

Rural Routes: A Study of Rural High School Graduate Life Transitions

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By
L. Helen Gress

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Department Head
Department of Educational Administration

College of Education
28 Campus Drive
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Canada
S7N 0X1

Abstract

This phenomenological retrospective study investigates the transitional experiences of five graduates from one rural school's classes. The study has two guiding themes: (a) the factors which influence graduating students' decisions for their futures, and (b) the transitions they experience following those decisions.

High school graduation and the subsequent transition to life after high school was the phenomenon that each participant had undergone. During semi-structured interviews, participants discussed their decisions before and after that delineating moment. The research question was: What supports do recent graduates perceive to have existed in a small rural school to assist students in their transition from school to post secondary education or the workforce? Follow up interview questions were: (a) What challenges have recent graduates faced as they transitioned from high school to their current positions as post secondary students or employees? (b) What supports do recent graduates believe should be implemented to assist future graduates in their upcoming transitions from high school to post secondary education or the workforce?

The study results indicated that graduates perceive school's role as peripheral or tangential to their transition to their post secondary lives. The caring and interested relationships developed between students and school personnel while important, are at best, incidental and not perceived to be instrumental and in one case may be seen as limiting. The data reveals the significant influence of family, or social *habitus* and cultural capital on both the career and life decisions and on the transitions experienced by the participants as they adjusted to life after high school. Challenges and transitions were recounted and participant suggestions for schools were discussed. I indicated the need for

increased professional development for teachers in the area of career development and transitioning, as well as the need for an expanded recognition of the pivotal roles held by family members in the transition to adulthood. Finally, I reflected on areas for further investigation which include gathering more insights from young adults and students as well as their families, investigating the transitions implicit in entering the workforce, and exploring the issue of providing hope for rural communities and schools.

Acknowledgment

It is with great pleasure that I give credit where it is due. I have been very fortunate to have had a strong committee as travel guides through this tour into academia. My advisor, Dr. David Burgess, prompted my thinking by offering suggested readings and more importantly by posing interesting questions throughout this process. I am indebted to him for his many readings of my work as he helped me refine my study and finesse this volume.

I have enjoyed numerous helpful and supportive conversations with College of Education faculty who without fail, gave freely of their time and helped me to gain the confidence I needed to take on this challenge. I would like especially to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Bonnie Stelmach, Dr. Pat Rhenihan, and Dr. Micheal Cottrell whose careful reading of my work and insightful questions inspired me to sharpen my focus. They, along with my external examiner, Dr. Jim Jutras allowed me to thoroughly enjoy this academic exploration.

Of course, although their real names have not been used in this volume, the study would not have been possible without the open self reflection by each of the study participants. I am indebted to them for their frank, humorous, and honest assistance.

Dedication

Search Saskatchewan's map for unmarked roads. My rural routes from prairie grasslands to Pasquia hills mark the beginning of this endeavor. I dedicate it to my parents Irma and Leslie Wilson whose love of learning and happy home gave me the courage to roam and to my husband Murray Gress, whose patience and support allowed me to focus on this seemingly endless paper journey. Finally, I dedicate this work to my children, who have just begun their own journeys- I look forward to seeing where their roads lead them.

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CHAPTER ONE THE BEGININGS

Mark Twain (1880) observed that to truly understand any community one needed to witness a funeral. I would argue, that another, perhaps more telling public event would be the small town high school graduation; there is no other event that is so eagerly anticipated, so well attended, or so emotionally charged. To understand the values and the culture of a rural community, one needs to witness a graduation.

The hall or auditorium will be packed with standing room only left for the young teens who travel from miles around to glimpse the pomp and spectacle, and to attend the after grad party that will be held in someone's field or bush with varying degrees of adult supervision. The town's mayor and other dignitaries, representatives of the various charity organizations, local politicians and everyone's grandparents whether or not they have a relative on stage will be eagerly seated waiting to see the town's past and future on display. Numerous teachers and guest speakers will attempt to impart one last bit of wisdom to the students. Scholarships representing the whole community's hopes and faith in their youth will be handed out accompanied by applause and camera flashes. Humorous speeches will be given with attendant, 'you had to be there' humor and the crowd will be regaled with sentimental stories.

The small town reporter will have published the graduates' stated plans for the future along with the obligatory cap and gown pictures, despite the fact that few small town graduations actually feature caps and gowns. The following week's paper will publicize the scholarship winners, and will include snippets from the speeches immortalizing the event. A slide show or multimedia presentation will chronicle the transformation each student has undergone from toddler to scholar, and there will be more than one tissue dampened with tears of pride—and perhaps some other emotion too complex to be named.

The graduates lined up on stage in full view of their entire community will be aware and yet oblivious to the grandeur of the event. They will have spent the past few months bickering over theme songs and decoration choices, fundraising, writing speeches, and having hair trial appointments. They will have been stressed over exams and career choices, and they will have bounced like human pin balls buffeted by the flaps of adult regulations, curfews, and concerns bouncing to the tune of laughter and excitement as they have rolled ever forward to the freedom they both crave and fear. They will sit, sometimes listening to the speeches, sometimes watching the crowd, sometimes lost in the moment. But what comes next? After the tuxedos have been returned, the helium is lost from the balloons, and the party has died down, will the declarations they have made about their future plans come true or will they fall flat? Can they make it on their own?

The Researcher, The Setting and The Plan

I have been intimately involved in more high school graduations than I would like to admit, for they are annual reminders of time's relentless race. Aside from my own experience as a high school graduate, I can also lay claim to each of the following positions: high school teacher, graduation class advisor, yearbook staff advisor, vice principal, guest speaker, scholarship committee member, parent, and principal. I was a newcomer to the rural area when I began my teaching career in 1984, and have continued to work in the same school with only a brief hiatus for the birth of each of my two children. Each graduation since then has represented yet another opportunity to really come to know the community in which I live and work.

At the end of Main Street the small school plays a prominent role in the community, and everyone is keenly aware that the school's population is rapidly becoming smaller. Despite an economic boom in the province of Saskatchewan, the school serves fewer than 100 students in

Kindergarten to Grade 12. Pictures of former graduating classes dating back to the early 1940s are proudly displayed in oak and glass cases in the hallways. These pictures, a tribute to the school and community, have a magnetic appeal to visitors and students alike who point out their relatives or themselves and comment on styles and fashions of years gone by. I have heard numerous stories filled with nostalgic pride and glory days' mischief, and I have answered to the best of my ability the common question, '*whatever happened to...?*'

In this thesis, I attempt to create a different type of picture. Using a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews, I gathered insights from within one group whose class portrait hangs in that same hallway. The photographs displayed in the school hallways are silent, yet those students are still learning many lessons and their insights offer practical and theoretical points of discussion for rural educators. I want to allow the voices of these young adults to inform the school's practices pertinent to career development and students' transitional needs.

Background of the Problem

Rural families and rural school personnel face multiple fears as they send their children into their adult lives. Gone are the days when children automatically followed their family footsteps into agriculture or other traditional rural economic ventures; arrived are the days of global competitiveness and the realization that future careers will be very different from traditional, known jobs. It is a commonly held belief that post secondary education leads to greater economic benefit, and many students are encouraged to pursue schooling of some type (Hango & de Broucker, 2007). In fact, post secondary education has become a standard expectation for parents. In 2002, Statistics Canada found that 93% of Canadian parents of children aged 0 to 18 hoped that their children would attend post secondary education (Usher & Shean, 2005). Making decisions about what course to take or what school to attend is made more

difficult for rural students who may be the first in their family to graduate from high school.

Rural parents are more likely than urban parents to have discontinued their secondary education before graduation; those who did graduate are less likely than their urban counterparts to have experienced post secondary education (Cartwright & Allen, 2002).

Having no history of formal post secondary education in one's family is a significant barrier to entering university or college. A study conducted by Statistics Canada (2004) entitled the *Youth in Transition Survey* (YITS) explored the life trajectories of youth who were 18 to 20 years old in December 1999, with follow up interviews of the same cohort in 2001. The study's authors indicated that only 24% of rural students had entered university, while 38% of their urban peers had entered university. Two of the key factors appeared to be parental educational attainment and parental values towards post secondary education (Lambert, Zeman, Bussière, M. & Bussière, P., 2004).

There are many choices to be explored, and with these choices come great uncertainty. Relatively few researchers have delved into the hopes and aspirations; fears and apprehensions of rural high school graduates (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008). Their generic fear of the unknown, in all likelihood shared by their urban counterparts, is compounded by the geographic distances young people are forced to place between themselves and their families when they choose to enter post secondary education or when they enter the workforce. The belief that post secondary training and education is an expensive investment causes the decision to be even more stressful (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008), although many students overestimate the actual cost of tuition. These same students also overestimate the amount of money their parents will be able to contribute to their studies (Fine, 2006).

As preparations for graduation draw nearer, students and their parents debate over these choices. In nearly twenty-six years as an educator, I have noted that many parents of graduating students seek assurances that their children are on the right path. They ask about different schools, they want to know about employment opportunities, and they ask if their sons and daughters are ready. Many of the concerns are financial. *‘How much does it cost to send someone to university?’ ‘Where will my daughter live?’ ‘Is university the right choice, or would a trade be better?’* These conversations pit hopes and dreams against pragmatic realities and parental concerns.

There are also many students who want to enter the workforce immediately. Some of these students have achieved lower marks and may not qualify for training. Some have little or no desire to stay in school, and others simply want to take a break from formal education. The hoopla of scholarship applications, student loan seminars, and entrance deadlines can provoke myriad responses ranging from relief that these hurdles do not apply to them, to rage against an implied judgment that they are less worthy than their more scholarly classmates.

One student in particular stays in my mind. Knowing that she intended to wait for at least a year before going to school, I warned her that she would be disqualified from several of the local scholarships awarded on graduation night that hinged in part on career declarations. She was horrified and angry because she believed the awards should be given to acknowledge her marks and abilities regardless of her future plans. She toyed with making up a plan for education so that she could receive the recognition she had hoped for.

Another former student, who claimed no desire for scholarship recognition, felt the pressure to make a career declaration even though he did not want to go to school. He was

embarrassed about entering the workforce because his peers were nearly all going to school after graduation. He noted the close attention placed by the whole community on his stated plans and he desired confirmation that working was an acceptable choice.

Following a recent graduation, I received an angry phone call from a parent who was not happy with the ‘*whereabouts of last year’s grads*’ speech. Her daughter’s whereabouts, although accurate in naming where she was employed for the summer, did not reflect the fact that she had completed her first year of post secondary training. This parent wanted her daughter’s year of studies to be known by the community. One of her concerns was that people might believe her daughter had not deserved the scholarships she had been given the year before.

The small town graduation is more than a milestone for the students and their families. It is a celebration in which community members marvel at the talent and promise displayed in front of them, each graduate representing the future. Mixed in with the optimism and anticipation though, is the nostalgia and despair brought on by the certain knowledge that things are going to change. Will these students leave and never come back? The mayor’s address traditionally acknowledges the belief that most, if not all of the graduates will depart. The small town mayor customarily encourages graduates to return home whether for visits or to live, reminding them that this town is home. To accentuate his point, at the most recent graduation, the mayor gifted each graduate a copy of the town and district’s history book.

The teachers in the crowd have reason to feel pride in their students’ accomplishments. They have provided, “the ‘ladder’, the ‘bridge’, the ‘gate’, and the ‘stepping stone[s]’” (Corbett, 2007, p. 50) for our students to leave their communities. Corbett’s (2007) provocative book, *Learning to Leave*, posed the challenge to educators to recognize that schools may in fact be part of the problem of rural depopulation. In his context, the economic forces, the supposedly dying

fish industry, and corporate control over the fish industry were cited as reasons for students to escape their homes and leave.

Do rural schools actually set out to send young people away from their homes? In Saskatchewan, we look at the capricious agricultural market, high costs of agricultural inputs, and weather fluctuations, and encourage our students to consider anything but farming as their future. The irony is immense.

Rural educators, my colleagues, follow the lives of former students with interest. We want to know what courses they take, or where they find employment. Most of this interest stems from genuine care and concern developed from years of interactions in the classroom, on the volleyball courts, the drama stage, and generally in the community. Some of the interest is mild curiosity, but for some educators, the interest is also an attempt to seek validation. Did we prepare our students for the rigors of post secondary education? Were our students adequately prepared for 'the big world'? The dour messages reported in the media outlining the disadvantages rural students appear to have according to international testing regimes, causes us to really wonder if we have done everything we could to prepare them. How does our little school stack up compared with the bigger schools in larger centers?

There is an increased emphasis on the rural-urban gap throughout the world (Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey & Crowley 2006; Topping, 2006). Rural educators, parents and their students are aware that they face judgment. The desire to do well in comparison is tempered by several attitudes about urban students ranging from a fear of inferiority to disdain for those they deem to have had a pampered life. The students in the Shultz (2004) study that examined first year college experiences for students from agricultural background appeared to believe that they

had worked harder than their urban classmates. The concept of an ‘us versus them’ perception may be driven by international testing.

One prominent example sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) tests fifteen year old students in three areas of academic achievement: mathematics, reading, and science. These tests, known as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have been administered three times: in 2000, with 43 countries participating; in 2003, with 41 countries participating; and in 2006, with 57 countries participating. The 2009 round of tests will include students from 62 or more countries (PISA Canada, 2008). Canada’s PISA homepage (PISA Canada, 2008) explains that the goal of PISA is to determine how well students reaching the end of compulsory education are doing. Four guiding questions are listed: (a) How well are young adults prepared to meet the challenges of the future? (b) Are they able to analyze, reason and communicate their ideas effectively? (c) Do they have the capacity to continue learning throughout life? and (d) Are some kinds of teaching and school organizations more effective than others?

The first focus on young adult state of preparation for their future is related to my study. I am intensely interested in how the officials within Canada’s PISA branch will identify their answers to these questions and how these answers will be used to develop policy. I must admit to a suspicion that the small rural school may not be given enough attention within such large scale studies. I believe that PISA, with its widespread media coverage has the power to adversely affect rural residents’ confidence in their educational institutions.

As a rural educator, I certainly felt affronted by headlines indicating poor results for rural participants in PISA and this emotion drove my early enquiries ultimately leading to this study. While many rural residents may be oblivious to the existence of this testing regime, I felt that the

results may have bearing on the decisions made by educational and political leaders. Very little is known about what parents actually know and understand about large scale testing, yet I have noted that rural parents question whether or not their children will be able to compete in an urban environment. Increasing parental input into school improvement is a much touted theme across a wide range of educational jurisdictions throughout North America (Stelmach, 2004). A study set in a large Toronto elementary school done by Mu and Childs (2005) found that there is an increased effort on the part of school boards, the media and even book stores to gain a parental audience although the motivations for wanting parental attention is not uniform.

In order to contextualize and explore the transitions rural graduates undergo, I wondered about the role of the large scale testing phenomenon. I found that many writers have added to a debate regarding the worth of large scale international testing. Bracey (2005) provided a brief overview of several international writers who, like him, were questioning the validity of PISA. Bracey criticized an apparent unquestioning acceptance of PISA results in North American as irrefutable international benchmarks. I, too, have questions wondering if there is a pro-urban or an anti-rural context within the questions.

Achievement gaps both real and perceived can influence the public and policy makers (Klinger, Rogers, Anderson, Poth, & Calman, 2006; Rogers, Anderson, Klinger, & Dawber, 2006; Volante, 2006). Selective portrayal of testing results by government spokespersons and the media's interpretation of results also leaves lasting impressions such as typecasting rural residents as less academically successful. Using Canadian newspapers Michelle Stack (2006) examined coverage of the 2000 PISA results through a Foucauldian discourse analysis, by juxtaposing media coverage with press statements from government and unions. In other words, she was interested in seeing how what people say impacts perceptions of reality. Her first

finding, like Bracey's (2005), was that the majority of journalists accepted the test results without problematizing or exploring the implications presented by the numbers. If rural students have underperformed in previous tests, where are the efforts to alleviate the apparent problem?

Stack (2006) observed that there was no discussion linking PISA results with the changes Ontario's education system was launching. She also noted that there was no focus on the direct link between poverty and low scores. Instead media coverage, if it alluded to the affects of poverty at all, portrayed Canada as doing well in decreasing the impact of poverty. The majority of media items presented comparisons between regions in the country and between Canada and other countries. These either took a congratulatory tone or decried apparent or implied problems with schools. The articles did not explain why scores were lower in Atlantic Canada, for example. They simply perpetuated negative assumptions about the largely rural region (Stack, 2006).

As we have done many times in our history, Canadian educational leaders are following American trends and are embracing similar testing regimes (Von Heyking, 2004). In Saskatchewan, the *Continuous Improvement Framework* includes the *Assessment for Learning* (AFL) program. School leaders are encouraged to use the results of AFL to increase teacher awareness of student strengths and shortcomings in Mathematics, Reading, and Science. The expressed intent of AFL is to improve programs and professional practice and to inform policy and decision-making (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.). Proponents of the testing wave believe that attending to the results will increase accountability, prompt changes to the educational system, and lead to greater economic success.

Statistics Canada (2000) is currently involved in attempts to contextualize test results. The *Youth in Transition* (YITS) survey conducted as a companion and follow-up for participants

in PISA offers rich information and may continue to help Canadian schools improve their results. YITS is a longitudinal survey that will extend the focus begun by PISA employing phone interviews with the PISA students and their parents. The intent is to gain information about the pathways youth travel as they transition from high school to the workforce (Applied Research branch Strategic Policy Human Resources Development Canada, 2000).

Analysis of YITS has just begun with most of the focus being placed on the issues surrounding enrolment in post secondary educational programs. It is not clear at this point whether data will be examined in light of a rural versus urban experience. Researchers appear to be interested in the barriers students encounter when entering post secondary programs and the conditions that may lead to either withdrawal or successful completion of the programs. Perhaps the realities and barriers faced by rural students will become part of the YITS analysis. With government testing programs providing a background to my earlier wonderings about the readiness of my students to tackle an increasingly global world, I began searching for ways to alleviate their barriers by understanding the realities faced by my former students.

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate the transitions students experience as they leave their small rural school and enter into their adult lives. I explore student perceptions of the supports they received as they were making the decisions surrounding their future plans during their final years in high school. In addition, the study examines student experiences during the transition. The ultimate goal of the study is to provide information about the supports needed by students to facilitate their move from being a high school student to an adult enrolled in post secondary education or entering the workforce.

Research Questions

Recognizing the interactional nature of phenomenological research, the question with which I begin this retrospective study is as follows:

- What supports do recent graduates perceive to have existed in a small rural school to assist students in their transition from school to post secondary education or the workforce?

In phenomenological research, it is appropriate to pursue a series of sub questions which help to elucidate the central theme of the study. Two such sub questions follow:

- What challenges and triumphs have recent graduates faced as they transitioned from high school to their current positions as post secondary students or employees?
- What supports do recent graduates believe should be implemented to assist future graduates in their upcoming transitions from high school to post secondary education or the workforce?

Assumptions

As a rural teacher, administrator, parent, and researcher, I am close to the subject of inquiry and I will need to be aware of how my position influences my interpretation of the data. I will employ the phenomenological approach to research, meaning that I will be investigating the points of view or perspectives voiced by my research participants in order to understand their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I hope to gain insight into how rural school leaders can better prepare students for the changes they will undergo as they leave high school. The following basic assumptions underpin my research.

I assume the students who agree to participate in the study will remember their initial plans and will be able to explain the various decisions they have made following their high school graduation. I also assume that rural students will have experienced a divergence between what they thought life after high school would be like and the realities they have lived in the interim.

Further, I assume that using qualitative interviews will lead to valuable insights that can be taken as representative of rural youth. The lived experiences of recent graduates although unique to the participants, will provide more useful data for school leaders than results from international testing programs.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to a class that had stayed together from kindergarten to graduation from one small kindergarten to grade 12 school in an isolated rural Saskatchewan community. Interest surveys were sent to each of the sixteen members of the class of 2006 and their responses informed the completion of the study.

