

# **The Impact of a School's Closure on Rural Community Residents' Lives**

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### **Abstract**

In this dissertation, I use a single qualitative case study methodology, participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews to explore how a rural school's closure influenced the lives of residents in one rural farming community: Limerick, Saskatchewan, Canada. Three "stand alone" papers comprise this dissertation. In the first paper, I investigate the impacts of the school's closure on rural families. In the second paper, I explore the ways Limerick School's closure affected adults without school-aged children. In the final paper, I assess school closure's impact on gendered volunteer roles. Using social ecological theory and socialist feminist theory, I argue that the school's closure had far-reaching implications for community members and that these implications varied depending on stage of life, gender, and roles within the family and community contexts. Together, these papers not only make a contribution to filling the gap in existing literature pertaining to rural school closures, but they also strengthen our scholarly understanding of the school-community relationship in the rural context.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Rural communities are essential to Canada's social, environmental, and economic wellbeing. The natural resources that are extracted from rural regions contribute to fifty percent of Canada's exports (Federal Canadian Municipalities, 2009). Through these industries Canada can sustain a strong economic base that benefits both rural and urban regions. Resource-based communities across Canada, however, are experiencing a decline in resource production, which has resulted in high unemployment rates and reduced services and amenities. In turn, these changes have forced young adults to relocate (Gabriel, 2002; Malatest, 2002). As young people leave rural communities, the sustainability of such communities is called into question (Pretty, 2003). Increased costs for delivering basic infrastructure and services compounded with reduced populations in rural communities make it difficult for the government to justify financial support for community programs, social and education services, and infrastructure in rural communities (Goetz, 2000). In particular, rural schools have become vulnerable to closure, which is purported to threaten rural communities' viability and wellbeing (Lyson, 2002).

The significance of rural schools is embedded in the complex, multifaceted roles they play in rural communities. Schools have long been identified as rural communities' central hubs and are places for socialization and the development and strengthening of community identity (Miller, 1993). Through the rural school-community relationship, social capital and social networks are developed and strengthened, which create "meaningful and sustainable community renewal" (Lane & Dorfman, 1997, p. 10). Rural schools represent community autonomy, vitality, integration, personal control, personal

and community tradition, and personal and community identity (Lyson, 2002). They also act as cultural, recreation, and social centres for communities; they offer activities that contribute to community members' wellbeing (Parker, 2001; Nachtigal, 1994; Waldman, 2008). Indeed, Waldman (2008) aptly noted that a rural community's wellbeing is established through "creating and nurturing relationships between the school and the community" (p. 28). As a result, the school plays a vital role in rural community members' social wellbeing. But what happens when rural schools are closed?

As explained above, schools play important roles in rural communities. There is, however, a paucity of research that has examined the impact of a rural school's closure on rural residents' lives. As such, the purpose of my doctoral research was to investigate the impacts of a school's closure on residents' lives in one rural Saskatchewan community: Limerick. The guiding research question for this project was, what impact does a rural school's closure have on rural residents' lives? I addressed this research question in this dissertation through the "stand alone paper" format. More specifically, I examined the impact of a rural school's closure on 1) rural families, 2) adults without school-aged children, and 3) gender roles as expressed through volunteerism. Taken together, the papers that comprise my dissertation make strong and novel contributions to understanding the complex ways in which a rural school's closure can affect rural residents – in particular, those who live in Limerick, Saskatchewan.

### **Saskatchewan School Closures**

In a thirty-five year span, Saskatchewan's rural population has decreased from forty-five percent to thirty-six percent of the province's entire population, which has challenged the social structures of its rural communities, including their education

systems (Bollman & Clemson, 2007). With declining populations, it has become difficult to maintain adequate school enrollment numbers and the financial resources needed to operate rural schools. As a result, the Saskatchewan government implemented an education renewal strategy in 2004 that was intended to serve as a financial solution that was fair for residents of both urban and rural regions (Kirk, 2008). Saskatchewan's education system is funded by grants from the provincial government and local property taxes (Kirk, 2008). School divisions that have higher property taxes have more revenue for education and thus rely less on grants from the government. Divisions with lower property taxes, on the other hand, rely more heavily on government grants to fund education. The way in which grants are offered to school divisions is based on a formula that takes enrollment and property assessments into consideration (Kirk, 2008). In the early 1990s, outmigration in certain regions of Saskatchewan had an impact on property assessments and also resulted in decreased school enrollment, which caused an imbalance education funding throughout the province. As a result, the government restructured the school division boundaries to include regions with higher property assessments and some with lower assessments, which thus pooled together taxes from different regions and increased the likelihood of equity for students and taxpayers (Boughen, 2003; Kirk, 2008).

Between 2004 and 2006 the Saskatchewan government slowly restructured the province's school system. Part of the education restructuring process involved amalgamating the then eighty-two school divisions into twenty-eight larger ones. In January 2006, all twenty-eight school divisions became operational (Kirk, 2008). During the transitional period of September 2004 to December 31, 2006, a moratorium on

school closures was put in place to protect schools from closing until the government had established the new school divisions. In January 2007, the government lifted the moratorium and twenty-three school closures took place across the province.

### **Study Setting**

The Village of Limerick, Saskatchewan was one of the twenty-three communities that lost its school in 2007. Limerick is a rural community in south-central Saskatchewan, 128 kilometres southwest of the closest urban centre, Moose Jaw (Appendix A). Notably, it is also my hometown. Limerick has a population of 130 in-town residents, but provides services to the 315 residents that reside on farms and ranches outside of the community (Statistics Canada, 2012). For the purpose of my dissertation, when referring to the community of Limerick, I will be referring to both the in-town and out-of-town residents that the community services. The tables below provide the most recent information available pertaining to Limerick residents' age, sex, education, and income (Community Information Database, 2006).

Table 1

*Limerick residents' average age*

<b>Age</b>	<b>Percent of Population</b>
<b>0-14yrs</b>	24.6%
<b>15-34yrs</b>	20.2%
<b>35-54yrs</b>	33.1%
<b>55+</b>	22.1%

Table 2

*Number of males and females in the community*

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Number of Residents</b>
<b>Male</b>	240
<b>Female</b>	205

Table 3

*Highest Level of education attainment (15 years of age and over)*

<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Less than high school</b>	41%
<b>High school</b>	16.7%
<b>Trades</b>	10.3%
<b>College (certification/diploma)</b>	24.4%
<b>University</b>	6.4%

Table 4

*Income levels based on sex (15yrs and over)*

<b>Income levels</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Under 5,000 thousand</b>	27.5%	23.5%
<b>5k-10,000</b>	0%	0%
<b>10,000-20,000</b>	25%	20.6%
<b>20,000-30,000</b>	15%	17.6%
<b>30,000-40,000</b>	5%	5.9%
<b>40,000-50,000</b>	15%	14.7%
<b>50,000 and over</b>	10%	17.6%

Limerick's economy is based mainly in agriculture and private businesses. Agriculture is the primary economic industry in the region, with sixty-six percent of males and twenty-four percent of females working in agriculture-related industry (Statistics Canada, 2010). Limerick's private and public sectors currently includes a hair salon, construction company, insurance office, post office, bank, gas station, auto mechanic shop, grain elevator, grocery store, hotel, restaurant and bar, health and wellness centre, and daycare. Limerick is host to numerous community clubs and

organizations, including Limerick 49'ers senior club, Kids Kingdom youth program, community hall board, house authority, historical society, rink board, recreation board, service club, photography club, and playschool. Recreation and community facilities include the Limerick Centennial Rink, Limerick Community Hall, the Holy Trinity Church, ball diamonds, and a campground. The community also used to be home to Limerick School.

Limerick School had a deeply-rooted history within the community. The small country schoolhouse was originally located three kilometres north of the village and was known as Holdsworth School (Limerick Historical Society, n.d). The school opened in 1911, but was moved into the Village of Limerick in 1913. In 1917, the one room schoolhouse was transformed into a two-room brick school and its name was officially changed to Limerick School. Ten years later the school was expanded to include three additional rooms because of an increase in enrollment and the need for the provision of high school education. Limerick School officially joined the Assiniboia School Unit #5 in 1948. In 1966, a two-room high school and gymnasium were built next to the existing school. Further expansion to the high school in 1987 added six more classrooms, office space, and a staff room. In 1988 the initial brick schoolhouse was torn down and replaced with another new addition to the high school. From 1988 to 2007, Limerick School housed kindergarten to grade 12 students in one school building.

In January of 2007, the local school board announced the upcoming closure of Limerick School. In June 2007, the school closed despite an enrollment of forty-six students, five full-time staff, and one part-time education assistant. From June 2007 to April 2008, the Village of Limerick and the local rural municipality were in negotiations

to take ownership of the school building. In May 2008 Limerick School was purchased by the Village of Limerick and renamed the Limerick Opportunity Centre (Limerick Opportunity Centre, n.d.). The Opportunity Centre has a fitness room, gymnasium, computer and music equipment, and classroom space and offers its space for rent to a variety of community clubs and associations. As such, residents of Limerick have seen great change since their rural school's closure. Understanding the impacts of these changes as they pertain to residents' lives is my purpose in this dissertation.

### **Review of Literature**

To provide a broad context of understanding for my dissertation, here I present a literature review that pertains to a number of relevant areas of study: the concept of rural; rural school-community relationships; rural school closures; gender and volunteerism; gender and volunteerism in rural communities; and definitions of leisure and recreation.

#### **Rural**

Defining the term rural has proven contentious (Brown & Swason, 2003; Halfacree, 1993; Rye, 2006). In this dissertation, I conceptualize rural using three perspectives in rural research: the objective, geographic, and social construction approaches. From an objective/geographical perspective, rural is defined based on concrete, objective, and tangible features such as economics, settlement and occupational land use, landscape, distance from an urban area or essential service, and population density (Bealer, Willits, & Kuvlesky, 1965; Cloke & Thrift, 1994; Rye, 2006). For example, Statistics Canada's definition of "rural and small town areas" as towns and municipalities outside the main community zone of larger urban centres of 10,000 and more (Bollman, 2001). According to Statistics Canada (2012), Limerick is a Non

Metropolitan Influence Zone (MIZ), which means that residents do not commute to an urban centre for work. The objective emphasis on distance to urban centres is based on the fact that distance, adjacency, accessibility, and commuter flows for work to urban centres can influence Canadian's social and economic wellbeing of Canadians (McNiven, Puderer, & Janes, 2000). Other geographic approaches to defining rural were found through an extensive systematic review of rural research in four leisure and recreation journals, Edwards and Matarrita-Cascante (2011) found that most authors defined rural based on one of the three geographical factors: 1) rural communities being separate from urban political boundaries, 2) a strong presence of natural resources and wilderness environments, and 3) rural communities largely connected to natural resource extraction, i.e. mining, agriculture, or fishing.

Researchers have argued that objective and geographic perspectives (e.g. Cloke, 1997; Halfacree, 1993; Rye, 2006) are inadequate for explaining rural social change and that scholars should instead focus on subjective and socially constructed meanings of rural. Woods (2005) argued that the use of socially constructed meanings “produces a more robust and flexibly way of defining rural, which can for example accommodate the effects of the social economic change in rural environments” (p. 11). Characteristics of rural communities that are emphasized by those who use such an approach include traditionalism, dense social structures, a strong sense of community, and a more natural lifestyle as compared to urban communities (Rye, 2006).

Despite the dominance of objective and geographic-based definitions, researchers have argued that rural definitions should be based largely on the research questions that they are trying to answer (Edwards and Matarrita-Cascante, 2011), and should also take

into consideration scale and geographic dimensions of the rural area under investigation (DuPlessis et al. 2002). As such, one is not necessarily limited to using definitions from only one approach.

For the purposes of this study, I engage with objective, geographic, and socially constructed definitions of rural to frame the rural context of Limerick. The rural context of Limerick aligns with both Edwards and Matarrita-Cascante (2011) summarized rural definitions, but also with Statistics Canada's Non MIZ. Using objective and geographic rural definitions together strengthens the ability to conceptualize rural; however, in this study I am also particularly interested in the social construction of rural. Understanding rural from a social constructionist perspective highlights how individuals create and understand their own rurality (Rye, 2006). This approach emphasizes how rurality informs and shapes everyday social lives (Little, Panelli, & Kracck, 2005) and highlights multiple meanings including those who are marginalized. Through these different rural interpretations researchers are more likely to enhance our understanding of rural life, and further identify other important rural research priorities including the school-community relationship.

### **Rural School-Community Relationship**

Researchers have indicated that rural schools can be important assets for community development (Kilpatrick et al., 2002) that contribute to rural community residents' social and economic wellbeing (Lyson, 2002; Salant & Waller, 1998). Rural schools' importance in terms of community development can be heightened by rural communities' small populations and limited cultural facilities (Collins & Flaxman, 2001). Schools' contributions to rural community development are attributed to the resources,

programs, and services that they offer. Specifically, rural schools often have infrastructure in the form of gymnasias, computer rooms, libraries, theatres, and art galleries (Bruce & Halseth, 2000; Rosenfeld & Sheaff, 2002; Witten et al., 2001) that are offered to the broader community. Through these shared assets the school can be a central meeting place where the broader community and school connect (Bertrand & Giles, 2010; Parker, 2001; Squires & Sinclair, 1990). Rural schools have been highlighted as providing a source of entertainment, as community residents often support these schools' athletic, cultural, and musical events (Nachtigal, 1994). As a result, opportunities for socialization can be fostered (Miller, 1993; Wright, 2007) and social capital and networks are often cultivated, which can create "meaningful and sustainable community renewal" (Lane & Dorfman, 1997, p. 10). Through these social interactions, the rural school "institutionalizes a sense of collective identity" (Wright, 2007, p. 348), which can benefit the community's social wellbeing (Wright, 2007).

Economically, the rural school-community relationship has the potential to enhance a community's prosperity because they provide employment and can increase the town's attractiveness to potential newcomers (Bollman, 1999; Flora, 1998; Knack & Keefer, 1997). For example, in Saskatchewan researchers have indicated that schools are amongst the largest employers in rural areas (Martz & Sanderson, 2006), which can enhance the communities' viability (Miller, 1993) and ability to attract and retain young families (Gill & Everitt, 1993; Jackson & Poushinsky, 1971; Porteous, 1976). With an enhanced ability to retain young families, there is a greater likelihood that partnerships will form among families, community residents, and the school. In particular, rural schools often cultivate support from community members (Bauch, 2001) in the form of

coaching sports, supporting fundraising activities, and volunteering for school activities and events. Furthermore, schools typically have teachers and well-educated staff that provide leadership and skills that benefit the communities' voluntary organizations (Martz & Sanderson, 2006). As a result, these partnerships, which are based on social interactions, mutual trust, and relationships, have the potential to foster a deeper sense of belonging among community members (Bauch, 2001). According to Wotherspoon (1998), rural schools enhance residents' involvement in community life cultivates social cohesion. With an increased sense of cohesion within the community, residents are more likely to civically engage in and appreciate community life (Bauch, 2001).

### **Rural School Closures**

According to Bushrod (1999), rural school closures are predominantly produced by three larger forces: changing demographics, which have shifted rural populations to larger urban centres; economic policies that have restricted government finances; and, the shift from an industrial to a technological society. In the broad context, these societal changes have resulted in rural school closures, but the degree of the impact these forces have on rural community life will vary among different regions. Although there are varying forces that impact rural community life, a declining population appears to be the one largely responsible for school closures.

Due to the declining enrollment in schools across Canada, amalgamations and school closures have been on the rise (Schmidt, Muarry, & Nguyen, 2007). The mandated restructuring of school divisions in Canada is not a new practice; it has been occurring since 1995 (Pierce, 2003), but with limited knowledge on the impacts that such restructuring has on rural residents' lives. In particular, the research conducted in Canada

on school division restructuring has typically focused on how restructuring can improve efficiency and accountability (Langlois & Scharf, 1991; Wionzek, 1997; Williams, 2003), reflective aspects of the restructuring process (Trider, 1999; Reddyk, 2000; Gregg, 2001), and forecasting possible outcomes on division wide amalgamations (Langlois & Scharf, 1991; Wionzek, 1995).

Rural schools' closures are often met with tremendous opposition from communities and small school advocates. Those who contest school closures have focused on arguing that there are no cost savings to be had (Duncome & Yinger, 2005; Rural School and Community Trust, 2006), and that small schools provide stronger levels of achievement and more supporting learning environments for students than do large ones (Buchana, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). Other researchers have found that rural schools' closures limit population growth (Goudy et al, 1994); reduce rural communities' economic stability as skilled employees leave (Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Waldman, 2008) and retail and service sectors experience a decline in revenues (Sell et al., 1996); negatively impact residents' sense of cohesion, opportunities for socialization (Egeland & Lausten, 2006; Witten et al., 2001), and community identity (Bruce & Halseth, 2000); and diminish community energy and enthusiasm (Parker, 2001; Tompkins, 2003). Rural school closures also force families to travel greater distances for school-related activities (Kearns et al., 2009).

Although existing research has largely reported the negative outcomes of school closures, some studies have reported some positive outcomes. Sell et al. (1996) found that school consolidations brought smaller communities together and increased social networks for individuals that experienced the school's closure. Furthermore, Sell et al.

(1996) reported that students in consolidated schools received a better education because they had access to more resources and services in the larger schools. In addition, Rowedder (2003) noted that school consolidations increase students' opportunities to engage in competitive athletic programs and friendship networks.

Despite experiencing some positive outcomes, once "their" school closes, rural residents are often left with an enormous void to fill. More specifically, voluntary organizations and institutions are often called upon to fill these gaps (Halseth & Ryser, 2007).

### **Gender and Volunteerism**

Volunteer roles are strongly influenced by gender. According to Wilson (2000), in North America women are more likely to volunteer than men because of differences in human capital, motivations, beliefs, and social resources. Women are more likely to value helping others, carry a belief system that they are expected to "care for the personal and emotional needs of others" (p. 227), and see their volunteer roles as extensions of being wives or mothers. Men, on the other hand, typically have more free time and have skills specific to civic life, which closely links their formal employment with volunteer work (Wilson, 2000).

Gender also influences the type of volunteer work men and women do. In the broad context, researchers have found that women are more likely to take on nurturing and caring roles (Gerstel, 2000), and are less likely to be public, political, or leadership volunteer roles (Roto & Wilson, 2007; Wilson, 2000). Women are also more likely than men to volunteer to fundraise and to prepare and deliver food (Roto & Wilson, 2007), whereas men's volunteer work is usually closely related to their paid work; they are more

likely than women to take on leadership roles, serve on committees, and do consulting work (Roto & Wilson, 2007). Men also take on volunteer roles that are more likely to enhance their careers (Petzelka & Mannon, 2006).

In a Canadian study, Mailoux, Horak, and Godin (2002) listed the top six volunteer jobs for women: 1) making items, 2) preparing or serving food, 3) selling items, 4) collecting or distributing food, 5) providing care, and 6) administration duties, booking keeping, or library work. The top six volunteer jobs for men differed significantly: 1) repairing and/or maintaining facilities, 2) consulting, 3) fire-fighting, first-aid, search and rescue, 4) coaching, refereeing, judging, 5) acting as board members, promoting ideas, research, writing, or speaking, and 6) professionally consulting. Although the differences in volunteer roles among men and women have been highlighted in a broad context, the rural context of this study requires a further exploration of gender in rural communities.

### **Gender in Rural Communities**

The effects of restructuring in the rural context have had strong impacts on gender relations. Heather et al. (2005) identified strong patriarchal ideologies that position women as the focus of rural community life: “women run the home, raise the children and take care of the community” (Heather et al., 2005, p. 89). As such, restructuring can impact the multiple roles women have in the rural context. Specifically, when labour-related jobs that have typically been filled by men are lost, women are called upon to assume greater responsibility for their families’ economic wellbeing and, according to Bates (2006), men may find themselves more engaged in domestic work.

Mackenzie (1986, 1987) noted that the downturn in the formal economy in Nelson, British Columbia had an impact on the male labour force, which motivated women to

take on added economic responsibility through paid employment through at-home businesses. Similar results were found by Mackenzie and Norcliffe (1997), who identified that the economic restructuring of four rural communities' pulp and paper mills forced women to take on paid employment and reorganize household responsibilities among men and women. Oncescu and Robertson (2010) reported that the downturn in the fishing industry motivated the development of ecotourism in a small rural fishing village, which relied heavily on service related jobs that were filled by women. Furthermore, Bates (2006) reported how industrial restructuring in Cornerbrook, Newfoundland influenced women to take on at-home employment to support their families' economic wellbeing, which shifted traditional power relations between men and women. In each case, rural restructuring had implications to traditional gender relations as men and women took on new roles in response to the challenges posed by restructuring (Bates, 2006; Reed 2003). Although changes to men and women's economic roles are emphasized in the literature reviewed, further discussion concerning gender and volunteerism within the rural community context is needed.

### **Gender and Volunteerism in Rural Communities**

Rural communities' structures and values are strongly influenced by patriarchal ideologies, which support the traditional gendered-based division of labour described in the previous section (Little & Morris, 2005). Research has indicated that rural women have multiple roles embedded in their families, communities, and the local economy (Alston, 2004; Midgley, 2006). In the family sphere, rural women are largely connected to domestic responsibilities associated with wifhood and motherhood (Allen, 2002); as a result, their volunteer efforts are more likely to align with their children's activities and

link the family to community life (Midgley, 2006). Allen (2002) has argued that rural women “run rural communities” (p. 38) because they are often the ones who facilitate social and community functions, while men’s volunteer roles are typically in decision-making, finances, governance, power and control, and leadership realms (Dempsey, 1992; Hogg & Carrington, 2006).

According to researchers, rural restructuring influences women’s roles within the family and community, especially as they are called upon to work outside of the home during times of financial crisis (Little, 1986; Midgely, 2006; Warner-Smith & Brown, 2002); however, what is not as well understood is how men’s roles are influenced by such challenges. As such, the exploration of the gendered nature of volunteer roles within the rural community during the event of a school closure is warranted.

### **Leisure and Recreation**

The research summarized above has indicated that rural schools are often the social hub of rural community life, as they offer cultural, recreation, and sporting activities that are integral components of the rural school-community relationship. Schools are heavily involved in providing community-wide leisure and recreation activities that have the potential to connect residents to one another and enhance their quality of life. Because leisure and recreation also exists within broader social, political, and cultural spheres (Arai & Pedlar, 2003), understanding leisure and recreation in the rural context can potentially expand our understanding of rural life. As such, I have reviewed three dominant definitions of leisure and recreation and articulate their working definitions for this study.

From the onset of leisure studies as a field of research in the 1970s to the present, one of the most significant and on-going critical debates in the leisure field has been the definition of leisure. The definition of leisure has received concerted attention and for good reason: How we define leisure ultimately influences research with regards to who researchers study and how researchers go about studying leisure. In addition, however, this debate also highlights that leisure has multiple meanings for different people (Estes, 2003). Parr and Lashua (2005) identified that most introductory leisure studies texts utilized in North America conceptualize leisure in three dominant ways: as “free time, as activity, and/or as a state of mind of experience” (p. 17).

**Leisure as free time.** The notion of leisure as free time came about as society transitioned to the modern organization of work (Henderson et al., 2004). During pre-industrial times, work was more central to the natural patterns of the Earth, as lifestyles often revolved around sunrise and sunset, changes in seasons, and planting and harvesting crops (Murphy, 1981; Edginton & Chen, 2008). During this time, work and leisure were not separated, but rather comprised a whole way of life. The Industrial Revolution changed life dramatically. During this period, work became centred in the factory and the notion of mechanical time developed (Goodale & Godbey, 1995; Henderson et al., 2004). The development of mechanical time shaped shift work with start and end times that influenced the separation of work from leisure and, ultimately, leisure became known as free time away from work and other obligations (Kelly & Godbey, 1992).

Leisure as free time is for the most part framed in contrast to work and other obligations; however, some scholars have argued that leisure as free time is too simplistic and limits our understanding of the quality of that free time (Freysinger & Kelly, 2004;

Kelly, 1996). This definition assumes it is possible to separate the individual from society and society from the individual. The emphasis of freedom is problematic because in a complex society individuals are rarely ever free from obligations and social norms (Freysinger & Kelly; Godbey, 2003; Kraus, 2001).

**Leisure as activity.** Leisure as activity found its roots during the Renaissance and Reformation periods, when work was valued as a means to glorify god, while non-work activities were valued as a means to recover from the toils of work (Goodale & Godbey, 1999; Murphy, 1981). Leisure as activity is emphasized as “activity apart from obligations or work, family, and society to which the individual turns at will, for relaxation, diversion, or broadening his knowledge and his spontaneous social participation the free exercise of his creative capacity” (Dumazedier, 1967, p.14).

