following will be discussed as emergent themes: (a) parent and community support, (b) student well-being, (c) retainment, (d) programming, (e) rural school performance pressures, and (f) representation and policy gaps. These factors to rural school success ranked highest among the participants as priorities in their rural schools, in both interviews and through text analysis of their schools' Student Success Plans.

Parent and Community Support

Parent and community support ranked as the top priority by rural school personnel during both the interviews and the text analysis. This priority mirrored much of the rural school literature reviewed for this thesis (chapter 2) regarding school environment factors and the prioritization of rural schooling in Canada (Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). Numerous authors also echo the importance of community as part of the rural lifestyle (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Canada Standing Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 2006, 2008; Storey, 1993; White & Reid, 2008; Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000).

Many of the participants in this thesis study also discussed the active roles that their parents play in their rural schools, many citing that their parents were very supportive of the work within their rural schools. Xin et al. (2014) suggest that in rural schools both parent-initiated and school-initiated parental involvement was a very important mechanism in communication between home and school. School-initiated parental involvement demonstrated

adequate and meaningful yearly progress, which also supports the claims of the rural school personnel in this thesis study.

There was also recognition that issues facing the school also face the community, and vice versa (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Examples of this from the participating rural schools were: the successful place-based education programs that each school facilitates, the free cupboard or community stores that support the school and community, the liaison work completed by school personnel to facilitate outside agencies and wrap-around services, and lastly, the use of local employers to help facilitate and provide extensions to the curriculum as shared partnerships.

Student Well-Being

Student well-being was a very high priority in the participant interviews and through their schools' SSP goals. Student mental health and social-emotional health were passionately discussed during the rural school personnel interviews. Discussion within the next two sections concerns mental health and social-emotional learning as priorities to the success of rural school education in Nova Scotia.

Mental health. Almost all of the participants demonstrated a feeling of despair in their attempts to gain cohesive and on-going access to mental health services for their students. This despair speaks to the priority of the status of mental health services currently in rural schools in Nova Scotia.

Participants discussed the need for better supports and access to long-term care and wrap-around services for rural students facing mental health disorders, suggesting that although mental health professionals do work in their buildings, there are inconsistencies in their presence, courses of treatment, and follow up. This correlates with the literature (chapter 2) such as that of Michael, Jameson, et al. (2017) who also suggest that although children and families report

receiving the majority of their mental health care in school settings, rural schools have limited capacity to address the mental health needs of their students (p.5).

Although rural school youth have access to mental health professionals in their buildings, the participants in this thesis study suggested that said professionals are only available sporadically, hindering any long-term relationships of trust and treatment. Caltron et al. (1998) mirror this idea, suggesting that beyond initial access, students are also more likely to follow through with mental health services when they are offered uninterruptedly in schools as compared to other community mental health settings.

Michael, Jameson, et al. (2017) elaborate on this perception, noting that although schools offer access to mental health care for youth, some findings suggest that students are more likely to access services when their schools are located in urban settings than in rural settings. Thus, some of the other factors impeding care in rural settings (stigma, privacy concerns, etc.) may still be prominent in schools (Grief-Green et al., 2013; as cited in Michael, Jameson, et al., 2017). This suggests the need for established guidance counsellors in earlier grades to initiate relationship building and early intervention protocols for rural youth, in order to mitigate some of the reasons that rural school youth are hesitant to receive mental health care.

In the interviews, participants suggested that there tend to be fewer mental health clinics or psychiatric services available in rural settings, positioning schools to narrow the access gap among rural students with mental health problems through outside agencies (Greenberg et al., 2001; Mytton et al., 2006; O'Connell et al., 2009; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). In this thesis study, discussing the importance of access to programs and early interventions, participants suggested that it was the continuity of care and accountability that limited the success of mental health care and programs in rural schools. The presence of a mental health professional in a rural school

building only once a week was deemed insufficient: it limits the number of students the mental health professional can take on if they work between more than one school; it limits the personnel on staff when a crisis occurs; it limits the trusting relationships between adults and students that can only be formed through day-to-day presence; and it limits the programs that can be implemented school-wide. Many of the small rural schools in the Nova Scotia do not have 100% guidance counsellors as their job description, as the current province ratio is 500 students to one guidance counsellor. Most small rural schools in Nova Scotia do not have that many students enrolled, which puts added pressures on personnel. Schools are enlisted to not only coordinate intervention services for mental health specialists, but also to carry out the implications as mentioned earlier, many times without proper training.

Social-emotional health. In this study, participants discussed the importance of the social-emotional well-being of their students by describing many of the provincially funded programs and their in-house programs. The importance of mental health and student wellness is reflected in the literature review (chapter 2), suggesting that comprehensive school mental health programs are effective in reducing mental health problems, and improving student emotional and behavioural functioning (Walter et al., 2011; Hoagwood et al., 2007; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007; Hussey & Guo, 2003). This was also evident in the text analysis of the participating rural schools' Student Success Plans, proving the importance and priority of this topic. In Nova Scotia, rural school personnel are privy to many of the programs stemming from the studies mentioned in the literature review surrounding student well-being, which promotes the importance social-emotional learning for all students (Gibson et al., 2015; Michael, Albright, et al., 2013; Tingstrom et al., 2006; Catalano et al., 2003). The next emergent theme arising from the results was retention priorities of both students and staff in rural areas of Nova Scotia.

Retainment

Teacher. Recruiting and retaining rural teachers has been a challenge in many countries worldwide for as long as the term "rural education" has been around (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Corbett, 2014). In this study, participants from all three groups (principals, teachers, and SAC members) described the challenges of both recruiting and retaining staff, one school having had a 60% turnover rate within two years. Teacher retainment is an added performance pressure, as the participants in this study suggested. Participants spoke to teacher turnover as harmful for several reasons, some of which are obvious, and some of which are more complex thus perhaps more serious. The obvious effects of high turnover, as was discussed during the interviews, include disruptions to teachers' and students' lives, and to small schools and communities in general. Administratively, turnover of teachers has a significant impact on the quality of curriculum planning and implementation at a strategic level. The literature mirrors this occurrence in this study, suggesting that teacher retention can also increase the level of administrative problems associated with constant recruitment, orientation, and service delivery that can affect policies, curriculum preferences, and pedagogy (Brasche & Harrington, 2012; de Feijter, 2015; Dykstra, 2014).

In terms of current provincial policy, teacher retention was only discussed in the most recent 2018-2019 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's Business Plan, which stated that "the department will begin work on a French Strategy (value of French programming, equity and recruitment & retention of students and teachers), as well as ensure provincial goals are aligned for all Nova Scotian students" (Nova Scotia, 2019, p.9). As of the time of this thesis, however, no provincial retention strategy for rural educators or students was available or even suggested in the Nova Scotia educational policy literature, furthering the policy

gaps and prioritization of rural schooling in the province. Lack of rural education strategy also emerged during the interviews as an important factor in programming and creating a positive school environment, which also ranked as high priorities. Accordingly, there is a growing body of research aimed at reversing the problem of rural teacher turnover by first identifying its underlying causes (Jo, 2014; Washburn, 2003).

Student. During the interviews, it quickly became apparent that many of the rural schools in Nova Scotia are losing students to larger urban schools due to a lack of programs offered by smaller rural schools. A gap exists in the research of this phenomenon. In studies of rural school retention, much of the literature discusses the concept of teacher retention. However, little exists on the topic of keeping rural youth in their home community rural schools. Frustration was evident during the interviews when the topic of funding and programing was examined, suggesting that funding is linked to enrollment, which is then linked to programming. If rural youth have the means to attend urban centre schools close by, then they were transferring. When students transfer, it puts added pressure on funding and programming in a cyclical nature for rural schools. The interviews suggested that the majority of the students who transfer do so due to lack of higher-level academic programs (International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), Immersion, etc.), special needs programming, and skill trades programming. Rural schools are losing students who see opportunities outside of their home community schools due to “one size fits all” programming, the only programming currently available to rural school youth in this province.

