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Investigating Teachers Understandings and Responses to Diversity in a Rural Ontario Classroom

Stephanie Diane Tuters

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Investigating Teachers Understandings and Responses to Diversity in a Rural Ontario
Classroom

(Spine Title: Diversity in a Rural Ontario Classroom)

(Thesis Format: Monograph)

by

Stephanie Tuters

↓

Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education

School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

The University of Western Ontario

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2009

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**Investigating Teachers Understandings and Responses to Diversity in a Rural
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Abstract

This study is critical in nature, exploring the understandings and responses a group of teachers in a rural Ontario school have of diversity. During a one on one interview participants were asked to describe their understandings and responses to the diversity in their rural Ontario School. Participants described diversity, the challenges resulting from it and the strategies they use to help students overcome the challenges. Participants described diversity as difference broadly defined. Students were found to be different in terms of race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, family life, language and learning abilities. The main challenges associated with this difference were highlighted as intolerance, different learning needs, and curriculum unreflective of student diversity, different beliefs and values of the students and their families, and poverty. Participants explained how they tried to help students overcome these challenges through creating a culture of acceptance in their school, differentiating their instruction, collaborating with each other, and using two support services; the ESL teacher and community volunteers and donations. The findings are explored through a critical lens.

Keywords

Teachers, education, rural education and rural life, student diversity, understanding and responding to student diversity, challenges resulting from diversity, strategies used to overcome challenges resulting from diversity, critical theory.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to Greg, and my family for always supporting me and believing in me when I did not believe in myself.

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I would like to thank first and foremost, my thesis supervisor Dr. Katina Pollock. This project was only possible because of her guidance, dedication and support. I learned much more than how to write a thesis during our time together and am a much better person and student because of it, thank you!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This study investigates the understandings and responses of teachers to the diversity of the students in their rural Ontario classroom. In response to educational literature which is largely based on urban school experiences and the diversity of urban student populations: this study seeks to illuminate how teachers conceptualize the diversity of rural students to help facilitate teaching and learning in rural environments. This chapter provides an overview of where the idea of this study came from in the form of a prelude. The research problem is addressed. An overview of the relevant literature is given. Finally, the research questions addressed in this study will be outlined.

Prelude

When I was entering grade five, my family moved from the booming metropolis of Toronto to a rural community called Hawkshill (pseudonym). The following statistics will help to illustrate the contrast between Hawkshill and Toronto. Located in central Ontario, Hawkshill is part of a municipality comprised of a number of small towns. As of 2001, the total population of the municipality is 15,601, compared to that of Toronto which is 2,481,494 (Statistics Canada, 2002). The population density per square kilometre of the municipality is 55.9, while that of Toronto is 3,939.4. The average family income of the municipality falls below that of Toronto by \$5,235, being recorded as \$32,598. In the municipality, English is the first and only language for 94% of the population, compared to Toronto where 47% of the population speaks a language other than English, and 53% of the population only speaks English (Statistics Canada, 2002). The proportion

of the population identified as part of a visible minority in the municipality is 2%, where as in Toronto it is 43%. Moreover, in the municipality 0.01% of the population is part of a religion other than Catholicism, Protestantism or some form of Christianity, where as in Toronto 20% of the population is (Statistics Canada, 2002).

As a result of the move, my entire family experienced a culture shock. Initially, we felt as though we had traveled back in time. Children were still playing jump rope in grade eight, and playing together with the kindergarten students at recess. Before morning announcements we sang *God Save the Queen* prior to the National Anthem. Holiday festivities still bore Christian titles such as Christmas and Easter. It had been years since schools in Toronto had operated under the assumption that most of the students were Christian. My family and I discussed how we felt like outsiders, as well as how we were being treated as such by the community. We were often treated as though we did not belong because we were from Toronto, and could not relate to the rural lifestyle. We were even told that city people such as ourselves had a different understanding of things, and would never really understand what it meant to be from the “country.”

At first glance this new community seemed very homogenous to us, and lacking in diversity. All of the students appeared to be white, and Christian. However, once we spent more time in the community and got to know it better, we learned of the intricacies which help comprise rural life. We learned that, much like in the city, people lead diverse lives, and had diverse life experiences that influenced the way they engaged in society and its institutions. Children came to school with knowledge and experiences that we knew nothing about. The children grew up on farms and engaged in activities in the rural environment, which we had little or no experience with living in the city. Many of the

children in the area held responsibilities and knowledge of animals and farming comparable to that of adults working in farming industries. In Toronto, we had been immersed in a racially and culturally diverse atmosphere, in which we gained knowledge about things such as peoples' different religions and cultures. Comparatively, our new neighbours had grown up learning about things such as livestock and crops. We began to learn about the ways that rural life influences the development of individuals.

Much like many others, we had no idea about the diversity that exists in rural Ontario until we experienced it ourselves, and learned about it through the stories that were told to us by our friends and neighbours. Prior to moving to this rural area I had held a specific conception of what diversity meant which was based on things such as race, culture and religion. Diversity to me had meant different skin colours and cultural and religious celebrations. In Toronto diversity had meant attending to things such as my best friends' bat mitzvah, and learning about my friends experiences as a refugee from Romania. In Hawkshill, my conception of diversity changed, it expanded to include many more elements of a person's experience other than their race, culture and religion.

Research Problem

How teachers in rural Ontario classrooms understand and respond to diversity is explored in this study. This section begins by highlighting that the study focuses on a group of people who are not part of the dominant group in educational research, practice, and policy. The trend of using the urban classroom as the site for studies of diversity in education is discussed. The differences and similarities of the rural and urban classroom are highlighted in reference to the commonly referenced conception of diversity. This

conception of diversity is discussed in relation to how it may differ from other forms of diversity that can exist in a classroom. Finally, the goal of the study is outlined.

Nature of the Study. This study is critical in nature and explores a group of people who are treated as an 'other' in education, meaning that they are often over looked in educational literature and policy (Peters, 2005). This study explores rural education critically, keeping in mind that some groups have access to things in life that further their success, and give them greater power within society; whereas 'others' often have limited or restricted access to means of furthering themselves therefore perpetuating their status and position as 'others'. Rural students are marginalized by the prominence of urban education in educational research, policy and practice.

There are many groups of people in the field of education who are treated as the 'other', such as aboriginals and members of minority groups, rural students and teachers merely comprise one group of the 'other'. The concept of 'the other' is complicated, as being treated as an 'other' does not always mean the same thing or apply to the same group of people. A single person can be someone who 'others' people in one situation but is 'othered' themselves in another. Moreover, not all people are 'othered' to the same extent or in the same way. Henry Giroux (1990), Peter McLaren (1990), Paolo Freire (2000), and Kevin Kumashiro (2001) are just a few of the researchers who have done work that investigates the experiences of 'others' in education. Their work touches on the experiences of racial, sexual, and economically disadvantaged groups who are less likely to succeed in school because their educational needs are not appropriately met. Some people argue that education as an institution does not cater to the success of all groups of people; rather it caters to that of the dominant group (Freire, 2000; Kumashiro, 2001). As

Kumashiro (2001) puts it “schools need to be places that are *for* all students (italics in original)”, rather than spaces that merely reaffirm the status of the dominant groups of society (p. 17). Schools need to become environments where difference is not only acknowledged but facilitated. This study is intended to help meet the educational needs of rural students, who have not been treated as the dominant group in Canadian society in contemporary times.

Focus of the Study. There are many different ways to conceptualize diversity, or difference. Some of the ways people can be different are based on races, religions, cultures; people can have differing sexual orientations, socio-economic status, and different learning needs. In educational literature, the urban school environment is described as being diverse while the rural classroom is described as homogeneous (Corbett, 2006; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2003; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007). This is based on urban classrooms being more visibly diverse, whereas rural schools experience diversity that is less visible, such as that which is brought about by sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and life experience. Although some children may appear to be similar in appearance, and therefore homogeneous or lacking diversity; all students have unique lived experiences that make them different and diverse. These lived experiences contribute to the way they interact and engage in their educational environment. This study is specifically interested in the diverse rural life experience, and how it is responded to in the rural classroom. The diversity that is responded to in any classroom brings with it challenges that affect the nature of the educational environment and the success of students. In rural America, it has been found that students are experiencing diversity, and that aspects of this diversity are leading to educational failure

at the same levels of many large American cities (Barlow, 2008). This study is concerned with diversity as a result of any kind of difference, and that which contributes to student failure and being treated as an “other” in rural education.

It appears that diversity as a concept is commonly conceived and discussed in one way, but it can have multiple meanings depending on the context. It is my belief that the diversity referred to in educational literature is constructed within urban settings; it is a conception of diversity which is based upon visible signifiers such as race and ethnicity, which are commonly responded to in the urban environment and urban schools. However, diversity can have different meanings depending on the context, which enrich the classroom experience but also bring about challenges. Therefore, I feel it is important to understand teachers’ conception of and responses to diversity in the rural setting; to explore the kind of diversity experienced in rural schools and the manner in which teachers are dealing with the challenges it brings about.

The Research Problem. The specific research problem addressed in this study is that rural students, who comprise 30% of the student population in Ontario, are not getting the quality of education they are entitled to (Health Canada, 2003). This is because rural schools and rurality are understudied and are not prominent in public policy (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Corbett, 2006; Herzog & Pittman, 1995). In contrast, the urban classroom is often studied, especially in regards to diversity (Dei, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2003; Gerin-Lajoie, 2008; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007). This imbalance in how research is conducted has lead to policies and procedures which support teachers in dealing with diversity experienced in urban schools, but not in rural schools. Although rural teachers deal with diversity, little research has been

conducted in this area. This is possibly due to an assumption that diversity exists where it is visible, or obvious, and diversity is not always visible in rural areas.

Diversity in rural classrooms has been understudied, there is very little research available on this topic, and this contributes to the continuation and support of the hierarchical organization of society and its institutions. Urban students will continue to be the focus of educational research unless the need to research rural education is highlighted. This lack of research contributes to the continuation of rural students being treated as an 'other' in education. The goal of this study is to explore the ways in which the rural classroom is diverse, in order to help facilitate teaching and learning in the rural environment.

Literature Review

The literature review gives an overview of the terms and concepts that are explored in the study, and their grounding in current educational literature. The term rural can be defined in a multitude of ways. What it means for an area to be rural is discussed, followed by the definition of rural that is used for this study. A description of rural education is provided, including a discussion of the challenges that rural schools face. Finally, the term diversity is discussed. Although commonly referred to in the literature; diversity is rarely clearly defined as there are many different ways that a student or student population can be considered diverse (Levin & Riffel, 1993). A brief discussion of the common definitions of the term is presented, followed by the definition used for this study.

Rural. The term rural is very difficult to define. Multiple conceptions of the term rural exist for both quantitative and qualitative studies. In this study, rural is defined in

both qualitative and quantitative terms, even though the research is qualitative in nature. Statistics Canada defines a rural area as one which has a population of less than 10,000 people (2002). In this study rural will also refer to areas which are comprised of a population which is largely homogeneous in race, culture, and religion, and which is surrounded by land that is used for agricultural purposes (Rios, 1988). This is in contrast to the urban environment which is of a high population density; cultural, racial and religious diversity, and is surrounded by industry and businesses. This study will address how the rural context influences not only the diversity that teachers respond to, but also their understandings of it.

Rural Education. Much like the other concepts explored in this study, rural education is one which can have multiple meanings and take many forms. Based on the definition of rural areas from Statistics Canada, for the purpose of this study, a rural school is defined as one which is located in an area with a population of less than 10,000 people. In Ontario, 770 of the 4700 schools are located in rural areas, and 10% of those schools operate at less than half of their capacity (Downey, 2003). In Northern Ontario schools can be up to fifty kilometres apart from one another. However, not all rural schools exist at such a great distance from one another. Due to the uneven population distribution in Ontario, some rural schools skirt urban areas and are much closer to the nearest school. Other areas in Canada experience the same kind of population distribution and therefore have schools in similar situations. Saskatchewan has a large number of rural schools, and the University of Saskatchewan has become a leader in rural educational research. Some of the organizations that have come about as a result of the work that has been conducted at the University include the Canadian Rural Partnership and the National

Congress on Rural Education. Researchers from across Canada have been brought together with the help of the University of Saskatchewan to help explore issues and challenges facing rural education. However, even though rural education is explored and discussed by these organizations (and others), it still remains understudied, given the lack of research available regarding rural education. For the purpose of this study, rural education will be considered education which encompasses more than just schooling, including education obtained through rural life experience.

Challenges Facing Rural Education. A number of challenges facing rural Ontario schools have been uncovered, including (but not limited to); transportation issues, staff retention and recruitment, low enrolment, and lack of support services (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Downey, 2003; Singleton & Varpalotai, 2006; Varpalotai, 2003; Wallin, 2007). The challenges facing rural Ontario schools are interconnected and may be a result of the schools existing in rural areas. Transportation is a challenge, as students must be bussed in from remote areas, resulting in high transportation costs. Staff turnover rates are high, especially as boards continue to amalgamate as that makes it easier for teachers to transfer to schools in urban areas. Staff retention is also an issue because “many rural teachers find themselves working in multi-age, multi-grade classroom situations with increasing proportions of special students” (Wallin, 2007, p. 8). Classrooms situations such as this occur because rural schools are located in remote and under populated areas. Rural schools often operate with a reduced capacity which reduces funding and also reduces the perception the general population has of the schools viability as a public institution. Low student success has been linked to the lack of support services

in rural areas (Wallin, 2007). Support services are often scarce or non-existent for rural schools and students, as they tend to be located in and around urban areas.

Varpalotai (2003) points out that “rural schools are further marginalized as directives come from the urban board offices” (p. 121). Varpalotai highlights how the challenges facing rural schools are compounded by policies and funding formulas not only emanating from urban areas but being based on the urban reality rather than the reality of rural life, this is as a result of a power imbalance. The power imbalance between rural and urban exists because of a disparaging view of rurality. Herzog and Pittman (1995) describe this imbalance quite well when they describe how

...modern society does not value ruralness; prejudices against rural people and places are strong...Just as one can imagine the bumpkin persona arising from demographic, economic and educational conditions in rural areas, the same relative conditions exist today to sustain the image. Even though our times are characterized by a heightened awareness of multicultural differences, it is still considered socially and politically correct to poke fun at ‘rednecks,’ hillbillies,’ and ‘hicks’”(p. 3).

This disdain for rurality contributes to urban schools and settings being the place where educational research is frequently conducted. Therefore, educational policies and procedures often cater to the urban school. It is easy to see why urban schooling receives such attention and primacy within research and policy. Urban schools are located in areas where the highest population density occurs. Further, ministries of education and other educational institutions often formulate policies based on what will be best for the largest number of students. Therefore, it makes sense that urban schooling and students receive as much attention as they do. However, as previously mentioned 30% of Ontario’s students attend rural schools, which is a significant proportion. A goal of this study is to

highlight issues within rural education, in the hope that policies and procedures will become influenced by what happens in all schools, rather than just the majority.

The Nature of Rural Education. Varpalotai (2003) describes rural education as being much more than just the curriculum taught in the classroom. Varpalotai talks about how rural education encompasses rural life, it includes that which is learned at home – on the farm, in the community, and in the classroom (2003). The life experience of rural students is very different from that of an urban student, and their knowledge base is as well. By the time rural students reach school age many of them are extremely knowledgeable about different farming industries. Rural students have a whole other form of education that continues along side and intersects with their school education. The rural school is also where rural life converges. In single and rural school communities, the school is often the only public institution (Downey, 2003; Singleton & Varpalotai, 2006). It serves as the centre of the community in more ways than one. The school acts as the site for education, physical activities, political activity, and the meeting place for clubs and teams. In rural communities, the school is often the cornerstone or centre of the community.

Rural areas, although they are often depicted as being homogeneous or lacking in diversity, are the site of diversity much like any area. Corbett (2006) explains:

There are a lot of myths about rural schools. One is that they contain less diversity than urban schools and that they reflect more cohesive communities. This is not necessarily the case. Rural communities can contain as much social difference as urban spaces. In fact, in rural schools there may be more diversity given that urban and suburban schools serve relatively homogeneous neighbourhoods. (pg. 1111)

As previously discussed, there are many different kinds of diversity, both visible and less visible. While invisible signifiers of difference such as sexual orientation, religion, socio-

economic status, life experience, or learning styles, may have previously been the more commonly responded to forms of diversity in rural communities, ethnic and racial diversity is becoming more prevalent in rural schools as well (Rude, Paolucci-Whitcomb & Comerford, 2005).

Rural Schools and Their Communities. Rural communities are often very close or tight-knit due to their remote location and their small population. Therefore, community members are often very aware of one another's lives. Unfortunately, this close relationship can lead to the creation of a hostile or unsupportive environment for individuals not part of the dominant group, or those who are diverse. In rural communities, as in many other locations, when people are somewhat different than the norm they are often unaccepted and left unsupported. Therefore, not only do rural teachers have to deal with the diversity brought forth by rural life, as well as the diversity that is responded to in urban schools, but they also have to deal without the support services available to urban teachers.

Varpalotai and Singleton (2006) discuss the problems that can arise in rural schools as a result of a lack of support services and a rural community which is unsupportive of difference. They state that sexual diversity is a form of diversity which is often ignored or treated as inappropriate or wrong by people in rural areas. In rural areas there are much fewer resources for both students and teachers. As a result, students whose sexual orientation is different from the mainstream or dominant group, often flee to urban areas in hopes that they will find increased acceptance or autonomy, but often end up making unsafe life choices such as becoming prostitutes (Singleton & Varpalotai, 2006). Varpalotai and Singleton state that the internet is becoming a source of support for

teachers, but that it is not enough. Moreover, the internet is not always accessible in rural areas.

As previously mentioned, issues facing rural schools are further compounded because educational policies cater to the dominant group - urban schools. Rural schools, while they are the minority, 30% of the students in Ontario. If rural students are to be given an equal opportunity to succeed, their educational situation must be understood, and policies and procedures put into place must be meaningful for rural schooling. Researching diversity in rural schools and the responses that teachers have to it is an important first step towards helping teachers help their students. Further, according to a comprehensive study conducted on the state of rural education research, not only is current research poor, there is also not sufficient research available for formulating policy (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005).

Diversity in Educational Literature. Definitions of diversity that are used in educational research were almost always described using more visible signifiers such as race and ethnicity, culture and religion. Even though diversity means difference, or variance of any kind, when people think about diversity or difference in reference to others it is the more visible signifiers that come to mind. This appears to be true in educational research as well. Because of this, diversity has come to be conceptualized in educational literature as; racial, cultural, and religious diversity (Harper, 1997). This is likely as a result of the majority of research on diversity in schools being conducted in urban areas, where the more visible differences are prominent.

In educational literature, diversity is often described as something unique to the urban environment. In some of their recent work Solomon and Sekayi (2007) state:

Recognizing that much traditional teacher education often fails to account for the unique challenges that urban teaching presents, they outline concrete approaches to reforming, renewing, and reinvigorating teacher education for urban schools.
(p. xiv)

This statement is part of the preface which discusses the challenges teachers face in their quest to bring about equity and social justice in their schools, these challenges are discussed as being influenced by the diverse student populations within the schools. In the quote listed above challenges facing the urban teacher are described as being unique. The researchers appear to be insinuating that challenges brought about by diversity are unique to the urban environment.

The more I read about diversity in the urban classroom, the more I found myself reflecting on my experiences with it in a rural setting and thinking about the diversity that I witnessed. Although it may not have been diversity in terms of racial and cultural difference, there were many students in my rural community with different lived experiences that affected the way they engaged in the school environment. In Gerin-Lajoie (2008) a new teacher, discusses how the common discourses on diversity naturalize whiteness, and white privilege. Knight points out that this can be done in many ways, one of which is by defining diversity as “otherness”, those who are diverse are the racial minorities. This has led to heterogeneity being treated as synonymous with diversity. I found this understanding of diversity to be very popular in the rural community where I grew up. In my community, people often expressed the belief that diversity did not exist in the community because everyone was white. Not only is

diversity thought to be absent in the rural community based on things such as naturalizing whiteness, it is practically absent in rural educational literature.

Diversity in Rural Educational Literature. A scan of literature on rural schooling brings little to bear on diversity in rural education, more importantly the scan brings little to bear on rural education in general. “Relatively few scholars are studying rural education issues” (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005, p.1). Howley (1997) states that: “beneath this scepticism about rural schools runs a deep disregard of actual rural places, diverse as they are” (p. 3). Therefore not only are rural schools viewed sceptically, they are regarded as lacking in diversity and virtually irrelevant to educational research and literature. Current research assumes urban schools and teachers experience difficulties meeting the needs of a diverse student population, and are in need of help (Solomon & Sekayi, 2007; Gerin-Lajoie, 2008; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2003).

This omission of diversity in rural educational literature can be attributed to the current general conception of diversity that focuses predominantly on race and ethnicity, culture, and religion. There is a general assumption that rural Ontario is homogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity, culture and religion and therefore lacking of diversity. It has also been found that:

Too often, researchers overlook what is most particularly rural as a fit object of inquiry in educational research. Instead objects of national—or perhaps, cosmopolitan—practice absorb their attention, and thereby obscure rural issues and dilemmas (Howley, 1997, p. 1).

However, things that appear to be homogeneous are often diverse. There are many ways people can be different or diverse based on their lived experience, sexual orientation, religion, learning style or their socio economic status.

Socio-economic status is defined in this section because of how frequently it was brought up by participants in this study. Socio-economic status is generally as a combination of income and education levels of the parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In this study when participants discussed socio-economic status they used the terms low socio-economic status and poverty interchangeably. Poverty is defined by the Canadian government as being measured either absolutely or relatively. When poverty is measured absolutely it is measured by whether or not a person has enough money to purchase goods and services recognized as essential for everyday life (Government of Canada, 2007). Poverty is measured relatively by comparing spending patterns to the general population (Government of Canada, 2007). Someone may be able to purchase their essential goods and services; however their income and the quality of their goods and services might be greatly lower than the general population, which would make them impoverished by comparison. "Despite cyclical variations, the rate of one in six can be considered the structural rate of child and family poverty, rooted in the social and economic inequality in Canada" (Rothman, 2007, p. 50). This rate of poverty is an average, which does not reflect poverty rates of Aboriginals or specific groups of citizens. Poverty rates are significantly higher for students from single parent homes, racial minorities, and families that have recently immigrated to Canada (Rothman, 2007). Diversity based on socio-economic status is therefore closely linked to other ways of being different.

Definitions of Diversity. Diversity has been defined in many different ways, and depending on who is discussing the topic it can mean a number of different things. The Merriam and Webster (2008) on-line dictionary defines diversity as: “the condition of being diverse: VARIETY ; *especially*: the inclusion of diverse people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization <programs intended to promote *diversity* in schools>”. In educational literature, in reference to the word diversity, Dei et al., (2003) says that “educational sites respond to the needs and concerns of all students from diverse racial, ethnic, gender, sexual class, religious, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds” (p. xii). In Solomon and Sekayi (2007), diversity is discussed in relation to issues of social justice, and is tied to concerns about preparing teachers to be educators in classrooms with diversity defined in terms of linguistics, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status.

In the classroom diversity can exist in even more ways, such as learning needs, and educational interests, however it is most commonly discussed in relation to signifiers of difference that are visible or obvious. Hyun (2007) describes the experiences of a student teacher, who was surprised by the description that was given of the diversity that existed in her teacher mentors’ classroom because it did not include things such as learning diversity or disabilities. Although researchers define diversity in many different ways, the definitions are similar because most of them include specific signifiers of difference such as race, religion and ethnicity (Dei et al., 2003; Levin & Riffel, 1993; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007).

Diversity in This Study. For the purposes of this study, diversity is defined as a difference or variance of any kind which can contribute to students feeling and being

treated as an 'other' in the institution of education. The purpose of this study is to critically examine the responses and understandings teachers in rural Ontario have of diversity, and what it means for their teaching practice. It will provide a basis for discussing how diversity is conceptualized, experienced and responded to in rural Ontario. Rural diversity should be understood as encompassing more than just the more visible signifiers of difference. It should be understood as encompassing things such as life experience and knowledge specific to rural life. This diversity should also be considered as having the same possibility of creating challenges for educators as urban diversity.

While diversity can bring positive aspects to the classroom educators often have to deal with challenges in the classroom which are brought about by diversity (Levin & Riffel, 2003). Researching diversity in the rural school is important for helping develop strategies teachers can use to help them deal with the challenges they may face as a result of how diversity plays out in their classroom. Studies of diversity in the urban school setting have at least provided information for helping them develop strategies for dealing with the challenges brought about by the diversity that exists in their classrooms and schools. The studies help provide a framework to grow and expand on.

Research Questions

Diversity, as previously mentioned, is a term that can mean different things to different people. Challenges can arise in the classroom based on a teacher's notion of diversity and the setting in which they are experiencing it. Based on the complex nature of the term, and the unique ways it can be understood, it is important to uncover how

diversity plays out in rural schooling in terms of who is included and who excluded in education, as well as what challenges diversity creates for teachers. Not all life experiences are treated as valid or right, and therefore not all students are included in education. Students are excluded by having their life experiences, traditions, and values both invalidated and excluded from education. By uncovering this phenomenon it will then be possible to help determine what kind of action can be taken to help improve or enrich the rural education system.

The research question pursued in this study is: **How do teachers in rural schools understand and respond to diversity?** The purpose of the study is to determine the notions teachers have of diversity in the rural setting. An appropriate method for doing so is interviewing teachers who work in classrooms comprised of students who live in a rural area of Ontario. The literature discusses how diversity is often talked about within academia, yet “it does not always reach the public school level” (Gerin-Lajoie, 2008, p. 129-130). Therefore, the results of the research done on diversity remains within academia rarely and rarely make it to the public school level for educators and administrators to put into action. The goal of the study is to gain primary information regarding teachers’ definitions and notions of diversity in a rural setting.

Conclusion

This introduction provided the reader with a prelude explaining the origin of the study. An overview of the nature and focus of the study was given, as well as the research problem. The study was identified as being critical in nature; seeking to uncover information regarding a group of students treated as an ‘other’ in education and are oppressed by the dominant group in society. Uncovering the many ways to be different in

a rural Ontario classroom is the focus of the study. The research problem was illuminated as being that 30% of the student population currently receives a quality of education that is less than they are entitled to.

A description of the terms and concepts explored in this study was provided. The term rural is defined as an area with a population of less than 10,000 people, and is surrounded by land used for agricultural purposes. Rural education was described as something which is not the same in every rural school, or rural area. It has also been described as encompassing much more than the standard curriculum. The rural school was described as the centre of many rural communities, and functioning as much more than just as school. Challenges facing rural education were highlighted including transportation and staff retention issues. The diversity responded to in rural schools was described as encompassing what is responded to in urban schools, as well as what is brought forth by the diverse rural life experience. A discussion was held about how rural teachers often face the challenges of diversity without the support of services available to urban teachers, as well as how the challenges brought about by diversity are compounded by the nature of the rural community. It was highlighted that further research into diversity in rural areas is of importance.

For this study, diversity was defined as a difference or variance of any kind which can contribute to students feeling and being treated as an 'other' in the institution of education. However, in educational literature diversity is most commonly referred to in relation to urban education and that which is experienced in the urban context. Therefore, rural diversity should be understood as encompassing more than just the obvious signifiers of difference, specifically life experience and knowledge specific to rural life

and rural education. It was also highlighted that while diversity can bring many positive things to a classroom it is not without the possibility of challenges.

This study responds to educational literature catering to the dominant group of students, by being largely based on research regarding experiences of diversity in the urban school setting; resulting in the research problem of the educational needs of rural students being inadequately met. The next section will discuss the conceptual framework and methodology used for selecting the participants and conducting the interviews.

Chapter 2

Conceptual and Methodological Approaches

This chapter describes the conceptual framework and the methods and methodology used for this study. Critical theory is discussed, along with some of the critical theorists whose work was used to help form the lens of the study. What it means to view educational research critically is described, along with some current educational research that was conducted from a critical perspective. The qualitative approach used for this study is outlined. This outline will be followed by an explanation of the type of case study that was conducted. The study design and data collection method is explored. A discussion regarding the participant selection method is followed by a brief description of them. Finally, the manner for analysing the data is described.

Conceptual Framework

This study concerns rural students, who are placed near the bottom of the social hierarchy in Ontario schooling. A critical approach to educational research: “seeks to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 26). Kincheloe (2004) states critical pedagogy is “grounded on a social educational vision of justice and equality,” it is “constructed on the belief that education is inherently political”, and it is “dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering” (p. 6-11). Critical theorists are committed to social justice and actually achieving positive change. It is important to approach this study from a critical perspective because of the domination of urban people and urban beliefs over

rural people. This section discusses how this study critically examines the understandings and responses teachers have of diversity in their rural Ontario school.

Recent research on rural education conducted from a critical perspective is highlighted. How critical theorists view the hierarchical organization of society is discussed, in reference to how that organization influences the educational experiences of students. In this study the hierarchical organization of society is highlighted by discussing how rural students are taught using policies and practices based upon urban or dominant beliefs and values. Critical research is described as having the goal of creating more equitable and just educational experiences for all students. This study will help achieve that goal by uncovering how diversity plays out and is responded to in this rural Ontario school. Critically examining the hierarchies at play in this rural school is crucial first step towards dismantling them.

Critical Theory. Issues of diversity are interrelated with domination and oppression, who holds power in society and its institutions and who does not. Critical approaches are often used to explore the concepts of power in education. Critical educational theory and practice has been largely influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (2000), who is arguably one of the founders of critical pedagogy and practice.

Freire has conducted a lot of research with rural or agricultural groups (Freire, 2000). His experiences working with members of agricultural communities and labourers provide a strong connection to the rural community and rural education. Interestingly urban theorists and educators have found his work to be so relevant to their work. Yet such comparatively little work has been done that relates his theories to rural education.

His work has largely been related and compared to the urban classroom, especially in North America. There has been some research done on rural educational settings in Europe, in which Freires' work was used as a framework. In one article in particular Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux (1990) are asked to discuss the implications of critical pedagogy to rural education in Poland, and they comment on the irony of the situation. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren are known to be critical theorists, building upon the work of Paolo Freire in their own ways. In this particular article they state that:

The invitation from Paul Theobald to do an article on the implications of critical pedagogy to rural education was both a surprise and a challenge. We were immediately struck by a profound irony. While critical pedagogy in its early stages largely grew out of the efforts of Paulo Freire and his literacy campaigns among peasants in rural areas of Brasil and other Third World countries, subsequent generations of North American teachers and cultural workers influenced by Freire's work have directed most of their attention to urban minority populations in major metropolitan centers. Very little writing exists that deals with critical pedagogy in the rural school classroom and community. (p. 154)

The work of Freire will be used in the latter part of this study to help deconstruct the teachers' responses and what is happening in this rural school.

I chose to approach this study using a critical lens because I believe current inequalities in education arise out of power imbalances in society resulting from a hierarchical organization of beliefs and values. This hierarchical organization of society has led to urban beliefs and values taking precedence over rural beliefs and values, contributing to the educational needs of rural students being unmet. I believe that one of the ways to find meaningful solutions for this problem is by uncovering these power imbalances and critically examining where they come from and why they are in place.

Critical theorists recognize that the world is ruled by power relationships, and those who control the power design societal institutions according to their specific needs

(Kumashiro, 2002). In the Canadian context, white middle-class citizens often hold and control the power in society and its institutions. By benefiting from this Euro-centric organization of society the dominant groups are able to maintain and enhance their position in society to the detriment of other citizen groups such as minorities, new immigrants, or any others (Kumashiro, 2002). Further, those who benefit from this organization of institutions often resist change that would make the organization equitable. Therefore, the “other” groups in society are often unable to compete or survive in institutions as well as the dominant groups. This study will examine where and how rural students fit in the euro-centric organization of society, as well as which rural students are being catered to and which students are not.

Other groups in society are often unable to compete or survive in societal institutions based on inequities that exist within institutions, and in peoples’ perceptions of themselves and society. Being diverse or different in society, and public institutions, means not all groups (or individuals) will be treated the same. It also means that institutions will not facilitate the success of all individuals, creating inequity. Service (2000) believes “inequities are rampant throughout our schools, both urban and rural, in every province and territory across Canada, in varying ways and to varying degrees (p. 5)!” In order to help make schools more equitable, the source of inequity must first be understood; meaning we must critically examine rural schools to determine how rural students are different, and what their learning needs are to determine how we can improve education to better meet their needs. We must also critically examine how teachers respond to the diversity of rural students, and the strategies they use to overcome the challenges arising from that diversity. Service (2000) goes on to explain how equity is not

about what we can actually see; it is about “perceptions, attitudes, values, principles, policies, and hopefully, practices of both the teacher and the students (p. 6).” Critically exploring teachers’ experiences and responses to diversity in this rural Ontario school will help determine what kinds of inequities exist in the school and how they are being addressed.

The Goal of Critical Theory. Critical theorists seek to bring greater justice and equality to the world by problem-posing, and acting upon their findings to bring about positive change. This study hopes to be a vehicle for positive change, by uncovering the ways in which inequities are perpetuated. Kellner (2006) discusses how looking critically at education can help make it more equitable, and help to eliminate oppressive practices when he states:

but that certain idealist, elitist, and oppressive elements of classical and contemporary pedagogy must be rejected. A critical theory of education has a normative and even utopian dimension, attempting to theorize how education and life construct alternatives to what is (p. 3).