A more current understanding of leisure as activity stems from Stebbins (2001), who coined the terms “serious leisure” and “casual leisure”. His work has had a profound influence on the way that leisure studies scholars understand leisure. Serious leisure is an activity that engrosses an individual due to its complex nature and challenges. Stebbins (2001) categorized these activities as amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer. Serious leisure is “profound, long-lasting, and invariably based on substantial skill, knowledge, or experience, if not on a combination of these three” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 54). In contrast, casual leisure is a more immediate experience that can be intrinsically rewarding, but is shorter in length, pleasurable, and requires little to no training (Stebbins, 2001).

Leisure as activity is closely aligned with the term “recreation activities”: in fact, recreation activities are often framed as activities in which individuals participate during leisure or free time. For example, Pigram (1983) defined recreation as an “activity

voluntarily undertaken, primarily for pleasure and satisfaction, during leisure time” (p. 3). App (1986) defined recreation as “experiences and activities chosen and pursued by the individual in his/her free time” (p. 167).

Although understanding leisure based on activity presents a simplistic understanding of leisure, conceptualizing leisure in this manner does have limitations. Researchers have noted that leisure as activity is a simplistic approach that does not take into consideration that all not all leisure is a pleasurable experience (Freysinger & Kelly, 2004; Henderson et al., 2004; Kelly, 1980). As a result, the extent to how leisure is understood is limited to the activities in which an individual participates.

**Leisure as a state of mind.** Leisure as a state of mind focuses on the subjective or psychological dimensions of experience and became well-known during the mid-1980s. This approach moves the definition of leisure away from the structures of work and obligation, which dominate the definitions of leisure as activity and leisure as free time (Kelly, 1996) and instead focuses on the meanings and attitudes that the leisure actor experiences (Freysinger & Kelly 2004; Kelly, 1996; Henderson, et al., 2004). The leisure as a state of mind approach emphasizes freely chosen activities, intrinsic motivation, and sense of control over outcomes as important aspects to leisure. This approach has nevertheless been criticized for being overly concerned with individual psychological experiences related to satisfaction and wellbeing and for failing to acknowledge ethical or moral dimensions of such experiences (Godbey, 2003). As well, less intense or more passive activities are somewhat neglected, but have been argued to be equally important to life satisfaction (Godbey, 2003).

The above review of the three dominant conceptualizations leisure are provided to frame leisure for the purpose of this dissertation. For clarification, it is important to note that leisure within this dissertation, leisure is utilized as a concept rather than as a theoretical lens. As such, leisure is used to conceptualize the activities, experiences, and interactions that an individual deems enjoyable (state of mind) and engaged in outside of the confines of work and or other obligations. This definition utilizes aspects from the three aforementioned definitions of leisure, which is especially useful and appropriate because these three components are used by the general public to conceptualize leisure (Mobily, 1989; Parr & Lashua, 2005).

Such a broad conceptualization of the term leisure was important for my study participants because if they did not understand the concept of “leisure,” other descriptive concepts or statements such as “activities in your free time” or “recreation activities” could be utilized. Framing leisure in this manner helped me to ensure that both my study participants and I were sharing a common conceptualization of leisure. By reviewing the literature related to leisure, I was able to further frame the role the school had in the community, especially in terms of the school’s impact on the community beyond just an educational institution.

As my literature review shows, rural is not an easily defined term, but rather a complex notion that is dependent upon a large number of factors. This review has highlighted existing research pertaining to the valuable relationship between rural schools and rural communities. Within this body of literature, a school closure’s impact on residents of rural communities, particularly adult residents, is poorly understood; this is a gap that I intend make a contribution to filling with the research described below.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The primary theoretical framework for this study is social ecological theory (SET). SET was utilized as a guiding framework for all three papers; however, because of the stand-alone paper format employed in this dissertation and the gendered aspects of some of my research findings, in paper three, I also draw upon socialist feminist theory. Below, I introduce the frameworks in detail and justify their selection.

### **Social Ecological Theory**

SETs focus on the “interrelations between organisms and their environments” (Kaczynski & Henderson, 2007, p. 316). Many SET models have been developed to explain individual behavior; however, a general covenant of SET is that it treats individuals “as active agents who constantly shape, and are shaped by, their environments” (Loundsbury & Mitchell, 2009, p. 215). Within existing iterations of SET, there is an emphasis on understanding the dynamic interplay between and among individuals, groups, and their socio-psycho surroundings through multiple levels of influence (Stokols, 1996). SET is thus an appropriate approach to investigating residents’ lives in a rural community after a school closure because it can be used to explore a range of influencing variables that impact individual behaviour, including the physical environment, and intrapersonal, interpersonal, policy, organizational, and community factors (Sallis et al., 2006).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) is credited with major advances in SET. In his model of SET, human behaviours are understood as being influenced by different layers of interaction between the individual and his/her environment at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems layers, with each layer being interrelated. The first layer, the microsystem, represents the patterns of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations

in one's environment such as one's family, school, peer groups, and workplace. The mesosystem is essentially a system of microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) that is characterized by interactions between more than one microsystem; for example, the relations between home and school, and the school and workplace. The exosystem is comprised of the broader social system and includes social structures such as work, communities, mass media, government agencies, communication, and informal social networks. The macrosystem is the overarching system that includes the whole network of interconnected layers within a setting (micro-, meso-, and exosystems). The macrosystem refers to the overall pattern of ideology that characterizes a society or social group, which can include belief systems, bodies of knowledge, customs, and lifestyles that are embedded in the broader system. Bronfenbrenner's (1994) layered model illustrates the idea that an individual's behaviour is influenced by a complex and interconnected relationship in his/her environment.

SETs have been used extensively as a means to effectively promote active living (Sallis et al., 2006). According to Sallis et al. (2006), "ecological models are particularly well suited for studying physical activity, because physical activity is done in specific places. Studying characteristics of places that facilitate or hinder physical activity, therefore, is a priority" (p. 299). Various authors have suggested that settings associated with physical activity such as parks, health centres, neighbourhoods, and schools need to be studied using ecological models that are relevant to the environment, as individuals' behaviours vary depending on the environment (Sallis & Owen, 1997; Giles-Corti, Timperio, Bull, & Pikora, 2005).

Although SETs have been utilized primarily in investigating physical activity and health promotion programs, they are also relevant for understanding rural residents' behaviours as they relate to a school closure. Townsend, Moore, and Mahoney (2002) claimed that the sporting and recreation activities in rural community bring together the whole community and provide a sense of community and belonging. In my study, the school was seen to be a central institution that provided such interactions and activities. As such, SET, and in particular McLeroy, Bibleau, Steckler, and Glanz's (1988) version of it, provides a strong framework for understanding the impact Limerick School's closure had on community members. McLeroy et al. (1988) identified five factors that influence an individual's behaviours as they relate to health: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and organizational, community, and policies. These factors are not separate from one another, but are interrelated.

According to McLeroy et al. (1988), the first level of influence on individual behaviour is related to intrapersonal factors, which include an individual's characteristics such as knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, self-concept, skills, gender, race, and income. The second layer, interpersonal factors, consists of formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including the family, work group, and friendship networks. The institutional and organizational level, the third level of SET, includes social institutions with organizational characteristics, formal and informal rules and regulations for operation, and organizations in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. The fourth level of SET, community level factors, includes community wide social networks, norms, and standards that exist among individuals, groups, partnerships, and organizations. The

final SET level, the policy factor, which includes factors related to local, provincial, and national laws and policies, has the broadest level of influence on individual behavior.

Although McLeroy's et al.'s (1988) SET model is framed in a similar way as Bronfenbrenner's (1994), there are some defining differences. For example, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) microsystem layer focuses on an individual's social roles and interpersonal relations within different settings or environments such as the family, school, peer groups, or the workplace, whereas McLeroy et al.'s (1988) first layer is focused on individual characteristics, attitudes, skills, age, or gender roles. The second layer of McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model focuses on interpersonal relationships, which connect more directly with Bronfenbrenner's first level, microsystems. McLeroy et al.'s (1988) institutional and organizational factors and community factors are similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1994) mesosystem level, which highlights the influence of social institutions, community norms and networks; however, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) mesosystem includes government agencies' influences, which corresponds closely with McLeroy et al.'s (1988) policy level factors. The broadest level of influence for Bronfenbrenner (1994) is the macrosystem, which is an overarching belief system that does not directly align with any component of McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model. Although Bronfenbrenner (1994) is credited with advancing SET, McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model has had greater uptake by health promotion and active living researchers (Sallis et al., 2006).

Though SET has been utilized extensively in active living research, researchers have acknowledged some limitations. Some have argued that many SET models are simplistic and lack the ability to describe the complexity of interactions among levels within the model (Burke et al., 2009; Langille & Rodgers, 2012). Many of SET models

are also limited in their ability to consider the influence of the individual's social context. The social context in which individuals live is complex and influenced by social cultural, economic, political, legal, historical, and structural forces (Burke et al., 2009). More specific to this study, the way in which rural life is understood by its residents, and the extent to which they may behave based on traditions, ideals, and values, are marginalized within the framework of SET. Deeper reflection of how individuals are influenced by these larger forces within the varying levels of SET is needed.

Although some researchers have articulated SET as being simplistic, in its entirety SET is very complex. Golden and Earp (2012) reviewed twenty years of SET frameworks within health promotion and found that most articles only reported on intrapersonal and interpersonal factors of influence, and marginalized institutional, community, and policy factors. Although SET is holistic framework that addresses individual behaviour, it is important that my dissertation also engaged with a theory that focused on gender relations.

### **Socialist Feminist Theory**

In the third paper, I investigate the ways in which gender influences rural community members' post-school closure behaviours. Gender is an intrapersonal factor within the SET. As a result, for this paper, it was important for me to engage with a theoretical approach to gender that fit with SET; as a result, I selected socialist feminist theory.

The link between rural restructuring and gender warrants a feminist perspective. Feminist theorists pay special attention to "aspects of equity, empowerment, and social change for women and men" (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 13) and advocate for social change through the deconstruction of the traditional patriarchal power relations that

govern contemporary society (Little, 1986). Feminist theories are diverse and involve multiple perspectives (Olesen, 2005; Schwandt, 2001). For the purposes of the third paper of my thesis, I engaged with socialist feminist theory.

Socialist feminists believe women are oppressed due to the unequal power relations that arise from social constructions of gender, race, and class. In particular, socialist feminists are concerned with broader societal sources of oppression, including relationships and structures within social institutions such as religion, education, the economy, and family (Aitchson, 1997; Henderson et al, 1996).

Socialist feminist theory stems from understanding women's oppression as originating from the mutual dependence between the capitalist class structure and male supremacy, which is known as capitalist patriarchy (Calasanti & Bailey, 1991; Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993). Socialist feminists bring together Marxist views of class distinctions and labour and radical feminist views of patriarchy; as a result, they focus on individuals as social beings who interact in larger social institutions (Sapiro, 1994) and place particular emphasis on women's dual roles in production and reproduction (Little, 1986).

Socialist feminists see capitalist patriarchy as operating within the sexual division of labour and society. Prior to the industrial revolution, the home, including the farm, was the primary economic unit where men, women, and children worked in unison to produce goods necessary for sustaining life (Deseran, 1991; Eisentein, 1999). Women's roles during this time were predominantly connected to procreation and child-rearing. Once men were taken out of the home and employed in the factory, however, women were left to take care of the home and the children. During this time, women became

predominantly known as “housewives” and the duties they performed in the home were not considered work because they did not produce a monetary profit (Acker, 1990).

According to Eisenstein (1999), although the duties performed by women in the home are still not considered to be productive labour, their roles support capitalist patriarchal society in four ways. First, women support patriarchal structures by fulfilling domestic duties within the home, community, and family, which further supports men’s dominance in productive (paid) labour. Second, women reproduce new workers through childbirth. Third, women work in the workforce but for less pay than their male counterparts, even for the same work. Fourth, women stabilize the economy through their consumption of goods and services. As such, the production and reproduction of men and women’s roles become integral elements in sustaining the capitalist patriarchal system.

Socialist feminist theory is not, of course, beyond critique. A major critique of the socialist feminist perspective is its limited focus on social differences between women (Sachs, 1996). By grouping women into a homogenous category, socialist feminism lacks the ability to analyze varying effects of inequalities an individual may experience due to his/her position in a number of axes of difference (Shaw, 2011). Socialist feminism is also critiqued because it struggles to explain dominance of patriarchal gender relations in non-capitalist settings (Mille & McIlvenny, 2000; Steeves & Smith, 1987) and the varied ways patriarchy interacts with women in different domestic and work situations (Steeves & Smith, 1987).

The critiques of socialist feminism are also evident when exploring different environments and settings. Alston (1995) argued that the urbanized models of socialist feminism are limited when exploring rural and farm women’s lives. During the

development of capitalism, production and reproduction became separated in urban areas, which devalued women's nonproductive work (Alston, 1995; Eisenstein, 1999; Little & Panelli, 2003; Little & Morris, 2005; Peter et al., 2000). On the other hand, women's work in the rural context did not experience this separation and there often remains little separation between home life and work life, especially within farm enterprises (Alston, 1995; Deseran & Simpkins, 1991; Little, 2003). Nevertheless, feminists have argued that both women's paid employment and domestic duties are essential for the survival of the family farm business (Leckie, 1993; Little & Panelli, 2003; O'Hara, 1998; Kelly & Shortall, 2002).

To strengthen socialist feminism, researchers argue that patriarchal ideologies must be explored in relation to their historical and cultural contexts (Steeves & Smith, 1987). This being said, highlighting the rural context within socialist feminism is important because rural values and norms are often embedded in patriarchal ideologies related to traditional gender roles (Little & Morris, 2005). It is through these ideologies that men and women's gender roles are constructed.

To understand a school closure's impact on rural women and men, a theoretical approach that analyzes multiple factors of influence, including gender, must be utilized. As both SET and socialist feminist theory attend to how community social structures, institutions, and policies influence individual behaviour and interpersonal factors, such a theoretical approach was both appropriate and necessary for the third paper. This theoretical approach also worked well with my methodology.

### **Methodology**

To investigate the impacts Limerick School's closure has had on the lives of its residents, I utilized a single case qualitative case study. Case studies are in-depth investigations that collect a variety of information including background information, current status, and interactions of the unit under study (Henderson, 2006). The primary purpose is to "understand complex social phenomena through retaining holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 1994, p. 3), such as a rural school's closure. According to Yin (1994), case studies have three critical components. The first is that case studies focus on the "how" and "why" questions. The second component is the extent of control the researcher has over the behaviour or events under study. Case studies are a preferred methodology when studying contemporary events where the behaviour cannot be manipulated. The final characteristic is that the case study research should be based on a contemporary rather than historical event. The case of Limerick School's closure easily meets all of these criteria.

Drawing on Yin (1994), I used an exploratory case study approach. The primary reason for this approach is because exploratory case study frameworks are used to highlight a given issue or phenomenon through a detailed examination of an event (McCormick, 2000). As such, this case study's focus was to understand how one school's closure affected rural residents' lives.

Qualitative case studies have been used to investigate the impacts of school closures on rural families and urban neighbourhoods (Kearns et al., 2009; Witten et al., 2003); the role of schools in building social capital (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2004); rural school-community relationships (Falk & Prescott, 2002; Kilpatrick, Johns, & Mulford); and acts of citizenship during the school closure process (Basu, 2007). As such, the case

study has been shown to be a useful approach to studying school-community relationships.

### **Sampling**

A common approach to sampling for qualitative studies is purposive sampling (Henderson, 2006). In this study, I used purposive sampling because it is a “deliberately non-random method of sampling, which aims to sample a group of people, or settings, with a particular characteristic usually in qualitative research design” (Bowling, 2002, p. 187). Through purposive sampling I was able to obtain “the most comprehensive understanding of the phenomena” under study (Henderson, 2006, p. 173). The reason for purposive sampling is derived from the study’s emphasis on the development of in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002); selecting participants who will be able to make a meaningful contribution to the study is required to obtain information-rich data (Creswell, 2009; Neuman, 2004), which resulted in a greater understanding of the school closure’s impact on rural residents’ lives.

I had twenty-two participants. According to Patton (2002), there are no rules for qualitative studies’ sample size, as “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observations/analytical capabilities of the research than with the sample size” (p. 245). To obtain an in-depth but broad perspective of the school closures’ impacts, participants for the study included a number of different groups: 1) two male and two female key informants that represented volunteers from informal social groups or community clubs, and local governance, 2) two adult men and eight adult women who do not have school-aged children, and 3) four adult female parents and four adult male

parents with school-aged children at the time of the school closure. The participants selected to participate in my research had experienced life in the community prior to the school's closure; as such, they were able to speak about the school closure's impact on their lives and community life in general.

To identify research participants, I used key informants, who are sources of expert information (Henderson, 2006; Marshall, 1996). Key informants were involved in my research study in two ways: a source of information to generate a list of potential participants for the focus groups and as participants in semi-structured interviews. Often used in ethnographic research, key informants are widely used throughout the social sciences (Marshall, 1996). The rationale for the inclusion of key informants was due to their knowledge and information needed to select participants that can address the research study's goals.

To find appropriate informants for the study, I located individuals that had leadership roles within Limerick and access to knowledge needed for the study (Marshall, 1996). It should be noted that participants involved in the study were purposefully sampled based on criteria related to living in the community prior to, during, and after the school's closure. As a result, newcomers to the community were not able to participate in the study. Because of my established relationships and history in the community, I knew most of residents in the community and was already aware of individuals that had leadership roles in the community. In particular, I included three volunteers from community organizations and one town council member as key informants. To ensure participants' anonymity, I cannot disclose further descriptions of the key informants. Including different key informants was important because each one

provided a different perspective of the community based on his/her role within the community. Once I identified the informants, I contacted them by phone and invited them to participate in the study. Once these individuals agreed to be informants, I set-up a meeting that took place in their homes or place of business, as per their request.

To provide a description of the individuals involved in the study, the following tables provides a description of each study participant, the sex of each study participant, the kind of data collection in which they were involved, and in which papers they are directly quoted.

Table 5

*Study Participant Description*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Method</b>
Blair	Male	Volunteer with the local community hall	1st key informant semi-structured interview
Darren	Male	Member of town council	2nd key informant semi-structured interview
Maggie	Female	Volunteer largely connected to the Opportunity Centre	3 <sup>rd</sup> key informant semi-structured interview
Lori	Female	Volunteer connected various community organizations	4th informant semi-structured interview
Victor	Male	Husband of farming couple in his late fifties	semi-structured interview

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Lana	Female	Wife of farming couple in her late fifties	semi-structured interview
Danny	Male	Husband of farming couple in his early forties, with three school-aged children at the time of the school closure	semi-structured interview
Jan	Female	Wife of farming couple in her early forties, with three school-aged children at the time of the school closure	semi-structured interview
Curt	Male	Husband of farming couple his late-thirties, with two school-aged children at the time of the school closure	semi-structured interview
Joanna	Female	Wife of farming couple in her early thirties, with two school-aged children at the time of the school closure	semi-structured interview
Abbey	Female	Older-aged local business owner	Focus group #1 participant
Heidi	Female	Older-aged farmer's wife	Focus group #1 participant
Gabby	Female	Older-aged farmer's wife	Focus group #1 participant
Cathy	Female	Older-aged employee at the local agriculture centre	Focus group #2 participant
Lisa	Female	Older-aged local employee	Focus group #2 participant

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Ruby	Female	Older-aged retired childcare provider	Focus group #2 participant
Sandi	Female	Middle-aged adult resident	Focus group #2 participant
Donna	Female	Middle-aged local resident with a child in the school at the time of the closure	Focus group #2 participant
Diane	Female	Middle-aged childcare provider with a child in the school at the time of the closure	Focus group #3 participant
Tom	Male	Middle-aged employee at the agriculture centre, and retired farmer with a child in the school at the time of the closure	Focus group #3 participant
Mark	Male	Older-aged local volunteer and farmer	Focus group #3 participant
Rick	Male	Middle-aged employee at the local agriculture centre with a child in the school at the time of the closure	Focus group #3 participant

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All participants identified in Table 5 were involved in the study as a whole; however, each paper varied to the degree to which each participant's quotes were utilized. For example, in chapter two, I quote 14 of the 22 participants. In chapter three, 10 participants involved in the study are quoted. Finally, in the fourth chapter, 13 participants' quotes were utilized. Although not all participants' conversations were directly utilized in each paper, their contributions were valuable throughout the research

process. For example, Ruby and Diane were two focus group participants that are not quoted directly in any of the papers, but were a part of a collective conversation that cultivated discussion among other participants. Furthermore, I utilized participants' contributions that best highlighted the results for each paper.

To recruit participants for the focus groups, I used the contact list that was generated by the key informants. I then used the local phone directory to contact potential participants. Other forms of recruitment such as posters, flyers, or letters were not utilized because of the initial list generated by the key informants. Furthermore, I felt phone calls were a more efficient way to describe the research and connect with the participants. The initial phone calls provided potential participants with information about me, my role in the research, and general information on the research study. During each phone call, I discussed background information on the research and the extent of the participant's potential involvement in the study if s/he wished to participate. Before the commencement of the semi-structured interviews with key informants and the focus groups, I reviewed confidentiality concerns with the participants, and had each individual sign a consent form regarding his/her voluntary involvement in the study.

### **Sequence of Data Collection Methods**

I began data collection with semi-structured interviews with the four key community informants because these individuals had leadership roles that engaged them in community life to a greater extent than others, and because they were a source of information to generate a list of potential focus group participants. Once I completed the semi-structured interviews with the key community informants, I then contacted potential focus group participants and scheduled three focus groups based on the participants'

availability. Eighteen residents agreed to be involved in the focus groups; however, due to unforeseen circumstances six participants (3 married couples) were unable to attend the focus groups, but were able to meet with me outside of the focus groups. As result, I coordinated three separate semi-structured interviews with the married couples after I had conducted the focus groups. Further details pertaining to each method are highlighted below in the corresponding subsections.

### **Methods**

To be congruent with a case study methodology, I utilized multiple methods of data collection to gather detailed information regarding the impacts of the school closure on rural residents' lives. Characteristics of case studies are related to multiple methods (Stake, 2005). Methods of data collection for this study included, semi-structured interviews (papers 1, 2, & 3), focus groups (papers 1, 2, & 3), participant observations (paper 3), and field notes. The primary source of data came from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, while participant observations and field notes acted as supportive sources to add depth necessary for a case study methodology (Creswell, 2003; Yin, 1994).

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection tool where the researcher asks open-ended questions to participants and records their responses (Ayers, 2008; Bowling, 2002). Researchers have used semi-structured interviews to understand complex topics in-depth through interacting with an individual (Henderson, 2006). I utilized semi-structured interviews because they gave me the opportunity to probe for clarity and ambiguities, I could ask complex questions, they cultivated more information

and greater depth, and I could clarify inconsistencies and misinterpretations throughout the process (Bowling, 2002; Creswell, 2009). A key feature of a semi-structured interview is an interview guide. In this study, I used an interview to guide cover topics and issues related to the impacts the school's closure had on Limerick's residents (Henderson, 2006). General questions were laid out in advance, but the questions were "expanded or contracted" (Henderson, 2006, p. 109) depending the flow of the interview and the participants involved. For example, two of the married couples have school-aged children and they brought forward perspectives that were not addressed in the initial interview guide; as such, I was able to expand and probe further because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews. A semi-structured interview is flexible and allows the participant to comment on what s/he feels is relevant, which allows for conversational flow between the researcher and the participant (Bowling, 2002). This conversational flow was important as it cultivated a sense of familiarity and comfort that put the participants at ease.

The interview setting is an important component in the research process. According to Creswell (2003) qualitative methods that utilized a natural setting allows the researcher to gain more depth and knowledge about individuals involved in the study. The natural setting or a setting the participant selects also balances power relations between the researcher and the participants (Falconer-Al Hindi, 1997; Krueger, 1994; Oberhauser, 1997). The interview locations varied depending on the participant. For example, I interviewed two key informants at their place of work and one at the Opportunity Centre; however, the rest of the semi-structured interviews took place in the participants' homes as per their request.

Some participants who were invited to participate in the focus groups were unable to do so because of scheduling conflicts, but still wanted to contribute to the study. Although not initially planned for, as mentioned above, I organized separate semi-structured interviews to include these participants: one married couple without school-aged children and two married couples with school-aged children.