Limitations

The key limitations of this study are human—resting in the researcher's ability and identity, and in the willingness and memory of the participants. The researcher's *emic* status is a limitation of this study. Having taught the participants during several of their high school years, I can be seen as an insider who has a shared history with the participants. However, due to life experiences, educational background and status, I am not a peer to the participants, so there is a limit to my *emic* status.

Participants' availability and willingness to engage in this study may limit opportunities to discuss their insights with participants, as will the memory of the participants. The

methodology employed will involve numerous contacts with participants; some of whom no longer live near the researcher. Due to the retrospective nature of the study, it is also limited to the memory of the participants within the period of the study.

Definitions

Within the body of this study the following definitions will be used.

Educare *versus* Educere

The two Latin roots for the word education are fundamental to understanding our purpose in schools (Bass & Good, 2004). *Educare* means to train or to mold. This root emphasizes schools as pre-employment centers, which focus heavily on rote learning and ‘back to basics’ teaching. *Educere*, the other root means leading out. This emphasizes the development of problem solving, creativity and questioning skills. Bass and Good (2004) described the need for balance between *educare* and *educere* in schools.

Emic *versus* Etic

The distinction between *emic* and *etic* positions helps to bring clarity to my position in my study. Pike (1957) noted that the same event could be interpreted differently depending on the observer. He coined the term etic to name the detached observer who will make comparisons, between different cultures or systems. He used the term emic to denote an insider or involved participant. Pike not only advocated acknowledgement of etic and emic perspectives, he also advocated using both perspectives to understand any event. Pike’s definition will be employed within this study.

Rural *versus* Urban

Our understanding of rurality is changing. An awareness of the varying definitions of rurality is important to understanding the literature reviewed in chapter two. Rurality is a state of mind (Rye, 2006). Teens participating in Rye's study exposed a dichotomy of meaning. They identified with images of rurality exemplifying Rye's term *rural idyll* espousing a spirit of co-operation, tolerance, and peaceful existence; yet they also identified with a differing view of rurality shown in Rye's term *rural dull* which included keywords of "boring," "gossip," and "redneck."

For me, rural is where landscape meets mindscape; it is a combination of wide-open spaces and of close human relationships. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) employs a population density formula to determine rurality. Statistics Canada (n.d.) identified any community with less than 10,000 residents as rural or small town. It should be noted that my experiences with rural have been in very isolated regions of Saskatchewan, where population density is more likely to be thought of in terms of livestock and wildlife than otherwise. For this study, I will employ the Statistics Canada definition recognizing that the research participants and the school in the study are far from the upper end of Statistics Canada's definition of rural.

Economic Capital, Cultural Capital and Social Capital

The concept of capital is not easily explained for it is a multifaceted idea. Bourdieu (1983) determined that there are at least three types of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. In a purely economic view of the world, capital can be seen as anything easily

converted into cash. Bank accounts, shares in companies, land and equipment would all fit into this category easily.

The other two forms of capital are less easily identified, but are as prevalent and as valuable if not more valuable to those who possess them. Cultural capital, Bourdieu (1983) noted, could explain why some children appeared to gain greater benefit from education. He sought to understand the impact of family background on the achievements of students in school and found that certain families inculcated their offspring with attitudes, aptitudes, and interests that promoted academic achievement. The physical evidence of these family conditions could be seen in some possessions, such as books and paintings, or in qualifications, such as degrees and certificates held by family members. The transmission of cultural capital between generations of a family, while in some cases could be seen as deliberate, such as garnering particular experiences for one's children like attending certain events, is most often an unconscious transfer of perceptions and sensitivities. Cultural capital is one way of naming the complex environment of one's life that promotes particular growth and interests within one.

Social capital can be seen as the accumulated human networks one has—the family, neighborhood, and social ties that confer with them expectations of favors, loyalty, friendship, mutual consideration, and courtesies. While economic capital can be depleted, social capital builds and by its very nature expands as it is used even though the holder of social capital may never stop to assess its value. While memberships in some groups, such as adult service clubs, may be sought with the express intent to extend one's network with expectation of economic benefits, most networks are entered into as a product of location, shared interests, and relationships (Bourdieu, 1983).

Bourdieu's explanation of the types of capital is useful to this study as a framework for understanding the differing approaches to decisions about one's life paths. It is not simply money which helps to predetermine what a student will choose to do after high school, nor is it simply a matter of academic achievement. Social, economic, and cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu (1983) will be used in this study to discuss the nature of these paths.

Lived Experiences

Experiences, events in one's life, are filled with fleeting sensations, underlying conditions and pervasive impressions which take on a deeper meaning and significance when they are examined and reflected upon. One must have lived through an experience to understand it, but one must also have attempted to capture the essence, the truth of the experience in order to explore and preserve meaning. (Burch, n.d.; van Manen, 2007).

Transitions

A commonly used word, transitions refer to changes, movements from one state of being to another. With any change comes a time of uncertainty and possible vulnerability. Life transitions such as changing marital status, jobs or residences bring forth or develop new or changed self image or definitions of self (Schlossberg, 1989). Each major life transition involves new routines and responsibilities, which require a period of adjustment. Schlossberg identified a predictable set of stages: moving in, moving through and moving out each involving a re-examination of one's situation, self, support and strategies. Her definition informs my thinking in this study.

Organization of the Thesis

There are five chapters in this thesis beginning in chapter one with a brief description of the study's setting that is home for the research participants. Chapter one provides an introduction to the researcher along with an explanation of how the international testing regime prompted her desire to research, the research questions, some relevant background, and a general statement of purpose. Chapter two is a literature review in which I further develop the background to the study and explore the theories, pertinent issues, trends, and concerns that have surfaced from my reading. The research design, methodology, and method that inform this study are presented in Chapter three.

Subsequent chapters provide details of the data collected during the study and offer analysis of the issues brought forth by the participants. I found that the study offered other areas for further research and held implications for school personnel in small rural schools. These concerns are communicated in the closing chapter of the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This study is an exploration of the transitions students experience as they leave high school and enter '*the real world*.' For most rural students, their post secondary life propels them into competition with urban peers either for jobs or for seats in post secondary educational programs, but also in social circles. In this chapter, I begin with a brief explanation of large scale testing and the media interpretation and reporting of these results as they relate to confidence in the public education system's preparation of rural students for life after high school.

The next section of the literature review follows several researchers' investigations of student motivation and identifies factors influencing students' educational aspirations. These include mobility, habitus, family background, and financial issues. Of interest is the process by which students determine which career path to follow. I also look at literature in which researchers delve into the life-course transitions pertinent to graduating students. These theorists provide a backdrop for '*the real world*' developed by the study participants.

Mirror Mirror on the Wall

When Snow White's evil queen asked the infamous question, she was seeking affirmation that she was in fact the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, and therefore safe from competition. Allow me to take a giant leap out of the fairy tale, into a more modern saga of competition. The search is not necessarily for beauty; the modern search is for global supremacy. Gazing into the mirror of international testing results, government leaders ask who is the most technologically and economically competitive of all. Theobald, (1995) arguing against the value of standardized testing spoke of this trend:

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the push for accountability has been indistinguishable from the push for more standardized testing, which has been indistinguishable from the push for a better global economic position. (p. 465)

The common assumption that test scores can be linked to economic competitiveness was summed up by American Raymond Scheppach, executive director of the National Governors Association, as he addressed a press conference accompanying the release of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results: “Our students’ performance today is the best indicator of our competitiveness tomorrow” (Bracey, 2008, p. 620). Another spokesperson at the same event, Former West Virginia Governor Bob Wise, added his affirmation of PISA calling it the *academic Olympics* (Bracey, 2008). Searching for links between educational testing results and economic competitiveness is a common exercise (Bracey, 2008; Gordon, 2007; Levin, 1998; Viadero, 2008), but there is no clear consensus on the issue. Each round of results prompts further study and brings out numerous sub topics for investigation. One of these is the status of rural education and the ability of rural students to compete with their urban counterparts.

Allow me to extend the mirror, mirror image raised earlier. If international competitiveness is one feature examined in the mirror of international testing, then what features within the country, or within sectors of the country need be examined? The next section of literature reviewed explores rural realities that may impact student motivation and decision making. Perceptions can empower or burden. The features displayed in the mirror could be seen as distinguishing or as disfiguring. What are the realities on the face of rural educational opportunities? These include mobility; the sprawl or call of urbanization; the security or

repression of close familial ties and social capital; and financial concerns. Ultimately, rural graduates embark on journeys that may or may not take them far from home. The choices they make, the changes they undergo, and the transitions they experience are inextricably connected with their self-image and the perceptions they have developed and continue to develop.

Mobility: Promise or Peril?

Are rural students disadvantaged compared to their urban counterparts when choosing future directions? Certainly this is a controversial question. It would depend on the context of the question. If discussing future choices, perhaps rural students do have to face more drastic changes than their urban counterparts. Statistics Canada (2000) traced among other things, the out migration experienced by rural regions. It would seem that most rural students, will leave their homes and head to the urban centers either for post secondary education, or training, or to enter the workforce. Urban youth also leave their communities but in smaller numbers. People will go to where there is a job or what might be called a future, risking economic, social, and psychological costs due to this migration. Saskatchewan and Newfoundland, for example, although currently in an economic upswing, are shown by Statistics Canada (2000) to have experienced out-migration from their rural communities for decades. The angst felt in a small rural town as their youth leave, identified by Corbett (2004) in Nova Scotia's Digby Neck region is not a new phenomenon and by extension is likely to be felt in other small rural communities throughout the country.

The long tradition of migration taking young people away from their rural roots is not evenly applied throughout Canada. Atlantic Provinces have much lower rates of youth out-migration than do the four western provinces. Manitoba and Saskatchewan have even higher rates of out-migration than Alberta and British Columbia (Dupuy, Mayer, & Morissette, 2000).

One possible reason for the decreased rate of departure from Atlantic Provinces suggested by Dupuy et al. was distance. Atlantic youth who leave their rural homes are more likely than those of other provinces to also leave their provinces, as well. Newfoundland and Labrador had the highest incidence of this trend.

Corbett (2007) studied the migration patterns of small coastal communities in Nova Scotia during a thirty-year period ending in the 1990s. Employing Bourdieu's (1980, as cited in Corbett, 2007) *Logic of Practice*, Corbett explored the deep-seated issues within the rural communities collectively known as Digby Neck. Decisions about whether to stay or leave involved an interconnected series of conditions including what Bourdieu called *habitus*, which could be defined as the inherent beliefs and ways of thinking and acting which are gained by individuals within a society. Rural children, especially boys raised in a fishing community, will have a very different habitus from those who were raised in an urban location. Corbett found that the *leavers* were much more likely to have higher levels of education than those who stayed in the community. The leavers were also much more likely to be female; virtually all female leavers had achieved some level of post secondary education.

Those who stayed had negative perceptions of education yet displayed entrepreneurial resilience despite being portrayed as *fisher folk*. Corbett (2007) also noted that those who stayed had various reasons for doing so, not the least being the additional cost and risk associated by going away. The decision to stay can be explained in part by Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice*. These men often prosper taking advantage of their social and cultural capital, their family connections, and the long-standing traditions of making a living without advanced education. In fact there is a complacent pride of place both geographic and social in being *born and bred* fishermen.

The women who stayed were less often as economically successful, but they, too, were heavily involved in maintaining their pride of place. These attitudes are consistent with Bourdieu's model, which holds that societal groups, holding differing levels of power are often in conflict with each other. The born and bred fishermen described in Corbett's study certainly fit this criteria, as do those who chose to leave their maritime home and search for other opportunities. Those who left qualified their home as a great place if you wanted to leave; those who stayed were cynical about the potential advantages leaving might bring (Corbett, 2004).

Corbett (2007) pointed out that the *learning-leaving link*, as he calls it, increases the ambivalence and suspicion rural residents might have towards schools. Are schools the social agent of change and improved quality of life for rural residents, or do they cause depopulation and loss of local control? Who will draw the fish from the waters if all the young leave? Corbett participated in a fishing day and took note of the family connections and the traditional ways of learning the trade as young boys worked beside their fathers on the boats. For many, Corbett found, leaving threatens the end of that way of life.

Corbett (2007) employed *resistance theory* to explain what outsiders might consider a stubborn refusal to take the implied promise of success available through education and mobility. Education brings with it the ability to join a postmodern mobility, urbanity, and rapidly globalizing lifestyle. Many Digby Neck residents, like other rural residents who agreed that education is increasingly important in a modern world, are not willing to depart from their way of life. Corbett also speculated that resistance theory combined with the lack of mobility capital explains the growing trend for Digby Neck youth to remain *around here*. Instead, he found that they struggle to maintain and defend their communities against the urbanization of their spaces.

Dupuy et al. (2000) also studied the migration of rural and urban youth following three sub groups: *leavers*, *stayers* and *returners*. Using census and tax data for the period of 1990 to 1996, they tracked migration patterns throughout Canada in three different age groups: those aged 15-19, 20-25, 25-29, and older. Their findings, that, at best 25% of the leavers returned to their rural communities after having been away for a period of up to ten years mirrors the trend I have noted in the rural community in which I live and work. They also noted that leavers experienced a net increase in their income. The researchers raised a question: is departure from the rural area the key factor for income increase, or is the leaver more likely to earn higher income regardless of mobility? Other questions raised by this study involved the impact of in- and out-migration on the rural communities involved. Dupuy et al., noting the difficulties in monitoring migration, did little to explore this issue other than to indicate that returners can offer hope for rural community survival.

Urban Sprawl

Throughout North America, rural areas are experiencing changes in their demographics. Areas closer to urban centers are becoming suburbanized transformed into bedroom communities where people who work in the cities opt to live in outlying smaller towns to benefit from what they perceive to be more secure, healthy environments. Sonya (2003) in *Newcomers to Old Towns*, recorded her studies on the effects of this population shift felt in six American mid-western towns. A feature of modern rural settings noted in Sonya's (2003) book is the increased impact of urbanity in the rural setting. Rural residents, using the freeways and internet, bring urban goals, trends, and products into their homes.

I can testify to this trend with my own experience. It is common for students in my remote school to travel to the city for concerts, shopping, visiting, and sports. I recall a recent

conversation with a grade 12 student who told me I should not be surprised that students would drive to a major provincial urban centre, a two and half hour trip, on a school night. She was discussing a concert she had attended the night before saying the event was worth being tired at school the next day. In her mind, the concert presented an important opportunity to be *with it*. I have often noticed rural teens' compulsion to be in touch with the urban trends. My students definitely do not want to be seen as *hicks from the sticks*. They resist the stereotyped view of rural residents inherent in pop culture, which showcases rural places as either sleepy or backwards (Frank, 2003). Negative labels of rural residents may in fact influence teens to leave after graduation. The negative stereotype of rural residents was found to be a factor in outmigration in one West Virginian study in which the researchers used cognitive mapping to assess the affects of rural stereotypes on the migration preferences of teens (Towers, 2005).

Family Portraits

The combined effects of socio-economic status (SES), parental educational attainment, parenting styles, and cultural and social capital are largely responsible for the career and educational plans made by young people. Many researchers have noted a link between parental educational attainment and the aspirations of graduating students (Finnie, Lascelles, & Sweetman, 2005; Schultz, 2004; Trusty, 1998). There are several approaches one can take to better understand this phenomenon. One is to explore the concept of cultural capital or what Hango and de Broucker (2007) called *inherited intellectual capital* gained by the children raised by parents who have higher educational attainment. This means that they have a greater chance of understanding the benefits of post secondary education, and are more likely than those whose parents achieved lower education to expect to go on to school. Scholarships, entrance requirements, and other aspects of entering post secondary education will be familiar concepts.

Another way of putting this is that school is simply a part of the habitus or culture in certain families.

Higher SES is another predictor of higher educational aspiration (Finnie et al., 2005; Levin, 2007). Higher levels of parental education may in fact lead to a high SES, but this is not always the case. Certainly having been raised in a home with the benefits of a higher SES attributable to higher educational attainment predisposes students to reach for similar or more affluent financial status. Finally, students from families with higher SES have a greater likelihood of achieving higher grades in high school (Usher & Junor, 2005). Not surprisingly, higher grades are also known to increase the likelihood of entering post secondary education. These factors, parental educational attainment, SES, and high school achievement each have the potential to influence a young person's academic and career goals.

The decision to enter post secondary education is more easily made if there is an economic plan in place to meet the costs of post secondary education. In an attempt to understand the factors that influence educational savings patterns, Statistics Canada commissioned an analysis of the 2002 Survey of Approaches to Educational Planning. Saving for post secondary education is influenced by various factors including educational aspirations of parents for their children, the child's age, success in school, and most significantly the family's financial circumstances. Students whose parents have taken at least some post secondary education are more likely to save money to support post secondary education for their children, as are parents in higher income brackets (Lefebvre, 2004).

The expectations and role-modeling provided by parents is not solely economic. The general attitudes and beliefs surrounding the value of education may be an even more important contributing factor. Stelmach (2006) interviewed high school students about the role they

perceived their parents to have in school improvement plans. The participants in her study were reluctant to have their parents take active visible roles in their school lives but did hope for and expect general support such as reminders to study and interest in their studies and extra-curricular activities.

The ability to show positive support for education holds true regardless of the financial status or educational background of a family (Trusty, 1998). Student perceptions of their parents' support of school can have a profound affect on their own attitudes towards post secondary education. Trusty examined parental involvement as it pertained to the educational aspirations of adolescents. He found that attendance at school functions, even those that are not academic had positive influences on students' educational expectations regardless of SES, although the benefits were more pronounced for those at the two ends of the SES scale than for those with a moderate SES. Trusty speculated that the positive affect of extra curricular activities on academic success was due in part to increased student and parental engagement.

Trusty (1998) explored what he called authoritative parenting and career control. Student participants were asked to respond to statements indicating the degree of control they perceived themselves to have in choosing jobs, or high school courses and in spending their money or in making career choices. The statements were on a continuum ranging from: *I decide*, to *my parents decide*. The scores were then cross referenced with the scores attained by their parents who were also study participants. Not surprisingly, students who perceived their parents positively, who perceived their parents as controlling and who reported their parents as being highly involved in their education had higher educational expectations than students whose parents appeared to have a lower interest and involvement in their child's career development.

Clearly familial issues are inexorably linked with educational aspirations of young people. As mentioned earlier, fewer parents expect or demand that their children automatically follow their footsteps, especially in agriculture, despite the fact that earlier studies have indicated reluctance on the part of many families to support post secondary education (Corbett, 2007). Economic conditions are in flux in Saskatchewan with a heavy demand for skilled trades people, and with the increasingly high tech nature of making a living, many students are searching for quick ways to enter the workforce. Apprenticeship programs are becoming a popular route, perhaps because students can earn money as they learn their trade.

Money Matters

There is detailed interest in the financial issues surrounding post secondary education (Finnie et al., 2005; Hango & de Broucker, 2007; Looker & Lowe, 2001; Rogers et al., 2006; Usher & Junor, 2005). Parents, educational leaders, and government all have a vested interest in increasing educational rates for Canada's youth (Brunson, Butt, & Déziel, 2002). The researchers attempt to answer a wide range of questions with the most predominant theme appearing to be finding ways to enhance educational opportunities for greater numbers of students. Surprisingly, although students and their parents often mentioned financial concerns as possible impediments to post secondary education, the data from numerous studies shows that finances are not a clear-cut deterrent (Looker & Lowe, 2001; Prairie Research Associates, 2005). The barriers that prevent students from entering post secondary education are a complicated mix of emotional, academic, geographic, and economic factors.

Another subject of interest is the increased cost borne by individuals and their families for post secondary education. Researchers have noted a lack of accurate knowledge on the true costs of such education; student perceptions of expected costs for tuition are significantly higher than

the actual costs (Fine, 2006). Perhaps when asked their opinion of the potential costs of post secondary education, students surveyed are thinking of all the costs involved, including lost earning potential. Prairie Research Associates (2005) found that students were aware of various programs such as the Canadian Millennium Scholarships and Government sponsored loans but they knew very little about them. Despite their lack of knowledge, a majority of the students in the *Prairie Research Associates Student Survey* expected that financial aid would be available to them.

