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Rebuilding a Sense of Community through Reconnection:
The Impact of a Rural School's Closure on Individuals without School-Aged Children

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Abstract

Through the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 22 residents of Limerick, Saskatchewan, in this paper I examine the impact of a rural school's closure on the lives of residents without school-aged children. The findings show that the school's closure decreased participants' sense of community and instilled a sense of fear for the community's future. These feelings resulted in residents without school-aged children utilizing existing and new community institutions and organizations to re-connect residents and to motivate them to work towards their community's future. This paper makes a novel contribution to the literature by demonstrating the profound effects a rural school's closure had on a segment of the population that is often marginalized in research pertaining to school closures: residents without school-aged children.

Keywords: school closure, rural, sense of community, community organizations, older adults

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1.0 Introduction

Schools have long been identified as the central hub for rural communities and as places for socialization and the development and strengthening of community identity (Miller, 1993); indeed, schools are the cultural, recreational, and social centres for rural communities (Nachtigal, 1994; Parker, 2001; Waldman, 2008). As such, rural schools are key components in rural communities' development and sustainability, as they foster social capital and social networks (Lane & Dorfman, 1997), partnerships (Johns et al., 2000), and leadership (Bauch, 2001).

Due to the decline in rural populations, however, amalgamations and school closures have been on the rise across Canada (Schmidt et al., 2007). Rural communities are facing a decline in resource production, high unemployment rates, and limited services and amenities, all of which have forced young adults to relocate to larger centres (Gabriel, 2002; Malatest, 2002). As these communities' populations decline, governments reduce financial support for education services (Goetz, 2000); as a result, rural communities are vulnerable to school closures.

The benefits of the rural school-community relationship have been well documented in the literature. Limited research exists concerning the impacts of a rural school's closure (Lauzon, 2001), especially on adult residents without school-aged children; in this paper I seek to address this gap. Results from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 22 residents of Limerick, Saskatchewan, revealed that due to the school's closure, adults without school-aged children felt a diminished sense of community and worried about the future of their community, but were motivated to re-build their sense of community through existing community institutions and organizations. Through these efforts, they found ways to reconnect community members after the school's closure in order to re-build a sense of community. Using social ecological theory (SET), my study highlights the influence one school's closure had on interpersonal, institutional, and organizational factors within a community and how, together, these factors had a profound impact on the lives of residents without school-aged children.

2.0 Study Setting

Declining rural populations have challenged the social structures of Saskatchewan's rural communities, including education (Bollman & Clemson, 2007). As a result, the Saskatchewan government restructured the province's school system between 2004-2006. Part of the government's education restructuring involved reducing the then 82 school divisions into 28 larger ones. During the restructuring, a moratorium on school closures was put in place to protect schools from closing until the government had established the new school divisions. In January 2007, the government lifted the moratorium and 24 school closures took place across the province—including the school in the community of Limerick.

Limerick is a rural community in south central Saskatchewan and has a population of 445 residents (See Figure 1), which includes 130 in-town residents, and roughly 315 residents that reside on farms and ranches outside the community (Statistics Canada, 2010). Limerick has 240 male and 205 female residents, with the largest cohorts between the ages of 35-54yrs (34%) and 0-14yrs (24%), and the smaller cohorts being 55 years and over (22%) and 15-24yrs (20%). Agriculture is the primary economic industry, but to support the local economy Limerick is host to a variety of businesses: a hair salon, construction company, insurance office, post office, bank, gas station, agriculture centre, mechanic shop, grain elevator, grocery store, hotel, restaurant and bar, health and wellness centre, and daycare. Community clubs and organizations are also prevalent throughout Limerick, and include: a senior's club, a youth club, community hall board, house authority, historical society, rink board, recreation board, service club, photography club, and playschool. Furthermore, Limerick has a variety of recreation and community facilities, which include: a rink, community hall, the United Church, ball diamonds, and a campground. Limerick was chosen as the study site because in 2007 its school closed along with 23 others across Saskatchewan. In addition, Limerick is my hometown and I was familiar with the local residents, life in the community, and the history of the role the school played in the community assisted with the research.

Figure 1. Map of South Central Saskatchewan.

Source: Based on ESRI Data & Maps, 2004.

The inception of Limerick school was as a one-room schoolhouse located on the outskirts of the village in 1911, but it was then moved into the community in 1913. Over time the one-room brick schoolhouse transformed into an eight-room school with office space, staff-room, industrial shop, playground, and gymnasium. In June 2007 the school closed, despite having 46 students and five full-time and one part-time staff members. Twenty-two families were forced to relocate their children to outlying communities to attend school. There were three outlying communities that received

students from Limerick, which were located 23, 24, and 69 kilometers from Limerick; however, it should be noted that some families resided on farms outside of Limerick, so the distance to outlying communities would be different than those that are in-town residents. The selection criteria for the schools varied for each family, but most selected a school based on distance from their home, access to academic courses, school sports, children's preference, and access to extra-curricular activities.