Conducting semi-structured interviews with the married couples could be seen as problematic because third parties can influence responses (Boeije, 2004) and may it more difficult to explore each individual's perspective (Taylor & Hilde de Vocht, 2011); however, Hertz (1995) argued that interviewing a couple may cultivate a shared story. As such, Taylor and de Vocht (2011) claimed that the couple is then "seen as a system that consists of two mutually influencing partners" (p. 1557) who collectively share meanings on the topic being discussed. Through the joint interviews I was able to draw on the collective perspective of the couple (Gillis & Davis, 1992). Drawing on Boeije's (2004) comments, it is important to remember that qualitative interviews are not a "laboratory setting, and interviewers have problems with such things as controlling the presence of other persons than the interviewee" (p. 3), but rather a process that cultivates co-constructed meanings by all involved individuals (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). By conducting the interviews with married couples, I was able to generate a richer discussion because each individual shared their own thoughts that then provoked further sharing throughout the interview.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups are facilitated semi-structured interviews in a small group setting where participants can interact with one another (Bowling, 2002). According to Morgan

(2004), focus groups have three key components: 1) they are a research method; 2) interaction within the group is a form of data; and, 3) the researcher is in charge of cultivating group discussion. By using focus groups I was able to utilize group dynamics to inspire discussion and generate insights regarding the impact the school's closure has had on residents' lives (Bowling, 2002). I was also able to cultivate a stronger, more effective collective energy from the focus groups, which generated larger amounts of data than through individual interviews and observations (Kamberelis & Dimitraïdis, 2005). Another strength of the focus group was that my authority as the researcher was limited. As a result, the participants took more ownership of the interview setting, which enabled the participants to share their stories as they related to the school closure (Kamberelis & Dimitraïdis, 2005). The shared nature of the focus group cultivated a safe space for participants to share similar stories with one another to further stimulate discussion regarding the impacts felt by the school closure.

Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I discussed with each participant the background of the study, reviewed the consent forms, discussed their right to decline answering specific questions or their participation in the study, and discussed the opportunity to review copies of the transcripts to proofread/verify.

The location of the focus groups varied. I conducted the first and third focus groups in two separate participants' homes. All the participants involved in focus groups 1 and 3 knew each other and were happy to conduct the focus group in the corresponding homes. The second focus group was held in the community centre. All three group focus ranged from 60-90 minutes in length.

Initially, I had planned on conducting all the focus groups in the local community hall because it provided a neutral environment that would limit power structures between the researcher and the participants (Krueger, 1994), and because it was easily accessible for all participants (Henderson, 2006). However, researchers have argued that interviews conducted in participants' homes can be a strategy for limiting power structures between the researchers and participants (Oberhauser, 1997; Falconer-Al Hindi, 1997), and provide greater comfort and security for the participants (Manderson, Bennett, and Andajani-Sutahjo, 2006). Because it was important to me that the participants felt comfortable, the focus groups took place in the participants' homes.

Both the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interestingly, all study participants in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups either declined the invitation to review their transcripts or did not respond to my request to review the transcripts. I am unsure as to the exact reasons why participants declined the opportunity or failed to review their transcripts, but during the initial set-up of each interview, I found most participants were not overly interested in signing the consent forms or ensuring their anonymity. There could be many reasons for this, but I feel as though there was a level of trust among the participants, all of whom have known me since I was a child, that I would ensure the ethical use of the transcripts - an assumption based on my history with them and the community.

### **Interview Guide**

The interview guide for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups was comprised of 24 questions to provoke conversation and probes regarding the impact of

the school's closure on rural residents' lives. I developed the guide based on the existing literature, my theoretical framework, and my research questions. The interview guide was developed for use with all participants; of course, questions evoked different responses depending on the individual participant and his/her role in the community. For example, one key informant was a member of town council and highlighted different implications of the school's closure than those who were parents of school-aged children. As a result, the subsequent probing questions, which were based on each participant's response, varied slightly for each interview and focus group. Throughout the research process different questions were added and developed which is indicative of the qualitative research approach (Patton, 2002). As a result, I have included both the initial interview guide and some of the subsequent questions that surfaced throughout the research process (Appendix B).

### **Participant Observation and Field Notes**

Prior to discussing the intricacies of participant observation, it is first important that I situate myself within this method. I conducted my participant as an insider to life in Limerick, as I grew up in the community. At the same time, however, because I moved away from the community to pursue post-secondary education and employment, I had not resided in the community for 11 years. My inherent interest in understanding the impacts of the school closure on the lives of rural residents in Limerick largely stems from my rural upbringing. I was raised on a fifth generation family farm eight kilometres south of Limerick and to this day return to visit family and friends. My experiences growing up on the farm and within Limerick were largely influenced by a traditional rural way of life. My father was a farmer and tradesman and considered the primary breadwinner within

the family, whereas my mother supported my father on the farm and was primarily responsible for raising my brother and me and managing other household obligations. My parents were also actively engaged in community life and modeled civic engagement and volunteerism throughout my childhood.

The traditional gender roles I was exposed to within my own family were also evident in other families and throughout the larger community. Growing up, I saw very traditional gender roles within the community context. The men were often on town council and in charge of labour-related tasks, while the women were often in charge of the community events, and the cooking and cleaning duties. In fact, I remember on numerous occasions going into Limerick with my mother and helping her to cut and peel potatoes at the kitchen in the local community hall for special events.

My rural experiences were also influenced by recreation and sport activities – most of which were cultivated by the school or my parents. While a student, I participated in a variety of school sports and after school programs. Organized school sports were an important part of my life as a teenager and often took up most my free time. During my childhood, Limerick was a vibrant and active community and largely connected to the school. I remember numerous occasions where local residents would come out to support the school's sporting events, oratory competitions, fundraisers, and holiday celebrations. Certainly, the school played a hugely important role in the community.

During 2006 and 2007, the school's closure was a topic of conversation among most phone calls home and visits to the community. During these conversations with my parents, friends, and neighbours, I realized the role the school had not only in my own life, but rural life in general. Residents were left wondering what Limerick would be like

without the school and how such a change would impact their future. Because of my personal connection to the community, residents were aware of my rural research pursuits and invited me to write a letter of support when Limerick was fighting to keep the school open. Although my letter did not influence much change, it did inspire me to further explore the school-community relationship in the rural context and the impact of the school's closure on residents' lives and placed me as an insider to the debates concerning the school's closure.

Peshhkin (1988) stated that research topics are selected based on the influence of our human selves. In particular, he argued researchers have two selves that emerge during the research process: the human self that experiences the everyday and the research self, acting in accordance to the research context. In the context of this study, my human self as the former rural resident and "insider" has influenced my research.

According to Robson (2002), the close relationship I have with Limerick makes me an "insider." The notion of being an insider produces an understanding of the researcher as having a direct connection with the research setting; in this case I grew up in Limerick and still largely connected to the community and its residents. As a result, some have argued that validity and trustworthiness are lost because of the researcher's close involvement with the participants and/or subject area; however, others suggest complete objectivity is not possible (Rooney, 2005). I align myself with the latter point of view. As a constructionist, I believe that objectivity is impossible. Nevertheless, having been outside of the community for so long, I argue that I am also an outsider of sorts, too. I do not believe, however, that this affords me any objectivity.

To ensure quality research is being conducted, it is important the researcher is

transparent and highlights how the human self influences the research process (Hammersely, 2000); as a result, I have not removed the human self from the research process, but rather have conducted credible, rigorous, and meaningful research by using both my research self and human self throughout my dissertation process (Dupis, 2010), but particularly my participant observation.

An important component of my research involved spending time in the community and observing community life – a process known as participant observation. Patton (2002) claimed that participant observation is a critical tool in qualitative research. Through participant observation I experienced some of life in Limerick in its natural setting, which gave me a deeper understanding of the school closure's impact (McKechnie, 2012). There are different types of observation that range from the researcher being a complete observer, a participant as observer, to being a complete participant (Henderson, 2006; McKechnie, 2012). Henderson (2006) claimed that most field researchers use some dimension of “observer as participant or participant as observer” (p. 98). In this study, I took on the role of participant as observer during my visits to the community - this was largely due to the fact that community members saw me as a fellow established community member because of my history as a past resident and because my parents continue to live there. Such a position enabled me to have strong rapport within the community, which is an important part of any fieldwork (Henderson, 2006).

Because the school had closed two years prior to the commencement of my research, it was important that I spend some time in the community after the school's closure, as when I had last lived there, the school was still open. Throughout the four

years in which my research was developing and took place, I visited the community ten times. Staggering my visits was important because of the seasonal nature of farming, which is the focus of community life in Limerick, which at times limited access to study participants and also changed the dynamic of community life. For example, visiting the community in May presented challenges because farm families were heavily involved in seeding crops. As such, I ensured that my visits to the community covered different times of the year. Broadly speaking, my time spent in the community typically included informal social interactions with residents at local businesses or attending community functions and events. I also attended holiday celebrations, fundraising events, and sporting events. Through these experiences I was able to capture part of Limerick's life and record reflective thoughts, processes, and insights in my field notes (Fetterman, 2008). Table six summarizes when I visited the community and the duration of each visit.

Table 6

*Field Trip Details*

<b>When</b>	<b>Duration</b>
October 2008	1-week
December 2008	8-days
June/July 2009	3-weeks
December 2009	1-week
May 2010	1-week
August 2010	10-days
December 2010	10-days
February/March 2011	3-weeks
April 2011	5-days

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December 2011	1-week
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**Field notes.** From the beginning of this study, I kept record of experiences, events, and reflective insights to support my data collection. According to Brodsky (2012), field notes are a personal journal unique to the researcher that reflects on all data collection activities. Field notes are reflective tools for the researcher to highlight the process, findings, problems, and patterns throughout the study (Brodsky, 2012). In this study, I used field notes primarily as a reflective tool. To record my field experiences, I divided my journal into two columns, one with my observations from the field/community visits, and another with personal reflections and informant information. For example, I made field notes after being a participant in a community activity or after having an informal conversation with local residents; these field experiences were recorded in the first column. In the second column I would record reflective thoughts and impressions based on the experience or observation that took place. I also followed the same procedure after interviews and focus groups to ensure I capture as many details as possible; these reflective notes and added rich, in-depth insights to the data analysis (Fetterman, 2012).

### **Data Analysis**

I used two different procedures for data analysis. For the first and third papers, I used Creswell's six-stage (2009) process. In the second paper, I used thematic analysis (Ayers, 2008; Lapadat, 2009). Below, I outline the steps I took to analyze the field notes, focus group, and semi-structured interview transcripts. In both approaches I employed a deductive analysis, whereby I began analysis with established codes related to the theoretical framework.

For the first and third papers I followed Creswell's (2009) six-stage data analysis. I began the process by organizing the focus group and interview transcripts and field notes. I then proceeded to step two and completed an initial read of all the data to familiarize myself with it and the meaning that was emerging. After I became familiar with the material, I moved to step three, which is coding the data. Coding began with a thorough read of all the interview and focus transcripts and field notes. I then selected one transcript at a time, read it, and made reflective notes in the margins. This process was replicated for all the transcripts and field notes. I then generated a list of all the topics from the notes in the margins, and clustered similar topics together. These topics were then assigned codes and compared to the original transcripts and documents under review. Codes were developed based on the specifics of my study and included 1) codes related to the literature and common sense, e.g., rural communities, rural community-school relationship, and gender 2) codes that are unexpected, e.g. intergenerational relationships, 3) codes that are unusual, which were not identified in this study, and 4) codes that are directly related to theoretical framework, e.g., intrapersonal factors like age and gender, and interpersonal factors like friendships and family relationships (Creswell, 2009). More specifically, codes that emerged through the inductive data analysis process (Creswell, 2009) related to rural families, adult residents without school-aged children, and gender roles as expressed through volunteerism were emphasized. After I identified the codes, I categorized them with descriptive wording. I then clustered together categories that were similar. The fourth step involved taking the categories and developing themes for the findings section of each paper. This was then followed by step five, which is where I expanded on the themes as they related to the

theoretical frameworks, SET and socialist feminism. More specifically, these themes were expanded as they related to they related to the impacts of the school closure on rural families, adults without school-aged children, and gender roles. The final step involved my own interpretation of the data as they related to the theoretical frameworks, relevant literature, and I also positioned new questions for future studies.

The second data analysis procedure I used was thematic analysis. I began analysis by reading and organizing all the transcriptions, which was then followed by thematic coding. Thematic coding can be both inductive and deductive (Lapadat, 2009). I started with deductive coding, which analyzed the data based on codes related to 1) the literature, 2) the theoretical framework including SET and – for the third paper, socialist feminism, and 3) the research question (Ayres, 2008). This study investigated the impacts of a school closure on the lives of rural residents. More specifically, rural families, adult residents without school-aged children, and gender roles as expressed through volunteerism; therefore, I emphasized codes specific to these topics. Through deductive coding, I connected codes to the theory and research questions, which then led to the development of codes that were unanticipated or unusual. After the deductive analysis I categorized the codes into themes using descriptive wording. After the categories were identified, I further analyzed the themes in relation to the overall research question and theoretical framework Ayres (2008).

Due to the complexity of reporting SET in its entirety (Golden & Earp, 2012) and the thick and rich descriptive characteristics of qualitative case study methodologies, I have limited the scope of this research to certain components of SET. In particular, I focus on SET's intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and community factors. As a

result, through these three papers, I was able to articulate on a deeper level the impact the school's closure had on Limerick residents' lives.

### **The Three Papers**

My research resulted in the production of three papers, which are included in this dissertation. The development of these papers emerged through the theoretical framework and review of literature, which informed the choice of methods for data collection and analysis. In the first paper, "Changing Relationships: The Impacts of a Rural School's Closure on Rural Families," I explore the impact Limerick School's closure had on rural families. My findings indicate that rural families have experienced a sense of disconnection from their community and family, but have also established new relationships and social activities in outlying communities. The second paper, "Rebuilding Sense of Community Through Reconnection: The Impact of a Rural School's Closure on Individuals without School-Aged Children," I focus on the impacts the school's closure had on a group of individuals that are rarely considered to be affected by school closures: adults without school-aged children. I found that the school's closure resulted in adults without school-aged children worrying about their community's future; as a result, they began to rebuild the community through restructuring Limerick's remaining institutions and organizations and by starting new ones. In the final paper, "Changing Traditional Gender Roles: The Impact of a School's Closure on Gender Roles as Expressed through Volunteerism," I explore how the school's closure influenced gendered volunteer roles. I found that the school's closure caused a gap in volunteer efforts as parents engaged in outlying communities to support their children's school related activities. This gap in volunteer capacity resulted in community members

restructuring their local institutions and organizations, which resulted in changes in traditional gender roles as expressed through volunteerism. Together, these papers highlight the dynamic impacts a school's closure has on rural residents' lives, which has largely been ignored in scholarly literature.

One of the critiques of the stand-alone paper format for a dissertation is that it necessitates some repetition between the articles. I have tried my very best to minimize this repetition, but it was impossible to avoid in its entirety, particularly in descriptions of the study's setting and methodology. Despite this limitation, I believe that all three papers make strong and novel contributions to our understanding of the impacts that a rural school's closure can have on community life.

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## **Chapter 2:**

### **Changing Relationships: The Impacts of a Rural School's Closure on Rural Families**

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### **Abstract**

Through the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with twenty-two residents of Limerick, Saskatchewan, in this paper I use social ecological theory to examine the impacts of a rural school's closure on the lives of rural families. The findings show that leisure-related school activities developed and maintained valued interpersonal relationships between parents, children, and the broader community; however, since the school's closure, relationships within the community have shifted. As a result, rural families have experienced a sense of disconnection from their community and family, but have also established new relationships and social activities in outlying communities. This paper thus demonstrates the complex ways in which both the presence and absence of school-based leisure activities can impact families and their relationships within rural communities.

Rural communities are essential to Canada's social, environmental, and economic wellbeing. Fifty percent of Canada's natural resources are exported from rural regions (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2009); indeed, Canadian natural resource-based industries sustain a strong economic base that benefits both rural and urban regions. Nevertheless, resource-based communities across Canada are experiencing a decline in resource production that has resulted in high unemployment rates, as well as reduced services and amenities, which have in turn forced young adults to relocate (Gabriel, 2002; Malatest, 2002). As young people leave rural communities, concerns are raised regarding these communities' sustainability (Pretty, 2003). Increased costs for delivering basic infrastructure and services compounded with shrinking populations in rural communities have reduced financial support from the government for community programs, social and education services, and infrastructure in rural communities (Goetz, 2000). As a result, rural communities are vulnerable to school closures.

The school-community relationship in rural regions is multifaceted. Schools have long been identified as the central hub of rural communities and are places for socialization and the development and strengthening of community identity (Miller, 1993). The relationship between the school and the community develops and strengthens social capital and social networks, which create meaningful and sustainable community renewal (Lane & Dorfman, 1997). Rural schools represent community autonomy, vitality, integration, personal and community tradition, and personal and community identity (Lyson, 2002). They also act as the cultural, recreational, and social centres for communities, as they offer activities that contribute to community members' well-being (Parker, 2001; Nachtigal, 1994; Waldman, 2008). As a result, the school can play a vital

role in enhancing the quality of life for residents in rural communities, especially for families with school-aged children.

Due to declining enrollment in schools across Canada, amalgamations and school closures have been on the rise (Schmidt, Muarry, & Nguyen, 2007). As noted above, the benefits of the rural school-community relationship have been well documented in the literature; however, limited research is available about the impacts of school closures in rural areas (Lauzon, 2001), especially on families with school-aged children. Gaining such understanding is especially important due to the declining enrollment in rural schools across Canada and thus rising numbers of school closures (Kirk, 2008).

The larger study from which this paper originates explored the impact of a school's closure on rural community life; however, the data revealed a number of interesting findings pertaining to rural families. This being the case, in this paper I use SET to highlight the impacts of a rural school's closure on rural families, more specifically families with school-aged children. Because the larger study was not focused on rural families per se, the data I collected through semi-structured interviews were generated by adult residents with and without school-aged children who lived in Limerick, Saskatchewan, both prior to and after the school's closure. My findings show that rural families experienced changes to their interpersonal relationships as a result of Limerick School's closure. Participants most clearly tied these changes in interpersonal relationships to changes in leisure<sup>1</sup> that occurred as a result of the school's closure. In particular, participants highlighted how parents' increased time spent traveling for their children's leisure-related school activities limited time spent socializing and connecting with other Limerick residents. Nevertheless, this change has brought about the

development of new friendships with other adults in outlying communities. Further, as a result of the school's closure, the youth have experienced social and physical disconnection from the community, but have also experienced increased recreation opportunities and fostered new friendships. In addition, family relationships have shifted: extended family members do not connect with parents and children as often as they did in the past because of fewer community events and leisure activities in Limerick. Overall, I identified that numerous shifts in the interpersonal relationships of members of rural families have occurred as a result of the school's closure, which emphasizes the strong link between rural schools, leisure activities, and interpersonal relationships.

### **Study Setting**

I conducted this study, which represents a segment of a larger study on the impacts of a school closure on rural community life, in Limerick, Saskatchewan, Canada, a small rural village located 128 kilometers southwest of the closest urban centre, Moose Jaw. According to Statistics Canada (2011), Limerick has a population of 130 in-town residents, but provides services to the 315 residents that reside on farms and ranches outside the community. Limerick's economy is based mainly in agriculture and private business. Agriculture is the primary economic industry in the region. Limerick's business sector currently includes a hair salon, construction company, insurance office, bank, gas station, mechanic shop, grain elevator, grocery store, hotel, restaurant and bar, and health and wellness centre, and daycare. Limerick is host to many community clubs and organizations, including Limerick 49'ers senior club, Kids Kingdom youth program, community hall board, house authority, historical society, rink board, recreation board, service club, photography club, and playschool. Recreation and community facilities

include the Limerick Centennial Rink, Limerick Community Hall, the Holy Trinity Church, ball diamonds, and a campground. Further, since the school's closure in 2007, the community has taken ownership of the school building, which is now called the Limerick Opportunity Centre. The Opportunity Centre has a fitness room, gymnasium, computer and music equipment, and classroom space and offers its space for rent to a variety of community clubs and associations.

The school-community relationship in Limerick spans a ninety-six year history. Initially, the school opened 2.4 kilometers north of the village in 1911, but then moved into the community in 1913. The one-room schoolhouse transformed over the years to a four-room schoolhouse because of the increase in enrolment and need for high school education. In 1966 a two-room high school and gymnasium were built next to the existing school. Further expansion to the high school in 1987 added six more classrooms, office space, and a staff room. In 1988 the initial brick schoolhouse was torn down and replaced with another new addition to the high school. From 1988 to 2007 Limerick School housed children from kindergarten to grade 12 in one building. In January of 2007 the local school board announced the upcoming closure of Limerick School. In June 2007 the school, which had an enrollment of forty-six students, five full-time staff, and one part-time education assistant, closed its doors. I lived in Limerick between 1983 and 1999 and attended Limerick School between 1986 and 1999. My immediate family continues to live in the community and, as such, I maintain strong ties to the community and its residents. These connections facilitated my ability to not only conduct research in the community, but to obtain an in-depth understanding of the impacts of Limerick School's closure.

## **Literature Review**

To understand the dynamic impact a rural school's closure has on rural families, I reviewed literature related to rural life and rural schools. In particular, the literature review that appears below highlights the social construction of rural communities, schools' roles in rural communities, school closures and rural communities, and rural recreation and leisure.

### **Rural Communities**

Defining rural is not a simple task (Reimer, 2005); in fact, some argue that rural is an irrelevant term (Hoggart, 1990). Definitions of the term rural are typically offered from one of two different perspectives. The first is objective and geographical, which focuses on population density, distance, and concrete, objective, and tangible features such as economics, settlement and occupational land use, and landscape (Bealer, Willits, & Kuvlesky, 1965; Cloke & Thrift, 1994; Rye, 2006). The second is socially constructed and emphasizes perception, identity, power, and symbols (Reimer, 2005). Critics of the former approach argue an objective approach is inadequate in explaining rural social change, and an emphasis on the subjective and socially-constructed meanings of what rural is should be used instead (Cloke, 1997; Rye, 2006). Utilizing socially-constructed meanings "produces a more robust and flexibly way of defining rurality which can for example accommodate the effects of the social economic change in rural environments" (Woods, 2005, p. 11). To clearly articulate the rural context of this study, I utilize the objective, geographic, and socially constructed approaches to understanding rural. Encompassing all three perspectives strengthens the conceptualization of the rural context in which Limerick is located and influenced by. For example, Limerick is located 128

kilometers from an urban boundary, has a strong presence of natural resources and wilderness environments, and largely connected to natural resource extraction in the form of agriculture. As a result, Limerick aligns well with objective and geographic understandings of rural. However, the objective and geographic perspectives of rural limit our understanding of the socially constructed ideals of rural life; therefore, this study also engages with the socially constructed perspective of rural.

As a socially constructed term, rural is based on residents' values, lifestyles, feelings, and perceptions (Clarke & Miller, 1990; Ryan-Nicholls & Racher, 2004; Teather, 1996; Valentine, 1997; Rye, 2006). From this perspective, rural is understood based on multiple meanings and explains the conflicting myths that exist between the *rural idyll* and the *rural dull* (Haugen & Villa, 2006). The rural idyll is the notion that rural places are characterized by positive healthy lifestyles that are simplistic and free from stressful environments (Haugen & Villa, 2006). The rural studies literature outlines three primary characteristics of the rural idyll: the connection to the natural environment; the social fabric of the rural community; and elements of tranquility, calmness, and peacefulness (Rye, 2006). Other abstract qualities associated with rural idyll include health, safety, relaxation, and simplicity (Rye, 2006).

In contrast to the rural idyll, the rural dull emphasizes rural residents' reservations regarding the social fabric of rural communities (Rye, 2006). Researchers have argued that rural life for women, lesbian and gay individuals, and youth is not as positive as the rural idyll suggests. Feelings of social control, limited education and job opportunities, lack of choices for cultural and leisure activities, heighten physical and social isolation, and being less progressive and embracing a more traditional way of life envelope notions

of the rural dull (Haugen & Villa, 2006; Rye, 2006; Warner-Smith & Brown, 2002). According to Fosso (2004), young people associate rural places with unskilled manual jobs rather than high-skilled and high-tech occupations. Furthermore, young people envision the urban landscape as more energetic and vibrant, and the rural landscape as boring. Waara (2000) stated that young people conceive rural as “traditional, underdeveloped, backward, and old fashioned” (p. 138). As a result, young people often migrate from rural locations to urban ones to pursue higher education or employment (Dupuy, Mayer, & Morissette, 2000). As such, it is important to understand the role the school plays in rural communities and how it contributes to the complex socially constructed understanding of rural life.

