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“We Are of this Place, Not Just From It”

The Culture that Sustains a Rural Charter School in Northern Minnesota

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By

Julie W. Goldsmith

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION


May, 2013



UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

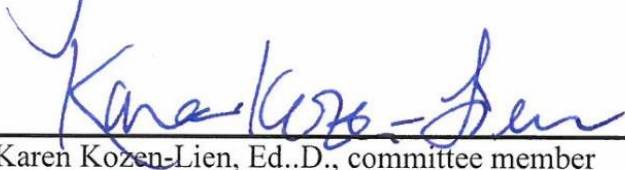
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Love to you all.

Abstract

The focus of this research was in the area of organization development and culture within the context of a rural, Minnesota, charter school. The methodology best suited for this work was ethnography; through observation and interviews, the levels of culture were defined including the outermost layer of tangible artifacts, the deeper layer of espoused beliefs and values, and the deepest, most tacit layer of basic underlying assumptions. The analysis of these layers utilized Schein's culture model and another lens of Adizes corporate lifecycles model. Such a study is important in order to expand the limited body of ethnographic research within charter schools and continue the conversation about culture in education.

The findings from this research were intended to give a comprehensive look at the culture of North Shore Community School and how the groups of adults in the building made meaning of it. The school has been successful in nurturing its students and upholding its mission as a small, rural school that served its surrounding community. As the school has grown and drawn students and staff from a broader area, the changes have been aligned with their espoused beliefs and values, but challenge the tacit, basic assumptions of their culture. Change presents the excitement and hope for continuing their innovation and conversely raises concerns that the history and tradition that distinguishes them may change beyond recognition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter One	1
Problem	1
Purpose Statement and Research Question	2
Researcher Interest and Bias	3
Definition of Common Terms	5
Public school districts	5
Unorganized county schools	5
Charter schools	5
Authorizer/sponsor	6
Environment as an integrating context focus	6
Culture	7
<i>Explicit artifacts</i>	7
<i>Espoused beliefs and values</i>	7
<i>Basic (and tacit) underlying assumptions</i>	8
Chapter Summary	8
Chapter Two – Literature Review	9
Rural Public Schools	9
Unique qualities	9
Poverty	9
Rural school challenges	10

Sense of community	11
Rural charter schools	11
Culture	13
Ethnography in Education	14
Chapter Summary	16
Chapter Three – Methodology	17
Research Design	17
Site	18
Participant Selection	19
Human Protection	19
Methods of Data Collection	21
Internal documents	21
External documents	21
Observation	21
Focused interviews	22
Personal journal	23
Methods of Reporting and Analysis	23
Reporting	23
Analysis	23
Delimitations	24
Chapter Summary	25
Chapter Four – Findings	26

Observation Findings	27
September 28, 2012	27
October 4, 2012	34
October 5, 2012	39
October 8, 2012	45
October 15, 2012	52
October 22, 2012	55
October 23, 2012	57
December 4, 2012	59
Interview Findings	60
Artifacts	60
<i>Environment and local history focus</i>	61
<i>Stories and myths</i>	63
<i>Traditions</i>	65
<i>Internal groups</i>	67
<i>Paraprofessionals</i>	67
<i>Special education staff</i>	67
<i>Nutrition services</i>	67
<i>Office staff</i>	67
<i>Grade level teaching teams</i>	68
<i>The group that went to school together</i>	68
<i>The guys' group</i>	68

<i>The “love my job” group</i>	68
<i>The “go to” group</i>	69
<i>Preschool</i>	69
Espoused Beliefs and Values	70
<i>Partnership: together we achieve more than alone</i>	72
<i>Historic internal community</i>	72
<i>Recent internal community</i>	73
<i>The school unifies the external community</i>	75
<i>Stewardship: care and responsibility for our natural and social environments</i>	76
<i>Natural environments – the connection to the outdoors</i>	76
<i>Social environments – “family”</i>	77
<i>Autonomy</i>	78
<i>Site-based management</i>	79
<i>Potential for the future</i>	80
<i>Leaders as shapers</i>	81
<i>Stated values from a staff meeting</i>	81
<i>“We are of this place, not just from it”</i>	82
Basic underlying assumptions	86
<i>Figure 1. The layers of the North Shore Community School culture</i>	87
<i>Discussion of issues of external survival and internal integration</i>	87
<i>Tacit content of the culture</i>	88
<i>General discussion of external survival issues</i>	88