In 2008 The Village of Limerick and the larger rural municipality in which Limerick is located took ownership of the school and renamed the facility the Opportunity Centre. The Opportunity Centre is a volunteer run centre and provides residents from Limerick and surrounding areas with a fitness room, gymnasium, computer and music equipment, and classroom space and offers its space for rent to a variety of community clubs and associations.

3.0 Literature Review

To understand the impacts a rural school's closure can have on the lives of adults without school-aged children, I reviewed literature related to rural services, the rural school-community relationship, schools and rural community development, and school closures and rural communities.

3.1 Rural Services

The quality of life in rural communities is closely linked to social, retail, health, and education services, adequate infrastructure, and voluntary associations (Halseth & Ryser, 2006; Reimer, 2006). Access to stable services provides rural communities with economic and social wellbeing, which cultivates the continued and future existence of rural communities. Local services provide rural communities with a stable economy and employment opportunities that retain residents and attract a skilled labour force that contributes to future economic activity (Halseth & Ryser, 2006; Martz & Sanderson, 2006). Rural services also provide a foundation for social activities that can bring residents together and enhance social cohesion by developing a sense of belonging throughout the community. For example, community institutions such as hospitals, libraries, and schools provide programs, events, and services that often foster interpersonal relationships among residents (Bruce & Halseth, 2000; Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Ruheni & Tate, 2004). Voluntary community organizations are also a critical component to rural life. For example, organizations related to recreation, health, and community social services often provide amenities to rural residents that are not provided by the public sector and that foster greater levels of civic engagement (Basu, 2004; Halseth & Ryser, 2007).

The importance of voluntary organizations in rural communities has been heightened due to the restructuring trends in rural services across Canada. In particular, public services related to health, education, and social services have been regionalized, which has resulted in rural residents traveling to outlying areas to access services (Joseph, 1999; Smithers et al., 2005). The decline in public services has also increased the pressure on voluntary organizations to meet the needs of rural community members, which can be difficult when there is a smaller population from which to draw volunteers (Barr et al., 2004). With an increase in public institution closures, rural schools that continue to operate are valuable assets for rural communities.

3.2 Rural Schools

Schools' roles in rural communities can go beyond formal education (Lyson, 2002, Kearns et al., 2009). In economic terms, researchers in Saskatchewan indicated that schools are one of largest employers in rural areas (Martz & Sanderson, 2006) and contribute to higher housing values and more developed infrastructure throughout the community (Lyson, 2002). The employment and social opportunities provided by rural schools can retain young families, which contribute to further economic growth (Miller, 1993; Gill & Everitt, 1993). Socially, schools tend to act as the community hub where sports, theatre, music, and other social activities take place (Lyson, 2002), all of which can enhance rural residents' social wellbeing (Beaumount & Pianca, 2002; Jimerson, 2006; Keyes & Gregg, 2001; Lyson, 2002; Parker, 2001; Salant & Waller, 1998). Because rural communities tend to have limited cultural facilities (Collins & Flaxman, 2001), the school's infrastructure such as gymnasiums and computer rooms, libraries, theatres, and art galleries often serve as essential resources for rural community life (Bruce & Halseth, 2000; Rosenfeld & Sheaff, 2002).

The physical facilities, events, and programs that rural schools offer can also contribute to developing and strengthening interpersonal relationships (Squires & Sinclair, 1990). Essentially, the rural school can become a central place where friendships form, social networks are developed and community events are held (Kearns et al., 2009). Active involvement in school-community related projects and events often enhances the sense of belonging and bonds among community members (Wotherspoon, 1998), which can increase community residents' desire to cherish and cultivate their local community identity (Bauch, 2001; Kearns et al., 2009). The literature highlights the dynamic role a school has in rural community life, which extends beyond just formal education. The resources, programs, and skilled leadership within the school often exercise a large influence in the broader community and have an important impact on rural community development.

3.3 Schools and Rural Community Development

Community development can be understood in a variety of ways, but generally it is understood to be the actions residents take to improve the conditions of their own community (Pedlar, 2006). Schools have been identified as central institutions linked to rural community development and sustainability (Collins, 2001; Johns, et al., 2000; Kilpatrick et al., 2001). Several research studies have emphasized rural schools' critical roles in community development (Jolly & Deloney, 1996; Lane & Dorfman, 1997; Miller, 1993, 1995). Research has indicated that rural schools can provide residents with access to community associational life (Salant & Waller, 1998), which establishes interactions between residents that comprise a community (Fisk, 2002). Such social interactions foster the development of social capital. Social capital builds a sense of trust among residents and increases the willingness to accomplish goals that benefit the community (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000), which often improve rural community residents' social wellbeing (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Wright, 2007).

Rural schools can also foster partnerships within the community that benefit the school and the community's future development. Researchers in Australia found that close partnerships between rural schools and the communities in which they are situated develop cooperation, communication, and trust amongst community members, which are key elements for community development (Johns et al., 2000).