### **Schools’ Roles in Rural Communities**

Numerous researchers have found that a rural school is a key component of community life, while the community is also considered an integral part of the school (Collins, 2001; Jimerson, 2006; Lyson, 2002; O’Neal & Cox, 2002; Theobald, 1997 as cited in Wright, 2007). Schools can play important roles in rural communities that go beyond formal education, often due to low population and a limited number of cultural facilities (Collins & Flaxman, 2001). As a result, schools can become an essential social hub of rural communities and those who work there may find themselves taking on roles previously held by social agencies, such as working with families (Wright, 2007). Researchers have suggested that the school-community relationship positively impacts rural communities’ social and economic wellbeing (Lyson, 2002; Salant & Waller, 1998), and that schools can play important roles in community development (Kilpatrick et al., 2002a).

Rural schools often provide programs, resources, and services and serve as meeting places because they have resources such as gymnasiums, computer rooms, libraries, theatres, and art galleries (Bruce & Halseth, 2000; Rosenfeld & Sheaff, 2002; Witten et al., 2001). Researchers have also indicated that relationships can develop between the community and the school when these resources are shared (Bertrand & Giles, 2010; Squires & Sinclair, 1990 as cited in Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, & Mulford, 2000). Rural schools are often the places where public meetings are held and leisure activities are provided for the greater community (Parker, 2001).

While rural schools can foster many social benefits within the community, they also have the potential to enhance or support economic wellbeing. According to Miller (1993), schools can also play a large role in vitalizing small rural communities. For example, in Saskatchewan public institutions such as hospitals and schools are the second largest employers in rural areas and provide the community with well-educated staff members that often serve as volunteers within the community, provide leadership to children and voluntary groups, and share their knowledge with the greater community (Martz & Sanderson, 2006). These civic institutions can provide employment and social opportunities that support rural communities' viability (Miller, 1993) and may attract and retain young families (Gill & Everitt, 1993; Jackson & Poushinsky, 1971; Porteous, 1976).

Rural schools can also foster a strong level of involvement from community members (Bauch, 2001). Such involvement from parents and other adult community members can include coaching sport teams, assisting the teacher in split grade class room instruction, fundraising for school projects, providing transportation, and chaperoning

major trips (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, & Mulford, 2000; Miller, 1993; Squires, & Sinclair, 1990). Consequently, a partnership is developed between the school and members of the greater community, which is based on social interactions, mutual trust, and relationships, all of which a deeper sense of belonging (Bauch, 2001).

Due to the sense of belonging that schools tend to foster in rural communities, schools may also be a means through which community identity is formed, which can contribute to the community's social wellbeing (Wright, 2007; Miller 1993). Research has indicated that schools contribute to rural community development and validate local ways of life, traditions (Squires & Sinclair, 1990), a better school-community relationship, and stronger sense of community (Bauch, 2001). Community identity can also be further developed as residents rally around "their school's" athletic events, theatrical plays, and musical events as major sources of entertainment (Nachtigal, 1994). Indeed, according to Wotherspoon (1998), schools can be a means of encouraging residents' community involvement and increasing the sense of solidarity in a community through social cohesion. Ultimately, this cohesion within the community can give a sense of "rootedness in one's community and the desire [to] cherish and cultivate one's local community" (Bauch, 2001, p. 212). Research in this area highlights the often dynamic relationship between the school and the community, which can nurture relationships among community residents.

### **School Closures and Rural Communities**

Although there is a significant body of literature pertaining to the roles rural schools play in community life, there is limited research available on school closures' impact. In a review of the literature on school closures, Lauzon (2001) found that

“literature on impacts of rural school consolidation and closure on rural communities is, at best, sparse. Few studies have been undertaken that have examined the actual impacts of school closure on the community as a whole” (p. 1). The few studies that have been conducted have indicated that when communities lose their schools, populations decline and participants in community organizations lose energy and enthusiasm (Parker, 2001; Tompkins, 2003). Certainly, school closures have profound impacts on a community’s economic and social sustainability, as skills and expertise that contribute to rural community life are often lost (Martz & Sanderson, 2006) and opportunities for socialization and social cohesion can decline (Egelund & Lausten, 2006; Witten et al., 2001). Jackson, Peterson, and Spear (2001) reported that social continuity lessens when the social fabric of communities is frayed: people tend to fall out of relationships with each other, which then leads to a greater sense of social isolation, lower levels of community engagement, and less investment in social infrastructure, such as leisure activities.

### **Rural Recreation and Leisure**

The school-community literature has highlighted how the rural school often acts as the social hub for rural community life. As a result, the school can be a source of recreation<sup>2</sup> and leisure activities for rural community residents, which thus warrants a further exploration of literature related to recreation and leisure in the rural context. Below, I provide a synthesis of rural recreation and leisure literature to further frame the context of this study.

Rural recreation and leisure activities are shaped by geographic, economic, and social settings, and influence individuals’ ideals of the collective social behaviours that

shape the development of and participation in recreation and leisure activities (Arnott & Duffield, 1980). According to Long and Kraus (1983) and Long and Kieselbach (1987), recreation broadens the content of rural life, provides opportunities for socializing, provides individuals with self-discovery, personal and family enrichment, enhances family solidarity, helps to foster healthy personal adjustment, and provides a strong base for youth to pursue recreation and leisure activities during their future adult life.

Recreation and leisure services in rural communities typically have limited funds and resources and rely heavily on local community residents to facilitate opportunities (Lasley, 1987; Tefler & Wall, 1994; Glyptis, 1989).

Rural communities are currently facing numerous challenges that can limit recreation and leisure activities. According to researchers, rural communities tend to have smaller populations from which to recruit volunteers to organize recreation and leisure activities, which can leave the same few individuals to do all the work and results in burn-out (Riley & Arnold, 1995). In addition, transportation costs, which can reduce the distance that certain people are able to travel to access needed resources (Long & Kraus, 1983; Thompson, Rehman, & Humbert, 2005; Warner-Smith & Brown, 2002), and declining populations cause taxpayer resistance to funding recreation facility construction and maintenance (Long & Kraus, 1983; Long & Kieselbach, 1987).

Researchers have reported that the quality of life for people who live in rural communities can be directly related to the recreation and leisure activities (Arnott & Duffield, 1980; Long & Kieselbach, 1987; Middleton, 2000). Researchers have linked recreation, arts, and culture, and interpersonal relationships as the foundation for social wellbeing for rural residents (Ramsey & Beesley, 2006; Ramsey & Smit, 2002; Smith,

Krannich, & Hunter, 2001). For example, Ramsey and Beesley (2006) found individuals' connections to their community, their family, and community support increased their health and overall community satisfaction. Researchers have also indicated that participation in social activities can enhance interpersonal relationships among friends, families, and neighbours, which can develop strong social support networks, and a sense of belonging among rural residents (Ramsey & Smit, 2002; Smith et al., 2001).

Recreation and leisure activities can thus greatly enhance the quality of life in rural communities through, among other things, enhanced personal relationships; however, the challenges facing rural communities have resulted in a reduction in community recreation and leisure activities - activities which had previously helped to build a sense of community cohesion (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006). As such, if recreation and leisure activities and interpersonal relationships are essential components of rural community life, how does the reduction in community recreation and leisure activities and opportunities related to school closures affect these relationships? The literature reviewed above highlighted the importance of the school in rural community life; however, it also highlighted the gap of knowledge on the impacts of these schools' closures. It is my intention to help to fill this gap and to understand how one rural school's closure affected interpersonal relationships of rural families.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Due to the complexity of the relationships between schools and rural communities, a theoretical framework that explores individual behaviour from multiple perspectives was warranted. Social ecological theory (SET) emphasizes an in-depth understanding of the dynamic interplay between and among individuals, groups, and their socio-psycho

surroundings through multiple levels (Stokols, 1996). According to McLeory et al.'s (1988) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) SET, these layers extend from *intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and organization, community, and policy factors*. *Intrapersonal factors* include an individual's characteristics such as knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, self-concept, skills, etc. *Interpersonal factors* consist of formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including family, work group, and friendship networks. *Institutional and organizations factors* include social institutions with organizational characteristics, formal and informal rules and regulations for operation, and organizations in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. *Community factors* comprise community-wide social networks, norms and standards that informally govern individuals, groups, and organizations. Finally, *policy factors* are related to local, provincial, and national laws and policies, at the broadest level of influence on individual behavior. These factors are not separate from one another, but are interrelated (McLeroy et al., 1988). The SET has been utilized primarily to investigate physical activity and health promotion programs (Sallis et al., 2006), but has not been used to investigate the impacts of a rural school closure. The SET approach provides a robust framework for exploring the multiple levels of influence a rural school closure can have rural families.

### **Methodology**

I employed a qualitative, single exploratory case study methodology, which is an approach used for in-depth, holistic investigations of complex social phenomena involved in real-life events (Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2009). I used an exploratory case study approach because it focuses on “how” and “why” questions, which are exploratory in nature and are preferred when studying contemporary events over which the researcher does not

have control (Yin, 2009) – in this case, a rural school’s closure. Case studies are a robust research methodology due to their many strengths, which include their ability to be used to observe social processes in natural settings; their ability to utilize multiple methods for data collection; their holistic presentation of complex phenomena; and their ability to help in the generation of theories. Researchers have used qualitative case studies to investigate the impacts of school closures on rural families and urban neighbourhoods (Kearns et al., 2009; Witten et al., 2003); the role of schools in building social capital (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2004); rural school-community relationships (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk, & Prescott, 2002a); and acts of citizenship during the school closure process (Basu, 2007). Thus, previous research has demonstrated case studies’ utility in examining school-community relationships.

### **Study Participants**

As previously mentioned, this paper stems from a larger project that focused on the impacts of a school closure on rural life. As a result, study participants were not initially selected to represent just rural families; however, adults from rural families and the larger community were a part of the study, which I believe broadens the depth and knowledge obtained. I utilized purposive sampling to identify participants who could make a meaningful contribution to the study – a requirement for obtaining information-rich data in qualitative inquiries (Creswell, 2009; Neuman, 2004). As previous studies have focused on a school closure’s impact on students (Valencia, 1984) and have often ignored the impacts on other community members, I decided to focus on adults’ perceptions of school closures. More specifically, to obtain an in-depth yet broad perspective of the impacts of school closure on rural families, participants came from a

number of different groups: 1) key community informants, who helped me to identify other study participants; 2) adult community residents who did not have school-aged children at the time of the school closure and; 3) parents with school-aged children at the time of the school closure. I invited 25 participants to participate in the study; twenty-two participated. Eight men and fourteen women participated in this study and ranged from 29 to 70 years of age.

Of the twenty-two participants, four were key community informants (two men and two women) who participated in the study. These individuals included a volunteer member of the local community hall, a volunteer from the Opportunity Centre, a volunteer who is engaged in various local community organizations, and a member of town council. Of the remaining eighteen participants, eight were parents who had school-aged children at the time of the school's closure, while the remaining ten adult community residents did not have school-aged children at the time of the school's closure. Of these eighteen participants, 12 were women and 6 were men. Their occupations included childcare operators, farmers, administrative assistants, business owners, business managers, retail sector employees, and health care providers.

I employed purposive sampling to ensure information rich data would be collected based on the purpose of the study. As a result, all participants involved in the study lived in the community prior to and after the school's closure and were thus able to reflect on the impact it has had on rural families. Community members who moved into the community after the school's closure were not included in the study because they were unable to reflect on life in Limerick prior to the school's closure.

## **Methods**

An important characteristic of case study methodologies is the use of multiple methods of data collection in order to gather detailed information regarding the phenomenon under study. Methods of data collection for this study included semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are used for research on complex topics, and they enable the participant to comment on what s/he feels is relevant, which allows for conversational flow between the researcher and the participant (Bowling, 2002). Semi-structured interviews provide numerous advantages, including the interviewer's ability to probe for clarity and ambiguities, to ask complex questions, to obtain more information and greater depth, and to clarify inconsistencies and misinterpretations (Bowling, 2002; Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, unlike written questionnaires, semi-structured interviews do not have literacy requirements (Creswell, 2009).

I conducted four semi-structured interviews with the key community informants, all of which took place in the participants' homes or place of business. The key community informants have leadership roles in the community; as such, I considered their perspectives important for adding depth and breadth to the study. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, utilized a semi-structured interview guide, and included questions related to life in the community prior to and after the school closure. Sample questions included: 1) what was life in the community like before the school closed?; 2) how do you think the school closure impacted families with school-aged children?; and 3) has your role in the community changed since the school closed?

## **Focus Groups**

According to Bowling (2002), focus groups are facilitated semi-structured interviews in a small group setting where participants can interact with one another. This approach to data collection utilizes group dynamics to inspire discussion and generate insights and ideas about a specific topic in greater detail than one-on-one interviews (Bowling, 2002). Focus groups are also means to building a stronger, more collective energy, which can generate larger amounts of data that are often difficult, if not “impossible, to generate through individual interviews and observations” (Kamberelis & Dimitraidis, 2005, p. 900).

I conducted three focus groups with a total of twelve adult community residents. The first and third focus groups took place in two separate participants’ homes, while the second focus group took place at the local community centre. The focus groups lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and included a number of questions that spoke broadly to community life: 1) what was life in the community like before the school closed?; 2) do you think there are some community members that have been impacted by the school closure differently?;and 3) has the school closure impact community recreation and leisure opportunities?

## **Additional Semi-Structured Interviews**

Due to scheduling conflicts, certain participants were unable to participate in the focus groups, but wanted to be included in the study. As a result, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three married couples, two of which had school-aged children at the time of the school’s closure. Again, I utilized the initial interview guide, but included specific questions for the married couples who had school-aged children. Such

questions included 1) how has the school closure had an impact your children?; 2) has the school's closure had an impact on your families' leisure activities?; and 3) has the school's closure had an impact your own personal leisure (individual leisure activities separate from the family)?

All semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were digitally-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, I have removed all participants' identifying characteristics and I have assigned pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study followed a linear, hierarchical approach that builds from the bottom up (Creswell, 2009). I initially analyzed the data, which was then reviewed by my supervisor. I used Creswell's (2009) six-step process for organizing and analyzing qualitative data. First, I organized all the transcriptions to gain familiarity with the data. Second, I coded the transcripts based on: 1) codes related to literature, for example recreation and leisure activities, and the role of the school in the community; 2) codes that were unexpected or unusual, such as those related to intergenerational relationships and driving children to various activities; and 3) codes that were directly related to theoretical framework, such as interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal relationships, and the role of formal and informal community organizations and institutions (Creswell, 2009). I did not develop the codes before the data analysis, but rather the codes emerged throughout the data analysis phase (Creswell, 2009). The third step involved categorizing the codes. For example, once I identified the codes, I categorized them using descriptive wording that mirrored themes from the literature reviewed, the SET framework, and similar categories were then grouped together. The

fourth step involved developing categories from the codes. For example, I expanded codes related to interpersonal relationships into categories that included immediate and expanded family relationships, new community relationships, and new friendships. I then expanded these categories into themes for further discussion (step five) and analysis/interpretation (step six).

## **Results**

Through the data analysis it became apparent that SET's interpersonal factors of influence had a significant impact on rural families in three ways. Specifically, the data revealed that the closure of Limerick School influenced rural families' interpersonal relationships with others in three ways: 1) it changed existing relationships among community residents, 2) it changed the relationships among members of the family unit, and 3) it fostered new friendships with non-community members.

### **Changing Relationships with Community Members**

According to participants, the relationships between families and other community members changed as a result of the school's closure. More specifically, interpersonal relationships related to peer relationships and informal social networks have diminished. The results show the youth are largely disconnected from the community and other youth. As for parents, they experienced an increased time commitment to travel and volunteering in outlying communities, which disconnected them from the community and other parents.

**Youth-community disconnect.** Participants reported that when it was open, the school connected the families with school-aged children and the rest of the community through events, fundraisers, and holiday celebrations. The school's closure has since

limited this sort of connection and has resulted in a sense of disconnection between the school-aged children and adult community members. Victor, a local government official explained,

Well, the school brings people out for a lot more events, and with the school gone you don't see a lot of people, you don't see the kids, you don't even know a lot of kids that are even of school age anymore because...you're not in contact with the kids. So, it's too bad that way. And then with the kids selling stuff and fundraising in the community, you [would] see all these kids - now you don't even see the neighbours' kids anymore.

The school's closure resulted in less activity throughout the community, which contributed to decreasing feelings of connection between the youth and other community residents. In particular, participants commented on how the youth have limited opportunities to mingle with other community residents. The local store (called Dave's) was a frequent stop for Limerick School's students when on their lunch breaks. The youth would buy snacks and interact with local residents. Since the closure, however, youth do not frequent this community hub. Lana, an older-aged farmer and mother to three adult children, explained, "the kids would walk down to Dave's at lunch time and they knew everybody that said hello to them." Gabby, a female older adult in the community, added,

The youth would be getting groceries at Dave's store, and someone will say, "see what so and so did today," and we'll just have a little chuckle to yourself, and kids all knew us, and we knew all the kids, and we don't anymore.

Abbey, a farm wife and mother to two adult children, noted, "the youth in the community probably have no idea who we [adult community residents] are either. We don't know

them, and they [children] don't know us. [The school's closure has] just fractured everybody apart."

Participants also reported that Limerick's school fostered a strong connection between school-aged children - a connection that they believed was lost when the children moved to new schools. The children that were enrolled in Limerick School prior to its closure were moved from a school that housed kindergarten to grade 12 students to community schools that were divided into elementary, junior high, and high schools. Cathy, a older-aged female resident, described, "having the school K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12] means when you go to the bigger centre, it's like you lose that respect amongst kids, because they are not in the same school so they don't even know each other well." Donna, a middle-aged resident added, "the kids don't interact as much with the other kids in town - our kids don't see the other kids in the town."

**Parent-community disconnect.** When Limerick's school was open, school-based events and activities brought the whole community together and were an informal way for new and current community members to connect with one another; however, since the school's closure, parents have limited contact with community residents and noted they were left feeling as though they did not have such strong relationships. When describing his view of the impact of the school's closure on parents, a local community volunteer leader explained that the school's closure, "definitely...impacted the [parents] the most...they...lose contact with the community." Victor added that he does not see the students' parents anymore, "no, not much unless there is an event or fundraiser at the hotel and then we will see those parents...or in business, but...it's more limited now, much more limited."

Similar feelings of disconnection were felt between parents with school-aged children. A father, Curt, explained,

I think parents had more interaction together [before the school closure]...because after school, you go pick up your kids and there are other parents lined up and everyone seemed to visit. Now those parents of kids the same age as ours...we haven't talked to them for months, because the kids now attend a different school.

According to Heidi, a farm wife and mother to two adult children, "the parents are in different communities; they are not in our community." Victor further explained,

I think it's a little tougher to get some of these younger people with kids involved in community stuff now because they've got maybe a little more running [around] to do, maybe to Assiniboia or Lafleche [surrounding communities] for school, ball, and hockey...and because those parents who had a commitment to this community can't afford time wise to have that commitment to this community and the community where their kids are.

Extra-curricular activities such as sports and after-school programs connected the parents to Limerick; however, the school's closure shifted parents' commitments to surrounding communities. Mark, a community resident, noted,

When we had the school, if the kids were in sports or something, whether there is something going on, the parents would be at the school. You know like volleyball or whatever is going on, but now you don't see anyone because the kids have their sports and everything is being done in Assiniboia - their parents are going to Assiniboia.

Parents in the study expressed similar feelings. According to Joanna, a mother of two young girls, “we have probably become less involved as our kids are getting older and being involved in other communities, because you kind of gravitate to those other communities to help.” Indeed, when asked about whether her and other parents’ volunteer commitment to Limerick had changed since the school closed, Jan, a parent, responded, “We are all involved in different activities elsewhere.”

### **Changing Relationships within the Family**

Family relationships are another form of interpersonal relationships that were influenced by the school closure. In particular, the school’s closure has resulted in families with school-aged children driving greater distances for school-related activities, which has put a strain on their leisure time as well as and time spent with extended family members such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

Most of the driving that parents reported doing was so their children could play sports or be involved in leisure or recreation activities after school. These activities took place in the same community where the children attended school, rather than in Limerick, which compounded the travel issue. Many parents highlighted how much farther they now travel for their children’s activities since the school’s closure, but they felt it was worth it. One father, Curt, noted how many kilometres he had traveled in one winter:

This year was the most. We never traveled this much for hockey ever before. We figured out [that] I put 18,000 kilometres on my vehicle, so that was one vehicle, we have two that we go out with, but would we do it again? Yeah.

The school's closure forced families to drive outside their community for school and extra-curricular activities, which participants described as placing a strain on young families. Gabby explained,

They [parents] feel that they have to drive so far now to take their kids to volleyball...[and] basketball...they are putting a lot of miles on their vehicles and they have less time to be with their kids and [to have] normal family conversations. They get home and the kids [have] got to hit the books and do their homework, and then it's bed time, so it has cut back on family time.

Heidi added, "they are just so busy - they are driving a lot more, working, driving to get their kids, they don't have time - really they are just tired." Joanna echoed similar thoughts: "we are busy driving; we drive away for everything now."

The increase in travel among families with school-aged children has also had an impact the amount of time they spend with extended family members. When the school was open, extended family members who lived in Limerick had opportunities to see family members on a more regular basis. For example, children would visit grandparents or other family members for after school care if parents needed to run errands or were at work. "Kids would go in for school and skip the school bus and go to grandma's and grandpa's or their aunt's or uncle's, for mom is going to pick them up later...obviously that all stopped," explained Lori, a community volunteer leader. Lori also noted,

I think there is just not as much traffic through their homes for everybody who had a child, a grandchild, a nephew at the school. You know whether it was in our case, my sister-in-law coming in and waiting for the kids, coming in a little

early and having tea with us because she was going to pick the kids up at 3:30 to take them wherever. None of that happens [now].

When activities were hosted at Limerick School, many grandparents and extended family members would attend, but the new distances have limited the involvement of extended family members' in children's lives. Lisa, a grandmother, explained,

Speaking from a grandparent's point of view...I still try and go to the things in Assiniboia, but it's not handy anymore for sure. And other people older than me, I don't think [they] bother to go anymore. I mean, they would come if it was in Limerick because it was right here, but they are not going to...drive to Assiniboia to go.

Blair, a community volunteer leader noted,

The older people don't get the opportunities to go and see their nephews and grandchildren or family friends' children participate, because they are in a farther place. I think the closeness of the families has been lost. They are not mingling and interacting as much. We don't see each other often because we are not being drawn to certain events and activities and gatherings.

### **Fostering New Friendships**

According to participants, both parents and children are spending more time in surrounding communities than in Limerick, and this had led to an increase in new friendships and social networks.

One parent couple explained that even though they were busy taking their children to various sport and after school programs, their social lives had improved since the school's closure. According to Danny,

Yes [our social life] has changed, but in some ways it's probably more social with a broader group of people than it used to be. When we go to do sports in other towns, you also meet lots of new people - we have more acquaintances from other areas than we actually do in Limerick.

Another parent, Jan, echoed Danny's comments and explained that relationships develop in other communities, "because your kids are there." The participants viewed the new friendships as having a positive impact for the parents, as some did not have many friendships with people of their age cohort in Limerick. One father explained, "for myself, I have nobody in my age [group] - they all left."

Although Limerick's school had limited recreation and sport opportunities and the closure was deemed as having some detrimental impacts on the community, study participants identified how the school's closure increased the children's opportunities to try new activities and, as a result, meet new people, which was viewed as a positive outcome. As Victor explained,

are they [youth] going to have as much opportunity if they just stay here, and the funding is not there for different stuff? Is that good enough, or do you want to tell those kids well, look at all the increased opportunity - you might have cooking and photography and mechanics and everything if you go to Assiniboia or Lafleche or to a larger school, where you are not going to have that in Limerick.

The results indicate that the school's closure had profound implications on rural families' interpersonal relationships; in particular, the youth and parents became disconnected from other Limerick residents and extended family members. The school's closure did not, however, have only negative impacts on interpersonal relationships. In

fact, the youth and parents developed new friendships with individuals from outlying communities, a unique finding that warrants further discussion.