There is much literature surrounding keeping at-risk youth from rural areas in school, but there is a lack of literature regarding strategies for keeping motivated youth in their home community schools. At the time of this thesis, no Canadian studies on this topic were found.

Hardré (2013) pulls together 15 years' worth of literature surrounding motivation and retaining rural students which provides a plethora of research on multi-level strategies for motivating individuals and groups, elements of classroom instructional practice, interpersonal relationships, and the broader school motivational climate including policy. However, nothing in that literature pertains to programming needs to keep motivated rural youth in their home community schools (Hardré, 2013).

Programming

Alignment of curriculum, teaching, and assessment placed second in the participant priority rankings, suggesting the importance that programming and instruction as a key components to success in these two Nova Scotia rural schools. The schools' SSPS also mirrored this importance. The participant schools in this thesis study are focused on instructional qualities that lead to student achievement and provide insight into many benefits and challenges that rural schools face when trying to provide quality and equitable programming to their students. Leithwood et al. (2004) and Waters et al. (2003) also emphasize the importance of setting direction and focus on instruction in their meta-analysis on critical instructional leadership functions. In all the interviews of this research study, participants described the importance of instructional practice, and the alignment of curriculum and assessment in course delivery. In the following sections, discussions surrounding both the benefits and challenges rural youth face in program delivery in the interviews will be provided, as well as the current literature surrounding each topic. It is important to note that not all the challenges and benefits to rural schooling in Nova Scotia are surveyed and explained here, only those that received much discussion in the conceptual framework under the instructional key component of rural school success.

Benefits. Jimerson (2006) looks at the beneficial attributes of rural schooling in her literature review which provides many elements of instructional practice associated with academic programming benefits for students (p.7). In this thesis study, many of these same benefits to rural school education during the participant interviews took place were discussed. The following benefits were those key components of alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, which received high priority ranking by rural school personnel in terms of their importance to the success of their schools' factor of instruction.

Place-based pedagogy. Place-based pedagogy was discussed during the interviews. Each case school in this study had its own version of a place-based curriculum in their schools. The rural school personnel deemed these programs a high priority in terms of programming. They saw progressively positive results in providing diversity and connectedness of their schools to the communities they serve to provincial curriculum, mirroring much of the literature surrounding this topic (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1999; OECD, 2004; Siddle Walker, 2000; Stelmach, 2011; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995; Wright, 2003). Several authors also have highlighted the importance of studying rural education with a place-based mindset in order to reflect this diversity (Azano & Stewart, 2015; White & Reid, 2008).

Place-based pedagogy is a movement designed to ground school curriculum and instruction in the local geography, ecology, culture, economy, and history. In Canada, it was highlighted in British Columbia's 2017 Report on Rural Education as a way of including and respecting rural communities and the cultures they represent (Larson, 2017). Similarly, a place-based mindset is one in which these local elements are given an elevated level of conscious value (White & Reid, 2008). This pedagogy and mindset surrounding the importance of place-based learning was evident during participant interviews and described as a goal in the schools' SSPs.

Scheduling and multi-grade pedagogy. In the interviews, participants described the flexibility that comes with having fewer staff and students. In many of the schools, administrators, and teachers can collapse multiple grades and subject areas to work on cross-curriculum projects as a school, to extend the curriculum, and bridge community to school connections. The participants in the interviews described numerous endeavours that their schools have created, whether to work on community projects, to address issues seen at a school-based level, or to provide leadership opportunities to their students. This also speaks to the high priority ranking that the participants gave to parent and community connections. There are many ways of combining classrooms, including multi-grade classes (with students from two or more grades are taught by one teacher, in one room, at the same time) and multiage classes (that retain their respective grade-level assignments and grade-specific curriculum). Such classes are formed for administrative and economic reasons (Mulcahy, 2017). Schools may deliberately mix both age and grade levels for educational purposes, keeping the student with the same teacher in the same class for several years. This practice is described as multiage grouping. It is essential to differentiate multi-grade classes from multiage classes. Multi-grade classes are formed out of necessity; multiage classes are formed deliberately for their perceived educational benefits (Mulcahy, 2017).

Participants discussed multiage and multi-grade classes (sometimes called split classes), suggesting that multi-grade or split classes are becoming more common, especially in rural schools, so chances are good many children will end up in one at some point. Split classes are a worldwide phenomenon that is on the rise (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Canadian elementary schools increasingly use them as a strategy for balancing class sizes and juggling teacher resources to accommodate class caps and limited funding. Saqlain (2015) provides a brief history of multiage

education, stating that it began in the western world in the early 1900s and has developed out of the need primarily in rural areas due to teacher shortages and administrative necessity. Today, multi-grade and multiage classes are standard around the globe, reflecting organizational necessity, declining enrolment, or pedagogical choice (Mulcahy, 1992).

Often multi-grade and multiage classes are implemented for financial or budgetary reasons, or to combine two grades due to declining enrolment or uneven numbers of students in particular grades. Sometimes multiage classes are instituted because educators deem them a better form of instruction in a pedagogical sense. Little (2004) points to research that demonstrates integrated groupings promote cognitive and social growth, and argues that split environments can motivate the younger students while providing the older students with leadership opportunities.

In terms of the social aspect of multi-age and curriculum collapsing discussed in the interviews, the fundamental factor assigned to mental development was social interaction and transmission. Participants discussed the benefits of being able to collapse a school-wide schedule and provide their students with curriculum extensions, having the younger students look up to the older students, and the older students having increased leadership opportunities. Socialization is a structure to which individuals contribute as much as they receive from it. It is widely accepted that cognitive and affective social development are inseparable and parallel. Piaget and Inhelder (1969), in their last analysis of social growth and development, suggested that it is the need to grow to assert oneself, to love, and to be admired that constitutes the motive force of intelligence. Being in the same classroom with multiage kids can expand a student's social circle and improve self-confidence. Some of the research behind social development in the multiage classroom suggests that older children in a composite class get more leadership opportunities and

frequently build self-esteem as a sort of role model to the younger classmates (Little, 2001). Younger children aspire to do work like the older children in the class (Spradlin et al., 2009). It is also important to note that many of the participants in the interviews also said that there was an increase in multi-grading at their schools due to new proposed class caps in all levels of schools, so although multi-age and grade classes are a pedagogical belief system, they are now becoming a necessity to properly program and schedule classes.

Cohesive expectations for students. Text analysis of each school's SSP revealed that high expectations of students. Participants suggested that they must try to set the bar high for students from rural schools because they know that rural students face more adversity in their programming, and having high expectations helps build resiliency and self-regulation strategies. Examples from this study are the school-based common assessments created by both staff and the Regional Centres discussed in the schools' SSPs. In response to provincial assessments, schools have created targeted common rubrics and exemplars during professional development time, related to numeracy and literacy, to address areas of weakness. Both schools suggested that they have large populations of students with deficits, so they need to work hard as a school to address these deficits while also providing an extension for those who do not.

Challenges. Although many challenges to sound and successful programming were discussed during the interviews, the following were challenges that also received high priority ranking in the rural schools researched under the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment factor to rural school success.

Support for special education students. A challenge that schools are facing in terms of programming is the lack of specialized personnel to create programs for special needs students, such as accredited resource teachers and teaching assistants. Participants suggested that students

qualify for numerous special education programs (such as Individualized Program Plans (IPP) and Documented Adaptations (DA), both for learning disabled and behavioural reasons), but the programs do not receive adequate support. Participants suggested the need for more teacher assistants to help with special needs students, or having a dedicated resource teacher to work more in-depth with struggling students outside the traditional whole group classroom structure. In some cases, the rural schools do not have a 100% resource teacher job description, making support coverage and program planning tedious.