Partnerships between the rural school and rural community can allow for leadership to emerge and knowledge to be exchanged, which benefits the community's future development. According to Bauch (2001), partnerships relevant to community development can include those between the school and local businesses and other community organizations and institutions. The school can provide the community with resources and well-educated staff members who serve as volunteers within the community, provide leadership to children and voluntary groups, and share their knowledge with the greater community (Bauch, 2001; Martz & Sanderson, 2006).

3.4 School Closures and Rural Communities

Scholarly literature has documented extensively the relationships between schools and rural communities, but limited research has been conducted on the impacts school closures have on rural life. For example, researchers have investigated the deliberation, procedures, and policies concerning rural school closures (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006). Other researchers have found that rural school closures have a negative impact on communities' economic stability because of the decline in school events and activities that generated income within the community (Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Kearns et al., 2009), declining property value, and lost businesses (Lyson, 2002). Some research has even found that rural communities that lose a school also experience a decline in adequate infrastructure, because declining populations due to school closures result in fewer residents paying taxes to support municipal services such as water and sewer systems (Lyson, 2002). Additional research has found that rural school closures diminish social stability because the skills and expertise that contribute to the quality of life in these types of communities are often lost as schools' staff members leave the community (Martz & Sanderson, 2006). Further, Kearns et al. (2009) found that local community knowledge that was taught by teachers was lost after a school closure. Researchers have also found that opportunities for socialization and social cohesion in rural communities decline because of school closures due to the absence of school activities to generate community involvement (Bushrod, 1999; Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Witten et al., 2001). Other studies have had broader foci and have highlighted a decline in population and community organization energy and enthusiasm following a school's closure (Bushrod, 1999; Parker, 2001; Tompkins, 2003). One of the impacts that a school's closure may have is on residents' sense of community.

3.5 Sense of Community

According to Cicognani et al. (2008), sense of community is understood as "feelings of belonging to different kinds of communities" (p. 99), which include informal and formal social organizations within a geographical location, or related to social entities such as sport, volunteering, and political groups. Researchers have associated sense of community with community health and wellbeing, as it highlights positive emotional interconnectedness between individuals who interact with one another (Bess et al., 2002; Fisher et al., 2002). There are five dimensions to sense of community: (1) membership, which refers to feelings of association to part of a community; (2) influence, which represents opportunities for individuals to contribute to community life; (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, which describes the benefits individuals receive from being a part of a community; (4) shared emotional connection, which highlights a shared history and social bond that develops over time with other community members; and, (5) community identity, which refers to the extent an individual identifies with their community (McMillan

& Chavis, 1986; Obst et al., (2002). According Prezza et al. (2001), sense of community can be considered to be a channel for social involvement and active participation in the community.

Though sense of community can be strongly framed as positive for residents, there are some reservations that can challenge this viewpoint. Sonn et al. (1999) argued that not all individuals will experience a sense of community, and that a sense of community can marginalize some individuals, which can enhance feelings of exclusion, oppression, and alienation. Similarly, Dunham (1986) stated that sense of community is a measurement of group cohesion and imposes utopian ideals that do not exist within the community, at least not for everyone. What Sonn et al. (1999) and Dunham (1986) emphasized is that sense of community will be experienced differently depending on the individual.

As presented in the review of literature above, rural schools can be an important component to rural life and community development practices. In the rural context, the school is tightly connected to the community, which has been attributed to developing a strong sense of community (Bauch, 2001); however, there is a limited understanding of the impact of a school's closure on rural life, including a community's sense of community.

In summary, the school-community relationship can have numerous benefits for those residing in rural communities, but limited research exists concerning the impacts school closures have on rural communities' residents; in particular, there is a paucity of research on the impacts school closures have on adults without school-aged children. Such a gap is particularly concerning because research has indicated rural communities have older populations as compared to urban centres (Dandy & Bollman, 2008). It is my intention to make a contribution towards filling this gap and to understand how one rural school's closure affected the lives of adults without school-aged children in Limerick, Saskatchewan.

4.0 Theoretical Framework: Social Ecological Theory

SET suggests that to understand individual behaviour, researchers must utilize an approach that investigates in-depth the complex social and cultural context in which the individual behaviour occurs (Lund et al., 2005; Stokols, 1996). According to this theoretical approach, I can understand the changes in rural adult residents' behaviour after a school closure by considering the shared social and cultural factors that shape collective behaviour within a community context (Lund et al., 2005; Stokols, 1996). According to McLeroy's et al.'s (1988) articulation of SET, these factors of influence are structured into levels that include intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and organizational, community, and policy factors. Intrapersonal factors include individual knowledge, attitudes, age, sex, and skills. Interpersonal factors include social networks and support groups related to family, friends, acquaintances, and work. Institutional and organizational factors include social institutions and organizations with formal and informal rules and regulations for operation, and organizations in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Community factors include community wide informal and formal social networks, norms, and standards among individuals, groups, and organizations. Finally, policy factors include factors related to local, provincial, and national laws and policies at the broadest level of influence on individual behaviour.