Student debt is frequently discussed in the literature (Fine, 2007; Kapsalis, 2006; Looker & Lowe, 2001; Mueller, 2008). There has been an increase in access to student loan programs and there has also been a small increase in difficulties for students in paying off their loans. Roughly one third of Canadian students access government sponsored loans. These are consolidated within six months after graduation typically on a ten-year repayment schedule. Of those who graduated in 1994-1995, 39% had repaid in full by 2003; 30% were continuing to pay off their debt; and the final 31% had defaulted on their debt (Kapsalis, 2006). Difficulties in repaying student loans are connected to post graduate employment income, or lack thereof, rather than to the amount of debt. Looker and Lowe (2001) indicated that there is no clear knowledge on the extent of costs related to post secondary education. For rural students in most provinces the costs include the need to relocate. Drolet (2005) found that living away from the parental home added an additional \$5000 on average to the annual cost of post secondary education in the 1990s.

Of concern to public policy makers is the question: who should pay for post secondary education? One of the underpinning conditions is the belief that since individuals who successfully complete post secondary education enjoy numerous financial, social, health and

happiness benefits, they should bear the financial costs of attaining these benefits (Tandem Social Research Consulting, 2007). Others, aware of the societal benefits of a highly educated population including lower costs to government funded health and welfare programs, as well as higher overall productivity, believe governments bear a fiduciary responsibility to promote and sponsor institutions of higher learning and their students.

Ipsos-Reid (2004) found that Canadians generally support government loan programs although there were mixed results with some scenarios. Respondents were given a series of paired hypothetical students who had completed different programs of study with different levels of debt. Answers about which students should be forgiven \$5000 of their loan varied greatly whether analyzed by region, age or SES of the respondent. The Ipsos-Reid survey also captured a large range (from a low of no debt to a high of \$50 000 of debt) in what Canadians see as an acceptable amount of debt for graduating students.

In Canada, 57% of expenditures on post secondary institutions come from the public purse, although the exact amount varies greatly from province to province. Thus public support of higher education is greater than in the United States where public expenditures on post secondary institutions represent only 43% of the total cost (Tandem Social Research Consulting, 2007). Public support for post secondary education brings with it public scrutiny. There is increased interest in two related but distinct concepts: accountability and accessibility.

Those concerned with accessibility desire an educational system in which post secondary education is universally open to any individual regardless of racial or religious background, SES, or gender. They want affordable seats in many locations to educate and train students in their chosen courses of study (Frenette, 2005; Prairie Research Associates, 2005). Accountability is a less easily defined term. Jaafar and Anderson (2007) point out that accountability is a much used

but under defined term with two distinctly different paradigms: economic and professional or ethical. Who is held responsible for the quality of post secondary education programs and financial assistance programs in Canada? How is quality judged? These are questions that are just now surfacing in the literature, but are beyond the scope of this study.

The various pathways taken by students from high school to post secondary education are also key topics of study (Hango & de Broucker, 2007). Using data from YITS, Hango and de Broucker (2007) identified ten pathways that they collapsed into five for analysis. They found that young people in their study (who were aged 18 to 20) could be grouped as follows: (a) High school droppers—those who have left high school without graduating; (b) second chancers—those who left high school but later returned to achieve a diploma or to take some post secondary education before returning to the workforce; (c) High school only—those who graduated from high school but did not attend post secondary education; (d) Non-gappers—those who went directly (within four months) from high school to post secondary education; and (e) Gappers—those who took more than four months after graduating from high school before entering post secondary education.

Various demographic characteristics were also sought revealing sub categories or traits held in common by various members of each group. Not surprisingly the majority of non-gappers had earned higher grades, came from families with higher SES and had parents who were highly educated while those with lower marks and lower SES were more likely to enter the work force. Fewer female students chose the drop-out pathway and females were also more likely to be non-gappers. The droppers and High school only group were more likely to have entered the workforce before leaving high school. This circumstance leads to another sub topic worthy of study. Is holding a part time job during high school a deterrent to entering post

secondary education? Hango and de Broucker (2007) found that students who worked more than 20 hours per week while attending high school were more likely to be high school dropers, or to just complete their high school. It should be noted though, that there were also many in this category who later became part of the second chancer group.

Is the choice to work during high school due to a shortage of money, a desire to leave the esoteric studies of school behind and enter the practical adult work-a-day life or an attempt to begin saving money for post secondary education? Are the lower marks due to the extra hours of work or are students who have lower marks more inclined to seek affirmation through working than in trying to achieve higher grades? In a rural setting, the ability to earn a living or to be seen as a reliable worker is a source of pride. Do more rural students self-select out of academic pursuits because hard work is respected in a rural culture? Do gappers need more time to decide what type of studies to enter or do they need to earn money before entering post secondary education? Why do women more often select the academic pathways rather than entering the workforce? Hango and de Broucker (2007) did not provide answers to these questions. Researchers who use in-depth interviews and panel discussions with young people may be able to uncover some answers but the answers will inevitably be multifaceted and complicated.

Choices and Changes

Although this study focuses on rural adolescent and early adulthood experiences, it is appropriate to look at literature that is set in urban centers because so little information specific to rural exists. Daigneault and Wirtz (2008) used surveys to begin and eventually held small group panel discussions with 28 graduating students in one large high school in New England. These discussions led the researchers to develop a set of themes surrounding the emotional concerns held by these students. As expected, these themes include financial concerns, change,

anticipation of greater freedom and greater responsibility, but also delve more deeply into how students make decisions about their future.

Pressure to succeed was one theme. One student described pressure from his parents to succeed academically to advance financially beyond where they had. Several students felt pressure to achieve scholarships to assuage the cost of their education. Another student described the expectation that he follow family tradition and enter the military. Others noted the pressure to attend college was pervasive, showing up especially in the questions they faced throughout their senior year. One student commented that the pressure to make decisions completely negated his earlier expectation that his senior year was going to be easy and stress free (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008).

Some attention was given to how students eventually formed their future plans. Students discussed how visiting schools helped them make selections, others described how their plans linked to long-held aspirations or tied into long-time hobbies. An older sibling influenced one student, and others sought advice from school counselors (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008).

Another theme selected by Daigneault and Wirtz (2008), individuation *versus* community, described the students' realization that they would have an opportunity to have a fresh start. They could develop new images or be who they want to be without being type caste by their peers and teachers. One student in particular felt that she could break away from being known as the quiet one and looked forward to creating a new image. Tempering this optimistic theme was the realization that leaving the familiar routines, and friends and family would have its own set of challenges. Many felt they would miss the routines and structures and wondered if they would have the ability to cope with new responsibilities such as paying the bills and shopping for groceries (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008).

Each of these concerns is connected with what individuation theory deems as a necessary stage of life: the transition from dependence on family to the autonomy of adulthood (Bucx & van Wel, 2008). These life stage transitions include, but are not limited to, living away from the parental home, entering the workforce, becoming financially self-sufficient, finding a life partner, and starting a family. While there are often tensions within families as adolescents reach toward independence, Bucx and van Wel found that the well-being of adolescents and young adults experiencing transitions was very closely connected to the parent-child bond. They noted that the bond was adversely affected by the child leaving home but was strengthened by the child gaining financial success. A further issue is timing. Clark (2007) found that students are delaying many of the transitional stages due in part to the increased amount of education they are receiving.

The Daigneault and Wirtz' (2008) study provides practical implications for school counselors. These include increased awareness of the emotional flux experienced by high school seniors. Students need to explore their options and should be encouraged to be prepared for changes. Attending to the concerns of parents was also mentioned with suggestions that schools make specific efforts to inform parents of funding costs, and programs of support and offer financial planning strategies such as budgeting for students. A further value in the Daigneault and Wirtz' study is that the researchers gave voice to high school students. Adolescent student voices are becoming more prevalent in the research literature (Prairie Research Associates, 2005; Shultz, 2004; Stelmach, 2006), but surprisingly they continue to be underrepresented as sources of information about schools.

I see a clear link between the Daigneault and Wirtz study (2008) and my own because, like them I attempted to encapsulate the student voice. They spoke to students on the threshold

of post secondary life; my study participants have traveled beyond that threshold. A second difference is the fact that Daigneault and Wirtz spoke to students from a large urban high school whereas my students are from a very small rural K-12 school. I also seek practical applications for school personnel by the former students to recount their experiences and perceptions.

The researchers touched on the importance of helping students deal with their angst and with their feelings of *disequilibrium* (Golan, 1981, as cited in Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008) brought on by the transitional period of senior year, but did not go into any details. The researchers encouraged school counselors to use qualitative research to enhance their practice, but did not appear to recognize how demanding of time and expertise this advice would be.

The issue of disequilibrium, although variously described, appears in several studies (Morales, 2008; Schultz, 2004). As the word suggests, this is a term used to describe the imbalance or the ambivalence felt by people who are in transition. Feelings of joy, anticipation and optimism can be dampened by uncertainty and apprehension. Transitions are especially difficult for students who are forced to leave familial connections behind. Faced with new surroundings rural students may fear they will not make friends, know how to behave or be able to handle the changes they will encounter. Both those who enter the workforce and those who attend post secondary education will feel this uncertainty. Some students will avoid the decision altogether; others may begin their courses of study or take on new jobs but may not persevere due to homesickness or other reasons. Rural students who do pursue post secondary education and who persevere in their studies may also struggle with feeling disconnected. A closer look at how these students make adjustments represents a key facet of the present study.

Those who study academic resilience focus on students from minority groups, as well as those who have had extreme economic or health concerns or who have overcome severe life

challenges. Morales (2008) interviewed 50 marginalized college students in his study on academic resilience. Some of the themes that emerged from his in-depth interviews are applicable to rural students. These include isolation, culture shock, feelings of inadequacy, and high levels of stress. As mentioned earlier, few rural students are as isolated from urban influence as they once were, but living in the city and attending classes with numerous strangers can be disconcerting, especially to those whose way of life is vastly different from their new peers.

Students in small rural schools develop close-knit interdependent social groups that help to define their understanding of themselves (Blummer, 2004). They move through their educational years together developing their own sense of belonging and of being from within their social interactions. As they learn together, eat together, play together they influence each other. They define themselves in part by how they perceive their peers to be reacting to them. They behave as they are expected to behave or as they think they are expected to behave for they develop their role in the group and in their context through their mutual experiences (*cf.* Goffman, 1959). For example, if asked by a new teacher, they can easily identify who is the math wizard, or the computer genius, the artist, the athlete or the clown. Individuals may become trapped in a stereotype or may feel pressure to perform in a particular way. They may feel comforted by their belonging to the group or they may feel confined.

Students within these homogeneous groups will utilize or prey upon each other's strengths, and weaknesses. As they come to know each other's interests and passions, each class develops its own culture or personality. High school graduation brings with it a dispersal of the group and the resulting shift into a new context can be exhilarating or it can be terrifying.

Shultz (2004) explored the first year college experiences of agricultural first generation rural students. The students felt strongly connected to their agricultural background, and believed they had had to work much harder before college than their urban classmates had. All of his participants noted the sensation of being an outsider or being different. One student's wry comment summed up his feelings of culture shock: "it's just being a long way from any cows. That's all you have to say" (Shultz, 2004, p. 50). Making the adjustment to urban academic life was a challenge for these first generation farm students, yet they believed that their ability to work hard and be self sufficient would get them through.

The strategies utilized by academically resilient students, such as those who participated in Morales' (2008) study, are varied. Some black students reported having to develop a different persona to employ while at school reverting to their normal self when at home to avoid being accused of acting *white*. One student spoke of the need to become virtually bilingual. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses, and working hard to overcome limitations is important, as is learning to deal with feelings of self-doubt. Participants needed to find ways to become connected such as joining a student's union. They had to search for appropriate times and locations to study, often hiding the amount of work they did from family and friends who did not appear to value what they were doing. They had to resist temptations and stay focused in order to reach their goals.

What are the goals of recent high school graduates? This question prompted a study of what first year college students define as success. Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, and Purswell (2008) studied the strategies and definitions of success held by 22 participants, using narratives to present a multilayered picture of the transitions their participants were experiencing. Three

themes emerged in their study: academic success, social integration, and an ability to navigate the college environment.

Findings in the Yazedjian et al.'s (2008) study included insights into how students viewed their academic success. There did not appear to be any consensus on what was considered to be a good mark. Students were pragmatic about the marks they achieved and appeared to adhere to personal expectations rather than focusing on comparing their marks with other students. Students reflected that they had learned important academic skills such as how to study and take notes but also indicated that they had not needed to use them in high school. They found college classes much more difficult to master. When questioned further on their academic strategies for success, several participants indicated that they did not always use the strategies, sometimes procrastinating or neglecting their readings. They also indicated that although they needed the Internet to complete course work, it was often a distraction to them. Online social connections through email or internet social networking sites like Facebook frequently took up more time than anticipated.

Although academic success was one of the key themes, with most students agreeing that they had not truly understood the level of rigor they would need to thrive in college studies, it was not the only or necessarily the most important topic of concern. The second theme was social integration, or making new friends. One student's comment indicates the importance of making new friends, "It's a bummer to figure out you don't have a social life. And to realize that you want one" (Yazedjian et al., 2008, p. 146). Students discussed finding ways to balance a social life with work and academic responsibilities, while expanding their social networks. Clearly the social adjustments of entering school loom large in students' view of their own success.

The third theme described in Yazedjian et al.'s (2008) study pertained to the students' ability to be independent. The researchers noted that this area of student success rarely surfaces in the literature, but it appeared very important to their participants. The students indicated pride in their newfound ability to demonstrate responsibility and to make their own decisions. Understanding definitions of success is very much a product of perception. One participant's summation of her first year experiences illustrates that the first year after high school is about the transition to becoming an adult: "I think college is all about finding who you are as a person" (Yazedjian et al., 2008, p. 147).

Each of the themes found by Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, and Purswell (2008) is connected to this study. The themes or goals noted by Yazedjian et al. were developing independence, creating a social life and achieving academic success. Each of these topics would be important for any young adult but for rural youth who may be leaving social and familial safety net miles behind, these skills are paramount. Creating a social circle may be a new skill for rural youth because for many, their friendships have been defined in part by their geography and their social lives may have been organized by school, family, or community leaders. Finally, the theme of academic success, will obviously apply to those who have entered post secondary education or training rather than the workforce. Ultimately the choices and changes rural students face result from a variety of interdependent factors including their self perceptions.

Staying Put: Self-Selection or Rural Roots?

Certainly becoming an adult means making choices about one's future. In discussing the underlying differences between various educational choices, most prominently a choice between entering college or entering university, Usher and Junor (2005) discussed a tendency they called *self-selection*. They noted that many students self select out of rigorous academic pursuits long

before grade twelve. The reasons these students simply do not see themselves as potential university students are myriad. Social capital weighs in heavily here, as does the concept of habitus. Academic success is another factor. Those with lower grades are much more likely to self-select out of post secondary education (Usher & Junor, 2005).

What else motivates rural students? What aspirations do they have? Social and geographic isolation and economic deprivation are often cited as reasons for lower educational attainments in rural people. What affect does attachment to place and family connections have on rural students? While many leave their communities, some do so quite reluctantly. Hektner (1995) investigated the question of how rural students are affected by their attachment to place testing his hypothesis that when fulfilling educational aspirations led to relocation, students would experience significant conflict. He found that rural adolescents do indeed experience the dilemma of believing that living close to family and getting away from their area are both valuable and the resulting conflict appears to encourage some, more often male students to renounce or delay their educational aspirations. Researchers and teachers may not have given enough credence to the benefits of rural lives. “Planning to remain in one’s local community, however, may also be an important and decent aspiration....” (Howley, 2006, p. 66). While studies indicate that rural students do tend to aspire to lower levels of post secondary education, they actually tread a line between educational aspirations and their commitment to family and place.

The Teacher Connection

In their study, Hardré, Crowson, Debacker, and White (2007) noted that rural conditions although recently garnering increased attention, are greatly underrepresented in research. They chose to study the achievement goals and motivations for rural students testing the hypothesis

that positive classroom climate, perceived instrumentality and students' self-perception of ability would greatly enhance motivation. They speculated that positive classroom climates that enhance students' ability to focus on their studies and be successful academically would provide students with greater confidence to formulate long term goals and aspirations that would include academic post secondary education. The other hypothesis involved instrumentality, which means that the more likely that students are able to link the work they are doing in school to practical, useable, real life situations, the more meaningful they would find their studies.

Hardré et al.'s (2007) hypotheses proved to be accurate within the confines of their study. While the assumptions on the surface appear to be simple, the implications are not. Teachers need to be able to create and maintain supportive, challenging classrooms and demonstrate the usefulness of learning. Of course, implicit in their study of student motivation, was the assumption that aspiring to graduation from university was preferable to training for the trades or entering the workforce. While none of these assumptions or conclusions is startling, they do lead to other areas of concern. Staffing rural schools is an issue that begs attention (Berry, 2004). How are teachers prepared to help students with their future goals? Will having highly competent teachers also increase the enrollment levels of students in post secondary education?

When attempting to explain lower rural test results, writers and educational leaders often look at the teaching staff in rural schools (Lowe, 2006; Robertson, 2002). High turnover rates, difficulty in recruiting teachers, and difficulties in providing professional development and social capital are some general issues surrounding staffing small rural schools. As an administrator in a small rural school, I have experienced all of these difficulties. In particular, staffing for French language instruction and the senior mathematics and sciences has been a challenge. While our division has put some measures in place to alleviate these concerns, each issue is of concern and

is inextricably interwoven in the complexities of specific schools. Large scale, universal fixes are unlikely to solve the staffing concerns for all rural schools (Berry, 2004).

Small rural schools are often seen as stepping-stones for novice teachers and administrators (Clarke & Wildly, 2004). While these people bring their idealism, enthusiasm, and often youth to a school staff, their inexperience can be a detriment to their students (Berry, 2004). Administrators at the school and division level not only need to provide support to allow novice and new coming teachers to hone their skills, but also need to help them acclimatize to the small town cultures they enter. Unless they have rural roots, these new staff members will experience culture shock and are less likely to last more than a year or two.

Principals in four isolated rural schools in Australia were the subjects of an ethnographic study that highlighted the culture shock experienced by novice administrators who, new to their jobs, new to their communities, and new to administration, were often overwhelmed and frustrated. One quote in particular caught my attention: “The isolation here could get to me if I let it. I don’t have much furniture or many possessions. You could say I live in a suitcase. This suits me. It means I can make a quick getaway” (Clarke & Wildly, 2004, p. 564). As a long time rural resident and administrator, I was piqued by the lack of commitment that Clarke and Wildly’s participant administrator showed to her community and wondered how she fared given that her attitude must have shown itself to the people she had supposedly come to serve.

While the focus of this study is not the teaching staff of the small rural school from which the participants graduated, their perceptions of the staff as having a role in their career planning and in preparing them for life after high school may surface.

Transitions

Transitions occur throughout our lives. Some transitions are quite obvious such as when a child learns to walk or talk, signaling the switch from infancy to childhood. The onset of adolescence is somewhat less definitive and the transition to adulthood is even less tangible. As mentioned earlier, the most obvious adjustments accompanying a shift to adulthood are establishing an independent home, earning a living, finding a life partner, and entering parenthood. Several researchers point to the extended period of time the transitions to adulthood are taking (Beaupré, Turcotte, & Milan, 2006; Clark, 2007; Stettersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). More students are electing to enter post secondary education for longer periods of time, and for many that means postponing one or more of the common harbingers of adulthood. Some continue to live with parents while they raise children or while they go to post secondary school. Others leave their parents' homes but later return. These are often referred to as the *boomerang generation* (Beaupré et al., 2006)

The boomerang effect is the most obvious sign that the transitions from adolescence to adulthood are not completely linear. In fact, living outside of the parental home may offer an illusion of independence that, if closely examined, may reveal a continuing emotional, financial, and psychological dependency on parents. Regardless of how the transitions occur within a given family, each step is a change necessitating an emotional shift or adaptation that, depending on the specific circumstances of the individuals involved, can be celebratory or anxiety ridden (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008).