Multiple subject teachers and quality of teaching. Many teachers in rural and small schools are expected to teach more than one subject or grade, and teach students with a wide range of abilities in the same classroom. In the interviews, participants disclosed that sometimes they are forced to teach courses that they are not certified to teach because of staffing allotments. This is due to a lack of candidates for positions, low staffing numbers, and schools trying to provide a range of course selections with fewer staff. Studies from Australia, Iceland, and the United States reinforce this notion, suggesting that some rural schools also suffer from a lack of qualified staff (Cowen et al., 2012; Fowles et al., 2013; Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Beesley & Clark, 2015; Downes & Roberts, 2018). Shortages are particularly acute in certain subject areas and specializations, such as science and special needs (Barter, 2008; Monk, 2007; Schulken, 2010; Sigbórsson & Jónsdóttir, 2005). This often results in a below-average share of experienced and highly trained teachers (Monk, 2007; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2012), and teachers with little subject-specific training covering curriculum areas. Fullan (2001) describes the gradual watering down of capacity and knowledge through time as staff leave and are replaced. However, in small schools, it may be more apt to describe capacity and knowledge as being washed away. Small rural principals, as discussed above, have a significant influence both on learning and on the

success of program implementation and change. However, as this study revealed, small rural school administrators commonly remain in positions for a relatively short time, and when they leave, any progress made may leave with them. Consequently, these small rural schools may find themselves in a continual cycle of change and re-change, leading, as observed in some of these participant schools, to a sense of frustration, and lack of lasting longevity planning and program implementation.

Technology infrastructure and distance learning. As mentioned in the literature on distance learning, despite the lofty intent of distance learning initiatives through the Nova Scotia Virtual School (NSVS), current practices seem to be providing rural students with inequitable access. In its beginning, the NSVS's mandate was to deliver access to courses that were unavailable in rural schools for rural students, and provide them with the same program opportunities as their urban counterparts. On the surface, this sounds like an equitable practice, but in reality this program is still very limiting. Three reasons surfaced in the interviews that spoke to inequity in the administration of the program:

1. Poor infrastructure provincially in internet capabilities, limiting the use to schools only, as many rural communities still do not have the internet infrastructure to sustain programs that the NSVS uses.

2. Lack of support to rural students outside of the virtual domain, as rural schools rarely have a dedicated liaison teacher to provide guidance and advocacy. Students are left on their own to navigate the courses, resulting in lower completion rates and low grades in those courses.

3. Inequitable enrolment practices and policies. Nova Scotia is currently without policy to ensure that rural students (who do not otherwise have access to the courses they need) will be

able to enrol due to class caps, suggesting that they do not get priority over students whose schools already have those courses in their schedules.

Equalizing Opportunities in Rural Nova Scotia. Distance education is particularly vital to rural and remote communities (Barbour (2007), Provasnik et al., (2007) as cited in Kirby & Sharpe, 2010). "Schools are often challenged to offer a full range of course options because of low levels of student enrolment in certain courses or difficulty recruiting teachers with appropriate subject matter expertise." (as cited in Kirby & Sharpe, 2010, p.83). Programming is an issue of concern for education policymakers since limited course availability, especially concerning courses required for secondary school graduation and subsequent admission to higher education institutions, can narrow the range of career options available to rural students. There is a growing population of rural students in the province are completing a portion of their secondary-level education in E-learning environments. This differs substantially from the traditional classroom learning environment. Based on figures provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in 2018, there were approximately 1,600 students enrolled in course offerings from the Nova Scotia Virtual School, and nearly 1,100 students enrolled in courses offered through the correspondence studies program (Babour, 2019). E-Learning in Nova Scotia is not just limited to rural students. However, rural students who go to schools that cannot provide certain courses should have prioritized access to these courses through the virtual school. Students in schools who do not offer courses due to small school status and programming constraints should receive preferential placement over their urban counterparts to those courses.

Improving the Quality of Experience for Students. Irvin et al. (2010) specified three significant barriers in distance education programs: academic, cultural, and technical. Expanding

on these, the following will focus on ways Nova Scotia is improving the quality of experience in their e-learning programs, and areas where it is still lagging.

Academic barriers include lack of student time and large class size. Due to the way that distance learning is regulated and governed in Nova Scotia, classes of 30 students are permitted for each classroom teacher. Each teacher assigned to a class is certified by the NSTU, and students in the NSVS program are limited to the number of courses they can take a semester to four courses (Nova Scotia, 2017).

Technical barriers such as inadequate connectivity and access, availability of computers, and necessary programs have significant implications for rural students. Although each student receives a personal laptop to use for the duration of the course, the Nova Scotia market has tended to lag in providing province-wide high-speed Internet access. Concerns about the urban-rural "digital divide" is a considerable influence on educational policymaking in the province (Looker & Naylor, 2010). Many of the rural school communities still struggle with obtaining high-speed Internet, creating further divides between their urban colleagues. The province of Nova Scotia has an innovative online e-learning platform, but has failed to invest in internet infrastructure and policy regarding access. Rural students need more access to better internet quality and technology infrastructure, as well as support and advocacy during their e-learning courses to close the current digital divide.

In terms of representation and advocacy into the successful implementation of distance learning (E-learning) experiences for rural youth, Nova Scotia presently does not have an education advisory group to advocate for rural students. The research has revealed that students miss out on courses that they need for entrance into post-secondary institutions but that their school currently does not offer. Students are also finding themselves alone, without school-based

support during their e-learning courses. Evidence also suggests that there is a lack of infrastructure and technology to support e-learning platforms.

Passed over programs. Evidence of rural schools being passed over for programs to more centralized schools was also evident during the participant interviews. In Nova Scotia's EECD 2018-2019 Business Plan, the topic of Skill Trades funding was discussed. Seven additional skill trades centres for high schools in Nova Scotia were announced, essentially one for each Regional Centre for Education:

> Skilled Trades and Experiential Learning Skilled Trades Education supports an approach that provides exposure to a wide range of careers, engages students in authentic learning in the community and immerses students in the realities of skilled trades work. In April 2017, the addition of seven Skilled Trades Centres for high schools in Nova Scotia was announced, supporting government's commitment to expanding access to skilled trades programs. (Nova Scotia, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018b, p. 6)

In this thesis study, it was revealed that both rural schools were passed over, with this program going to a larger central school. In the interviews, rural school personnel described their role as educators to provide the tools and resources our students need to achieve, but indicated that they know not all schools and communities have easy access to those resources.

To What Extend Does Current Educational Policy Prioritize Rural Youth in Nova Scotia?

When participants in this study were asked the question whether they felt that rural youth were equally represented in current educational policy and committees, much discussion ensued. Multiple participants reflected on the new Inclusive Education Policy currently in its implementation phase, pointing out that policy developers keep using the collective term "all

students" but still refuse to support programs in their schools, even after local community consultation (Nova Scotia, 2019). Programs such as Reading Recovery were deemed not needed in some rural schools where there are already small class sizes, so literacy intervention is not as prioritized. Both schools in this study were refused skill trades programs that were later given to larger centralized schools, with no alternative programming arranged or criteria for choice provided. Participants also described instances where funding for successful programs and initiatives, such as the nutritious food and outdoor education initiatives, was provided through provincial and regional budgets, but then discontinued without school or community consultation of their success.