SET has been used primarily to explore physical activity and health promotion programs (Sallis et al., 2006) or applied as an intervention strategy to target specific changes in health-related behaviours (Lund et al., 2005). Although to my knowledge SET has not been applied to investigate the impacts that a rural school's closure has had on the lives of residents without school-aged children, it is an effective approach because it allows us to examine the complex relationship between the school, community, and adult residents without school-aged children.

Despite its usefulness, SET is a complex model and reporting on all its elements can be challenging for researchers. In fact, through a 20 year review of health promotion journals, Golden & Earp (2012) found that researchers often only explore segments of SET. Following this trend, I have also limited the scope of this article to SET's interpersonal, and institutional and organizational factors. By limiting the scope of this SET investigation, I can provide a robust description of certain aspects of the impacts of the school's closure, which will lay the foundation for future studies.

5.0 Methodology

To capture a school closure's impact on rural adult residents' without school-aged children, I used a qualitative exploratory single case study methodology. Exploratory case studies focus on contemporary events that the researcher does not control, and emphasize "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2009). Case studies are often utilized to intensively investigate a particular phenomenon, which could be a community, organization, individual, or event in a bounded context, using multiple methods for data collection (Bryman, 2004; Cohen et al., 2007; Punch, 2005; Tight, 2006). The outcome of employing a case study is a robust of the complex phenomenon under study (Gummesson, 2007). A case study is an effective approach for studying complex issues and has been utilized by other researchers to explore school closures and the school-community relationship. For example, Kearns et al. (2009) investigated the impacts of a rural school closure on sense of place and cohesion, while Witten et al. (2003) explored the impacts of a school's closure on urban families. In addition, case studies have been employed to examine schools' roles in establishing social capital (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2004) and rural school-community relationships (Kilpatrick et al., 2002).

5.1 Study Participants

This paper is part of a larger study that focused on the broad impacts of a school closure on rural life. As such, study participants were not initially selected to represent just adults without school-aged children; however, adults from the larger community were a part of the study. Twenty-two participants agreed to participate in the study. All study participants ranged in age from 29 to 70 years. To ensure participants could reflect on the impact of the school closure on residents without school-aged children, all participants involved in the study lived in Limerick prior to and after the school's closure. Of the 22 study participants, four were key community informants. Each key informant had an important leadership role in the community: (1) a male town council member, (2) a female volunteer with the Opportunity Centre, (3) a female volunteer who is engaged in various community associations, and (4) a male volunteer from the community hall. The remaining 18 participants included 12 women and six men with a variety of occupations: childcare operators; farmers; administrative assistants; business owners; business managers; retail sector employees; and health care providers. Due to confidentiality and the community's small population, I cannot expand upon these limited descriptions of the participants.

5.2 Methods

I conducted four semi-structured interviews with key community informants, one interview with a married couple without school-aged children, and two interviews with two married couples with school-aged children, and three focus groups with a total of 12 adult residents without school-aged children. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and, like the focus groups, included discussions on life in the community prior to and after the school's closure, the role of the school-community relationship in the lives of adults without school-aged children, and the benefits and challenges adult community members without children have encountered since the school closed. I asked numerous questions, including the following: (1) what was life like in the community before the school closed?; (2) what is life like now in the community since the school closed?; and (3) how did the school-community relationships benefit residents without school-aged children? All semi-structured interviews with key community informants took place in the participants' homes or place of work and lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. During the course of data collection, six participants that were invited to participate in the focus groups could not attend the focus groups because of scheduling conflicts, but they still wanted to contribute to the study. I thus set up semi-structured interviews with these six individuals, all of whom were married. As a result, I conducted three separate interviews with three married couples (three men, three women). All interviews with the married couples took place in the participants' homes and lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. I also conducted three focus groups. The first and third focus groups each took place in participants' homes, and the second focus group took place in the community centre. The first group had three female participants, the second group had five female participants, and the third and the final focus group had three makes and one female. The focus groups lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were digitally-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants to ensure anonymity.

6.0 Data Analysis

I utilized thematic analysis to find meaning within the data. I searched for themes that emerged as being important to the description phenomenon of the impacts of a rural school closure on the lives of adult residents without school-aged children. I began analysis by reading and organizing all the transcriptions, which was then followed by thematic coding. Thematic coding allows the researcher to utilize known or anticipated codes related to a number of areas: 1) the literature, for example, rural community development and rural schools; and 2) the theoretical framework, such as the influential role of institutions and community organizations on rural life after a school closure (Ayres, 2008). Analyzing the transcripts for anticipated codes connected to the theory and research questions also led to the development of codes that were unanticipated or unusual such as those related to rebuilding a sense of community and generational responses. This robust approach to coding enhanced pattern recognition within the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), which allowed me to categorize the codes into themes using descriptive wording. For example, codes related to institutions and community organizations were expanded into themes that included the church and the 49er's Club. Following Ayres (2008), I then further analyzed the themes in relation to the overall research question and theoretical framework.

