LEADERSHIP IN RURAL EDUCATION: PROGRAMMING AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

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by

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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education
(Educational Leadership Studies)

Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland

September 2010

St. John's **Newfoundland and Labrador**

Abstract

This qualitative study examined aspects of rural education in Newfoundland and Labrador. A phenomenological approach was used to describe the essence of the experiences of rural teachers and administrators in the province. Questionnaire responses revealed the views of rural educators' personal encounters with community, programming, and policy.

The study was driven by the following research questions:

- How can rural schools provide programming that motivates students while challenging them and preparing them for life after school?
- How can rural schools implement policies and expectations, according to the standards of today's education system and society as a whole?
- Are rural communities resistant to the provision of an education that is in line with current societal standards?
- How can rural schools provide the highest possible quality education?

The findings in the study reveal the significant role that both distance education and multi-grading play in rural programming, with support requested in both areas. Study participants also described some perspectives of small schools and the nature of rural community interactions. A major finding in the study was the sociological perspective that rural communities, in their attempts to maintain individual cultural identities in an infringing, globalizing society, may be in part responsible for some of the challenges that face rural education.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to a number of individuals and groups for their support and guidance during the production of this thesis and indeed the entirety of my Master's program. My academic supervisor Dr. Jerome Delaney in particular, has provided the utmost quality in advice and leadership during the research and writing processes.

The participating school districts are to be acknowledged for allowing me access to study participants. I would also like to recognize the contribution of all the rural educators who took the time to complete the surveys that provided the data for this paper. Aside from supplying the central ideas that drove this study, their valuable perspectives have provided me with the motivation for substantial reflection.

Finally, the support and encouragement, as well as patience, provided by my wife Allison during this commitment has been vital. Thank you also to my infant son Gabriel, and my dog Monty, for providing me with smiles and tail-wags during an overwhelming research process.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents Gordon and Jocelyn Ralph,

both of whom are teachers,

and who have instilled in me the value of education

and

my first administrator, Hollis Cull, exceptional and ideal,

who supported and encouraged my initial growth and reflection

as a rural educator.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

With such a large portion of rural schools, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador is faced with the unique challenge of providing consistent educational programming to a large number of communities with very inconsistent identities and cultures. Critical considerations in rural programming include distance education and multi-grade classrooms. The efficiency of these pedagogical necessities is significant, but is also very much dependent on the attitudes and beliefs of those charged with their implementation. Along with the unique programming required to meet the needs of rural schools, the implementation of policy should also consider the distinct nature of the communities being serviced by the province's schools.

Considerable research reflects the unique identities and cultures of rural communities (Bartholomaeus, 2006; Lyson, 2005; Salant & Waller, 1998), yet these may often be seen as cultures of isolation, economic troubles, and out-migration (Budge, 2006; Corbett, 2005; Press, Galway, and Collins, 2003). Some rural communities may be seen as islands in the sea of society. Rural schools are encouraged to reflect their communities' cultures while encouraging and supporting student achievement and preparation for a future which, in all likelihood, exists outside of rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Indeed, Sher and Sher (1994) suggest that rural students must learn to succeed *biculturally*, surviving in a rural culture while preparing for an urban one. Perhaps the tides of societal change are stronger than the education system itself can manage. However, one cannot consider supporting rural communities and their schools without knowledge and understanding of the true needs that exist therein.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to provide insight into aspects of rural education, namely programming and policy implementation. Using phenomenological qualitative research methods, rural teachers and administrators were given the opportunity to share their pedagogical and rural community experiences, exposing some of the challenges and benefits of rural education.

Statement of the Problem

The current literature on rural education demonstrates a variety of challenges, as well as possible solutions, that are facing rural communities. There are also some advantages to teaching and learning in rural communities. However very little research, particularly in Newfoundland and Labrador, exposes the real experiences and feelings of rural educators. The close-knit community nature of the province may be contributory to this trend where teachers or schools may be readily identifiable in areas of small populations. This study aims to share critical rural experiences in education while maintaining the integrity of participants as well as that of the schools and communities. The problem for this study was to analyze the perceptions of rural educators in order to determine the critical challenges and areas of need, specifically in the areas of programming and policy and their applicability in rural settings.

Research Questions

Following are the four research questions which guided the study.

1. *How can rural schools provide programming that motivates students while challenging them and preparing them for life after school?* The research must consider teacher recruitment and retention as well as the programming provided by distance education and multi-grade classrooms.

2. *How can rural schools implement policies and expectations, according to the standards of today's education system and society as a whole?* The guidelines and expectations outlined in policies should be examined relative to the characteristics of rural communities.

3. *Are rural communities resistant to the provision of an education that is in line with current societal standards?* The historical, cultural, and economic aspects of unique communities must be considered and discussed.

4. *How can rural schools provide the highest possible quality education?* It is also important to consider teacher recruitment and retention, as well as what actually constitutes a quality education.

Significance of the Study for Research and Practice

To date, the literature on rural education has consisted primarily of analyses of rural settings relative to either their urban counterparts or to the education system as a whole. The education system's applicability to rurality is often considered (Huysman, 2008; Mulcahy, 1996; Wallin, 2007), along with analyses of academic achievement levels of rural students (Press, Galway & Collins, 2003), but without acknowledgement of the practices and experiences of the individuals involved. Educators and policy makers

may therefore be lacking the experiential evidence with which to guide practice in support of rural education.

There presently exists limited research on real pedagogical experiences in rural areas of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Although much of the province is rural, support of rural education may be seen as coming from the outside in. Research must begin to demonstrate educational practices that are occurring in rural classrooms, as perceived by those experiencing them, and presented by those who have experienced them.

This study supports existing literature in pointing out the various challenges facing rural education as well as its benefits. It may, however, reveal some deeper understandings regarding the forces that impact these characteristics. The explicit feelings of rural educators may shed some light on the nature of the province's rural communities, their schools, and the system in which they find themselves. Mulcahy (1996) notes that the uniqueness of community context and the views of rural people must be the starting point for change. Such findings are a call to action for all stakeholders - from students, parents, and community members to educators and policy makers - to collaborate on a common ground to support and sustain the communities that give this province its unique character.

Limitations

According to Creswell (2008), limitations are potential problems or weaknesses with a study. Limitations identified in this study were:

1. the number of experienced participants, with 9 of 17 participants having less than 10 years of teaching experience;
2. the length of the electronic interviews being potentially intimidating to participants;
3. the categories (from which themes in the data emerged) were determined by the survey instrument itself, due to the nature of one-way communication in electronic interviews; and
4. the skill and knowledge of the researcher in preparing and analyzing questionnaire data.

Assumptions

The study was conducted on the basis of the following assumptions:

1. that all participants, according to the survey data provided, had some experience with teaching in rural Newfoundland and Labrador; and
2. that, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, the participants were willing to honestly share their real perceptions of rural education.

Organization of the Thesis

Seven chapters are contained in this thesis. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the topic as well as background to the research problem. Also included in Chapter 1 are the research questions that guided the study, a description of the significance of the research, and a statement of the limitations and assumptions. Chapter 2 reviews the

available literature on rural education. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 provides a description of the schools in Newfoundland and Labrador and a brief overview of the participants. Chapter 5 discusses the analysis and interpretation of the data received from the questionnaires, including an explanation of the categories and themes that emerged from that data. Chapter 6 relates the findings of the study to the guiding research questions. Finally, chapter 7 summarizes the study, identifying conclusions and implications worthy of consideration.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Although there exists some ambiguity regarding the term *rural*, there are characteristics of educational settings that may be considered specific to rural schools. Small populations, remote geographical locations, and a requirement (based on governmental teaching allocations) for multi-grade classrooms are some characteristics of rural schools. According to the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (2009-2010), *rural* indicates all communities with a population of less than 5,000. Currently in the province, 64% of schools are defined as rural, with 51% of all schools in the province having less than 200 students (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2009-2010). Critical considerations in rural education are teacher recruitment and retention, community dynamics, distance learning, multi-grade classrooms and school reorganization. Corbett (2006) strongly suggests that rurality must be considered in educational policy as well as questions of pedagogy and curriculum.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Challenges and Suggestions

Whether because of a lack of support, poor community connection, or the desire to relocate to more urban centers, there is no doubt that one of the more significant challenges facing rural schools is teacher recruitment and retention. Although some staff turnover may be considered healthy, bringing new energy and perspective, significant turnover requires time for orientation and team-building, as it presents disjointment and inconsistency for students and the rural community (McCullough & Johnson, 2007). Collins (1999) reported that the principle reason for recruitment issues is social, cultural and professional isolation. Although identified in an American study, this consideration certainly has applicability in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador: with such a sparse population, teachers in rural areas may find themselves with the feeling that they are miles from a nearest neighbour. Each rural community has its own cultural identity, which may or may not be reflected in the teacher's personality and the nearest colleague teaching similar material may very well be on the other side of the bay. Townsell (2007) also identified isolation as the primary deterrent to teacher retention. Other factors that have been identified include a lack of community services, poor housing options, high workload and limited opportunity for spousal employability (Harmon, 2001). A survey by Liu and Johnson (as cited in Barley & Brigham, 2008) revealed that teachers may often accept rural positions without having been adequately informed about requirements and expectations, leading to disillusionment and frustration. Evidently, such misinformation may also be a factor contributing to retention problems.

Identification of the issues is certainly the first step to countering the problem of finding teachers and keeping them in rural areas. The challenge is to present options that outweigh such deterrents. Significant literature has been presented on potential solutions. Collins (1999) recommends background considerations of potential employees, identifying teachers with a history of rural citizenship or an otherwise predisposition to live in a rural community. Barley and Brigham (2008) recommend that new rural teachers be well informed regarding the details of positions they are accepting, in order to prevent false expectations and dissatisfaction. Lowe (2006) suggests mentoring and induction programs for new rural teachers, as well as financial incentives such as loan relief and housing provisions. Nichols (2004) has presented a perspective of recruitment protocols by school districts. Although most recruitment procedures involve little more than a newspaper advertisement or a website posting, he found that "districts with smaller student populations were far less likely to have an identified protocol in place to recruit and interview teachers" (Nichols, 2004, p. 43). Malloy and Allen (2007) suggest a recruitment and retention plan which involves carefully selected teaching assignments, leadership and decision making opportunities, clearly outlined student behavioral expectations and the opportunity to interact with parents. The literature certainly provides an array of practical suggestions which may counter the issue of teacher recruitment and retention. One may, however, be left to wonder whether there are more significant societal concerns for which there are few or no solutions.

Globalization and Out-migration

Corbett (2006) presented perhaps one of the most significant underlying factors responsible for the issues facing rural education - globalization. He examined the population changes in Nova Scotia, noting that the increase in the population of Halifax was due in large part to the movement of families from rural communities into Halifax. Collins (1999) noted that most rural teachers were raised in communities where they currently teach, returning "home" to spend their career. If Corbett's (2006) description of population change is applied, the future does not look promising for rural communities. As the populations of rural communities diminish, the possibility weakens for the return of trained citizens. Other than the Conseil Scolaire Francophone, each school district in Newfoundland and Labrador has shown a continual decrease in student enrolment (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2009-2010). Understanding a trend of globalization, the decrease in the enrolment of rural schools in particular may be considered significant, thereby reducing the opportunity for the return of rural teachers.

Further findings by Corbett (2005) question the optimism that rural citizens will return home to teach. He found that individuals who remain in or near (within 50 km of) their hometown tend to have less formal education; those that pursue educational opportunities seem to permanently move away from their hometown, likely for employment opportunities (Corbett, 2005). Corbett (2009) describes this social dilemma as a conundrum that involves rural citizens wishing to improve their life chances with a higher education that requires out-migration. Unfortunately, the skills acquired through this higher education may be crucial to keeping rural communities alive (Corbett, 2009). Again, as populations of rural communities diminish, so too do employment

opportunities. The historically self-sustaining nature of rural communities begins to fade as the pressures of globalization and the need for formal training mount.

The Rural Teacher

Some literature has categorized the rural teacher according to certain characteristics. As mentioned, Corbett (1999) proposes that a rural teacher should have a rural background. Other particular traits may include certification in multiple subject areas or grade levels, preparation to supervise extracurricular activities, the ability to overcome cultural differences, and the ability to face social scrutiny and lifestyle changes (Harmon, 2001; Townsell, 2007). As such characteristics may very well be required for success in rural education, teachers should be recruited with these in mind.

Specialist Teachers

Rural education calls for generalist teachers with the ability to teach multiple subjects or ages (Harmon, 2001). This concept in itself reduces the likelihood that teachers will be highly qualified in a particular subject area (Barley & Brigham, 2008). Furthermore, the smaller teaching staff of rural schools reduces the possibility of reassigning classes to specialist teachers (Barley & Brigham, 2008). Also considering the challenges of teacher recruitment, the possibility that rural students will be taught by subject area specialists is slim. Students being educated by generalist teachers may then be missing an opportunity for themselves to become highly educated or trained in a specific area of interest. Bartholomaeus (2006) claims that students who pursue further education after completing their secondary education in a rural school are more likely to choose less prestigious areas to study. Without qualified staff to provide educational

programming, especially in core subject areas, students may be disadvantaged in their opportunity for graduation success or their preparation for post-secondary education or the workforce.

Community Dynamics

Rural communities are characterized by particular traits, namely size and isolation. Budge (2006) further identifies commonalities such as school and community interdependence, an out-migration of youth, and a salient attachment to place. These traits in themselves cannot justify the consideration or treatment of rural communities as one entity. Perhaps the most significant factor that all rural communities have in common is that they are all different. Treating them as such may be critical to their survival.

Community Identity

Budge (2006) presented a case study which analyzed rurality and a sense of place in school leaders of a particular rural area. The study demonstrated the importance of school leaders truly understanding the intricacies of the communities in which they taught. Participants prioritized the need to be highly visible, accessible and approachable, and to reach out to community members (Budge, 2006). Most significant however, was the fact that young members of the community were seen to have a stronger connection to their community than to success in society outside the community. Many youth were seen as unmotivated with a weak value of education and low aspirations. This attitude was taken to reflect the intention for youth to remain in their community after high school, as was

done by siblings and parents. Teachers also commented that many youth unsuccessfully attempted post secondary education before returning home (Budge, 2006).

Corbett (2009) furthered this notion, identifying a deep ambivalence that rural communities have of becoming educated, as a result of continually seeing educated members of their community leave for work. "Going over to the dark side" (p. 238) is how Corbett (2009) noted that rural people regard those who pursue formal education. Bartholomaeus (2006) also noted disengagement of rural students from mainstream education, the perception that higher societal values exist outside of rural communities, and that the less financially advantaged students and less able students are often those that remain in rural communities. In this way, a formal education may contribute to a distancing of rural citizens from their communities. The challenge then, for these rural communities, is clear: allow the formal education of its citizens, while ensuring their return home to contribute to local infrastructure. The solution of course, is not so clear.

Corbett (2009) makes a number of recommendations in this light:

- maintain a wide range of publicly funded services to draw youth back home;
- provide additional financial aid for rural students;
- implement satellite campuses and online program delivery;
- develop programs that tie student support to a commitment to return to rural areas;
- attempt the containment of post-secondary tuition costs;
- provide place-based educational initiatives;
- reflect entrepreneurship in K-12 curriculum; and
- initiate a new emphasis on geography and environmental studies in an attempt to develop a sense of place, globalization, and stewardship. (p. 243)

A detailed study by Barkley, Henry, and Haizhen (2005) showed that, in today's society of international competition and technology production processes, an increase in the number of rural citizens with higher education does not significantly stimulate the economy of that particular rural community; due to the nature of rural communities to seek a, "low-skill, low-wage labour market" (p. 14), enhancement of the labor force in the rural community itself was limited. Apparently, the task at hand is not small by any means but the message from rural communities is clear: their sense of identity may continue to remain stronger than their desire to compete in a global market. This challenge may therefore continue to have implications for rural education systems.