<i>General discussion of internal integration issues</i>	89
<i>Explanation of basic underlying assumptions</i>	89
<i>Our strength is in upholding our past</i>	90
<i>We are unique and must fight to stay that way</i>	93
<i>We run best as a family</i>	95
<i>Our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work</i>	98
<i>It is best to not get any larger</i>	99
Director’s Role in Shaping the Culture	99
External Environmental Factors that May Shape Culture	102
Old apostolic Lutheran community	102
Nature	103
Historic community, fishing, and agriculture	103
Highlights from the Findings	104
Chapter Summary	105
Chapter Five	106
Discussion of Research Findings	106
The school’s tacit assumptions of growth	106
The school’s lifecycle	108
<i>Courtship</i>	109
<i>Infancy</i>	109
<i>Go-go</i>	111
<i>Adolescence</i>	111

<i>Prime</i>	113
The shift from adolescence to prime in the basic underlying assumptions	114
<i>We are unique and must fight to stay that way</i>	114
<i>We run best as a family</i>	114
<i>Our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work</i>	117
What Does This Mean for the School?	118
Thoughts on the Absence of the Director During my Research	120
Personal Reflection of My Experience as a Participant Researcher	121
Significance	125
Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research	126
Implications for the Field of Organization Development and the Practitioner	129
Final Thoughts	130
References	132
Appendices	135
Appendix A: Photographs of the Site	135
Appendix B: Consent Form Template	139
Appendix C: Original Letter to Staff	143
Appendix D: Duluth Township Newsletter Article	144
Appendix E: Email Soliciting Volunteers for Interviewing	145
Appendix F: Additional Email Soliciting Volunteers for Interviewing	146

Chapter 1

Problem

The first charter school laws in the United States were enacted in 1991 in Minnesota. After years of progressive innovation, including open enrollment rights to every child and post-secondary options to earn college credits during high school, Minnesota shifted the outlook of public education from a bureaucratic franchise to one that was consumer driven by the students and families of the state. While it would not be long before the rest of the country would follow, Minnesota had jumpstarted a new way of approaching education that would become the exemplar.

Even though charter schools have been around for the last 21 years, the National Charter School Research Center (2011) declared that rural charter school development “deserves more research and policy attention.” The focus of research on charter schools has been the academic performance of urban and suburban schools, how they compare to the public schools in their area, and schools’ ability to close the achievement gap. Even current cultural research commonly focuses on specific aspects of student learning, instruction, or programs and neglects the elements of culture apparent in those schools that sustain their success and growth.

Perhaps the lack of a market for the social constructivist approach to ethnography is what has contributed to the scarcity. This type of research asks not for the statistics and replicable practices, but for researchers to “consider the tacit underpinnings of human learning” (Wolcott, 1999, p.167). Ethnography challenges the researcher and those who read it to consider how humans make meaning and shape their reality. Current research

attempts to “reduce the complexity of the events they seek to explain” (p. 168). Just as educators cannot reduce a child’s learning to rote memorization or performance on standardized testing, they cannot limit educational research to the numbers and replicable practices. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) offered that despite the idiosyncratic nature of ethnography, “cultural theories generated in one ethnography provide the basis for hypothesis, hunches, observed patterns, or interpretations to be explored and developed in the same and other, similar settings” (p.8).