7.0 Results

Data analysis revealed that Limerick School's closure influenced adults without school-aged children in three ways: 1) it diminished their sense of community; 2) it produced a sense of fear for the community's future; and, 3) it motivated them to attempt to rebuild the sense of community by reconnecting residents through existing and new community institutions and organizations.

7.1 Diminished Sense of Community

The school's closure shifted participants' sense of connection to their community because residents felt that they no longer knew each other as they once had when the school was open. According to interviewees, Limerick was a community with members that once prided themselves on their sense of community; however, since the school's closure, adults that did not have children at the time of the school's closure have struggled to adjust. Abbey, a local business owner, explained:

> I think it's just such an adjustment for the community when you had a school and you take it away…everybody is just kind of floundering and not knowing how to make it a community again, and or not willing to make it a community again or step up and make it a community.

Darren, a local business owner noted:

> In my mind, I think that it's not a community… since [the school] closed…It doesn't seem like…one because now some guys have to bugger off here and other people have gone there, some kids have gone there, so you don't have the school as a common spot where everyone comes together.

Participants in the study highlighted how the school used to foster informal social interactions that pulled the community together; however, the school's closure has since limited these interactions. According to Abbey:

> You would run into people on the streets - more than you do now. There were just people in the community more than what there is now. It just doesn't seem to be a community that pulls everybody together anymore. You don't see the kids, you don't see the parents, and you miss the functions that went on…there really isn't a lot of community to participate in.

The school's events and activities provided opportunities for community members to connect and were often gateways for new residents to meet existing ones, but the closure has limited these interactions. Abbey explained: "People who have moved into the Limerick community in the last couple of years, I don't even know their names because we don't cross paths."

7.2 Fear for Future

Residents without children in the school at the time of its closure worried about the future of their community. In particular, participants expressed the belief that the school's closure limits the community's potential future economic growth. Further, they felt that because the youth are now attending school in another community, the residents do not have a future to work towards.

Darren felt that the school's closure has limited the potential economic and population growth needed for future community survival:

> By not having the school…it does not attract people who might consider moving into the area if there's no school. They won't come because they want to be close to one. There is also a loss of some [school-related] employment as it went elsewhere and it's not in our community anymore.

The school's closure has forced parents and their children to outside communities, which has limited their involvement in Limerick. As a result, those who have been left behind feel as though they do not have a future towards which to work. Blair explained:

> The school was a way to stay in contact with the children of the community. Having children in the area I think gave parents and older people a purpose for continually wanting to help them to raise them, to maybe be involved, and help them achieve things. If there was something [at the school] that needed to be done, the community got behind it and did it because there was purpose and future.

Another volunteer community leader, Lori, echoed Blair comments and shared her feelings for the future:

> Christmas is the first time that I have started to really feel that we won't be able to keep this community alive…It is partly the fact that when the children aren't here, people begin to look away from this community to see what's happening elsewhere. I'll tell you that the first day I saw a picture in the local paper of a pancake breakfast that they were having at the primary school in Assiniboia and I saw one of our [Limerick's] moms there…it made my heart physically hurt when I looked at that picture, but of course she has to be there. Her daughter goes to that school. If [the mom] has got time, she has to be there.

Since the school's closure, residents find themselves questioning what they are working towards without a younger generation to nurture. According to Blair:

> In my perspective, it's kind of made it feel like no future…the future isn't there. These young people were out and about in your community and seeing them around and watching them grow, you knew we were going to possibly have some future.

7.3 Rebuilding a Sense of Community

Prior to its closure, the school was an institution that offered events and activities that brought together the whole community; however, the school's closure brought about a decline in sense of community and fear for the future has motivated the residents to attempt to rebuild their sense of community. Long-standing community institutions and organizations such as the church and the 49er's club, along with the newly developed community Opportunity Centre, have provided the residents with new leisure opportunities that have helped rebuild their sense of community by reconnecting residents.

7.3.1 Church

The United Church has been an active institution in attempting to rebuild the community. One event that has developed since the school closed is the church's graduation ceremony. When the school was open, the school graduation was often attended by all community members. To continue with the spirit of graduation, the church decided to offer a community-wide event to honour its local high school graduates. Lori described how the event developed:

One day somebody was saying, "we are not going to see our kids graduate, and traditionally everybody could go to that one part of the graduation service." I mean [before the school closed], the hall was bursting at the seams and we all went to see the kids go up on the stage and get their certificates and stuff. And they [church members] said, we are not going to be able to see [the students graduate], and people were kind of gutted by it. So, we talked about it for a little while, and we said, "maybe we should try to do something at the Church?" And we [the Church's congregation] have no history of being involved, but we thought, well, maybe we could try? So we put together a little service of congratulations and blessings…we said, let's do it as long as we can identify children and youth who would have been attending this school if the school had been here. So as long as we can do that, we are going to keep doing it.