What happens to those students who venture beyond their rural communities? Although very few researchers appear to have followed high school graduates who have entered the work force directly, there are several articles and studies about transitions experienced by students who

move from rural areas to urban centers to continue their education (Bucx & van Wel, 2008; Richards, 2004; Schultz, 2004; Wright, Scherman, & Beesley, 2003). Many of these expose a dogged determination on the part of rural students to succeed despite predictions that they were at risk of dropping out from post secondary education (Richards, 2004; Schultz, 2004).

Geographic and economic boundaries faced by rural students are also fairly well documented (Cartwright & Allen, 2002; Dupuy et al., 2000; Lefebvre, 2004; Schultz, 2004). Studies explore how the attitudes and expectations held by rural families impact on post secondary successes of rural students. One in particular suggested that rural students' parents are greater facilitators of independence than urban parents. This factor may alleviate the difficulties to adjusting to college faced by their students (Wright et al., 2003). Other studies would counter this optimism, pointing out that the drop out rate of rural students is significantly higher than that of their urban counterparts (de Broucker, 2005; Frenette, 2005).

While various underlying factors that influence student career path decision making were outlined in this chapter, the focal point of this study is transition. Participants had each experienced a series of changes since their departure from high school. In most cases they had left their hometown, and in all cases they had left their parent's homes. They had entered their adult lives as students or members of the workforce. The transitions they had experienced both troubling and invigorating are central to the study, and as such, were saved for the end of this chapter.

Summary and Conceptualization

Rural residents have day-to-day practical concerns. They may listen to long-range weather forecasts, certainly, but are sure to step outside and feel the wind and soil before deciding when to plant or harvest a crop. They may listen to futures reports, but know that

conditions in the marketplace are as changeable as the weather and it would be foolish to plant only one crop. Allow me to extend my agricultural metaphor. Transplanting rural youth to urban centers for post secondary education is a form of crop diversification to offset the potential risks of having youth stay in one place or enter into one field of employment. Rural residents frequently know first hand the risks involved in relying on resource based industries for a steady income. They are interested in seeing their youth thrive wherever they are planted.

Any study of the transitions rural students face in the early years out of high school must be put into context. Results reported from international testing such as PISA and Statistics Canada that predict poor outcomes for rural students are the background or the climate for this study, yet the factors that motivate and influence rural students as they make those first forays into adulthood are in the forefront. These factors may appear to be interdependent or at the very least interconnected. When examined closely they reveal that planning one's future is a complex task. The support received from peers, family, employers, neighbours, and school personnel may actually be perceived by the student as pressure to perform. Financial considerations, ties to place, social capital, cultural capital, habitus, and academic achievement all play a role in developing a student's self perception. A student's view of his or her abilities is central to how options are explored.

This retrospective study explores these underlying factors in decision making and motivations for the study participants but the intention is also to expose the surprises and adjustments students encountered during their first few years beyond high school. By investigating the transitions faced by the graduates of one small rural school, I intend to clarify the roles and responsibilities rural educators have in helping their students make decisions for their future and adjust to the inevitable changes they will encounter.

Conceptual Framework

This study investigates the experiences of transition of students from one graduating class from one rural school. Providing a backdrop are underlying issues brought forth in the PISA results that indicate that rural students face greater barriers than their urban counterparts do when transitioning from secondary school. Within this context the study has two guiding themes: (a) the factors that influence graduating students' decisions for their futures, and (b) the transitions they experience following those decisions. High school graduation is the pivotal point. The study participants were asked to recount their decisions and their experiences before and after that delineating moment.

The literature identifies issues that affect future plans of graduating rural students (see Figure 1) including mobility, familial factors, and financial concerns. Various theories about how choices are made are also outlined in the literature. These included the social and cultural capital developed in part through family background and in part through community and peer interactions, Habitus, and Resistance theory.

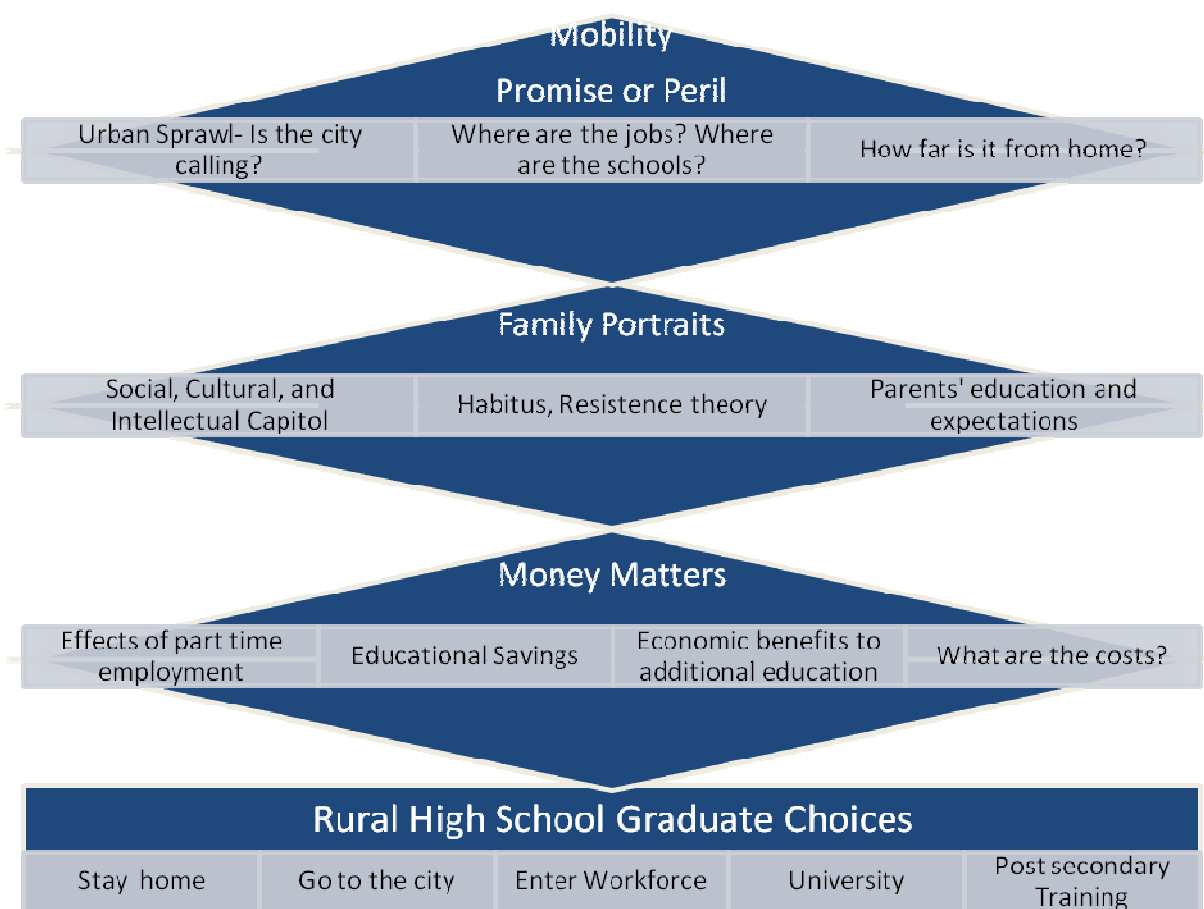


Figure1: Factors and Conditions Affecting Rural High School Graduate Choices

The transitional experiences fall into the second aspect of the study (see Figure 2). Disequilibrium may be brought on by the changes that coincide with the end of high school. Resilience theory is applicable to those who overcome severe disequilibrium. Individuation theory, which looks at establishing independence, is another area of focus

The ultimate goal of this study is to describe the lived experiences of adolescents during their transitions from high school student to their adult roles as post secondary students or members of the workforce. By exposing participant perceptions of supports received in their high school, I developed useful recommendations for educators who want to ease their students' transitions into their chosen fields.

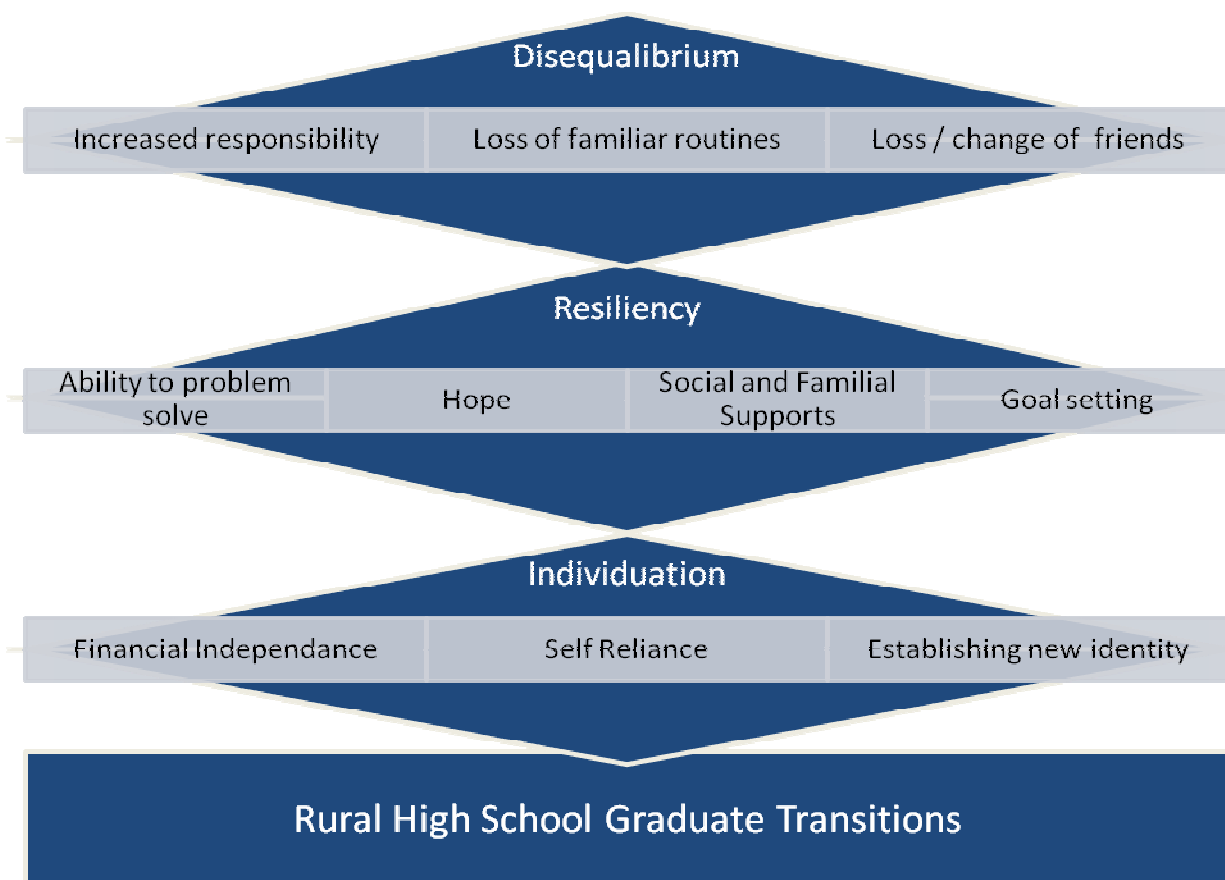


Figure 2: Conditions and Transitions Experienced by Rural High School Graduates

CHAPTER THREE CREATING MEANING: THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study employs phenomenological methodologies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004) to explore the perceptions held by young adults about their transition from high school to adulthood. In keeping with an earlier stated goal of this study, the hope is to provide voice for a group whose input may not be heard within the decision making discussions at school levels. Phenomenological approaches best serve the purpose of this study because they allow the researcher to explore the personal perspectives of the participants (Lester, 1999) by asking participants to describe their experiences. The intention is to come to a greater understanding of how participants have come to think about their lived experience and how these thoughts have helped them to shape their own understandings of themselves.

Revealing the Researcher

To fulfill a key tenet of phenomenology, I need to reveal my own perspectives (Creswell, 2007) and in order to do so, I need to recognize that, like anyone else, I have a multi-faceted approach to viewing the world. My perspectives are formed in part by my experiences and background and in part by the various roles I hold: former student, teacher, parent, farmer's wife, school administrator and researcher. As stated earlier, I have a close interest in the topic of research; both as a parent and as a school leader, I am keenly aware that grade twelve presents a time of angst, and excitement for students and their families.

As a rural student more than thirty years ago, I faced difficulties in deciding what to do after high school. I have distinct memories of the adjustments I had to make as a university student. I was irritated and intimidated by what I presumed was ordinary in the eyes of my urban classmates. An example which springs to mind was the sheer number of shoulders one rubbed

up against in the seemingly endless lines for class registration, a student card, food, banking or even using the bathroom. As a rural student, I had rarely waited in line for anything. I was disturbed by the fact that while walking home from night classes, I was unable to see the stars as they were obscured by a distastefully artificial pink urban glow. On a more academic note, I was also troubled by the fact that no one knew who I was or appeared to care whether or not I understood my classes or even if I showed up for them.

As an educator in a rural setting, I am also keenly aware of the apparent disadvantages for students revealed in statistical reports such as PISA. I began this research project driven to explore the reasons for the statistical gaps between rural and urban students. Within the context of international testing and what I perceived as an increase in demands for school accountability, I pondered what true success for a rural school actually meant and knew that for the parents in my community, success of the graduates was a key indicator of the school's success. I also wondered how does one measure the success of those graduates? I found a plethora of articles exploring the statistics of post-secondary schooling but few about the students who directly entered the workforce. Corbett's (2007) writings which problematized the role of schools within their community, prompted me to think about whether or not entering post-secondary education was in fact, the best method of measuring success for rural schools. Is success for a school defined by how many students achieved post-secondary graduate status? Like beauty, success is difficult to define, for it is truly in the eye of the beholder.

These thoughts led me to wonder about the perceptions held by my former students, for to extend the earlier used phrase, they are the beholders of rural education. I had read several studies which triggered my interest and helped to mould my research focus. The first, Corbett's (2007) *Learning to Leave*, was quickly followed by the work done by Yazedjian et al. (2008) that

explored first year college students' concept of and strategies for success. What would my former students perceive to be the measure of their success? How do they feel the school impacted their career decisions? How well did they believe the school had helped prepare them for the transitions they would face following graduation?

I came to believe that the views of my former students, their perceptions of how well prepared they were to enter their adult lives, would provide another aspect of truth to this question. I was most drawn to the research which employed qualitative methodology, because I enjoyed considering the contextual information behind the study. I found the social constructivist approach used by Yazedjian et al. (2008) as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2005) to be very similar to the type of research I wanted to do.

As a researcher, I had come to believe that phenomenology with its focus on participant perspective best suited my interests. A constructivist approach as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2005) would allow me to build a multi-voiced picture of rural realities. A pivotal aspect of this approach is the recognition that people construct their view of the world based in part by their experiences and their social context and the researcher's task is hermeneutic interpretation which means I need to understand and interpret the individual participants' narratives. In the Yazedjian, et, al. (2008) study the social context was a large university offering 4-year programs of study. The social setting for my study is a polar opposite, one which could be explored and explained by asking open-ended questions about my participants' experiences and interactions, and taking into account the social settings in which these events happen.

I believed that while they were students, several of the participants, especially Buddy and Charity had judged the success of their school based on a criterion involving a blend of extra-curricular opportunities, winning sports matches against neighbouring towns, and their own

ability to earn respectable grades. It also appears to me that rural students judge their school by the variety of subject offerings available for they often decry their lack of optional courses. In my years of teaching I have often had to explain to students why certain classes, such as cosmetology, journalism, or various second language courses are unavailable in our small school. I have often wondered when in their day students believe they would access these optional classes since most of the students in our school take a fairly rigorous academic stream of classes. In all probability, course choices would change if more options became available, but whether or not extra options would be an indicator of school success is debatable.

I believed that my participants would offer insight about the competition or envy they may feel toward urban students who they may believe would have had more opportunities or an easier time in school than they did. One point of contention is departmental exams. These provincial exams form 40% of the final grade, in the subjects for which there are no accredited teachers on staff. Many rural students face the provincial exams in several subjects such as Math, English Language Arts, and the Senior Sciences. Few urban students write these exams because urban schools typically only employ accredited teachers at senior levels. This strikes a note of discord for rural students because final grades in these subjects are key determiners for acceptance into post-secondary schools.

Beyond acceptance in post secondary educational programs, I was also interested in learning how well those who continued their education fared in the actual classes. I was also interested in knowing what aspects of their high school had helped participants who had entered the workforce directly. I believed that rural students could face difficulties in making the move from their small schools to the larger settings they would encounter and I wondered how I as a small school principal and teacher could help prepare them for the challenges they would face.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were the key form of data collection used in this study. While the interviews progressed and during the reflective periods between data collection and writing I thought about how the perspectives had been shaped in part by the group with whom they have shared experiences. Social Interaction theory, a guiding framework of the Yazedjian et al. (2008) study would also guide my research. These symbolic interactions are intrinsically embedded in all human conduct and as such help to form the emotions, attitudes, and understandings of individuals within any group. Because nearly all of the potential study participants had been together throughout their public education years, an understanding of the group was important. Mead (1957, as cited in Blumer, 2004) observed that significant gestures, which include conversation—words and body language could effect changes that might be minute and barely perceptible or could just as easily be immense and obvious. Meaning is formed by a continual reaction to others in the group. Attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours are developed through recurring reactions to others.

To further elucidate the importance of considering the perceptions of the research study's participants, I turned to the writings of Erving Goffman (1959) who used a stage analogy to explore how human beings create and maintain their images in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman discussed the importance of setting, noting that one's behaviour and resulting image will be altered in different settings. Wittingly or not, individuals present or perform whenever they are in contact with others. My emic status, as rural resident, as former student and as former teacher, must be considered. I have shared the stage with my participants. As researcher, I attempted to set aside my previous role as teacher and pick up the role of researcher, seeking answers to questions which as a rural resident, I may believe I already knew

the answer. As research participants, I asked my former students to set aside their role as student and pick up a new role. I pondered which types of performances rural youth would present during this retrospective study?

Goffman (1959) considered one's collective performances a front. Each of us chooses which aspects of our being to present or display for others. The majority of one's performance, however, is not contrived; most of one's presentation is displayed unconsciously based on the cues or directives taken in from other actors on the stage. In the more formalized parts of one's life—on the public stage, if you will—one's behaviour is carefully maintained. In keeping with the stage analogy, Goffman also gave thought to the role of audience. In the case of semi-structured interview, the audience is the researcher, but so too are the people who were present whenever the event being recounted happened. I wondered if the stories they recounted reflected awareness that their actions and reactions to their new setting were also developed in part by the actions and reactions of their audience? The meaning of any event constructed in the mind of the participant will have been influenced by the social situation.

Phenomenological research is interactional, an exchange of perspectives and beliefs (Groenewald, 2004). In order to capture these perspectives, I began with open ended questions asking the participants to reflect on topics rather than answer a strictly followed question and answer script. A semi-structured interview allows participants to steer the conversation into territory that they may feel is particularly pertinent to the over-all purpose or theme of the study. The researcher as a co-constructor of knowledge prompts deeper description by asking probing questions to clarify the various conversational threads that develop in a semi-structured interview (Suzuki et al., 2007).

There is difficulty in prescribing the steps one will follow in phenomenological study. Max van Manen (2002) advised that the researcher enters into a cognitive state of wonder but also noted that the research writer can only hope to evoke a sense of wonder in her readers. Phenomenological methods are not regimented steps; rather they are, a “way toward human understanding.... And even if we are open to it then wonder is still more a state of being than an intellectual activity” (2002, p. 249). For me, the sense of wonder began with trying to determine whose voices will inform the study. I wondered whose perspectives would lead to a clearer picture of the phenomenon I searched to describe, that of transition.