Of course one might argue that, in most rural communities, the school is a primary source of community identity itself and that the school should reflect this identity. Lowe (2006) contends that a school must consistently reflect local culture and community. In a study of mostly native, isolated communities across Canada, Davis, Anderson and Jamal (2001) found that the most successful schools were those with very strong community connections. Bartholomaeus (2006) examined the successful implementation of place-based educational programming in rural communities, noting that, "place-based education can both enable students to gain higher academic achievements and learn to live well and better appreciate the place where they live" (p. 487). Hammer (2001) also strongly supports a pedagogy of place that is grounded in local geology, ecology, history, culture, and economics. Keyes and Gregg (2001) comment that rural communities need a more substantive connection to the school, focusing on sustainability of the locality. Of course, such a premise would likely require high teacher retention and community commitment.

Teacher Connectedness

Huysman (2008) contends that teachers in rural schools cannot leave their jobs at work; they must continually socialize and interact with colleagues in the community:

> Relationships among families, parents, couples, children, friends, and rivals cannot be left outside the school doors. The result is a complex dance of perceptions and realities, long-standing animosities and alliances. These complexities are what teachers most enjoy about teaching in a rural district but are, at the same time, the source of many frustrations. (p. 34)

According to the study, a significant source of job dissatisfaction for rural teachers is the inconsistency between their professional roles as teachers and their social roles in the communities (Huysman, 2008).

Appleton (1998) analyzed teacher identity and how individual teachers associated their identity with the community in which they taught. Three main components of identity were considered - personal and social identity, professional identity, and desired future personal and professional identity. Where there were discrepancies in the three forms of identities, the author noted a likelihood of feelings of isolation. For example, rural teachers who spent their weekends in an urban center several hours away clearly had very little personal and social identity in the community in which they taught, nor did they have any future aspirations to remain in the community (Appleton, 1998).

Evidently, rural teachers are connected to the community. How they treat this connectedness and how they are perceived by the community may be critical to their professional success. Once again, a case is made for the return of rural citizens, with an established connection to the community, to teach in their hometowns.

Economic Distress

Unfortunately, economic challenges are yet another factor that characterize some rural communities. Budge (2006) contributes many social problems that affect rural schools to economic distress, stating that, "rural economies, dependent upon agriculture or extraction of natural resources, are weak" (p. 2). Hillman (2003) described a "brain drain" (p. 4) in rural areas as a result of young adults leaving their rural towns for employment. Press, Galway and Collins (2003) note that the unemployment rate in rural areas is significantly higher than the national average, and that some of the lowest socioeconomic levels in the country exist in Newfoundland and Labrador. An advocacy for entrepreneurship in rural communities is a possibility, focusing on novel business ideas rather than those already in existence in markets outside of rural settings (Henderson, 2002). Unfortunately, many such endeavors are unsuccessful as a result of low population and geographical isolation, among other factors (Henderson, 2002). Wallin (2007) calls for the initiation of various programs designed to support the rural economy, stating that, "Rural poverty is a very real, and a growing, concern" (p. 9).

Of course, the economic issues facing rural areas are not mutually exclusive from the educational issues. The educational and community characteristics discussed may be very much contributory to rural economic problems, and vice versa. An optimistic view is that educational adjustments are continually being made to compensate for the challenges facing rural education, in an attempt to impact the long-term sustainability of rural communities.

Distance Learning

Perhaps one of the most prevalent compensations for the challenges of rural education has been the development and implementation of distance learning programs. Indeed, rural schools have pioneered the use of distance education technology (Hillman, 2003). In cases where live classroom instruction is not available, today's education system provides the opportunity for students to enrol in high school courses through the assistance of technology. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Center for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI) provides this online programming. In this system, electronic teachers have the primary responsibility for course delivery and evaluation, while mediating teachers at the school level ensure appropriate interaction between students and e-teachers (Mulcahy & Barbour, 2004).

There is little doubt that with the assistance of online learning, rural students currently have access to programming that would not otherwise be available. "Access to technology may enable the neediest schools to overcome the effects of poverty and isolation, improve their educational quality, and allow students to become the technological leaders of tomorrow" (Collins & Dewees, 2001, p. 1). Barbour and Reeves (2008) identify a number of advantages to distance education, including high quality learning opportunities, expanding educational access, and allowing for educational choice.

The reliance of technology for learning is not without its challenges however. Collins and Dewees (2001) acknowledge that deficiencies in technological and internet access may be more pronounced in rural areas and even if internet access is offered during the school day, availability in homes may be an issue, particularly in rural areas. Lowrie (2006) also claims that geographical isolation may result in limited or nonexistent access to learning, despite recent advances in technology. Block (2010) stresses the

importance of narrowing this *digital divide* in order to reap the full academic and pedagogical benefits that technology can provide. The nature of online learning may also require independent learning skills, high motivation and strong skills in time management, literacy and technology (Barbour & Reeves, 2009), as demonstrated by students who are academically capable, self-disciplined, and independent (Kirby and Sharpe, 2010). As discussed, these may not necessarily be representative traits in all rural students. In this light, Mulcahy (1999) calls for the development of models that are aimed at all students, not just those best suited. The increasing trend for rural students to enroll in online course out of necessity rather than choice may be creating further academic risk, considering the academic challenges already facing rural students (Mulcahy, 2002).

Multi-grade Classrooms

Multi-age Versus Multi-grade

A review of the concept of multi-grade education must first consider a comparison to its pedagogical counterpart, multi-age education. Although the terms may often be used interchangeably, they have their marked differences. Mulcahy (2000) clearly differentiates the two concepts, noting that multi-age classrooms do not differentiate students by grade, whereas multi-grade classrooms are clearly graded. He explains that, in a multi-age setting, students of different ages are integrated into one learning community; multi-grade classrooms however, are distinctly divided into groups according to grade levels. Mulcahy further notes a stigma that may often be associated with the term multi-grade, noting that the term multi-age may be used to avoid negative connotation, although the practice considered may truly be multi-grade. This may indeed

be the case of rural classrooms, particularly in Newfoundland and Labrador, where a history of such practice is identified (Mulcahy, 2000). There is not, at this point in time, provincial curricula available for multi-age teaching and learning.

Advantages of Multiple Ages in a Single Classroom

Research shows a number of pedagogical benefits to multi-age classrooms. Although they differ practically from multi-grade classrooms (which are likely the case in rural Newfoundland and Labrador), the advantages discussed may also have applications in the multi-grade classrooms of this province. One such advantage may be the security that students feel by remaining in the same classroom for multiple years. Kasten and Lolli (1998) note that this sense of comfort may be most evident during the summer, as students prepare to re-enter the same classroom for the coming school year. Whether the classroom is a grade four to six arrangement (multi-grade) or one with ages nine to eleven (multi-age), this sense of security is probable. Secondly, acts of nurturing and altruism are more probable in settings with mixed ages. In today's society of potential violence, this may be a sense of reassurance for educators and parents of multi-grade and multi-age children (Kasten & Lolli, 1998). Finally, Kasten and Lolli note the importance of consistent role models for children, particularly those with stability issues at home. For children who see a transient number of significant adults in their lives, a consistent teacher over an extended period of time (as might be the case in multi-age and multi-grade environments) has the potential to be a stabilizing force in life (Kasten & Lolli, 1998). The literature also notes social and emotional benefits to multi-age learning (Song, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2009; Finley, Pettinger, Rutherford & Timmes, 2000). Although a multi-grade classroom may not often see direct learning interactions across

age groups, the simple presence of older or younger students in the same classroom may present social and emotional benefits to some degree.

Advantages of Multi-aging Not Seen in Multi-grading

Although some characteristics of multi-age learning may be applied in a multi-grade environment, there are some advantages that may be overlooked when classes are divided strictly by grade level. Perhaps the most evident of these is differentiated grouping: in a multi-age classroom, students may be grouped by interests, learning styles, need for special attention, and perhaps most importantly, the groups can change frequently (Kasten & Lolli, 1998). In a rural multi-grade classroom, there may only be a small number of students in each grade who are required to remain in working groups within their grade level for the majority of their learning. Also, the social and emotional benefits associated with multi-age environments (Song et al., 2009; Finley et al., 2000) may not be as significant in a multi-grade classroom, where students typically remain with students their own age.

Disadvantages of Multiple Ages in a Single Classroom

Research has identified a number of concerns with multi-age classrooms, which may also be relevant in Newfoundland and Labrador's multi-grade environments. Song, Spradlin and Plucker (2009) identify issues with implementation and operation, especially parental concerns regarding the quality of instruction or consistency in academically challenging students of different ages. Lodish (1992) also identifies potential frustrations due to a gap in ability level of students at different ages. Teachers may also be resistant to teaching multiple ages, due to lack of preparation time or

workload concerns (Song et al., 2009; Lodish, 1992). This may be particularly relevant in multi-grade settings, when multiple curricula are being implemented at the same time. Lauer (2000) identifies the necessity for support in the areas of collaborative planning, understanding the complexity of the changes required, support from principals, and adequate resources. There is also contradiction between the concept of multi-age education and standardized testing, which typically occurs at particular *grade levels* (Song et al., 2009). Even when grades are differentiated in the classroom (multi-grade), using standardized assessments on students who spend time in class with different grade levels may have validity concerns. Mulcahy (2000) believes that rural teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador would be willing to make the transition to multi-age education, but currently lack the district support and professional development to do so.

Policy and Reorganization

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 analysis regarding rural education. Using a series of case studies on rural Manitoba districts, Wallin (2007) identifies a contradiction between rural lifestyles and urbanizing school policies, in an attempt to lobby for rural policy support. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Mulcahy (1999) calls 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) comments that rural schools are expected to operate under the same policies and expectations as their urban counterparts without the necessary support or resources. "Rather than viewing rural communities as places where people live, policymakers have viewed rural areas as sectors of a national economy" (Budge, 2006, p.

2). Rural policies must change if the various challenges facing rural education are to be met (Barkema & Drabenstott, 2002).

Perhaps the most controversial policy issue surrounding rural education is school reorganization. In 1996, Mulcahy (1996) commented on the rurality of the 472 schools in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Currently, there are 279 schools in the province. Although the total number of schools has dropped by 41% since Mulcahy's study, the total rurality of schools in the province has changed very little. In fact, Mulcahy noted at that time that 60% of schools were rural, compared to the current 64% (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2009-2010). Of course, the intent of school consolidation is not to reduce rurality, but to allow districts to retain savings from school closures, thereby enhancing teacher allocations to rural schools, and funding new construction and renovations (Press, Galway & Collins, 2003).

While such benefits may be realized in parts of Newfoundland and Labrador, there are concerns with school consolidation. Bard, Gardener and Wieland (2005) see school consolidation as inevitable when a community's population has declined past the point of providing a quality education, but identify with rural communities whose schools provide for them a considerable sense of identity. Rural community members see schools as the heart of their communities (Hammer, 2001). Lyson (2005) notes that schools in rural communities are more than simply educational institutions, serving as social and cultural centers, hosting a variety of civic activities. Furthermore, Salant and Waller (1998) review the social and economic importance of rural schools to their communities, as well as their nature as arenas for local politics, resources for community development, and delivery points for health services. After a school closure, the issues of out-migration and population decline are augmented, diminishing support for public education (Bard,

Garland, & Wieland, 2005). Furthermore, due to the consolidation of regionally located schools, some students in Newfoundland and Labrador are required to travel up to two hours a day on a school bus (Press et al., 2003).

Press et al. (2003) commend the efforts of numerous policy initiatives for rural education in Newfoundland and Labrador, including structural changes, new teacher allocation models, e-learning, teacher professional development and various collaborative efforts between the school districts, the provincial Department of Education, and Memorial University. Such commendations, although optimistic, are based primarily on the results of external assessments for the entire province, and not on the perspectives of the province's unique rural communities. "The core of rural education is community, which cannot be tested" (Hillman, 2003, p.1).

Conclusion

Research has demonstrated that rural communities are unique in their educational circumstances. A number of factors may contribute to such settings, and a number of considerations are necessary to provide support. The future of rural education is the responsibility of all stakeholders, from students and community members to teachers and policy makers.

Although each individual community has its own identity and culture, certain factors may be consistent in a number of rural settings. For example, trends of declining populations and out-migration may contribute to cultures of poor motivation and low academic achievement. Such cultures (among other factors) may be contributory to challenges of teacher recruitment and retention, necessitating a specially-qualified rural

teacher. Furthermore, schools are encouraged to reflect the local culture of a community, despite ongoing pressures from policy makers and society itself.

A number of implementations have contributed, albeit out of necessity, to the sustainability of rural schools. The use of instructional technology may be the most significant development assisting rural programming, and multi-grade instructional practices may also have educational and developmental advantages. Of course, the critical interactions that occur in the learning process are those between a teacher and student. With the necessary support from the communities in which they teach and the employers for whom they work, it is hoped that rural teachers will continue to sustain quality programming to support today's rural youth, tomorrow's rural leaders.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter 3 describes aspects of the research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Also discussed are concerns of trustworthiness and measures taken to counter such concerns, as well as ethical concerns with responding strategies.

Research Design

Creswell (2008) defines a research design as the specific procedures involved in the processes of data collection, data analysis and report writing. Qualitative research considers the views of participants using broad, general questions with textual responses that are analyzed for themes and trends (Creswell, 2008). It is most useful for understanding the meanings that people make of their experiences (Morrow, 2007). Today's qualitative researcher is presented with an array of options and strategies for conducting research (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). The research design selection depends on the subject being investigated, the questions being raised, and the type of end product that is desired (Delaney, 1995). The particular research design considered in this study is phenomenology, a particular branch of qualitative research that uses the views of participants to describe commonalities in their experiences (Creswell et al., 2007).

Phenomenology Approach

Ostergaard, Dahlin and Hugo (2008) note a growing interest in phenomenology in today's research agendas. In phenomenological studies, the researcher identifies a shared human experience (or phenomenon), collects data from individuals with this experience in common, and attempts to describe the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007). Such qualitative approaches are able to delve into complex processes and illustrate the multifaceted nature of human phenomena (Morrow, 2007).

The central purpose of this study was to provide insight into aspects of rural education from the viewpoint of rural educators themselves. Phenomenology was considered the most ideal approach to describe the essence of the experiences of rural teachers and administrators. Questionnaire responses reveal personal views of rural educators' experiences with community, programming, and policy.

Access to Participants

In November of 2009, school district personnel were contacted from the Labrador School District, Western School District, Nova Central School District and Eastern School District in a request for approval to contact rural educators to complete a questionnaire. Where required by district policy, individual principals were contacted for consent and a list of participating schools were directed to the appropriate district personnel. Given the geographical spread of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, participants were contacted electronically and invited to complete a questionnaire.

Rural educators were selected from across the province through a network of online professional correspondence with the researcher. Starting in January, 2010, the researcher provided participants with a background to the study, including ethical concerns, and a blank copy of the questionnaire, and asked participants to return the questionnaire through e-mail, fax, or regular mail. Responses were returned in a variety of these three formats. A total of 51 questionnaires were sent, with 17 returned. The final survey was returned in June, 2010.

Data Collection

According to Creswell (2008), qualitative research methods seek to satisfy a general or broad purpose with the help of participants' experiences. Data collection tends to be in a general, emerging form, in text that has been retrieved from a small number of individuals or sites. Furthermore, this approach relies on open-ended interviews so that the views of participants are not restricted (Creswell, 2008).