7.3.2 49er's Club

The 49'ers Club, which is a long-standing seniors' community organization that provides a social club for residents over the age of 49, responded to the school's closure by providing a Friday night social event. Typically, this community organization meets the needs of the community's senior population through mid-day activities such as cards, crib, knitting, pool, darts, and informal social mingling. Since the school's closure, however, the organization has utilized its physical resources to provide new leisure activities to the whole community. Lori highlighted the seniors' club initiative: "the 49ers have a Friday night thing, and it's for people of all ages. They go to the 49ers [Club] and they play darts and pool on Friday nights, and that's available for the kids."

7.3.3 Opportunity Centre

After the school closed, the community decided to buy the building from the school board and use its assets to rebuild residents' sense of community. The Opportunity Centre is multipurpose in its use and hosts small businesses, a fitness centre, and a variety of recreation and leisure activities. The Centre is seen as a positive development in the community. Heidi, a farm wife, explained: "We have the Opportunity Centre now, and that's done a lot [for the community], like, I mean we've got the fitness centre." Donna, a middle-aged community member, highlighted other activities that are offered by the Centre: "They [the Centre] are offering yoga classes and numerous different classes, archery, children's playschool and a kids' kingdom." Cathy further emphasized other activities that the Centre offers: "They have the painting and knitting and rug hooking. So, there is that committee that has tried doing different things in the community." Blair shared similar thoughts: "our vacant school is a beautiful facility. We have tried to maintain it and offered the gymnasium for evening volleyball, there is archery going on in there. We have a fitness centre in one of the classrooms that offers physical activities for anyone."

Once in operation, the volunteers at the Centre started a community wide-walking program for the winter months. Lori explained:

> We started a walking program here just at the beginning of February, and walking is really kind of only an excuse, but Marlene started to be concerned that people weren't getting out. She wasn't seeing them at the store and some of them in their cars were snowed in, they couldn't drive down to the store, and so on. So, we devised this walking program, the idea of being that we would bring people here [Opportunity Centre] and they would walk and they would have tea and cookies and a little bit of interaction and so on.

The Centre also rents office space to two small businesses that help to generate revenue to keep the facility operating. The increase in business opportunities has given residents more opportunities to have their needs met in the community and more money to help run the facility. Maggie discussed one of the businesses that has developed since the Opportunity Centre opened: "Tina has a Wellness Centre, which brings in different people, [but it's] not as busy as it should be, but it is there." The Opportunity Centre is also home to a massage therapist. Lana, a local farmer, explained: "The massage therapist has been really positive. She moved in there and she comes part-time, which is great."

7.3.4 Reconnecting

Through the efforts of volunteers who are involved in the different community institutions and organizations, some of the study's participants have been able to reconnect through new opportunities. Although some participants involved in this study stated that they initially doubted the effectiveness of some of the new activities in the community, the majority of the activities have been well attended. Heidi noted:

> Well, the church for the past three years has had a grad ceremony that has been well attended. I thought, "oh, these kids aren't going to show up because they are not even members of our church," and the community showed up and all the kids showed up. They did a little biography of the kids and their interests and it was very well received, and the kids actually really appreciated that it was something from their community, and that just really surprised me, because I didn't think it would fly.

Similar positive thoughts about the 49'ers Club were shared by Lori: "I heard them [attendees at the Friday night event] talking one day about how many have come out, and they said last week, "we had 13," so somehow they are getting people to turn out, because I mean Friday night's kind of like the dead zone."

With the increase in new activities, the Opportunity Centre and the church have started providing newsletters to inform community members of upcoming activities. The newsletters have provided a sense of community and belonging that was severed after the school closed. Lori noted:

> There has been a real will in the community to try to keep it going as a community. We put out several newsletters a year. People thought a lot about those newsletters because they feel like it helps them to stay connected. I mean, there used to be school newsletters. Now, this year the church has started the newsletter as well for the same reason: to try again to

give people a sense of belonging and a sense of community, that there are
still things going on here that are worth thinking about being involved in.

The new events and increase in communication about community activities has re-
energized adults without school-aged children to take ownership of Limerick's
future. The development of the Opportunity Centre brought about changes to the
community and provided a sense of community and motivation to work towards
building a future for the community. In particular, the community wanted to own
the facility and be in control of its operations so that it could limit the potential of
having an individual or business from outside the community strip the building of
its resources. Cathy, an employee at the local Agriculture Centre, explained:

> People are fighting to keep the [Opportunity Centre] going. You can see that it
> brought about a sense of community and one common goal to keep that facility
> there and not have someone to come in [an outside individual or business]. It
> shows how close the community is and [how it has something] to work towards.

8.0 Discussion

The complex relationship between a rural school and the community warranted a
holistic framework. Through the use of SET (McLeroy et al., 1988), I was able to
understand several key factors that influence individual behaviour – specifically,
how a rural school's closure influenced adults without school-aged children. My
findings suggest that these changes most influenced factors related to the
interpersonal, institutional, and organizational elements of SET. Following
Cardenas, et al. (2009), I have thus limited the scope of this paper to discuss the
findings that relate to these aspects of SET.