Participant Selection

The first action was to select research participants. Suzuki et al. (2007) employed an African proverb, ‘the pond you fish in determines the fish you catch’ to describe participant selection in their study. This proverb reminds me of another fish analogy. Small schools are filled with big fish who may find they are small fish when they swim into the big ponds. I chose a specific graduating class as my fishing pond. Although there were sixteen potential participants who had graduated together, my pool of fish was only fifteen because one of the graduates had been my son and I choose not to include him as a participant. I believed that my close relationship with him could detract from the effectiveness of the study. I gathered contact information such as phone numbers and email addresses from former students and some of their parents who, without exception, live in my community. The purpose of the study, the expected timeline, and the potential risks were explained according to the protocol set out in accordance with the ethics guidelines provided by the University of Saskatchewan’s Behavioral Research Ethics Board.

There are three basic categories within this alumni group: (a) those who entered the workforce directly after high school; (b) those who entered post secondary education as soon as possible following high school; and (c) those who changed their course of action within a short time. There are also within the group those who (a) remained quite close to home, (b) others who traveled a further distance to pursue their chosen paths and (c) some who both left and returned, balancing work or schooling with frequent return trips for extended periods. In choosing participants from the pool of interested volunteers, I employed a purposeful sampling strategy known as maximum variation which allows for a greater diversity of perspectives and findings (Creswell, 2007). In order to gather an appropriate variety of information, I sought representation from each of these sub-groupings within the group of interested volunteers.

Following initial contact, to determine willingness to participate in the study I procured informed consent from willing participants. I employed semi-structured interviews with the participants. Participants were provided with a list of potential questions prior to our discussions to decrease any concerns about the nature of the study (see Appendix A). Because the prospective participants knew each other well, I knew that protecting strict confidentiality could be difficult. Garnering informed consent prior to the interviews was especially important.

Data Collection and Interpretation

Because one of the stated goals of this study was to allow the participants' voices to be heard, the number of interviews, and the basic structure of interview questions were determined through reciprocal conversations between participants and the researcher. I took field notes or memos describing the interviews and the nature of the interactions between participants and myself in order to facilitate data analysis or explication (Groenwald, 2004). In some cases, the

interviews were my first opportunity to interact with participants since they had graduated from school. I looked for indicators of symbolic interactions (Mead, 1959).

I avoided interrupting the participants' comments following Seidman's advice to listen more and talk less. I took note of salient themes during the conversations and jotted down phrases used to facilitate data interpretation and to ask follow up questions (Seidman, 2006). Following each session, I recorded my observations about the interview taking note of the conversations which occurred after the voice recorder had been turned off. These reflective journals assisted in the data interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007).

Due to the fact that discussions may trigger memories and comments that, if quoted, may make it difficult to strictly protect the anonymity of the participants, it is crucial that they have the option of removing any information they may not want others to later attribute to them. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and were allowed to make any desired corrections, deletions, or clarifications (Seidman, 2006). Also known as member checking, this activity served as a method of insuring authenticity of the data (Groenewald, 2004).

The recorded discussions were transcribed allowing for the search for common themes to develop and be explored. The data allowed for coding or mapping the various ways in which, participants had come to understand their experiences, to perceive their circumstances and generally interpret their world (Marton, 2004). Themes or categories for reflection were revealed through the process of listening to the recorded sessions several times and frequent re-readings of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008). While listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts, I held my key research questions in mind. What do the participants

believe helped them make decisions during their final months as high school students; and what adjustments did they have to make after high school? What recurring phrases were used?

I searched for significant statements (Creswell, 2007) from each of the participants and used them to develop themes. By juxtaposing the significant statements of each participant, I determined where the commonalities of their experiences and their interpretation of these experiences lay. As Marton (1988) advised, I was now able to think less about the individual's experiences and think more about what he called the 'pool of meanings' to be discovered in the collection of significant statements.

Ethical Considerations

As I embarked on this journey I have been constantly aware of the real challenges I faced in protecting the confidentiality of my volunteer participants. In small rural locations, everyone knows everyone, or they think they do. Pseudonyms were employed throughout the written results, and details which could be used by others to identify participants were avoided.

I informed potential participants of the study's purpose, discussed the issue of confidentiality, and procured written consent prior to beginning data collection. As mentioned earlier, I made sure that participants knew that they could withdraw at any time and the data which they had contributed would then be destroyed. They were also assured that they would have an opportunity to clarify or expand on comments made in interviews or to delete any details which would be used. These principles were outlined in the consent form (see Appendix B) and reiterated at the beginning of each individual discussion, although each of the participants assured me that they did not care if their comments or contributions to the study became known. In addition, participants had the opportunity to review transcripts of their sessions and make

additions or clarifying remarks. They were asked to authorize my use of their thoughts and words by signing a Transcript Release Form (see Appendix C).

Summary

This chapter has provided a brief outline of the guiding methodology which informs my study. I have identified phenomenology as the appropriate approach because the perspectives of participants are the central focus. A constructivist framework exists within the study which will allow the context and the participant voice to collectively develop an understanding of the transitions experienced by the group. Within ordinary life, there are many ways of interpreting events and conditions, and much can be learned by examining the perspectives of those involved. I have provided background rationale explaining the participant selection and have described the semi-structured interview and data analysis methods used in the study. Finally, the ethical considerations of the study were explored.

CHAPTER FOUR DETAILING THE DATA

In small towns we share scenery, soaking up the same sights and smells; traveling the same roads and watching the same sunsets. We share history, knowing the tales of those who lived here before we did and telling stories frequently filled with expressions that might not be understood by outsiders. We wonder collectively and individually about what will become of us, of our children our future. How well do our graduates do when they leave their little school behind? How do they adjust to their lives in the ‘*real world*’ of post secondary school and the workforce? How effectively has the school helped them prepare for those transitions? These are the general questions that prompted the present study. It is a look back, a retrospective, with the purpose of better understanding what role the school played to help graduating students face the future; it is also a look forward with the purpose of improving service to high school students as they launch away from school to their adult lives. This chapter provides an in depth account of how the participants were selected, and how the data collection proceeded, but more importantly, it provides, through their own words whenever possible, the thoughts, experiences and understandings held by the participants.

Participant Selection and Data Collection

Rural relationships are personal and casual; two characteristics which facilitated yet also frustrated the initial phase of data collection. I approached the potential participants, all members of the same graduating class, to assess their interest in helping me with the study personally, by phone or in person. I sent follow-up email correspondence and consent forms to those who expressed initial interest. Three individuals did not wish to participate, and of those who expressed initial interest eleven people returned consent forms. I now had the difficult

decision of who to select as interview candidates. I wanted to gain a variety of perspectives and experiences and sought to do so by selecting five participants. A frustrating part of the process was that time limitations posed by my full time job, on the side, and my urge to complete the data collection before too much time had passed, meant I had to limit my number of participants. In the end I chose to select a purposive sample to allow for as much variety of data as possible within the confines of five participants. I sought male and female perspectives, as well as those of students and working people.

Although I had originally thought focus group discussions would be a method of data collection, I collected the first round of data through personal semi-structured interviews. These were arranged at mutually convenient times over the course of two weeks and took place either in my home or in the case of one participant in his apartment in the city. I found that although most expressed doubt that they had helpful information, they were all more than willing to answer my questions and describe their challenges and achievements from the past three years. These kitchen table conversations were recorded, transcribed and returned to participants for data checking. In all but one case the conversations continued for an extensive time after the voice recorder was turned off and I took reflective notes based on the conversations and asked follow up questions through email correspondence.

Presenting the Participants

There were five participants in the study: two women and three men. One of the participants had just completed his third year of university, although he had changed his course of study once. One participant had entered the workforce as an apprentice and will be returning to take the next phase of his classroom training in a few months. Another participant worked for

a few months while waiting to go to school. She then completed a technical course and is now employed part-time in her field. The other two participants in the study had joined the workforce, one splitting his time between the Alberta oil patch and his family's farm, and the other working in a local business. The study included career paths that ranged from the trades, to the academic, from natural resource industries to health services, and to retail.

Although the paths these former classmates had taken them different directions, they began in the same place. They had attended the same school from kindergarten to graduation. Prior to their graduation, they had participated in most extra-curricular activities together, although interests and talents had led some of the participants into different pursuits from the others. The participants in this study have a shared background set in a rustic, agrarian environment. Their common ground—their stepping off place of familiarity—features seasonal activities centered around the farming community resting just on the edge of provincial forests. These participants had enjoyed snowmobile and four-wheeling adventures in the bush; hockey games and figure skating in the arena; camping and ball games in the parks; as well as hunting, and fishing in the wild.

I would like to introduce the five study participants, using the somewhat whimsical nicknames we selected in order to shield their identities.

Buddy with the Hat

The first participant was accustomed to an esteemed place in his community, known for his athletic prowess both through school sports and on the community's hockey team, his service to the school through the Student Representative Council (SRC), his family's status and his

genial personality. Everyone knew his name and he recalled being pleasantly surprised by the huge support he received from the community:

especially I remember our graduation. There was so many—the hall was packed and so many gifts and cards—it was—I didn't even know that the support was so strong. I guess they like to see someone succeed. And I guess they feel that they should show support and I was friendly with the community but I still didn't know the support was there. (Buddy)

Leaving the little town and the farm behind, he entered into the College of Engineering at the University of Saskatchewan to try his hand at something that was, “not agriculture”. His experiences will be detailed later in this chapter, but one quick story about his time at university will supply his nickname for the purpose of this study.

Not wanting to take the time to do his hair each day, our participant threw on a ball cap most mornings. He found it convenient to sit in the same places in most classes and began to recognize people he took classes with although he did not get to know many of them at first and he certainly did not know many names. In his third year, after switching into the College of Commerce, he began making stronger personal connections and found out that he had been given a nickname by some of his peers. Apparently, without knowing his name, others had begun calling him ‘Buddy with the hat’. I called him Buddy.

Tonka-Man

The next participant was also known and respected in the community, although he had a less noticeable public profile. He, too, participated in sporting activities, especially in curling—

both at school and in the community square draw and bonspiels. He ran his own business, doing yard work for the senior citizens on the side while also holding down several other jobs during his high school years ranging from working with a bee farmer, and working for a cabinet-maker to helping around his grandparent's farm. His fascination for heavy equipment began in the sand box and led to his career choice of heavy duty equipment mechanic. He completed the first phase of his training at Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) before getting his first job in the city and is looking forward to his return to school for the next step of his apprenticeship program. His own admission lends me his nickname, "I never really grew out of Tonka Toys... Even still in the yard at work, well we'll have to test a machine; I'll be out there trying to move dirt" (Tonka-Man). I called him Tonka-Man.

Smiley

The next participant during his initial interview repeatedly used variations of an expression, "and I've got a smile on my face" when describing how he felt about his work. His nickname is suitable, for with few exceptions, he was known for his amiable nature, his willingness to work hard and his ready smile. This participant did not take part in many of the organized extra-curricular events at school opting instead to help out on his family farm or head out to the bush. He is one of 'the red army,' the young hunters in the community who vie for bragging rights over who will get the biggest buck, elk, or moose. Missing school to help with farm work or to 'push bush' during hunting season was a common experience for this participant. Although he did not love academics, when asked how he felt about school he readily admitted, "I think I was happy.... I'd go back to grade twelve any day of the week. To tell you the honest truth" (Smiley).

Immediately following graduation, Smiley began working on the rigs, returning home to work with his father on the farm in the off season. He is defiantly proud of his success in learning the ropes and being able to withstand the rigours of manual labour. He recalls the first phone call home to his father who asked, “can you make the pliers bite” (Smiley)? When asked to explain what his father had meant, he described in detail a process involving quick movements, physical strength and an ability to follow directions. In a sense, his father was asking if he could pull his weight on the rig. The fact that he can is a source of pride. Smiley relayed a comment made to him by a co-worker:

He looked at me one day and he’s like, you’re the last of the dying breed.

...He means like for working the floor; I like to hammer and pound away on things and the more noise the better. (Smiley)

For his joyful approach to work, I will call him Smiley.

Charity

The next participant is keenly aware of the support she received from her community. Remembering her graduation she commented, “The hall was packed...I guess [people] just coming to that event tells me that they were there watching you grow up through reading the newspaper or whatever” (Charity). She felt passionately about the importance of living up to the faith shown in her saying that she wants to do something that matters, something which would make her grandparents proud. Her first step away from home took her to the city to work for six months as a cleaning lady. Disappointed in the earning potential offered by the job, she came home again to work as a lifeguard while she waited for a place in her chosen SIAST program. Of the cleaning experience she laughingly remembers how it had provided her motivation to

work hard once she entered her studies saying, “everyone needs that really bad job that makes you want to go to school” (Charity).

I chose to call her Charity, because throughout her high school years she had been involved in several projects in which she gave back to the community. Noting that she had received support from people in school and in town, Charity had looked for ways to contribute to her community through her involvement in the SRC. In fact that statement, “giving back” occurred frequently in her discourse. Charity works on a casual basis making use of her training as a medical laboratory technician as she looks forward to securing a full time position somewhere near the community, where her family and fiancé reside.

Hope

Determining a suitable pseudonym for the next participant was more challenging for several of the possibilities which came to mind would easily identify her. She is the only participant in this study who had not left the community, choosing instead to work in a local business. Throughout her discourse, Hope displayed an optimistic tone saying things like, “There’s lots of time; I might still do it; and even after school you’ve still got a lot of time after that” (Hope).

The approach of keeping her options open began in high school when she embarked on a personal attitude reversal dropping an entrenched habit of sleeping in and being late for class. Hope had reflected on her personal habits and knew that she needed to make a change, “it’s like it’s a little different when you get into work, they kind of expect a little bit more maturity out of you” (Hope). Instead, she chose to volunteer each morning with an elementary classroom. When asked why she wanted to volunteer during her morning spare, she replied:

yeah, I kind of knew that I wanted to get out of that phase before I did have to go to—you know, in grade twelve it's like I don't want to be sleeping in and missing work in the morning, I want to actually start training myself to be awake and be on time and ready to go in the morning. (Hope)

Recognizing that this participant actively pursued her goals with optimism, I called her Hope.

Common Threads

Throughout the semi-structured interview sessions, I was struck by the common themes and topics raised by each of the participants as they reflected on the interview questions. These conversation threads, rested in my memory, and when brought forth for examination through reading and re-reading the interview transcriptions began weaving a picture of how the participants viewed the transitions they had been undergoing since high school. Although most of the participants described some situations and experiences that fit the category of anxiety and disequilibrium, most of their stories evoked a sense of growing independence, increasing confidence, and pride.

Several comments mirrored themes I had found in the literature during the earlier phase of the study. Among the theories I had studied, the concept of social capital and habitus loomed large in my mind. The study participants had been keenly aware of their place in their community. As they pondered what factors had helped them develop their future goals, without exception, they spoke of their families, especially their parents. The transitions they recounted ranged from small shifts in self-concept to rather startling revelations. The participants each spoke at length about their high school experiences, and they reflected on their future aspirations.

As I searched for meaning and direction in the data, I found that it was like untangling a knotted ball of multicolored threads jammed in a sewing basket. Gradually I was able to sort through the threads and lay them out for closer examination. Remembering the writings of Schlossberg (1989) who identified an expected series of stages for transition she called: moving in, moving through and moving out, I decided to use a semi-chronological format to examine three life phases that help to organize the data: (1) pre-transition, or the final remembered experiences of home and high school; (2) transition, the adjustments, both positive and negative which accompanied the move away from being a high school student; and (3) post-transition, the projected future plans for the participants.

In addition, I found the themes laid out in the conceptual framework (Figures 1 & 2) matched many of the comments made by participants. Family background, mobility concerns, and financial considerations, as well as work and school experiences, both structured and unstructured, all helped the participants see their future picture more clearly. The transitions they described which included details of disequilibrium and resilience and helped me to see the picture more clearly. Each of the participants was interested in sharing their future plans. Understandably, they see the picture as unfinished—a work in progress. In the upcoming sections I present the themes that emerged from the data. These included the influences of parents, work experiences, school activities in and out of class, and the human relationships with school personnel on their career decisions; the actual transitions they experienced, and how they handled these transitions as well as their suggestions to improve school practices. Finally, I described their future plans.

Parental Patterns

Each of the participants credited their parents and other family members with influencing their future choices. Some parents reportedly pushed their children to take advantage of opportunities which had been unavailable to them. Buddy recalled that neither of his parents had a university education, and he felt pushed especially by his father to pursue post secondary education, “he felt strongly about it- that after high school you needed education post-secondary, he felt very strong” (Buddy). Later when Buddy changed his original college choice, his father was concerned about the decision, “and I think now he still pushes and he still thinks it’s very important, but he just knows that whatever you choose it has to be to what you want, it can’t be forced or it doesn’t work” (Buddy).

As a child, Tonka-Man often went to work with his father to hand him tools and watch him fix equipment. This experience, he knows, deeply influenced his choice to become a heavy duty equipment mechanic and his parents also influenced the timing of his training:

originally I wanted to go and maybe work for like a year out of high school and maybe make some more money and that, save up, go to school, but my parents talked me into going right away, while I was still kind of in the ‘school mode’ I guess was kind of their words. (Tonka-Man)

Smiley, too, worked along side his father and despite feeling pressure dealing with the farming side of his life, he said, “I’m happy the way that he raised me, I’m happy with that and I probably wouldn’t be where I am [without my dad]” (Smiley). Several of Smiley’s comments gave tribute to his father for instilling in him a strong work ethic. He was also lured to the oil industry by observing what he called ‘the lifestyle.’ His father and his uncle who both worked

the rigs could afford to drive nice trucks and own snowmobiles and other 'toys'. Asked if he knew how tough the life of a rig hand would be, he reflected on the time spent away from home:

Yeah, but I watched my parents do it for twenty or I guess it wouldn't have been twenty years, probably fifteen years there when Dad worked the rigs...I don't know if there's women who'll put up with it... ah who knows. (Smiley)

Smiley knew that his mother had a challenging time dealing with his father's extended absences for work but he hoped to live a similar life.

Charity's mother worked as a nurse and she did not want to follow her mother's example and be expected to do shift work, yet she was drawn to the health field. Several of her other relatives had worked in medical labs and they helped Charity through the process of applying to school by answering her questions and helping her complete a pre-study career investigation, an entrance requirement of the school she attended. Charity noticed that several other issues within her family guided her thinking. She was aware that her strong money sense was due to family examples. "I always triple think stuff before I spend something" (Charity). She reported that she and her mother had discussed future possibilities:

Well, I don't know if it will ever ever happen but my mom and I were talking about going to Africa some day to do some kind of work. Either building houses or even something in health care, you can go do that for a little while. It's a little bit dangerous maybe but something that I would like to try. (Charity)

Keeping close to family, including her fiancé is important to Charity, and she freely admitted that although she would like to live closer to the city and be able to see some of her friends more often, staying close to home will trump that desire.

Family influences were also noted by Hope who recognized her work ethic came in part from realizing the value of a dollar, “well, it was a lot of my family stuff... we were always told, like we had lots of kids, there was five of us growing up, so money wasn’t always very, like, open or whatever, we didn’t have a whole lot” (Hope). When asked about following her parents’ career paths (journeyman cook in healthcare facilities), Hope, ever the optimist, responded, “it’s definitely something I would consider” (Hope). Keeping her options open, Hope realized that one of the reasons she is likely to stay close to home is her family.