This study used electronic e-mail interviews, which Creswell (2008) describes as providing rapid access to a large population over a large geographical distance, while forming a detailed database of text for qualitative analysis. The interviews were composed of a combination of closed-ended questions (for example, to determine participant demographic information) and open-ended questions (which were used in conjunction with demographic information) to determine trends in responses.

All teachers received identical questionnaires (as shown in Appendix A), and principals received very similar forms as teachers, with slight variations in the wording of some questions. For example, it was not assumed that rural principals necessarily had teaching assignments, so the particular question was worded, "*If you teach,* which grade(s)

and subject(s) do you teach?" (See Appendix B). Upon receipt of each completed questionnaire, the researcher mailed to the participant a $25 book store gift certificate.

The nature of electronic interviews allowed the researcher to analyze data periodically as it was collected. As each interview was returned (whether electronically, through fax or through regular postage), the researcher was given the opportunity to perform a detailed analysis, and relate the responses to those previously received. In this manner, by the time the final questionnaire was returned, significant trends were identified and prepared in the ongoing analytical process.

Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data involves the description of information and the analysis of text to develop themes (Creswell, 2008). A number of characteristics are typical of qualitative data analysis: it is inductive, going from the particular data to general themes; it may be simultaneous with data collection; it may involve several readings, each one providing more detailed understanding of responses; and it is interpretive in nature, leaving the researcher to identify themes or categories of information (Creswell, 2008).

As mentioned, the analysis of data in this study was carried out each time a questionnaire was returned. On no particular day was more than one questionnaire returned, which allowed the researcher time to perform a detailed analysis of each response, including highlighting major themes and making note of important trends. Electronic responses were printed to facilitate the process of note-taking and the physical

organization of surveys according to trends. As further questionnaires were returned, themes tended to emerge more obviously from the responses and trends appeared stronger in the data.

Once it was determined that the entirety of data was collected, surveys were organized according to categories that existed intrinsically in the nature of the survey instrument. Each category was then analyzed and coded in order to identify emergent themes. These themes provided evidence that led to the eventual interpretation of the data. This process was repeated numerous times in order to narrow the number of themes into the most comprehensive system.

Trustworthiness

Regardless of the discipline or research design, the trustworthiness of a study's data and interpretations is a critical consideration (Delaney, 1995). Morrow (2005) includes trustworthiness as one of the standards of quality in qualitative research. Although certain aspects of trustworthiness are specific to paradigm, Morrow considers a number of aspects as applicable to qualitative research as a whole. Such considerations include social validity, sufficiency of data, attention to subjectivity, adequacy of data, and interpretation (Morrow, 2005). Four specific trustworthiness criteria identified by Morrow are addressed in this study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were also identified by Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Delaney, 1995).

Credibility

Morrow (2005) relates credibility to the concept of internal consistency, where one considers the rigor of both the research process and succeeding communication. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Delaney, 1995) note that participants should see findings and interpretations as credible. Two ways in which to achieve credibility are prolonged engagement with participants and researcher reflexivity (Morrow, 2005).

The very nature of e-mail interviews allowed for prolonged participant engagement in this study. Participants were given no time frame in which to complete questionnaires, and were encouraged to contact the researcher for clarification or questions. In fact, questionnaires could have been completed over a period of months, allowing the participants to reflect on their practices and experiences, adding or altering their responses during such reflection.

Due to personal experience in rural educational administration and pedagogy, the potential exists for researcher bias in the study. The researcher acknowledges the importance of reflexivity as a reflection of one's own biases, values and assumptions (Creswell, 2008). In analyzing and interpreting survey responses, a concerted effort was made to recognize the potential for subjectivity and to recognize trends according to voluntary, open-ended participant responses.

Transferability

Transferability considers the ability of the reader to apply or generalize the interpretations of the study to personal experiences and contexts (Morrow, 2005). Rural education stakeholders may find this study (or portions thereof) applicable to personal

contexts. It is important to note that the researcher does not imply that the findings can necessary be generalized to each and every similar context (Morrow, 2005). Particularly in the case of rural Newfoundland and Labrador, the uniqueness of each community should prevent the generalizing of the study's interpretations to all rural settings. The reader may, however, find applications in the study for practice or future research.

Dependability

Morrow (2005) describes dependability as consistency that is evidenced by explicitly derived findings that may be repeated in similar contexts. Dependability may be accomplished through an audit trail that includes a detailed chronology of research activities and processes, influences on the collection and analysis of data, and emerging themes (Morrow, 2005). As mentioned, surveys were analyzed as they were collected, with detailed notes regarding themes as they emerged. Such themes are described in detail in the study. The researcher did not consider the chronology of incoming responses, with the intent of encouraging participant engagement. The time frame for the entire study period however, has been duly noted and is reproducible.

Confirmability

Confirmability lies in the understanding that research is never truly objective; it requires the researcher to manage subjectivity such that the integrity of findings lies in the data (Morrow, 2005). This data should relate closely to the analysis and findings in such a way that the reader may confirm the study's adequacy (Morrow, 2005). The researcher acknowledges the potential for subjectivity in the study and encourages the

reader to acknowledge similar findings within the primary data presented (participant transcripts).

Ethical Issues

The following procedures were followed in order to protect the study's participants:

1. Written permission to conduct the study was received from the four participating school districts in Newfoundland and Labrador.
2. The background and purpose of the study were presented (electronically) to school district personnel, school principals (where applicable) and study participants.
3. Survey responses (both hard copies and electronic versions) were filed in secure locations.
4. Schools, communities, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.
5. Participants were given the option of opting out of the study at any time.

The research proposal was reviewed by Memorial University's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the research design and methodology employed in this study. In an attempt to reveal experiential commonalities of rural educators through the expression of their views, phenomenology was determined as the most appropriate method of study. Also in this chapter, concerns of trustworthiness and ethics were considered and addressed.

CHAPTER 4

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR SCHOOLS

Introduction

For hundreds of years, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has based its social and cultural way of life on the fishing industry. Historically, towns were settled in every coastal bay that was suitable for harvesting fish (Barbour, 2007). The geographical spread of communities that resulted from such settlements had, and continues to have, its impact on educational organization. As the populations of fishing communities began to decline in the province, fish plants were closed and the produce was preserved and sent elsewhere for processing (Barbour, 2007). Rural communities in the province continue to decline in population for a variety of reasons not exclusive of the loss of infrastructure. Kasten and Lolli (1998) depict 19th-century American education in one-room schoolhouses where, as a result of sparse populations, children of all ages were being taught by the same teacher. Some of today's schools in rural Newfoundland and Labrador may continue to reflect such a necessary organization.

This chapter will provide a demographic outline of schools in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The researcher will then generally introduce the study's participants, as a representative sample of the educators that work in these schools. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain school, community, and participant anonymity and confidentiality.

Provincial Profile

The organization and dispersal of schools in Newfoundland and Labrador is historically related to its geography and population dynamics. The entire province has a land mass of over 400,000 km², with the Labrador portion comprising three quarters of this area (Barbour, 2007). With a total population of just over 500,000, the population density of the province is 1.4 people per square kilometre, lower than Canada's at 3.5 people per square kilometre (Statistics Canada, 2010). According to Barbour (2007), three quarters of the communities in Newfoundland and Labrador have less than 1000 people.

As of the 2009-2010 school year, Newfoundland and Labrador had a total of 279 schools (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2009-2010). These schools are currently organized and directed by four English school districts and one French school district, as outlined by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (2009-2010) and described below:

- Labrador School District: 15 schools with a total enrolment of 3,477;
- Western School District: 71 schools with a total enrolment of 12,489;
- Nova Central School District: 67 schools with a total enrolment of 12,493;
- Eastern School District: 121 schools with a total enrolment of 40,950; and
- Conseil Scolaire Francophone: 5 schools with a total enrolment of 256.

Of the 279 schools in the province, 178 are considered rural. Of the 101 urban schools, 66 are found in the Eastern School District. Only 39% of the entire student population is found in rural schools; that is to say that only 39% of the province's students are found in 64% of the total schools. (Government of Newfoundland and

Labrador, 2009-2010). A total of 88 schools, or 32% of all schools, welcome students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2009-2010). Almost half of the rural schools in Newfoundland and Labrador are considered necessarily existent, meaning that they are found in locations that make transportation to other schools not feasible (Barbour, 2007).

Stakeholders

The Schools

The schools with which study participants were employed were all considered rural schools, found in communities of less than 5000 people, as indicated on survey responses. Of the 17 schools with participants, 9 were K-12 schools at the time of the study, and 14 were schools with a population of less than 200 students. If the K-12 school system is divided into four age divisions (primary, elementary, intermediate, and high school), 15 of the 17 schools had students from more than one division. A total of 12 schools had high school enrolment, 9 of which included enrolment in distance education through the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI).

The Communities

The communities in which the participants worked were all considered rural communities, with populations of less than 5000 people, as indicated on survey responses. Of the 17 participants, 11 worked in communities that are located at a distance greater than 50 km from the Trans Canada Highway, and 5 worked in communities greater than

200 km from the Trans Canada Highway. Considering a population of 5000 to be urban, 15 of the participants worked in communities that were more than 50 km from an urban center, and 8 worked in communities greater than 200 km from an urban center.

The Educators

All participants in this study were educators (12 teachers and 5 administrators) in the Newfoundland and Labrador school system at the time of participation. All participants were considered to be rural educators, working in communities of less than 5000 people, as indicated on survey responses. Of the 17 participants, 4 had been teaching for more than 20 years, 8 for more than 10 years, and 8 participants had less than 5 years of teaching experience. There were no participants who were first-year educators. Only 7 educators lived directly in the community in which they worked at the time of the study and 7 participants (not necessarily the same individuals) considered themselves from the school's community or a nearby community. Multi-grade teaching was a current practice for, or had been previously practiced by, 13 of the participants at the time of the study. Of the 15 educators with teaching experience at the intermediate or high school levels, 8 had been responsible for teaching 9 or more courses in one year.

For the purposes of this study, participants were each assigned a pseudonym, as was their school and community names. With the intent for the reader to "get to know" the participants, a brief description of each is provided below, with the omission of any information that might reveal their identity.

1. Julianne teaches at Benson Primary School in Arbormoor Estates. At the time of the study, Julianne had been teaching for 3 years. She originates from a rural community.

2. Clayton is a principal at Blackstone School in Little Mistwild. He has 28 years of education experience and originates from rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

3. Liza teaches at Almeda All Grade in Montmoor. She has been teaching for 4 years and considers herself to be from a rural community.

4. Katy is a principal at Pickering Academy in New Mayfair. She has been in the school system for 13 years. Katy also originates from rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

5. Lonnie teaches at Laureate Academy in Cape Harborbridge. She has also been teaching for 4 years. Lonnie is from a rural community.

6. Allie teaches at East Point School in Willow Forest. She had been substitute teaching for a year and a half at the time of the study. Allie is from rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

7. Jessie teaches at Bretton Woods Collegiate in Glen Manor. She is in her fourth year of teaching and originates from a rural community.

8. Kelly teaches at Lexington Collegiate in Old Waterfield. She has been teaching for 4 years and does not originate from a rural community.

9. Miranda teaches at Harrington Academy in Lake Oakdale. She has been teaching for 13 years and is not from a rural area.

10. Marcie teaches at Orion All Grade in Waterhurst. At the time of the study, she was in her fourth year of teaching. Marcie originates from rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

11. Darren is a principal at Palmers Green School in Cape Ridgeley. He has been an educator for 18 years and originates from a rural community.

12. Clare teaches at Cranston Collegiate in Radcliffe Square. She had been teaching for 3 years at the time of the study. Clare is from a rural area.

13. Hugh teaches at Monticello All Grade in Baywick Square. Hugh has been teaching for 6 years and originates from a rural community.

14. Ted is a principal at Chadwick Academy in Sweetshore. He has spent 15 years in education. Ted is from a rural community.

15. Amie teaches at Barrington Academy in Southwell Bridge. She has been in the teaching profession for 22 years and comes from a rural area.

16. Tabatha teaches at Wexford Regional School in Cotswold Towers. She has been teaching for 20 years and does not originate from a rural community.

17. Lorraine is a principal at Ravenhurst Collegiate in Greenleaf Downs. She has 28 years of experience in education and originates from rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

Summary

This chapter presented a brief history and outline of education in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The researcher considered such a background to contribute critically to an understanding of the nature of the province's educational contexts. The settings in which study participants found themselves at the time of the study were described, followed by a brief outline of each participant.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Introduction

This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from interview data. The questions on the survey instruments were divided into particular categories according to aspects of rural education, guided by the research intent. The areas of teacher recruitment and retention, community, programming (distance education, small student population, and multi-grade learning), and policy were the categories that were analyzed for the generation of themes. The themes that emerged from the data are discussed herein.

Categories and Emergent Themes

This study examined the perceptions of rural educators in Newfoundland and Labrador. Data were collected through electronic interviews, which were divided into categories according to certain aspects of rural education. Analysis of the data in these categories has revealed a number of underlying themes. Creswell (2008) notes that themes form a major idea in the database and therefore form a core element in qualitative data analysis. The six major categories are outlined with a description of their respective themes.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

In the area of teacher recruitment and retention, study participants were asked to select what percentage of staff they felt returned to their schools each year. The largest number of participants (8) identified 75-100% staff retention, 6 chose 50-75%, 2 chose 25-50%, and 1 participant noted that 0-10% of staff returned each year. Participants were then asked to describe reasons that contributed to the trend identified in their selection. Analysis of responses revealed two major themes in the responses: location and employment.

Location

The issue of the school's location was discussed by a significant number of participants. For some educators, it was considered an important aspect of lifestyle, an area from which staff originated or that they eventually called home. In this light, the school's location was a major contributor to staff retention. Lonnie, who teaches at Laureate Academy contributes high staff retention rates to "family life, Cape Harborbridge is rural but is only an hour or two away from a more urban area".

Allie from East Point School in Willow Forest says that "most of the teachers actually live in the community and want to stay there. 80% of teachers are 40 or over".

Several participants acknowledged that "many teachers are from this area," (Jessie, who works in Glen Manor) or "originate from the area" (Marcie from Orion All Grade in Waterhurst); and Katy, principal at Pickering Academy, notes that "being from the area" accounts for high staff retention.

"Teachers in this area stay here - live and have families here, in the area or a short commuting distance (1/2 hr.) drive to the nearest larger community" (Tabatha, teacher in the community of Cotswold Towers).

Unfortunately however, location is an issue, rather than a solution, for some rural communities. The school is located in an area that is considered isolated or inconvenient, negatively impacting the retention of teachers. For example, Darren, principal at Palmers Green School in Cape Ridgeley, listed a number of location deterrents including "isolation, lack of recreation/leisure/social opportunities, lack of services, desire to move to more centralized areas".

Liza, who teaches at Almeda All Grade in Montmoor, also identified location as the first of several reasons for low teacher retention rates: "There is such a high turnover rate among teachers for many reasons. First, the location. The community is isolated and has little opportunities for entertainment and shopping . . . Working in this setting is not for everybody." She had experienced similar feelings the previous year:

> I taught in [community name], a very rural community . . . It was too far away from major centers to stay there any longer than one year. It was also very difficult to get out of the region in the winter so it made for feelings of isolation and detachment.

Kelly from Lexington Collegiate in Old Waterfield described these inconveniences:

> I found teaching in a rural community made it more difficult to access resources than it would be if I taught in a larger centre which may be closer to the board office or stores for obtaining materials.