It was also mentioned during the interviews that some programs and services could not be taken away because some surrounding communities with considerably more social resources to advocate for themselves would revolt. However, in rural communities whose social resources lack, programs become unavailable. This suggests that if communities lack social capital or do not have the means to advocate for themselves, then they will not be granted the same programming. Where funding is concerned, at the time of this thesis, there are no known rural education policies or strategies in Nova Scotia, thereby decreasing the accountability of the people who make funding decisions for rural schools, and furthering the policy gaps in prioritizing rural youth.

The development of sound policies and practices that provide beneficial results and outcomes for all learners served by the education system rely on evidence-based practices and empirical research. While there has been an increase in research conducted on topics germane to rural education, the sheer volume of urban-focused research overshadows the concern for rural (Wuthnow, 2013). Policymakers and educational leaders charged with the implementation of

education policy face a conundrum concerning rural education. As Nova Scotia begins to roll out its new Inclusive Education Policy effective September 2020 promoting “their commitment to ensuring a high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and *equitable* education to support the well-being and achievement of every student” (Nova Scotia, 2019, p.1) the pressure is increasing for policymakers to address rural education at the provincial and local levels (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Showalter et al., 2017).

Ralph’s (2010) study of program and policy implementation in rural education in Newfoundland mirrors many of the same findings from this study, stating that “along with the unique programming required to meet the needs of rural schools, the implementation of the policy should also consider the distinct nature of the communities being serviced by the province's schools” (p. 1).

There is no doubt that rural educational settings demonstrate their share of unique characteristics. Research also shows the uniqueness of rural policy, and the need for policy research and analysis regarding rural education. Examples of these are a series of case studies of rural Manitoba districts in which Wallin (2007) identified a contradiction between rural lifestyles and urbanizing school policies, in an attempt to lobby for rural policy support. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Mulcahy (1999) called for a rural policy that clearly defines the educational experiences of all children regardless of the size or location of the school they attend. Huysman (2008) commented that rural schools are expected to operate under the same policies and expectations as their urban counterparts without the necessary support or resources. Budge (2006) wrote that "rather than viewing rural communities as places where people live, policymakers have viewed rural areas as sectors of a national economy" (p. 2). Barkema and

Drabenstott (2002) also postulated that rural policies must change if the various challenges facing rural education are to be met.

Rural School Performance Pressures

Participants noted many positive aspects of small schools such as smaller classrooms and teacher to pupil ratios, closer relationships and community ties, flexible scheduling, school-based cross-curricular connections, among others. However, many participants stated or implied, sometimes reluctantly, that as enrolment declines and funding pressures mount, it becomes more challenging to adjust operations in a way that does not have a detrimental impact on the quality of education that they can provide their rural students. Schollie et al. (2017) mirrored this sentiment in their report on the impact of schools on rural communities in Alberta. They suggested from their study that "participants acknowledged the reality that as enrolment declines and budget pressures mount, it becomes more challenging to adjust operations in a way that does not impact on the quality of education" (p.8).

Consideration of how the lack of equity rural youth in Nova Scotia face directly impacts the quality of education they receive was evident in the interviews. This also encompassed other factors such as students' opportunities for extra-curricular activities and social relationships, along with transportation and many other issues highlighted throughout this research study. For example, some participants in this study noted that pressure is mounting to provide an equitable standard of education in relation to their urban or central school counterparts due to fewer courses available, extracurricular opportunities, retainment, student well-being coordination, and lack of school longevity planning afforded to rural schools in Nova Scotia. Press, Galway, and Collins (2003) mirrored these pressures in their study of rural education policy in Newfoundland and Labrador wherein they discussed the positive strides that province has made in their rural

education policies to first address rural school pressures in order to create an equitable education system for rural schools and students. This also speaks to pedagogy surrounding school effectiveness models discussed in the earlier literature (chapter 2), suggesting that society is entering into a fourth contemporary phase, calling on reformers to explore the dynamic nature of school effectiveness taking into account the changing nature of its components. This contemporary phase explores blending both quality achievement and performance components with equitable policy practices (Burušić et al., 2016). Many of the pressures discussed in the interviews correlate with the OECD (2012) report on equity and quality education earlier mentioned.

What Characteristics Describe a Successful Rural School in Nova Scotia?

In this thesis study, the argument is made that there is a policy gap in rural education in Nova Scotia, leaving no protection for rural educators from the challenges they face in providing rural youth with an equitable and quality education. Rural schools have become more sophisticated and more adept at doing what they have always done best, which is relying on local expertise and the concept of community to work together with partners in order to find ways to innovate, to offer as many opportunities as they can for the students they serve, and to support the local people who work hard to make sure their children receive the best education they have to offer (Wallin, 2009). Aside from having these school reform issues, there is a crop of schools that continue to exceed expectations in achievement. They are striking exceptions to the pattern of low income/low performance.

Successful rural schools in Nova Scotia are those that advocate to allocate funding based on student characteristics and community demographic instead of enrolment. Successful rural

schools use technology not to replace educators, but to create opportunity for rural staff to collaborate and for students to communicate with students from other communities. Through grassroots community action, the development of rural education councils in this province will allow communities and rural educators to push for more equitable funding systems that do not favor large schools. This also presents the opportunity for rural students to participate in a democratic process for their schools and communities as a way to mitigate out migration among rural youth from their communities after graduation. This will, however, require a tremendous shift in how rural education is viewed in Nova Scotia.

6. Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this study to assess the student academic performance of rural schools in Nova Scotia as it relates to achievement or scores. Instead, it was the intention of this study to explore the prioritization that rural youth receive in policy development as a way to describe characteristics of what a successful or effective rural school in Nova Scotia looks like based on the priorities in their buildings. I have presented findings that revealed the relationships with qualitative case study attributes, and answered each of the research questions. This research study provided many characteristics of what a successful rural school could look like in Nova Scotia if given prioritization. In this concluding chapter, the primary research question is highlighted using both the answers to the secondary research questions, as well as implications for policy, practice, and theory development. Limitations to this thesis and recommendations for future research and policy development are then investigated. Finally, the researcher's thoughts and reflections are revealed, and conclusions are made.

What Characteristics Describe a Successful Rural School in Nova Scotia?

Many priorities were revealed through the participant interviews and text analysis of the schools' SSPs using the key components from the conceptual framework of this study. The secondary research questions revealed that many the factors to a successful rural school in Nova Scotia fell under the *School Environment* key component. The importance of parent communication, community partnerships, and the involvement that both parents and communities have on their rural schools is a true factor of rural school success. These factors were also reflected highly in the literature surrounding rural education. Other factors of rural school success in Nova Scotia that illustrated the importance of the school environment were

student well-being, and the significance of coherent work by outside agencies to support students.

Under *Professional Community*, factors such as student and staff retention, and professional development were also important to the programming success of rural schools in Nova Scotia. Professional development, leading to quality instruction, was another factor in rural school success. *Instruction* as a key component to rural school success was also highly prioritized. Discovery into the concept of student retainment as a factor to rural school success occurred during the study when many of the participants disclosed the challenges that they had to keep rural students in their home community school. Rural students, if supported, seek programs that their home community school is unable to provide for them by transferring to central or urban schools that do. There is currently a research gap in this area, so further research into this concept could be explored from this finding.

Under the key component instruction, the alignment of curriculum, teaching, and assessment was the second-highest prioritized factor, suggesting the importance of daily operations such as curriculum and their importance to rural communities. Participants presented both the benefits and challenges to successfully providing quality instruction to their schools. This study's findings also correlated with the early McREL (2005a) study, which discussed that although individualized instruction and opportunity to learn undoubtedly shape the effectiveness of classroom instruction, this study also revealed through the schools' SSPs that the goals and expectations for learning were clear to students and their communities, but lacked longevity thinking.