Although she lived independently from her parents, and was pleased to have established her own home complete with decisions about painting rooms and planting a garden, she admitted that the switch was not easy. One of the hardest things she found was learning how to cook for just one or two people. Entertaining herself in the evenings was also difficult at first. Hope had no reliable television and found herself missing the family games and company, but she also relished her new freedom:

Well, I mean of course Mom’s always there if I ever need anything and Dad, but... You can have your own rules and your own—well, you know, if the house needs to be cleaned it’s not Mom telling you, you need to clean the bathroom, it’s all kind of your own, you’re totally dependent on yourself entirely. (Hope)

With independence and freedom came greater responsibility and some of the participants spoke of those daily life tasks with self-deprecating humor. Tonka-Man admitted to owning laundry soap but didn't think he had opened the box. He brought his clothes home to wash, avoiding the coin operated machines in his apartment, but he insisted that he did his own laundry once he's home—usually. Buddy admitted that he “went four to eight months with peanut butter and honey sandwiches,” (Buddy) before making some adjustments. Now he has a different food plan:

I cook usually on Sunday. Cook enough for leftovers 'til Friday 'cause I find that cooking takes so long and there's so many dishes. I don't mind to cook but it's the time that I don't like wasting. When I could be looking at a couple questions or I could be taking a nap or something. Something more productive. (Buddy)

This first theme, parental patterns chronicles some of the ways participants were able to identify the influence their families had on helping them to formulate their future plans. Of course, any discussion of home influences, also leads to the adjustments made necessary by leaving home. The comforts of home, whether it was home cooked meals and clean laundry or family togetherness and company were missed by all of the participants, but the ability to adjust and cope with these tasks and changes was a source of humor and pride. The participants had clearly experienced periods of disequilibrium but their resilience, gained in a large part from their habitus, was able to help them make the adjustments they needed.

On the Job

Each of the participants held part time jobs during their adolescence. They believed that holding these jobs helped them assess their future goals and also influenced their social activities.

Hope recalled that she began working, “like when I was 13, I think it’s 13 when I started working in the summer at [name of business]” (Hope). During her high school years, Hope babysat, worked at a local apiary, and also tried her hand at entrepreneurship creating an odd job squad, offering to do housecleaning and yard work for various community members.

Work offered more than an income for Hope; it also gave her a source of pride, “I kind of realized that I’m—I was pretty much a good worker. I’ve always considered myself a pretty good worker” (Hope). Hope elaborated on what a good worker is:

You know, I never ever phoned in sick because I had too much to drink the night before. If I did, if it was the occasion it was like well, it’s your own fault so get up and go to work, so—instead of like lots of people would just normally phone in sick and be done for the day. (Hope)

Hope appeared to take satisfaction in the fact that others saw her as reliable. She noted that she found her social life changed by the fact that she was working:

you know, most of my friends didn’t really have summer jobs or anything and so you kind of just—you kind of hang out with people more that actually have jobs and have to be somewhere in the morning and actually go to work ... well I got to work tomorrow so I gotta go home and go to bed. (Hope)

Charity’s jobs as a high school student included babysitting, lifeguarding and teaching swimming lessons. When asked if holding these jobs helped her make decisions for her future, Charity replied, “Well, that’s kind of like a conflicting thing because I definitely wanted to be - I

thought I wanted to be in health care but then I also thought oh, I like kids so much, maybe I should be a teacher or something like that” (Charity). In the end, Charity reflected that she knew she did not want to take an extended course, “I knew I didn’t want to go to university ‘cause I didn’t like school lots. I liked working and making money” (Charity).

When asked what benefits his jobs had offered him, Tonka-Man said he had gained valuable experience with his different jobs and had learned the importance of being self-reliant as well as how to interact with co-workers:

They were a lot of pretty much I could keep to myself jobs, [except] like when I worked at [name of business], well I had to work with guys there but it was all kind of people I maybe knew already and a lot of joking around and I just kind of was used to that, as well. (Tonka-Man)

Another welcome feature of summer jobs or part-time employment was the paycheck, especially important for those who went to school after graduation. Tonka-Man confirmed this; “for sure, I had a lot of money saved up before I went to school and it helped out a lot” (Tonka-Man).

Each of the participants held jobs during their high school years. It appears clear that they found the jobs useful in helping them define who they were and what types of work they would enjoy, as well as in helping them to save money needed for living and for going to school.

I was also left wondering if the jobs had an impact on what Usher and Junor (2005) called self selection, a process whereby students may opt out of more rigorous academic classes as a way to avoid post secondary education. Both Hope and Smiley had taken a lighter academic load than their peers in their final year. Smiley had been clear about his future plan but Hope had been undecided well into the year, yet when asked to clarify how she had felt when she was able

to drop math, her response could be summed up in one word: relieved. When asked about the supports they believed high school students should have available to them, several participants remarked that the school needed to foster a workplace mentality, or encourage a strong work ethic. Hope in particular, wished a work experience program had been available:

Well definitely work experience things help, like I never actually took the work experience but at least that way you can explore something that you might be interested in and see how it works for you, like work experience is very good. Then you have to pick one thing and do that but it would be nice if you could have a few different things to try all at once.
(Hope)

Smiley expressed disgust at how few classes his younger brother was enrolled in despite the fact that his brother's schedule closely resembles his own grade twelve year. Yet he also believed that if a student had no desire for post secondary training, they should be allowed to take a less academic load. Tonka-Man and Smiley both suggested having working people come in to talk about their trades so that students could be better informed about work opportunities. While the actual jobs do not have a strong link to the literature reviewed earlier in this study, the importance of the jobs to the participants brought them into the discussion.

School Connections: In Class

Surprisingly, none of the participants could recall having classroom lessons or activities which were directly designed to assist their career making decisions. There were, however, several supports for their career development imbedded in their schooling experiences. Charity spoke about the assignments that involved public speaking as a benefit to her, "I don't know if

there's any specific activities that really made me choose a career, but I know like doing activities like standing up in front of people talking.... it definitely helped in your confidence in the future" (Charity). She also recalled being especially interested in doing science labs, "when we did experiments in the lab actually. I was really fascinated" (Charity). Tonka-Man was very specific in his career preparation thinking:

Well, there wasn't really a lot in school for my particular career other than industrial arts, which was something I liked to do already. But it was—that was a lot of woodworking too, which was another career I had considered maybe going into carpentry but—the machines was—my main calling.

(Tonka-Man)

Hope described her information processing class as a deterrent, "I knew right then there I didn't want to have nothing to do with computers. Computers aren't my strong point" (Hope). When asked about computer related course work Tonka-Man felt confident in his skills, "You know, the computer classes I had to take in SIAST, well I was up ahead of everybody else, I knew what I was doing more so than some of the students in my group" (Tonka-Man). Charity, too, felt competent in her computer skills although they did not contribute to her career decision. She remembered being annoyed while at SIAST to be going over information she already knew, wishing she could spend more time learning new material.

Buddy had been one of two students who participated in a pilot expansion of the online learning offerings in our school division. His father had requested that we explore ways to offer Calculus in the small school. We had already been offering and receiving the other senior level math classes and some optional courses to our students. Buddy's father's request was easily met.

When asked if the online component of his senior maths and the other computer related courses had facilitated the adjustment to university, Buddy was nonchalant, launching into a discussion of how technology is everywhere and is commonplace. Upon further reflection he added the following clarification to his interview transcript:

We did use blackboard at high school but it differs from the one we use in university. That I guess helped me because that's the way we found some of our notes or marks in high school (which is how it's done at university).
(Buddy)

Career days were mentioned by each of the participants, although several questioned the effectiveness of the day. Hope, in particular, was glad to have had the opportunity to travel to a large center and be exposed to the options. "Actually I really liked the career fairs; it was interesting to see all the different options. Massive amounts of options that you could get into" (Hope). When questioned further on this topic, she admitted that in some ways the options were overwhelming. Career days made her:

well, interested and a little bit kind of like—'cause I could do a lot of different things, so it kind of makes it a little crazy in your head, like well, I could do that but I could do that. And it's like I'd like to do that but I'd also like to do that. (Hope)

Tonka-Man, who had rarely gone to the city, commented that school trips and in particular a trip to a career fair, "were an eye opener as to what programs and stuff there is out there for post-secondary" (Tonka-Man). He qualified his statements by remarking that of course, he had known about University and SIAST, but added:

like in case you maybe want to drive truck, well it showed there's programs out there where you can learn.....or—you know, operator courses for equipment or any number of different courses...[you don't have to] go through a big institution. (Tonka-Man)

Charity felt that the timing of career days was important and noted that when she had attended a large career fair in the city, she was not really ready, “It was definitely in the back of my mind coming soon but I wasn't making any choices then” (Charity). In fact the career fair:

was like I was there to look a little bit and like ooh, there's a couple of exciting options but I was more like—I think there was a hair thing there so we got our hair done and that was more exciting than picking a career at that point! (Charity)

While Charity took career day in as an opportunity to do something fun with her friends, Smiley opted out completely. When asked why he had never attended any of the career days offered, he replied, “I don't know, I decided what I was going to do” (Smiley). When pushed a bit farther about opting out of career choice making, Smiley responded that having working people attend career days would be beneficial, commenting that the school had not prepared him for the economic conditions of a market economy:

I don't blame anybody because probably not a whole bunch of people choose the path that I took, I suppose. But I think that [seeing working as a career] should be an option. It's not the greatest and the parents would probably be mad at home that you showed them the option but I think—like

I'm—on a warm, dry day this year and I'm out on my boat, I'd be so happy that—you know what I mean? (Smiley)

For Smiley, the financial benefits of entering the workforce right out of school offer him opportunity to enjoy the luxuries he wants and he believed that his choice should be a respected option for future graduates. However, discussing how his work both on the farm and in the oil patch is tied to the economy brought out this comment, “Yeah, it runs my show” (Smiley). He completed this train of thought by discussing the fact that he knows several people who have worked the rigs to get some quick cash, enabling them to pursue other goals, as well as those who have, ‘moved up the ladder’:

And sometimes it's slow, like it's slow right now and like in 06... when I started it was slow, but in a couple years when she was wide open and if you want to put some time in and that was going to be your career, you could be up the ladder and you could still be working right now probably. So—just that easy. I think it's good. (Smiley)

Identifying school specific supports for career decision-making appeared to be inextricable from the specific choices made by individual participants. For those students who are academically inclined, the traditional career days and focus on gaining good grades, making applications to scholarships and to post secondary schools may well be all the supports required. Students not interested in entering institutions of higher learning may have entirely different needs.

School Connections: Beyond Class

Without doubt, the extra-curricular teams and other activities had a role in shaping the participant's views of who they are. Each of the participants participated in several extra-

curricular events that brought them into close contact with their peers and their community.

These included annual dinner theatre productions put on in their town; school, and community spring cleaning work bees; fundraisers for their school sports program, and for charities; Senior Citizen Christmas Dinner, and Delivering *Meals on Wheels*. Charity spoke about these opportunities:

when I first entered high school in grade seven I was never doing (Student Representative Council (SRC). Never being part of it. And then you kind of—I guess you become the older people in the school and you feel like yeah, I could do something good for the school or my friends especially. And after we all [names a few classmates] got on the SRC we could do something awesome so we all became part of it and it was probably the best thing I did. (Charity)

When asked how the experience affected her, Charity responded, “I really enjoyed it, it made me more confident, it made me plan things, it made me do something other than school” (Charity). The simple fact of having to plan events in her role as Social Convener helped Charity hone skills that she knew she would need later in life, “You have to become more independent” (Charity). She went on to discuss her other volunteer experiences, most notably the *Meals on Wheels* initiative. “Well most of the people that were delivering meals on wheels were old themselves” (Charity). Charity’s participation on community sports teams and school sports teams combined with her active SRC involvements and her studies kept her busy, but she believed all of these experiences benefited her. She believed that they had helped refine her time management skills, gain confidence and set priorities. When asked what she had learned from being involved in the extra-curricular programs at school, Charity quickly replied:

Never give up I guess. 'Cause even—I mean, you're a small town so you don't have enough kids to run everything I guess, you have to be in just about every sport for there to be one. (Charity)

Buddy had also worked with the SRC. He realized that the experience had helped him learn how to work in groups, a skill that he found invaluable in his university studies. Buddy had also been very involved in sports both in and out of school:

I always thought that I was an okay athlete. I never felt the need to go and play double A or to go away from the community. I thought if I could play in [name of hometown], they support me and I'm happy. It never took over my life. I know track and field was a personal sport where it was only you to do it. Which was a nice change from a volleyball or a hockey team perspective 'cause you did as good as you put into it. (Buddy)

After high school Buddy joined the track and field team for two years with the university and commented that the experience had helped him to adjust to living in the city and could continue to help in his future:

I was happy. I wouldn't change that. I met so many good people that way. That I feel that a few of them are going to go and do a real good thing. And I think the biggest thing I do want to take on at university is the friends so I can, if I ever do need a hand or an idea I won't feel guilty of asking them for a favour for knowledge or something. (Buddy)

Buddy fully intended to use his people skills and maximize on his social capital while at school and also in the years that follow.

Hope believed that she had gained self confidence, self esteem, and pleasure through her volunteer experiences during high school. For her the opportunity to work in an elementary classroom had offered the most benefits:

Well, they kind of taught me a lot too, it was just a good experience to see different phases of learning and how it's been awhile since I've been in elementary and watching them struggle in parts and then later on learning how to do it and - just made me feel really good doing it actually. ...Yeah, it was lots of fun I really just enjoyed it. (Hope)

Many students, sign up for extra-curricular activities for enjoyment, but the extra benefits gained included confidence, people skills, time management skills, and self esteem. Although each of the participants in the study was involved in extra-curricular activities while in high school, Buddy and Charity appeared to find most relevance in the extra-curricular offerings they had participated in.

School Connections: The People

The strongest supports for the participants in the small rural school were the close and often personal relationships with the staff. Buddy's summation showed some ambivalence about this topic:

Well, this [is] a win-lose situation, I know that I always had a respectable, friendly relationship with every teacher, with the custodians, all the way

down the tree. I think that helped me. But I also think—know—that it hindered me coming to university. By not having the support from the teachers like I did back in school. So that’s a win-lose. (Buddy)

When asked to elaborate on these thoughts, Buddy explored what he had meant by a win-lose. He felt that his teachers may have, “[cut him] some slack” (Buddy) because they knew he was busy or because they knew what he was capable of doing. In response to the question of whether or not he should have been pushed harder in academics, he replied, “Yeah. I think I—yes. Without doubt I would have been better... By being as close as we are with the few students, I don’t think it’s possible either, to be half a step back” (Buddy). Hope too, expressed the thought that her teachers could have been tougher with her, “you guys should have kicked my ass when I was late every morning” (Hope)! Smiley’s thoughts on this subject differed. He knew that in order to do well he needed a good work ethic, although not necessarily in his studies. He felt that his teachers respected his choices, which often included missing school to help with the farm work:

And you knew that I was, what I was doing. Knew that I worked. So that way, I was. Well, I don’t know, I think I did okay grade twelve, I finally just figured out what I was going to be I suppose it took me twelve years to figure it out. (Smiley)

In thinking about school personnel, most of the recipients mentioned an itinerant guidance teacher who worked with them helping to put together applications for scholarships, loans, and school. His efforts were appreciated, especially by those who attended post-secondary institutions. Buddy indicated that, “he gave me a different perspective, but I still feel that our

school wasn't open to brochures and the opportunities" (Buddy). To elucidate his comment, Buddy remembered learning about an open house opportunity through his parents reading the newspaper rather than through the school. The two working participants expressed some concern that they could have used more time with the itinerant guidance person, although they realized his time was limited to less than one day per week in their school. Hope's words sum up those concerns:

well, it would have been nice even with like our counselor there, I forget what his name....Even though you know you're not considering going to a university, just... so take a little bit more time to talk to the people that are undecided probably more than the ones that are going to university because they already have a plan figured out as to what they want to do and focus a little bit more on the ones that kind of [needed a plan]. (Hope)

Other teachers and school personnel were also seen as there to support the students, although both Tonka-Man and Charity admitted that they never really asked for help from anyone. Tonka-Man felt he had made his choice and felt that the school staff generally supported his decision. "People knew who I was and knew it was something that I liked to do, you know" (Tonka-Man). Charity's candor on the subject of adults attempting to warn her of future difficulties such as the challenges sharing expenses and living arrangements with friends is refreshing:

When I was in high school, I probably was saying in my head well they're just lying, I can do whatever I want or it's going to be however I make it but

it's definitely—I mean you can make it the way you want it but it's got to be on the other end too, like your friends have to want to still communicate and you have to—they have a point but everybody lives their own life. (Charity)

The interest and support of teachers was important for more than career development. Buddy spoke fondly of the relationship he and the other senior boys enjoyed with their coach:

he was a teacher but there's more to just teaching, there's the life part that he taught. Us guys anyhow.

[Researcher]. *So he was like a life coach?*

Yeah....I'd say every school has to have at least one male or female teacher that connects with the kids. With the male or with the female, they have to have one teacher that they can relate to... And we had that and it was very good, it was [listed several teachers]. (Buddy)

Buddy commented that even after he had been in university for a while he went back to high school and family support people as he faced various decisions, but that they did not dictate to him; they expected him to make his own decisions:

I know the teachers, I think each had their own thoughts of what that the students should have went into and they never told me, particularly [name of teacher]. And when he did hear that I switched [college choices] he told me it was about time. Even after I graduated I've talked to [guidance person] and I've talked to—some other teachers or educated

people, I'd consider them. And they've helped me just to make decisions but in the end it was my decision of what I've done. (Buddy)

Buddy's final statement, that his future was his decision, held true for each of the participants yet how he came to make that decision appears to be a complex mix of his experiences within school and in the community as well as his social interactions within his family, his class and his community. The collective effect of their pre-transition phase of life instilled within them the abilities, personality traits, and habits which would assist in the transitions they were to face next.

Transitions

The decisions about what the participants were going to do after high school were only the beginning. A second question asked for participants to move their reflections past the pre-transition phase into discussing the actual emotional adjustments of moving away from home. I approached this topic by asking: *What challenges and triumphs have recent graduates faced as they transitioned from high school to their current positions as post secondary students or employees?* Several participants recounted general anxiety otherwise known as disequilibrium, as well as triumphant moments, which could be accounted for by thinking about the concept of resilience. Each participant appeared to have a unique experience or set of experiences.

Adjustments and Negotiations

In those early days there were many changes to face. Transitions involve mental adjustments as one negotiates a change in identity brought about by a change in life circumstance. This was especially true for Buddy who had been accustomed to being known by

his peers, his neighbors, and his teachers. Adjustment to university for Buddy included being an unknown for the first time, and having to figure out how to negotiate his way through the crowds of other students:

Yeah. I feel overwhelmed but I met a lot of people and not - knowing me I had to start from scratch. And to start from scratch you have to say - I guess it's somewhat like a chess game, you've got to know who to make friends with, which student group you want to be involved with, what students you want to be friends with to help for group work, like so you don't get stuck in a bad group or whatnot.

[Researcher] *And how did you figure all that out?*

I guess you sit and watch. And you learn. You have to learn. You watch other people do it. You hear. I guess if you hear someone that picked up a sixty on one project and a ninety on another, well you want to try and be friends with the ninety. (Buddy)

Reflecting on what advice he would give future grads, Buddy commented on the reality of becoming one student among hundreds after having been one among dozens in a much smaller school environment:

But I think that the students have to be aware that they're not going to be the head honcho and they have to be aware that they're the bottom feeders. Even though in grade 12 you still might be the bottom feeder but and just because they didn't fit in just quite right. 'Cause here you're going to be the

bottom feeder and it's the stuff you do like. But once you do meet the one person that does introduce you to another person, it does open up a lot of doors. (Buddy)

He noted that it was more difficult in University to negotiate school tasks:

nothing is ever a snap on your fingers. Like in high school you could always go talk to the principal right then. Or you knew the librarian, like, and she'd kind of know what you're asking for even if you didn't ask the correct thing. Here you had to be specific; you had to book in advance to talk to anyone with any real power. Not just the secretary. You had to try and look for a quiet classroom if you wanted to study. The computer rooms were usually full. (Buddy)

It took time for Buddy to learn to make himself known and to ask for the support he needed:

Yeah, like I never went to any Prof. for like during their office hours or anything that first year. Never did. And I look back and that was a problem, I should have introduced myself to the Prof, I think the Prof. knowing that you're a first year unless so many I don't think they acknowledge you as much as they do now. (Buddy)

Buddy spoke with optimism about how his next year of studies would go now that he had figured out how to connect with his professors and classmates.