Clare, who teaches in Radcliffe Square finds that, "the community is a little too isolated (i. e., far from the highway) for some new teachers."

Clayton, principal at Blackstone School in Little Mistwild noted that he teaches in an, "isolated community so we hire on term basis because we cannot get qualified teachers in areas like Science, Math, etc."

Employment

The second theme which was drawn from the category of teacher retention was employment. Several participants noted the availability of jobs, particularly permanent jobs, in rural communities. Lonnie noted that the availability of "permanent positions" may contribute to teacher recruitment, and Lorraine from Ravenhurst Collegiate in Greenleaf Downs identified "job availability".

The nature of Newfoundland and Labrador's school system though, often sees the employment of teachers in rural areas for only a short time before they seek employment in larger centers. Ted, principal at Chadwick Academy in Sweetshore, says:

> We have a number of teachers each year who do not return and really, have no intention to return. For many of them, our school is a training ground so they can move to more urban schools and towns/cities. In other words, we train them and once they are tenured, the urban centre gets the benefit of our work and we are left with the green teacher all over again. It's a pattern I don't think will soon change.

Tabatha echoed this concern: "A few stay only to get permanent status and move to urban areas."

Hugh from Monticello All Grade in Baywick Square also noted "teacher transfers, teachers wishing to move," and Darren included "lack of employment opportunities/future prospects for self and/or spouse," and "want to move to a bigger school," in his list of issues with teacher retention.

Community

> The sense of community is very strong in rural communities. I really love that about my job. However, I do wish that certain things such as privacy and confidential items were not discussed in the community. I think it is hard to get away from these problems in small communities. To a degree I think it is their nature to know each others' business. (Jessie)

The second major category in the survey instrument dealt with the participants' views of the communities in which they taught. This particular category stimulated significant discussion, from which five themes emerged: residency, familiarity, relationships, communication, and extra-curricular involvement.

Residency

Of the 17 participants, 7 educators lived directly in the community in which they worked at the time of the study. Also, 7 participants (not necessarily the same individuals) considered themselves to originate from the school's area. Participants noted these considerations as impacting rural teaching experiences. For example, Darren described "a stronger familiarity and closer connection to teachers who live in the community".

Tabatha observed a similar relationship:

> the students overall appeared to have strong relationships with the teachers who were from the area or those teachers who had been teaching in the area for a long period (i. e., principal/prior guidance counselor, vice-principal, and teacher came to the area in the beginning of his career and is now retiring there.

Jessie shared her observations of the phenomenon:

> Most students grew up living next door to these teachers, or have parents who are friends with them. They have a much closer relationship, and are also respected more . . . communities are very close knit, and many parents have spent their whole lives growing up in these areas. Some of the parents were taught by the teachers that are now teaching their children! Many of them are related, or are close friends.

Of course, the contrary perspective would be that of teachers who are not from the area or who do not live in the community. For example Julianne, who during the study was teaching at Benson Primary School in Arbormoor Estates, noted the following from a previous teaching experience:

> The parents would complain about the fact that most of the teachers lived outside of the community and that they would not stay long after school for help, which was untrue because all of the teachers were more than willing to stay behind for extra-curricular activities and for extra help with curricular areas.

Principal Ted noted a similar trend:

> I have seen it where teachers who live in another community, it has been seen as if they don't have the same time to volunteer to kids after school hours. As well, depending on the origin of the teacher, I've seen it where students have made disparaging remarks to that teacher and I've also seen it where a teacher has made similar comments to students because of their origin (rural vs urban) . . . I have seen instances where parents have made negative comments about a teacher if that teacher decides to live in another community and commute to work from the other community.

Tabatha shared her experiences with specific examples:

> I found it difficult to form a relationship with students because I was new to the school and from an urban area previous to my teaching there. Students were less receptive to speaking to me on a personal basis. One student said, "Miss what you come out here for anyway?" . . . I felt that the students didn't view me in the same way they did the teachers who were on staff for a longer period of time and especially not in the same way as teachers who were from the area of the feeder communities...One other student said one day that he works harder for the substitute teacher because she lives in [community name], his community, and I didn't.

Miranda, a teacher at Harrington Academy in Lake Oakdale during the study, noted that "when I taught in [community name] students were more reserved in their initial approach to teachers from other communities".

Liza described the experience as that of being an "outsider":

> It takes teachers from outside the community longer to establish a rapport with students . . . Teachers who commute from nearby towns and do not live in the community are viewed as outsiders and looked down upon. Parents believe that if

> you teach in the town, you should live there as well. Basically, teachers who live outside the community have to work harder to gain trust and acceptance of parents and community members.

Some participants felt however, that the amount of time a teacher commits to staying in a community may help to build what's missing in the initial experiences in the community. For example, Miranda noted "more of a discrepancy when you are new and seems to fade the longer you teach in the community. It is as if over time parents accept you as being more a part of their community".

Jessie pointed out that:

> the new teachers do not have the same common ground to share with the students. The relationship is not the same. However, after spending so much time in the school and getting to know the people of the community I find they are all very friendly and accepting.

Darren noted the "connection to teachers who live in the community especially for an extended period of time," and Tabatha observed the teacher-community relationship as, "positive for teachers, especially those there for a longer period of time."

Familiarity

The second theme which emerged from the questionnaire's community category was familiarity. Whether or not teachers live in the community, participants seemed to experience and observe a feeling of familiarity within and around the school setting. For example, Ted mentioned that "teachers seem to know the students quite well and interact well with them," and that teachers "are very familiar with many of the parents".

Liza pointed out that "students like the familiar".

Amie teaches at Barrington Academy in Southwell Bridge. She identified an advantage for the students to such a familiarity:

> There are some teachers who have special relationships with certain students where they can have a very good personal relationship and help them out in time of need (academic or personal). There are teachers who have taken on the role of BIG TEACHER. Teachers pick students who have some need (academic, personal, emotional) and meet with them on a regular basis to help them out or just to talk with them.

Lonnie acknowledged a similar importance:

> Parents and teachers in our school are on a first name basis. Many parents have other children in the school and where the community is small everyone knows everyone and their lifestyle. For example, teachers know what children have a "good" home life and which children are not so fortunate to have parental support which allows for teachers to know their students personally and meet their individual needs. Teachers who have been teaching longer may have even taught some of the parents so the relationship is easily established to allow for open discussion of the child.

Of course, regardless of location and setting, teaching is a profession and several participants noted that the familiarity that exists in rural communities may interfere with professional responsibilities. Jessie claims to live "in a community where everyone knows everything," and where "parents may expect the teacher to be more open about school situations than we are allowed to be".

Allie's description identifies such a dilemma:

> Being a young teacher from around this community, many of the students know you, your past, your life now, and at times, they think they are your friends, which makes the teacher-student boundaries and roles hard to build. It also can conflict with respect issues . . . the student's know your past, your present and everything in between, they know things that students shouldn't know and they have no qualms with bringing it up in the classroom. They think you are their buddy.

Several participants felt that, when rural communities become used to the familiar, change may often be met with resistance. Tabatha provided an example involving "a small group of students, teaching them study skills: students were not receptive to new ways of doing strategies taught them. 'That's not the way we done it with [name],' (a

teacher . . . from the area and teaching there all her career)". She also noted that "students were very resistant to new methods of teaching drama skills".

Liza provided this description:

> Parents are happy with teacher performance as long as nothing new is implemented in the school - meaning nothing is done to disrupt their traditions. Tradition is very important in the school and community . . . Resistance is then filtered through their children, who see teachers as working against their parents and community. As in many avenues in life, when students are happy, parents are happy. However, parents in this community have a tendency to believe whatever their children say without discussing it with the appropriate teachers. There is a looming atmosphere in the school not to disrupt the stability and to try and please the students. As a teacher in this school, I often feel the need to compromise my teaching strategies, and thus my creativity and pedagogy, in order to gain acceptance from students and parents.

Hugh also noted that his "community is resistant to change and parents are very supportive of students over the school . . . Familiarity creates borders, students can become too comfortable with the teacher and vice versa. This can lead to classroom management issues".

Relationships

When asked about the experiences within their community, many participants noted the importance of relationships with students, parents and community members. Lorraine described such relationships as, "nurturing, caring".

Jessie described her relationship with the school and community:

> the community that our school is located in is very close knit, and the teachers tend to have a closer relationship with the students compared to bigger schools due to familial ties . . . Many of the parents and teachers are either related or are friends. I am neither, but I find the parents to be easy to talk to, and they have approached me outside of school in my community to say hello.

Allie pointed out that "it is also a very small school, so it is quite easy to build a relationship with all students in the school".

Principal Darren described his view of relationships as "healthy overall...strong and professional, good support on average".

Kelly noted that "teachers have a caring relationship with students," and Lonnie identified a similar "close relationship to their students".

Julianne described her student and community interactions as:

> very positive and comfortable. The students feel free to express themselves and speak with the teacher about anything that may be concerning them. The relationship of the teachers and the surrounding community is also very positive. The community is very welcoming and creates a comfortable environment for the teachers and staff . . . The relationship between the teachers and parents of students who attend the school is very open. The teachers feel very comfortable speaking with parents and vice versa. The parents are welcome in the school and sometimes enter the school before and after school hours just to have a chat with the teachers.

Amie described a special relationship that their staff has with parents in the community of Southwell Bridge:

> Teachers have a very good relationship with most parents. We have a parent support group that work with our staff. They provide school socials for us and the staff provides the same for them. The parents also come into our school and provide items for our students (free lunch, fundraising for items the school might need).

Finally, Clare stated that "Some parents are quite friendly inside and outside of school. They are open to small talk outside of school and some even invite you to visit or attend an event they believe you will like".

Just as familiarity has its downsides, there are some educators who find the relationships that form in rural communities as potentially intrusive. Lorraine, for example, noted that, "there is a problem with parents calling teachers at home when they so desire".

Liza described teacher-student relationships in the community of Montmoor:

> Traditionally, when teachers have lived in the community, they have often been called at home to let students into the school to retrieve books, for example. It has also been custom for students to visit teachers at their home on a regular basis. If teachers decide to live in this community, they compromise their freedom and business. It is a small community, and news and gossip travel quickly. . . This became preferable and acceptable to parents as they now believe that all teachers should have this informal and personal relationship with their students.

Clare shared a unique personal experience provided by the community of Radcliffe Square:

> Some parents seemed more inclined to have a relationship with some teachers if they shared their religious beliefs, or at least made some suggestion of having deep religious beliefs. These parents will 'bend over backwards' for you if you are another religion and start attending their church on a regular basis.
> I have experienced this. I used to work with the youth drama group in my local community (with was also a religious drama group). I presented myself to them as a helper and not an adult 'religious leader.' Due to the fact it was a religious drama group the children performed during services. I attended these services and a few random services as to get a better understanding of their religion and beliefs. Some adults took this as a sign that I wished to convert and made some attempts to help me do so. They were quite friendly and invited me to different religious social events. When I made it clear to them that I was not thinking of changing my religion the invitations soon ended, however they were still friendly to a point. I have not had much 'small talk' with these individuals since this, other than parent-teacher interviews.

Allie pointed out that:

> most teachers know the parents to an extent. The problem with that. . . is the boundary of teacher-parent. Parents can try to "walk over" the teachers, because they are buddies outside the school or what not. It also can cause hardships if you have a discipline problem with a "friend's" child, and the parent thinks that the problem is unfair . . . Teachers may treat their friends' children different than the others, special treatment, they get off with much more in terms of behaviors.

On a similar note, Liza described a challenge in maintaining expectations:

> Generally, teachers have a positive relationship with students as long as teachers do not have high expectations for the students to succeed academically. It appears as though teachers with high hopes of student achievement do not have the same rapport with students as teachers who expect or let students away with more. Students love their teachers who take them to the gym often, take them on walks around the community, give less homework and are more lenient with

> assessments. For example, I expect students to show up to class prepared, participate in class and be ready and willing to work. Often times, as soon as students enter the classroom, they will ask if I will take them to the gym or if we can do something 'fun' instead of doing work. I am committed to covering outcomes, using differentiated instruction, and varying assessments while at the same time making learning fun. I put much time and effort into preparing for my classes but it appears that students favor teachers who laugh, joke, have a good time, spend less time preparing and are less concerned with their academics.

Tabatha provided two brief examples of negative parent encounters:

> Some were receptive to my recommendations about the student. Some, however, were not. One parent stated she felt I was treating her daughter differently in class than another female student in class. She expressed concern I was too strict with her daughter...One parent allowed her son to phone me at school (in her presence).

Hugh also described teacher relationships with students as "increasingly negative. Education is often not valued by the students".

Communication

Of course, one of the critical considerations for building respect and preventing and overcoming challenges in relationships is communication. The idea of communication, especially with parents, was a recurring theme that emerged in the data. Amie expressed particular support for the importance of communication:

> I think for the most part parents respect us because we make it a point to contact parents not only about the bad but the good as well. We have a number of ways in which parents are informed of what is going on with their child (Monthly progress reports, telephone calls, parent/teacher interviews, monthly newsletters, website and K12 Planet).

Marcie also noted "good communication between parents and teachers, phone calls, newsletters, grad meetings, and club meetings".

In Old Waterfield, "parents are involved in knowing how well their children are behaving and how well they are doing academically on a regular basis" (Kelly).

Darren and Miranda identified "good communication," and "good lines of communication," respectively.

In the community of Glen Manor, Jessie said "I find the parents to be easy to talk to".

Perhaps the very nature of rural Newfoundland and Labrador is conducive to informal means of communication. Julianne states that "the teachers feel very comfortable speaking with parents and vice versa. The parents are welcome in the school and sometimes enter the school before and after school hours just to have a chat with the teachers".

Furthermore, Allie noticed that "parents are usually within the distance to come to the school for meetings".

As discussed however, it may be noteworthy for teachers to maintain lines of communication as professionally as possible, in order to avoid Ravenhurst Collegiate's issue of "parents calling teachers at home when they so desire" (Lorraine).

In such "close-knit" communities as Jessie's Glen Manor, the previously discussed concerns around familiarity and relationships have applications when the lines of communication are opened.

Extra-curricular involvement

The final theme that was derived from the discussions regarding communities was that of extra-curricular involvement. Participants seemed to concur that teachers' involvements outside of the regular school day are rather important in building rapport and respect with students. For example, Clare explained that:

> teachers have a friendly relationship with students. They are easy to talk to, especially if you coach or do any type of extracurricular activity with them. Once you have a common ground with the students it is easy to have a good working relationship with them.

Lonnie identified a similar relationship:

> The teachers in my school have a close relationship to their students in that they are involved in the community activities in which the children participate such as hockey, figure skating, swimming, soccer and coaching after school sports.

Marcie noted that "teachers spend a lot of time with students on after school activities (extra-curricular);" principal Katy saw teachers as "sports coaches, group leaders;" and Allie thought "it is easier to teacher-sponsor activities that are in the same community as you are".

Finally, Lorraine said that teachers at Ravenhurst Collegiate were "willing to spend extra time after school to assist students with academic difficulty".

Unfortunately, however, extra-curricular involvement may be seen as a necessary expectation of teaching in rural communities. Two principals suggested that living outside of a community may interfere with this commitment. Darren noted that "sometimes travel limits extra-curricular involvement," and Ted said that " teachers who live in another community, it has been seen as if they don't have the same time to volunteer to kids after school hours".

When discussing "such a high turnover rate among teachers," Liza suggested that "there are too many expectations placed on teachers. Teachers are expected to become involved in extra-curricular activities and devote their spare time even on weekends".

Distance Education

Programming was a third major section in the survey instrument, and a discussion of programming in rural Newfoundland and Labrador seems intrinsically to include online learning. As a category, three main themes emerged from the participant discussions regarding distance education: programming provision, student independence, and key skills.

Programming Provision

In Newfoundland and Labrador, online learning opportunities are provided through the Center for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI). Of the 12 educators with high school programming at their schools, 10 participants suggested that there were limited or no choices in course selections (Katy suggested "alternating choice," and one participant did not respond to that question). Although CDLI is able to accommodate this challenge to some degree, 8 participants reported that at least one core subject course (Science, Math, English Language Arts, or Social Studies) was offered through distance education at the time of the study.

Some participants seemed to feel however, that CDLI was essential for providing high school programming choice and consistency. For example, Marcie identified "more choice in courses and students are able to do advanced courses," at Orion All Grade.

"Increased course selection" was an advantage acknowledged by principal Darren.

Liza commented that "students may have the opportunity to take a course that interests them that the school does not offer".

Principal Darren pointed out that "with the assistance of CDLI . . . such courses as Music, Art, and Peer Counseling can be offered".

Jessie noted, "the students are learning the same material in the same way all across the board".

Ted commended distance education "for students who cannot access the courses they want through our school, CDLI provides it". On the other hand, Ted points out that "there are also times when we cannot offer a course due to small numbers and still, the students need it".

In this sense, CDLI has become a necessary aspect of rural high school programming in the province, rather than a choice. Of the 9 participants whose schools offered CDLI programming, 8 reported that students enrolled in online courses out of some degree of necessity (1 participant did not respond to this question).

Hugh acknowledged that at Monticello All Grade, "receiving necessary credits" was possible, thanks to CDLI.

Principal Clayton noted that "students can stay at their home community school and get courses that cannot be offered because of lack of staff in school".

Clare commented that "the students are able to take advantage of courses not offered at the school (due to multiple reasons)".

Student Independence

When online education becomes a necessity, students may find themselves in unsuitable learning situations. Ted continued by stating, "some of these students are ill-equipped to handle the experience of on-line courses due to . . . lack of independent skills".

The reliance of an online environment on independent learning skills is evident in participant responses. Of the 9 participants whose schools offered CDLI programming, 8

reported minimal or no supervision of students taking these classes (1 participant did not respond to this question).

Jessie pointed out that "there is no direct contact from a teacher".

Principal Clayton described his situation with CDLI programming: "Computers are set up in my class and I supervise while teaching other courses . . . there is no face to face contact with the teacher, the student has to be very independent and work a lot on his/her own."

Marcie had these comments regarding the online environment:

> CDLI requires the student to be an independent learner, and be able to do work unsupervised. Some students spend more time on You Tube and other sites than doing the course work. Offline classes are not being used for offline work.

Principal Ted also made an observation regarding off-task behavior:

> We don't have the staffing to monitor students online. I do make periodic checks myself but don't have the staff to assign to it. For the most part, except for exams, students are not fully supervised. I do know too that students are not using their time productively as when I do visit, students are scrambling to remove other websites from their screens.

Liza reported a similar trend at Almeda All Grade:

> Right now at my school, there is minimal supervision. There is no allocated time to supervise students taking online classes. When teachers are on a prep period, they are asked to have a look in at students to ensure they are on task but that is the extent of the supervision. I believe there needs to be more supervision for students taking on-line classes . . . Students taking online classes tend to walk the hallways and go to the washroom more than students who do not . . . there is less time on task for students taking distance education courses because of distractions.

Hugh commented that "if not an independent learner they may not succeed".

Principal Darren however, chose the optimistic perspective and stated that distance education "fosters independent learning skills".

Key Skills

Other than independence, the development of other skills may be facilitated in an online environment. Hugh generally commented for example that students "may learn some valuable skills".

Clare thought that "CDLI students learn how to use new technology that would otherwise be inaccessible to them." She also suggested that "they are also able to interact with students across the province and form connections that may last throughout university or trade school (if the students are so inclined to continue their education)".

Unfortunately though, there are certain skills that participants thought were critical to success with CDLI courses. Darren for example, thought that "discipline" and "work ethic" were challenges to distance education.

Katy thought that an online learning environment was "hard for students with a weak work ethic".

Liza said that "unless students are very mature and motivated, they become distracted by the internet or each other".

Finally, principal Ted identified, "short attention span, and questionable work ethic," as obstacles in an online learning environment. He also felt that "not all students have the maturity to work independently without supervision".

Small Schools

Although CDLI is often able to accommodate for low populations at the high school level, there are a number of associated programming challenges to small populations at the primary, elementary, and intermediate levels. Discussions around small school sizes brought forth two major themes from participants: instructional practices and classroom atmosphere.

Instructional Practices

From a teaching perspective, fewer staff members may mean that each teacher is responsible for instructing a number of different courses, or courses for which they have little or no training. For example, 8 participants had been responsible for teaching 9 or more courses in one year, with some teaching as many as 16 and 18 courses in a year. A number of participants identified course areas that were being taught in their school by teachers with no training. Specialty areas such as Music, French, Fine Arts, and Physical Education were most frequently mentioned, but Math, Science, Language Arts, Social Studies, Technology, Career Education, Design, and Family Studies were also identified.

Kelly from Lexington Collegiate shared her feelings of being in such a situation:

> My pedagogical practices may not have been up to par as compared to teachers who have actually had training in the courses I taught, as I have not been trained as an Intermediate teacher, nor did I hold a Music or Physical Education degree, so I was lacking in that expertise.

Lonnie shared a similar experience with "teaching various subjects that are not a specific area of knowledge for the teacher":

> I do not feel qualified to be teaching high school as I only have k-6 training but in rural areas teachers are expected to teach any subject that is needed whether you have experience in that area or not. Ideally I would only be teaching k-6 but in rural areas you have to do it all.

Some educators voiced the concern that teaching a large number of courses interferes with a teacher's ability to become specialized in a particular area. For example, Allie had this experience to share:

> I feel that teaching a great array of courses, you never really become superior in the teaching of one course. At times, you are teaching such a different array of courses that they do not relate at all...Planning takes more time, because all the courses are so different from each other.

Liza from Almeda All Grade felt similar:

> When teachers are responsible for teaching many courses at the same time, they do no have the opportunity to become well versed in any of the subjects - basically they are spread thin. All of their time is spent preparing and planning for a variety of courses instead of becoming well acquainted with 2 or 3 subjects. This situation is not desirable for teachers or students. Students are not getting the best quality education and teacher stress is increased because of preparation demands. Because of the hassle of preparing such a demanding load, I don't believe I retain half of what I teach. And because my course load changes each year, I am not reaffirming for myself what I am teaching and learning, thus, not helping my professional pedagogy.

This notion was also expressed by Clare:

> It seems to be a bit harder to implement pedagogical practices if you are constantly teaching a different course. I believe if I had more than one course of a particular subject it would be less planning and therefore easier to organize lessons that are based on media production, for example.

Principal Ted also had feelings on the matter:

> For me personally, I did not have a heavy teaching role due to high demands in administration. However, I am aware of teachers who have up to 16 courses to teach. It is impractical to think that a teacher can do this and not to either have his/her pedagogical practices suffer or to have his/her students' achievement suffer as a result.

Principal Clayton felt that he had "way too many courses for one person to teach along with administration duties".

Darren, also a teaching principal, observed that his "quality of instruction suffers, inadequate preparation time, limited time for reflection, too many tasks to complete (course-related and administrative), inadequate feedback to students and from students".

Finally, Hugh found his course load at Monticello All Grade to be "very time consuming, with lessons often less effective".

On a positive note, Allie stated that teaching several different courses "keeps the teacher on their toes, learning right along with their students. I think most courses should be handled in the same manner, hands-on, interesting, and innovative".

Classroom Atmosphere

Of course, small schools have their advantages, and participants seemed to feel that small class sizes made for a comfortable and positive atmosphere for learning. For example, Ted felt that at Chadwick Academy, "class sizes are smaller so it is more of a nurturing atmosphere in the lower grades".

At Laureate Academy, "class sizes are usually smaller so it allows for individual bonding between the student and teacher" (Lonnie).

Lorraine pointed out another advantage to teaching a small number of students many subjects. She suggested that "you get to know the students' strengths and weaknesses in different areas".

Liza also commented similarly:

> Because I teach in a very small school, I see the same students all day . . . Because of this, I know what the students enjoy, what areas they excel in and what areas they struggle with. I can thus adjust my teaching practices fairly easily to accommodate their needs.

Clare noted an appreciation for small classes in that, "I already know what the students are interested in and what will help them in their learning. I can easily use ideas that relate to their real world experiences".

On the other hand, Clare also pointed out:

> I find it difficult to do group centered activities with so few students. In some ways this is good because they get more individual attention, but when you attend an in-service where they discuss items using groups of 8 and you only have 8 in your class it's a little harder to rearrange the lesson.

Liza also expressed a down side:

> On the other side, seeing the same students all day can become very boring and monotonous. There also appears to be less excitement from the students as well, as they too, see the same teachers all day long.

Multi-grading

> The teacher has to be very innovative and creative to be able to teach in a multi-graded classroom. There is more time spent on teacher planning. Multi-grade teachers need a lot of support and guidance. I was taught in a multi-graded classroom in primary and elementary. I taught in a single graded classroom for 20 years, when my job became redundant and I was placed in a multi-graded classroom. I found it so difficult, that I went back and did my Masters in Teaching with a focus on Rural Education (Multi-graded Classroom). (Lorraine)

One of the most significant adjustments rural schools have made to accommodate their small populations is the practice of multi-grading. Of the 17 participants, 13 had experienced some multi-grade teaching. Four themes were drawn from participant responses. Two dealt with teacher practice: curriculum and preparation/planning, and two concerned student perspective: social impact and lack of individual attention.

Curriculum

Evidently, multi-grade teachers are required to implement multiple curricula simultaneously. Some educators considered this to be a positive opportunity for professional growth. "Teachers learn to multi-task and become more versed with multiple curriculums" (Liza).

Ted also commented that teachers "get to become familiar with different curriculums which better prepares you in knowing what it is kids will need to know in another grade which helps in your preparation for teaching".

As might be expected however, the volume of educational programming to implement was considered by most participants to be prohibitive. Kelly shared that "becoming familiar with several different curriculums at once," was a challenge.

Liza reported that "teachers need to be masters of more than one curriculum at the same time".

Katy identified a "difficulty teaching all outcomes due to different learning abilities . . . the teacher may get lost with so many classes/courses," and Clayton thought that there is "too many courses being taught in the same period".

Darren also included "course coverage" on his list of multi-grade challenges.

Lonnie shared her challenges with multi-grade curriculum:

> The biggest challenge for a teacher is curriculum and lesson planning. It is more work for the teacher to meet all the outcomes for various grades at the same time and ensuring student needs are met. Demanding schedules and teaching various subjects that are not a specific area of knowledge for the teacher is also common in rural schools as well as lack of resources.

Julianne also described a similar concern:

> One challenge being the large amounts of curriculum that have to be taught. In my current situation (K-3) I have four curriculums that I need to be covering in all of the subject areas. This, at times, can be very overwhelming and stressful.

Principal Ted admitted, "it is quite a challenge to prepare for different curriculums. I know of one teacher who has 6 grades in her class at one time and **that** is a challenge".

Preparation/Planning

With the expectation of multiple curricular coverage, teachers must spend the time preparing for lessons that are meaningful for all students. Participants identified this area as a considerable aspect of multi-grade teaching. Principal Darren actually considered that planning for a multi-grade environment may assist the processes of "learning to multi-task, adapting lesson delivery . . . and developing time management and classroom management skills".

Kelly noted the planning benefit of "knowing the children better after teaching them for more than one year and being able to group them according to ability level rather than age or grade for certain activities".

Julianne noted a similar practice:

> One benefit to the teacher in a multi-grade setting is that when planning and implementing lessons and activities, all of the students are being exposed to the outcomes. For example, while teaching a grade three math lesson, even though the expectations are not meant for the other k-2 students, they are still being exposed to the information. Then the following year when they may be expected to understand this information, they are already familiar with it from seeing it in a prior year and they may achieve the outcome quicker.

The time-consuming process of planning for multiple grades, however, was generally reported as an inconvenience by teachers. For example, Lorraine stated simply, "teacher planning is a challenge".

As Ted stated, "It is quite a challenge to prepare for different curriculums."

Kelly noted the nature of "multi-grade/multi-age to change depending on the

numbers and therefore the 2-year or 3-year plan gets interrupted and has to be done again".

Jessie had this to say about multi-grading:

> I believe that a MG classroom can work if the teachers were properly prepared. I felt when I taught music in a multi-graded setting, I was not prepared to plan for more than one grade at a time . . . The students will suffer if the teacher is not prepared to teach in this setting. They will not learn as much.

Ted expanded this crucial impact on the students:

> Students don't seem to have much of an opinion on the situation as for the most part, they do what they are told to do. They have no idea whether they are being prepared for a wholesome education or not. It is mostly the teachers who are most negatively affected by multi-aging and unfortunately, the students really have no way of knowing how they are being affected. If a teacher can handle the situation, the students may continue to do well. However, if the teacher cannot, the students will suffer. However, that student may not realize how behind he/she might be until it is too late.

Liza described where she spends her planning focus:

> More preparation . . . More emphasis is placed on the importance of student independence and effective group work. Group work needs to be thought of carefully in order to cater for individual differences - all of which takes time and energy.

Miranda confirmed that "developing resources to use for all ages is extremely time consuming if it is not already developed".

Clayton found that he had "no preparation time to research new ideas," and Marcie stated that there was "more preparation time needed (even though there are only 5 periods in the day, the teacher may have to prepare for 7 different classes)".

Social Impact

In a multi-grade classroom students must share the learning environment with classmates of different ages and ability levels. Many participants seemed to concur that this setting intrinsically involves an impact on the social development of students. Marcie noted that "they enjoy being in class with their friends".

Lonnie listed several social benefits to a multi-grade environment:

> Wider social experiences with mixed-ages, transition of class roles from a novice to a mentor, new mix of classmates every year (1/2 or 1/3 in-coming students as 'older' students move on), and decreased anxiety of students transitioning to new teacher or next stage in schooling because they already know the teacher and some students as former classmates.

Amie pointed out, "that students can help each other, learn from each other, take on leadership roles," and Darren listed, "peer learning/helping . . . group work/cooperative learning" as benefits to students in a multi-grade setting.

Lorraine also thought that "younger students learn from older students".

Liza described the social benefits experienced by multi-grade students in Montmoor:

> In a multi-age classroom, students of all ages became classmates and develop a closeness that extends beyond the school to activities in the home and community. In a multi-age setting, older students are given opportunities for leadership while developing a classroom atmosphere of cooperation, teamwork and mutual respect. Younger students are provided with the opportunity to see appropriate academic behaviour modeled for them by fellow peers rather than a teacher.

Principal Ted had this to say regarding the social impacts of multi-grading:

> The social aspect of having different students to interact with can be both a benefit and a challenge. It depends on the maturity, socio-economic standards of the students, and personality of each individual in the classroom.

Contrary to her previous description, Liza added that "in a multi-age setting, there is a worry of younger students exposed to negative behaviour/influences of older peers".

Finally, Julianne described a unique social observation at Benson Primary School:

> A challenge for the students in a multi-grade classroom I find is displayed more in the older grades (in my K-3 class, it would be grade 3). I find my grade three students have very little motivation because they see the work that the younger students are completing so they feel that if they are completing the same quality of work that they are doing all they can. They do not push themselves to go further. I especially notice this in my school because once they move to grade four they are bussed to a different school. Therefore, the grade three students are the oldest students in the school so they do not have the interaction with older students or the opportunity to see the work that older students are completing . . . There is a major difference in attention spans and interests between a kindergarten student and a student in grade 3.

Lack of Individual Attention

Regardless of how peer interactions are perceived, many participants noted that the level of interaction between student and teacher was reduced in a multi-grade classroom. For example, Amie found that "students who want to make sure they are doing something right must continue on without constantly being reassured. Not as much one on one attention".

Marcie listed a challenge to multi-grading as "less instructional time per class/each class can be distracted by the other . . . Students may not have their questions answered as quickly as possible because the teacher may be teaching another class," while Darren noted it may "not always be a focused delivery of lesson, with waiting, loss of instructional time, disruptions".

Kelly reported a similar observation:

> A challenge to the students is being taught their own curriculum at the same time as another grade, which may result in less specific focus on their own specific outcomes, and the teacher must divide his or her attention.

Liza agreed that "there is not as much individual attention in a multi-age setting. Often times, students teach other students".

In this light, the lack of attention teachers afford to students may create an opportunity for peer support and independent learning. For example, Katy noted that "students can help one another," and that students can "get help/assistance".

Amie described the importance of "planning activities that students can do on their own while you are working with another group . . . teaching students to be independent and to work on their own without interrupting".

The development of independent learning skills was also noted by other participants. "Students learn to be more independent" (Clayton) and, "students are more independent" (Lorraine).

Finally, Jessie made this observation:

> I do think it provides a great place for "hidden curriculum" to develop. The students can use this setting as a way to direct their own learning, and provide opportunities for success for themselves and others.

Policy

The final category that was discussed on the survey instrument was policy in the participants' schools. When asked if their schools were met with resistance during the implementation of new policies, 8 participants reported this to be the case. From discipline and behavior management policies to nutrition and lunch policies, some educators were involved in the challenge of facing parent and community resistance. When given the opportunity to discuss school policies, two major themes were presented by participants: parental support and applicability.

Parental Support

As discussed in previous sections, familiarity and close relationships may be elements that are engrained into rural culture. Participants seemed to feel that open

communication and positive relationships with parents can be integral in the implementation of policies. First of all, participants reported the use of handbooks, newsletters, school newspapers, memos, websites, e-mails, assemblies, meetings, and curriculum nights to distribute information regarding policy. For example, Liza stated:

> The school council is made aware of new policies and there are parent representatives on the school council. Whenever a new policy is implemented a memo is sent home to parents/guardians that outlines and explains the new policy.

Tabatha and Clayton also acknowledged the school council as a forum for policy input from parents, and Clare had this to report:

> They wish to have input from the school council so there will not be resistance later. The administration is then able to say that it was brought forth to the council and approved. This puts the ownership of involvement back on the parents, who should have attended the meeting to voice their opinion at the time.

Katy indicated "great parental support" in New Mayfair, and Julianne found that "parents understand that it is for the students' well being".

Miranda identified parents as "partners in education," and Kelly felt that involving parents in policy gives them "a sense of ownership".

In Glen Manor, "we have many parents that back the school as well" (Jessie).

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Hugh reported a "lack of support from parents," but acknowledged that "we believe that parental input could help restore a positive relationship in the community".

Applicability

Amie reported that, at Barrington Academy, "things have been tried before and did not work. It does not fit our school".

This raises the question of policy applicability. Liza felt that "some policies are handed down by the school district and stakeholders are expected to follow them without much input".

Darren and Miranda noted respectively that some policies were "mandated by government and district," and are "actually required by school boards".

Marcie stressed that for "new policy, parents and students have to adapt to the change".

Unfortunately in Baywick Square the "community is resistant to change" (Hugh).

As shared in this paper's section on community familiarity, Tabatha and Liza have also faced challenges of breaking traditions in Cotswold Towers and Montmoor, respectively.

Principal Ted offered this acknowledgement:

> Sometimes, there may be some resistance but for the most part, once it is explained to students that something is going to run a certain way, they accept it, though not without some complaining and testing.

Liza had these comments about Almeda All Grade:

> Traditionally at my school, parents assumed much control over . . . day to day operations and even what policies were implemented . . . In the past number of years, the school has not seen a leader follow a number of district policies. Rather, previous administrations let parents assume much control as it caused less upheaval. Less complaints equal happy school board personnel.

Clare went as far as to say that at Cranston Collegiate:

> They do not meet with much resistance for new policies due to the fact that they usually do not implement a new policy . . . New rules would possibly bring resistance and the administrators do not want to anger parents as they have to live in these small communities with them.

Summary

Noteworthy aspects of rural education include teacher retention, community dynamics, distance education, small school characteristics, multi-grading, and policy. Each aspect was considered a category from which themes were extracted using data from participant questionnaires (see Figure 5.1). The comments made by rural educators were provided in portraying these themes.

Figure 5.1

Summary of Categories and Respective Emergent Themes

	C A T E G O R I E S					
	Teacher Retention	Community Dynamics	Distance Education	Small Schools	Multi-Grading	Policy
T H E M E S	Location	Residency	Programming	Instructional Practices	Curriculum	Parental Support
	Employment	Familiarity	Student Independence	Classroom Atmosphere	Preparation/ Planning	Applicability
		Relationships	Key Skills		Social Impact	
		Communication			Lack of Individual Attention	
		Extra-Curricular Involvement				

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to investigate educators' perceptions of their teaching experiences in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Specific considerations included community experiences, programming and policy.

Four main research questions motivated the study. Chapter 5 provided thematic data analysis according to categories in participant questionnaires. The concepts from these questionnaires were derived from the study's central research questions. This chapter will discuss the study's findings as motivated by each of these research questions.

Research Questions

How can rural schools provide programming that motivates students while challenging them and preparing them for life after school?

> We are being cut staffing members each year and as a result we either have to cut programming or begin doubling up classes or even a bit of both. This is a reality for small schools and something that don't seem to be changing. The response to us is to make more use of CDLI and while that system is a good one, not all students have the maturity to work independently without supervision. (Principal in rural Newfoundland and Labrador)

A discussion of rural school programming may not be complete without considering the areas of distance education and multi-grading. Participants also discussed the impact of small student populations on programming. Therefore, the first step to answering this initial question is to acknowledge the significance of these considerations.

Distance Education

The participants in this study seemed to concur that the provision of programming through distance education was necessary to the survival of rural education. Several educators' comments suggested that CDLI was currently providing high school programs that are required for graduation. The concern, as supported by this study as well as the literature, is that online learning is not necessarily aimed at each and every student. One Newfoundland and Labrador principal suggested that "some of these students are ill-equipped to handle the experience of on-line courses due to short attention span, questionable work ethic, lack of independent skills".

Barbour and Reeves (2009) suggest that the nature of online learning may require independent learning skills, high motivation, and strong skills in time management, literacy, and technology. Mulcahy (1999) calls for the development of models that are aimed at all students, not just those best suited. The increasing trend for rural students to enroll in online courses out of necessity rather than choice may be creating further academic risk, considering the academic challenges already facing rural students (Mulcahy, 2002).

In this light, it seems that CDLI is succeeding in challenging students while providing necessary programming. Student motivation may also be accommodated to some degree, as several participants noted that students can enroll in online courses based on choice and area of interest. The program, however, may not be applicable to all students. In order to accommodate these students, the school system must adjust to this challenge. Supervision and encouragement of students who lack the necessary skills such as independence is critical. Two solutions are possible in this light: increase the allocation of teachers to rural schools in order to accommodate the demands of student supervision

(many participants acknowledged that CDLI supervision was not a part of their school's teacher allocation), or have teachers supervise students taking online classes during regular instruction. A teaching principal in rural Newfoundland and Labrador has "computers set up in my class and I supervise while teaching other courses".

Mulcahy (2002) questions this intent:

> Does it mean that a school-based classroom teacher would be responsible for mediating two or more web based courses, while at the same time and in the same space, be attempting to teach a face-to-face course? Are the additional demands being placed on classroom teachers in a mediating role to be recognized as part of their workload and appropriate provision for this incorporated into their overall assignment? Or is this work to be done on their "free time" on a voluntary basis? (p. 21)

The notions implied in these questions suggest change, or at least support, for rural schools implementing distance education practices.

Small Student Populations

The dwindling populations of rural communities in Newfoundland and Labrador is being reflected in the classrooms of their schools. As student populations diminish, teacher expectations (particularly regarding course load) are increasing. Although small class sizes were recognized as healthy and nurturing learning environments, participants in the study also reported teaching assignments that required planning and preparation for an unhealthy number of different courses. Their response was that they were unable (due to lack of planning time and volume of material) to become specialists in a particular area of teaching. One rural teacher provided an exemplary description:

> When teachers are responsible for teaching many courses at the same time, they do not have the opportunity to become well versed in any of the subjects - basically they are spread thin. All of their time is spent preparing and planning for a variety of courses instead of becoming well acquainted with 2 or 3 subjects. This situation is not desirable for teachers or students. Students are not getting the

> best quality education and teacher stress is increased because of preparation demands. Because of the hassle of preparing such a demanding load, I don't believe I retain half of what I teach. And because my course load changes each year, I am not reaffirming for myself what I am teaching and learning, thus, not helping my professional pedagogy.
>
> So how can rural schools provide adequate programming with this considered?
>
> Two rural principals had calls for support to the same stakeholders:
>
> Not enough teaching staff . . . more help needs to be provided by program specialists to teachers in isolated communities teaching courses outside their field of study;
>
> I do think that the staffing allocation formula the boards use does not address the needs of rural schools. They look purely at numbers and it does not take into account the workload that doubling classes or multi-aging or multi-grading has on a teacher.

The demand placed on preparation and planning was identified as an intrinsic aspect of teaching multiple courses. These teachers require support in the implementation of pedagogical strategies that meet the unique conditions of rural classrooms.

Multi-grading

One such adjustment is the implementation of multi-grade classroom arrangements. As with distance education, however, this strategy has applications that derive out of necessity rather than choice. Participants in this study reported feelings of being stressed and overwhelmed by the pressures placed on them by multiple curricula and planning. Despite these challenges, this study may acknowledge that hope exists in multi-grading. Participants noted numerous social benefits of having different ages learn together and, out of the challenge of low teacher-student interaction arrives the development of independent learning - maybe even the skills necessary to support the CDLI students of the future.

So how can the system overcome the pressures placed on teachers, the very pressures that may be holding back the success of multi-grade learning? An important pedagogical distinction made by Mulcahy (2000) may be the solution. Mulcahy identified key differences between the concepts of multi-grading (which seems to be the practice in rural Newfoundland and Labrador) and multi-aging: in a multi-age setting, students of different ages are integrated into one learning community, whereas multi-grade classrooms are clearly graded.

At least two participants in this study may have been inadvertently implementing multi-age practices without realizing it. One such teacher provided this suggestion:

> Knowing the children better after teaching them for more than one year and being able to group them according to ability level rather than age or grade for certain activities.

Recognizing the need to make the transition from multi-grading to multi-aging is a critical step to supporting the programming provided by rural teachers. Educators must then be allowed the freedom to implement this pedagogical strategy, as well as the curricular development and training to support their professional growth as rural teachers.

Can rural schools provide programming that motivates students while challenging them and preparing them for life after school? Absolutely. How? Provide the necessary resources to support distance education, support teachers that have overwhelming teaching assignments, and begin the implementation of multi-age (rather than multi-grade) pedagogy.

How can rural schools implement policies and expectations, according to the standards of today's education system and society as a whole?

> The sense of community is very strong in rural communities. I really love that about my job. However, I do wish that certain things such as privacy and confidential items were not discussed in the community. I think it is hard to get away from these problems in small communities. To a degree I think it is their nature to know each others' business. (Rural educator)

The description that this teacher provided regarding the closeness of rural communities may provide more insight than initially appears. Although some teachers in this study saw the close-knit nature of the community as a comfort and a reassurance, others found it to be intrusive. The familiarity displayed by rural citizens towards each other, and to teachers, may contradict the professional expectations of today's educator. Another teacher shared this observation:

> Most students grew up living next door to these teachers, or have parents who are friends with them. They have a much closer relationship, and are also respected more . . . communities are very close knit, and many parents have spent their whole lives growing up in these areas. Some of the parents were taught by the teachers that are now teaching their children! Many of them are related or are close friends.

These genuine family-like relationships that bond community members together may interfere with the need to implement educational change. Study participants noted a hesitancy for educators to implement policy or administer discipline when such actions involved the children of families with whom they had a close relationship:

> The problem . . . is the boundary of teacher-parent. Parents can try to "walk over" the teachers, because they are buddies outside the school or what not. It also can cause hardships if you have a discipline problem with a "friend's" child, and the parent thinks that the problem is unfair...Teachers may treat their friends' children different than the others, special treatment, they get off with much more in terms of behaviors.

Another participant provided this insight:

> They do not meet with much resistance for new policies due to the fact that they usual do not implement a new policy . . . New rules would possibly bring resistance and the administrators do not want to anger parents as they have to live in these small communities with them.

The literature also offers some insight regarding community resistance. Corbett (2009) identified a deep ambivalence that some rural communities have of education as a result of continually seeing educated members of their community leave for work.

If rural students are to be prepared for post-secondary education or the work force, they must be offered the privileges of challenge and expectation, similar to their non-rural counterparts who learn in communities in which familiarity and closeness may not factor. Having said that, some study participants questioned the applicability of blanket policies to rural areas. Some literature also suggests a contradiction between rural lifestyles and urbanizing school policies (Wallin, 2007). Corbett (2006) strongly suggests that rurality must be considered in educational policy.

The onus then is on several stakeholders, policy makers no less and perhaps a team effort is required. A strong demonstration of rural school leadership may be one of the more influential factors to maintain and yet soften the borders between the school and the community. One rural teacher identified concerns with school leadership:

> In the past number of years, the school has not seen a leader follow a number of district policies. Rather, previous administrations let parents assume much control as it caused less upheaval.

A strong rural leader must therefore be willing to maintain a firm stance against the will and personal interests of parents. That said, participants in this study also noted the importance of having parents on board with the school and its policies.

One such professional practice in Newfoundland and Labrador is the development of school councils:

> They wish to have input from the school council so there will not be resistance later. The administration is then able to say that it was brought forth to the council and approved. This puts the ownership of involvement back on the parents. (Rural teacher)

Although this teacher's perspective may sound slightly artificial, several other participants acknowledged the importance of school councils in bridging communication between the school and community.

The literature also acknowledges the importance of leadership in rural education and may suggest means by which to develop this important parental connection. Hetherington (2007) suggests being familiar with the historical and cultural contexts of the school and community, being visible to the community and getting to know the members of the community (including their interests), all of which are part of a leader-as-servant model that can create a positive culture.

Similar practices may be acknowledged by teachers as they develop relationships within their school's community. It may be noteworthy however, for teachers to be educated regarding the maintenance of professional boundaries and the pedagogical challenges that may develop from overstepping such boundaries. A significant source of job dissatisfaction for rural teachers is the inconsistency between their professional roles as teachers and their social roles in the communities (Huysman, 2008). Indeed, teachers and administrators can both play a role in the implementation of policies and expectations while still developing healthy relationships in the community.

This discussion should not consider parents and community members as mutually exclusive from the bridge-building process. Communities must take some responsibility for ensuring that all educators (including those not from the particular town) are made to feel welcome but also respected in their decision making. Several participants in this study noted markedly different relationships between parents and teachers, based on the teachers' place of residence or origin. The following two comments from rural teachers are demonstrative of this phenomenon:

> The students overall appeared to have strong relationships with the teachers who were from the area or those teachers who had been teaching in the area for a long period . . . I found it difficult to form a relationship . . . because I was new to the school and from an urban area previous to my teaching there.