Leadership plays an extensive role in planning and programming quality instructional programs, and maneuvering through their many benefits and challenges was also revealed as

indicators to success in these two rural Nova Scotia schools. The principal as a change agent and as an instructional leader were also factors highly influential to the success of long-term planning, which was revealed as another contributing factor of rural school success. All schools reported a high turnover rate with their current administration. Participants revealed that as a result they rely heavily on their teacher leaders as mentors. This correlates with Anderson's (2008) transformative model of teacher leadership of creating open and trusting channels of communication on staff, which spills into the rural communities that these schools serve. In this case, however, teacher leaders are being used out of necessity, not pedagogical beliefs. This is another area of research to be further explored from this thesis. Two main priorities also appeared evident under this key component: the challenges of the small rural principal's role, and how they overcome student vulnerability to help students to increase their achievement.

Policy Gaps and Representation and Their Influence on Rural School Success

In terms of policy gaps and representation, the analogy of a sinking ship is appropriate. Current programs and initiatives are being used as plugs in the challenges that rural schools face in this province. Many of these programs are not bound by policy, meaning that once established, the government can eliminate them as they see fit without any consultation with the school administration or community. Initial funding is provided to get programs running, then once the program is established the funding dries up, removing the plug. Schools are left to absorb the costs of these successful initiatives, such as some of the programs revealed through this study. Also, having fewer representatives from regions creates adversarial relationships between these governing bodies, rural schools, and their communities. A rural school policy framework will make governing bodies, rural schools, and the communities accountable to the vulnerable and overlooked populations that they serve in this province.

This exploratory study offers only the first steps in definitively understanding the unique factors that support success in rural schools in Nova Scotia. To describe or provide a definition of rural school success in this province would be premature and beyond the scope of a qualitative study such as this. In the next section, implications of these results are examined to provide an understanding of rural school success with policy gaps in Nova Scotia.

Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy and Theory

An implication that was revealed from this study is that Nova Scotia currently does not have a rural education strategy. However, it is also one of the only provinces that currently does not have a rural youth or rural education advocacy or consulting council, even though rural schools make up over 40% of the province. There is clearly a line drawn between being from centralized regions such as Halifax or not (Corbett, 2014). Students growing up in a rural community with little social capital and financial resources face adversity, compounding the vulnerability indicators and SES issues they might already face at home. This places even further pressure on rural school achievement, as rural schools in this province are currently challenged with providing their rural students with an equitable and quality education that compares them with their urban or centralized counterparts within their same region without benefit of their programs and services.

The literature review provides an overview of the current scenario for the rural youth of this province, with above average rates of childhood poverty and vulnerability, little to no representation on provincial advisory boards and political platforms, and no policy to protect resource and service delivery. This research study has demonstrated indicators to what a high-performing high-needs rural school looks like in Nova Scotia. It also discussed current indicators of rural school success, gaps in policy and in theory behind successfully educating rural school

youth and keeping them in their home community schools, in hopes of dissuading further out-migration.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research and Policy Development

In the following section, limitations to this thesis study are revealed and reviewed. Recommendations for addressing these limitations and further research into rural education in Nova Scotia are then discussed. Finally, future policy research and development are examined.

Limitations and Delimitations

The main limitation of this research reflected the very nature of the complexity in rural education. This study was only able to represent a snapshot of a particular point in these schools' representation in a policy that currently does not exist. One limitation of selecting case study design centers on generalizability (Yin, 2014). The decisions made by the researcher surrounding the context of the study, number of participants, number of documents reviewed, and interviews reflect this challenge of its generalizability. The focus was on gaining a deeper understanding of rural school personnel's perspectives of the priorities in their building, and seeking the current extent educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova Scotia. Another delimitation was the use of a small sample size. With only two schools in the sample, and the limitations that accompany on-site one-on-one interviews, priority rankings could be much different with a larger sample size.

Furthermore, the top five priorities were reviewed as emergent themes, possible reasons for low ranking priorities were discussed, and newly discovered factors to rural school success were revealed. Using a survey of priorities may have allowed for an increase in the sample size of the study, but it was the thick, rich context in the priorities in the building, and discussion

surrounding representation and policy development through on site, one-on-one interviews that were needed by the researcher to discuss the uniqueness of rural school matters.

The researcher's timeline into this thesis was restricted to one school year based on her educational leave. Access to participants for this research was also contingent on the participants' and the researcher's schedules, which placed limits on the amount of data collected. A prolonged ethics review process and the dismissal of school in March due to the COVID-19 outbreak also restricted the researcher's timeline and scope for this project. While multiple data sources provided ample evidence and the one-on-one interviews allow for a deep rich context, the study would have been more fruitful if data collection occurred using a larger sample from the same schools or other schools.

Recommendations

This was primarily a qualitative case study that sought factors that describe rural school success and the prioritization that rural youth receive in educational policy in Nova Scotia. Due to the rapid turnover of administrators and staff in the small rural schools studied, many participants could not reflect a real sense of their school's success without comparing themselves to their urban or centralized counterparts. This paints a picture of the current staffing and longevity planning challenges that rural schools in Nova Scotia are facing. It is hard to create a baseline of rural school success in the province when there are gaps in policy, little exploratory research, and little longevity planning.

Reviewing what other provinces are doing would help develop our own policy, but further surveying and consultation of rural schools and their communities across Nova Scotia needs to occur, to create that baseline, before we can even begin.

Additional Areas of Research

Additional areas of research include looking at achievement rates (such as graduation rates, post-secondary migration patterns, provincial assessments, etc.) to develop literature describing what it means to be an effective rural school in Nova Scotia. Researching two-way regression models of school reform could also enhance the current method of accreditation or evaluation to which rural schools are currently bound. Further longitudinal research that involves revisiting these schools after the development of a rural education strategy would also provide greater understanding of the long-term impact educational policy has on prioritizing rural youth and rural school success.

Another area of further research could be exploring how small rural schools can most effectively program plan to retain students in their home community and prevent them from transferring to other more centralized schools since current funding for programs is tied to enrolment. A gap in the research of home community student retention was also revealed in this study.

Another area of research into longevity planning during high administration and staff turnover could be an examination of the influence that retired educators often called, out of necessity, to act as substitutes are having on rural schools in Nova Scotia. Currently, retired teachers in Nova Scotia are permitted to substitute for 100 days before their pensions are affected, due to shortages in the substitute teacher workforce.

Personal Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

It is not often that one is afforded the opportunity to step into another educator's school to observe, interview, understand, and learn from their practice. Luckily for me it happened! I found this opportunity enjoyable, puzzling at times, and rewarding overall, on a variety of levels. I believe embarking on this thesis journey has also tested my resilience, persistence, and courage

to have sometimes difficult conversations. One of the most important things that I have learned pursuing this master's degree is understanding the process of research. Through this process, I have reflected on my own practice, values, and beliefs, and navigated how they impact my teaching, curriculum, school environment, and students. Without divulging my own bias, many of the experiences shared by the participants in this study reflected my own beliefs such as the need for educators to role model, build relationships, and advocate for their students. On the other hand, some of the experiences they related challenged and sometimes changed my own beliefs. In particular, the way that programming is completed for rural schools and the lack of protection and equity that we give to our vulnerable populations forced me to reflect on my own rural roots.

Through this experience, I have gained a great sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and many new skills. Too often, as educators, we get wrapped up in our own little bubble and do not take a moment to pause and question the "why" in what we are doing. As time passes, we often see what we do as "right," view our programs as best practice, and deviate little from what we feel "works."

This study has allowed me to experience and take part in authentic, meaningful discussions with rural school educators who are working hard to provide the best quality education that they can with the resources that they have. I gained a greater understanding of the factors that can contribute to rural school success and rural student achievement. The goal of this research was to challenge and explore what a successful rural school in Nova Scotia is. Instead, I found only its potential with proper policy, programming, and practice to ensure that rural youth are prioritized and given equal opportunities to an equitable and quality education.