Critical theorists recognize that people are like unique fountains of knowledge and experience (Freire, 2000). Moreover, that people bring value to the situations they are a part of, and rather than pushing preconceived notions or ideas on others, we should be sharing our knowledge and experiences and continually learning and growing with each other in a positive manner. Rural students (all students) have unique knowledge based on their life experience that should be shared and incorporated into the classroom experience and valued as well. This study explores whether the unique knowledge and experience of rural students is incorporated into their school experience.

Critical research and practice is conducted with the belief that the research should be “injected with a healthy dose of what Freire called radical love” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 3). This study is injected with radical love in the sense that it seeks to create positive change; radical love is a love that leads to action and therefore positive change. Radical love involves seeing ways in which things can be changed for the better, and not only acting to achieve that positive change but holding on to the hope that the change can actually be achieved. Radical love means recognizing things like inequalities but maintaining a positive attitude that things can and will change for the better. By being injected with radical love; I hope the research will assist teachers in keeping students actively engaged and interested in learning. The goal is for it to help rural teachers and students further their understanding of each other and their diversity, or lived experiences. From a critical perspective, students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled, nor are teachers imparters of definitive knowledge (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 2). Rather, students and teachers bring knowledge and life experience with them to the classroom that can both enhance and impede their ability to learn.

A critical analysis of the school environment helps inform teachers that the knowledge and experiences of individuals may not conform to the dominant norms and beliefs supported by their schools. By being aware of how their students may differ from the dominant group, and understanding how to incorporate these differences into their classrooms, rural teachers can help adapt their classroom environment and teaching tactics to better support each and every student. Institutions such as the 4H club (in which youth learn about things such as woodworking, livestock and square dancing) when functioning alongside education benefit from the knowledge and experience rural youth

possess (Varpalotai, 2003). Education could benefit much more from the knowledge of rural youth by further incorporating particular kinds of knowledge and skills into all education practice.

Researching Rural Education from a Critical Perspective. Some current research has approached rural schooling in the United States from a critical perspective (Barlow, 2008; Rude, Paolucci-Whitcomb & Comerford, 2005; Tompkins, 2008). These researchers dispel the myth that rural America is “white, wealthy and withering” (Tompkins, 2008, p. 24). They state that educational policies appear to be prepared under the assumption that rural America has money, is comprised mainly of white people, and its population is decreasing. Rural America, they say, is actually the exact opposite of the way it is portrayed by politicians and policy. Researchers feel that politicians would be very surprised by what they found in rural America if they actually visited the area. This research is critical because it questions the assumptions of politicians and policy, comparing it to the real life experiences of rural people.

According to Barlow (2008), rural America is growing in population and diversity, and its students are experiencing poverty and educational failure at the same levels of many large American cities. Rural American schools are being ignored in educational policy, largely based on misconceptions about the nature of the rural educational environment. This information regarding the misconceptions in educational literature and policy regarding rural US schools, and the reality of the situation there, is relevant to this study because little research has also been conducted regarding rural education in Ontario. Therefore, much like the rural US, little is actually known about the rural Ontario school experience. This study considers whether the conceptions of a

homogeneous rural Ontario, which are imbedded in educational research, policy, practice and theory, are accurate.

For this study, approaching rural education with a critical lens means uncovering what is currently going on in the school being studied. This means uncovering how the teachers conceive of the students diversity, and the challenges students face as a result of this diversity. It also means uncovering the strategies teachers are currently using to try to help students overcome the strategies arising out of their diversity, and considering whether these strategies are effective in helping students overcome things such as inequality. Effectiveness of the strategies is considered in reference to the work of Freire and other critical researchers. I plan to deconstruct the strategies teachers use and seem to feel are successful. I will determine what exactly it is that they are doing, how they feel about it and the goals they are trying to achieve, looking for ways they might be perpetuating inequality.

By exploring how teachers in rural educational settings understand and respond to diversity, this study hopes to uncover the challenges teachers face when trying to provide an equitable education to rural students. This study will also examine the strategies teachers use to overcome these challenges. By critically examining what participants had to say about diversity compared to how they reacted to it when trying to help students overcome challenges will help illustrate their true feelings and intentions. Considering the responses critically, will also help to determine why teachers react to rural diversity in certain ways and why they choose specific strategies for dealing with the challenges of diversity.

Summary of Section. Some of the general assumptions included in this study are; that everything is political, and societal institutions are organized in a manner which benefits some but not all. Further, students are not empty vessels waiting for knowledge to be imparted on them. Everyone has different (yet valid) knowledge and life experiences which influence who they are as individuals, as well as their ability to learn and interact in an educational environment. Values that are central to the creation of this study are the achievement of social justice for all, and working towards positive change within education and its institutions by critically examining the ways things are versus how they should be. This study intends to critically examine rural teachers' notions of diversity, and how this understanding influences their interactions with students, in an attempt to improve rural education.

Methods and Methodology

This section describes the qualitative approach used for this study. The design of the study is explored. Interviews are explained to be the method of data collection method. The sampling method used for selecting the participants is also described. The individual participants are explored by providing an overview of things such as the number of participants, their gender, place of residence and number of years of teaching experience. Finally, the methods used to analyse the data are discussed.

Methodological Approach. A qualitative approach is used for this study.

Educational research is commonly conducted in a qualitative manner; it is an established tradition of inquiry within the field (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 167).

Moreover, critical theory, which provides the lens used to look at this phenomenon of

rural education, is naturalistic in and of itself, seeking to illuminate differing experiences and view points which are commonly suppressed by the dominant viewpoints (Kumashiro, 2002). This project is better suited to the naturalistic approach than others such as scientific or quantitative methods, as it is more concerned with description, exploration, and discovery, rather than prediction (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The study is an exploratory case study, based on interviews conducted with teachers from one school. I will describe teachers' responses to questions regarding how they understand and respond to the diversity of the student population in their rural Ontario school and classrooms.

Design of the Study

The study intends to determine how rural teachers understand and respond to diversity in their classroom. It is a descriptive exploratory case study which uncovers how diversity is typically responded to and conceived in this particular rural setting.

Descriptive case studies have a fairly narrow focus; they can be illustrative, exploratory or critical instance case studies (Morra & Friedlander, 1999). Descriptive studies are often useful in cases where researchers are looking to define things, which is relevant for this studies' attempt to determine how rural teachers are conceptualizing and experiencing diversity. A descriptive exploratory case study is relatively short in nature, and is most useful in situations where little information is available regarding the situation.

Exploratory case studies provide a starting point for research that may evolve into a larger project (Morra & Friedlander, 1999). This study is exploratory in nature as there is limited information regarding the rural educational experience, let alone information regarding diversity in rural schools. The study is a case study because it focuses on a

specific school and group of teachers, and how they personally understand and respond to the diversity of their students. The results will therefore not necessarily be useful for generalizations about the larger population. However, the results will hopefully be helpful for other teachers in both rural and non-rural schools when understanding and responding to diversity in their schools.

The teachers identified as the desired participants were male and female teachers, teaching in schools with students from rural areas, in an English speaking public school board in South Western Ontario. People falling into these categories were approached by a key informant to see if they were interested in participating in an interview. Participants were given the option of participating in a one-on-one, face-to-face semi-structured interview. Interview questions were designed to elicit responses regarding how the participants experienced and responded to diversity in a rural context. The interview questions were grouped into topics based on the three main elements of the problem or question being addressed. The topics included their understanding of diversity in this context, their experiences with diversity in their classrooms, and their responses to it. Each topic group had sub-topics and questions to help spur further discussion or greater depth of description. Teachers were asked how they make sense of diversity in a rural context. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder.

Data Collection

Interviewing was the research method used to collect participants' responses. "Interviews are one of the most commonly recognized forms of qualitative research method" (Mason, 2006, p. 63). Interviewing provided rich in-depth descriptions. They

provided the opportunity to ask participants to expand on certain answers and go into further depth when the individual so desired. Interviews were chosen because one of the purposes of the study was to uncover how the participants personally understood and responded to diversity in their school and classroom, as well as how they felt about it. Therefore other data collection methods such as surveys and video – taping would have been ineffective at collecting the appropriate information.

Conducting the interviews face-to-face also allowed the researcher to note non-verbal cues. The interviews provided information regarding the participants' individual experiences and conceptions of the diversity existing in their classroom; which helped to provide a basic understanding of what rural teachers are actually experiencing, and how they are conceptualizing it. Interviews were chosen because this study stems from a belief that the peoples' individual knowledge and experiences are meaningful components of the social reality, which can be used to help analyse society and its institutions (Mason, 2006, p. 63). Capturing participants' personal understandings and responses to the diversity of their students was very important for this study. One-on-one interviews allowed the researcher access these thoughts and feelings which are meaningful aspects of social reality.

The style of the interview was relatively informal, much like a “conversation with a purpose”, where the purpose was to get a narrative-like account of the teacher's experiences' of the diversity of their students, and how they conceptualized the diversity (Mason, 2006, p. 62). The interview was more structured at the beginning, asking the participants to answer simple questions that provide a context for the discussion such as; years of experience, number of students in the classroom, years of experience at that

current location, etc. As the interview progressed questions were less specific providing greater opportunities for the participant to share narrative-like accounts of experiences and thoughts on the topics such as how a new teacher might be incorporated into their school community. Questions such as this helped draw the participants focus to the overall school community and climate, and how it might appear to a newcomer. It gave the participants the opportunity to view and consider their school from a new angle. Interviews varied in length from half an hour to an hour.

The interview questions were designed to encourage rural teachers to discuss their personal responses to diversity in their classrooms and schools. Gerin-Lajoie (2008) discusses how important it is to discuss diversity in terms of “adapting the curriculum or pedagogy” (p. 125). However, first it must “be examined within the existing power structure of our society” (p. 125). Questions were posed to the teachers such as: how do you respond to diversity in your classroom? When you think about the word diversity, what comes to mind? By interviewing teachers about their experiences in their classrooms, the study was intended to gather information about how the hierarchical organization of society plays out in the classroom. Participants were not directly asked about the hierarchical organization of their school and classroom, this information was inferred from the answers participants gave to other questions. The questions were designed to determine how diversity is understood by teachers and responded to in the rural classroom.

The interviews were recorded by a voice recorder for transcription. Notes were also taken by the interviewer during the interview, to record relevant findings or thoughts about the conversation as it unfolded. A journal was kept, which helped the researcher to

reflect on the findings as they were coming about. Following each interview, a journal entry was made, and also throughout the course of the research to reflect on how the research was progressing in general.

Participant Selection

The sample group for the research project was comprised of teachers in an English speaking public school board in South Western Ontario, who teach in a rural school. The intention was to complete semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. Because the purpose of the study is to conduct foundational research about rural teachers experiences with or responses to diversity, and their conceptions of the term, it is very important to go directly to the primary source.

The school chosen for this case study is in Croyden (pseudonym) Ontario, which is a small town in South Western Ontario that is surrounded by rural areas. There are many teachers at this particular school who have been teaching there for a lot of years and who also live in rural areas themselves. Croyden was chosen as the site for the research because it has a population less than 10,000, and is surrounded by land used for agricultural purposes (Statistics Canada, 2006). The town has three elementary schools, one high school, and one private school. The town does not have a hospital; however it does have a walk-in clinic, and six doctors. There are 500 more females than males in the population (Statistics Canada, 2006). Most of the residents speak English (5,045), however a fairly large number (larger than expected; 1,910) are reported as speaking a language other than English (Statistics Canada, 2006). These numbers match fairly closely with the numbers of those residents who are non-immigrants (5,495) and those

who are immigrants (1,500). The median income of people in Croyden is \$24, 608, while the median income for the rest of Ontario is reported as \$27,258 (Statistics Canada, 2006).

The elementary school where the study took place was built in the 1950's. It houses around 400 students from junior kindergarten to grade four. According to participants there are a fairly even numbers of female and male students. The school has a principal, one secretary and approximately twenty teachers. About a third of the teachers were interviewed for this study. For many years this school has welcomed Mennonite students as either permanent or semi-permanent members of the student population. Their parents are attracted to the area for work and because their family members have previously migrated to the area (Bowen, 2001). The decrease in employment opportunities in the area were described by the participants as contributing to poverty, especially for the Mennonite proportion of the population. The Mennonites have primarily acquired work as labourers on farms in Croyden and the surrounding area for seasonal work. Many of the Mennonites in the Croyden area are Old Colony Mennonites, who moved to Mexico from Europe and Alberta and do not make enough money in Mexico to support their families (Bowen, 2001). Some of the families move back to Mexico at the end of harvest seasons, whereas some families have become permanent residents of the area. Since the tobacco industry has slowed down over the last five years, the number of jobs has decreased and the number of people who come to the area as migrant workers has decreased as well. The low-skilled labour sector has been decreasing with the slowing economy (Zhou, 2003, p. 219). Therefore, the Mennonite population has been decreasing over the last few years (Bowen, 2001, p. 473). The Mennonite proportion

of the student population represents one visible signifier of student diversity. Croyden and the elementary school in the study were chosen as the source of the research sample based on convenience and time restraints. Croyden was conveniently located for travel, and I had access to the school through the relationship between the school board and the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario.

For this study, a key informant introduced the topic of my research to teachers that they work with who might be interested in participating in the study. “Most qualitative studies involve at least one key informant. The key informant knows the inside scoop and can point you to other people who have valuable information (Seiglle, 2008, p. 1).” If teachers were interested in participating I was given their contact information, to can contact them to see if they were interested in setting up an interview. I intended to use snowball sampling. “The process of one subject recommending that you talk with another subject is called snowballing (Seiglle, 2008, p. 1).” However, this was not necessary, as all of the elementary school teachers the key informant had initially spoken to were interested in being interviewed.

Elementary school teachers were interviewed because there are more rural elementary schools in rural areas than there are secondary, and elementary school teachers spend more time with their students. As previously mentioned, the ratio of elementary to secondary schools in Croyden alone is 3:1. There is also greater opportunity for elementary students to get to know their students on a more personal level, as they spend so much time with the same groups of students. This is in comparison to secondary schools, where teachers sometimes only have students for one period of the day. There are more elementary schools in rural communities than high schools because

students tend to be bussed to larger high schools in more urban areas. Individual distinguishers such as sex and age were not as important as whether or not the member of the sample was part of a rural school. However, considering that there are more female than male elementary school teachers (Snyder, 2008) an effort was made to include participants of all genders in the study. Interestingly, participants did not seem to differ in their responses to the interview questions based on gender.

Participants

There were seven participants in the study: five female and two male. Participants were given pseudonyms, in order to keep their identities secret. The female participants are referred to as Andrea, Becky, Elizabeth, Fran, and Gena. The male participants are referred to as Carl and Dan. Teachers who live in a rural area may have a deeper understanding of the existence of diversity in the rural setting, as well as their students' experiences with it. Therefore, the goal was to interview teachers who not only teach students who live in a rural area, but who are residents in rural areas as well. Five of the teachers that were interviewed live outside the community, while two of them lived in Croyden. However, one of the participants that lived outside of the community lived in a neighbouring rural area. Therefore, three of the participants lived in rural areas at the time of the study. Five of the participants had grown up in rural areas, while two of them had grown up in urban areas. This provided a good combination of participants living in rural areas and outside of them.

An effort was made to interview an equal number of both male and female teachers. However, only two of the seven participants were male, which is a reflection of

the greater population of female teachers in public elementary schools. All of the seven participants had experience teaching at more than one school. Three of the participants had experience teaching only in rural schools, whereas four of them had experience teaching in both rural and urban schools. The majority of the participants had over twenty years of experience, with only two of them having less. Most of the teachers at the school had many years of experience. There was also at least one participant who taught in each grade from kindergarten to grade four. Understandings and responses to diversity and rural life experience may differ based on things like gender, how long teachers have taught at the school, if they have taught anywhere else, and their level of experience. This was taken into consideration when reviewing the interview transcripts, and in the selection process. An attempt was made to have a broad and balanced range of teachers included in the study. Participants did not seem to differ in their responses to the interview questions based on things such as gender, years of experience, or whether or not they lived in the community. Most of the participants answered the questions in a similar manner. In a few cases one or two participants differed from the group in their responses. When this occurred it appeared to result from their personal experience or situation.

Analysing the Data

This is an exploratory study. Using a critical lens, I explored and uncovered patterns in the data, such as competing notions of diversity, focusing on the challenges rural teachers face in dealing with diversity, and the strategies they attempt to implement to meet particular student needs. The descriptions the participants gave of diversity were analysed and compared to commonly held definitions of diversity to see if any signifiers arose that were significant to the rural context.

The interview process was continued until patterns became apparent and obvious. An initial goal of conducting five interviews had been set, however seven were actually conducted. Patterns began to emerge after the first two interviews; however the interview process was repeated seven times to ensure proper saturation of data. Themes identified from the literature such as notions of diversity, challenges, and strategies, as well as any others that arose during the research project were grouped together into meaningful categories to help answer the questions posed in this study. The interview data from the individual interviews was compared and contrasted with one another to come up with a basic conception of how rural teachers experience and respond to diversity, how they conceptualize the term, the challenges and strategies that arise as a result of it (Glesne, 1998). The three main themes that arose were; how the participants conceptualized and experienced diversity, the challenges that arose as a result of the diversity they experience, and the strategies they use to overcome the challenges. Subcategories such as categories of difference, different kinds of challenges and strategies arose from the three main themes that are discussed further in the discussions chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the conceptual framework and qualitative approach used for this study. An explanation was given of the critical conceptual framework on which this study is based. What it means to approach educational research from a critical perspective was explored. The study was described as being designed to determine how rural teachers understand and respond to the diversity of their student population. The data collection method used was face-to-face interviews, designed like conversations with a purpose (Mason, 2006). The interview questions were designed to encourage teachers in

rural Ontario to discuss their personal responses to diversity. The sample group was described as being comprised of teachers in an English speaking public school board in South Western Ontario, who teach at a school with students who live in a rural area. The sampling method was initially supposed to be a combination of convenience and snow-ball sampling. However, only the key informant was necessary for getting enough teachers to agree to participate. Participants Andrea, Becky, Elizabeth, Fran, Gena, Carl, and Dan were briefly described. This was followed by an explanation of the method used to analyse the data and pull out themes surrounding the diversity of the student population.

Chapter 3

Conceptualizing Diversity in a Rural School

This study is exploratory in nature, and seeks to uncover the experiences and understandings rural Ontario teachers have of student diversity. The first portion of this chapter examines how participants described their understanding of diversity in their rural school. How participant's conceptualized diversity in their rural school is explored, followed by how they feel living in a rural area influences their students. The second part of this chapter explores how diversity played out in this context. Participants highlighted a number of categories of difference in this study. The main categories of difference discussed were language, learning abilities, socio-economic status, and family life. A number of sub-categories were discussed which overlap, therefore some themes such as nutrition, food and clothing will be discussed in relation to more than one main category. Although most of the categories of difference are related in some way or another, an attempt was made to separate them for organizational purposes.

Conceptualizing Diversity

Diversity is difficult to define, and is a contested term. Diversity in education is often described as being largely based on visible signifiers of difference, and on urban school experiences. During the interviews participants were asked to describe the diversity they experience in their school and classroom, how they respond to that diversity, and also what comes to mind when they think about diversity in general. Initially, participants' focused on the more obvious signifiers of difference when they described how their students were diverse. However, as the interviews progressed

participants eventually described diversity as encompassing many aspects of difference, rather than being described in reference to things that are more visible such as race or ethnicity.

Visible Diversity. When initially asked to describe the student diversity in their school and classroom the teacher's' initial reactions were to portray the Mennonite proportion of the student population. The Mennonite student population is likely the most visible or obviously diverse student population in the school. Fran, one of the participants, discussed the Mennonite students as being the difference that initially comes to mind for her:

Well, I am sure you have already heard that the diverse population in this school is the Mexican Mennonites, some of those are Spanish, there are a few more Spanish coming who are originally Spanish, Mexican Spanish, and then we have the German Mennonites.

Another participant, Becky, similarly described the diversity she experiences in her school in that way when she stated: "there is a very large Mennonite community there as well, which would be the diversity that I am most familiar with." The Mennonite student population appeared to be the most obvious difference found within the entire school population. Clothing and language were suggested as some of the immediate differences that identified the Mennonite groups as different from the general student population. These differences are examples of the more visible signifiers of difference, because they would be almost immediately noticeable.

Less Visible Diversity. Diversity is not always based on more visible characteristics; this section explores the less visible characteristics of diversity that were

discussed by the participants. As the participants continued to speak about the diversity they experience, the Mennonite community became just one group of students identified as diverse. As participants expanded their discussions and explanations of the diversity they experience in their school they mentioned things such as food and nutrition, clothing, race and ethnicity, religion, language, learning abilities, socio-economic status, and family life. It is important to note that while participants began their descriptions of diversity by focusing on the visible or more obvious signifiers of difference; their descriptions grew to include many categories of difference both visible or obvious and less visible. Data analyses of participant responses lead to a much boarder conceptualization of diversity.

Although most of the educational literature considers diversity in an urban school setting, this study portrays a diverse rural student population. When discussing diversity in general, most of the participants seemed to feel diversity existed at their school regardless of its rural location. Gena portrayed this conception well when she stated “I think diversity is everywhere, I don’t think it’s just the rural versus urban. If you look at any segment of the population you are going to find diversity.”

Rural Life Experience. The town of Croyden is surrounded by land that is used for agricultural purposes, and has a population of less than 10, 000, categorizing it as rural. It was assumed that because the town and the school are rural the students would have experiences typical of rural life, such as knowledge of farming. However, the participants expressed the belief that very few of the students at the school have experience or knowledge of things typical of rural farming life. Andrea commented:

A lot of them (parents of the students) are factory workers or truck drivers; there are no farming students here. I have asked in our farming unit how many people have been on a farm. Out of the two classes of forty kids, probably five have been on a real farm ever in their life, at the age of five. They have driven by it, but they have never been on a farm unless it was grampas' farm. But they really do not have any understanding of what a farm was, whether they grew plants or whether they had animals on the farm. So, amazingly enough we are very rural, but they have no understanding of what farm is.

This is a very interesting finding; it appears that the participants associate what it means to be rural with farming. However, there is more to being rural than farming.

It was assumed more of the students would live on farms or have experience with farming industries. The participants explained how most of the parents work in industries other than farming, and many of them commute to urban areas for work. Howley (1997) discusses how this is becoming more common in rural areas when he says: "fewer rural people—and rural people less and less frequently—are responsible for rural land (p. 3)." Becky described the community as a bedroom community for the larger urban areas. It is unclear as to whether this is typical of other rural areas and schools in Ontario, or whether Croyden is unique in that regard.

A small proportion of the student population was identified as having limited knowledge of farming. Participants explained how the Mennonite students often contributed to the family income by helping pick seasonal vegetables. When asked whether or not this experience led to the students acquiring knowledge of farming and agriculture the participants explained their belief that the students retained very limited knowledge as they were completing small repetitive tasks such as picking fruit or

vegetables. Becky described this when she said: “they know a very narrow focus; they know what they have seen.” While students may have gained limited knowledge of a specific farming task, the participants did not believe the exposure or experience with fresh fruits and vegetables contributed to their nutrition in a positive way. Teachers explained how students, especially Mennonite students, are not very interested in eating fruits and vegetables, and they have to encourage them to eat healthy foods through education and modeling (Gena).

Although the students were not identified as having knowledge of farming or rural industries, teachers did discuss how being in a rural area geographically had contributed to the students being different from students attending schools in more urban areas. Participants explained how they felt students were more naive than those in urban areas. They also discussed how rural students did not have access to the same kinds of experiences as urban students. This was displayed as a positive thing by Carl when he said: “The largest thing I would comment on is the difference in that they are not as worldly, which is really a good thing... there is to a certain extent I guess an innocence.” Carl has lived and taught in both rural and urban areas. He described the rural school and community as having a more friendly and caring relationship, and rural students as being less complicated and younger for their age. However, rural students often do not have access things that are commonly found in urban areas such as museums and art galleries which can contribute to positive life experience. Therefore, there are both negative and positive aspects of rural life experience.

Not all of the participants seemed to identify this innocence or lack of knowledge of the students as a good thing. Becky felt the parents and students both had a lack of

knowledge or life experience that limited their idea of possibilities that exist for their children. Becky explained this when she said: “They don’t even know, you could be a stage technician at Westwood (pseudonym), and that wouldn’t even cross their mind.” Becky was specifically referring to families living in the rural area with low incomes.

Summary of Section. In this study, descriptions of diversity started out being based on more obvious differences, and became more complex as the interviews continued. While many aspects of diversity were discussed by the participants, the four main categories of difference that were described were socio-economic status, family life, language, and learning abilities. These four categories will be expanded on further in the following section. The four categories will be discussed separately; however most of them are very connected. Socio-economic status and home life in particular rarely stood out as being isolated categories of difference.

Socio-Economic Status

One of the main ways the student population was depicted as being diverse was in terms of socio-economic status. In this case the participants seemed to conceptualize socio-economic status as being defined predominantly by the income level of the parents, and partially by the parents’ level of education such as whether or not they were literate or had completed any post-secondary education. Participants also tended to use the terms low socio-economic status and poverty interchangeably. In this study, when participants discussed their students as experiencing poverty they referred to poverty measured in absolute terms. Students were described as being impoverished because they came from families that could not afford necessities such as food and clothing.

Socio-economic Status of the Family. Students were described as coming from families with a variety of income levels. Andrea stated: “most of the students are low in terms of socio-economic status.” Becky described the school as having both the haves and have nots when she said “yeah, there definitely are the haves and have nots in every school. This school has subsidized housing and they have the transient population as well, and there is also the other end of the scale as well.” Fran discussed a portion of the student population as being quite impoverished: “oh, yes. They are quite impoverished...” Some of the teachers seemed to think the poverty existing in the school was a result of the economy: “but generally speaking, it is the same as everywhere else where you have got people losing their jobs (Dan).”

While other participants felt the poverty in their school was related to people being attracted to the area for seasonal work. This translates into a number of families going without steady income. Some of the participants felt many of the students were experiencing poverty, while others felt only a few of them were. However, most participants discussed issues surrounding poverty. Socio-economic status and poverty were brought up throughout the interviews and were interwoven in discussions of the issues teachers dealt with in their classroom. Many of the participants discussed how they have students who frequently come to school hungry, and would not have things such as winter boots and jackets if it were not for donations from the school and community. Participants discussed how poverty creating difference in teaching and learning when they discussed how students had a hard time concentrating if they were hungry or had non-nutritional foods for lunch.

Participants seemed to feel students from families of low socio-economic status experienced more stress than those of higher socio-economic status. They also expressed the belief that it affected them negatively at school. “You have lower income families in this area. So, there are a lot of challenges as far as behaviours in terms of what they have experienced, and how they deal with it at home (Elizabeth).” Elizabeth went on to support this by saying: “many of the students are from lower socio-economic groups, so they come with a whole host of issues. You have to be flexible; you have to be able to adapt your curriculum, down and up.” Being flexible, and adapting the educational programs, was just one way teachers described dealing with the challenges brought about by poverty. One of the ways participants discussed adapting their programs was by explaining lessons in more than one way, using visual verbal and written lessons. They also discussed how they would design lessons so they could be taught to students who were at a variety of different levels of learning. Participants did not appear to be making the assumption that students experiencing poverty have lower intelligence, but rather that they had more stressors to deal with that get in the way of their learning.

Food and Nutrition. The socio-economic status of the students was described in absolute terms when participants discussed the food and nutrition levels of the students. Students of low socio-economic status were described as not having enough food in their lunches, or having food that was of little nutritious value. Food and nutrition was mentioned as something that is different from student to student in terms of what kind of food they bring to school and how it affects their learning. Andrea commented:

Nutrition, that’s a big one... It’s like saying – ok you can do your speed and then I am going to teach you (in regards to students having sugary foods in their

lunches)... So, nutrition is a big one for the kindergarten kids, and that also affects their learning, and the background of the parents, not having the knowledge about what is good for your child.

This quote displays how things such as socio-economic status and home life are interconnected. Some families could not afford nutritious food for their children, some chose not to provide it for them, and some did not have the requisite nutritional knowledge or experience.

A student's diversity in terms of race or ethnicity was also highlighted as influencing the kinds of food students brought to school with them. The Mennonite students were described as frequently bringing lunches to school that were low in nutritional value. The food they brought to school with them was not Mexican; they were just highlighted as a group of students who have typically brought lunches with low nutritional value to school. Participants also discussed how if the some of Mennonite students and their families ran out of money for food they would be kept home, rather than being sent to school without food.

Behaviour and Attendance. While poverty may have been described as something that influenced behaviour and attendance, it was not seen as something that influenced whether or not students were able to make friends at school. A number of the participants expressed their belief that poverty did not influence the students socially because the other kids did not care whether or not they were poor; they accepted each other regardless of income. Gena explained this when she commented: "you know what, at this school I think that the social aspect of that, of the poverty, I don't think it's as big of an issue as it might be in a more urban situation. I think it's pretty much like, ok, well, you are still part

of this community.” This was not the only time the school was depicted as having a general attitude of acceptance toward difference. Children were portrayed as being indifferent about whether or not students were of low socio-economic status, and did not have things such as similar clothing or sporting equipment. Participants discussed how students and their families experience challenges brought about by low socio-economic status and poverty regardless of whether the school was in a rural or an urban location. These findings contradict those of Tompkins (2008), that rural areas are wealthy and withering. Rural families experience problems as a result of poverty similar to families in urban and other areas in North America that often go unreported and therefore unaddressed.

Family life

Home life and parental make-up was described as attributing to student diversity. This section provides greater clarity regarding how students differ at this school in terms of family life, and how teachers respond to varying family orientations. Students were mainly described as having different home life or family experiences based on things such as family make-up (whether the students live with one or more parents etc.), socio-economic status, sleep levels, clothing, and religion.

Relationships. The relationship of the parents was one of the ways families were described as being diverse. A number of participants mentioned students who had single parents, or more than one family. “The other factor is that there is a lot of single parents in this town, so we have a lot of children who are running between two families in this town (Andrea).” Carl mentioned that there seemed to be a growing number of single

parent families. Participants expressed the belief that certain aspects of home life and family experiences contributed to students having higher stress levels. One of the main stressors they mentioned was either the recent or impending separation or divorce of parents.

Stress related to family and home life was mostly discussed in reference to divorce or separation of the parents. Participants felt students' behaviour and ability to stay engaged in the class was influenced by the stress levels they were experiencing at home. Teachers discussed how, especially when the family has recently separated, students experience increased stress levels that could impede or slow their progress in the classroom. Participants mentioned one of the ways they help the students cope with this stress by creating routines and continuity in the class to help the students regain their confidence. Participants expressed the belief that students felt more confident in situations that were stable and continuous, and that the discontinuity of things like divorce and separation influences the confidence level of students.

Knowledge and Experience. As previously mentioned students and their families were described as being diverse in terms of socio-economic status. Parents of low socio-economic status were described by participants as not always having the required knowledge to help their children succeed at school. "So, it's almost like the parents weren't educated well enough to become educators of their own children (Andrea)." Participants discussed how this affects the students in terms of things such as homework. Parents were unaware of homework expectations, especially in the lower grades, and had difficulties helping their children. Students and parents in this situation could also require greater assistance in navigating the school system. Andrea discussed how parents of low

socio-economic status seemed to require greater explanation of how the school functioned, and what kind of activities and lessons their children would take part in at school, as well as how they would be expected to contribute to their children's education.

Nutrition, Sleep and Clothing. Nutrition and sleep were aspects of home life participants mentioned as affecting students in the classroom in different ways. Teachers discussed how students have a hard time staying focused and on task if they have not slept enough the night before. "What I find affects them the most is whether they have had enough sleep, because sometimes bed times are not enforced or sometimes they don't have a designated place to sleep, or there are too many people in a room, or in a bed (Fran)." Participants mentioned a number of ways they learned about sleeping arrangements, students would talk about being sleepy, and not having had enough sleep the night before, students would appear to be quite sleepy, or they would have heard from a colleague that the students sleep arrangements were not conducive to getting a good sleep. Participants also discussed having a difficult time teaching students who have not eaten a nutritious meal either for breakfast or lunch. In order to help students achieve better nutrition levels the school was described as being proactive in terms of teaching the students about nutritious food choices and providing nutritious food in the breakfast program. However, the teachers pointed out that the students do not always have a say in what happens in the home and what gets put in their lunches. Students also want to fit in with their peers; therefore they might pick un-nutritious cool food for their lunches.

Clothing was also discussed as contributing to difference. The family life of the student can influence the clothing of the students based on things such as socio-economic

status and religious beliefs. Becky described difference in dress that was based on religion when she stated:

As what the kids are wearing...Some of the girls wear dresses to school every day, so when you are doing high jump or track and field we would always encourage them to wear shorts, or we would have clothes that they could borrow. But, you know, still respecting their choice of dress.

In this instance, Becky discusses how the students are encouraged to wear clothing that is more appropriate for gym class, even if it goes against their religion. Participants discussed difference in dress based on SES when they described students who relied on the school clothing donation program, for things such as winter jackets and mittens. Difference in dress based on both religion and SES contributes to students being visibly different from the rest of the students.

Religion. The majority of the students were described as being part of a Christian religion, or something similar. Other religions discussed were Mennonite and Jehovah's Witness. The school was described as mostly celebrating Christian religious celebrations, and sometimes celebrating the religious celebrations of minority groups in the school. One example given was of a family of Chinese descent who attends the school; each year the mother of the students comes to the school to help the students partake in the Chinese New Year celebrations (Carl). Participants did not discuss religion very often. However, it is significant that when religion was discussed it was largely discussed in reference to Christian religious celebrations and traditions, or in reference to tokenism of a less dominant religion. The next section discusses how the students differed in terms of language abilities.

Language

Language abilities were repeatedly brought up in reference to the ways students are different. Teachers spoke about differences in terms of both written and oral language abilities. In reference to differences in oral language abilities Andrea discussed how “out of the one hundred and twenty kids in the kindergarten program, there is still a third that either has English as their second language, or some of them don’t speak at all.” Andrea was discussing how some of the students speak English as their second language (ESL), and many of them also have difficulties with speaking in general. Andrea went on to discuss how some of the students in their class have such difficulties with speaking that they are selectively mute. A number of the participants discussed how students have difficulties with written language. Being a student with (ESL) was said to account for some of the issues with language, for others it was viewed as being an issue of learning ability. Participants discussed how they were able to have the language abilities assessed for some of their students who were struggling. However, they described some of the parents as being uncooperative about having their students assessed by agencies outside of the school.

Language in the Home. Experiences with language in the home were described as contributing to most of the diversity in the language abilities of the students. It was described by participants as being partially due to differences in ethnicity when they stated things such as; “this school has a fairly high number of ESL students, so you have your Mexican Mennonite students, and the town also has a huge population of Amish Mennonites, now they attend their own schools (Elizabeth).” Becky explained how the Mennonite student population “presents challenges for the English language.” However,

it was really the students who were challenged by the language. Many of the Mennonite students were identified as having Low German as their first language. However, participants explained that students often had diminished language abilities in their first language as well as in English. Teachers discussed how students who come from families that have English as their second language differ greatly in terms of their language abilities. They also explained how things such as whether or not their parents speak and read English can have an impact on how quickly the students are able to learn to both write and speak English.

Difference in language abilities was not always a result of having English as a second language. Teachers discussed that literacy, in terms of reading and writing is an issue for some of the parents regardless of ethnicity. Some of the parents who had English as their first language were identified as being illiterate as well. Gena pointed out, “some of the parents were not able. It’s not just a cultural thing. We have parents who are illiterate and not just because of their culture.” Participants discussed how students with illiterate parents struggled more in school than those with literate parents. Illiterate parents are not always able to help their children with their homework, putting the students at a disadvantage in terms of developing language and literacy skills. Participants did not discuss whether or not the illiteracy of the parents had any relationship to the rural nature of the community.

Language Acquisition. Having English as a second language may present challenges in terms of language acquisition, especially in a rural area where there are fewer opportunities to interact with people who speak the same language. However, one of the participants discussed how students who come from different backgrounds, and

speaking different languages at home contribute to creating an accepting atmosphere at the school. Andrea commented “I think the children who have more languages in their background are more adapting of the people who come in... I think they are more accepting.” Andrea was discussing the positive reception that ESL students give to both students and guests of the school who are different from the predominantly white, English speaking student population based on their language abilities.

Learning

Diversity in terms of learning was repeatedly mentioned by the participants as something they experience and respond to on a daily basis in their school and classroom. Diversity in learning was described as resulting from the students being at different levels of learning or from students having different learning needs.

Level of Learning. The student population was described as having many students at different levels within each grade. Gena commented: “we have diversity in academic ability, I have got three that are on individual education plans (IEPs) at the grade one level, and the rest of them are up here (making a hand motion).” Classrooms were depicted as having multiple students on IEPs. Andrea explained how the school has also had difficulties with EQAO (Education, Quality and Accountability Office) test scores, she stated:

We get extra funding from the government because our EQAO scores are kind of always hovering at level two, and we want to bump those level two kids to level three, and for some reason it’s not happening. And so there is extra funding and literacy teachers who assist us, and we get extra things, extra books and workshops and all kinds of things that help us think, how are we going to reach those level two children, and bump them to a level three.

The student population was described as being extremely diverse in terms of levels of learning. Even though Dan was teaching in a single grade classroom, he stated his classroom is so diverse in terms of learning levels it is more like teaching in a one room school house. Many of the participants discussed how they have to modify their programs for most of their students. They discussed how having multiple students at different levels within one classroom meant every lesson had to be adaptable to different levels. Participants displayed confidence in their ability to teach students of all levels, and seemed to feel their differentiation was successful for the students.

Learning Needs. Having different learning needs was identified as one of the ways students were diverse. Students were described as being diverse in terms of physical and mental capabilities. A number of the participants discussed how a proportion of the student population is differently abled. Becky described this by saying “we also have a population of special needs students here as well, and try to integrate them as much as possible as well.” Students with different learning needs were described as being incorporated into the classroom as much as possible, although with little success. “I have dealt with a number of students, one was, I had him in my mainstream classroom who was mostly deaf, and he had autism, and he had an EA (educational assistant), but there was not a lot of programming he could do without an EA with the other students (Elizabeth).” Providing programs that are applicable to all of the different learning abilities within the classroom was discussed as not always being possible.

Having students with different learning abilities in the classroom was described by the participants as being beneficial for all students in some ways. Most of the participants seemed to believe that having all different kinds of students in their school enriched the

learning environment for their students, and taught them to be accepting of different lifestyles and abilities.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a discussion of how participants conceptualize the diversity that exists in their schools and classrooms. Participants began their description of diversity by describing the Mennonite student population, which is the more obviously diverse or different group of students. However, as the interviews progressed participants began to incorporate many more aspects of difference into their descriptions of diversity. Rural life was not found to contribute to diversity of the student population in the way it had initially been assumed to contribute. It was found that while students did not generally bring knowledge of farming or agriculture to the classroom with them, the participants expressed the belief that their rural students were different from urban students. The four main categories of difference that were discovered were socio-economic status, family life, language, and learning abilities.

Participants discussed how a number of the students in the school are of lower socio-economic status, and that some of them experience poverty. Poverty was described as influencing things such as the food and nutrition levels of the students, and the quality and availability of clothing and sporting equipment. Students were described as coming from a variety of different types of families. Some of the students came from families that had experienced divorce and separation. Families were also described as differing in terms of religion, race and ethnicity, although only in small numbers. Students were portrayed as being mostly white Anglo-Saxons. The students and their parents were

described as being quite diverse in terms of language abilities. A number of the students have ESL, and experience illiteracy in their homes. Students were also described as being different in terms of learning abilities. Participants explained how teaching in single grade classrooms is more like teaching in a one room school house, because most of the students are at different levels of learning development. A proportion of the student population was also highlighted as being diverse in physical and mental abilities. The student population was depicted as being diverse in numerous ways, creating challenges for the participants and the community to overcome. Participants remained positive that the diversity of the students contributed to making the school a more enriching environment, and that their efforts to overcome the challenges brought about by the diversity they experience were making a positive difference for the students and the school. It is interesting that the diversity experienced by the participants and their students is both similar and different to how urban diversity is discussed, and is nothing like the white, wealthy, withering and homogeneous descriptions given of rural areas. Students were described as being different from each other in many ways, and having a variety of different income levels. Many of the students were described as experiencing poverty.

Chapter 4

Challenges Associated With Diversity in a Rural School

This chapter will begin with a conversation about tolerance and intolerance. Most of the participants seemed to feel their school was a fairly accepting place; however it was not free from intolerance. Following this, the challenges that arose as a result of the different student abilities are discussed. Related to this challenge is the issue of whether or not the curriculum appropriately reflects the diversity of the student population. The kinds of challenges teachers experienced in trying to teach students whose beliefs and values conflicted with the curriculum requirements will be explored. Finally, students and parents with contesting notions of the value and role of education and what they feel is appropriate to teach will be discussed.

This chapter considers the challenges participants faced as a result of the diversity they experienced in their rural school. As mentioned in the literature review, challenges facing rural education were listed as transportation issues, staff retention and recruitment, low enrolment, and lack of support services (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Downey, 2003; Singleton & Varpalotai (Eds), 2006; Varpalotai, 2003; Wallin, 2007). These challenges were discussed as being compounded by educational policies and programmes designed based on research conducted mostly in urban schools. This leads to educational policies and programs that are unreflective of rural schooling needs. Participants did not discuss transportation, staff retention and recruitment, and enrolment as challenges they face in their school. However, participants did discuss how, outside of the support service from which they receive most of their help, their school is limited in terms of the help it can provide students for things such as mental health issues. Many

believed this was a result of their school being located in a rural area. It is difficult to collaborate with support services such as hospitals and mental health centres because they are too far away from the nearest city centre.

The challenges discussed most frequently by the participants include: intolerance, dealing with different learning needs, a curriculum that is unreflective of the diversity of the student population, different beliefs and values of the students and the community, and poverty. Diversity is a difficult concept to define and to discuss, as people have contesting notions about what it means to be diverse or different. People also have different notions of how social institutions such as schools should responded to diversity. This leads to practices and programs that can contribute to intolerance and inequality (Kincheloe, 2004; Kumashiro, 2002; Levin & Riffel, 1993).

Tolerance/Intolerance

Attitudes regarding diversity vary from person to person. In this study, when discussing challenges brought about by diversity, participants expressed the belief that most of their students either accepted the differences of their peers or were oblivious to them. Participants expressed the belief that the few students who did not value diversity, or viewed it as a negative thing, had learned to do so by their families. These feelings were expressed by Andrea when she commented:

Everybody tolerates each other in kindergarten, because there is no colour, and there is no race, and there is no economic status in kindergarten, you are the same as everyone else. They don't see that unless someone else like their parents point it out, or another older brother or sister... So, they come in with no knowledge,

everybody is equal, and as the year goes by they choose with whatever their interests are at the activities.

Andrea is describing her belief that students enter kindergarten essentially colour blind, and they choose their friends based on similar interests at the activities stations. Students who like to play blocks group together, and students who like to do arts and crafts play together. She believed kindergarten students did not notice things such as race, class and religion, these differences were highlighted as being pointed out to the students by their parents and older siblings. Therefore, she feels intolerance is a learned behaviour.

Participants also expressed the belief that when students acted negatively towards each other because of difference, they may not even completely understand what they are saying. They just realize they are saying something negative because they heard someone else say it:

If it is anything that comes up where there is a concern with one of the kids it tends to be where the kids will refer to one of the Mennonite kids as a Mexican, and they do it in a negative way, which has to be a learned behaviour from home, just the way that they are aware of what they are really saying and passing it on (Dan).

They also described their belief that this kind of behaviour was short lived, as the school does not tolerate negativity towards one another.

Participants made it clear that intolerance, and negativity towards one another was not permitted, and any time a teacher witnessed an act of intolerance they would step in and explain to the students how their behaviour was unacceptable. "So, you see that happening and you have to tell them that we treat everybody the same and that kind thing.

But, you have to take care of that kind of stuff here (Elizabeth).” Participants repeatedly stated that students were taught that everyone was to be treated the same. However, tolerating the differences of some students is not the same as treating all of the students the same. When discussing how the students reacted to each others diversity, the participants said the students accepted and tolerated each other. Participants used the words tolerance and acceptance interchangeably. Participants also said they did not allow students to act negatively towards each other because of their differences.

Different Learning Needs

Teaching children with different learning needs was described as one of the challenges facing the participants. One of the ways they explained this was by describing how difficult it can be to teach a large number of students who have ESL. Andrea described how a third of her students have ESL. Teachers found this challenging in terms of how to both teach students and ensure they were being integrated into the student population and accepted by the other students. “Socially, number one, you are watching them to see if they are interacting with other children, if they are learning how to speak, if they are making friends, so you are kind of worried about that (Andrea).” Participants discussed how it was not easy for them to determine whether or not students were having a hard time adjusting if they were not able to speak to them. So, not only was it more difficult to teach ESL students, interacting with them and helping them interact with the other students was a challenge.

Challenges brought about by different learning abilities were not always a result of the students having ESL. Within each classroom, many of the students were identified

as being at different levels of learning. “In the classroom as far as materials, lessons, topics, each child has, if you want to think of each child as being on their own little program (Dan).” Participants discussed how their lessons had to be adaptable to all of the different levels of learning within the classroom.

Participants also discussed how their classrooms included students with different mental and physical capabilities, and how this was yet another way in which they had to adapt their lessons and teaching styles:

I had one in my mainstream classroom who was mostly deaf, and had autism, and had an EA, but there was not a lot of programming we could do without an EA with the other students. I also had one that came from Belize with no English, and who was in the mainstream classroom, and then two years after I taught them they had to go into the developmental classroom because they only had part of their brain. But the change of figuring all of that out, when you are in a grade one classroom you have to go through a lot of steps before you put them in the proper program, to figure it out (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth is discussing how challenging it can be to have an inclusive classroom for both the students and the teachers. Not only are lessons that are applicable to all kinds of learners limited, but understanding how the students differ in terms of learning needs and abilities is in itself a challenge that is sometimes insurmountable given the time and resources available. The curriculum can also make it difficult for teachers to create lessons that are applicable and appropriate for all students.

Curriculum Unreflective of Student Diversity

A few of the participants discussed how they felt the curriculum and curriculum documents did not appropriately reflect the diversity of the student population. Some of

the activities that are part of the physical education curriculum were viewed as inappropriate for some of the students based on religious beliefs. Becky explained this when she commented:

One issue that came up this year, and it has come up in the past, is that some of the kids won't do dance, and it is part of our curriculum. So, you can't say, we are going to do a dance unit... Because there were some parents that would say, you know I am not going to let my kids dance, just because their religious background or there cultural bias... and I think the report cards really need to reflect that as well, and to respect that. (Becky).

Becky was explaining how she felt the physical education curriculum did not reflect the needs of a diverse student population in her rural Ontario School.

Another part of the curriculum teachers found to be a challenge was the section on traditions. According to the Ontario curriculum documents, grade two students are required to learn about the "wide variety of customs and traditions that coexist in Canada" (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 23). Part of this curriculum involves teaching the students about cultural and religious traditions that are celebrated in Canada in general, as well as the community where the school is located. Participants discussed how members of their student population are not supposed to learn about different religious traditions because of their religious beliefs. Elizabeth expressed how this challenged her when she stated:

Well, you don't play most holidays, it makes it hard for the grade two classroom when you are supposed to be doing traditions right, when you have to kind of plan around it, and sometimes they will go – oh it's a religious tradition, and sometimes that is an issue for families that don't want any of that spoken about, but it is the curriculum and you have to do it.

In this case, the participant did not feel they were capable of modifying the program at all. Therefore, students not permitted to learn about other religious traditions based on their own religion were subject to inappropriate curriculum. In both cases (physical education and traditions), the participants seemed to have had to deal with the challenge on their own. They seemed to have made a personal decision as to whether or not to modify the program and how. There did not appear to be any assistance from the school board in terms of what to do in these situations.

Participants also discussed how the curriculum limited what could be done to teach students with different physical and mental abilities. They discussed how important it was to have students with different needs incorporated into the mainstream classroom as a tool for teaching the other students about difference. However, unless an educational assistant was present there was not much that could be done to teach students with different needs. This highlights yet another way the curriculum fails to meet the needs of the student population, and raises questions of the efficacy of the creation of inclusive classrooms in Ontario. Having all students in the mainstream classroom sounds like a good idea, however in this case it does not seem that the educational needs of students with different abilities were being met.

Different Beliefs and Values

One of the challenges resulting from diversity is dealing with the different beliefs and values. Values and beliefs differ from person to person. Many people in Canadian society view education and higher learning as an important part of a child's life. However, not all groups in Canada view things such as education in the same way. In this

study, participants mostly discussed the divergent views the Mennonite proportion of the population has towards public schooling. The Mennonites were identified as having a low opinion of education and not valuing it very highly as a part of their children's upbringing. Participants discussed how their view of education influenced whether or not the children would attend school regularly.

One thing with the Mennonite community is that the value of education is not the same. They are a very transient population, that travels here and there depending on the work, and they take their kids out of school to help them when they are in the fields and so on... and the kids know that they are not going to finish their school year here... So, it is interesting just trying to find a balance. You want the kids to be at school, and you want them to do well, but you don't want to conflict with their parents' wishes either (Becky).

Becky discussed how attendance used to be a bigger issue with the Mennonites, but over the years attendance has gotten better. It is unclear whether attendance has gotten better because the opinion of public schooling has changed or if fewer Mennonites travel to and from Mexico, both were discussed as being contributing factors.

Related to the issue of the value of school attendance is the value of homework. Participants discussed having difficulties getting some of the children to complete their homework. Participants discussed how homework is a challenge for the Mennonite students because their parents do not believe it is important, so the students are not supported or assisted with their homework if they take it home.

It depends on the family; there are some families who do take the schooling seriously in that if homework comes home they need it to be done... You get to know those families, and so you get to modify your program and your

expectations... Sometimes you need to take that extra time at recess maybe with that child, because they are not getting that support (Carl).

Carl went on to discuss how sometimes families do not value school as much as other because of religious views, however, sometimes parents and their children are not as involved in school because they do not understand the system and are intimidated by it. Carl explained his belief that intimidation of Canadian institutions exists for things such as hospitals as well, and explained how parents are reluctant to take their children to the hospital as a result. Another one of the participants expressed this belief as well, and mentioned that a number of the students have recurring medical issues such as ear infections because their parents are too frightened to take them to the hospital. Therefore, students' education and health needs being unmet was described as being related to their parents intimidation of social institutions.

Parents were also discussed as believing that the relationship between the school and the family should be separate, and that teachers were solely responsible for education. This is an issue highlighted in urban schools research. Urban schools have a lot of students from families that have recently immigrated to Canada. "Parents hold beliefs that teachers are responsible for children during school time, that parents are responsible for children out of school, and that the two roles should not mix" (Jang & McDougall, 2007, p. 24). This is yet another way the different beliefs and values of students and their families can challenge educators, and can contribute to limiting the success of things such as attempts at collaboration between the school and students families.

Poverty

Poverty was previously defined as being either relative or absolute, with absolute poverty being most commonly referred to by the participants. In the case of absolute poverty the essential needs of a person go unmet. Participants explained how their students are challenged by the poverty they experience, as well as how it plays out in the classroom. This displays how some students are not only experiencing poverty but many other challenges, which can be compounded by living in a rural area that lacks support services for people such as single parents and new immigrants.

The poverty experienced by students at the participants' school was described by Becky when she explained how many of the students in her school do not have things such as running shoes "some of the students would quite often come in September and they wouldn't have running shoes. So, the staff would provide dress-down funds to help buy running shoes." Elizabeth highlighted how some of the students do not have enough food in their homes, and their parents can not afford to celebrate holidays such as Christmas when she stated:

We have a breakfast program, where they open the doors earlier for the students that need to come in and have breakfast before they come. We have a lot of students that take advantage of that. We deliver Christmas presents to their door because they wouldn't get any otherwise. And, we provide mittens and coats and boots and all of that stuff through the school. And they need that because a lot of them would come without that (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth was describing how some families at the school were unable to provide necessities such as food and clothing to their children. The participants also discussed their belief that the school and the community have been very proactive in helping meet

the needs of their students in poverty and overcome the financial challenges they and their families face.

Conclusion

This chapter explores some of the challenges highlighted by the participants when teaching a diverse rural student population. Participants discussed how their students generally tolerate and accept those who differ from the dominant group. They went on to explain their belief that children are generally tolerant, but sometimes they pick up negative remarks from their family and friends. The participants explained how they feel students often do not even understand what they are saying. Intolerance was described as not lasting very long, because it was quickly discussed by the teachers and other school staff as being inappropriate. Participants explained how the different learning needs of their students create challenges in the classroom. Most of the challenges of this nature, that were discussed, revolved around students who have ESL, and who have different mental and physical capabilities than the dominant group. The curriculum was described as being a challenge for the participants when trying to adapt their teaching to accommodate different religious beliefs of the parents and their families. Different values and beliefs people have of the importance of education was discussed as a challenge, especially in relation to some of the Mennonite families who do not seem to value education in the same way as the dominant group at the school. Finally, poverty was discussed as being a challenge because not all students are able to afford necessities such as food and clothing. The following chapter will expand on the ways the participants feel they have helped their students overcome the challenges they face in their rural school as a result of diversity.

Chapter 5

Strategies for Dealing with Challenges Brought About by Diversity in a Rural School

This chapter explores the strategies participants used to help them deal with challenges brought about by the diversity they experienced in their rural school. The most common strategies participants discussed, and those explored in this chapter are: creating a culture of acceptance in the school, differentiated instruction, collaboration, and support services. The most prominent strategy reported was how participants thought their school tried to create a culture of acceptance for dealing with things such as intolerance and bullying. They discussed how they continue to build upon this culture of acceptance to teach their students to respect themselves and one another. Differentiated instruction is illustrated as one of the ways teachers try to overcome challenges faced by students with different learning abilities and levels. Collaboration is explored as one of the ways participants supported each other and shared ideas. Finally, support services that provide assistance for ESL students and those at different levels of learning are described.

Culture of Acceptance

Name calling and bullying, was one of the main challenges the participants described as resulting from a diverse rural student population. When discussing how they stopped student intolerance, the participants repeatedly referred to the values and beliefs the school works hard to instil in their students. These values and beliefs include the notion that all students are equal, and should be treated with respect. Elizabeth discussed how respect, responsibility, cooperation and doing your best are taught to the children to remind them of the behaviours expected of the students.

These values and beliefs are expected to be enacted by the teachers, students and school staff, for themselves and each other. This was described by the participants as a school culture. It is important to note in this case the word culture refers to the school climate or atmosphere; it does not have anything to do with personal characteristics such as race or ethnicity. "Culture refers to the things that people agree on to be true and right. It is the general atmosphere of a school" (Sautner, 2008, p. 19). Becky explained the culture of her school when she said:

We really work on our school culture here, and it is a primary school. So, we have the advantage of how kids really do try to please, and we work on it. Every month we have a spirit assembly where we remind the kids of our goals of respect, responsibility, cooperation, and doing your best, and they used to even chant it over the announcements last year. So, they really do work on their social skills as part of the curriculum as well. So, when they do have a problem we can just go back to that, and they already know the language.

Many of the participants described how they rely on the school culture of acceptance to help them teach the children how to accept one another.

Participants described how they use the school culture to deflate issues between students. It was mentioned that when issues arose between students they reminded the students that differences were accepted in the school and intolerance was not. Participants did not discuss talking the issues through with the students. Rather, it appears that a top down approach was used to change student behaviours rather than working on where the behaviours were stemming from. The participants appeared to be using a reactionary approach to deal with intolerant behaviours. The development of the culture of acceptance within the school was believed to have ridden the school of intolerance.

Participants discussed how issues of intolerance towards difference had been more of an issue previous to the development of the school culture of acceptance.

Differentiated Instruction

Participants described how their classrooms had students with a variety of different learning needs. Many of the students were portrayed as being at different levels of learning or having different mental and physical needs. Participants explained how they found it challenging to teach students with such a variety of learning needs. When discussing how they deal with this challenge many of them discussed the importance of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is an approach to planning so that one lesson is taught to the entire class while meeting the individual needs of each child (Eaton, 1996, p. 1). Participants discussed the importance of the ability to adapt each lesson to meet the learning needs of different students.

When asked how they come up with ideas for differentiating their instruction, some of them mentioned technology, specifically smart boards and the internet. Almost all of them mentioned the importance of collaboration. Experience was where all participants said their ideas for differentiated instruction came from. Dan explained how they teach their students the same material but at different levels at his school. "They will do the same material, but in a more simplified manner where the English is a little more understandable, and the kids who are on IEPs, then the same thing, you have to find the same material but at a lower grade level." Participants expressed a good understanding of the importance of differentiated instruction, and all of them indicated that they used it to help meet the needs of their students. Modifications were made to more than just the

lessons, programs and program expectations also had to be changed to reflect the student diversity.

Participants also discussed how they have tried to change their programming and expectations to better fit the needs of the students and their families. One of the main changes was to the home reading program. A number of participants discussed that homework is often not completed when sent home. Participants believed some of the caregivers did not value homework in the same way as the school. They also expressed the belief that some of the parents were unable to assist their students with homework because they were not literate in English or at all. Participants discussed how the school had modified its program in order to help these students by making more time during the day for work that would usually be completed at home to be completed in the classroom at times such as recess or lunch. Carl explained this when he stated:

We do a home reading program here, and of course keeping in mind that some of the parents and the adults in the family don't really speak English, they really can't, and they feel intimidated to a certain extent. So, you need to accommodate that in maybe paired reading in the class, so that they can at least complete their home reading, and they are not penalized by their cultural situation.

Carl was explaining how they changed the program so that students complete the reading which would normally be sent home during school time. Participants described this as occurring during class time, at lunch or recess. They also discussed how there are older students and members of the community who work together with students who have difficulties reading.

Collaboration

Participants discussed how important it is to collaborate with their colleagues to help overcome challenges, and find new and different ways to teach their students. As Fran pointed out, “this is a collaborative school environment. Everything get shared and passed around.” In this study when participants referred to collaboration they were referring to discussing classroom challenges and sharing ideas for how to overcome them. In this manner participants were working towards a common teaching goal or philosophy (Panitz, 1996).

Participants discussed how they would collaborate by turning to their colleagues for support when they were unsure how to help students with different learning needs, or how to differentiate their instruction. Carl explained this when he stated “if somebody else is teaching grade two for example, you know, work with them, get ideas from them, share with them, find our what works to that you are not thinking ok I have to do everything at a grade four level because that is not going to work.” Carl was mostly referring to collaborating with one another as a means to gather new ways to differentiate instruction for students at different levels of learning.

Participants discussed how important it was to be open with each other about their strategies and methods. They discussed how it was very important that lesson plans and ideas be shared openly; otherwise they would be unable to help as many students as possible. However, just because teachers share lesson plans and ideas with each other does not mean they are not acting in racist or prejudice ways towards the children. Teachers can be collaborative with each other yet be exclusive or prejudiced towards their

students. When asked what participants would say to a teacher who was planning on working in their school, most of them discussed how they would have to be ready to collaborate and share. Participants seemed to feel that not all teachers would be prepared to work in such a collaborative environment, and highlighted how vital it was that teachers recognize the value and importance of collaborating with each other. Participants expressed the belief that their school was a generally supportive and collaborative environment for students and the educators. This was reflective of the assumed culture of acceptance created within the school; the teachers were also expected to respect one another, be cooperative and do their best.

Support Services

Participants explained how they relied on the help of support services to overcome challenges. The community and the ESL teacher were the two support services participants discussed the most. The community discussed by the participants seemed to be comprised of parent volunteers, people living in the community, and local business owners. Participants also described a growing cooperation between the Mennonite church and the school. Participants mentioned how the community helped students overcome challenges associated with poverty. They discussed how students experienced poverty in absolute terms, and often went without necessities such as food and clothing. Participants discussed ways in which the school and the community help provide things such as food, clothing. "Also, our kids do a skating program, and we have had the community donate skates for kids that do not have them... So, I think it's great in that way (Becky)." Participants discussed how the school provided things such as breakfast and snack programs, and donated dress down funds to purchase running shoes for the students.

Programs such as the breakfast club were discussed by the participants as ways they help provide the basic necessities for students who do not have them available in their homes. Breakfast clubs are mentioned often in educational research as a way to help students attain better nutrition levels for a variety of reasons (Black, 2008; Covell, 2009; Fine, 2009; Purden & McLean, 2008). Hundreds of schools across Ontario, both Elementary and Secondary now have breakfast programs where free breakfast is provided to the students through donations from local food banks and donors.

Gena commented: “yes, we have a breakfast program, and have had one for years, beyond when it was the thing for most schools to have one, for years and years, because there are children within this community where there is nothing for them at home.” Participants also discussed how things such as winter clothing, athletic clothing *and sporting equipment are made available to students who need them through donations from parents and community members. As a result of these programs students in need get things such as food and clothing with the help of the school and community.*

When participants discussed which part of the community was involved in helping the school they largely spoke of a small group of parents who were on most of the school committees, as well as local businesses. Participants did not discuss characteristics of the community members. The community was identified as playing an active role in these programs by volunteering their time and money to support programs. They also discussed how the support of the community had encouraged many of them to continue teaching at the same school for longer than they had intended. Gena declared, “I’m not leaving, I’ve only got a few more years, and I’m staying!” Some of the participants mentioned how they felt the closeness of the community was unique to that rural environment. “It’s worth

the drive, being a small community, it's cosier, it doesn't have a lot of the problems that you do see in the larger urban centres... (Dan)." They did not seem to think the schools in urban centres would have the same kind of close relationship with the school in a larger urban centre. Carl, who had experience teaching in both rural and urban schools, mentioned that in his experience at the urban school it was not the same kind of relationship.

The ESL teacher was the second support service highlighted as playing an important role in helping the teachers and students overcome challenges brought about by diversity. Many of the students have ESL; therefore the teachers rely on the ESL teacher for help. The participants all had positive things to say about the ESL teachers' influence in terms of helping the student's progress. "We have an ESL teacher and *they are* wonderful (Becky)." Elizabeth discussed how other volunteers assisted the ESL students as well as the ESL teacher. "Well, the ESL teacher will take them, but we also have coop students from the high school, volunteers come in (Elizabeth)." However, for the most part, participants discussed the ESL teacher and what an important role they played in the school. The ESL teacher was the most prominently discussed support service, and was always discussed as contributing to positive change in the students' education. Using support services to help overcome the challenges brought about by diversity in language is closely linked with the notion of creating a culture of acceptance within the school. The culture of acceptance in the school was described as encompassing more than just teaching and learning practices; it encompasses support services and the community surrounding the school as well.

Conclusion

Participants were asked to describe the strategies they use to deal with diversity in their school. The most common strategies the participants referred to were; creating a culture of acceptance within the school, differentiated instruction, collaboration, and support services. Creating a culture of acceptance was explained by the participants as teaching the students to value respect, responsibility, cooperation and doing your best. Differentiated instruction was described as teaching the same lesson to students at a different level or in a different way. Participants discussed how they collaborated with one another to find new ways to teach lessons. The community and the ESL teacher were described as the two support services used by the school to help overcome challenges. Importantly, the concept of community and the feeling of belonging to a community was prevalent throughout all of the discussions of strategies, whether it was feeling supported by the community outside of the school, or the community within. A close relationship between the school and the community is common in rural areas, as there are often either few or no other social programs available resulting in the school becoming the cornerstone of the rural community (Downey, 2003; Singleton & Varpalotai, 2006).

Chapter 6

Dominant Values and Beliefs and Canadian Identity

The previous three chapters provided answers to the main research questions regarding how diversity is conceptualized, the challenges brought about by that diversity and the strategies used to meet those challenges. Participants were initially found to conceptualize diversity as being comprised of more visible signifiers of difference. However, as the interviews progressed participants eventually described diversity as difference broadly defined. Students were identified as being different from each other based on factors such as socio-economic status, family life, language and learning abilities. Tolerance and intolerance, different learning needs, the curriculum being unreflective of student diversity, different beliefs and values, and poverty were among the challenges participants highlighted as being brought about, or associated with the diversity of the student population. Strategies used to meet these challenges included attempting to create a culture of acceptance, differentiating instruction, collaboration with other teachers and using support services such as parent volunteers and the ESL teacher.

How participants understand and conceptualize diversity, what they identify as challenges associated with diversity, and how they feel they should try to help their students overcome these challenges is all connected to, or rather influenced by, their beliefs and understandings of what is dominant or expected of and for students in rural Ontario. Through the process of reading and re-reading the interviews, and finding themes in the participant's responses, a general belief of what is normal, and therefore what is valued by participants became apparent. After once more consulting educational

literature, and literature regarding rural life, it appears that the beliefs and values of the participants likely portray those of North American society in general.

This chapter will provide a discussion of what I believe to be a circular and interconnected relationship between values and beliefs of what is dominant or preferred and also what is to be valued in society and social institutions. Entangled with these beliefs and values are power relationships and struggles. The values and beliefs will be identified as affected by and a part of a values hierarchy, which plays a part not only in how society and institutions are designed and function, but also how people act within those institutions to uphold this set of beliefs and values. The hierarchy of values is what supports the creation and continuation of dominant groups, therefore perpetuating oppression. This chapter will include a discussion of dominant beliefs and values present in the rural school in which this study took place, as well as in Canadian education in general. The relationships between the concepts of the dominant beliefs and values, identity and social hierarchy are interconnected in this study and were all found to influence each other. This chapter begins with a description of the idea of a discussion of the dominant versus the 'other', it is followed by a description of the values hierarchy. The dominant Canadian identity is critically examined in relation to how people view rural life. Finally, the dominant beliefs and values are explored through a discussion of the strategies participants described for dealing with the challenges brought about by the diversity of their students.

Dominant versus the 'Other'

Through reading and re-reading the interview transcripts it became apparent that the student population was being described in a way that put certain students into the dominant group, and other students into the group of the 'other'. This idea of what was dominant and preferred appeared to be entrenched in the identities participants held of the students; the expectations values and beliefs regarding students. The challenges participants identified as resulting from diversity, as well as the strategies they chose for dealing with them were also influenced by these notions. This organization of society as dominant versus the 'other' permeates societal institutions, and is what critical theorists seek to problematize and dismantle. In the case of education, rather than celebrating or praising differences students are continually working towards achieving things such as levels of learning that are based on dominant standards. This furthers the oppression of students who are not part of the dominant group, and does not recognize or appreciate different beliefs, values and ways of knowing and being.

In this study, participants discussed helping students achieve in school based on the dominant and preferred standards of educational achievement, such as when participants discussed how a number of the students are at different levels of learning. They also made reference to the dominant or standard beliefs and values of schooling. This was highlighted in chapter 4 through Becky and Carls' explanations of how the Mennonite community does not value things such as school attendance and homework as much as they should. Students and their families who held different beliefs and values regarding schooling were described as differing from the dominant group in a negative way and were described as the 'other'. Participants did not seem to feel any activities

happening outside of the school had educational value; school was discussed as being the prime or best location for education. Moreover, through participant discussions of the home lives of students schooling was described as being of greater importance than the education students receive through their home life experiences. Therefore, students such as the Mennonites who value schooling differently than most of the students were viewed as being less knowledgeable, and basically deficient. Shaker (2007) explains the contradiction this creates within education when she states:

Not only does the school provide a wide array of learning resources and opportunities to children who otherwise might never have access to them, but it also defines what is "worth" knowing, and -by its omission from the curriculum - what is not. It not only encourages children to learn the difference between "right" and "wrong," but it also tells them what that difference is. And, just to make it undeniably clear to students what they should and shouldn't do, the school is responsible for adhering to and reinforcing a complex system of assessment, grades, rewards and punishments. (p. 17)

Therefore, anyone refusing or unable to participate in education in the dominant way is penalized socially and educationally.

Interview participants such as Gena and Becky discussed how the teacher's efforts to help students such as the Mennonites overcome challenges must be working, because they were seeing positive changes in things such as school completion rates. They explained how more Mennonites students now continue on to high school and receive things such as school awards. Gena in particular described how Mennonites who have lived in the community for a while, those that are second or third generation Canadian citizens, refuse to interact with new immigrants from Mexico. It can be argued that this is an example of Mennonites being assimilation into the dominant group. Not only are Mennonite students forced to conform to the education system but they are taught to disassociate themselves from those who are not part of the dominant group (the 'other'),

regardless of their connection to them. The teachers have become so accustomed to this process of assimilation that they feel they are succeeding in helping students to better themselves only when the students are achieving in dominant ways. The creation of dominant groupings and standards for achievement are supported by the dominant beliefs and values of society. Beliefs and values are held regarding many aspects of life, one of those is regarding life-styles.

Beliefs and Values

The beliefs and values expressed by participants were dominant as well. All of the participants fit in with the dominant Anglo-Saxon beliefs which are inherent in the Ontario education system (Levine & Riffel, 1993; McLaren, 2007). It is believed that all but one of participants are Caucasian Anglo-Saxons with English as their first language. Their beliefs are a reflection of Canada's history of perpetuating Anglo-Saxon beliefs and values in and through education, and attempting to assimilate those with different beliefs and values (Harper, 1997; Levine & Riffel, 1993; McLaren, 2007). The process of assimilation was found to be active in the practices of the participants, even if they expressed beliefs contrary to assimilation. This was very aptly displayed through a conversation with the participant named Andrea, who went to great lengths to describe the benefits of diversity as well as how all students should be given an equal chance to succeed in school. However, when she described facing the challenge of having a curriculum that is unreflective of the beliefs and values of all of her students, she made it very clear that she would not change her teaching or the curriculum to reflect the diversity of the student population. She explained her self by telling me that, after all, the students whose values and beliefs are not reflected in the curriculum joined "us" (Canada), we did

not join them. This reflects her belief in a dominant or correct Canadian identity and education, as well as her belief that this dominant identity takes precedent over all others in school. This also displays how being inclusive is a difficult process that does not always move in a forward or positive direction. Almost all of the participants expressed their belief in creating equitable school environments, but almost all of the participants also displayed a resistance to abandoning dominant beliefs, values and ways of teaching.

Canadian Identity

Canadian identity and therefore Canadian institutions (such as education) are entrenched with beliefs and values regarding what it means to be a good or dominant Canadian. Highly valued within Canada and Canadian institutions is contributing to the perpetuation of the success of capitalism, and economic progress (Harper, 1997). The value placed on progress and the economy contributed to a push in education being designed to encourage students to continue to University and college after high school. Relatively recent changes in education in the mid 1990's were designed to create greater economic success and progress. They were part of the neo-liberal movement and were put in place during the Common Sense Revolution of the Harris government (Gidney, 2002). Out of the Common Sense Revolution came such things as EQAO testing, further amalgamation of small schools, and the college of teachers (Gidney, 2002).

Changes such as these contributed to a high value being placed on urban life, and the belittlement of rural life. DeYoung and Howley (1990) discuss the history of urban values being entrenched in educational policy initiatives when they discuss what they view as the beginning of schooling being treated as a means of college preparation. They

point out that rural people were sceptical that this form of schooling would be better for their children developmentally than physical labour and hard work. However, rural people apparently do believe schooling designed to create college and university graduates will help level the social playing field between urban and rural students (DeYoung & Howley, 1990). Therefore, rural people gave in to the pressure and agreed to school reform.

The belief that school should be reformed to strengthen the economy through initiatives such as creating more college and university graduates helps to display that people associate success and intelligence with urban life. It also helps to explain how the urban identity achieved its place at the top of the social hierarchy. It helps to portray how rural life is defined not only as inferior but in opposition to rural life. Howarth (1997) explains this when he states:

Countryside is an urban idea, reflecting both pride and anxiety about the city's status... The image that people have had of rural areas is one largely fashioned by the residents of cities, who have seen the countryside as the often welcome antithesis of urban life (p. 5).

To describe it very simply - rural life is perceived as the opposite of urban life. Urban life is perceived as the place where progress and growth happens. Because urban life is fast paced, progressive and intelligent, rural life is therefore backwards, slow, and incapable of progress. Rural people are therefore commonly described as and perceived to be uneducated "country bumpkins", and "stupid hicks" (Malhoit, 2005; Theobald, 2005; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). These descriptions portray two different and possibly competing notions of rural life, the first being a romanticised view of rural life as a welcome opposite to urban life. The second notion of rural life is that it is backward and uneducated. These competing notions were evident in the participants' answers to the

research questions, sometimes the rural area where they school is located was described as being a good place, whereas at other times it was described as being less advanced and having less opportunities for children to succeed.

These different descriptions highlight the derogatory opinion regarding rural life and rural people, which has contributed to educational policies and programs being designed and executed based on urban beliefs, values and needs (Malhoit, 2005; Theobald, 2005; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). They also display how little to no value is perceived to be derived from rural life experience. Kumashiro (2002) explains how allowing dominant people to define the identity of non-dominant people in this way is oppressive, and furthers the privileging of dominant viewpoints and those who hold those views. The two differing conceptions of rural life may also be a result of the fact that rural life and what it means to be rural is most often defined by those residing in urban areas, and who may have little to no actual idea of what it really means to be rural. Participants in this study both held the two different notions of what it means to be rural. Although participants were teachers in a rural school most of them appeared to believe that urban identity and lifestyle were better than or higher on the social hierarchy than rural identity and lifestyle. For the participants, to be dominant was to be urban, and to be non-dominant was to be rural.

Identifying the Influence of Dominant Beliefs and Values

Participants' beliefs and values regarding what is dominant and therefore good became most apparent in their descriptions of both the challenges they felt were brought about by diversity, and the strategies they used to try to overcome them. As previously

mentioned the challenges participants listed as associated with the diversity of the student population were intolerance, different learning needs, the curriculum being unreflective of student diversity, different beliefs and values, and poverty. Strategies included attempting to create a culture of acceptance, differentiating instruction, collaboration with other teachers and using support services such as parent volunteers and the ESL teacher.

Through the use of the strategies listed, participants expressed their intention to eliminate intolerance, meet the educational needs of the students, and help students acquire basic necessities such as food and clothing. However, through a review of literature it was found that participants were contributing to the assimilation of students who did not fit into the dominant group. In this manner the students comprising the 'other' were further oppressed. Participants encouraged the existence of dominant groupings in this way by teaching the students to value superficial knowledge of the other (such as celebrations), and by valuing and supporting dominant forms of dress over others (such as that of the Mennonite or poor students).

Perpetuating a Culture of Acceptance

Creating a culture of acceptance in the school was one of the ways participants perpetuated the groupings of the dominant versus the 'other'. When participants described this culture of acceptance, they discussed how it was about teaching the students respect, responsibility, cooperation, and doing their best. They explained how any time a student acted intolerantly towards another they were asked to apologize and repeat a mantra.

Rather than engaging the students in a discussion regarding why they acted the way they did, and how the students felt about it, they were merely told to stop acting in that way.

This denies the presence of intolerant thoughts, it only recognizes intolerant behaviours. It

also does not involve any deconstruction of intolerant beliefs or feelings, it teaches the students to respect what is dominant.

Macgregor (2007) describes how students need to learn more than merely how to tolerate one another; they need to learn *about* each other. They need to understand how they differ from one another. In a rural area, understanding how students differ from one another may not always include discussions of obvious differences such as race or ethnicity, however, as previously mentioned, there are many ways in which students can be diverse, and any of those differences can be explored with students. Participants did not really mention any teaching about the other. As previously mentioned, Carl discussed how a Chinese parent comes into the school to teach the students about Chinese holidays, but that is a very superficial lesson. Only teaching students about celebratory aspects of non-dominant peoples identities and histories teaches that their culture and beliefs have no real value, they only have celebratory value. The Ontario elementary curriculum provides teachers with the opportunity to teach about the other, however teachers in this study (or their administrators) choose not to. Merely teaching celebrations maintains the hierarchical organization of society and beliefs, because it perpetuates the notion that normal beliefs and values are those that are worth knowing and therefore truly valuable.

Not only did students appear to be taught about the other in superficial ways, there also did not seem to be any deconstruction or explanation of what it means to be respectful of one another. It seems students were told to respect each other and themselves, yet were not engaged in discussions about what it means to respect one another. Participants described how they would stop disrespectful behaviour when they saw it happening. They did not mention engaging in a discussion with their students about

why it was happening, and where the feelings of disrespect were coming from.

MacGregor (2007) also points out something that should be very obvious, but is not always- bullying happens in many places and in many ways. If students never understand how they differ from one another and what it means to be respectful of that difference, we will never move past mere tolerance, bullying and intolerance will prevail. If students who are not part of the dominant are merely tolerated, not truly incorporated into society and its institutions their educational needs are not likely to be met. Nor are they likely to exit their position of non-dominance in school and in society.

Another way participants contributed to the oppression of their students was through their efforts to help provide necessities such as food and clothing to those who would otherwise go without. Participants described how they helped provide donations of these necessities with the help of parents and other community members.

Freire (2000) explains how providing a handout furthers oppression when he states:

True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes with nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands-whether of individuals or entire peoples-need to be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and working, transform the world. (p. 45)

By giving people what they need, rather than helping people provide for themselves, a cycle of oppression and poverty is created. Participants and the community perpetuate poverty in their school by providing handouts to those in need rather than helping the students and their families overcome their poverty on their own.

McLaren (2007) provides further insight into how poverty and oppression are perpetuating in this manner when he states:

Marginalized people are often positioned by the dominant culture in relations of dependency where they are excluded from equal citizenship rights. Even if they are materially comfortable, these groups may be oppressed on the basis of their marginal status, for instance, senior citizens who suffer from feelings of uselessness, boredom and lack of self-worth. (p. 42)

He goes on to explain how the dominant culture is able to exercise its power over the oppressed people by bringing them under the measure of their domination, thereby reinforcing the position of the dominant group. This helps to secure the position of superiority for the dominant group, and inferior from the non-dominant.

Freire (2000) explains that oppressed groups must be empowered, and achieve freedom through their own actions. This is where the importance of education comes in. Students must be taught that they have the capability to rise above oppression, and succeed on their own terms. Therefore, students need to be taught a curriculum that is both reflective and relevant to their life experience. Participants in this study could adapt their lessons to teach their students how they have the power to overcome their poverty and oppression. Rural students and their families will always be oppressed if they are only ever given handouts.

A third way participants acted to further domination and oppression in their school was through their disregard of the personal beliefs and values of the non-dominant or 'other' students. This was displayed through the discussion of how participants addressed the challenge of having a curriculum that is unreflective of differences in the beliefs and values of the students. This was brought up by Andrea when she discussed having difficulty teaching traditions to students such as the Mennonites who are not allowed to learn about other religions. Participants also discussed having problems with students who either did not wear clothing that was deemed appropriate for gym class, or were

unable to participate in certain gym activities based on their religious beliefs. They described how they felt they had changed the programs to meet the needs of the students by changing the name of dance unit to something else, and explaining to students why they should not wear things like dresses during gym.

Participants expressed their belief that these modifications successfully met the needs of their students to the best of their ability. They explained this by describing their belief that the curriculum requires them to teach dance. Therefore, they had to teach their students dance whether they wanted to or not. However, the curriculum does not specifically require students to be taught dance. The curriculum document states that by the end of Grade One, students should be able to “travel in a variety of ways using different pathways (e.g., straight, curved, or zigzag pathways in creative dance; Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 22).” Dance is merely used as an example of how students can be taught to move in certain ways. It is unclear where the participant got the notion that the curriculum required them to teach things such as dance to their students. The belief that the curriculum limited them in this manner was expressed by many of the participants. This could be an example of a misinterpretation of a policy, or it could be an example of participants using the curriculum to back up the beliefs about the value of certain aspects of schooling.

The solution to challenges brought about by student diversity should not be to teach a curriculum that meets the educational needs of only the dominant group (those who are able to celebrate religious traditions etc.). Not only would this be inequitable, but it is also illegal, as the Constitution Act of 1982 very clearly states that individuals have the right to practice a religion of their choosing. Rather than merely talking about

celebrating difference, it is important for education to be inclusive and therefore equitable. In order to be inclusive the diversity of the student population should be incorporated into the everyday curriculum and practices of the school, rather than merely celebrated on the appropriate holidays. It is important that students feel like (and truly become) active participants in the school environment, rather than outsiders or visitors, regardless of their religion, race or ethnicity. Established norms, beliefs and values should constantly be questioned and deconstructed. Dominance should be resisted, and equity should be truly strived for.

It might be easy to blame the participants for their actions in perpetuating oppression in this rural Ontario school. However, the reality of the situation is that our beliefs and values are greatly influenced by society, and the dominant beliefs and values (Donart, 2009). Therefore, the actions of the participants express the dominant beliefs and values of their rural school, and likely the community surrounding the school, and government institutions as well. Participants may even have learned to express dominant beliefs and values through their education in teacher training programs. It is my belief that participants learned to support normal and dominant values and beliefs through their participation in Canadian society and its institutions, I do not believe they came up with their idea of what is normal or right on their own.

The descriptions of the participants provide a good example of how easy it can be to participate in oppression, knowingly or not, and the dangers of complying with taking societal norms and values for granted. Further, it remains uncertain whether teachers, or even schools, have the capacity to make the kinds of changes necessary to actively work towards equity and deconstructing hierarchies. Even I perpetuated the oppression of rural

students and others when I created the definition of rural for the purpose of this study. A rural area was defined as one with a population of less than 10,000 people. Rural was also defined as areas which are comprised of a population which is largely homogeneous in race, culture, and religion, and which is surrounded by land that is used for agricultural purposes (Rios, 1988). This definition was limiting, not in terms of population size, but in terms of the portrayal it created of rural life. Because I defined rural areas as that which are surrounded by land used for agricultural purposes I went into the interviews expecting to discuss with participants the knowledge their students had of agriculture and farming. However, very few of the students were described as having knowledge of what I had defined as rural life experiences.

By going into the interviews with a pre-disposed notion of what it means to be rural I allowed rural to become an 'other', and contributed to rural being defined in opposition to and as lesser than urban. I should have allowed the definition of rural to come out of the data, I would have gathered richer and more real information about what it means for participants and their students to live, teach and learn in a rural school. In conversation with Dawn Wallin (an expert in the field of rural education) she explained to me that identities should not be defined for others. More importantly, she stated that dominant people should not define the identities of non-dominant people, because that is a way of perpetuating oppression. I should have let the participants define what it meant for them to be rural, and how they perceived their students to be rural. The findings of the study help portray the cyclical and contradicting nature of education, and of society. Even when people believe they are helping others, they could be furthering their oppression. And, even when people believe they are working towards equity they could actually be furthering inequity.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a description of the normal or dominant beliefs and values existing in the rural school where the participants of this study teach. Anglo-Saxon beliefs and values were identified as those that are treated as both normal and dominant. Other beliefs and values were highlighted as being non-dominant, or incorrect. Urban life was portrayed as being normal or better than rural life, and rural life was described as defined by urban people in opposition to urban life. This was explained as contributing to the formulation of educational policies and programs largely based on urban beliefs, values and experiences. The way domination and the primacy of certain beliefs and values over others played out in the participants' school was described through a discussion of the strategies they used to try to help their students overcome challenges they identified as stemming from diversity. It was reiterated that the beliefs and values of the participants are a reflection of their school community and the community around them.

The goal of this study was to uncover how rural teachers understood diversity in a rural educational setting. Participants were found to understand diversity in a normal or dominant way. They were found to place greater value on the dominant or normal values and beliefs, and appear to perpetuate them through their teaching. All of the participants expressed the desire to be inclusive and provide equitable education for their students. Regardless of their intentions, their actions appear to be furthering the oppression of the non-dominant groups in their school. This highlights the importance of not only discussing how teachers understand diversity, but also how they respond to it, because even though teachers may think they value diversity they may really value assimilation.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Why Does This Matter and, Where do we go From Here?

Revisiting the Research Questions

This study uncovered the understandings and responses of rural teachers to the diversity existing in their rural Ontario school. Teachers in this rural setting understood diversity to be difference broadly defined, and also that which was different from the dominant group. Students were found to be diverse if they were different from the dominant group based on ethnicity, socio-economic status, family life, and language and learning abilities. The main challenges associated with this difference were highlighted as intolerance, different learning needs, and curriculum unreflective of student diversity, different beliefs and values of the students and their families, and poverty. Participants explained how they tried to help students overcome these challenges through creating a culture of acceptance in their school, differentiating their instruction, collaborating with each other, and using two support services; the ESL teacher and community volunteers and donations. However, it was found that although the teachers were well intended they were actually assimilating students into the dominant group, and perpetuating their poverty and oppression by providing them with handouts. It was discussed that creating a truly inclusive school environment is a process or a journey that does not always move in a forward direction. Contradictions were also found to play a large part in this process, which was illustrated by the participants' discussions of how they believed in equity, and were trying to achieve it in their school, in comparison with the oppressive nature of their actions.

Significance

This study contributes to research regarding diversity, rural schooling, conceptions of the 'other' and marginalization. It expands the field of diversity research by considering diversity in a rural setting. The findings highlight how this specific school experiences diversity that is both similar and different to urban areas. The findings regarding the perceptions of diversity, and also the strategies used to overcome challenges demonstrate that teachers in this rural Ontario school have a set of dominant beliefs and values regarding Canadian identity and Ontario schooling. Participants expressed their perception that Canadians should both learn about and propagate Anglo-Saxon beliefs and values. Further, participants portrayed how values outside of these dominant ones belong to outsiders and are less valuable, and not worth teaching to or about. It is significant that participants' descriptions of the diversity existing in their rural school centred on how students were different from the dominant group.

This study contributes to research regarding rural education because it provides preliminary findings regarding how diversity is perceived and plays out in a rural school. It is significant that a rural Ontario school was found to be experiencing diversity similar to urban schools. Students were described as experiencing poverty, and having difficulties associated with being English language learners, which are challenges that urban schools face as well. However, as previously mentioned, rural areas have less support services than their urban counterparts (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Downey, 2003; Singleton & Varpalotai, 2006; Varpalotai, 2003; Wallin, 2007). Therefore, one of the main differences between challenges brought about by diversity in an urban school compared to those in a rural school is that challenges associated with being an English language learner, or experiencing poverty would be compounded by living in a rural area

because of this lack of support services in rural areas. It was also mentioned that rural schools are often the corner-stone of rural communities, the place where rural life converges (Downey, 2003; Singleton & Varpalotai, 2006; Varpalotai, 2003; Wallin, 2007). This could lead to enormous pressure being placed on local schools and educators to provide solutions to the challenges their students face. It could also mean that schools would be working largely on their own to put these strategies into action. Therefore, urban and rural students may be diverse in similar ways, but the way this diversity plays out is different based on the context. This study is significant because it provides preliminary information regarding how teachers and their schools have been trying to help their students overcome challenges. It provides an opportunity to deconstruct the strategies and consider more equitable alternatives, as well as areas for future research.

This study also provides insight into how rural students are marginalized and treated as an 'other' in education. It was discussed that the teachers in this study hold dominant beliefs and values regarding student achievement and what is worth teaching. Although participants expressed their desire to be equitable educators, they were complicit in marginalizing and 'othering' students who were not part of the dominant group. Although participants praised their rural school and its community for being a friendly place to live and work, they placed rural in the category of other or non-dominant through their support of educational values that place primacy on urban identities and life styles. This study is significant because it contributes information about the struggle towards inclusion, and why the process is not always linear.

Implications for Practice

The findings provide valuable information regarding the difference between perceptions and actual outcomes. They highlight how talking to people about how they

are teaching and how they feel about it is not enough. This study has implications for teacher professional development and practice specifically as a way to encourage more reflective practice. Baron & Thompson-Grove (2008) discuss the importance of facilitating reflective practice for teachers in order to create positive change in education. They discuss how it is ineffective to continue bringing experts in to tell teachers how to change what they are doing to create more equitable schools. They state that providing teachers with the opportunity to reflect on their practice in a learning community is a more effective vehicle for positive change.

This idea that teachers should be given the opportunity to stop and think about their practice, and how they might be complicit in perpetuating inequality is not new, but it is worth emphasizing. Ramrattan Smith (2007) illuminates the importance of reflective practice in critical educational studies when she states “without critical reflective practice, the lenses the educator uses to view current situations, create a vision, understand curriculum and deliver pedagogy may become clouded and perpetuate the very injustices that each of us seeks to end” (p. 48). Ramrattan Smith points out the importance of giving teachers the opportunity not only to reflect on their practice, but to reflect critically, and consider the ways their practice might perpetuate oppression and inequity. This study provides an example of a group of teachers who would benefit from some critical reflection on their teaching practice. It demonstrates having the intention to be equitable (or believing in equity) is not enough; teachers must be given the opportunity to deconstruct their practice to determine how they can become more equitable as educators.

Implications for Policy

In terms of policy, this study is significant because it points out the need for policies that support rural teachers and administrators in the creation of equitable schools.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (1993) has a policy (PPM 119) which states that school boards are required to create policies that specifically relate to antiracism and ethnocultural equity. The intent of the policy is to “ensure that all students achieve their potential and acquire accurate knowledge and information, as well as confidence in their cultural and racial identities” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 5). The school board within which this study took place has no such policy because in 1995 the government made policies such as this ineffective. Groups within the government that had previously been working towards achieving equity within schools were closed down, and policies such as this became useless.

This study is significant because it points out a need for policies that address issues of antiracism and ethnocultural equity. This study also highlights that Ontario has a history of working towards assimilation, rather than social justice. The Ontario government is “committed to excellence in education and to equitable educational outcomes for all students” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 5). Yet, this study highlights how this rural school is clearly not supporting all of their students in achieving equitable educational outcomes, and does not appear to have a policy in place that the teachers could use to help them achieve that outcome.

It would be interesting to study how many schools have antiracist or social justice policies in place, and whether or not they are being used and used effectively. A number of school boards have safe schools policies in place, which seem to conflate the issue of school safety with that of diversity. It would be useful to study why this is the case, why administrators and educators assume diversity is something that should be grouped together with school safety. Do people think diversity is dangerous? Further, if administrators and teachers function under the assumption that diversity is dangerous,

how will this shape their actions surrounding issues of diversity, and therefore the climate in their school? It would also be interesting to study Ontario's new equity and inclusive education policy, to see if it will truly support and encourage schools to work towards creating inclusive school environments that cater the needs of all students, rather than just the dominant group. Policies such as this provide hope for the creation of more inclusive schools, but only if they will not be rendered useless like similar policies in the past such as memorandum PPM 119.

Ideas for Future Research

A number of areas for future research were illuminated through this study. The issues that were brought up by most participants that would be useful to research further were students that were English language learners, students being colour blind, and students experiencing poverty.

As mentioned in the study, a number of the students at this rural school have English as a second language, and spend time with an ESL teacher. It would be helpful to have a better idea of the number of English language learners that are schooled in rural schools. Further it would be helpful to have more information regarding the kind of services that are available to ESL students and their families in both the rural school and community, and whether or not they are helpful.

Canada is becoming increasingly diverse, and that 20% of the population will be a visible minority by the year 2016 (Naqvi, Coburn, Goddard & Mayer, 2007). Therefore, the proportion of the student population who has English as a second language will continue to grow, and teachers must be prepared to teach children with a variety of language abilities. "Research shows that educators can help in the literacy acquisition of

multilingual children by creating instruction that accounts for students' linguistic diversity (Naqvi, Coburn, Goddard & Mayer, 2007, p. 9)." This means that rather than trying to start from scratch with English, students should continue to develop their first language, and use that as a frame of reference for learning English. In this study, the participants spoke largely about the students abilities in English, but rarely mentioned their first languages. Moreover, the English as a second language teacher was portrayed as being in charge of teaching the students English. Cummins (2006) explains how this is typical of Canadian schools; the provision of instruction for ESL students is predominantly left up to the ESL teacher, and cultural knowledge and home language proficiency for ESL students rarely has instructional relevance. Cummins finds this to be problematic for a number of reasons, it increases the amount of time that ESL students need to catch up in terms of English language abilities because their prior knowledge base is abandoned, it also leads to students feeling shameful and negatively towards their home language and culture, and they often lose their home language within a few years of coming to Canada (Cummins, 2006). As previously mentioned, ESL students in the school in this study were described as distancing themselves from new immigrants who were from the same community as them. Participants discussed how second and third generation Mennonite students often refused to speak or associate with first generation students from their community. Cummins goes on to explain how the problems surrounding ESL students and schooling is a multifaceted issue, with many things that need to change in order for schooling to become more equitable, including teacher education. Diversity in language abilities is something that will only become more prominent in the future in both rural and urban schools, as diversity in language and learning abilities will continue to increase as a result of immigration and other factors.

A few of participants also discussed their belief that young students are colour-blind regarding skin colour. One participant in particular said she could swear her young students do not even see skin colour. Gosh (2008) highlights how racism is often ignored and therefore perpetuated in Canadian schools as a result of a Canadian tradition of pretending that Canada is not racist and does not have a history of racism. Gosh discusses how one way Canadians pretend not to be racist is by claiming that they view everyone equally, they do not even see visible differences. She highlights how when people are colour blind they act as though they are treating everyone the same, which ignores differences between people, therefore perpetuating inequality. Gosh states that not only does ignoring difference create inequality, it just bottles up problems until eventually they are manifested in serious ways. By perpetuating the idea of colour blindness educators in this study are actually increasing challenges for the minority students in their school. Problems between students will continue to grow and become more serious if they continue to be ignored. It would be helpful to know how many of the participants believe their students are colour-blind, because that might explain the lack of discussion they have with their students regarding differences between students. It would also be helpful to learn if this perception of young student being colour blind is something that prevails in rural schools in Ontario in general.

Participants in the study spent a fair amount of time discussing poverty. However, there is very little research regarding poverty in rural Ontario. It would be helpful to do further research into the prevalence of poverty in rural Ontario to determine student and family needs. One of the issues associated with poverty was that of health and nutrition. A number of participants expressed a passionate concern for the health and nutrition of

their students, stating that students were coming to school with a lack of food or non-nutritional food. Youth obesity rates and discussions of health and diet are on the rise, but rarely in reference to rural schooling. One participant in particular expressed the concern that rural students are often bussed to and from school. It would be helpful to research the implications of decreased student health and nutrition rates and increasing bus ride times, based on rural school closures and amalgamations. More in depth studies would be helpful for further uncovering how oppression and values hierarchies are playing out in rural environments and contributing to practices that perpetuate poverty and oppression.

Limitations

This study was limited by the fact that only teachers were included in the participant group. More rich and real data would have been obtained by interviewing caregivers or students as well as teachers. This study was also limited because identities such as urban and rural were defined prior to the beginning of data collection. Defining rural was especially limiting because the definition was used to help both organize and design the research questions. Therefore, descriptions of what it means to be rural or to have rural life experience were very limited. Lessons learned from this study include how the research practices can further the oppression of non-dominant groups by defining their identity prior to the collection of data.

Final Thoughts

Through working on this study I have learned that creating an equitable or inclusive school is a process or journey. Participants and their colleagues seem to have made progress in decreasing things such as intolerance and bullying at their school.

However, there are still a lot of improvements that can be made, especially regarding the kind of strategies used to help students experiencing poverty and marginalization. There are also improvements that can be made regarding how research such as this study can be conducted, so that it better facilitates the needs of students who are different or the 'other'.

Over the course of this study I learned about ways that not only the participants, but that I myself am complicit in oppression. This study was created with the intention of helping students who are treated as an 'other' in education, and although I was well intended I contributed to the further oppression of those students based on the way I conducted the research. I now realize that rather than, or maybe in combination with, interviewing the teachers I also should have interviewed students who were identified as being different and their families. I should have asked them about their experiences, and how they feel about the school and the curriculum. I also should have found out where the participants got their notions of the curriculum, specifically regarding what they are required to teach. These notions could have come from many different places; from other teachers, principals, unions, or their own interpretation of the curriculum.

I also learned that realizing how one is complicit with oppression is difficult in itself. I struggled with the realization that I contribute to things such as the reinforcement of normal or dominant beliefs and values, and that I am sensitive about changing the curriculum to meet the needs of minority groups. I have also been part of (and even organized) charities that provide hand outs to oppressed groups, rather than helping to actually emancipate them. These realizations helped me to further understand how creating an inclusive environment is not only a journey or a process, but is one that does

not always move in a forward direction. This study has left me with questions regarding how the students who are part of the 'other' feel about school, and about their position in the social hierarchy. I am left wondering where teachers get their notions of what the required curriculum is, and whether the Ministry of Education is aware of how students in rural Ontario are diverse, and what their needs are. I hope to be able to answer these questions with future research.

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Appendix B

[Investigating Teachers Understandings and Responses to Diversity in the Rural Ontario Classroom]

[Student researcher: Stephanie Tuters, Faculty Advisor: Katina Pollock]

CONSENT FORM

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name (please print):

Audio-recording:

___ I agree to have my interview audio-recorded.

___ DO NOT audio-record my interview.

Signature of Participant

Date

Please Print Name

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:

Appendix C

Interview Questions

- 1) Age?
- 2) Gender?
- 3) Years of teaching experience?
- 4) Years of experience at the current location?
- 5) Grade being taught?
- 6) Years of experience teaching this grade?
- 7) Educational background?
- 8) Other relevant work experiences, (perhaps that lead them to teaching)?
- 9) Place of residence?
- 10) Amount of time residing there?
- 11) Could you please describe your school to me?

Section regarding understandings of diversity:

- 12) Could you please describe your classroom to me?
- 13) How would you describe the students in your classroom?
- 14) Could you please describe the life experience of your students, for example – what is their home life like?
- 15) Are the students similar to one another in terms of what their experiences at home are like? For example, do many of the children's parents have the same

kind of jobs, live in the same kinds of homes, have a similar income, or practice a similar religion?

- 16) Are there aspects of the students' home lives that they bring to that classroom with them that you find noticeable, or that have an affect on their engagement in the classroom?

Section regarding teachers responses to diversity:

- 17) Have you had any experiences with your students in which their background has affected their learning?
- 18) Do you feel that diversity exists within your classroom?
- 19) If so, how did you deal with this?
- 20) If so, how do you feel you respond to this diversity?
- 21) If so, have you experienced any difficulties because of it?
- 22) If you did experience difficulties as a result of diversity, how did you deal with them? Did you use methods that you learned at teachers college, or in an AQ course?
- 23) Have you had any problems interacting with the parents of your students?

Section for expansion on understandings and responses:

- 24) When you think of diversity in the classroom, what do you think of? What words would you use to describe diversity in the classroom?
- 25) If you were given the opportunity to give advice to a teacher who was about to start working in your classroom, what would you say to help prepare them? Are there any experiences that you would share with them, or any resources you find especially helpful?

Appendix D

Ethics Form



THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE

Review Number: 0901-10
 Applicant: Stephanie Tuters
 Supervisor: Katina Pollock
 Title: Investigating teachers understandings and responses to diversity in the rural Ontario classroom
 Expiry Date: April 30, 2009
 Type: M.Ed. Thesis
 Ethics Approval Date: February 5, 2009
 Revision #:
 Documents Reviewed &
 Approved: UWOProtocol, Letter of Information & Consent

This is to notify you that the Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates under the authority of The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the date noted above. The approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

No deviations from, or changes to, the research project as described in this protocol may be initiated without prior written approval, except for minor administrative aspects. Investigators must promptly report to the Chair of the Faculty Sub-REB any adverse or unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected, and any new information which may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study. In the event that any changes require a change in the information and consent documentation, newly revised documents must be submitted to the Sub-REB for approval.

Dr. Jason Brown (Chair)

2008-2009 Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board

Dr. Jason Brown	Faculty (Chair)
Dr. Elizabeth Nowicki	Faculty
Dr. Jacqueline Specht	Faculty
Dr. John Barnett	Faculty
Dr. J. Marshall Mangan	Faculty
Dr. Immaculate Namukasa	Faculty
Dr. Robert Macmillan	Assoc Dean, Graduate Programs & Research (ex officio)
Dr. Jerry Paquette	UWO Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (ex officio)

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