Confidence and Self Reliance, and Responsibility

After working for a time Hope and a friend enrolled in a short course learning to teach English as a Second Language. They dreamed of traveling to a foreign country as English language teachers. The course involved a few trips into the city where she and her friend stayed in a tent while taking their weekend classes. Although this experience has not led her to travel as she once thought it would, Hope is proud of having taken the step. It built her confidence and her spirit of self reliance. The tenting, she remembers as a crazy adventure which may lead her to other adventures at some point in her life.

Hope, at first did not think she had experienced much of a transition after high school. She went from working at a summer job in the apiary to working in a local business. Upon further reflection, she commented on the greater responsibility she has as an adult. The stakes were higher in the workforce:

Well, it's different having to get up and go to work every morning than getting up and having to go to school every morning. I don't know how but it just is. It's like—well, it's just a little bit of a longer day. But. You have to be, you know, schools. You're just learning and—oh. You don't care for you when you're in school but when you're actually out of school and you have a career, you have to be there every day and you have to be on time... I mean it's not like in school you guys could have kicked me out for being late all the time. I mean with the job, you have to be very careful with that 'cause they will fire you if you're not up to their expectations. (Hope)

Hope had preempted this transition by shifting her focus during her last school year doing nearly two hundred hours of volunteer work in elementary classes. She had begun to see herself as an adult prior to leaving school, but still noted changes in how she faced life as an independent person. Changes aside, Hope looked forward to her next shift:

Well, I kind of would like to take over the management position at the,
[Name of Business] but I don't think that [co-worker] wants to retire just
yet, so I'm kind of just patiently waiting on her to retire. (Hope)

Charity, although frightened of the usual things, such as whether or not she could find her way around or how she would know where her classes were, soon became familiar with her new school and became enthralled in what she was doing:

Yeah. Like I mean, there's definitely down points. Like you have really
bad days but then the next day won't be so bad and once you start learning
all those things, like I remember an X-ray [class] I just—it was a couple
weeks in and I couldn't believe how much I had learned in that short a time.
(Charity)

Once Charity finished her course, she moved back into the area to be closer to her fiancé who farms in the area. Charity works *casual*, meaning she gets shifts in two different hospitals in two different towns so she has no formal living arrangement:

Yeah. I've lived everywhere it feels like sometimes. I have a relative in
[town] that I stay with if I'm working more than one or two nights in a row

or how I'm feeling, 'cause otherwise I have to get up at five in the morning.

And I'm not much of a morning person. (Charity)

Accepting the level of responsibility and forcing herself to speak up for herself were two important adjustments for Charity. She spoke about the importance of doing her job correctly noting that mistakes really mattered because she was helping doctors deal with patients' health.

Smiley too noted a big difference in the level of responsibility he feels now as a working man:

I had to work every day after school but I had no responsibility at all. None. Never had to think for myself.

[Researcher] *So is that a positive or is that a negative?*

Oh, I suppose I'm learning a lot more about life than I would have just in grade twelve but I don't know, I—still, if I could go back. It's like I was telling my brother, I tell him almost every day. I said you better enjoy 'er.
(Smiley)

Smiley spoke freely about his conflicted role in the family farm. When asked who made the decisions about the farming he replied:

Most of the time I make my decisions. Dad makes the decisions for what days I work I suppose. Usually it's every one. [laughter] Oh, it is! He had [my brother] out this morning first thing....

[Researcher] *Do you see yourself being tied to the farm?*

Don't know yet. I love farming I want to play and—yeah, that's—I'm only twenty years old and everybody's trying to make me grow up way too fast.

[Researcher] *What do people do that make you think they're trying to make you grow up?*

Well, just—working every day. Every day, every day. I don't know how many—I've worked an ugly amount of hours in a year. If you sat there and added them all up I bet it's unreal. (Smiley)

Yet as a worker on the rig, Smiley is happy to put in those 'ugly' hours:

I'm the grubbiest guy at the end of the day, I'm just black. My face is black, my hands are black, black up to the elbows always. But actually I got a smile on, I've got a white smile I suppose on actually and that's about all.
(Smiley)

Of course, for Smiley, the biggest evidence that he had successfully entered the next phase of his life was his ability to make and spend money, "I keep close tabs with my farm money, I got it separate but—my rig money is just fluff, most of it's sitting out there [indicates truck in driveway]." (Smiley) When asked about keeping the farm money separate, Smiley explained:

the farm money is, it just goes back into the [farm], like I bought a new semi. Or not a new one, but I bought a semi this fall. And I go to buy a trailer this spring and they're very, very expensive.

[Researcher] *So will the rig money help you pay for the farm expenses?*

No, I don't, I—if the farm can't [pay for itself] I'm not going to do it.

(Smiley)

Smiley is confident in his ability to earn a living and he is self-reliant but he appears reluctant to take full responsibility as an adult and has not completely decided if he will commit to farming.

Overcoming Fears

Tonka-Man faced drastic changes when he moved to the city to enroll in his course. He and his family had rarely traveled into the city. He admitted to having fear, “there were some things that scared me about the city, you know, all the people and all the crimes and that that happen in the city and people you don't know” (Tonka-Man). He had always seen himself as, “kind of a shy guy, [who] never really speak[s] to anybody. Keep to myself” (Tonka-Man) and he was accustomed to close family controls. He had to help his mother accept the changes he was experiencing:

I'd say for the most part I'm independent... my parents really don't help me out like financially or they're not controlling me. Which is something which was a change I found when I moved out on my own. I could do what I wanted and go out with friends and whatnot and... at first my mom was kind of like—didn't really maybe not like the idea of me going to bars and whatnot but it was just something she learned to accept it and—she even had a hard time with me having girlfriends at first but she got over that.

(Tonka-Man)

Still, finding a social life has been a bit of a challenge for Tonka-Man. And filling in his evenings after work has been an adjustment:

I'm getting used to it, it's still kind of—you know, sit around and do nothing a lot of nights, just kind of bored, whatever. Nobody really to talk to or anything sometimes, but—I've made quite a few friends since I went to the city though.

...

It's just been kind of finding the ambition to do [cook meals] some days after work, you know, you come home—hard day at work or even a day of doing nothing, you just feel like doing nothing, so. (Tonka-Man)

Life in the city was overwhelming to Tonka-Man and he admitted to getting lost, “more times than I can count but at least now I know my way around, you know, you can't be afraid to go out and adventure, explore. The map was in the glove box but I was too stubborn to get it out” (Tonka-Man). Venturing out of the house and making social connections has become rewarding for Tonka-Man who related a recent triumph:

And I'm doing stuff now that I haven't really done before like just recently took a trip to ... last weekend took a trip to Grande Prairie with a friend of mine out there, so I met some of his friends, saw some different country.

Talked to a girl. (Tonka-Man)

Although making the adjustments to independent, urban living was difficult for Tonka-Man, he felt pleased with how his life was going:

I'm doing all right for myself. I mean, bank account isn't getting any bigger but I have some nice stuff and my job—most days makes me happy, you know we have—a machine that came in dead and you see it roll out the door running and ready to go to work again, it's kind of an accomplishment, it's a feeling I like, you know? (Tonka-Man)

Tonka-Man's satisfaction with his life encompassed his growing social capital, his newfound freedom from parental control, his ability to do his job well and his ability to overcome his earlier fears about life in the city.

Road Maps

While Tonka-Man decidedly did not want to use a road map, I wondered what directions or suggestions he and the others would have for future rural graduates and for the school personnel who worked with them. The question asked was, *What supports do recent graduates believe should be implemented to assist future graduates in their upcoming transitions from high school to post secondary education or the workforce?*

Buddy had several ideas. To begin with, he advised that teachers could give very specific advice to students. When asked for examples he provided several. Students should give themselves some time to adjust to their new location:

Have a five day break-in. Bring your mom or dad with you. Walk around whichever campus, don't be strictly to [name of city] just 'cause it's closer. But make yourself comfortable. Try and be able to meet new friends.
(Buddy)

Buddy also had an earnest belief that students should be advised against scheduling early morning classes. He believed the extra hour of sleep in the morning, especially on those dark winter mornings would help students. He would also caution future students to find out about courses and professors prior to deciding what classes to take.

Recognizing that each student leaving high school had a unique outlook and individuality, Charity was reluctant to give advice for others. She remembered her own attitude to the advice she received from adults when she was finishing grade twelve and knew that she had ignored some of it. Her best advice reflected that attitude. She believed that people may have good intentions, but that the individuals must make up their own minds about what they should do. “It doesn’t matter if how many people tell you or how important that person is that tells you that, you’re going to do something to make it—you’re going to do the wrong thing but learn from it I guess” (Charity). When asked about learning from her mistakes, Charity spoke of the difficulties she had faced in trying to save money by sharing housing with too many people; she went on to explain that at the time she had not felt she had another choice because housing was scarce at the time she was studying in the city.

Tonka-Man, too believed that students should be encouraged to follow their heart when it came to future plans. He and Smiley both indicated that the staff in their small school had known what type of work they had enjoyed, and they felt glad that the staff had accepted or encouraged their choices. Staff should encourage students, but also remind them to remain flexible, “If they can pinpoint something that they’re pretty sure on, like it can change really quick” (Smiley). Smiley had another idea he wanted to extend to future graduates such as his brother. They should enjoy their freedom from responsibility while they could because life is not all about work.

Hope remembered that for her, school slipped by very quickly, and she described how she had felt, “kind of like—oh my God, what am I going to do with [my life]—[graduation] day came a lot sooner than I thought” (Hope)! When pondering how schools could help students avoid that panic, she commented:

I mean in a small, small town you can't really have everything, you just only have your certain parts. Have little work experience day where everybody's got to pick a career out of a hat and go and try it out or something! (Hope)

Her suggestion that the school should try to offer work experience or job shadowing as a way to help students prepare for their futures mirrors Tonka-Man and Smiley's comments that work which may not require post secondary school or training programs should be seen as a viable option for students.

What's Next?

Hope and Charity had both entered serious romantic relationships which they admitted will have the effect of holding them close to home. The men in their lives were both farmers in the area. Both women expressed their love of living in a smaller community or in the country. Charity indicated that she would live wherever her fiancé wishes, noting that as a farmer, he was not likely to move. She was busy planning her wedding. Hope spoke of visiting the city for shopping or to see family but stated that she could never live where she could not see the stars. Hope would like to take on a managerial position. Charity was looking forward to attaining a permanent full-time position. Both women were waiting for others to retire and make room for them in the organizations for which they work.

Tonka-Man looked forward to getting his journeyman ticket after which he may continue to work where he is, or he may pursue work in a northern mine or in Alberta. He spoke enthusiastically of the various options he felt were open to him, and was feeling optimistic about a possible new romantic relationship. Smiley, when asked what his expectations for the future involved, replied, “I don’t know, I guess find a wife is the next one to do” (Smiley), adding that he was no longer in a hurry to do so. In the meantime, Smiley continued to work in the oil patch and he needed to make decisions about his farming. He had enjoyed earning big money and was concerned with the current economic downturn hitting the oil industry, but was also aware of the cyclical nature of his occupations. He was very aware that his future may change, “I don’t know, like—I still at twenty years old haven’t figured out how to choose MY direction” (Smiley).

Buddy also needed to decide if he wished to return to the farm or if he will become an entrepreneur after he finishes his degree. He looks longingly at the spending power some of his working friends have and reminds himself that his studies will pay off in the long run, although he clearly had not decided what he will do once he has earned his degree.

Hope’s words sum up what each of the participants is experiencing, “[it’s] part of life. To experience the next stages and keep moving ahead” (Hope). Each will continue to make adjustments, negotiate the changes, and continue to gain confidence and self reliance as they overcome their fears, take on greater responsibilities, look for or deepen their romantic relationships, and follow the paths they have set out to travel.

Summary

In this chapter I have presented the findings of the study employing the participants' actual words whenever possible. I began with a brief introduction of the five research participants detailing the rationale used to create the nicknames chosen for each of them. As I explored the research question, *What supports do recent graduates perceive to have existed in a small rural school to assist students in their transition from school to post secondary education or the workforce?*, I found that participants' answers could be organized around basic categories including following family patterns, building on job experiences, and relating to their school experiences. Subsequent information answered the two other interview questions detailing the transitions faced by research participants as they moved into their own homes, entered the workforce, or entered post secondary education, and providing suggestions for current high school students and personnel. Finally, recognizing that the participants in my study had not completed their transitions to adult lives, I sketched out the pictures each participant envisioned for his or her near future.

In the upcoming chapter, I will draw comparisons between the data presented here and the literature reviewed in chapter two. Although the data drawn from this study may not be expected to represent the experiences and perceptions of other individuals, there are some parallels which can be drawn between this study and others, most notably those done by Daigneault and Wirtz (2008) and Yazedjian et al. (2008). I will also revisit some of the issues in Corbett's study, *Learning to Leave* (2007). I will describe some of the changes which have taken place in support of student career development since the inception of this study, and I will reflect on how this study may impact my own future practice. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on further research which I see potentially beneficial in promoting a greater understanding of rural

student perceptions and in serving their needs for support in the transitions they face as they leave their small rural schools.

CHAPTER FIVE BEGINNING AT THE END; ENDING AT THE BEGINNING

The small town graduation with its annual rituals of beginnings and endings offers the bookends to this volume. I began writing this study shortly after experiencing the class of 08's graduation and I begin writing the last chapter mere days away from celebrating the class of 09's launch into life after school. It all began as I contemplated how former graduates would perceive and judge the success of their school in preparing them for their future lives. I was piqued by the apparent judgment of rural schools evident in the PISA reports, and I pondered whether those results held any relevancy for my students. How is success perceived? In a small town, a school's success is judged in part, by how well its graduating students do. Community members commonly ask variations of the question, are they ready for the real world?

In seeking affirmation for small rural schools in the midst of a world increasingly obsessed with large scale, global competitiveness as evidenced by international testing regimes like PISA, I wondered what my former students would say about the role the school played in helping them to deal with '*the real world.*' The phenomenological study began then, by exploring the former students' perspective and the initial question was this: *What supports do recent graduates perceive to have existed in a small rural school to assist students in their transition from school to post secondary education or the workforce?* Subsequent questions were also developed: (a) *What challenges have recent graduates faced as they transitioned from high school to their current positions as post secondary students or employees?* and (b) *What supports do recent graduates believe should be implemented to assist future graduates in their upcoming transitions from high school to post secondary education or the workforce?*

Throughout the research and the writing, I have been immersed in the daily tasks of running a small rural school. As mother to a graduate this year, grade 12 homeroom teacher, and

small school principal, I have lived and breathed the anticipation that graduation brings. In addition, I have been keenly aware of the changes currently taking place in the province with an increased focus of *beginning with the end in mind*, which inspires both the planning and renewal of provincial curricula and the teacher planning of individual units of study. All of this work leads to graduation which is, of course, both an ending and a beginning.

Procedural Ponderings

This retrospective study was completed through a series of semi-structured interviews with five participants who provided their perspectives on the processes of transition they have experienced as they made choices for their future during their high school years and the three years immediately following their graduation. Each participant was asked to reflect on a series of topics including how they made their post secondary plans for education or entering the workforce; how they experienced the transitions from high school to '*the real world*' of life after high school; and advice they would offer to upcoming graduates and the school personnel who serve their needs. As is common in phenomenological research, the participants were free to steer the conversations that meandered throughout their high school and postsecondary experiences. Sitting at a kitchen table like *true rural folks*, the participants described their hopes and fears as well as their trials and triumphs.

I had prepared the participants for the general topics I was interested in by providing them an advance copy of sample questions. I felt that sharing the questions would allay any concerns they might have had about the whole process and showed respect for my participants' time and sensibilities. The interviews did not follow a linear path from topic to topic, but instead, as mentioned earlier, meandered and circled around many experiences, ideas and speculations. I asked questions inspired by my reading of the literature outlined in chapter two of this study,

focusing on rural realities, family background, financial concerns, and school influences. I also asked about mobility and the experience of relocating for studies and work. Finally, I pondered the transitional experiences and asked questions connected to individuation, resiliency, and disequilibrium, although I carefully avoided using these terms during my line of questioning to avoid participant discomfort.

Transcripts of these conversations were reviewed by the participants who made some corrections and offered follow up comments in person, by email and through jotted notes on their interview transcripts. My careful and frequent re-readings of the transcripts led me to develop, or uncover, common themes.

During the interview phase of the study, and while I pondered the participants' words, I reflected on the entire phenomenological process. I had been trying to identify and describe a phenomenon by capturing the perspective of my participants. Knowing that perspectives are formed in part by one's self image and by the reactions one receives from others, I had speculated that I might need to puzzle out whether or not my participants were recounting information that they thought I, as their former teacher and vice principal would want to hear. My prior reading about methodology had led me to look for examples of Goffman's stage analogy. I found myself conscious that I was researcher, but was not aware of putting on a front except when refraining from the urge to fall back into my comfortable and familiar teacher persona- the one who knows the answers. While listening to the interview transcripts I heard myself repeatedly saying something like, "you might think this is a dumb question for me to ask, because you might think I know the answer, and perhaps I do, but it is your take on the question that I'm looking for."

Each of the study participants reflected on how they had felt about themselves in light of others' reactions to themselves. Charity, I believe had consciously chosen a front to display when she went to school, and enjoyed the resulting respect and confidence she gained. Buddy had hidden under his hat until he had found the comfort level he needed to reach out and make himself known to his peers and professors. Smiley and Hope had both enjoyed the respect they had earned by having a good work ethic. Tonka Man indicated an eagerness to get back to the classroom portion of his apprenticeship so that he could compare notes with the other students about what they had learned while earning their on the job hours.

Surprisingly, I did not feel that the participants were putting on a front for me. I felt that our conversations, rich in anecdotal references, filled with laughter and punctuated with small silent pauses were providing me with a wealth of data to interpret. Retrospective research, by its very nature takes one down memory lane and I found the interviews to be enjoyable and rewarding.

As I write these pages, I reflect on what I could have done differently in this research. I believe I could have scheduled shorter interviews and spread them out through a longer period. This may allow for more reflective time for participants and me in between data gathering segments. A disadvantage of this approach would be the inconvenience for participants and the additional time commitment required. In the end, the data collected might be more diverse. But, as Robert Frost's famous traveler postulated, one can never really go back to those diverging roads in the bush. I took one path, and that has made all the difference.

View of the Findings

During the interviews, and after the initial re-readings of the data, I was struck by how little direct influence students perceived the school to have on their career choices or on the

transitions they faced following high school. As an emic researcher, a part of the school community from which the participants graduated, I had my own perspectives on what supports had been available to the participants while they went through school. I was surprised and humbled at the peripheral role participants allocated to the school. Although participants were able to identify various school activities that helped them become the individuals they are, and gave credit to certain individual school personnel for taking strong interests in their lives, the participants identified their families as having the strongest influence on their career choices and on their transitions after school. As Buddy said, “life starts at home” (Buddy).

Finally, the participants recognized the fact that they are not finished with the process of growing up and that they will continue to experience changes. In all cases, the participants celebrated their achievements taking particular pride in their self-efficacy and they were all eager to share their experiences with me.

Parental Paths

Many issues discussed in the literature can be found in the study data. Most prominent is the theme that rural students tend to follow the paths laid out by their parents. Trusty (1998) investigated the role of authoritative parenting in student decision making finding a correlation between involved parents and higher academic aspirations in their children. All of the study’s participants indicated that they had been supported by their parents. They all noted that decisions about their futures had been their own, but three of the participants identified parental and family influence as being strong in one aspect or another of the decision making.

Charity’s mother and other relatives assisted her in exploring her options and although her decision did not exactly follow her mother’s footsteps, she did enter the same field. Buddy’s father had insisted that his son take advantage of post secondary opportunities he had missed, and

Tonka Man's parents had convinced him to pursue his post secondary training immediately after high school rather than working first. Smiley entered the workforce splitting his time between the farm and the oil fields, just as his father had done. Hope entered the workforce immediately after high school which is not a complete copy of her parents' experiences but her approach to life and work in the small town does mirror her parents' lives.