### **Discussion**

SET (McLeroy et al., 1988) was useful in this study because of its holistic approach to understanding individual behaviour – in this case, how a rural school's closure influenced rural families, which, based on my study, was largely expressed through changes in their leisure behaviours. SET was particularly useful in understanding the ways in which Limerick School's closure affected members of rural families and their relationships with other residents. The results of this study indicated that interpersonal factors, namely relationships between rural family members, and their relationships with other community residents were of greatest concern for participants.

Due to the complexity and depth of SET, reporting results pertaining to the whole model can be difficult (Sallis et al., 2006). In fact, in their review of twenty years of publications in health promotion that used SET frameworks within health promotion, Gold and Earp (2012) found that most articles only reported on intrapersonal and interpersonal factors of influence, rather than institutional, community, and policy factors. Similar challenges were found in this study, so I have limited this paper to an exploration the portion of the SET framework that is most relevant to my findings. Following Cardenas, Henderson, and Wilson (2009), I have limited the scope of this paper to discuss the findings that relate to interpersonal factors.

My primary finding is that prior to its closure, Limerick School's school-related leisure activities developed and maintained a strong sense of connection and belonging among community residents, but that the closure has since disconnected members of rural

families from one another and other community members, because of changes to these leisure activities. Further, this study emphasizes how a school's closure can result in rural community members accessing resources and services in other communities. As a result, the time and energy that rural families are spending in transport to and actually in surrounding communities has strained family relationships. Despite these challenges, the school closure's impact on Limerick residents has had some benefits, such as family members' development of new friendships and social networks.

Through the SET framework, I was able to emphasize the important roles schools play in fostering various forms of interpersonal relationships among rural families and the larger community. In particular, study participants highlighted how leisure activities offered through the school cultivated informal social networks, peer and family relationships, and friendships, all different forms of interpersonal relationships (McLeroy et al., 1988) among rural families and the larger community.

Previous literature on the impacts of rural school closures has emphasized a decline in socialization and social cohesion (Egelund & Lausten, 2006; Witten et al., 2001), which are both elements that are cultivated by interpersonal relationships (McLeroy et al., 1988). These findings are supported in my study. Specifically, prior to the school's closure, school-related leisure activities cultivated *informal social networks* among community residents and rural families. Since the school's closure, however, these relationships have diminished because rural families are not frequenting community establishments or participating in community activities as often. My findings also indicate changes in *peer* relationships. In particular, the school closure disconnected older youth from the younger youth, and peer relationships among youth that live in the

community. As for the parents, they have less interaction with each because they are supporting their children's extra-curricular activities in outlying communities. Certainly the informal *social networks* and *peer* relationships that were once maintained by the school have been greatly reduced and, as a result, there are now diminished opportunities for socialization for the community as a whole. The decrease in socializing among rural residents can be problematic for rural communities, because the strong social fabric of rural life is embedded in the interpersonal relationships among all residents.

My study emphasized that *family relationships* were also important forms of interpersonal relationships that were influenced by school's closure. More specifically, the findings indicate that the time rural families are spending travelling to and being in outside communities has strained family relationships. Throughout the interviews, parents highlighted how much extra time goes into driving for school-related activities as a result of the school's closure. Although parents with school-aged children at the time of the school closure highlighted that they would continue to drive long distances for their children's activities, other study participants felt the time spent on driving has put a strain on young families. The increase in time spent driving to outlying communities also limited the time young families spent together in their home community, and with extended family members, which can negatively influence community satisfaction. According to Ramsey and Beesley (2006), rural residents have stronger feelings of community satisfaction when relationships between family members are fostered within the community.

This study also highlights the positive impact that a school closure can have on friendships, another form of interpersonal relationships (McLeroy et al., 1988). More

specifically, my findings indicate that the formation of new friendships and increased opportunities to socialize that were a result of the school's closure had a positive impact on Limerick families. With a small school population, the parent participants from Limerick reported that they felt they had an inadequate social circle to meet their needs. The parent participants highlighted how they have enjoyed developing new friendships with other parents of the same cohort as a result of the changes that came about due to the school's closure. Furthermore, parent participants discussed how moving their children to a larger school enhanced their children's social lives and access to leisure activities. Even community residents that highlighted numerous negative impacts as a result of the school's closure could not ignore the positive aspect of new social opportunities for the children, as the children were exposed to new recreation and leisure related after-school programs that met their needs and enhanced their quality of life.

### **Conclusion**

In broad terms, these findings highlight leisure and recreation activities' power to foster strong connections and different forms of interpersonal relationships among individuals, especially in rural communities (Ramsey & Smit, 2002; Smith et al., 2001). According to SET, interpersonal relationships are of key importance to understanding individuals' wellbeing (McLeroy et al., 1988), which are closely related to leisure opportunities (Long & Kieselbach, 1987; Middleton, 2000). As a result, the quality of life in rural communities is often attributed to the social relationships between community members (Struthers & Bokemeier, 2000); in this study, the school was a vehicle that developed and maintained these relationships.

In addition, this study highlights the value of interpersonal relationships between

youth and other community residents. My study found that a disconnection between the youth and the community emerged as a result of the school's closure, which may be problematic for the future of rural communities like Limerick, because schools are a microcosm of the larger community where students indirectly learn about community life (Wright, 2007). The school's closure has limited children's social engagement with other community members, which has been identified as a factor in children's future community involvement (Parker, 2001), an essential element for strong rural communities.

My findings also emphasized how challenges such as a school's closure can transform rural communities' status of being hubs of local activity (Wright, 2007) to basically being bedroom communities because residents are accessing resources and services in other communities. For example, participants highlighted how the school's closure forced young families into new communities for school and, as a consequence, these families were spending money on other services such as restaurants, groceries, and gas in the new communities rather than in Limerick. This shift resulted in young families spending time supporting school-related activities and developing interpersonal relationships with other families and community members from outlying communities rather than Limerick. This is problematic for communities like Limerick because the vitality of a rural community and the wellbeing of residents (McLeroy et al., 1988) are dependent upon its residents' support and interactions (Chan & Elder, 2001).

My research also contributes to family and leisure literature in a rural context by revealing how a school's closure influences family leisure. This study shows that a decrease in family time has limited family leisure experiences, which researchers have

indicated is an important interpersonal relationship that fosters rural community social wellbeing (Ramsey & Beesley, 2006). Travel and transportation have been documented as inhibiting constraints to leisure participation in rural communities (Thompson, Rehman, & Humbert, 2005; Warner-Smith & Brown, 2002); however, this study has highlighted how travel for school-related activities diminished the connection among immediate and extended family members rather than limiting overall leisure participation. Parent participants argued that while transportation did not constrain their children's participation in leisure activities that they felt were important, it did impact time together as a family unit and with extended family members, which served to weaken their interpersonal relationships.

Despite the negative outcomes presented thus far, this study also demonstrates that there are in fact positive impacts that may result from a school's closure. For example, the children and parents have developed new friendships and social relationships with individuals from outlying communities, which are key indicators of social wellbeing in rural communities (Ramsey & Beesley, 2006) and, again, an important aspect of the interpersonal component of the SET.

Overall, this study adds to the body of research that examines the impact of school closure on rural communities. The benefits of the rural school-community relationship are well documented in the literature; however, limited research is available on the consequences of school closures as they pertain to rural families (Lauzon, 2001; Lyson, 2002). With limited research available and rural school closures occurring with increasing frequency, it is fair to say that decisions regarding school closures are being made without knowing the impact on rural family life (Lauzon, 2001). The findings from

this study emphasize the changes in rural community life after a school's closure, particularly as they pertain to interpersonal relationships. This study corroborates Beaumont and Pianca's (2002) finding that a local school is more than an institution for learning; rather, it is the heart of the community. When such an important institution is lost, rural families experience the impacts in profound ways.

This research also demonstrates the utility of the SET as a theoretical approach to explore the dynamic and multifaceted relationships between a rural school and community members. Research has indicated the multitude of roles the school plays in rural community life (Bruce & Halseth, 2000; Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Parker, 2001; Rosenfeld & Sheaff, 2002; Witten et al., 2001), which warrant the use of a theoretical approach that utilizes various components to explore rural families. The SET utilizes multiple factors such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policies to understand human behaviour (McLeroy, 1988). Although this paper only focuses on interpersonal relationships related to families with school-aged children, further research that explores intrapersonal, institutional, community organizations, and policy factors would provide different perspectives that would further deepen our understanding of the impact a school closure has on rural community life.

My research also draws attention to the positive impacts of a school closure, which are absent in existing scholarly literature. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, residents often noted that the school's closure provided the children with enhanced leisure activities and led to parents and children developing new friendships and expanding personal social circles, which have enriched their lives. Future researchers should try to assess if there are other positive benefits that might be accrued due to a rural

school's closure.

My study was limited to the experiences of participants from one rural community; while this approach provided the data with great richness, in the future researchers may want to include rural communities from different geographical locations to broaden our understandings of school closures' impact on rural community life. In addition, rural children's voices would provide valuable perspectives on life in a rural community after a school closure.

The importance of continued research on rural school closures is magnified due to the fact that rural communities will continue to be susceptible to social and economic restructuring because they are resource-based and vulnerable to the negative fluctuations in the markets, technological changes, and globalization (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Goetz, 2000; Wotherspoon, 1998). To respond to the needs of those living in rural communities, it is important that researchers continue to investigate the complex relationships between leisure, schools, and rural residents' quality of life.

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### **Chapter 3:**

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

### Abstract

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

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

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

The benefits of the rural school-community relationship have been well documented in the literature. Limited research exists concerning the impacts of a rural school's closure (Lauzon, 2001), especially on adult residents without school-aged children; in this paper I seek to address this gap. Results from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 22 residents of Limerick, Saskatchewan, revealed that due to the school's closure, adults without school-aged children felt a diminished sense of community and worried about the future of their community, but were motivated to rebuild their sense of community through existing community institutions and organizations. Through these efforts, they found ways to reconnect community members

after the school's closure in order to re-build a sense of community. Using social ecological theory (SET), my study highlights the influence one school's closure had interpersonal, institutional, and organizational factors within a community and how, together, these factors had a profound impact on the lives of residents without school-aged children.

### Study Setting

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

Limerick is a rural community in south central Saskatchewan and has a population of 445 residents, which includes 130 in-town residents, and roughly 315 residents that reside on farms and ranches outside the community (Statistics Canada, 2010). Limerick has 240 male and 205 female residents, with the largest cohorts between the ages of 35-54yrs (34%) and 0-14yrs (24%), and the smaller cohorts being fifty-five years and over (22%) and 15yrs-24yrs (20%). Agriculture is the primary economic industry, but to support the local economy Limerick is host to a variety of businesses: a hair salon, construction company, insurance office, post office, bank, gas station,

agriculture centre, mechanic shop, grain elevator, grocery store, hotel, restaurant and bar, health and wellness centre, and daycare. Community clubs and organizations are also prevalent throughout Limerick, and include, a senior's club, a youth club, community hall board, house authority, historical society, rink board, recreation board, service club, photography club, and playschool. Furthermore, Limerick has a variety of recreation and community facilities, which include a rink, community hall, the United Church, ball diamonds, and a campground. Limerick was chosen as the study site because in 2007 its school closed along with 23 others across Saskatchewan. In addition, Limerick is my hometown and I was familiar with the local residents, life in the community, and the history of the role the school played in the community assisted with the research.

The inception of Limerick school was as a one-room schoolhouse located on the outskirts of the village in 1911, but it was then moved into the community in 1913. Over time the one-room brick schoolhouse transformed into an eight-room school with office space, staff-room, industrial shop, playground, and gymnasium. In June 2007 the school closed, despite having forty-six students and five full-time and one part-time staff members. Twenty-two families were forced to relocate their children to outlying communities for school. There were three outlying communities that received students from Limerick, which were located twenty-three, twenty-four, and sixty-nine kilometers from Limerick; however, it should be noted that some families resided on farms outside of Limerick, so the distance to outlying communities would be different than those that are in-town residents. The selection criteria for the schools varied for each family, but most selected a school based on distance from their home, access to academic courses, school sports, children's preference, and access to extra-curricular activities.

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

### **Literature Review**

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

#### **Rural Services**

The quality of life in rural communities is closely linked to social, retail, health, and education services, adequate infrastructure, and voluntary associations (Halseth & Ryser, 2006; Reimer, 2006). Access to stable services provides rural communities with economic and social wellbeing, which cultivates the continued and future existence of rural communities. Local services provide rural communities with a stable economy and employment opportunities that retain residents and attract a skilled labour force that contributes to future economic activity (Halseth & Ryser, 2006; Martz & Sanderson, 2006). Rural services also provide a foundation for social activities that can bring residents together and enhance social cohesion by developing a sense belonging throughout the community. For example, community institutions such as hospitals, libraries, and schools provide programs, events, and services that often foster

interpersonal relationships among residents (Bruce & Halseth, 2000; Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Ruheni & Tate, 2004). Voluntary community organizations are also a critical component to rural life. For example, organizations related to recreation, health, and community social services often provide amenities to rural residents that are not provided by the public sector and that foster greater levels of civic engagement (Basu, 2004; Halseth & Ryser, 2007).

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

### **Rural Schools**

Schools' roles in rural communities can go beyond formal education (Lyson, 2002, Kearns et al., 2009). In economic terms, researchers in Saskatchewan indicated that schools are one of largest employers in rural areas (Martz & Sanderson, 2006) and contribute to higher housing values and more developed infrastructure throughout the community (Lyson, 2002). The employment and social opportunities provided by rural schools can retain young families, which contribute to further economic growth (Miller, 1993; Gille & Everitt, 1993). Socially, schools tend to act as the community hub where

sports, theatre, music, and other social activities take place (Lyson, 2002), all of which can enhance rural residents' social wellbeing (Beaumont & Pianca, 2002; Jimmerson, 2006; Keyes & Gregg, 2001; Lyson, 2002; Parker, 2001; Salant & Waller, 1998).

Because rural communities tend to have limited cultural facilities (Collins & Flaxman, 2001), the school's infrastructure such as gymnasiums and computer rooms, libraries, theatres, and art galleries often serve as essential resources for rural community life (Bruce & Halseth, 2000; Rosenfeld & Sheaff, 2002).

The physical facilities, events, and programs that rural schools offer can also contribute to developing and strengthening interpersonal relationships (Squires & Sinclair, 1990). Essentially, the rural school can become a central place where friendships form, social networks are developed and community events are held (Kearns et al., 2009).

Active involvement in school-community related projects and events often enhances the sense of belonging and bonds among community members (Wotherspoon, 1998), which can increase community residents' desire to cherish and cultivate their local community identity (Bauch, 2001; Kearns et al., 2009). The literature highlights the dynamic role a school has in rural community life, which extends beyond just formal education. The resources, programs, and skilled leadership within the school often exercise a large influence in the broader community and have an important impact on rural community development.

### **Schools and Rural Community Development**

Community development can be understood in a variety of ways, but generally it is understood to be the actions residents take to improve the conditions of their own community (Pedlar, 2006). Schools have been identified as central institutions linked to

rural community development and sustainability (Collins, 2001; Johns, et al., 2000; Kilpatrick, Bell, & Kilpatrick, 2001). Several research studies have emphasized rural schools' critical roles in community development (Jolly & Deloney, 1996; Lane & Dorfman, 1997; Miller, 1993, 1995). Research has indicated that rural schools can provide residents with access to community associational life (Salant & Waller, 1998), which establishes interactions between residents that comprise a community (Fisk, 2002). Such social interactions foster the development of social capital. Social capital builds a sense of trust among residents and increases the willingness to accomplish goals that benefit the community (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000), which often improve rural community residents' social wellbeing (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Wright, 2007).

Rural schools can also foster partnerships within the community that benefit the school and the community's future development. Researchers in Australia found that close partnerships between rural schools and the communities in which they are situated develop cooperation, communication, and trust amongst community members, which are key elements for community development (Johns et al., 2000). Partnerships between the rural school and rural community can allow for leadership to emerge and knowledge to be exchanged, which benefits the community's future development. According to Bauch (2001), partnerships relevant to community development can include those between the school and local businesses and other community organizations and institutions. The school can provide the community with resources and well-educated staff members who serve as volunteers within the community, provide leadership to children and voluntary groups, and share their knowledge with the greater community (Bauch, 2001; Martz & Sanderson, 2006).

## **School Closures and Rural Communities**

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

have is on residents' sense of community.

### **Sense of Community**

According to Cicognani et al. (2008), sense of community is understood as “feelings of belonging to different kinds of communities” (p. 99), which include informal and formal social organizations within a geographical location, or related to social entities such as sport, volunteering, and political groups. Researchers have associated sense of community with community health and wellbeing, as it highlights positive emotional interconnectedness between individuals who interact with one another (Bess et al., 2002; Fisher et al., 2002). There are five dimensions to sense of community: 1) membership, which refers to feelings of association to part of a community; 2) influence, which represents opportunities for individuals to contribute to community life; 3) integration and fulfillment of needs, which describes the benefits individuals receive from being apart of a community; 4) shared emotional connection, which highlights a shared history and social bond that develops over time with other community members; and, 5) community identity, which refers to the extent an individual identifies with their community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Obst et al., (2002). According Prezza et al. (2001), sense of community can be considered to be a channel for social involvement and active participation in the community.

Though sense of community can be strongly framed as positive for residents, there are some reservations that can challenge this viewpoint. Sonn et al. (1999) argued that not all individuals will experience a sense of community, and that a sense of community can marginalize some individuals, which can enhance feelings of exclusion, oppression, and alienation. Similarly, Dunham (1986) stated that sense of community is a

measurement of group cohesion and imposes utopian ideals that do not exist within the community, at least not for everyone. What Sonn et al. (1999) and Dunham (1986) emphasized is that sense of community will be experienced differently depending on the individual.

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

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

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Ecological Theory**

SET suggests that to understand individual behaviour, researchers must utilize an approach that investigates in-depth the complex social and cultural context in which the individual behaviour occurs (Lund et al., 2005; Stokols, 1996). According to this theoretical approach, I can understand the changes in rural adult residents' behaviour

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

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

Despite its usefulness, SET is a complex model and reporting on all its elements can be challenging for researchers. In fact, through a twenty-year review of health promotion journals, Gold and Earp (2012) found that researchers often only explore

segments of SET. Following this trend, I have also limited the scope of this article to SET's interpersonal, and institutional and organizational factors. By limiting the scope of this SET investigation, I can provide thick, rich description of certain aspects of the impacts of the school's closure, which will lay the foundation for future studies.

### **Methodology**

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

### **Study Participants**

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

### **Methods**

I conducted four semi-structured interviews with key community informants, one interview with a married couple without school-aged children, and two interviews with two married couples with school-aged children, and three focus groups with a total twelve adult residents without school-aged children. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and, like the focus groups, included discussions on life in the community prior to and after the school's closure, the role of the school-community relationship in the

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

### **Data Analysis**

I utilized thematic analysis to find meaning within the data. I searched for themes that emerged as being important to the description phenomenon of the impacts of a rural

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

## **Results**

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

### **Diminished Sense of Community**

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

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

Darren, a local business owner noted,

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

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

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

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

### **Fear for Future**

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

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

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

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

The school was a way to stay in contact with the children of the community.

Having children in the area I think gave parents and older people a purpose for continually wanting to help them to raise them, to maybe be involved, and help

them achieve things. If there was something [at the school] that needed to be done, the community got behind it and did it because there was purpose and future.

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

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

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

In my perspective, it's kind of made it feel like no future...the future isn't there.

These young people were out and about in your community and seeing them around and watching them grow, you knew we were going to possibly have some future.

### **Rebuilding a Sense of Community**

Prior to its closure, the school was an institution that offered events and activities that brought together the whole community; however, the school's closure brought about a decline in sense of community and fear for the future has motivated the residents to attempt to rebuild their sense of community. Long-standing community institutions and

organizations such as the church and the 49er's club, along with the newly developed community Opportunity Centre, have provided the residents with new leisure opportunities that have helped rebuild their sense of community by reconnect residents.

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

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

**49er's Club.** The 49'ers Club, which is a long-standing seniors' community organization that provides a social club for residents over the age of forty-nine, responded

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There has been a real will in the community to try to keep it going as a community. We put out several newsletters a year. People thought a lot about those newsletters because they feel like it helps them to stay connected. I mean, there used to be school newsletters. Now, this year the church has started the newsletter as well for the same reason: to try again to give people a sense of belonging and a sense of community, that there are still things going on here that are worth thinking about being involved in.

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

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

### **Discussion**

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

My general findings emphasize that Limerick's past school-community relationship developed and maintained interpersonal relationships, which contributed to a

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

### **Diminished Sense of Community**

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

Abbey's comments emphasize how Limerick's school cultivated informal social networks among community members, which contributed to a strong sense of community, pride, and identity; however, since the school's closure, this sense of community has diminished. These findings echo those of Witten et al. (2001), who stated that when a

rural community loses a physical space that has been utilized for community activities and social interaction, such as a school, there is also a decline in the sense of community felt by residents. This decline is highly problematic for rural communities like Limerick because the strength of rural community life and its survival is dependent on the self-supporting and co-dependent relationships between individuals (Cicognani, et al., 2008; Little et al., 2005).

### **Fear for Future**

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

According to researchers, public services related to health, education, and social services have been regionalized, which has increased the need for rural residents to travel to outlying communities to access services (Joseph, 1999; Reimer, et al. 2006; Smithers et al., 2005). Similar to these findings, my study found that parents are engaged in new

communities because of their children's school activities, which has reduced their social and civic engagement in Limerick. As a result, initiatives to rebuild the sense of community were developed in large part by adults who were fifty to seventy years of age.

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

My study emphasizes the importance of SET's interpersonal relationships as they related to informal social networks between youth, parents and the larger community, and the future of rural communities, especially after a school closure. Without these types of interpersonal relationships, rural communities struggle to work towards a future. Rural communities need to have a vision for the future to retain youth, because the younger

generation is more likely to see growth and opportunities in their own community, which is important for rural community sustainability (Witten, 2003).

### **Rebuilding a Sense of Community**

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

Rural restructuring that has resulted in the closure of public services, such as a school, has heightened the necessity for voluntary organizations to provide activities that

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

Community members appeared to see the development of a sense of community is often seen as unfailingly positive – as something that residents of a community like Limerick must fight to maintain. Such a view, however, is utopian in nature. It fails to address the ways in which a sense of community in rural life is often contingent on women's unpaid labour, particularly in the home (Alston, 1995), and also how community's cohesiveness can formulate feelings of "Otherness" for those who do not fit in (Pretty et al., 2003). Sonn, et al. (1999) argued that individuals may experience sense of community differently than others based on their daily lived experiences. How individuals interact within the environment and the sources they draw upon for identity, feelings of belonging, and general wellbeing will differ and impact their perceived sense of community. For example, in my study Limerick's older adults emphasized interpersonal relationships as being an important factor that cultivated a sense of community; however, these dense social relationships could decrease an individual's

privacy, which could have implications for how other individuals experience community life. Dominant understandings of what comprises a “good” sense of community should be problematized in future research.

### **Conclusions**

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

to cope with other forms of rural restructuring could broaden our knowledge on topics related to rural community resiliency.

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

Although this paper focused on interpersonal, institutional, and organizational level factors of the SET, further research that explores other facets of SET. Furthermore, expanding this type of research into regions that are rich in other natural resources, such as fishing or mining communities, would also give a different perspective of school closures on rural community life.

Lyson (2002) stated, "the school is not only the social hub of the village, but the school setting also contributes to the sense of survival of adults in the culture" (p. 24).

Although the school primarily serves as an educational institution for young people in the rural context, my research shows how the school – and its absence - is connected to the whole community. In particular, my study draws much needed attention to the impact of a school's closure on adult community members without school-aged children. Research on school closures has largely focused on the political processes and policies of school closures and has neglected exploring the impact on adults who live within the community. Because the rural school-community relationship cultivates interactions between residents that comprise a community (Fisk, 2002), it is important to explore how a school's closure affects the lives of all community members. In this study, adults without school-aged children reacted to the school closure by trying to rebuild the sense of community that was lost for them and for others in the community, actions that perhaps highlight the inherent value the school had for these adults.