> Teachers who commute from nearby towns and do not live in the community are viewed as outsiders and looked down upon. Parents believe that if you teach in the town, you should live there as well. Basically, teachers who live outside the community have to work harder to gain trust and acceptance of parents and community members.

With this in mind, some parents must carefully be made aware of the impact that their traditional views are having on the long-term repercussions of educational sustainability and therefore on the future generations of their communities. Such lines of open communication (also considered by participants to be important in the implementation of new policies) may allow teachers the autonomy to treat children in the school and community as they ought to be treated - as mature, responsible citizens preparing for a future in a changing society.

Although it may be noteworthy to consider the nature of rurality in the making and implementation of policies, rural schools should be just as efficient as any in promoting student standards and expectations. School leaders and teachers should be

cognizant of professional social boundaries, but communities themselves should also be open-minded and accepting of educators and their intentions.

Are rural communities resistant to the provision of an education that is in line with current societal standards?

Policies and expectations guide student behavior and can certainly have academic repercussions. A culture of educational proficiency and academic success, however, may not be a natural beneficiary of the implementation of policies. Some results of this study, as supported in the literature, seem to indicate cultures of low achievement and educational indifference in some rural communities. This is not to imply that parents and communities do not wish the very best for their children. The researcher is not suggesting that rural parents outwardly resist quality educational opportunities. Perhaps historical experiences of environmental and economic hardships (Budge, 2006; Press, Galway & Collins, 2003) continue to haunt the corridors of rural schools, but some rural educators seem to experience a struggle with maintaining high academic standards. This rural teacher's description may have relevance to this discussion:

> Generally, teachers have a positive relationship with students as long as teachers do not have high expectations for the students to succeed academically. It appears as though teachers with high hopes of student achievement do not have the same rapport with students as teachers who expect or let students away with more. Students love their teachers who take them to the gym often, take them on walks around the community, give less homework and are more lenient with assessments . . . I am committed to covering outcomes, using differentiated instruction, and varying assessments while at the same time making learning fun. I put much time and effort into preparing for my classes but it appears that students favor teachers who laugh, joke, have a good time, spend less time preparing and are less concerned with their academics.

Bartholomaeus (2006) noted disengagement of rural students from mainstream education, and the perception that higher societal values exist outside of rural communities. Corbett (2009) went a step further and described a social dilemma that involves rural citizens wishing to improve their life chances with a higher education that requires out-migration. Unfortunately, the skills acquired through this higher education may be crucial to keeping rural communities alive, and yet there seems to be a negative regard for those individuals who pursue formal education (Corbett, 2009).

Without generalizing then, the answer to the research question is yes, there are instances where rural communities demonstrate resistance to the provision of an education that is in line with current societal standards.

The researcher would like to add to Corbett's social dilemma: the literature encourages schools to reflect the cultures exhibited by their rural communities (Lowe, 2006; Davis, Anderson & Jamal, 2001); teachers with rural backgrounds and ties to their communities seem to be more successful in their rural teaching experiences, and are often encouraged to return 'home' to teach; these teachers may be seen to lower expectations in order to avoid social resistance and maintain positive relationships in their communities (thereby reflecting a nonacademic culture). These considerations may contribute to a cyclical pattern whereby educational change as "brought in" by society is refused, continuing a culture of low achievement and social and economic strain. This dilemma is depicted in Figure 6.1, which will be used to drive discussions from the final research question.

How can rural schools provide the highest possible quality education?

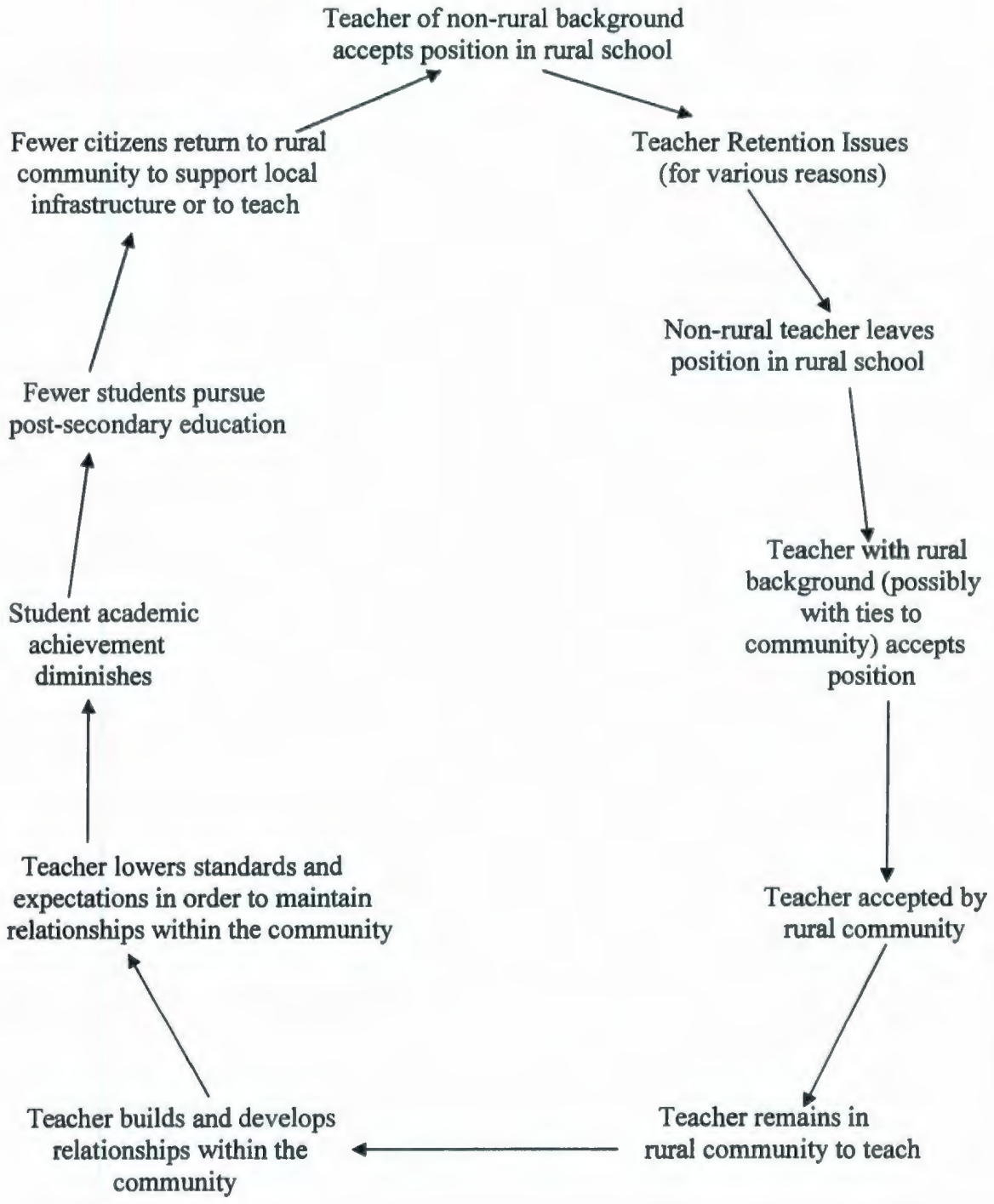
All is not lost for rural education. The reader should not lose sight of the numerous study participants who noted very positive experiences with rural teaching, as well as community interactions. The presentation of the above social dilemma along with Figure 6.1, however, may instigate critical discussions regarding this final research question.

The researcher would like to acknowledge at the outset that Figure 6.1 certainly does not apply to all rural settings, nor should it be understood that the flow chart indicates isolated cause-and-effect relationships. As an example, the researcher does not imply that the lowering of standards by rural teachers is the sole cause of diminishing academic achievement. The marvel of rural education is a complex array of interrelated facets and features, only some of which are herein considered.

First of all, distance learning is now considered an integral component of rural programming. As discussed, with the appropriate supports, CDLI may already be on its way to supporting and promoting academic achievement in rural schools. Secondly, the implementation of multi-age (rather than multi-grade) classroom environments may alleviate teacher workload and anxiety, thereby promoting a quality education. Even these two considerations, as demonstrated in this study and in the literature, could change the outlook of rural education implied in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1

Continuum of Possible Scenarios in Rural Education



But what else can be done to support quality rural education? Research has demonstrated issues with teacher recruitment and retention in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Maintaining consistency of staffing is an important consideration, as high turnover presents disjointment and inconsistency for students and the community (McCullough & Johnson 2007). So how can the second step of Figure 6.1 be climbed and conquered? Unfortunately, the very geography of the province induces feelings of isolation and loneliness in regions that some people call home:

> I taught in [community name], a very rural community...It was too far away from major centers to stay there any longer than one year. It was also very difficult to get out of the region in the winter so it made for feelings of isolation and detachment. (Rural teacher)

The bureaucratic nature of the education system also contributes to teacher turnover, as teachers use rural communities for breeding grounds:

> We have a number of teachers each year who do not return and really, have no intention to return. For many of them, our school is a training ground so they can move to more urban schools and towns/cities. In other words, we train them and once they are tenured, the urban centre gets the benefit of our work and we are left with the green teacher all over again. It's a pattern I don't think will soon change. (Rural school principal)

But can it change? If rural students are to receive the highest possible quality education, qualified teachers must be recruited to provide it (even CDLI cannot support K-9 programming). Once rural communities are fortunate enough to receive the services of qualified teachers, measures must be taken to keep them there. A number of incentives and suggestions, such as professional support programs and financial assistance (Lowe, 2006), are provided in the literature, all of which are viable. A comment from one of this study's rural teachers, however, stands out in this discussion:

> The new teachers do not have the same common ground to share with the students. The relationship is not the same. However, after spending so much time

> in the school and getting to know the people of the community I find they are all very friendly and accepting.

Perhaps it is the nature of human relationships but the development of security and comfort in new settings seems to require the passage of time. Perhaps conscious relationship-building would appear patronizing and insincere. However, participant responses seem to indicate that feelings of belonging in rural teachers may contribute to their desire to remain. With declining populations, rural communities cannot continue to rely on the return home of educated citizens. Although rural teachers may take some onus, it may be the responsibility of communities to play their role in welcoming teachers to their communities, making them feel at home, while still maintaining a balance that demonstrates professional mutual respect and a value for education.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the study as guided by four central research questions. Each of the four questions was presented and, along with summaries of participant responses and support from the literature, the findings of the study provided descriptive responses to the research questions.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In the first section of this chapter, the researcher provides a summary of the study, including the purpose, methodology and the findings, as guided by the research questions. The findings will include a revision of the categories and emergent themes from educators' perceptions of rural education. The second section of the chapter deals with the conclusions resulting from the findings in Chapter 6. The final section identifies and discusses implications arising from those conclusions.

Summary

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to provide insight into aspects of rural education, namely programming and policy implementation. Using phenomenological qualitative research methods, rural teachers and administrators were given the opportunity to share their pedagogical and rural community experiences, exposing some of the challenges and benefits of rural education.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach whereby electronic interviews were conducted with educators in rural Newfoundland and Labrador to investigate programming and policy implementation in this setting. The interviews were composed of a combination of closed ended questions (for example, to determine participant demographic information) and open ended questions (which were used in conjunction with demographic information) to determine trends in responses. A total of 51 questionnaires were sent, with 17 returned.

As suggested by Creswell (2008), the interview data was then analyzed for major themes within each survey category. Such themes led the researcher to determine a number of findings and conclusions.

Findings

A number of themes emerged from the commentaries provided by rural educators regarding their experiences in education. These themes were derived once the responses on the survey instrument were divided into categories, each corresponding to a critical aspect of rural education.

The categories and their respective themes were:

- teacher recruitment and retention: location and employment;
- community dynamics: residency, familiarity, relationships, communication, and extra-curricular involvement;
- distance education: programming, student independence, and key skills;
- small schools: instructional practices and classroom atmosphere

- multi-grading: curriculum, preparation and planning, social impact, and individual attention; and
- policy: parental support and applicability.

The study's four research questions along with a brief summary of their responses follows.

1. *How can rural schools provide programming that motivates students while challenging them and preparing them for life after school?* With the necessary support (particularly in the area of student supervision), CDLI may be integral in supporting high school programming in rural schools. The current method of grouping rural students of different ages seems to reflect multi-grading. A change in philosophy whereby multi-age programming is encouraged, supported and implemented may also support rural programming.

2. *How can rural schools implement policies and expectations, according to the standards of today's education system and society as a whole?* The familiarity and closeness that characterizes many rural communities in Newfoundland and Labrador must be recognized as impacting educational programming. The researcher does not wish to imply that such relationships are negative; they can provide significant support to schools. However, a level of professionalism should be maintained, particularly with parents, in order to sustain policy standards and expectations. This process may be promoted by strong school leadership, communication, and education. The communities themselves can also play a role in supporting school decisions and policies. In some cases the applicability of policies to rural settings should be considered.

3. *Are rural communities resistant to the provision of an education that is in line with current societal standards?* This was shown to be the case in some circumstances. It may be the nature of strong traditions and cultures or the vision of educated youth leaving home without return. Of course, teachers' experiences of student academic resistance could result from any number of factors but participants seemed to note this cultural trend along with the resistance of policy implementation. Furthermore, the literature has shown a trend of educational resistance from sociological and historical perspectives.

4. *How can rural schools provide the highest possible quality education?* As discussed in the response to the first research question, the provision of online learning programs and multi-age practices can augment the quality of rural education. Teacher recruitment and retention must also be considered, in order to provide consistency and stability for educational programs. Once again, however, the communities themselves must take on some responsibility in accepting and welcoming teachers of various backgrounds and experiences, fostering professional relationships of mutual respect and educational value.

Conclusions

The findings of this study have led the researcher to draw several conclusions. These have been related to implications for a sustained future of rural education in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Conclusion #1

Further support is required in order for online learning to reach its full programming potential. Particularly in the area of student supervision, support from either the provision and allocation of human resource or pedagogical adjustment is necessary. Most participants with distance education at their school reported minimal supervision of CDLI students. Some schools were making adjustments (for example, by having CDLI students working on the computers in the same space and at the same time as a traditional class), but these may be essentially increasing the workload of already over-burdened rural teachers.

Conclusion #2

Teaching small student populations has its drawbacks, and these teachers require support. Teachers who have small numbers of students must balance the advantages associated with small classes with planning and preparing significant course loads. The amount of curriculum that some teachers are expected to cover is unreasonable. Teacher allocation formulas for rural schools may not be applicable when considering the number of courses for which teachers are responsible. Also, preparation and planning time for individual teachers was found to recur in participant responses. Perhaps schools and districts should consider preparation time in teacher schedules according to curricular volume in teaching assignments.

Conclusion #3

The current concept of multi-grade pedagogy should be replaced with multi-age practices. There is an important distinction to be noted between multi-grading and multi-aging. This difference, the flexible grouping of students by (for example) ability level or interest as opposed to grade (Mulcahy, 2000), could have particular repercussions on teacher morale and effectiveness. The current practice in rural Newfoundland and Labrador seems to be that of multi-grading, where teachers are expected to implement a large number of different curricula throughout the school day, often at the same time. Multi-age practices could allow teachers the freedom to adjust their practices so that all students are treated as one learning community that meet curricular outcomes at their own pace according to their ability level, rather than being permanently segregated by grade. This transition would of course require significant support from school districts and the Department of Education, especially in the area of curriculum development and adjustment. Professional development in the area of multiage teaching would also be critical for teachers.

Conclusion #4

Rural school leaders have a difficult balance of firm policy implementation and positive community relations. Rural students deserve the opportunity to be challenged both academically and behaviorally. Educational change occurs naturally in response to society. Despite the potential for rural communities to resist this change, educational leaders are responsible for its support and implementation, while still fostering and acknowledging the close-knit, traditional nature of rural relationships. Such relationships were reported to be critical in supporting school functions, but may also be prohibitive to

the maintenance of professional standards. School councils may be important professional forums in which professional relationships with parents are maintained.

Conclusion #5

Rural communities have critical roles to play in rural programming. Much of the literature on rural education seems to provide analysis and commentary from the outside in, describing what the school system can do for the communities. The data from this study supports the notion that the communities themselves (particularly the parents) can have a crucial impact on the success of rural education. As direct stakeholders in the learning process (especially in close-knit rural communities), parents may have the potential to lend support to rural schools (e. g., by welcoming and encouraging new teachers or by supporting school policies) or to hinder school processes (e. g., by resisting the efforts of new teachers and overlooking the educational intent of policies). The latter can certainly have a negative impact on their children's programming. The researcher is not suggesting that the educational community should direct rural parents in how to conduct themselves but communities should be educated regarding the crucial role that they play in supporting schools, and encouraged to play that role in sustaining the viability of their schools.

Conclusion #6

Measures should be taken to support the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas. Although one cannot change the geography of the province (to minimize feelings of isolation), or suggest a change in the bureaucratic structure of collective agreements (to reduce the impact of teacher movement through rural communities), one

can suggest more effort from all stakeholders in order to maintain teacher consistency in areas where there has been little. Financial support from government, mentoring support from districts, induction programs from schools (Lowe, 2006) and welcoming atmospheres from communities are just a few of the considerations.

Conclusion #7

Some rural communities are lacking educational value in their culture. Data from this study, as well as the literature, suggest a diminishing value for education in rural communities. The acknowledgement of this trend is an important initial consideration, but it should not remain as simply an acknowledgement. Suggesting that educators can change the culture of a community is both presumptuous and overambitious. However, with strong leadership, positive lines of communication, careful relationship building, and time, one would hope that a committed team of educational stakeholders can gradually make the changes necessary to initiate and maintain a culture of high educational value, thereby encouraging a community's social, cultural and economic sustainability.

Implications

Several relevant implications were presented by the findings and conclusions in this study. These implications have value either practically or for research.

Implications for Practice

This study involved the investigation of rural educators' perceptions of their experiences in Newfoundland and Labrador. The researcher suggests that benefits are presented to participants and other rural educators, the supporting school districts and the rural communities themselves.

In completing the electronic interviews, participants were provided the opportunity for professional reflection on various aspects of their experiences. The survey instrument itself was organized so as to guide the participants through reflections of particular aspects of rural education (the eventual categories in the data). Not only were educators willing to share their own experiences, many of them described observations and insight into the driving sociological forces behind rural challenges.

1. *It is therefore recommended that rural educators be encouraged to reflect on the various unique aspects of rural education, as a means by which to truly understand the intricacies that motivate the interactions with which they deal on a daily basis.*

Rural leaders may initiate such reflection in staff meetings, through focus groups, or through informal conversation in carpools on the way to work from another community. Rural teachers may also initiate such reflection themselves through personal

journaling or the perusal of the increasingly developing libraries of rural education literature.

Given the considerations in this study, it is hoped that such reflection might motivate rural leaders to continually strive for excellence in their practice. For the sake of this province's future, today's students must be given every possible opportunity to develop in a supportive and encouraging system that challenges and motivates.

2. *It is therefore recommended that rural leaders continue to maintain high standards of academic achievement and expectations, despite the potential for conflicting priorities in the cultures of rural communities.*

A number of suggestions are implied in this study's conclusions which may be important considerations in supporting rural education. Especially in the areas of distance education and multi-age learning, support from the Department of Education and the school districts is critical in supporting the unique characteristics of rural school programming.

3. *It is therefore recommended that the school districts that receive a copy of this thesis consider wholeheartedly the findings and conclusions contained herein.*

The concerns addressed in this study have provided insight into the complex historical and sociological backgrounds of rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Such an analysis has motivated the researcher to request that rural communities acknowledge their own (often cultural) shortcomings and play their part in support of rural education.

4. *It is therefore recommended that rural communities in this province take some responsibility for the educational challenges they face, and make a concerted effort to support the schools and educators that are keeping their communities alive.*

Implications for Research

This study has considered in a general sense a variety of factors that may impact rural education. Some of these considerations have received significant specific attention in the literature over the past decade (distance education, for example). In a changing society that requires the adaptation of traditional cultures, such research should continue, in order to inform and support the needs of rural programming. Some, however, have been reflected in only sparse publications. For example, although aspects and experiences of multi-age pedagogy have been well documented, its applicability to rural Newfoundland and Labrador (where multi-grading has traditionally been a practice) could avail of further research. The impact of historical and sociological perspectives on rural schools, as raised in this study, could also open doors of exploration and understanding.

It is therefore recommended that current and future academics in rural education continue to support the existing literature but especially to consider the applicability of multi-age pedagogy as well as the sociological aspects of rural education.

Concluding Comment

Other than the potential benefits provided to the various stakeholders as discussed in the study's implications, the researcher has also accrued a number of benefits. These include: the opportunity for significant reflection of personal theory and practice (as provided by the study's data analysis); access to considerable literature relevant to personal practice; the development of the skills related to qualitative research; and the development of a network of educators and researchers with a genuine interest in the field of rural education.

In conclusion, the researcher would like to note the importance of rural communities to the identity of Newfoundland and Labrador. In a globalizing society, individual community cultures are diminishing. Newfoundland and Labrador may have one of the more unique cultures in the world, thanks in large part to its rural history. It is hoped that the education system can help to sustain these communities for many more generations without imposing on the individuality that characterizes each little piece of home.

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Appendix A

Teacher Questionnaire

Teacher Questionnaire

Instructions: Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. All responses are voluntary, and will be kept entirely confidential. Please note that some questions may not be applicable, and may be skipped. Provide as much or as little detail as you see necessary.

School/Teacher Dynamics

1. What grades are taught at your school? _____

2. Approximately how many students are enrolled at your school?

☐Less than 50 ☐50-100 ☐100-150 ☐150-200 ☐greater than 200

3. Please indicate the following information regarding the community in which you teach:

a) Approximate population of community:

☐less than 500 ☐500-1000 ☐1000-2500 ☐2500-5000 ☐greater than 5000

b) Approximate distance of community from Trans Canada Highway:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

c) Approximate distance of community from the closest community of a population of 5000 or more people:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

4. Are you: ☐Male ☐Female

5. How many years have you been teaching? _____

6. For how many of your teaching years have you taught at your current school? _____

7. Please describe any teaching positions which you have held, other than your current position (please include geographical location).

_____

8. Do you currently live directly in the community in which you teach? ☐yes ☐no

9. Do you consider yourself to originate from the community in which you teach?

☐yes ☐no

10. Please indicate the following information regarding the community from which you originate:

a) Approximate population of community:

☐less than 500 ☐500-1000 ☐1000-2500 ☐2500-5000 ☐greater than 5000

b) Approximate distance of community from Trans Canada Highway:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

c) Approximate distance of community from the closest community of a population of 5000 or more people:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

11. Please describe the relationship that teachers have with students in your school and within the community in which the school is located. Feel free to use specific examples to clarify your description.

---

12. Please describe the relationship that teachers have with parents of students who attend your school. Feel free to use specific examples to clarify your description.

---

13. Have you observed or experienced discrepancy in the relationship between teachers and students, according to the teachers' place of origin or current residence? Please explain with examples, if applicable.

---

14. Have you observed or experienced discrepancy in the relationship between teachers and parents, according to the teachers' place of origin or current residence? Please explain with examples, if applicable.

Programming

15. Which grade(s) and subject(s) do you teach? _____

16. Do you currently teach, or have you ever taught, in a multi-grade setting? ☐yes ☐no
(if you answered *no*, please skip to question number 17)

a) Please describe any benefits and/or challenges to the *teacher* in a multi-grade (or multi-age) educational setting.

_____

b) Please describe any benefits and/or challenges to the *students* in a multi-grade (or multi-age) educational setting.

_____

17. Do you teach, or have you taught, at the *Intermediate and/or High School* level?
☐yes ☐no
(if you answered *no*, please skip to question number 20)

a) How many different courses/subjects do you, or did you, teach in one year? _____

i) How do you believe this impacts pedagogical practices?

_____

b) Do you teach the same students repeatedly throughout each day? ☐yes ☐no

i) How do you believe this impacts pedagogical practices?

_____

18. Please describe, to the best of your knowledge, the level of programming choice offered to Intermediate and High School students at your school.

_____

19. Do students at your school enroll in online courses? ☐yes ☐no
(if you answered *no*, please skip to question number 20)

a) Please describe the nature and level of in-school supervision provided to students taking online classes.

_____

b) Please describe any benefits and/or challenges to students in an online learning environment.

---

c) Do students in your school enroll in online courses out of:

☐interest ☐necessity ☐both

d) To your knowledge, which of the following subject areas are most frequently taught in an online setting at your school?

☐Math ☐Science ☐French ☐English Language Arts
☐Music ☐Fine Arts ☐Social Studies ☐Career Education
☐Design ☐Technology ☐Religion ☐Physical Education
☐Family Studies

20. To your knowledge, which of the following subject areas are taught in your school by teachers who, to your knowledge, have **no** training (ie. degree or diploma) in the area?

☐Math ☐Science ☐French ☐English Language Arts
☐Music ☐Fine Arts ☐Social Studies ☐Career Education
☐Design ☐Technology ☐Religion ☐Physical Education
☐Family Studies

21. Please indicate, on average, the percentage of teaching staff that *returns* to your school each year.
☐0-10% ☐10-25% ☐25-50% ☐50-75% ☐75-100%

a) Please describe reasons that you believe contribute to this trend.

Policy and Policy Implementation

22. To your knowledge, does your school have a policy handbook?
☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

23. Are students and parents made aware of:

i) school policies?
☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

ii) school district policies
☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

iii) provincial policies
☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

a) If so, through which means does this communication occur?

---

24. Do you believe that the implementation of new policies is met with resistance at your school?
☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

a) If so, which policies or types of policies?

---

b) Please explain why you believe your school does or does not meet this resistance.

---

25. Does your school permit/acknowledge parental input regarding school policies?

☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

a) Please explain why or why not.

---

26. Please provide any additional comments regarding the strengths and/or challenges that you have experienced or observed in rural education.

Thank you for your time and commitment to rural education.

Appendix B

Principal Questionnaire

Principal Questionnaire

Instructions: Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. All responses are voluntary, and will be kept entirely confidential. Please note that some questions may not be applicable, and may be skipped. Provide as much or as little detail as you see necessary.

School/Teacher Dynamics

1. What grades are taught at your school? _____

2. Approximately how many students are enrolled at your school?

☐Less than 50 ☐50-100 ☐100-150 ☐150-200 ☐greater than 200

3. Please indicate the following information regarding the community in which you teach:

a) Approximate population of community:

☐less than 500 ☐500-1000 ☐1000-2500 ☐2500-5000 ☐greater than 5000

b) Approximate distance of community from Trans Canada Highway:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

c) Approximate distance of community from the closest community of a population of 5000 or more people:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

4. Are you: ☐Male ☐Female

5. How many years have you been teaching? _____

6. For how many of your teaching years have you taught at your current school? _____

7. Please describe any teaching positions which you have held, other than your current position (please include geographical location).

_____

8. Do you currently live directly in the community in which you teach? ☐yes ☐no

9. Do you consider yourself to originate from the community in which you teach?

☐yes ☐no

10. Please indicate the following information regarding the community from which you originate:

a) Approximate population of community:

☐less than 500 ☐500-1000 ☐1000-2500 ☐2500-5000 ☐greater than 5000

b) Approximate distance of community from Trans Canada Highway:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

c) Approximate distance of community from the closest community of a population of 5000 or more people:

☐less than 50 km ☐50-100 km ☐100-150 km ☐150-200 km ☐greater than 200 km

11. Please describe the relationship that teachers have with students in your school and within the community in which the school is located. Feel free to use specific examples to clarify your description.

---

12. Please describe the relationship that teachers have with parents of students who attend your school. Feel free to use specific examples to clarify your description.

---

13. Have you observed or experienced discrepancy in the relationship between teachers and students, according to the teachers' place of origin or current residence? Please explain with examples, if applicable.

---

14. Have you observed or experienced discrepancy in the relationship between teachers and parents, according to the teachers' place of origin or current residence? Please explain with examples, if applicable.

Programming

15. If you teach, which grade(s) and subject(s) do you teach? _____

16. Do you currently teach, or have you ever taught, in a multi-grade setting? ☐yes ☐no
(if you answered *no*, please skip to question number 17)

a) Please describe any benefits and/or challenges to the *teacher* in a multi-grade (or multi-age) educational setting.

_____

b) Please describe any benefits and/or challenges to the *students* in a multi-grade (or multi-age) educational setting.

_____

17. Do you teach, or have you taught, at the *Intermediate and/or High School* level?
☐yes ☐no
(if you answered *no*, please skip to question number 20)

a) How many different courses/subjects do you, or did you, teach in one year? _____

i) How do you believe this impacts pedagogical practices?

_____

b) Do you teach, or have you taught, the same students repeatedly throughout each day?
☐yes ☐no

i) How do you believe this impacts pedagogical practices?

_____

18. Please describe, to the best of your knowledge, the level of programming choice offered to Intermediate and High School students at your school.

_____

19. Do students at your school enroll in online courses? ☐yes ☐no
(if you answered *no*, please skip to question number 20)

a) Please describe the nature and level of in-school supervision provided to students taking online classes.

---

b) Please describe any benefits and/or challenges to students in an online learning environment.

---

c) Do students in your school enroll in online courses out of:

☐interest ☐necessity ☐both

d) To your knowledge, which of the following subject areas are most frequently taught in an online setting at your school?

☐Math ☐Science ☐French ☐English Language Arts
☐Music ☐Fine Arts ☐Social Studies ☐Career Education
☐Design ☐Technology ☐Religion ☐Physical Education
☐Family Studies

20. To your knowledge, which of the following subject areas are taught in your school by teachers who, to your knowledge, have **no** training (ie. degree or diploma) in the area?

☐Math ☐Science ☐French ☐English Language Arts
☐Music ☐Fine Arts ☐Social Studies ☐Career Education
☐Design ☐Technology ☐Religion ☐Physical Education
☐Family Studies

21. Please indicate, on average, the percentage of teaching staff that *returns* to your school each year.
☐0-10% ☐10-25% ☐25-50% ☐50-75% ☐75-100%

a) Please describe reasons that you believe contribute to this trend.

Policy and Policy Implementation

22. To your knowledge, does your school have a policy handbook?

☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

23. Are students and parents made aware of:

i) school policies?

☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

ii) school district policies

☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

iii) provincial policies

☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

a) If so, through which means does this communication occur?

---

24. Do you believe that the implementation of new policies is met with resistance at your school?

☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

a) If so, which policies or types of policies?

---

b) Please explain why you believe your school does or does not meet this resistance.

---

25. Does your school permit/acknowledge parental input regarding school policies?

☐yes ☐no ☐unsure

a) Please explain why or why not.

---

26. Please provide any additional comments regarding the strengths and/or challenges that you have experienced or observed in rural education.

Thank you for your time and commitment to rural education.