My general findings emphasize that Limerick's past school-community relationship
developed and maintained interpersonal relationships, which contributed to a strong
sense of community. In particular, the school nurtured informal social networks
among adults without school-aged children, youth, parents, and the larger
community. Since the school's closure, however, these forms of relationships have
diminished and, as a result, there are fears for the community's future. Adults
without school-aged children have thus utilized Limerick's institutions and
community organizations to reconnect community members. As a result, Limerick
School's closure has had some benefits, such as development of a new community
organization, new programs, and new events.

8.1 Diminished Sense of Community

According to SET, interpersonal factors that influence behaviour can include
primary social groups, such as formal and informal social networks, family, work
groups, neighbours, and friendships networks (McLeroy et al., 1988). Limerick
School's closure had a significant impact on the interpersonal relationships of rural
residents without school-aged children. More specifically, participants reported
feeling a diminished sense of community when interpersonal relationships related to
informal social networks that were once facilitated by the school diminished. As
noted by Abbey, when Limerick School was open, there were more opportunities
for adult residents without school-aged children to connect informally with each
other and parents and youth in the community, whether it was seeing them at the
local grocery store during lunch hour or at school events and functions.

Abbey's comments emphasize how Limerick's school cultivated informal social networks among community members, which contributed to a strong sense of community, pride, and identity; however, since the school's closure, this sense of community has diminished. These findings echo those of Witten et al. (2001), who stated that when a rural community loses a physical space that has been utilized for community activities and social interaction, such as a school, there is also a decline in the sense of community felt by residents. This decline is highly problematic for rural communities like Limerick because the strength of rural community life and its survival is dependent on the self-supporting and co-dependent relationships between individuals (Cicognani, et al., 2008; Little et al., 2005).

8.2 Fear for Future

My study also identified a strong link between the interpersonal component of SET, the school's closure, and the feelings residents had about their community's future. Interpersonal relationships such as the informal social networks that connected the youth to the larger community were deemed by participants to be of particular importance for Limerick's future. As illustrated above, the informal social networks that directly connected the youth and the larger community have diminished since the school's closure. As a result, adult residents without school-aged children, like Blair, doubted there was a future for the community towards which to work. These feelings are problematic for members of rural communities because rural youth and their active engagement in community life are critical components for the longevity of rural communities (Johns et al., 2000; May, 2008; Pretty et al., 2006). Part of this issue is compounded by the increase in travel youth and parents must now engage in school-related activities.

According to researchers, public services related to health, education, and social services have been regionalized, which has increased the need for rural residents to travel to outlying communities to access services (Joseph, 1999; Reimer 2006; Smithers et al., 2005). Similar to these findings, my study found that parents are engaged in new communities because of their children's school activities, which has reduced their social and civic engagement in Limerick. As a result, initiatives to rebuild the sense of community were developed in large part by adults who were50 to 70 years of age.

Research has indicated that older adults are motivated to give back to their community because they want to make improvements for future generations (Wilson, 2000); in this study I found that older adults were doing so predominantly to ensure a future for their community and to cultivate a sense of community that was lost after the school's closure. This is concerning because research has indicated that though volunteerism older adults can heighten feelings of well-being while enhancing the quality of life for the community (Fraser et al., 2009), if these volunteer efforts are forced or brought about through stressful circumstances, such as a school's closure, the positive feelings and benefits of volunteering could disappear or provoke negative ones for older adults (Gordon & Hattie, 2008). Such a problem may be further compounded by the fact that rural communities typically have older, smaller populations, which makes it challenging to draw volunteers (Stowe & Barr, 2005). As a result, the institutions and organizations that rely on volunteers could cease to exist or experience a decline in activities because of the limited volunteer capacity, which will further impact rural residents.

My study emphasizes the importance of SET's interpersonal relationships as they related to informal social networks between youth, parents and the larger community, and the future of rural communities, especially after a school closure. Without these types of interpersonal relationships, rural communities struggle to work towards a future. Rural communities need to have a vision for the future to retain youth, because the younger generation is more likely to see growth and opportunities in their own community, which is important for rural community sustainability (Witten et al., 2003).

8.3 Rebuilding a Sense of Community

Through the application of the SET, I was able to highlight the influence community institutions and organizations have on rebuilding a sense of community. According to SET, the structure, programs, events, and resources that comprise community institutions and organizations also influence individual behaviour (McLeroy et al., 1998). Researchers have found that rural schools are a central institution linked to rural community development and sustainability (Collins, 2001; Johns et al., 2000; Kilpatrick et al., 2001). Similar to these findings, I found that the heightened fear for Limerick's future was largely connected to the fact that, in general, schools are institutions that play large roles in vitalizing small rural communities by fostering interpersonal relationships between all community members (Fisk, 2002; Miller, 1993). In my study, however, the development of the Limerick Opportunity Centre and the restructuring of the senior's club and the church highlight how Limerick replaced the school with other programming activities within the community. As Blair stated, there are a variety of fitness activities that are offered at the Opportunity Centre - all activities that were developed after the school closed. As such, the school's closure appears to have brought about new opportunities to reconnect the community, which has made contributions to rebuilding residents' sense of community for residents without school-aged children.