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

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**Chapter 4:**  
**The Impact of a Rural School's Closure on Volunteers' Gender Roles**

### **Abstract**

In this study, I employed social ecological theory and socialist feminist theory to explore a rural school closure's impacts on residents of Limerick, Saskatchewan. My findings from participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews indicate that prior to the school's closure, male and female volunteers within both the school and broader community contexts displayed traditional gender roles; however, the school's closure caused a gap in volunteer capacity as local children's parents became engaged in outlying communities in which their children's new schools were located to support their children's school and extra-curricular activities. As a result of the school's closure, some middle-aged women and older male and female adult residents in the community challenged traditional gender roles as expressed through volunteerism in order to allow several local institutions and organizations to continue to function. This paper demonstrates the far-reaching and often unanticipated changes a rural school's closure can have on a rural community's residents.

The quality of life in rural communities is largely influenced by the services and amenities that exist. Services related to business, health, education, and social services provide important structures to maintain rural community life. The challenges rural Canadian communities are currently facing, such as urbanization, aging populations, and a declining resource-based economy, are resulting in rural service restructuring, regionalization, and even service closures (Halseth & Ryser, 2006). A particularly strong example of this phenomenon is the declining enrollment in rural schools across Canada, which has resulted in amalgamations and increases in school closures (Schmidt, Murray, & Nguyen, 2007). These changes are important for residents of rural communities because of the multifaceted role schools play in supporting rural community life, whereby they act as cultural, recreation, and social centres (Lyson, 2002; Nachtigal, 1994; Parker, 2001; Waldman, 2008).

Increases in rural service closures, such as school closures, put pressure on local residents to fill the gaps left when these services are no longer available (Halseth & Ryser, 2007); having a strong volunteer capacity to provide programs, events, and functions in rural communities is essential when resources are limited (Petrzelka & Mannon, 2006). Research has, however, demonstrated that rural women do the majority of volunteer work, largely due to the “traditional gender division of labour in rural communities” (Petrzelka & Mannon, 2006, p. 237). Indeed, rural women are more likely to be involved in voluntary community organizations, whereas rural men are more often involved in economic industry organizations (Peter et al., 2000). Research has indicated that rural women’s volunteer work in the community mirrors that of domestic duties related to the home and family (Hook, 2004), which are also closely linked to supporting their

children's school activities. Kilpatrick et al. (2003) reported that rural schools rely heavily on active volunteer leadership from the community. Little is known, however, about what happens to these volunteers when a rural community's school closes.

The study described herein used social ecological theory (SET) and socialist feminist theory to describe the impacts Limerick School and its subsequent closure had on adult residents' gender roles as expressed through volunteerism in Limerick, Saskatchewan. Through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, I found that volunteer roles within the community were heavily gendered prior to the school's closure. Due to the school's closure, however, parents began to travel more often to the outlying communities that house their children's new schools, which limited parents' availability to volunteer in Limerick. As a result, community organizations had to find ways to fill the newly created volunteer gap, which resulted in some older male and female residents and middle-aged mothers taking on volunteer roles that are "non-traditional" in terms of gender roles. These findings emphasize the importance of gaining understanding of the complex links between gender roles, volunteerism, and rural schools' closures. Gaining such understanding is especially important due to the increasing number of rural school closures (Kirk, 2008) and the resulting increased reliance on volunteer groups to maintain rural residents' quality of life (Halseth & Ryser, 2007).

### **The Study Setting**

This paper is derived from a larger study of the impact of a rural school's closure on community life in Limerick, Saskatchewan, Canada. Limerick is a rural village located in south-central Saskatchewan; it is strongly embedded in the agriculture industry.

Limerick is home to approximately 445 community members: 130 in-town residents and roughly 315 farm residents (Statistics Canada, 2012). During the period of time in which the research was conducted, Limerick had several retail and business services that supported community life: a hair salon; construction company; insurance office; post office; bank; gas station; mechanic shop; grain elevator; grocery store; hotel; restaurant and bar; health and wellness centre; and daycare. Limerick also had numerous community organizations: a senior's club; youth program; community hall board; house authority; historical society; skating rink board; recreation board; service club; photography club; and a playschool. To facilitate these organizations' activities, the Village of Limerick maintains a range of community facilities including a rink, community hall, church, ball diamonds, and campground.

Limerick residents enjoyed a long association with their school. In 1911, Limerick's one-room schoolhouse opened on the outskirts of town (Limerick Historical Society, n.d). In 1913, a new, four-room schoolhouse was built within the community, which served to replace the previous school. Over the years, Limerick School was transformed into a facility that included eight classrooms, a staff office, and a gymnasium. Despite its long history in the community, the school closed in June 2007 with an enrollment of 46 students, five full-time staff, and one part-time educational assistant. In May 2008, the Village of Limerick and the rural municipality in which Limerick is located bought the school building and opened a community centre called The Limerick Opportunity Centre. The Opportunity Centre has a fitness room, gymnasium, computer and music equipment, and classroom space. Its space is also rented out to a variety of community clubs and associations.

Limerick was chosen as this study's site because of its recent school closure and because it was my hometown for sixteen years of my life. Since leaving the community, I have maintained a strong connection to the community and its residents, which enhanced my ability to conduct research there.

### **Literature Review**

To contextualize the impacts of a rural school's closure on gender roles as expressed through volunteerism, I reviewed literature related to rural community change and restructuring, rural school closures, gender and volunteerism, gender and rural communities, and gender, volunteerism and rural communities.

#### **Rural Community Change and Restructuring**

Canada's rural landscape is changing, largely due to technological advancements, urbanization, and globalization (Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Smithers, 2005). Canada's "strong global connections" (Reimer, 2006, p. 158) have been largely related to the natural resources that are found in rural and remote regions. For rural regions, globalization has increased their exposure to "international competition, a decrease in place-specific support programmes, and an increase in labour mobility" (Reimer, 2002, p. 848). As a result, resource-based industries and the communities in which they are found are vulnerable to fluctuating trade market conditions that are driven by global commodity demands and prices (Beckley & Burkosky, 1999; Halseth, 2007), which can cultivate unstable local economies (Reimer, 2002). The extent to which a rural community is influenced by globalization can vary, but researchers have indicated rural economies are affected by corporate and public policy decisions concerning natural resources (Apedaile, 2004), which in turn impact community services and resources.

According to Halseth et al. (2003), rural Canada service provisions have transitioned through three prominent eras. The first era saw rural communities as isolated entities with few public supported services and limited private sector enterprises, which resulted in rural communities looking after their own needs. The second era came about after the World War II. During this time there was an economic boom that fueled public and private sector growth, which expanded rural community services and resources. The government provided funding for services such as education and health care, which became widely available across rural Canada. During the last era, the economic crisis of the 1980s caused considerable cutbacks from both public and private sectors. During this period of time, the federal government “closed post-offices, employment insurance offices, and human resource offices” (Halseth & Ryser, 2007, p. 245). The federal government also cut back on transfer funds to provinces, which resulted in the closure of numerous health and education services (Halseth & Ryser, 2007).

Since the downturn in the 1980s, rural restructuring has varied from “industrial consolidation to the increasing adoption of labour-shedding technologies” (Ryser & Halseth, 2010, p. 513). These labour restructuring strategies have focused on labour allocation and requirements, which emphasize specialized training or high-skilled labour experience. As a result, jobs in resource sectors are lost because they are filled by consultants or on a short-term contract basis (Ryser & Halseth, 2010).

Today services continue to close and the regionalization of service delivery is on the rise (Halseth & Ryser, 2006; Ryser & Halseth, 2010). Regionalization involves a higher concentration of services in larger centres. With service closures and regionalization continuing, rural residents are faced with considerable distances to reach

essential services and resources, which can impact vulnerable residents, such as seniors and individuals living in poverty (Halseth & Ryser, 2007). Furthermore, rural communities are faced with younger generations migrating to urban centres for employment, which reduces their populations (Gabriel, 2002; Malatest, 2002; Ryser & Halseth, 2010) and makes it more challenging for the government to support the costs of delivering services (Desjardin et al., 2002). The availability and access to rural services such as retail, health, social, and education in rural communities impacts rural residents' quality of life and rural towns' ability to retain residents (Desjardin et al., 2002).

### **Rural School Closures**

Part of recent rural service restructuring has included school closures. The consolidation of rural schools is a highly contested issue because of the important roles schools play within rural communities (May, 2005). Rural schools often act as central social hubs in which residents interact through school-related events, which can cultivate community identity and a strong sense of community. Indeed, the school-community relationship can meet many community members' economic, academic, and social needs (Dunn, 1995; November, 1992). According to May (2005), rural communities residents' motivation to save their schools in the face of closures is less about academics and more about the future of their community. Rural schools often serve as a symbol for future community growth and prosperity (Lutz, Lutz, & Tweedale, 1992; 2002; Sell et al., 1996; Waldman, 2008). As Peshkin (1978) aptly noted many years ago, "viable villages generally contain schools; dying and dead ones either lack them or do not have them for long" (p. 161). A community's capacity to maintain a school is an indicator of its well-being.

According to Lauzon (2001), very few studies have explored the impacts of rural schools' consolidations and closures on rural community members; nevertheless, existing research has indicated that school closures can hinder population growth (Goudy et al., 1994), diminish community energy and enthusiasm (Parker, 2001; Tompkins, 2003), and decrease participation in civic and community organizations (Sell et al., 1996). Further, communities' economic stability can be lost as skilled employees leave (Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Waldman, 2008) and retail services lose income that was once generated by the school (Sell et al., 1996). Other researchers have found that opportunities for socialization and social cohesion often decline due to rural school closures (Egeland & Lausten, 2006; Witten et al., 2001) as families are forced to travel farther distances for their children's school activities and thus spend less time in the community (Kearns et al., 2009). The impact of a school's closure is complex and the consequences often extend across the community and into individuals' lives. Of particular interest for this study was the impact a school's closure had on rural residents' gender roles as expressed through volunteerism.

### **Gender and Volunteerism**

The differences in men and women's volunteer roles are closely linked to gender. According to Wilson (2000), human capital in the form of work, income, and free time, motivations, beliefs, and social resources all impact volunteer roles among men and women. Differences also exist in the amount of time men and women dedicate to volunteering. In a Canadian report by Mailoux et al. (2002), the authors found that women were more likely to volunteer than men. This finding may be due in part to the

fact that Mailoux et al. (2002) found that men were more likely than women to be employed-full-time.

In the broad context, research has found that women are more likely to take volunteer roles related to caring for and nurturing others (Mailoux et al., 2002; Wilson, 2000). For example, women often have specific volunteer jobs related to canvassing, campaigning or fundraising, provide care and support to others, and preparing and serving food (Gerstel, 2000; Mailoux et al., 2002; Roto & Wilson, 2007). Women are also engaged in supporting their children's school-related activities and more involved in volunteering in community and social services than their male counterparts (Mailoux et al., 2002). On the other hand, men are more likely than women to volunteer to teach or coach, engage in physical labour, provide transportation for an organization, sit on a board, contribute ideas, and do maintenance tasks (Mailoux et al., 2002). Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) found that men are more likely than women to engage in volunteer roles that closely resemble their formal employment or enhance their careers, to take on leadership roles, serve on committees, and do consulting work (Roto & Wilson, 2007). Men are also more engaged as volunteers in infrastructure, service clubs, firefighting, search and rescue, economic development, and sports and recreation organizations than women (Mailoux et al., 2002). As research has highlighted broad differences among men's and women's volunteer roles, it is important to understand how gender intersects with the rural community context.

### **Gender and Rural Communities**

Researchers have investigated gender in the rural community context since the 1980s (Little & Panelli, 2003). During this time, feminist scholars offered critiques of

rural community life based on gender inequalities. In particular, researchers found rural residents to embrace strong patriarchal ideologies that emphasize traditional roles whereby women are primarily responsible for both the household and family obligations (Halliday & Little, 2001; Little, 1987, 1997, 2002; Little & Austin, 1996; Midgley, 2006; Peter et al., 2000) and are “subordinate to the male breadwinner” (Little & Panelli, 2003, p. 282).

To expand scholarly knowledge on gender inequalities in the rural context, researchers have focused on the sexual division of labour and how inequalities in income and employment influence rural community life and men’s and women’s roles (Little & Panelli, 2003). More specifically, researchers have examined how men’s work takes precedence over and restricts women’s opportunities to engage in the labour force, which often results in women being at home and being responsible for family obligations (Hughes, 1997; Little, 1997; Little & Panelli, 2003). In rural regions, farming practices such as running farm machinery and access to knowledge and resources on agriculture are typically male domains; as a result, women often become dependent on men and take on roles that support the farm, most often as farmwives or mothers (Whatmore, 1991). Researchers have argued that the sexual division of labour found within rural communities’ work and domestic realms is also mimicked within the voluntary sector (Petrzelka & Mannon, 2006; Wilson, 1990).

### **Gender, Volunteerism, and Rural Communities**

Contemporary rural women’s lives are busy and complex, as they often include formal employment outside the home, managing the domestic and family domains, and contributing to rural community life as volunteers. As rural women’s voluntary efforts are

typically linked to social functions and events and supporting social services within the community, rural women are more likely than men to be the binding agent between family and community life (Midgley, 2006). These efforts have led some to state that women “are at the heart of rural communities” (Countryside Agency, 2003, p. 5).

Men also play important volunteer roles in the rural context. Researchers have stated that resource-based communities tend to be “male spaces,” where the interests of the male population are favoured (Dempsey, 1992; Marshall, 2001; McLeod & Hovorka, 2008). Such findings are largely connected to the labour intensive roles associated with resource-based employment in rural regions (Little & Jones, 2000). Dempsey (1992) found that rural communities are more dedicated to men’s interests and that men control most major decisions within the community, including within the volunteer realm, as they relate to recreation and community life; as a result, male volunteers in governing roles heavily influence decisions pertaining to recreation and community life.

As my review of literature demonstrates, rural schools greatly shape the ways in which men and women volunteer in their communities. At the same time, little is known about the ways in which rural school closures influence communities in general, but gender roles as expressed through volunteerism in particular. It is this gap that I sought to address in the research described below.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand a school closure’s impact on volunteers’ gender roles in a rural community, I needed to utilize a theoretical approach that analyzes multiple factors of influence, including gender. As both social ecological theory (SET) and socialist feminist theory address how community social structures, institutions, and policies influence

individual behaviour and interpersonal relations, such a theoretical pairing was both appropriate and necessary for this research.

### **Social Ecological Theory**

The SET framework primarily explores individual behaviour from a holistic view, where behaviour is viewed as being influenced by the physical, social, environmental, cultural, and legal environments (Henderson et al., 2001). From this perspective, individuals are acting in a multilayered system that exerts an influence on their behaviours. McLeroy et al. (1988) utilized a SET approach that identified multilayered levels of influences: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and organizational, community, and policy. Intrapersonal factors can include a person's knowledge, attitudes, skills, sex, gender, and age. Interpersonal factors are a person's interaction with others, their social networks, and relationships with family, friends, acquaintances, and work. Institutional and organizational factors include social institutions and organizations with formal and informal rules and regulations for operation, and organizations in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Community factors are established norms and standards that govern individuals, groups, and community-wide organizations. The last factor is related to policies at the local, provincial, and national level. In this paper, I follow Cardenas, Henderson, and Wilson (2009) by emphasizing select aspects of SET: intrapersonal and institutional and organizational factors of influence. Such an approach to SET is particularly useful for exploring complex issues, such as those related to a rural school's closure, while also enabling researchers to focus on key areas of interest.

### **Socialist Feminist Theory**

As the focus of my study was to understand the impacts a rural school's closure had on gender as expressed through volunteerism in Limerick, Saskatchewan, it was necessary to theorize gender. Socialist feminists argue that women are oppressed due to the unequal power relations that arise from social constructions of gender, race, and class. In particular, socialist feminists are concerned with broader societal sources of oppression, including relationships and structures within social institutions such as religion, education, the economy, and family (Aitcheson, 1997; Henderson et al., 1996). Socialist feminist theorists posit that women's oppression stems from capitalist patriarchy, which is the mutual dependence between the capitalist class structure and male supremacy (Calasanti & Bailey, 1991; Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993). Socialist feminists see capitalist patriarchy as operating within the sexual division of labour and society; as a result, these theorists focus on individuals as social beings who interact in larger social institutions (Sapiro, 1994) and place particular emphasis on women's dual roles in production and reproduction (Little, 1986).

Socialist feminist theory is of particular relevance to my study because the rural context cultivates gendered economic inequalities, especially in terms of employment and income (Dempsey, 1987), which influence volunteerism within the community context (Petrzelka & Mannon, 2006). Indeed, socialist feminists have critiqued the inequalities found in agriculture-based communities and have found that patriarchal gender relationships and the sexual division of labour exert strong influences on rural community life (Little & Panelli, 2003). Although socialist feminism presents a strong approach for exploring gender relations in the rural context it does present some limitations. Researchers have indicated that socialist feminism has a limited focus on social

differences, which results in a narrow analysis of the varying effects of inequalities impacting individuals (Sachs, 1996). Furthermore, socialist feminist theories have typically been urbanized models and therefore limited in their exploration of rural and farm women's lives (Alston, 1995). Although socialist feminist theory, like all theories, has some limitations, it still provided an adequate framework when combined with SET.

A challenge of combining SET and socialist feminism is related to their different ideologies. SET is a theoretical framework that is primarily descriptive, whereas socialist feminism is explanatory. SET's purpose is to describe "behaviour as being affected by, and affecting the social environment...SET divides the social environment into analytic levels that can be used to focus attention on different levels and types of social influences" (McLeroy et al., 1988). SET is a complex model that is often criticized for its inability to sufficiently explain the sources impacting individual behaviour (McLeroy, et al., 1988). Socialist feminism is concerned with broader societal sources of oppression and explains women's oppression from the mutual dependence between capital class structure and male supremacy (Calasanti & Bailey, 1991). Although the combination of these different approaches has some tensions, together they provide a necessary framework for this study.

The combination of SET and socialist feminism was necessary for this paper for a number of reasons. Researchers have indicated that many models of SET are too simplistic and do not explore interactions between the various layers that comprise the model (Gold Earp, 2012). By combining SET and socialist feminism, I am able to further explore the relationship between gender and the broader levels of influence related to SET. Furthermore, SET does not adequately take into consideration the individual's social or cultural context (Burke et al., 2009); however, by combining SET with socialist

feminism, I can “draw attention to the socially constructed aspects of difference between men and women” (Shortall, 2002, p. 160), and enhance our understanding of rural ideals, gender roles, and social practices that impact men’s and women’s roles within the community.

The use of SET with socialist feminist theory is further warranted because gender is an intrapersonal factor within SET. Yet, as feminist theorists have pointed out, there are a variety of ways of theorizing and thus understanding gender; as such, it is necessary to position myself within gender-based theories if I am to adequately conceptualize and use gender in my analysis. Thus, by using these two theories in tandem, I am able to use SET’s strengths while simultaneously addressing its weakness (a lack of a theoretical lens through which to understand gender) through the use of a robust lens through which I can conceptualize gender.

### **Methodology**

For this research, I employed a qualitative exploratory single case study methodology; this approach is preferred when researchers want to explore a complex phenomenon in great depth (Stake, 1995). Case studies can focus on a community, organization, individual, or event in a bounded context (Bryman, 2004; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2003; Punch, 2005; Tight, 2010). A key feature of case studies is the use of multiple methods of data collection (Yin, 2009), which provide a thick, rich description of the complex phenomenon under study (Gummesson, 2007). The case study I utilized was exploratory in nature. The primary reason for utilizing an exploratory case study framework is to highlight a given issue or phenomenon through a detailed examination of an event (Yin, 2009). As such, this case study’s focus was to understand

how one school's closure affected rural residents' lives, specifically the impact it had on volunteers' gender roles.

Other researchers have effectively utilized the case study approach to explore the school-community relationship. For example, researchers in New Zealand utilized case study methodologies to investigate the impact of a school's closure on sense of place and cohesion (Kearns et al., 2009) and rural families (Witten et al., 2003). Furthermore, case studies have been used to investigate the complex school-community relationship with regard to social capital (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2004) and rural community leadership (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk, & Prescott, 2002). The strengths of case study methodologies are embedded in the multiple methods of data collection and the isolated focus on one event, which makes it an appropriate approach for exploring the impact of a school closure on rural residents' lives.

### **Methods**

I gathered data through four semi-structured interviews with key community informants, three semi-structured interviews with married couples (six individuals), and three focus groups with a total of twelve adults. All participants lived in Limerick before and after the school's closure. Data were also gathered through participant observation – which was recorded as fieldnotes during my frequent trips to the community.

All interviews and focus groups were semi-structured in nature and included discussion of life in the community prior to and after the school's closure, men's and women's volunteer roles in the community, and the benefits and challenges the community has faced due to the school closure. Sample questions included 1) What was life like in the community before the school closed?; 2) What is life like now in the

community since the school closed?; 3) What roles did men and women play in the community prior to the school closure?; and, 4) What roles do men and women now play in the community after the school closure?

All interviews with key community informants took place in the participants' homes or place of work and lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. The key informants included a town council member, a female volunteer with the community's Opportunity Centre, a female who volunteered with the various local community organizations, and a male who volunteers with the local community hall. The key informants had leadership roles within the community and were able to assist the primary researcher in generating a contact list of potential study participants for the focus groups. After the interviews with the key informants, I organized three focus group sessions with interested participants. Due to scheduling conflicts, some participants were unable to participate in the focus group, but wanted to contribute to the study. As such, I organized interviews with the remaining participants, which included three married couples. All interviews with key informants and the married couples took place in the participants' homes or place of work and lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. Couple one was comprised of a male and a female, both in their mid-thirties, with two school-aged children. Couple two was made-up of a male and a female, both in their late-thirties, with three school-aged children. The final couple, included a male and a female, both in their mid-fifties with no school-aged children.

The first and third focus groups took place at a participant's home, and the second focus group took place in the local community centre. The first focus group included three female adult residents who ranged in age from 50-70 years of age. The

second focus group was comprised of five female adult residents, ranging in age from 29-70 years of age. The third focus group was made up of one female and three male adult residents, ranging in age from 40-65 year in age. The initial intent was to ensure a relatively balanced representation of men and women in the study; however, due to scheduling conflicts and other commitments some of the men initially invited to participant had to decline. Each focus group lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. I digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim all interviews with the key community informants, the married couples, and focus groups. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants to protect their identities.

Data collection also involved participant observation, which was conducted over a two-year period. Due to Limerick's primary economic industry being agriculture-based, it was important to stagger visits to the community, because farming practices intensify during certain times of the year which influences community life. As a result, I varied my visits throughout the year. During these visits I participated in community-wide events, such as community Christmas party and a fundraising auction, and engaged in informal conversations with local residents at local community businesses. All participant observation activities were recorded as fieldnotes, which were included in the data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the transcripts using Creswell's (2009) six-step data analysis, which emphasizes an inductive approach. The first step involved organizing the interview and focus group transcripts and field notes. Next, I carried out an initial read of the all the transcripts and field notes to understand the meanings that were emerging. The third step

involved coding, which started with a comprehensive read of all the transcripts and field notes. I selected one transcript, read it through, and made comments in the margins. This process was repeated for all transcripts and field notes. I then produced a list of topics from the comments made in the margins. From this list of topics I clustered similar topics together, and assigned them codes and compared to the original transcripts and documents under review. For example, I linked together codes related to the roles men and women had that supported the school, such as “women and driving” and “men and coaching” to form the category “gender and school.” Creswell (2009) suggested developing codes based on the specifics of the study. In terms of my research, codes included 1) those related to the literature, such as gender and volunteerism, 2) those that were unexpected or unusual, such as those related to older aged adults, and 3) those that were directly related to the theoretical framework, such as intrapersonal, and institutional and organization factors. Once I identified the codes, I categorized them using descriptive wording and clustered together similar categories. Fourthly, I developed broader themes. For example, “gender and school” and “gender and community life” developed the theme “reinforcing traditional gender roles before the school’s closure.” Step five involved expanding on the themes as they corresponded to the theoretical framework, SET and socialist feminism. I then finished my analysis with step six, which involved my interpretation of the data as they related to the theoretical framework and relevant literature.

## **Results**

The data revealed that Limerick’s school, and especially its closure, influenced volunteer roles in three main ways: 1) when in operation, the school reinforced traditional

gendered volunteer roles within the school and within various community organizations; 2) the school's closure reduced the time men and women had to volunteer in Limerick and causing a gap in volunteer engagement; and 3) the gap in volunteer engagement resulted in changes to traditional gendered volunteer roles.

### **Reinforcing Traditional Gender Roles Prior to the School's Closure**

Prior to the school's closure, the participants reported that men and women held traditionally gendered volunteer roles both within the school and community contexts.

**School.** Prior to its closure, Limerick's school reinforced traditional gender roles in volunteerism. When the school was open, study participants reported conventional gendered volunteer roles for men and women. For example, study participants stated that women drove their children or grandchildren to and from school-related activities because their husbands or sons had to work. Gabby, a local farm wife, talked about her experiences with her granddaughter: "Tiffany would phone up and say, 'Grandma we [Tiffany and her school friends] got to be here, can you come get [drive] us?' We took our granddaughter places when her dad was working. He didn't have time to get off work and go." Blair, a community volunteer and business owner, echoed similar thoughts: "women did more driving [before the school's closure] because they were more available than men, so they would take the children to school and [school-related] sporting events."

In addition to driving, women were heavily involved in school-related fundraising activities. Abbey, a local business owner, noted the amount of fundraising in which she was a part: "Yeah the kids were always out selling this or that and you participated in that a lot." Heidi, a local farmer, echoed Abbey's statement: "There was a lot of fundraising

and stuff like that we used to do to raise money.” As for men’s roles, according to Blair they were more “hands-on, and did stuff with physical needs to help build ... something [at the school] or coach.” Rick identified that much of his involvement with the school was in his kids’ sporting activities: “I coached high school volleyball and coached [base]ball.”

**Community life.** When asked about men’s and women’s volunteer roles in the broader community prior to the school’s closure, study participants highlighted very traditional gender-based roles. Abbey explained, “Yeah, there is almost an expectation that the women are going to provide the food, the transportation no matter what the event.” Curt, a local farmer and father added that women most often took on “starting new programs and functions and anything with the children.” Blair stated, “the women were more involved with, say, some of the coordinating and recreation activities, and help with the preparation of foods and some of the fundraising events.” Men, on the other hand, were engaged in “maintenance or moving” (Heidi), or as Abbey stated, “men’s work.” According to Curt, “I think the men get comfortable in their macho roles. I’m a firefighter, I’m construction worker, or whatever. When something needs to be built, it’s the men [who build it].”

Limerick has a community hall that is voluntarily operated by both men and women. The hall hosts functions and events for both the local community and outside groups and organizations that raise money to support the facility’s infrastructure and community-wide events. The roles men and women play to support the community hall are also traditionally gendered. According to Gabbey, “women do all the baking, and the men grudgingly had to do the cleanup, sweep the floors, put the tables away [heavy

lifting].” Similar thoughts were echoed by Mark, a local volunteer, who stated that at community events, women “cook and clean.”

Traditionally gendered volunteer roles were also evident within Limerick’s local governance. As Tom, a local employee at the agriculture centre, stated, “Town council yeah, there are just three men and the town administrator, Tanya.” When asked about men’s roles in the community, Donna, a local resident felt, “they are the ones to make decisions on what’s happening within the community,” while Lisa a local employee stated men’s roles were “in regards to the monetary needs” of the community.

Limerick also has an ice arena that hosts both local and outlying communities’ ice skating, figure skating, and hockey activities and events. The operation of the facility has historically been undertaken by male volunteers. Heidi explained, “I don’t know if there is a woman on the rink board, or ever has been, but the men run [the rink] well.” As another female resident, Lisa, jokingly stated, “we [women] are banned from the rink, that's treachery!”

### **Volunteer Gap in Traditional Gender Roles**

The school-community relationship disappeared after the school’s closure. Following the closure, Limerick lost an enormous amount of volunteer capacity, as parents and youth began investing their time in outlying communities for school-related activities. Blair explained,

I think the parents are traveling too many different directions - they find it difficult to be still involved and dedicate their time to the community here now. It's difficult to get people to help and do the work that needs to be done on the volunteer basis.

The gap in volunteer efforts was also evident among men in the community. In particular, the absence of fathers became evident when study participants talked about how hard it was to find volunteers to run the rink and to sit on the hall board, which were both operated by men. Blair explained,

It's difficult to find people that will volunteer their time... They are going in other rinks, they are heading in other directions, they work in other places, their children go to school in other towns. It's very difficult. It's more and more difficult to get people to help. It's difficult, more difficult to get people together on boards and be representatives to help out with, for example, our Community Hall Board.

Although study participants highlighted that parents were traveling more, it became evident that the women were still primarily responsible for their children's school-related activities. As Abbey stated, "women still do most of the driving." The increase in travel among women became problematic for Limerick, because it meant women had less time to volunteer for community activities and events.

Since the school's closure, women, particularly mothers, have also been spending more time volunteering in outlying communities to support their children's new school activities, which has limited their availability to support Limerick's community life. Lori described the situation:

I'll tell you that the first day I saw a picture in the local paper of a pancake breakfast that they were having at the primary school in Assiniboia and I saw one of our moms there, it just, it made my, I mean my heart physically hurt when I

looked at that picture, but of course she has to be there. Her daughter goes to that school so if she has got time, she has to be there.

As more mothers became invested in volunteer opportunities in outlying communities, the gap in volunteer efforts resulted in the disappearance of long-standing community events. In particular, many of the community events the local church once hosted have ceased. Cathy, a local resident stated that the “Fall supper organized by the church hasn’t happened for at least two years now, because the responsibilities are falling on the younger kids, and younger women.” According to Lori, “We [Church] don’t do our soup and sandwiches anymore without the kids, but it’s also without the parents, because it was always the women that were involved in it.”

### **Changing Traditional Gender Roles**

With fewer volunteers to draw upon because they – especially the parents, were volunteering at their children’s new school and at other activities in outlying communities, Limerick’s community organizations, especially their older members, had to adapt. Since the school’s closure, adult men and women aged fifty to seventy and several middle-aged women have had to adopt non-traditional volunteer roles to keep community organizations running, especially at the community social events at the senior’s club, Church, Opportunity Centre, and the ice rink.

Throughout my trips to the community, I was able to observe and take part in various community activities and social conversations with local residents. During one visit to the community, I noticed that older adult men were organizing events that were new to the community. For example, an older-aged male member of the senior’s club developed a weekly Friday night social event for the community, and volunteered to

establish a St. Patrick's Day fundraising event to support local community activities and infrastructure upgrades, which in the past were activities typically organized and implemented by women.

When the school closed, Limerick's church experienced an initial decline in activities, because the mothers that had supported the church activities had less time to volunteer. As a result, the church restructured and added a men's ministry comprised mostly of older men, which has resulted in new community activities. More specifically, the church launched special occasion lunches and a Shrove Tuesday pancake dinner, which are all organized by the men. Lori explained,

So we always have lunch after church on Sundays, but now like on Mother's Day and Valentine's Day, the men do the lunch, a fancy lunch, and bring all those fancy cookies and things. Shrove Tuesday they [the men's ministry] do a pancake supper. And they are doing it this year with the hall board because they need extra guys to help. It's really a cool thing to watch.

In an effort to rebuild their sense of community after the school's closure, Limerick's older residents also encouraged the town to take ownership of the school building and turned it into a community centre known as the Opportunity Centre. Older volunteers predominantly run the Centre and it hosts numerous recreation activities for both youth and adults. It also provides rental space for a few small businesses. The Centre is primarily managed by a female volunteer in her early sixties. During a tour of the facility, the manager discussed with me the tasks for which she was responsible in order for the centre to operate. She highlighted non-traditional roles related to maintenance and

labour on top of programming and administration work. Heidi supported these observations through her description of the roles associated with the volunteer position:

We've got one person that has the desire and keeps things running at the Opportunity Centre. She is up three times a day checking the furnaces, doing the maintenance [viewed traditionally as men's work], taking phone calls for every event whether it's rug hooking or like anything that's going on. She is the contact person.

While it has been predominantly older adults who have taken on non-traditional gender roles to fill the gap in volunteer capacity, several middle-aged women have also adopted non-traditional roles to allow the ice rink to continue to operate. In the past, Limerick's rink was predominantly operated by middle and older-aged men. Since the school's closure, however, it has had to draw on middle-aged women for support. Sandi explained, "well they put the women on the [crew list], but only if [the men] are really, really short."

The above findings indicate that the school had a strong impact on gendered volunteer roles within Limerick. Specifically, when the school was operational, study participants highlighted how volunteer roles within the school and community context were divided by gender, with women planning and implementing community social functions and men maintaining facilities and engaging in physical labour. The school's closure caused parents to become engaged in outlying communities to support their children's activities, which limited their volunteer contributions in Limerick. As a result, the older adult residents restructured various community institutions and organizations,

which necessitated changing gendered volunteer roles, and some middle-aged mothers also embraced non-traditional gender roles to support the rink.

### **Discussion**

My findings suggest that a rural school's closure can have profound impacts beyond those pertaining to children's education and the economy; in addition, they touch a wide variety of community members in ways that have been previously ignored within the literature. Prior to the school's closure, the capitalist, patriarchal ideologies that supported men's economic control over women was evident in community members' volunteer roles. The school's closure, however, caused a gap in volunteer capacity as parents became more engaged in outlying communities to support their children's school-related and recreational activities; as such, they had less time to invest in Limerick's community functions, events, and facilities. This resulted in a change in traditional gender roles within Limerick's voluntary institutions and organizations, especially among older adults. While older-aged adults appeared to be adopting non-traditional roles to the greatest extent, middle-aged women were also shifting their gender roles to support the local rink. Although I found that parents in general were less engaged in volunteering in the community, some mothers supported the rink because it was closely linked to their children's sporting activities. These findings extend our understanding of not only rural school closures, but also gendered volunteer roles in rural communities.

#### **Limerick Prior to the School's Closure: Reinforcing Traditional Gender Roles**

When it was open, Limerick School reinforced traditional gendered volunteer roles. Using the SET, it is clear that the school (i.e., an institution) influenced intrapersonal factors (i.e., gender roles). When asked about men's and women's volunteer

roles as they related to the school's functions prior to its closure, Blair stated women drove their children to school and sporting events because they were more available than men due to men's (paid) work commitments. Through Blair's and other participants' comments I began to see how men's paid work resulted in women engaging in unpaid, conventionally feminine work because they were deemed to be more available to attend to their children's and the broader communities' needs. Using a socialist feminist lens, I can identify a subordination of women's work/needs/interests to those of men's. My study thus supports previous research findings that have argued that the idealization of rural community life, known as the *rural idyll*, in which the rural school plays a large part, is largely constructed from dominant patriarchal ideologies (Allen, 2002; Cloke, 1997) and perpetuates traditional gender roles; however, after the school closed, a change in traditional gender roles for volunteers became evident.

### **Volunteer Gap in Traditional Gender Roles**

According to McLeroy et al. (1988), community institutions and organizations in the private, public, and nonprofit spheres impact individual behaviour. In my study, Limerick School's closure influenced other community institutions and organizations. In particular, some of the programs and volunteer roles within Limerick's institutions and organizations were reorganized because parents, especially women, were volunteering in or had to drive their children to outlying communities. Without such unpaid labour within Limerick, some of the community's institutions and organizations discontinued various events. The time rural parents, especially women, spend traveling is compounded in the rural context. In particular, rural communities as compared to urban communities are typically physically isolated and have limited resources, which increases the need and

time for travel, which – as found by Hornsby and Doherty (2003) and supported by these findings, limits women's time to volunteer for community activities.

The struggle to find volunteers was also evident among the male residents of Limerick. Previous literature has indicated that rural men dominate leisure facilities, especially those related to sport and recreation (Dempsey, 1992). Similar to these findings, my study indicated that prior to the school's closure, male volunteers operated Limerick's ice rink, more conventionally called a hockey rink, which inscribes it as male space. When the school closed, however, fathers were pulled into outlying communities to support their children's sport activities. As a result, the rink was unable to maintain a contingent of male volunteers. As volunteer engagement declined among men and women, certain responsibilities and tasks in the community were left unmet. As a result, the vacancy in volunteerism forced a change in traditional gender roles.

### **Changing Traditional Gender Roles**

The dynamic interplay between SET's intrapersonal factors, such as gender roles, and institutional and organizational factors, such as the delivery of programs and structure of volunteer responsibilities, was amplified for Limerick's residents because of the school's recent closure. The labour intensive roles associated with resource-based employment in rural regions (Little & Jones, 2000) have historically dictated men's and women's traditional volunteer roles within communities. My study, however, showed that after the school's closure, older men and women and several mothers chose to take on volunteer roles that were deemed "untraditional" to enable the continuance of various community organizations. For example, the school's closure limited the time mothers had to support community events, such as the ones hosted by the church. In fact, as stated

earlier, the church had to discontinue some activities because the women were not as available. To provide new activities, the church developed a men's ministry, which took charge of some program activities largely related to food preparation, a conventionally feminine activity. Lori commented that the church lunches used to be organized by the women, but now the men's ministry provides lunches and organizes special celebrations. The men's new roles in organizing community events contradict stereotypical gender expectations of men because the planning of community events and social activities has typically been a conventionally feminine activity (Midgley, 2006).

The older adult men were not the only cohort that shifted their traditional gender roles. In addition, middle-aged mothers also began volunteering at the rink, but mainly because the rink was a facility that facilitated their children's activities. This finding is particularly interesting, as rural school closures have not typically been associated with the demise of male control over sport and recreation facilities. Similar to Dempsey's (1992) findings, I found Limerick's ice rink had been historically dominated by men. Since the school's closure, however, the men struggled to find volunteers to support its function; as a result, women volunteers became necessary. Despite Dempsey's (1992) claim that men dominate sport facilities in rural communities, my study shows how the sexual division of volunteer labour can be blurred as women take on roles within institutions that have been historically male dominated, which according to socialist feminist theory has been one of the causes of women's oppression, especially within the rural context (Little & Panelli, 2003). While the changes at the ice rink seemed to be a last resort of sorts, and further show many mothers' desire to volunteer in positions that

enable their children's continued sport participation and thus may be argued to support patriarchal norms, they do show that change is occurring.

Taken together, my research findings highlight that Limerick's residents coped with the school's closure by restructuring community institutions, organizations, and functions, which resulted in changes to the traditional gender roles within the volunteer sector. These changes in gender roles show that some residents of rural communities are challenging gendered ideologies that have long dictated men's and women's roles in rural community life.

### **Conclusions**

Through SET and socialist feminist theory I was able to show how a rural school's closure influenced individual behaviour. In particular, my study highlights how rural restructuring, such as a school's closure, has impacts that extend far beyond economic or educational factors; indeed, Limerick School's closure caused a cascade of events, which resulted in many changes, including changes to gendered volunteer roles. These findings are critically important because rural gender researchers have highlighted women's continued oppression in rural communities (Little & Paneill, 2006); furthermore, as Little (2002) suggested, a focus on rural men's lives is lacking in scholarly research.

This study also addresses some of SET's weaknesses. In particular, researchers have argued SET neglects the social and cultural domains of life that influence individual behaviour (Burke et al., 2009) and lacks depth in reporting interactions between various layers of the model (Golden & Earp, 2012). By combining socialist feminism within SET, I was able to show how the traditional patriarchal ideologies of rural life influence volunteer gender roles, and how these roles are influenced by an institution's closure.

Furthermore, this study highlights the interaction between multiple layers of SET – a lack of consideration of these interactions has been considered a weakness of others' use of this model (Burke et al., 2009). For example, in this study volunteer gender roles (intrapersonal) influenced Limerick's church, 49'ers club, and the development of the Opportunity centre (institution and community organizations), which then helped reconnect residents (interpersonal factor).

Importantly, I do not suggest that all gender roles in Limerick are changing; indeed, many of the parents who volunteered outside of Limerick maintained the gendered division of volunteer labour, but outside of the community. Nevertheless, changes in the gendered nature of some volunteer roles within Limericks' institutions and community organizations highlight the ways in which a rural community may respond to challenges – many of which may be unexpected, presented by a school's closure. Faced with rural restructuring, rural residents are being challenged; as a result, some are stepping beyond the boundaries of patriarchal ideologies that have historically influenced a well-known way of life. Problematizing these traditional ideologies and transforming rural communities in this way might just be the response needed to sustain their future.

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## **Chapter 5: Conclusions**

Rural communities across Canada are being challenged by environmental, industrial, economic, social, and political changes, which are influencing rural restructuring. In a broad context, restructuring can include decentralization, a decline in natural resource production, and public and private service closures. Research has indicated that there are various forms of rural restructuring happening across Canada and that they have been accompanied by a wave of implications for rural residents' lives. The event of a rural school's closure is just one example of rural restructuring, but one that my doctoral research has shown to have profound effects on a variety of rural community residents. In this conclusion, I provide a brief review of my dissertation before drawing some broader conclusions concerning my findings' implications.

### **Overview**

The three papers that comprise this dissertation highlight the profound changes that the residents of one rural community, Limerick, Saskatchewan, Canada, have faced since its school closed. My research revealed that Limerick School's closure had far reaching impacts on many aspects of community life.

In the first paper, "Changing Relationships: The Impacts of a Rural School's Closure on Rural Families, I showed how the school's closure had a significant impact on Limerick families, especially in terms of family members' relationships. The school's closure forced students and their parents into outlying communities for school-related activities, which disconnected them from the larger Limerick community as a whole. Moreover, I also found that the school's closure had impacts on extended family members. When the school was open, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were more likely to connect with youth and their parents through school-related events, celebrations, and

sporting activities; however, the school's closure resulted in extended family members having fewer opportunities to interact with the youth and their parents. Although the school's closure had some negative impact on family members' relationships, my study also identified positive changes, especially as they related to fostering new friendships in outlying communities. Of particular importance to participants was the opportunity for both adults and youth to create extended networks of friends outside the immediate Limerick community, something that was facilitated by spending time engaged in school-related activities in outlying communities.

In the second paper, I used SET to explore the school closure's impact on adults without school-aged children. I found that adults without school-aged children felt a shift in interpersonal relationships that diminished the sense of community they once felt when the school was open. In particular, study participants reported that after the school's closure there were fewer opportunities to informally interact with one another. As a result, adult residents without school-aged children feared for Limerick's future and responded by reorganizing other community institutions and organizations and developing a new community centre. The church, the senior's club, and the Opportunity Centre are examples of organizations that adult residents revived or created in order to fill the void created by the school's closure. In turn, these organizations allowed residents without school-aged children to reconnect with other members of the community and to rebuild their sense of community.

In the final paper, I used SET and socialist feminist theory together to investigate the school closure's impact on gender roles as expressed through volunteerism within Limerick's institutions and community organizations. The findings highlighted how the

school, when operational, reinforced traditional gender roles in men's and women's volunteer activities. In particular, women supported their children's school-related activities and planned community-wide social functions and events, whereas men coached, volunteered at the local rink, and engaged in physical labour or local governance. When the school closed, however, adults, particularly those with school-aged children, started volunteering in outlying communities to support their children's school-related activities, which limited the time they could volunteer within Limerick. As a result, a gap in volunteer capacity became evident, which forced those who volunteered at Limerick's community institutions and organizations to adapt. More specifically, older adult residents and some middle-aged women took on non-traditional gendered volunteer roles to support Limerick's senior's club and church, while some middle-aged women engaged in non-traditional gendered volunteer roles at the local ice rink.

These papers make strong and novel contributions to the scholarly literature. In particular, taken together, they show how a rural school's closure can cause a ripple effect that facilitates change throughout an entire community – even amongst those not typically considered as being affected by a school's closure. The ability to highlight the ripple effect of the school closure on community life was accomplished by utilizing a comprehensive theoretical framework.

### **Considerations of the Employment of SET and Socialist Feminist Theory**

Articulating the ripple effect on residents' lives that was caused by the school's closure was made possible by utilizing SET for the first two papers and by using SET in

combination with socialist feminist theory in the third paper. The SET model employed in this study was comprised of five factors of influence on individual behaviour including intrapersonal, interpersonal, community institutions and organizations, and policy factors (McLeroy et al., 1988). In my study, I was able to address some critiques of SETs by including reporting on three layers of SET, exploring interactions between SET layers, and integrating social and cultural contexts within the larger SET framework.

### **Focusing SET**

Although SET is comprised of five factors, in this study I limited the reporting to three: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community institutions and organizations factors. Reporting on only three layers of SET is not unusual; in fact, few researchers have been able to employ all five SET layers. Through an extensive review of 20 years of health promotion research, Golden and Earp (2012) found that most researchers that used SET limited their research to focus intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of influence; however, in this study I reported on three different layers of SET. As such, I was able to consider more layers than most scholars.

### **SET and Interacting Layers**

The literature on the impacts of a school closure on residents' lives is sparse, but this study allowed for a more in-depth investigation within certain levels of SET and how these levels interact with one another. Researchers have argued that general SET models tend to emphasize a top down motion of influence and do not capture the potential for influences between different SET layers (Burke et al., 2009; Langille & Rodgers, 2012).

In this study, however, I was able to capture interactions between different levels of SET. For example, I identified how the school influenced individuals' lives based on

age, an intrapersonal factor within SET. For example, in the third paper of this study, I highlighted how the school's closure influenced traditional gender roles, but also how these traditional roles influenced community organizations. As such, my study captures the complex interactions between layers, a notion of the SET model that has been critiqued by some researchers.

### **SET and the Study's Social and Cultural Context**

Utilizing SET in a rural context had advantages for this study – and I argue that it shows utility for future research. First, the use of SET approaches in the rural research context is limited. Sallis et al. (2006), who employed a SET model to explore active living, found that most SET models focus on middle class, white adults living in urban and suburban settings and has neglected rural and at-risk populations. The rural context of my study demonstrates this framework's potential for use in future rural research. Second, the rural context of my study emphasizes the social and cultural constructs of rural life. Burke et al. (2009) critiqued general SET models for failing to capture the social and cultural domains of life adequately or with necessary depth. In my study, however, I was able to highlight the dichotomy of the rural idyll and rural dull – two prominent constructs of rural life, and the myths that surround them through the employment SET. For example, the rural idyll frames rural community life as tight knit and with a strong sense of community; however, in my study, the school's closure (institution) depleted Limerick of its younger generations (intrapersonal), which resulted in disconnected relationships (interpersonal) and a decrease in sense of community. By embracing the socially constructed ideals of rurality we can deepen our understanding of the influences the rural context has on residents' behaviours.

Although SET models have been criticized for their limited ability to capture the social and cultural domains of life and their influences on individuals' lives, by incorporating socialist feminism into my third paper I was able to highlight the socially constructed ideals of men and women's roles in a rural community. Through this approach I was able to capture and understand the broader ideologies of men's and women's traditional roles in rural community life within the larger framework of SET through intrapersonal factors related to gender. As a result, I was better able to address the social and cultural domains of rural life and thus further respond to previous criticisms of SET.

### **Rural Idyll, Rural Dull, or Rural Confusion**

Limerick's school served as a central hub for socialization within the community and served to help nurture relationships between the residents as well as the institutions and organizations, which strengthened and sustained residents' sense of community. The important role Limerick's school had within the community made it a highly valued institution; however, the school's closure severed many dynamic school-community relationships, a change that extended beyond education and disrupted Limerick residents' usual way of life. By employing the SET – and in the case of the third paper, socialist feminist theory too - I was able to show how Limerick School's closure had a ripple effect that extended throughout intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community institution and organization facets of Limerick residents' lives.

What SET illustrates is the complexity of rural life during turbulent times. A school's closure can create a ripple effect that has an impact on many facets of rural community life. I argue that the school's closure resulted in a once inward looking, self-

sustaining community looking outwards for not only education, but also for new relationships and leisure activities, all of which serve to limit the time, energy, and volunteer work that are now invested in Limerick. Reduced social ties in rural communities that result from looking outward can have long-term implications on residents' ideas of what a community is, how it functions, and their civic engagement, which could further threaten the self-sustaining practices and sense of community upon which rural communities have prided themselves for so long (Jackson, Peterson, & Spear, 2001).

I suggest that the school acted as an anchor to a traditional way of life; without it, the community became vulnerable to the ripples of change that the school's closure caused. The school was an institution that cultivated a way of life similar to the ideals of the *rural idyll*, which is characterized by a strong sense of community, friendliness, strong civic engagement, and close relationships among residents (Haugen & Villa, 2006). The school's closure, however, disconnected Limerick's residents from one another and the strong social fabric that once existed began to fray, which represents the notions of the *rural dull*. Researchers have framed the rural dull with strict feelings of social control, limited education and job opportunities, lack of choices for cultural and leisure activities, heighten physical and social isolation, and being less progressive and embracing a more traditional way of life (Haugen & Villa, 2006; Rye, 2006; Warner-Smith & Brown, 2002). With the school's closure came the fear for the community's future, especially when the younger cohort was forced to engage more frequently with other outlying communities. I believe, nevertheless, that Limerick exemplifies neither the rural dull nor the rural idyll; instead, I suggest that it represents what I would call *rural confusion*. I frame rural

confusion as the state that occurs when rural communities' residents are forced to respond to challenges outside of their control by attempting to rebuild their community, find a new identity, and create a sustainable and viable future.

According to Bryant and Grady (1990), one of the key principles of community stability is centripetalism, which is the notion that community members work with one another towards common goals. I assert that the school served as the focus of this centripetalism. With it now closed, Limerick's community members are attempting to find other institutions to which they can anchor the community. Several institutions, such as the church and the Opportunity Centre, are key parts of community members' response - yet none, as of yet, has been able to take the school's place. As such, confusion remains as to how the community can become what it once was without the institution that helped to shape it.

### **Broader Implications and Future Directions**

Although this study's results cannot be generalized, I do suggest that a school's closure can have several broad implications for rural life that warrant further consideration and research. In this section, I turn my attention to rural youth and adult civic engagement, rural youth and social capital, rural seniors, rural families, and rural leisure and recreation.

#### **Rural Youth and Adult Civic Engagement**

There is an adage that "it takes a village to raise a child—meaning child rearing should be a community effort" (Salamon, 2002, p. 3). However, when the children in your village are gone, what happens to the village? The role of the community in youth development can be profound. Youth and families do not live in isolation; rather, they are

embedded in larger communities that exert cultural norms and values (Benson et al., 2012). The cultural context of community life can positively and negatively influence youth development. The relationship between the community and youth is not, however, just uni-directional, but instead reciprocal: both youth and the community influence one another.

Researchers have found that youth have the potential to inspire action and infuse energy among adults and community organizations (Zeldin et al., 2000). Youth's presence in a rural community has the potential to impact adult residents' civic participation. Rural communities intergenerational relationships can inspire civic participation among residents, which contributes to community cohesion through an emphasis on voluntary actions that motivate and create a sense of community among community residents (Coakes & Bishop, 2002). There is evidence in my study that, as a result of Limerick school's closure, adults and youth have disconnected from one another. The disconnection inspired action among adults without school-aged children and community organizations reorganized programs and events in an effort to reconnect residents and cultivate the sense of community that was lost after the schools closure. However, Limerick's youth are no longer as engaged in the community as they once were, and over time adults might lose motivation and inspiration to continue to take action within the community. The youth's presence in rural community life can have significant influence on rural adult's civic participation and warrants further research.

### **Rural Youth and Social Capital**

The relationship between generations in the rural community setting is an integral part of rural life; the relationships between the younger and older generations are valued

and seen as beneficial to both to the residents individually and to the community as a whole (Jarrett et al., 2005). According to Parker (2001), when youth are engaged in community life as active participants, they discover a deeper understanding of the norms and values that comprise it. Youth's community involvement is partially influenced by their parents' civic participation. Researchers have found a clear link between parental involvement and their children's social participation in community life. According to Chan and Elder (2001), "Active citizens are created early through parents' actions, both social and economic. Through their own involvement, parents socialize children into a civic culture, engender community values, and encourage participation in youth groups" (p. 26). That being the case, a school's closure can have considerable implications on rural youth's involvement in the community. In my study, as a result of Limerick School's closure, parents became largely disengaged from Limerick's community activities and organizations because of the increased time spent in outlying communities. The disengagement to civic life can be problematic for rural life, especially as it relates to social capital.

According to Putnam (2000), social capital is embedded in moral obligation and norms, social values (especially trust), and social networks. Social capital directs attention to the mechanisms that strengthen the integration of societal values, solidarity and togetherness that creates consensus and sustains a stable society. The evidence Putnam utilized to establish his theory of social capital was significantly based upon voluntary association memberships for civic engagement (Hemingway, 2006). For example, the decline in voluntary associations was evident in spheres that include

political participation, civic involvement, religious practice, involvement in leisure and sport clubs, the workplace, and volunteering (Blackshaw & Long, 2005; Putnam, 2000).

Because social capital is reliant on civic participation, the increase in parental disengagement from Limerick's community life could affect the future of rural community life. In particular, parents are not role modeling community social participation to the same degree that there were when the school was open, which may affect the youth's future involvement in the community and the community's social capital.

Evidence of social capital being on the decline has been shown through the fall of cultural participation and the rise in consumption (Putnam, 2000). In particular, Putnam (2000) described four major factors in the decline in social capital: 1) pressures of time and money, changing work practices, especially those related to women in the labour market; 2) suburbanization; 3) technology or electronic entertainment, and; 4) generational change. In the rural context, communities are feeling the burdens of technology, globalization, centralization of services, and the urban migration of the younger generation (Gabriel, 2002; Malatest, 2002), all of which impact rural community life. The decline of social capital in the rural context can be problematic because rural community' survival is embedded in social bonds that are developed and strengthened through working with others toward common community goals (Cicognani, et al., 2008; Little et al., 2005).

If parents are not role modeling social or civic participation in community life to the same extent as in the past, will the youth's ideas and values of what a community is and how it functions be affected? And, will the youths' future civic engagement be

affected? How Limerick and other communities like it manage to cultivate an ongoing relationship between rural youth and the community will be interesting to monitor. Future research that explores rural youth's understanding of rural life and its relationship to rural community social capital would add depth to the scholarly literature. Though rural youth are a cohort directly affected by a school closure, rural seniors also experience its impacts.

### **Seniors and Rural Community Life**

Rural restructuring has broad implications for rural populations, but can have particularly important ones for seniors. For example, the centralization of employment, services, and resources has forced younger rural cohorts to larger centres for work and education (Bushy, 2000; Gerrard, Kulig, & Nowatzki, 2004), and rural restructuring in the form of a school's closure forces families with school-aged children to outlying communities, which limits their engagement in their own community. As a result, rural communities have fewer young people engaged in the community, a smaller overall population, and a higher proportion of seniors (McCracken et al., 2005).

The implications of rural restructuring can take different forms, which can have varying impacts on seniors' lives. For example, rural restructuring can affect health care services, and result in rural hospital services being reduced or eliminated (Davenport et al., 2005; Houle, et al., 2001), which can have negative outcomes for seniors' health and wellbeing. In particular, rural seniors lack access to transportation and have lower incomes that constrain their access to health services that have been relocated to larger centres (Clark & Leipert, 2005). Although the closure of rural health care facilities and services on the wellbeing of seniors seems obvious, school closures can also influence seniors' health and wellbeing, especially as it relates to intergenerational relationships.

Through this study it became apparent that intergenerational relationships were an important component of life in Limerick. Residents of rural communities tend to have stronger interpersonal connections than their urban counterparts because they are “places where individuals know, share with, and care for one another” (Wright, 2007, p. 348). Rural schools and other community institutions and organizations are set in a context of community that typically values the notion of “belonging,” which can build the foundations of intergenerational relationships. These intergenerational relationships are important aspects of rural life, but are vulnerable as younger generations spend more time in outlying communities or migrate to urban centres. A diminishment in intergenerational relationships can negatively impact rural seniors, which is particularly concerning because rural communities’ populations are aging as a whole (McCracken et al., 2005).

Traditionally, rural communities have established strong intergenerational relationships within the family and community context, which cultivated social support that assisted in the development of youth and care of the elderly (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003). According to Miedema and Tatemichi (2003), contact with friends and family members is more likely to occur in rural than urban settings, and through this contact with others, rural seniors are less likely to experience loneliness and are assumed to be embedded in a community with strong social networks (Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011). My findings indicate that due to the school’s closure, Limerick’s older residents might be at increased risk of becoming disconnected from such social networks. Indeed, similar to my findings, Clark and Leipert (2007) reported that young people’s out migration has contributed to rural seniors’ diminished social support.

Rural seniors are faced with challenges related to geographic isolation, transportation, and limited income, which can negatively impact their health and wellbeing (Clark & Leipert, 2005). As a result, the role of interpersonal relationships in supporting rural seniors becomes heightened. Researchers have indicated social support in the form of friends, family, neighbours, and community members can increase quality of life, morale, active living, health care regime, self care, and lower depression among seniors living in rural and remote communities (Clark & Leipert, 2005). In fact, Skinner et al. (2008) argued that the limited formal services in small towns are often filled by the “close ties among rural people and a shared understanding of the notion of community” (p. 97). My study illustrates that a school’s closure might endanger these close ties and thus informal services for seniors. Further research that explores a rural school closure’s implications on rural seniors’ lives would make a valuable and necessary contribution to the existing body of literature.

### **Rural Families**

As mentioned above, rural restructuring has resulted in public and private service closures, which have forced families to travel to outlying communities. As a result, family time is changing because of the increased time spent traveling. In the rural context, this has ramifications for rural mothers and fathers because rural life has been deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideologies that have dictated traditional gender roles within the community and family context. In the context of farming, Trussell and Shaw (2007) found that fathers were less able than mothers to attend their children’s school-related activities because of the fathers’ intense work ethic and time spent working. As a result, mothers were often the ones responsible for transporting their children to their activities.

If this is the case, closures related to retail stores, health, and education may continue to force rural mothers to travel for their children's activities, which could compound the disconnect between some rural fathers and their children.

The disconnect between fathers and their families can be problematic, especially for their children. Research has found that fathers who are engaged in their children's play and caregiving positively impact their children's cognitive development, peer relationships, and school readiness (Brotherson et al., 2005). Often fathers' involvement in their children's play can take the form of coaching, being a league administrator, or an official for their children's sport activities (Coakley, 2006). However, the event of a school's closure can have implications on the time fathers have to support their children's extra-curricular activities. For example, the school closure can increase parents' time needed for travel, which can limit rural fathers' ability to coach their children's sport teams or volunteer with other extra-curricular activities.

Balancing parental responsibilities within the context of a school's closure could also have implications on rural families as a unit. The decisions parents have to make regarding their children's upbringing and how they can meet their children's needs, balance other work, household responsibilities, and financial commitments are all tightly interwoven in the rural context and vulnerable to the demands brought about by a school's closure. For example, travel to outlying communities where larger schools are located increases transportation costs, which could force parents to limit their children's involvement in extra-curricular activities to maintain the families' finances. The parents' ability to manage current household and employment obligations is compounded by the added time for travel to their children's school-related activities, which may result in

mothers and fathers dividing their time to certain tasks to ensure they are meeting their families' needs. In addition, some families that are dual income households might have to reduce their income to a single source so that one parent is accessible for their children's school-related activities.

Managing family decisions and dividing parental responsibilities within the context of a school's closure can be challenging, especially for rural women. In the farming context, Trussell and Shaw (2007) reported that mothers felt considerable amounts of stress and fatigue as they tried to balance the responsibilities for their children, household tasks, and their own employment. This role overload is faced by many rural mothers and can result in a variety of mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and higher suicide rates (Bolin, 2005). The stress and fatigue rural mothers face from their multiple roles could be compounded by school's closure. For example, mothers are forced to navigate new communities where they have fewer social network and friendships; they have to drive longer distances, which limits their own personal time; and they could experience heightened levels of social isolation because they have less time to spend with their partners, other family members, and friends.

The stress of a school's closure on rural mothers could also impact family leisure and recreation. Mothers are often the ones facilitating family leisure and recreation experiences (Trussell & Shaw, 2007). Because women have to allocate more time to travel for their children's school activities, manage household responsibilities, and maintain their own employment, they have far less time to plan family leisure and recreation experiences. The relationship between family and leisure is important. Families are a key component to nurturing children's leisure and sport participation (Kay,

2000). For example, parents are responsible for the financial costs, providing transportation, and changing family schedules to support their children's sport and recreation pursuits (Kay, 2000). The financial demands of traveling further distances for sport and recreation in the rural context is not unheard (Townsend & Murphy, 2001); however, the event of a school's closure could compound the costs associated with travel and could deplete finances for family leisure and recreation experiences.

Leisure and recreation is also important for family functioning. Researchers have argued that family leisure and recreation experiences are valuable because they enhance family functioning, cohesion, and the overall "sense" of family (Buswell, 2012). In a study by Shaw and Dawson (2001), family leisure and recreation activities were found to be important because they enhanced family functioning through increase interactions and communication, and family leisure passed on important values and healthy lifestyles ideals to children. Indeed, family leisure experiences make important contributions to family functioning; the event of a school's closure could have implications on family leisure.

The interconnected relationship between a school's closure and rural families was made evident in my study, but further research is warranted. In particular, more research pertaining to the changes that rural parents make in the face of a school's closure about how they raise their children, manage their family, and balance their own familial responsibilities would further our understanding of current rural family life.

### **Rural Leisure and Recreation and School Closures**

Leisure and recreation opportunities in the rural context are important components of rural residents' quality of life (Arnott & Duffield, 1980; Long & Kieselbach, 1987;

Middleton, 2000), but they are being challenged by restructuring, especially as community institutions and voluntary organizations are closed or forced to reorganize. Because leisure is a social phenomenon that takes place not only in the mind, but also in the larger social world (Kelly, 1983), a school's closure can influence leisure and recreation. According to Stokowski (1994), involvement in leisure and recreation activities is not only a product of individual choice, but is also "influenced by the range of opportunities made available by the production system that contains leisure services and places" (p. 85). Therefore, individual leisure and recreation choices are affected by the social structures within the community, including the school and other community institutions and organizations.

Exploring leisure and recreation in the rural context is important because these communities have distinctive "cultural, social, and physical characteristics that distinguish them from urban environments" (Hornosty & Doherty, 2003, p. 40). The differences between rural and urban contexts include geographic isolation, fewer resources and services, and higher rates of poverty and unemployment (Hornosty & Doherty, 2003). Because of the limited services and resources, rural community institutions and voluntary organizations can be important aspects to rural life; they can foster leisure and recreation activities that bring together the residents and can cultivate feelings of cohesiveness. Part of this cohesiveness is derived from connections with other community members across generational divides, which encompasses rural lifestyles, traditions, and customs (Arnott & Duffield, 1980; Hornosty & Doherty, 2003). Leisure and recreation can help rural communities to become more socially cohesive by creating activities that are communal in nature, and this in turn contributes to rural community

quality of life. Local culture and traditions are embedded in a community's sense of identity, which are often displayed through leisure and recreation activities.

Leisure and recreation activities can help to form and develop rural communities; however, when the community's institutions or voluntary organizations close or are forced to reorganize their structures, the leisure activities they once offered are vulnerable to disappearing. Leisure and recreation activities can be integral to rural community life, and it is important for researchers to continue to explore the relationship between leisure and recreation and rural restructuring. In particular, research that explores the ways in which leisure and recreation in the community context is facilitated and how constraints to leisure are negotiated after a school's closure would further our understanding of rural life. Furthermore, research that investigates the ways in which rural social structures are changing and adapting and the implications for leisure is needed.

### **Recommendations**

Through my research it became apparent that Limerick School anchored residents to one another. The school was an institution that went beyond just educating youth; it also cultivated a sense of community by bringing residents together. The school's closure not only brought about fears for the communities future, but also changes to individual lives and community institutions and organizations. What the school's closure did, in short, was change community life for all of Limerick's residents.

I believe school closures and other rural restructuring strategies are going to continue to further alter rural community life. I further believe that what is important to explore is how rural communities are coping/will cope with continued rural restructuring. If researchers can capture the ways in which rural communities cope and respond to

school closures and other restructuring strategies, this information could assist governments, communities, and other stakeholders in establishing policies and practices to best address significant rural community change. Based on my research, below, I provide some recommendations for the government and school divisions, and the school that will receive transplanted students. Finally, I propose the development of regional partnerships to mobilize assets and address leisure and recreation needs.

**Government & School Divisions.** The decision to close a school is political process that involves the provincial government, school divisions, and variety of consulting boards and groups (Kirk, 2008). There are many parties involved that guide the process, but often the local school division will be the one in direct communication with the communities at risk of losing their school. School divisions typically provide communities that are vulnerable to losing their school with the opportunity to attend public consultation sessions on the school's potential closure process prior to the school closing; however, there appears to be limited consultation sessions or communication with communities after the school closes.

To assist a rural community after a school's closure, the government and local school division could provide the community information sessions or packages on revitalizing community life or community building. The ability for a community to mobilize its assets after a school's closure can be challenging and stressful. In my study In Limerick, older adults without children took on the responsibility of reorganizing community institutions and organizations or creating new ones; however, other rural communities might respond differently. In some school closure scenarios, the school division gave the community the first opportunity to purchase the school building for a

fairly reasonable price, which can be a valuable asset for the community. The task of deciding what to do with an abandoned school building, how to generate community involvement with fewer individuals in the community, and navigating community life without a school's resources is not an easy one. The government and school divisions could provide funding to contract local economic development organizations and regional recreation and community developers to assist these communities in maintaining the residents' quality of life in the school's absence. In particular, these professionals could help communities that lose their schools understand the potential that still exists in their community, provide needs assessments, provide training and support for leisure and recreation programs, and provide knowledge on how to access grants and other financial support for community programs.

The government and school divisions are responsible for the allocation of bus routes. As mentioned numerous times above, a rural school's closure can compound the distance youth have to travel by bus to get to school. In some cases, rural youth do not reside within the village or town boundaries, but rather on farms and ranches outside of the community, which can further increase the travel time on buses. As illustrated above, the increase time on the bus could impact the youth's time with family and in the community; their health and wellbeing; their academic achievement; and their involvement in sports, extra-curricular activities, and other after-school programs. As a result, the government and local school divisions should work closely with the schools who receive the displaced students, the students, and their parents to establish bus routes that minimize the time youth spend on the bus.

**Schools that Receive Displaced Students.** The impact of a school's closure can also have implications on the schools that receive the displaced students. Developing initiatives to ease the transition of the new youth and parents into the new school and community should be implemented. A school closure can be stressful because it forces youth and parents to leave the comforts of their current community, potentially disconnect from friends and family, and engage in a new and unknown school and community environment. In anticipation of receiving new students from outlying communities, the new school could develop information sessions for the parents and youth. Information sessions and packages could highlight the school's education program, sport program, extra-curricular programs and clubs, teachers, parental volunteer involvement, and other important information about the school. Schools that receive the new students could also put in place staff or resources to support the youth in their new school environment.

The schools that receive the new students may also experience an influx in population that could stress their current resources. For example, one rural school's closure could also influence the receiving school's youth sport and extra-curricular activities. In particular, the schools on the receiving end of a school closure will have to navigate the possibilities of larger sport teams and clubs for their schools. In particular, the receiving school might have to administer tryouts for sport teams to limit the team's size, or multiple teams might be developed and tiered based on abilities and skills. Another option is that school sport teams take on additional players making team rosters larger than usual. The additional youth involved in sport and extra-curricular programs could add pressure for more resources related to coaching, supplies, equipment, or gym

and recreation space. Regardless what the receiving school does with its sport and extra-curricular clubs, there could be an implication to the youth's level of participation. It will be important that the receiving school ensure adequate support is in place for sport and extra-curricular activities, especially for the schools that are rapidly growing in size due to school closures. Though receiving schools play an integral role in easing the transition of a school closure, rural communities could develop regional partnerships to address other needs that rise from the event of a school closure or other rural restructuring initiatives.

**Regional Partnerships.** Although some rural communities are located in regions where professional expertise is limited, rural communities could develop regional partnerships that could support the region's communities that have lost their schools or are experiencing other forms of rural restructuring. For example, partnerships between rural communities could be developed to address the needs of the region, for example by examining how a vacant rural school building could help the region and not just the one community. I believe stronger partnerships between rural communities will be needed in the future, and that utilizing a school building as an asset for the region could be one approach to maintain the quality of life for residents of the community and surrounding area. Because rural communities are already faced with fewer resources, older populations, limited volunteers, and geographic isolation in comparison to more urban communities, developing regional partnerships with nearby rural communities could be one way to mobilize resources and devise collective action plans that meet the region's needs.

Regional partnership could also address rural communities' leisure and recreation needs. In my study, when the school was open, it provided an array of activities that brought the community together; however, since the school's closure, fewer activities are available. Through regional partnerships and the support of regional recreation and community developers, rural communities could develop leisure and recreation activities, events, and programs that meet the region's needs. By bringing together rural communities within a region there is a greater likelihood of establishing programs for youth, adults, and seniors that could be well attended and supported. Each community has a different pool of physical, financial, and human resources, which could cultivate more leisure and recreation opportunities for rural residents within the region. By developing these partnerships, rural regions could identify recreation and leisure needs based on the changes they are experiencing from events such as a school closure or other rural restructuring activities that have taken place or will take place. Generating a collective approach to satisfying rural communities' leisure and recreation needs could enhance the quality of life for rural residents.

#### Limitations

Although this research has identified a number of interesting findings, there are some limitations. First, the research participants included only adult residents. Youth are an integral component of rural community life and including them in the study would have added a different perspective of the impact the school's closure had on residents' lives. Second, there was an imbalance of men and women participants, with more women than men involved in the study. Ensuring a better balance of men and women could have strengthened the gendered perspectives throughout the study. Third, the participant

observations and time spent in the community was limited to an in/out structure, meaning I had frequent visits to Limerick for shorter periods of time. Longer periods of time spent in the community could have expanded my observations of community life. Finally, the reports of SET excluded discussion on community and policy level factors of influence. SET is a robust theoretical framework and limiting reports to certain levels of influence limits the ability to provide a holistic description of the school closure's impacts on residents' lives. Future research should consider how to report SET in its entirety.

### **Final Thoughts**

In the broad context, restructuring has numerous effects on the social fabric of rural community life. Regardless of the restructuring that takes place, most rural communities face loss, stress, and an uncertain future when services close or when resources are redirected to larger centres (Miller, 2000). In particular, researchers have indicated restructuring impacts the mental, physical and social health of individuals and communities (Binkley, 2000; Fraser, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2005; Neis & Grzetic, 2000). If this is case, furthering our understanding of the impact of social and economic restructuring such as a school closure's impact on rural residents' quality of life and the community is warranted.

Despite these challenges, rural communities' residents are resilient and are devising ways to cope with economic and social changes. It is important that future research continues to shed light on not only the ways in which rural communities are challenged by rural restructuring, but also and more importantly on what these communities and their residents are doing to adapt to maintain or enhance their quality of

life. It is through these lessons that we can better understand the ways in which rural life is transforming and how rural residents are anchoring themselves in a new way of life.

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### Appendix A



## Appendix B

### Initial Interview Guide

1. What was life like in the community before the school closed?
2. What is life like in the community now that the school is closed?
3. What do you miss most now that the school is closed?
4. What role do you have in community if any?
5. Has Limerick experienced any negative impacts since the school closed?
6. Has Limerick experienced any positive impacts since the school closed?
7. What has been the worst thing about the school closing?
8. What has been the best thing about the school closing?
9. What was your involvement in the community before the school closed?
10. What is your involvement in the community after the school closed?
11. Have local residents' community involvement changed since the school closed? If so, in what ways? And, which residents' roles changed the most?
12. What type of activities did you participate in that the school offered?
13. What do you do in your free time? What type of activities do you participate in?
14. Was your social life or leisure or recreation activities impacted by the school closure? If so, in what ways?
15. What activities do you miss most that the school offered?
16. Since the school closed have any other community groups taken the initiative to offer similar activities the school did?
17. What type of recreation and leisure activities exist in the community today? Did they exist in the community when the school was open?
18. Do you think there are some community members that have been impacted by the school closure differently? For example, seniors, children, parents?

19. Do you think the social relationships among community residents have been impacted by the school's closure?
20. Have other organizations or community groups within the community stepped up and replaced some of the social activities and events the school used to host?
21. Have any new social clubs or organizations formed or developed since the school closed?
22. Are or were there any policies that you think influenced the school-community relationship pre or post closure? For example, school board policies, busing, ownership of the new facility?
23. What roles did men and women have in the community that were attached to the school? Have these roles changed since the school closed?
24. Do you think the school closure impacted men differently than women?
25. Have men's and women's roles in the community changed since the school closure?

#### Subsequent Questions

- 1) How do you think the school closure impacted families with school-aged children?
- 2) How has the school closure impacted the youth?
- 3) How has the school's closure impacted your children's leisure and social activities?
- 4) How has the school's closure impacted your children?
- 5) Has the school's closure impacted your families' leisure activities?

Has the school closure had an impact your own personal (individual) leisure?

### Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Here, the term leisure is used to conceptualize the activities, experiences, and interactions that an individual deems enjoyable and are engaged in outside of the confines of work and or other obligations.

<sup>2</sup> Recreation is defined as “an activity voluntarily undertaken, primarily for pleasure and satisfaction, during leisure time” (Pigram, 1983, p. 3).