In conclusion, I believe it is hard to describe what a successful or effective rural school looks like in Nova Scotia, only what it could look like based on what other provinces throughout Canada are doing for their rural school youth and what the current research described in this study demonstrates. For decades, as a province, we have accepted mediocrity and have continued to place wet bandages on the open wounds of our vulnerable rural populations. We currently have a baseline of inattention to the needs of rural youth and its rural education. We can only imagine what proper representation, advocacy, and accountable policy development could do for our rural youth. It is incumbent on us as a province to ensure equity and quality across the public education landscape, providing a level playing field for all, no matter how large or small the school, town, or city.

Evidence revealed through this study illustrated that rural schools offer many positive benefits to students, being at the heart of their communities in a way that is not possible in a suburban or urban setting. In this thesis submission, I have created arguments and recommendations regarding the value of rural schools in this province, education funding, recruitment and retention of both teachers and students, longevity planning, learning resources and programming, support for vulnerable populations, and exemplar policies and frameworks for the development of our own rural education strategy. In closing, I urge the government to champion the value, benefits, and importance of rural and small schools in this province. Perhaps the primary lesson to be learned here is that the theoretical conceptualizations of how rural areas are represented and thrive have yet to be refined. Policy developers still have much to learn about the dynamic nature of what it means to be living in rural Nova Scotia.

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8.0 Appendices

Appendix A: Regional Centre for Education Research Approval

Research Project: Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.

Dear Centre for Education,

As introduced previously, my name is Jessica Fancy-Landry and I am a graduate student at Memorial University. I am currently completing a thesis as part of my Masters of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Degree at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Kirk Anderson.

Title: *Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.*

The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the factors perceived by rural school personnel that contribute to the prioritization of rural youth in schools across Nova Scotia. This will be accomplished by interviewing participants who have professional knowledge of the education system in Nova Scotia and by listening to and documenting their experiences and understandings of the rural school(s) in which they taught. By taking part in this research participants will greatly improve our understanding of the specific benefits and challenges that rural school youth face in their pursuit in an equitable and quality education. This may be used to highlight the needs of rural school policy in the province of Nova Scotia and to develop supports where they are most needed.

I will be interviewing the principal and teachers from rural schools within your Regional Centre, as well as their respective School Advisory Council Chairs. Please complete the form below to confirm the RCE's approval to allow me to conduct research within your Regional Centre.

If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact either myself at [redacted], or my supervisor Dr. Kirk Anderson [redacted]

Thank you in advance,

Jessica Fancy-Landry

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Regional Centre for Education Approval

Title: *Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.*

Researcher: Jessica Fancy-Landry, Memorial University of Newfoundland

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered. I understand that neither the names of people involved, nor the organisation will be used in any public reports. I approve the participation of the SSRCE schools in this research project.

I agree to allow this research to take part within the [redacted]

Name: _____

Position: _____

Institution: _____

Date: _____

Signed: _____

Researcher Counter Signature

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Recruitment Email Letters

Recruitment Email
Principals

My name is Jessica Fancy-Landry, and I am a student in the Department of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting a research project called *"Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps"* for my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Kirk Anderson.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the factors perceived by rural school personnel that contribute to the prioritization of rural youth in schools across Nova Scotia. Research will be accomplished by interviewing participants who have professional knowledge of the education system in Nova Scotia and by listening to and documenting their experiences and understandings of the rural school(s) in which they taught.

I am contacting you to invite you, your staff, and your community's School Advisory Committee (SAC) Chair to participate in research interviews. Each participant will be involved in a solo interview of approximately one hour in length. Each interview will be scheduled and located at a time and place that is convenient for the participant and conducive to confidentiality. By taking part in this research, you, your staff, and residents representing your community will significantly improve our understanding of the specific benefits and challenges that rural youth face in their pursuit of an equitable and quality education.

If you are interested in your school participating in this study, please contact me using my information provided below. I will then provide a teacher recruitment letter to your administrative assistant to forward to your staff as to protect the confidentiality of your staff. I will then contact your School Advisory Committee (SAC) chair asking for their participation.

This study is completely voluntary and is not an employment, school, or board requirement. Upon acceptance of this request, informed consent forms will be provided for you and your participating staff, and SAC Chair(s)' approval. I hope that you will agree to allow your school to take part and that you will find your involvement of benefit to both yourself, the wider rural school community you serve, and, most importantly, Nova Scotia's rural youth. If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at [redacted] or by phone [redacted].

Many thanks in advance. I look forward to hearing from you,

Jessica Fancy-Landry

Recruitment Script Via Email
Teacher Participants

My name is Jessica Fancy-Landry, and I am a student in the Department of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting a research project called *"Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps"* for my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Kirk Anderson.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the factors perceived by rural school personnel that contribute to the prioritization of rural youth in schools across Nova Scotia. Research will be accomplished by interviewing participants who have professional knowledge of the education system in Nova Scotia and by listening to and documenting their experiences and understandings of the rural school(s) in which they taught.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in research interviews. Each participant will be involved in a solo interview of approximately one hour in length. Each interview will be scheduled and located at a time and place that is convenient for the participant and conducive to confidentiality. By taking part in this research, you will significantly improve our understanding of the specific benefits and challenges that rural youth face in their pursuit of an equitable and quality education.

This study is completely voluntary and is not an employment, school, or board requirement. Upon acceptance of this request, informed consent forms will be provided for your approval. I hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find your involvement of benefit to both yourself, the wider rural school community you serve, and, most importantly, Nova Scotia's rural youth. If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at [redacted] or by phone [redacted].

Many thanks in advance. I look forward to hearing from you,

Jessica Fancy-Landry

Recruitment Email
School Advisory Committee Chair

My name is Jessica Fancy-Landry, and I am a student in the Department of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting a research project called *"Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps"* for my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Kirk Anderson.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the factors perceived by rural school personnel that contribute to the prioritization of rural youth in schools across Nova Scotia. Research will be accomplished by interviewing participants who have professional knowledge of the education system in Nova Scotia and by listening to and documenting their experiences and understandings of the rural school(s) in which they taught.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in research interviews. Each participant will be involved in a solo interview of approximately one hour in length. Each interview will be scheduled and located at a time and place that is convenient for the participant and conducive to confidentiality. By taking part in this research, you will significantly improve our understanding of the specific benefits and challenges that rural youth face in their pursuit of an equitable and quality education.

This study is completely voluntary and is not an employment, school, or board representation requirement. Upon acceptance of this request, informed consent forms will be provided for your approval. I hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find your involvement of benefit to both yourself, the wider rural school community you serve, and, most importantly, Nova Scotia's rural youth. If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at [redacted] or by phone [redacted].

Many thanks in advance. I look forward to hearing from you,

Jessica Fancy-Landry

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms

Participant Information Sheet

Research Project: Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.

Researcher: Jessica Fancy-Landry, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland
Supervisor: Dr. Kirk D. Anderson, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research into the prioritization of rural school youth in Nova Scotia.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Jessica Fancy-Landry, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction:
As introduced previously, my name is Jessica Fancy-Landry and I am a graduate student at Memorial University. I am currently completing a thesis as part of my Masters of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Degree at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Kirk Anderson.

Purpose of Study:
The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the factors perceived by rural school personnel that contribute to the prioritization of rural youth in schools across Nova Scotia. This will be accomplished by interviewing participants who have professional knowledge of the education system in Nova Scotia and by listening to and documenting their experiences and understandings of the rural school(s) in which they taught. Each participant will be involved in an interview of approximately one hour in length. Each interview will be scheduled and located at a time and place that is convenient for the participant and conducive to confidentiality. By taking part in this research you will greatly improve our understanding of the specific benefits and challenges that rural youth face in their pursuit in an equitable and quality education. This may be used to highlight the needs of rural school policy in the province of Nova Scotia and to develop supports where they are most needed.

I will be working with two rural schools to develop case studies. I will be interviewing the principal and teachers for each of these schools, as well as their respective School Advisory Council Chairs.

What it will mean for you
I want to interview you and talk about:

- Your school context and the opportunities and challenges it presents.
- Factors of rural school success
- Aspects of current educational policy that pertain to rural youth
- Your school's current and future programming for success

The total time commitment of you would be an interview with the approximate duration of one hour. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and a copy will be sent to you for your approval. Neither you nor your organization will be identified in the final thesis. I will provide the opportunity to share the overall findings of this research before it is submitted.

Possible Benefits:
The researcher hopes to gain a deeper understanding of the prioritization on rural youth in Nova Scotia's education system. The study will further the understanding of rural school success and rural education policy gaps.

Possible Risks: There are no known physical risks. Due to the nature of the research being conducted in a small school regarding the effectiveness and performance of rural schools, considerations regarding professional and social risks to the participants for this research project have been identified. As such, participants are able to cancel their participation in interviews at any time without repercussion. Participants are also able to skip any questions that they do not wish to answer or feel could jeopardize their employment.

Confidentiality:
The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use or disclosure. *Because the participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, all of whom are known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said*. Every attempt for confidentiality will be conducted as far as possible for all participants. Pseudonyms will be given to the names of the teachers and the schools they identified. As well, the researcher will make specific details more generic or entirely omit specific details which could indicate the identity of the participant. Moreover, the consent forms will be stored separately from the data collected, so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses.

Anonymity: Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance. Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity. You will not be identified in publications without your explicit permission.

Use, Access, Ownership and Storage of Data:

All data will be stored on an encrypted UBS stick in a secure location. Only myself the researcher and my supervisor will have access to the data. Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity and Scholarship Research.

Right to Withdrawal

Participation within this study is voluntary, and the participant may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time without penalty. Participants who wish to end their participation during data collection will have any data collected from the participant up to the point of withdrawal, retained by the researcher, unless the participant indicates otherwise. Participants will also be given their interview transcript to review and will have the option to remove or revise their data for four weeks from the time they receive the transcript. If the participant chooses to withdraw after data collection has ended, participant data can be removed from the study up to four weeks after they receive the interview transcript.

Reporting and Sharing Results:

Data from this research project may be published. Upon completion, my thesis will be available at Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II library, and can be accessed online at: http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/search/collection.theses. Data collected from this study will be reported using multiple formats, such as direct quotations or in an aggregated summarized form.

What happens next

I hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find your involvement interesting and of benefit to both yourself, the wider rural school community, and most importantly, Nova Scotia's rural youth. If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached consent form. If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact either myself at [redacted], or my supervisor Dr. Kirk Anderson [redacted].

Many thanks in advance,

Jessica Fancy-Landry

Consent Form for Research Participation

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research into the prioritization of rural school youth in Nova Scotia. Please complete the form below to confirm your participation with this project.

Title: Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research and you have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You agree to be audio-recorded and are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end participation during data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be retained by the researcher, unless you indicate otherwise.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw after data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the study up to four weeks after the date of the interview.

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Your Signature Confirms:

☐ I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

☐ I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

☐ A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

_____ _____

Signature of Principal Investigator Date

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Appendix D: Respondent Interview Guides and Permission Forms

Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.

Principal Interview

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to this interview which we expect should take no longer than about an hour. We would like to talk about your school and the surrounding community. From the interviews, I will develop a case study that will provide insight across the province in describing the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova School.

Protocol:

- The information I am collecting today will be rolled up into a larger pool of data. Any quotes that we may use will not be attributed to you by name in the final report, but instead to your role within the school.
- The name of the community and school will also not be used in the study to preserve anonymity.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- The recorder can be shut off at any time.
- Only myself and possibly my supervisor will be listening to the recordings.
- Some questions may seem repetitive, they are stated that way to make sure that I understand what you are saying.
- Participants can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.
- After your interview, and before the data are included in the final report, you will be able to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, change, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.
- Please feel free to ask any questions as we go along if something is unclear.

Name:

Experience:

Time in current position:

Previous positions of school leadership / support:

Leadership

1. Tell me about your school and your role within it.
3. What leadership strategies and techniques are employed in this school to demonstrate success?
4. What challenges do you face in providing successful leadership in this school?

5. Are there any extra pressures put on leadership staff of rural schools when hiring, retaining, and providing substitutes? Could you offer any strategies or suggestions for recruitment?

Instruction

6. In relation to student vulnerability, how much pressure do you feel school personnel (including yourself) are under to counteract these vulnerabilities (Examples not limited to: socioeconomics, attitudes towards education, literacy rates in the community, etc.)? What are you expected to "fix" and what additional stress does this message cause?
7. Please tell me about programming at your school. What do you feel is being done to ensure rural youth are being offered sound programming? Are there any issues with access at your school (specialists, alternate learning opportunities, etc.)?
8. In terms of the province's numeracy, literacy and well-being goals, what strategies are implemented to ensure achievement? Is there anything else that can be utilized that currently you do not have to successfully implement these strategies?
9. What gets in the way of improving student achievement in this school? (Examples not limited to: changing curriculums, grade configurations, teaching assignments, expectations, etc.)?
10. What kinds of supports for success are not currently available to the school that might be in other areas of the province?

Professional Development

11. Do you feel that working in a rural school puts you on an equitable playing field professionally in this province? Why or why not, please provide examples?
12. What benefits/challenges do teachers have who work in rural schools?
13.What are some of the issues rural educators face with the representation of rural schools on EECD advisory groups/committee which develop policies that will impact rural areas?
14. Do you feel like the students in this school are prioritized by current provincial policy? Please give examples for your stance.

School Environment

15. Describe your school's environment.
16. What, if anything, do you observe being done to address the trends impacting your school and its community?
17. What do you feel (use examples) can be done to provide further equitable educational opportunities for rural students in this school?
*School Level?
*Regional Level?
*Community Level?
*Provincial Level?
18. What benefits/challenges are youth faced with when graduating from rural schools?
19. What, if anything, do you observe being done to address the trends impacting your school and its community?

Do you have anything else that you would like to add?

Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.

Staff Interview

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to this interview which we expect should take no longer than about an hour. We would like to talk about your school and the surrounding community. From the interviews I will develop a case study that will provide insight across the province in describing the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova School.

Protocol:

- The information I am collecting today will be rolled up into a larger pool of data. Any quotes that we may use will not be attributed to you by name in the final report, but instead to your role within the school.
- The name of the community and school will also not be used in the study to preserve anonymity.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- The recorder can be shut off at any time.
- Only myself and possibly my supervisor will be listening to the recordings.
- Some questions may seem repetitive, they are stated that way to make sure that I understand what you are saying.
- Participants can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.
- After your interview, and before the data are included in the final report, you will be able to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, change, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.
- Please feel free to ask any questions as we go along if something is unclear.

Name:

Experience:

Time in current position:

Previous positions:

Leadership 1. Tell me about your school and your role within it. 2. What leadership strategies and techniques are employed in this school to demonstrate success? 3. What challenges do you face in providing successful leadership in this school? 4. Are there any extra pressures put on leadership staff of rural schools when hiring, retaining, and providing substitutes? Could you offer any strategies or suggestions for recruitment?
Instruction 5. In terms of the province's numeracy, literacy and well-being goals, what strategies are implemented to ensure achievement? Is there anything else that can be utilized that currently you do not have to successfully implement these strategies?