Staying Home

Attachment to place, explored by Corbett (2007) and Hektner (1995) is another theme evident in the data. For Hope and Charity part of the attachment to place is attachment to family and romantic relationships, but they also spoke of enjoying the lifestyle of small town living. While Charity would like to live closer to an urban center, and to the new friends she made while attending post secondary training, she recognized that the farm will keep her and her fiancé grounded where they are. Hope spoke of '*the city*' as a place she only wanted to visit, identifying it as a place in which she could never live.

Smiley turned the questions about where he wanted to live back to me. He wanted to know if my son, not a participant in the study, but a member of the same high school class was happy in the city. Struggling to hide the disdain in his voice, he asked if my son was going to be a city boy. Smiley could not fathom living in the city commenting that he found it boring. Smiley spoke of facing the hardships of working in the elements rather than living the pampered life of a student. His comments mirrored those made by the students in the Shultz study (2004), which had as one of its themes the attitudes and perceptions of rural students towards their urban peers. Tonka Man too had struggled with boredom in the city and continued to return home as frequently as possible. Buddy, keeping his options open commented that he will have to decide if he wants to return to the farm or use his education in a different way. He also commented that

he had returned to the farm for each harvest and that his apartment view of an open field was a source of comfort for him. While Tonka Man, Smiley, and Buddy all work or study elsewhere, their hearts, like those of Corbett's participants, truly remain "*around here*" (2007).

Although Corbett's (2007) study was set in a maritime location and the lifestyle is centered on the fishing industry, the attitudes are mirrored by those in this study. Many of Corbett's participants did not want their way of life threatened by post secondary education and relocation to urban centers. They were determined to defend against the urbanization of their space, and worked at preserving a cherished way of life. Here the lifestyle is farming instead of fishing. Only one of the five participants had no direct tie to a farm while growing up. Two of the participants are still actively involved in the family farm and both spoke of the conflicting emotions they had about being a farmer. The farm life is a paradox: fulfilling yet limiting.

A third participant is marrying her high school sweetheart, and they will farm along with his parents. This decision is like history repeating itself. Charity's mother attended post secondary training in the city and latter returned to her home where she works and her husband farms. Whether it is career choices, or location for living, family footsteps and attachment to place appear to be familiar markers in rural routes.

Watching For Signs

While reading Morales (2008) and Schultz (2004), whose work investigated academic resilience and adjustments, I wondered how severe the challenges would have been for my study participants. As a rural educator, I frequently receive visits from former students who show up in the hallways and regale me their trials and triumphs. Often there is an element of bravado in these interchanges and I am left wondering if they are seeking to impress or simply to express

their disequilibrium. Are they seeking validation that they are doing well or are they offering reassurance that they are doing well? I wondered would my participants report the disequilibrium discussed by Daigneault and Wirtz (2008)? What coping skills and strategies would they describe? While there were differences, I found some of the questions in the Daigneault and Wirtz study useful. I also found several themes revealed by their participants to be similar to those discussed by the participants in my study.

Surprisingly, I found no relevant connection in the data to the negative portrayals of rural education displayed in the literature discussing PISA. Canada's follow up survey with the PISA participants, however did bring out an area of interest to me. Usher and Junor (2005) in their analysis of the Youth in Transition survey highlighted the theme of self-selection. Their study exposed potential barriers to entering post secondary education. Self-selection or the tendency to remove oneself from potential post-secondary education in a variety of ways does appear in the results of this study. Hango and de Broucker (2007) studied the actual pathways of the Canadian PISA participants. The participants in my study fit into three of their categories: gapers (Charity), non gapers (Tonka-Man and Buddy) and high school only (Hope and Smiley). All of the participants worked during high school but I have no hard data on the number of hours worked. Making a close comparison to the statement made by Hango and de Broucker (2007) that students who worked long hours during high school were less likely to attend post-secondary education would be inappropriate but the affects of part time employment on high school student career development is an area worth further investigation.

Both of the participants who ended up joining the workforce alluded to making decisions prior to the end of grade twelve which steered them directly into the workforce. Smiley recalled that career fairs held no interest for him because he knew he did not want to attend more school.

Hope liked the opportunity of attending a career fair but indicated that financial concerns were a barrier to her attending school. Hope also expressed regret that she had not spent more time being advised by the school's itinerant guidance counselor. While Hope did enroll in a short course to prepare her as a teacher of English as a second language, she did not pursue that career.

Surviving and Thriving on the Road

Buddy, using a variation of the old saying '*a fish out of water*,' spoke of his adjustment in particular to university life making him feel like a bottom feeder but he was quick to add that he was glad he had made the adjustments—and that he now felt comfortable in the '*bigger puddle*.' Charity admitted that there were some tough days but also commented that one success led to another. She added that she will learn from mistakes. Charity and Hope each expressed pride in being able to '*do it on her own*.'

Tonka Man appeared to have had an even more difficult time adjusting to urban life speaking of his boredom in the evenings, and his fears of crime. He recounted an incident of hearing strange noises outside of his apartment building and turning out the lights to avoid drawing unwanted attention. Yet Tonka Man also reveled in describing his recent social triumphs of traveling and meeting new people. Each of the participants discussed what made them feel successful, and their pride in their newly developed social independence paralleled the participants in the study done by Yazedjian et al. (2008).

Yazedjian and his colleagues (2008) found that academic success was not the most important marker of adjustment to post-secondary school for their participants. The data in my study agrees with this finding. Although Buddy's comments about grades and academic success revealed an inner competitiveness, he expressed regret that he had taken so long to adjust socially

to the '*big puddle*'. He commented that a social life was important, "have a social life, or they'll stop asking you and it doesn't become as much fun. Don't go out every night but you do have to go out" (Buddy).

Charity enjoyed the fact that her professor was impressed with her work ethic and her ability to answer questions in class. For her, volunteering answers in front of her peers was a major step and it represented a new confidence she had not often experienced in high school. In a sense she was reinventing herself with the new peer group, in a similar way to the participant in the study by Daigneault and Wirtz (2008) who looked forward to creating a new image for herself. Charity welcomed this new sense of control when it came to her workplace.

Hope and Smiley both take pride in the feedback they receive from their co-workers. They enjoy knowing that as workers they are seen as reliable and competent. Smiley and Tonka-Man both expressed satisfaction in the buying power they had. Smiley's souped-up truck and his ability to head out to the lake on a boat make him proud and content with his choice to work rather than attend post secondary school. Tonka-Man admitted that his bank account was not growing but he was pleased with his 'nice things.'

Social relationships, financial independence, the ability to adjust to new circumstances and recognition from co-workers and teachers appear as important indications of success. Each of the participants commented that moving away from high school involved learning by experiencing life. Their comments also corroborated the individuation theme revealed in the Daigneault and Wirtz (2008) study. Each admitted that they had struggled with some negative feelings as they adjusted to life away from home, but each of them felt pride in being able to make the necessary adjustments. As Charity pointed out, "you're stressed out and so many

things happening and learning so many new things and I have to know how to do that right away by myself” (Charity). The coping strategies revealed by the participants were staying connected with family and friends, remaining optimistic and taking charge of life. Tonka-Man said it best with, “you can’t be afraid to go out and adventure, explore” (Tonka-Man). Clearly, the participants have needed to make adjustments in their lives, but they are now feeling that they ‘own the road’.

The answer to the key research question regarding the supports recent graduates perceive to have existed in a small rural school to assist students in their transition from school to post secondary education or the workforce was unexpected in its brevity. Given a peripheral almost incidental role in the minds of the participants, the school appears to have had limited affect on the decisions about future plans or on adjustments to those futures. Instead participants reflected on the roles of the summer jobs they had held, their parent and family influences and their own self sufficiency. Having had a role in the participants’ high school education, I felt I would hear more about some of the experiences I knew they had undergone such as mock interviews, simulation games and research projects, yet these lessons did not surface. Instead, when they thought of the supports available to them in school, it was the human relationships, sometimes challenging, sometimes nurturing and sometimes judgmental that came to mind. In response to the follow up query about the supports needed for future graduates, the participants reflected on practices that they had found beneficial as well as some they would have found helpful. These follow in the next section.

Implications for Rural Educators

Some Things Change

Greek philosopher Heraclitus once cautioned that one is not able to step into the same stream twice illustrating the idea that nothing remains the same. We learn as we go. The participants in this study have continued to grow and develop their approaches to learning and life in the three years since they graduated from their small rural school. Their small school and the people who work within its walls too, have continued to grow and change.

During the course of this study, I have found that many practices pertaining to career and work exploration have changed. There is an increased emphasis on developing and delivering lessons that attempt to immerse students in career development. As a member of a newly formed Professional Learning Community in my school division, I have been involved in the development of a career counseling handbook, specifically aimed at providing support for personnel in very small schools where the career guidance role is often given to someone with no particular training or background. We have purchased licensing to enable full access for our students and their families to a career development website which offers aptitude quizzes, and information about many careers and schools. We have accessed the skills and experiences of the career counselors who are employed within our larger schools. We have also met with officials from two of the province's larger post secondary educational institutions. Individuals from the group have attended workshops and have brought back information to the group about various schools, the Skills Canada competitions, and the military. As a group we have developed questionnaires, a protocol for career portfolio development and a survey which we intend to use to follow the graduates from our division.

Within my own school I have already adapted some of my practices and I know that following the completion of this study I will continue to keep the career decision and transitional needs of students in mind. I intend to push student research and reflection about career choices at an earlier age instead of leaving this area for the final two years of high school. Following some of the recommendations made by study participants, I would like to encourage more opportunities for students to speak with people who are working in various fields by inviting parents and former students to share their experiences in their chosen fields of work.

I intend to make information more readily available for parents of high school students. Unlike large schools, we have never held parent information meetings explaining the various course offerings in school. This absence may well be detrimental to our students, for the role of families in assisting with career choices is overwhelmingly the most obvious finding in this study. Offering to formalize the partnerships between school and parents may allow parents and their students to feel more confident in their choices.

Due to the small size of my graduating classes, it may not be necessary to hold large parent meetings, but the need for more formalized communication with parents is becoming apparent to me. This realization also occurred to Daigneault and Wirtz who suggested in their 2008 study that school personnel should expend effort to inform parents of the costs of post secondary education and offer other supports for families facing the imminent changes they will encounter as their children finish high school. I have already implemented a career plan component into the student led parent teacher conference for senior students and intend to reach out to parents for feedback on this practice.

This past winter, during our school's bi-annual science fair, while viewing one family's grade four student's project, the conversation veered to their grade twelve student. Both parents discussed their fears about their son potentially wasting his time in some course that was not suited to his interests or his needs. They felt that he was not suited to a manual labor job and knew that he would need to be enthusiastic about a career choice in order to be successful at it. We discussed some of his talents and interests and I promised to get him exploring options. They laughingly told me they would pay me to find inspiration for him. I have replayed that particular conversation in my mind several times in the past few months. I am paid, in part to inspire their son, and my other students. I believe that my role in his future is significant, yet I also know that his family plays a much bigger role. How will we work together on this important task? Now that he has graduated, will he return to his small school for support, to find a sympathetic or encouraging audience, to grab a student loans brochure or to pick up a school catalogue or pamphlet as many others before him?

Some Things Should Stay the Same

Career development and preparation for the transition from high school to post secondary life is the end we have in mind as educators. An emphasis on learning the various subjects offered and on attaining essential skills must not change. Teachers and students will continue the power struggles that are inevitably woven into their days. *What do we do with the student who sleeps in, skips class, or does not quite understand a key concept?* These puzzles continue to capture the minds of teachers and parents. *What do I need this for; how can I do this differently; how am I different from everyone else?* These questions continue to inspire the behavior of teens. As we focus on these issues, we must also remember that many of the life lessons taught within schools and within families are not found in the books.

What observations do the participants of this study have for me? Charity cautioned that schools must continue to offer the extra-curricular activities that allow students to develop their leadership skills and help them gain confidence in their own skills and talents. Buddy advised that teachers need to increase the rigor of studies, and not go too easy on students just because they know them so well. Tonka-Man believed that schools must continue to offer academic and practical courses allowing students to see what they are good at doing so they can follow their interests. Smiley reminded me that we need to respect the value of a working person, and acknowledge that sometimes school is not the most important part of life. Hope inspired me to remember that there are always opportunities to start over, to tackle new challenges. This study suggests that keeping a positive outlook, focusing on the future possibilities yet preparing for the small bumps, curves and detours in the rural routes is what must not change in our rural school.

Recommendations for Further Study

Much has been written about what might be seen as the detrimental affects of a rural education. Corbett (2007) brought several troubling aspects of the public discourse on rural schools to light. He cautioned that when rural communities are positioned in the media and in the community and teacher discourse as dead or dying, youth may well despair. Statistics which point to lower educational aspirations and lower incomes may in fact contribute to a pejorative attitude towards rural residents. Are rural residents limited in their horizons or do they chose their locations? Some, Corbett pointed out, choose to remain and resist the ubiquitous image of a dying community and instead thrive in their small communities offering hope for rural resilience.

Walker (2006) explained that a leader's first and last task was to create hope. His conviction, thoroughly supported in research and explicated with realistic school based examples

reaffirms my belief that casting the future of rural education in a positive light is important to maintaining student and parent confidence in their school. Corbett (2007) also affirmed the need for positive refocusing and understanding of the possibilities that exist in what he calls, “the intellectual seeds and pragmatic examples for imagining and conducting education projects that engage particular students in particular places in a globalized culturally hybrid knowledge society” (Corbett, 2007, p. 272). These are heady words, suggesting that more reflection on the positive aspects of a rural education could cast an entirely different perspective.

How much of education should be *educare*—the training and molding of citizens—and how much of education should be *educere*—the leading out, the inspiration of wonder and curiosity? Once again I ask the question, how is the success of a school defined? If one is able to find out how many of the former students are gainfully employed, how many of them are happy with their chosen paths, one might begin to sketch out a picture of success.

Additionally, the parent perspective is one that would offer a depth of information well worth considering. Parental perspectives are beginning to garner more attention in the research (López & Vázquez, 2006; Mu & Childs, 2005; Stelmach, 2004). My study reveals the pivotal role parents play in all aspects of their children’s development, clearly supporting the assertion made by López and Vázquez (2006) that parents are the student’s first teachers and teachers are the student’s second parents. My participants, like those described by López and Vázquez’ work gain social and cultural capital from their families which appeared to be the defining factor in their future plan making.

Yet many educators could be accused of being oblivious to this truth. Many school improvement initiatives encourage and in some cases mandate a stronger parental presence

within the school system but in most cases there is a reluctance to truly open the schoolhouse doors to parents (Stelmach, 2004). Stelmach's research elucidates several reasons which may account for a marginalized place for parents within education. The language used in policy and practice may be part of the problem (Brien & Stelmach, in press). In many cases parents are cast either as adversaries to the teachers or as advocates for the children. Nakagawa (2000) called the paradox parents faced, a double bind. As protectors parents need to be ensuring that their child's needs are met, yet if they become frequent visitors or raise uncomfortable questions, they are seen as problems. Both phrases set up a confrontational stage, not conducive to enhancing school improvement.

More research is needed to determine what goals parents have for their young adult children. What adjustments do they make as their children leave home? What supports do parents need from educators? These questions are most certainly worth exploring.

Ultimately, the voices of those closest to the issue of transition continue to call for more attention. There were very few articles that gave direct voice to the individuals who had left their rural roots to traverse the confusing and ever expanding world of post secondary education and training. More research grounded in the rural perspective could be helpful to rural educational personnel and might also serve useful to post secondary institutions who serve rural students. None of the participants in this study were 'Christmas grads', the slang-expression describing students who quit university or technical training shortly after beginning, but early withdrawal or failure from post secondary institutions is fairly common. Participant comments made during this study indicate to me a need for more focus on these areas.

The area of study I found most lacking in my reading would relate to students who did not pursue post secondary education but directly entered the workforce. What skills are needed by students who enter the workforce directly after high school? When do students begin to self-select out of the more rigorous aspects of their education and begin contemplating a life of work? What support do these students need? Do educators offer enough respect and consideration to those joining the work-a-day world? From a rural perspective, where a person's merit is often judged by their work habits and work ethic should there not be a focus on the transition to the work world?

Final Thoughts

My thesis title, Rural Routes, is a metaphor meant to invoke the complex roadmap faced by our small school graduates. It has made me think of the old expression '*all roads lead to Rome*,' which meant that there were many ways of getting to where you wanted or needed to be. Of course there was a more literal historical meaning giving the Romans credit for their prolific road building throughout the modern world that they wished to dominate. I think now of the various pathways my former students have traveled and I realize that all roads lead to home. I am reminded, and honored to know that for my students and their families, the school is part of their home and as such has helped to provide a small part of their roots and in a small way has influenced their future rural routes.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview/ Focus Group Questions

1. What are you doing right now? (What course are you taking or where are you working? Where do you live? How often do you come home?)
2. What can you remember about how you were feeling when you were thinking about leaving high school? (Were you excited or afraid? What were you looking forward to? What did you think were going to be your greatest challenges as you left high school?)
3. When did you decide what you were going to do after high school?
4. Who/ What influenced or informed your decision making? (Can you explain how...)
5. Could you describe how your parents helped you make decisions about going to school/ entering the workforce / where you would live?
6. Could you describe how the school (teachers, guidance personnel, curriculum, other resources) helped you make decisions about going to school/ entering the workforce / where you would live?
7. What changes (if any) have you made to the original plans you made for life after high school?
8. What were some of the surprises (positive and or negative) you had about what life was like after high school? How did you deal with these surprises? (What challenges did you face in finding living arrangements, finding your way around, making friends...?)
9. What experiences during your high school years helped to prepare you for what you are doing right now?
10. What suggestions would you give to school leaders to help them guide high school students towards a smooth transition to life after high school?

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled **Rural Routes: A Study of Rural High School Graduate Life Transitions**. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.

Researcher: Helen Gress (306) 769-8595 (Home), or (306) 769-8784 (Work), (306) 769-8931 (Fax) a Master's Candidate in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan.

Purpose and Procedure: The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of how students adjust to life after high school. My ultimate goal is to enhance the supports offered to high school students as they make decisions about their career options following high school graduation.

You will participate in focus group discussions with other volunteer participants from your grad class or individual interviews with Helen Gress at mutually agreed upon locations including but not limited to University of Saskatchewan Campus and Arborfield School.

Focus group discussions will last approximately one hour with possible follow-up telephone or email consultations. Transcripts of these conversations will be made available to you. You will have the opportunity to withdraw any comments you have made or to provide additional clarification. Findings from the conversations will be used in the preparation of a thesis.

Potential Benefits: I hope to learn more about how to support rural high school students in preparing for the transitions they will experience following high school graduation. While this is my goal, I can not guarantee specific results.

Potential Risks: Participation in the study has minimal risks. The discussions will center around your experiences leading up to and following your high school graduation. There are no known risks to participating in this study.

Storage of Data: All study information will be stored in a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan in the care of Dr. David Burgess for no less than five years.

Confidentiality: Information you provide during the study will be kept confidential. You will be assigned a different name which will be used throughout my writing to protect your privacy. All group discussions will begin with a reminder that protecting confidentiality is important and group members will be encouraged to protect the privacy of group members. I will follow these guidelines carefully although I can not guarantee that your peers will abide by these conditions.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. There is no guarantee that you will personally benefit from your involvement. The information that is shared will be held in strict confidence and discussed only with the research team. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort. If you withdraw from the research project at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researcher at the numbers provided if you have other questions. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on February 25, 2009. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect.

Follow-Up or Debriefing: Our conversations will be recorded and then typed up. You will have the opportunity to review your statements and make any corrections you feel necessary. You will also be offered an opportunity to add additional comments which may have occurred to you after the interview or discussion. The thesis, which will be housed at the University of Saskatchewan, will be available for anyone interested in reading it.

Consent to Participate:

I have read and understood the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Please Check Your Preferred Form of Participation

- ☐ I agree to participate in focus group discussions with other volunteer members of my high school graduating class.
- ☐ I agree to participate in a private interview with the researcher.

(Name of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Signature of Researcher)

APPENDIX C: Transcript Release Form

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my group discussion or personal interview with Helen Gress. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Helen Gress to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher