Creating Constraints to Community Resiliency:
The Event of a Rural School's Closure

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Abstract

In this study, a community resilience model is utilized to explore the impacts of a rural school's closure and its implication on community resiliency in the Village of Limerick, Saskatchewan. The findings from four semi-structured interviews and three focus groups indicate that the school's closure created a number of constraints that have considerable implications for community resilience. In particular, the school's closure decreased the residents' sense of community. In addition, as a result of the school's closure, the community resident's experienced diminishing civic engagement in the form of volunteerism, community recreation participation, and intergenerational relationships. This paper demonstrates the challenges of a rural school's closure on cultivating community resiliency, but also the changes to rural residents' lives and their communities.

Introduction

The event of a school closure can be traumatic for rural communities. The school is an important place that residents construct their social reality of rural community life (DeYoung & Howley, 1990)[1]. The sense of place that schools cultivate is largely tied to the complex and dynamic role they play in rural communities. Research has indicated that schools in the rural context act as the social hub, where socialization and community identity are strengthened (Miller, 1993)[2]. For example, rural schools are often the community's cultural, recreational, and social centre, as they offer activities that contribute to community members' wellbeing (Parker, 2001[3]; Nachtigal, 1994[4]; Waldman, 2008[5]). They also strengthen the community's social capital and social networks (Lane & Dorfman, 1997[6]). Rural schools, in particular, represent community autonomy, vitality and community identity (Harmon & Shaft, 2011[7]; Lyson, 2002[8]), but are also a source of community building activities (Blauwkamp et al., 2011)[9]. As a result, the school strengthens future community renewal (Lane & Dorfman, 1997)[10].

The benefits of a school in a rural community are numerous, which can make the event of a school closure devastating for rural residents. The closure of a rural school can be linked to a number of causes such as increased urban migration, advances in technology, and government policies (Bushrod, 1999)[11]. However, declining populations seems to be the strongest influential factor on

a school's closure (Bushrod, 1999)[12]. Like the Great Plains region of the United States, many rural communities across Canada are experiencing declining school enrollment which has caused a rise in school division amalgamations and school (Kirk, 2008[13]; Schmidt, Muarry, & Nguyen, 2007[14]), which is threatening the viability and future of rural communities (Lyson, 2002)[15]. In the United States, issues of declining enrollments, financial cutbacks, and education reform have caused a number of rural school closures (Bard, Gardner & Wieland, 2006[16]; Lyson, 2002[17]). Recent research has indicated that rural school closures can disconnect residents from one another, which results in a decline in collective interactions and a diminished sense of community (Oncescu & Giles, 2012[18]; Oncescu & Giles, in press[19]), essential factors that influence rural community resilience (Kulig et al., 2008a[20]; 2008b[21]; 2000[22]). Community resilience is the "existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise" (Magis, 2010, pg. 10)[23]. Extensive research has indicated the benefits of the rural school in community life. The dearth of research addressing the impact of a school's closure on rural community resilience will be addressed by this research.

This study employed a community resilience model to emphasize and describe the impact of the school closure in Limerick, Saskatchewan on its community's resilience. Data was collected through interviews and focus groups with twenty-two adult residents from the farming village of Limerick. The results indicated that the school's closure created a number of constraints to Limerick's resilience. In particular, diminishing sense of community and declining community engagement were seen as major sources that constrained the community's resilience. Through Kulig et al.'s (2008a[24]; 2008b[25]) community resilience model, this study emphasizes specific factors that constrain community resilience, but also the way in which traditional rural life is evolving for residents. The importance of this research is heightened as rural school closures continue to rise (Kirk, 2008)[26], which has the potential to transform residents' lives and the communities in which they reside.

Study Setting

Limerick is a rural farming village in south central Saskatchewan that lost its school in 2007. Limerick's school closure occurred at a time when the Saskatchewan government was restructuring its education, but more so was a result of low school enrollment. It was one of twenty-three Saskatchewan schools that closed in 2007. Limerick has a population of 445 residents, which includes 130 village residents, and roughly 315 out–of-village residents that reside on farms acreages outside the community (Statistics Canada, 2010)[27]. The primary industry that cultivates the economy is agriculture, but the community has a number of small businesses that support community life: a hair salon, construction company, insurance office, post office, bank, gas station, agriculture centre, grain elevator, grocery store, hotel, restaurant and bar, fitness centre and a daycare.

In addition to the private sector, Limerick has a number of community clubs and organizations that 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. Limerick also has a variety of recreation and community facilities, which include a rink, community hall, the United Church, ball diamonds and a campground.

Since the school's closure, the village of Limerick, and the larger rural municipality in which Limerick is located, took ownership of the school building and renamed the facility the Opportunity Centre. The Opportunity Centre has been in operation since 2008 and is a volunteer-run centre that provides residents from Limerick and surrounding areas with a fitness room, gymnasium, computer and music equipment, classroom space, and preschool and youth programming, and offers its space for rent 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 the author's hometown over a sixteen-year period.

Literature Review

Schools' Roles in Rural Communities

Research has indicated that schools play a dynamic role in rural community life—a rural school is a key component of community life, while the community is also considered an integral part of the school (Collins, 2001[28]; Jimerson, 2006[29]; Lyson, 2002[30]; O'Neal & Cox, 2002[31]; Theobald, 1997 as cited in Wright, 2007[32]). The school is integral because it goes beyond formal education. According to DeYoung and Howley (1990)[33], schools are important places where people construct social realities that links the school to community life.

The complexities of the school-community relationship can be linked to social and economic wellbeing, community development and sense of community (Kilpatrick et al., 2002a[34]; Lyson, 2002[35]; Salant & Waller, 1998[36]). In broad terms, the school acts as a social hub for rural community life because of the lack of other cultural facilities (Collins & Flaxman, 2001)[37]. As a result, rural schools often provide programs, resources, and services, and serve as meeting places because they have the physical infrastructure such as gymnasiums, computer rooms, libraries, theatres, and art galleries (Bruce & Halseth, 2000[38]; Harmon & Schaft, 2009[39]; Rosenfeld & Sheaff, 2002[40]; Witten et al., 2001[41]). Rural schools are often the places where public meetings are held and leisure activities are provided for the greater community (Parker, 2001)[42].

Economically, schools benefit the rural community's economic stability and play a large role in vitalizing small rural communities (Miller, 1993)[43]. Martz and Sanderson (2006)[44], conducted research in rural communities across Saskatchewan and found that public institutions such as hospitals and schools were the second largest employers and provided communities with well-educated staff members that often serve as volunteers within the rural community, providing leadership to children and voluntary groups, and sharing their knowledge with the greater community. These civic institutions can provide employment and social opportunities that often attract and retain young families (Gill & Everitt, 1993[45]; Jackson & Poushinsky, 1971[46]; Porteous, 1976[47]), which further supports prosperity in rural communities.

The multifaceted role of the school also strengthens community development practices. According to researchers, schools contribute to rural community development and validate local ways of life, traditions (Squires & Sinclair, 1990)[48], a better school-community relationship, and stronger sense of community (Bauch, 2001)[49]. For example, relationships can develop between the community and school when resources, such as meeting rooms and libraries are shared (Bertrand & Giles,

2010[50]; Squires & Sinclair, 1990 as cited in Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, & Mulford, 2000[51]), which can further cultivate civic engagement among residents (Oncescu & Giles, in press)[52]. In addition, schools can create a strong level of involvement from adult community members (Bauch, 2001)[53] that includes coaching sport, assisting teachers, supporting fundraising projects, providing transportation and chaperoning school trips (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk, & Mulford, 2000[54]; Miller, 1993[55]; Squires, & Sinclair, 1990[56]). According to Blauwkamp et al. (2011)[57], the school is a focal point for community building activities that enhance the school's connection to the broader community. These social interactions increase mutual trust and relationships that deepen residents' sense of belonging (Bauch, 2001)[58].

The sense of belonging that schools tend to foster in rural communities may also be a means through which community identity is formed (Harmon & Schaft, 2009[59]; Wright, 2007[60]; Miller 1993[61]). For example, community identity can be further developed as residents rally around "their school's" athletic events, theatrical plays, and musical events as major sources of entertainment (Nachtigal, 1994)[62], thus encouraging residents' community involvement and increasing the sense of solidarity in a community through social cohesion (Wotherspoon, 1998)[63]. 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)[64]. Research in this area highlights the often dynamic relationship between the school and the community, which can nurture relationships among community residents, but also compounds the potential tragedy when a school closes.

Rural School Closures

The challenges facing rural communities are complex, and largely resulting in the outmigration of young adults (Gabriel, 2002[65]; Malatest, 2002[66]). As rural communities' population decline, the costs for delivering basic infrastructure and services are compounded, including the resources needed to support the operation of rural schools (Blauwkamp et al., 2011[67]; Lyson, 2002[68]). Rural school closures are predominantly influenced by forces outside the community's control (Bushrod, 1999)[69]: changing demographics, which have increased migration from rural to larger urban communities; economic policies that limit government spending on education; and the shift from an industrial to a technological society. The degree to which these societal changes impact individual communities will vary among different regions; however, a declining population appears to be the one largely responsible for rural school closures (Schmidt, Muarry, & Nguyen, 2007)[70].

The declining rural school enrollment across Canada has increased amalgamations and school closures are increasing (Schmidt, Muarry, & Nguyen, 2007)[71]. Since 1995, school divisions across Canada have been mandated to restructure (Pierce, 2003)[72], but are doing so with limited knowledge of the impact that restructuring has on rural residents' lives. In Canada, research that has explored school division restructuring has focused on how restructuring can improve efficiency and accountability (Langlois & Scharf, 1991[73]; Wionzek, 1997[74]; Williams, 2003[75]), reflective aspects of the restructuring process (Trider, 1999[76]; Reddyk, 2000[77]; Gregg, 2001[78]), and forecasting possible outcomes on division wide amalgamations (Langlois & Scharf, 1991[79]; Wionzek, 1995[80]). The limited understanding of the impact school division amalgamations and school closures can cultivate tension and opposition, especially among individuals directly

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impacted by a school's closure.

The event of a school closure can be met with significant opposition from communities and small school advocates. Often, arguments from those who dispute school closures are embedded in research that states lack of cost savings (Duncome & Yinger, 2005[81]; Rural School and Community Trust, 2006[82]), and that small schools provide stronger levels of academic extracurricular achievement and more supporting learning environments for students than do large ones (Buchana, 2004[83]; Johnson, 2006[84]; Rural School and Community Trust, 2006[85]). Other research has indicated that a school's closure can impede on economic growth, for example population growth can decline (Goudy et al, 1994)[86], which makes attracting new residents a challenge. In addition, a school's closure can create rural community economic insecurity as skilled employees leave (Martz & Sanderson, 2006[87]; Waldman, 2008[88]), and the private sectors experience a decline in revenues (Sell et al., 1996)[89]. Also social implications that come from a school's closure include: decline in residents' sense of cohesion and opportunities for socialization (Egeland & Lausten, 2006[90]; Witten et al., 2001[91]); loss of community identity (Bruce & Halseth, 2000)[92]; decline in sense of community (Oncescu & Giles, in press)[93]; and diminish community energy and enthusiasm (Parker, 2001[94]; Tompkins, 2003[95]). Rural school closures also force families to travel greater distances for school-related activities (Blauwkamp et al., 2011[96]; Kearns et al., 2009[97]; Oncescu & Giles, 2012[98]), which can disconnect youth and their parents from older community residents and extended family members because of the added time needed for travel to outlying communities (Blauwkamp et al., 2011[99]; Oncescu & Giles, 2012; in press[100]).

A majority of the research on school closures has reported negative outcomes. However, some studies have reported positive effects. For example, researchers discovered that amalgamations brought together smaller communities, which enhanced residents' social networks (Sell et al., 1996)[101]. In addition, students who consolidated into a larger school had access to more diverse resources and services that increased their academic potential (Sell et al., 1996)[102], and also opportunities to engage in more competitive athletic programs (Rowedder, 2003)[103]. Researchers have also reported increased friendship networks for students (Oncescu & Giles, 2012[104]; Rowedder, 2003[105]) and their parents (Oncescu & Giles, 2012)[106]. Despite experiencing some positive outcomes, once "their" school closes, rural residents are often left with an enormous void to fill. More specifically, the community's sense of community diminishes (Oncescu & Giles, in press)[107].

Sense of Community

In broad terms, sense of community is most often understood as an individual's experience of community life (Hyde & Chavis, 2007)[108]. More specifically, Cicognani et al. (2008)[109] defined sense of community 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[110]; Fisher et al., 2002[111]).

According to McMillan and Chavis' model of sense of community, 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 describe 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 his or her community.

According to Prezza et al. (2001)[112], sense of community is a channel for social involvement and active participation in the community. Researchers have discovered that sense of community is related to social and political participation (Obst et al., 2002[113]; Prezza et al., 2001[114]). Some research has indicated that sense of community and participation in community life happen simultaneously: community participation creates a sense of community, which then leads to more participation.

Community Resilience

In broad terms, resilience has been understood as the dynamic processes involved in positively adapting to adversity (Luthar et al., 2000)[115]. Resilience has two parts: the first is exposure to an adverse challenge, and the second, successful positive adaptation despite resistance throughout the development process (Luthar et al., 2000)[116]. The development of community resilience has been cultivated through interconnected links to community development, social impact assessment, and environmental management (Buikstra et al., 2010)[117]. An example of community development comes from Flora, Flora, and Frey (2004)[118], who frame community resilience within the framework of community capitals (cultural, social, human, political, natural, financial, and build capital). Researchers of social impact have explored how communities organize themselves to respond to adverse conditions, and emphasize social, economic, and political connections (Buikstra et al., 2010)[119]. As for environmental management, community resilience stems from ecology and explores resilience in terms of an integrated social ecological system—ecosystems and individuals together as interdependent and coexisting (Berkes & Ross, date)[120].

The different approaches to understanding community resilience has resulted in a wide range of definitions. For example, Magis (2010)[121] defines community resilience as the "existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise" (p. 10), whereas Colussi (2000)[122] defined community resilience as the "intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to, and influence the course of social and economic change" (p. 5). Based on research conducted in resource-based communities in Alberta, Canada, Brown and colleagues defined community resilience as "the capacity of community members to engage in projects of coordinated action within the context of their community despite events and structures that constrain such projects" (Brown & Kulig, 1997, p.43)[123].

Regardless of the perspective or definition, community resilience focuses on the capacity to adapt and change (Magis, 2010)[124], and focuses on the dynamic and complex process between characteristics of individuals and their broader environment (Berkes & Ross, 2013)[125].

Community resilience is understood as a continual development process in confronting adversity and change, rather than securing a stable outcome (Berkes & Ross, 2013)[126]. Community resilience research focuses on identifying the factors involved, the processes of developing resilience, and evidence for intervention by community stakeholders (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000)[127]. In particular, researchers have discovered a number of factors that contribute to community resilience: social networks, social support, social inclusion, sense of belonging, leadership, acceptance of change and learning (Buikstra et al., 2010[128]; Kulig et al., 2008a[129]; 2008b[130]; Norris et al., 2008[131]; Ross et al., 2010[132]). Furthermore, the natural and built environment (Hegney et al., 2008[133]; Buikstra et al., 2010[134]), and the community's infrastructure and social services (Kulig et al., 2008b)[135] can also strengthen resiliency.

Although Kulig et al. (2008b)[136] found that the general perception of resiliency was a positive process through which communities demonstrated their ability to handle adverse and challenging conditions, constraints to community resiliency have been reported. For example, researchers have identified a number of factors that constrain community resiliency that include: 1) challenging events, such as an unexpected event or natural disaster; 2) infrastructure characteristics, such as lack of health services, geographic isolation; 3) social infrastructure, lack of community spirit and communication; 4) population infrastructure, lack of education, vision, caring, and leadership; 5) failure to be proactive; and 6) attitudinal characteristics, such as negativity, individualism, and apathy (Kulig et al., 2008b)[137]. As a result of these constraints, the community's resilience could be jeopardized.

The investigation of community resilience in the context of rural communities includes a diverse range of challenges and adverse conditions. For example, researchers in Australia have explored community resilience in the context of multiple hazards in rural regions in the context of individual and community resilience (Hegney et al, 2008[138]; Buikstra et al., 2010[139]). In Canada, researchers have investigated resiliency in the context of mining closures in rural communities and the role of health professionals in increasing community resiliency (Kulig et al., 2008a[140]; 2008b[141]). Furthermore, McManus et al. (2012)[142] explored the social, economic, and environmental links between farmers and their communities' resilience. The context for rural community resilience research is broad, however, to my knowledge community resiliency has not been explored within the context of a rural school's closure.

Theoretical Framework

To conceptualize the community resilience model, the term community needs to be discussed. The definition of community is complex and varies among social science researchers. For example, Hawe (1994)[143] described communities in four ways: 1) community as population, 2) community as setting, 3) community as a social system, and 4) community as a psychological sense. Community, for the purposes of this study, is broadly identified with social interaction, common connections, and geographic location. More specifically, community is understood as a collective through which its interaction results in a shared response (Kulig, et al., 2000)[144]. The reason for emphasizing community as a collective interaction is because Kulig et al.'s community resilience model acknowledges the dynamic participation of residents in community resiliency. Specifically, collective individual actions create and contribute to community resilience. The emphasis on collective interactions of residents is important for defining community, but it should be noted that

geographic and population characteristics are evident in the definition as well, mostly to identify the rural community under study.

To understand the implication of a school's closure on community resilience, this study utilizes Kulig et al.'s (2008)[145] model of community resilience. The broader goal of community resilience research is to understand the community's strengths and how they contribute to the collective process of confronting challenges and developing resilience (Kulig 2000[146]; Kulig et al., 2008a[147]; Kulig et al., 2008b[148]). Kulig and colleagues (2008b)[149], stated that community resiliency "can deepen our understanding of rural communities because the unique features of these communities challenge their ability to address adversity" (p. 95). As such, resilience at the individual and community levels is necessary for facing adversity (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001)[150]—and in the case of this study, a rural school's closure can challenge the surival of a community. Through the lens of community resilience, this study strengthens our understanding of rural community resiliency within the context of a school closure.

Kulig et al.'s (2000[151]; 2008a[152]) community resilience model was developed through a series of studies in resource-based communities that had remained resilient despite a number of economic crises, including mine strikes and closures and a natural disaster. The first component of this model, reciprocal influence between interactions as a collective unit, includes community togetherness, community problem-solving, leadership, ability to cope with change, networks, getting along, ability to cope with diversions and a shared mentality and outlook. The second component is the expression of a sense of community, including community pride and sense of belonging. The third component is community action, which is a result of the first two components creating a cohesive community—the more cohesive the community, the stronger the collective action to address the challenges faced by the community.

Methodology

To explore the impact of a school's closure on community resiliency, this study utilized an exploratory single case study methodology. Exploratory case studies focus on contemporary events that emphasize "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2009)[153]. Most often case studies are utilized to 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[154]; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007[155]; Punch, 2005[156]; Tight, 2006[157]). As a result, a thick, rich description of the complex phenomenon under study is developed (Gummesson, 2007)[158]. Case study methodologies are an effective approach for studying complex issues and have been utilized by other researchers to explore school closures. For example, case studies have been utilized in a number of studies involving school closures (Kearns et al., 2009[159]; Witten et al., 2003[160]) and the school-community relationship (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk, & Prescott, 2002)[161].

Methods

Data was gathered through four semi-structured interviews with key community informants, three semi-structured interviews with married couples (six individuals), and three focus groups (twelve individuals). All participants were residents of Limerick prior to and after the school's closure.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups created a flexible format that allowed individuals to comment on what they felt was relevant, and allowed for conversational flow between the researcher and the participants (Bowling, 2002)[162]. Other researchers have effectively employed semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore school closures and community resilience. For example, semi-structured interviews with key community informants, parents, school officials, students and local community members, to understand the impact of a school's closure on rural community life (Bushrod, 1999)[163]. Kulig et al. (2008a[164]; 2008b[165]) employed interviews with rural residents' impacted by adverse conditions to understand their meaning of community resilience. Furthermore, focus groups have been employed to explore the effect of a school's closure on displaced students (Kirsher, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010)[166].

Once ethics approval was granted, interviews and focus groups commenced. These interviews and focus groups included discussions of life in the community prior to and after the school's closure, residents' perception of Limerick's response to the school's closure, 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) How did the community respond to the school's closure?; and 4) How has community life changed since the school's closure?

Data collection started with interviews with key informants that took either in the participants' homes or places of work. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. 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. These informants were selected to participate based on their leadership roles in Limerick, and their ability to help generate a contact list of potential study participants for the focus groups. The next data collection method employed was the focus groups. However, throughout participant recruitment a number of participants were unable participate in the focus group because of scheduling conflicts, but wanted to contribute to the study. As a result, separate interviews were organized with the remaining participants, which included three married couples. All interviews with the married couples took place in the participants' homes and lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. The first couple 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 group took place at a participants' home, and the second focus group took place in the local community centre—each focus group lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Focus group one consisted of 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 final focus group was made up of one female and three male adult residents, ranging in age from 40-65 year in age. All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2009)[167] six-step analysis procedures, specifically emphasizing an inductive approach. The first step was to organize all interview and focus group transcripts. The second step, an initial read of all the transcripts, was conducted to capture the meanings that were emerging. The third step involved coding. During coding comments were made in the margins that were then complied into a list of topics. These list of topics we then clustered into similar topics, and assigned codes and compared to the original transcripts and documents under review. For example, we linked together codes related to "youth" and "seniors" to form the category "intergenerational divide". According to Creswell (2009)[168], studies should develop codes based on the specifics of the study. For example, codes included 1) those related to the literature, such as school-community relationship and rural school closures, 2) those that were unexpected or unusual, such as those related to community identity, and 3) those that were directly related to the theoretical framework, such as interactions as a collective unit, expressions of a sense of community, and community action. Once the codes were identified, they were categorized through descriptive wording and clustered together similar categories. The fourth step expanded the categories into broader themes. For example, "intergenerational divide", "increase travel", "volunteerism" and "declining community recreation" developed into the theme of "declining community engagement." The fifth step involved expanding on the themes as they corresponded to the theoretical framework, community resiliency. The analysis then concluded with step six, which involved interpretation of the data as it related to the theoretical framework and relevant literature.

Results

Data analysis revealed that Limerick school's closure constrained community resilience in two ways: 1) diminishing sense of community, and 2) declining community engagement.

Diminishing Sense of Community

The school closure appears to have influenced Limerick residents' sense of community. In particular, the school-community relationship is expanding and covering a larger geographic area that includes individuals from a number of outlying communities. Although Limerick has lost its school, rural families with school-aged children and their extended family and friends who support them, are engaged in outlying communities more often. As a result, Limerick residents' ideals of local community life are being challenged. Victor, a local farmer explained:

> The school-community is 70 miles by 70 miles instead of 20 by 20 miles. The local community is not really there anymore because the school-community is five times bigger now, and the school-community is totally different than before. It's not like your local community, and having your kids grow up where everybody knows them — it's way different.

The expanding school-community boundaries and the number of outlying communities that are encompassed has broadened what Limerick residents identify as their community. Dan, a father of three school-aged children shared his thoughts: "It's not necessarily the same community because these people [residents from outlying communities] are coming from surrounding communities. Like we are talking Willow Bunch, Bengough, Coronach, so the community is pretty broad now."

Some study participants felt the shift in sense of community as a result of the transient lifestyle among rural families with school-aged children, which have disconnected them from the community. According to Blair, a community business owner, since the school's closure, families with school aged children are disconnected from Limerick's community life but are also much more nomadic:

> It [the school closure] has disassociated a lot of the families from really belonging to a community. Their [parents] kids go to school in another town, and they really don't feel like they belong to one particular community, and I'm finding people are not as close to the community that they once were. They [the parents and children] kind of become nomadic people, that just wander and have no allegiance to any one community. They take advantage of whatever community they are at for their specific needs—whether it's because the kids play hockey or volleyball, but they get their groceries, repair parts and service work done on their vehicles because they are there [in outlying communities]. And, it's kind of made people just very nomadic.

Limerick's school acted as an anchor to the community, where social relationships were continuously cultivated. However, since the school's closure residents are no longer connected, which Lindy, a local older resident, felt changed the notion of what a community is:

> I just think it [the school's closure] is detrimental to the whole community because not everybody gets to see the young and the young don't get to see the older ones, and it's just that there is going to be a kind of gap in the community. The school closure really changed the dynamics of the community and what you call a community now.

Overall, the school closure has been an uncomfortable adjustment for the community, which has made community life feel different. 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 you have to adjust to a new community. There are lots of communities in the world that are a community but have no school, and will never have one. It's like when they took the school out 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.

Declining Community Engagement

Increase in travel. Since Limerick school's closure, the school-community boundaries have expanded, which has resulted in increased travel for residents engaged in outlying school-community relationships. Residents with and without school-aged children are traveling more often and further distances to support the children's activities. For example, some of Limerick's residents without school-aged children continue to attend the children's extra-curricular activities; however, interviewees commented that it is rural families with school-aged children that are burdened the most because of their commitment to school and extracurricular activities. Laurie, a

local resident explained, "they [parents and children] have to travel all the time so quite often they are not around here [Limerick] because they have to travel somewhere else for their school activities."

The length of time rural families are spending driving for activities has increased, but it also appears to be the "norm" for parents with school-aged children. Jan, a mother of three school-aged children shares her thoughts, "we are [parents] a society of popping into our vehicle. I mean it's nothing for us and other parents to drive three hours for a hockey game." As a result of the increased travel, parents of school-aged children are busier than before the school closed. The busy and hectic lifestyle appears to be the normal for the parent cohort impacted by Limerick's school closure. Dan stated, "I think everybody [parents] is a lot busier than they were [before the school closed], they have to make more time for the kids."

Volunteerism. Prior to the school's closure, Limerick had a strong level of community engagement among its residents—this included both younger and older residents. Parents and youth were a critical component of Limerick's volunteer capacity, but are less engaged in Limerick. Blair, shares his perspective of Limerick's volunteer capacity:

> It [the school's closure] has changed the volunteering, that was [volunteering] always such a strong thing in our community. I think the parents are traveling too many different directions and they find it difficult to still be involved [in Limerick] and dedicate their time to the community now. It's difficult, more difficult to get people together on boards and be representatives to help out. It's difficult to get people to help and do the work that needs to be done on a volunteer basis. I see that volunteerism vanishing, going away.

The decline in volunteering by the parents and youth has also disrupted traditional volunteer expectations in Limerick, specifically as they relate to volunteer community organizations. Abbey, explained:

> There used to be this expectation in community organizations that when some of the older ones [residents] stepped out [away from their duties with the organization], the younger ones [referring to the generation with school-aged children] would step in, and I don't know that you see the younger ones stepping in. I think people just become more disengaged in the community and it's just been easier to step back and not participate in community life.

With fewer parents volunteering in Limerick's community organizations, some residents felt there was a negative impact on the children and youth's community involvement. Tom, a local resident, explained:

> In spite of the times [school's closure], where are the young people that are here? What are they doing? Because I don't see them doing anything. I don't want to sound rude or anything, but the parents don't get out a lot and volunteer, and now certain kids don't [engage in the community], and I see that right now in lot of younger families.

Declining community recreation events. With fewer volunteers engaged in Limerick's community organizations, community recreation events and activities are struggling to survive. For example, Limerick hosts an annual slo-pitch tournament at the end of June. This event has been running in the community for over twenty-five years and has always had a close link to the school, youth and parents. The tournament organizers relied on the older school youth to organize the concession booth for the weekend. This concession booth was a fundraising opportunity for the school, but also an integral component of the community slo-pitch tournament; however, since the school's closure volunteer capacity has diminished and is threatening the viability of this annual event. According to Blair:

> I can see the slow pitch tournament dying, just because of the people involved. The kids aren't here and they were the big driving force behind the event, because they ran the booth [concession], and the parents helped out in the booth and there was more involvement. Now [since the school's closure], it's getting to be more of a chore and it's harder to get people to volunteer. So, that recreation might be going away too.

Although the slo-pitch tournament is still an active annual event, other long-standing community events have disappeared since the school's closure. For example, the Fall Supper was an annual event held in Limerick every October, but since the school's closure, it no longer exists. Limerick's United Church was the group that organized the annual supper, which relied heavily on the volunteer contributions of the younger women and youth. The women would prepare and cook a community turkey dinner that residents would buy tickets to attend. The event also involved a number of younger youth serving food and cleaning up tables. Cathy, a local resident, describes the disappearance the event:

> We always use to have a Fall Supper through the church but for the past two years now we haven't, because people are getting busier and the responsibility [of the Fall Supper] is falling on the younger kids and women, and they have gotten a lot busier [since the school closed].

Intergenerational Divide. Prior to the school's closure, the school and community's events and activities were an anchor that connected residents to life in Limerick; however, the school's closure has reduced the number of opportunities to connect residents. In particular, intergenerational relationships have been negatively impacted. Laurie, an older local resident, shared her experience:

> Speaking from a grandparent's point of view, I still try and go to the things [kids activities] in Assiniboia, but it's not handy anymore for sure, and other people older than me, I don't think bother to go [kids activities] anymore. I mean, they [older generation] would come [support the children's school related activities] if it was in Limerick because it was right here, but they are not going to drive to Assiniboia to go [to the kids events]. And, you don't know half of the kids that are playing [sports] anymore, or that are in the Christmas concert, you don't know who's who. It's like you've just totally lost the sense of community.

The disconnection between different generations is also felt with extended family members. Since the school's closure, Lacey, an older community resident, felt that older family members do not connect with the younger ones as often:

> I don't think there is as much traffic in their [residents] homes. For example, in our case, my sister-in-law would come in a little early and have tea with us because she was going to pick the kids up at 3:30 to take them wherever. I know that the family right next door to us—the kids came to the house and waited for their parents, and while waiting had a visit with grandma and grandpa. None of that happens in any home in the community.

Discussion

Through the use of Kulig et al.'s (2008b)[169] community resilience model, this study was able to understand the factors that influence community resilience—in this case, the a school closure's created a number of constraints to community resilience. The school's closure appears to have shifted Limerick residents' sense of community and diminished community engagement.

Diminishing Sense of Community

According to Kulig et al.'s (2008b)[170] community resiliency model, interactions as a collective unit are necessary to developing resilient communities. In particular, interactions as a collective unit increase sense of community, which then cultivates community cohesion, which in turn, leads to community action. However, Kulig et al (2008a)[171] asserts that challenging events such as a school closure can create constraints to community resiliency. In this study, Limerick's school closure negatively impacted Limerick residents' sense of community. As Victor and Dan noted, the school's closure has resulted in a larger geographic school-community boundary that has disordered Limerick residents' community identity and sense of community. As a result, Limerick residents are struggling to attach to a "local" community identity where residents are connected to one another and know one another as they once did when the school was open. As a result, residents' sense of community is disappearing. This is problematic for rural communities that lose their schools; researchers have found that rural residents who experienced a school or church closure identified their community where their children attended school, or where they socialized (Kulig et al., 2008b)[172]. This being the case, the more Limerick residents engage with outlying communities the more likely they will identify with these communities—reducing collective interactions and limiting their resilience potential (Kulig et al., 2008a[173]; 2008b[174]).

In this study, Limerick's school acted as an anchor that connected the different generations in the community. The extent to which young and old residents knew one another was heightened and cultivated Limerick residents' conceptualization of a community and their sense of community. Lindy stated that the school's closure decreased the number of opportunities that the young and old see each other, resulting in a change to "what you call a community now." The school no longer facilitates community togetherness—creating a discord in terms of how Limerick residents once created their sense of community, but also in terms of developing resiliency (Kulig et al., 2008b)[175]. This is concerning for rural communities because they are often conceptualized based on their strong social fabric and stronger sense of community that is largely "due to the

transparency of rural life that ensure that everyone knows everyone" (Rye, 2006, pg. 410)[176]. However, in the case of Limerick's school closure, residents are no longer interacting as a collective unit and the social relationships that once identified Limerick as a community are disappearing, creating a barrier to residents' resilience.

Declining Community Engagement

Research has indicated that a loss of industry, unexpected natural disaster, or a succession of negative events can present barriers to resiliency (Kulig et al., 2008a)[177]. Similar to these findings, this study found that Limerick's school closure created barriers to resiliency—specifically, it reduced Limerick's voluntary capacity. Research has indicated that challenges such as a school's closure can transform rural communities from cohesive, self-sufficient entities into a disconnected state where residents are accessing resources and services in other communities (Miller, 1993[178]; Oncescu & Giles, 2012[179]). Similar to these findings, this study found that the school's closure has increased travel time for rural families with school-aged children, which has reduced their volunteer contributions in Limerick. As Blair stated, volunteerism is declining and challenging Limerick's ability to maintain local boards and organizations. Low rates of participation in community life are seen as a barrier to residents' resilience (Kulig et al., 2008a)[180]. The declining volunteer capacity is concerning for rural communities, because the capacity to rebuild community life after a traumatic event such as a school's closure is often implemented by local residents.

The school's closure also negatively impacted Limerick's volunteer capacity and has reduced community recreation events and activities, sources of collective interactions. Kulig and colleagues (2000[181]; 2008a[182]; 2008b[183]) state collective interactions are a necessary precursor to building a strong sense of community and cohesion that cultivates community action when faced with adverse challenges. As noted by Cathy, the school's closure reduced the volunteer capacity to support the Fall Supper, which was an event that once cultivated collective interactions among Limerick residents. This is particularly concerning for rural communities because recreation events and activities are largely organized by volunteers (Arnold & Riley, 1995[184]; Oncescu & Robertson, 2010[185]; Payne & Schaumleffel, 2008[186]). As a result, future recreational activities and events could be jeopardized with limited volunteers, furthering the social discord between residents. Without community recreation events and activities, rural communities' cohesion may decline because residents have fewer opportunities to socialize with one another (Oncescu & Robertson, 2010)[187]. As a result, Limerick residents' sense of cohesion is jeopardized because they have fewer opportunities for face-to-face contact (MacTavish & Salamon, 2001)[188], which constrains community resilience (Kulig et al., 2008)[189].

According to the community resiliency model, a sense of community is critical to the development of community resilience (Kulig et al., 2008a[190]; 2008b[191]). As illustrated above, the school's closure diminished Limerick's recreation events and activities, however, these events and activities were also largely responsible for cultivating intergenerational interactions among residents. As Laurie stated, the school events and activities connected different generations in the community. However, with fewer events and activities happening in Limerick and rural families with school-aged children increasing engaged in outlying communities, residents such as Laurie, felt Limerick's sense of community diminishing. Declining intergenerational relationships are problematic for rural communities because it diminishes community cohesion (Oncescu &

Robertson, 2010)[192], and influences the ability to mobilize collective action necessary for successful community renewal (Miller, 1993)[193] and community resiliency (Kulig, et al., 2000[194]; 2008a[195]; 2008b[196]).

Conclusion

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 that strengthened and sustained residents' sense of community identity. The important role Limerick's school had within the community made it a highly valued institution. However, the school's closure severed many school-community relationships, and the closure extended beyond education and disrupted Limerick residents' usual way of life. By employing a community resilience model, this study indicates how Limerick school's closure created constraints to residents' community resiliency—specifically as it relates sense of community and civic engagement.

Kulig et al. (2008b)[197] asserts that collective interactions as unit is a critical component to developing community resilience. However, in the case of Limerick's school closure, community resilience could also be jeopardized because residents are struggling to identify Limerick as a community—largely because they have lost touch with the individuals that comprise their community. This has diminished their sense of community. The fractured community identity could be a result of a shift away from the traditional ideals of how rural communities have been identified. As Rye (2006)[198] stated, rural life is often socially constructed based on close relationships, where everyone knows everyone. A rural school is often the social hub of rural life (Parker, 2001)[199] where close relationships among residents are cultivated. In this study, the school's closure has reduced this closeness among residents. If rural community identity is largely tied to the social relationships that the local school facilitates, a school's closure can be a tremendous barrier to community resilience. Understanding the actions that rural communities take to survive a school closure would strengthen our understanding of community resilience, especially in terms of how rural communities continue to cultivate collective interactions among residents, an area of research that warrants further exploration.

Through the community resilience model, this study also highlights how a rural community's social isolation is intensified. In this study, Limerick school's closure created barriers to various forms of community engagement that community resilience relies upon, including declining volunteerism, reduced participation in community recreation events, and the widening social gap between generations. Broadly speaking, this study also depicts how a school's closure can heighten social isolation in a rural community. Although researchers have indicated that geographic isolation is a barrier to community resilience (Kulig et al., 2008)[200], I would argue that social isolation is just as much a barrier to community resiliency. The rationale for this argument lies in the notion of outward looking, where residents focus and attention is on outlying communities, which minimizes their time and effort in their community. As residents look outside their community, the rural community is at risk of losing the capacity to sustain its future because social isolation has increased. Without strong social relationships and networks inside rural communities, sense of community and cohesion are less likely to develop, creating barriers to community action when faced with adverse conditions.

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Broadly speaking this study emphasizes the complex dimensions of a school's closure in the rural community context. What the community resilience model 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 that can constrain resiliency. Where there was once an inward-looking, self-sustaining community, is now looking outwards not only for education, but also to meet their day-today needs. By looking elsewhere for their needs, the residents limit the time, energy and volunteerism that is needed to adapt to life without the school. 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. This shift in the conceptions of community has threatened the self-sustaining practices and sense of community upon which rural communities have prided themselves for so long (Jackson, Peterson, & Spear, 2001)[201]. Without the residents' capacity to come together as a collective unit, whether it is through community events or to volunteer for a local organization, rural community resilience is jeopardized.

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