6. What gets in the way of improving student achievement in this school? (Examples not limited to: changing curriculums, grade configurations, teaching assignments, expectations, etc.)? 7. What kinds of supports for success are not currently available to the school that might be in other areas of the province?
Professional Development 8. What types of professional development initiatives are currently being used in your school. 9. Do you feel that working in a rural school puts you on an equitable playing field professionally in this province? Why or why not, please provide examples? 10. Do you feel like the students in this school are prioritized by current provincial policy? Please give examples for your stance. 11.What are some of the issues rural educators face with the representation of rural schools on EECD advisory groups/committee which develop policies that will impact rural areas?
School Environment 12. Describe your school's environment. 13. What, if anything, do you observe being done to address the trends impacting your school and its community? 14. What do you feel (use examples) can be done to provide further equitable educational opportunities for rural students in this school? *School Level? *Regional Level? *Community Level? *Provincial Level? 15. What benefits/challenges are youth faced with when graduating from rural schools 16. What, if anything, do you observe being done to address the trends impacting your school and its community?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps.

Resident Interview

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to this interview which we expect should take no longer than about an hour. We would like to talk about your school and the surrounding community. From the interviews I will develop a case study that will provide insight across the province in describing the extent that current educational policy prioritizes rural youth in Nova School.

Protocol:

- The information I am collecting today will be rolled up into a larger pool of data. Any quotes that we may use will not be attributed to you by name in the final report, but instead to your role within the school.
- The name of the community and school will also not be used in the study to preserve anonymity.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- The recorder can be shut off at any time.
- Only myself and possibly my supervisor will be listening to the recordings.
- Some questions may seem repetitive, they are stated that way to make sure that I understand what you are saying
- Participants can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.
- After your interview, and before the data are included in the final report, you will be able to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, change, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.
- Please feel free to ask any questions as we go along if something is unclear.

Name:

Time living in community:

Affiliation with the school:

Leadership 1. Tell me about your school and your role within it. 2. What leadership strategies and techniques are employed in this school to demonstrate success? 3. What challenges do you (community) face in providing successful leadership in this school? 4. Are there any extra pressures put on leadership staff of rural schools when hiring, retaining, and providing substitutes? Could you offer any strategies or suggestions for recruitment?
Instruction 5. What are some of the highlights about this school's achievement? 6. What gets in the way of improving student achievement in this school? (Examples not limited to: changing curriculums, grade configurations, teaching assignments, expectations, etc.)? What have you (as a community) done to overcome these barriers?

7. What kinds of supports for success are not currently available to the school that might be in other areas of the province?
8. In terms of the province's numeracy, literacy and well-being goals, what strategies are implemented to ensure achievement? Is there anything else that can be utilized that currently you do not have to successfully implement these strategies?
9. What kinds of supports for success are not currently available to the school that might be in other areas of the province?

Professional Development

10. What issues of retainment of staff are evident in this school?
11. Do you have any strategies or ideas surrounding retainment of staff?
12. What types of professional development initiatives are currently being used in your school?
13. Do you feel that working in a rural school puts staff on an equitable playing field professionally in this province? Why or why not, please provide examples?
14. Do you feel like the students in this school are prioritized by current provincial policy? Please give examples for your stance.
15.What are some of the issues rural educators face with the representation of rural schools on EECD advisory groups/committee which develop policies that will impact rural areas?

School Environment

16. If a friend from another town asks you about this school,
a. How do you describe this school?
b. How do others describe your school? (other community members or area residents external to the school)
17. What, if anything, do you observe being done to address the trends impacting your school and its community?
18. What do you feel (use examples) can be done to provide further equitable educational opportunities for rural students in this school?
*School Level?
*Regional Level?
*Community Level?
*Provincial Level?
19. What benefits/challenges are youth faced with when graduating from rural schools?
20. What, if anything, do you observe being done to address the trends impacting your school and its community?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix E: Research Ethics and Transcription Approvals

I, _____, have reviewed the completed transcripts of my interview with Jessica Fancy-Landry in this study. As well, I have read, understand, and agree to the following points.

1) I have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcripts as I see appropriate.

2) I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects the content of my person interview with Jessica Fancy-Landry

3) I authorize the release of this transcript to Jessica Fancy-Landry to be used in a manner described in her consent form.

4) I have received a copy of this Transcripts Release Form for my own records.

_____ _____

Date Participant

_____ _____

Date Researcher

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Appendix F: Research Ethics Approval

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR)

St. John's, NL Canada A1C 5S7
Tel: 709 864-2561 icehr@mun.ca
www.mun.ca/research/ethics/humans/icehr

ICEHR Number:	**20201446-ED**
Approval Period:	February 18, 2020 – February 28, 2021
Funding Source:	
Responsible Faculty:	Dr. Kirk Anderson Faculty of Education
Title of Project:	*Prioritization of Rural Youth in Nova Scotia: Understanding Rural School Success with Policy Gaps*

February 18, 2020

Ms. Jessica Landry
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Ms. Landry:

Thank you for your correspondence of February 6, 2020 addressing the issues raised by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) concerning the above-named research project. ICEHR has re-examined the proposal with the clarification and revisions submitted, and is satisfied that the concerns raised by the Committee have been adequately addressed. In accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2)*, the project has been granted *full ethics clearance* to February 28, 2021. ICEHR approval applies to the ethical acceptability of the research, as per Article 6.3 of the *TCPS2*. Researchers are responsible for adherence to any other relevant University policies and/or funded or non-funded agreements that may be associated with the project.

Please complete the **ICEHR - Post-Approval Document Submission** form and upload the approval documents from the relevant school district.

The *TCPS2* **requires** that you submit an Annual Update to ICEHR before February 28, 2021. If you plan to continue the project, you need to request renewal of your ethics clearance and include a brief summary on the progress of your research. When the project no longer involves contact with human participants, is completed and/or terminated, you are required to provide an annual update with a brief final summary and your file will be closed. If you need to make changes during the project which may raise ethical concerns, you must submit an Amendment Request with a description of these changes for the Committee's consideration prior to implementation. If funding is obtained subsequent to approval, you must submit a Funding and/or Partner Change Request to ICEHR before this clearance can be linked to your award.

All post-approval event forms noted above can be submitted from your Researcher Portal account by clicking the *Applications: Post-Review* link on your Portal homepage. We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Kelly Blidook, Ph.D.
Vice-Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research

KB/bc

cc: Supervisor – Dr. Kirk Anderson, Faculty of Education

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Appendix G

Conceptual Framework

Data analysis will use the following conceptual framework of rural school success. (Canada without Poverty, 2019; Barely & Beesley, 2007; McREL, 2005). The four key components (Leadership, Instruction, Professional Community and School Environment) are based on earlier research on High-Performing High-Needs schools. Factors of success are then explored that comprise these four components and the relationships among them.

The grouped by key components are:

Leadership: 1) shared mission and goals, 2) principal as a change agent, and 3) principal as instructional leader.

Instruction: 4) individualization of instruction, 5) instructional resources, 6) alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, 7) programs for special needs students, *8) Culturally responsive teaching* and 9) instructional supports for learning (such as academic policies and the organization of the school day).

Professional Community: 10) teacher recruitment, 11) teacher retainment, 12) professional development, 13) teacher collaboration, and 14) teacher involvement in leadership.

School Environment: 15) use of student data, 16) high expectations for all students, 17) parent and community involvement, 18) safe drug free school, 19) *Outside agencies,* 20) *Multi-Tiered Systems for Supports* and 21) *Social Emotional Learning*.

The shaded components are the original factors used in the original HPHN study (McREL, 2005a). Components 1, 6,7, and 10 were selected from the original Barely & Beesley (2007) study on rural school success. The italicized components: *8, and 19-21* are new components added based on current experience teaching in rural school in Nova Scotia and from a report on childhood poverty in Canada (Canada without Poverty, 2019).