Rural restructuring that has resulted in the closure of public services, such as a school, has heightened the necessity for voluntary organizations to provide activities that enrich rural life (Halseth & Ryser, 2007). When Limerick School closed, it marked the end of many of the community's activities, such as the annual graduation celebration. The loss of these activities instilled a sense fear for the community's future, which brought about adult residents without children undertaking various activities to try to rebuild a sense of community. More specifically, it was only after the school closed that new events and programs were established by the United Church and the 49er's Club. In addition, the Opportunity Centre was established in the vacant school to offer community-wide recreation activities. As a result of the school's closure, Limerick's voluntary organizations provided new programs, resources, and events as a means to cultivate greater levels of civic engagement and to reconnect community members.

Community members appeared to see the development of a sense of community as often unfailingly positive – as something that residents of a community like Limerick must fight to maintain. Such a view, however, is utopian in nature. It fails to address the ways in which a sense of community in rural life formulate feelings of "Otherness" for those who do not fit in (Pretty et al., 2003). Sonn, et al. (1999) argued that individuals may experience sense of community differently than others based on their daily lived experiences. How individuals interact within the environment and the sources they draw upon for identity, feelings of belonging, and general wellbeing will

differ and impact their perceived sense of community. For example, in my study Limerick's older adults emphasized interpersonal relationships as being an important factor that cultivated a sense of community; however, these dense social relationships could decrease an individual's privacy, which could have implications for how other individuals experience community life. Dominant understandings of what comprises a "good" sense of community should be problematized in future research.

9.0 Conclusions

Through the SET, I was able to understand at a deeper level the interconnected relationships between a school's closure, interpersonal relationships, and organizational and institutional factors as they relate to community development. My study supports Israel & Beaulieu's (2002) assertion that strong social networks within a community provide a foundation for new community efforts to address community needs during challenging times. The importance of interpersonal relationships for Limerick's survival cannot be understated. It appears as though Limerick has been able to cope with the school's closure partly because of community members' existing social relationships with other residents. Study participants articulated that the school's closure diminished relationships and social networks with other residents. I also found that these networks had the ability to reconnect some residents, which re-cultivated at least some of the sense of community that they believed was diminished after a school's closure. Furthermore, this study highlights interpersonal relationships as agents of social resistance to change, which researchers have identified as being an important element to community development (Johns et al., 2000). Without these strong interpersonal relationships, rural communities' residents are likely to struggle as they navigate through challenging times. This being the case, further research on interpersonal relationships and rural resiliency is warranted. The event of a school closure is one example of rural restructuring that can influence rural life. How rural communities utilize their social networks and relationships to cope with other forms of rural restructuring could broaden our knowledge on topics related to rural community resiliency.

The application of SET allowed for a deeper understanding of the link between a school's closure and community institutions and organizations. Specifically, Limerick's Opportunity Centre is an example that supports Egelund and Laustsen's (2006) claim that if there are enough people in an area, and if the volunteer capacity is high enough, a closed school may be replaced by an institution or other community organizations that can strengthen the local community's cohesion and sense of belonging. Furthermore, my study also highlights the value of volunteer community institutions and organizations in rebuilding a sense of community after a school's closure. Specifically, the new programs offered by Limerick's United Church and seniors club support Halseth & Sullivan's (1999) assertion that how well rural communities cope with social and economic changes—in this case a school's closure—lies in the capacity of community voluntary organizations to adapt. Without these valuable institutions and organizations, rural communities would struggle to survive as they continue to experience the effects of regionalization and rural restructuring.

Although this paper focused on interpersonal, institutional, and organizational level factors of the SET, further research that explores other facets of SET is needed. Furthermore, expanding this type of research into regions that are rich in other

natural resources, such as fishing or mining communities, would also give a different perspective of school closures on rural community life.

Lyson (2002) stated, "the school is not only the social hub of the village, but the school setting also contributes to the sense of survival of adults in the culture" (p. 24). Although the school primarily serves as an educational institution for young people in the rural context, my research shows how the school - and its absence - is connected to the whole community. In particular, my study draws much needed attention to the impact of a school's closure on adult community members without school-aged children. Research on school closures has largely focused on the political processes and policies of school closures and has neglected exploring the impact on adults who live within the community. Because the rural school-community relationship cultivates interactions between residents that comprise a community (Fisk, 2002), it is important to explore how a school's closure affects the lives of all community members. In this study, adults without school-aged children reacted to the school closure by trying to rebuild the sense of community that was lost for them and for others in the community, actions that perhaps highlight the inherent value the school had for these adults.

This study supports Beaumont & Pianca's (2002) findings that showed that the local school is more than an institution for education; rather, it is the heart and future of the community. When such an important institution is lost, the whole community feels the impact – including adults without school-aged children.

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