Some of the most renowned of education gurus limit school culture definitions to the “norms, values, and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the ‘persona’ of the school” (Cromwell, 2002). This is a strong representation of visible, measurable elements of culture, yet neglects the tacit, basic underlying assumptions that ultimately shape the explicit elements listed. Essentially, increased accountability and research has provided the tools and skills that *should* build a highly effective system of success for learners, yet roadblocks deep within the culture often are what derail the implementation of sound practice.

This research and dissertation is in answer to the gap that exists in the current literature. I sought to take an in-depth look at the explicit and tacit layers of culture, as defined by Schein (1999), in a successful, rural charter school.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to understand the unique behaviors, language, artifacts, beliefs, values, and assumptions that define the culture among the

various groups of adults integral to the establishment and sustenance of North Shore Community School in rural Duluth Township, MN.

Specific to this purpose, my research question was: what are the explicit artifacts, the espoused beliefs and values, and the basic underlying assumptions that are taken for granted and how do they tacitly shape the culture of North Shore Community School?

Researcher Interest and Bias

I was introduced to North Shore Community School in the spring of 2011. The school's board of education was seeking a consultant to assist them in defining their vision and strategy for the next four years and my company, TeamWorks International, came with strong recommendations from the schools and districts that they had called.

Our first meeting was in the sunny library of the school overlooking the playground and greenhouse. I was offered a chair or a large ergonomic ball to sit on and invited into conversation about the process that my organization would take them through. Despite my outsider status, I was received warmly; afterward, they asked if I would join them for their chili potluck lunch and conversation. I was pleased when a few days later they asked that I submit a full proposal for the strategic planning work.

My company engaged with them in June of that year and worked through the summer and fall, culminating in a full board retreat in October, 2011. At the end of that day (and our contracted work), I presented the idea of the school's culture being the subject of my ethnographic research. While the director already liked the idea when I had tested the waters a few months before, I was unsure of the proposal's reception with the rest of the board. Fortunately, they were pleased with the idea, grateful for the

recognition of the work and passion that they had poured into the school since its opening in the fall of 2002. The Board Chair expressed, “It would be an honor to have our story told.” The four months I spent working closely with the staff, director, and board of the school lent insight to what I might discover. While I knew to not rely too heavily on my assumptions formed with the work, it certainly was the impetus for pursuing the site for my research.

Sandwiched within my 16 years as a consultant, were six and a half years when I shifted gears and taught seventh grade language arts in a large, suburban school district. During that time, I became increasingly interested in the unconscious elements of my school’s culture that impacted the efficacy of our work. While I have since left that career path, I continue to be intrigued in the culture of education and its institutions; my work with a variety of K-12 districts and schools digs deeper into the tacit elements that shape the results that they do and do not achieve. This professional experience gives me opportunities to be in schools throughout the north central United States and witness multiple approaches to education. North Shore Community School sets itself apart from many of the schools that I know and with which I work. Their environmental focus, connection to community, and successful site-based management may not be completely unique to North Shore Community School, but they are uncommon. Through this research, I more deeply understand what is meaningful to them with the added perquisite of a truly enjoyable time getting to know the people of the school and the community.

Definition of Common Terms

Public school districts (as defined by Minnesota law). The state of Minnesota has 341 public school systems (or districts). There are three different types of school districts: Common School Districts, Independent School Districts, and Special School or Charter Districts. These are open to all students, tuition free, and funded through state and federal dollars.

Unorganized county schools (historical definition from Minnesota Law). Throughout the rural communities of Minnesota, county boards were legislated to maintain and govern over the independent schools in the area. In 1974, schools that fell under this description were annexed into the local school districts and the governance of the district boards.

Charter schools (as defined by Minnesota law). “A charter school is a public school organized by teachers or parents. A charter school is, by statutory definition, a public school and part of the state’s public school system. Unlike other public schools, parents and teachers organize and operate a charter school with the oversight of an authorizer or sponsor. The relationship between the charter school and its authorizer is reflected in a three year, renewable contract that contains the terms for operating the charter school.

“A charter school is exempt from many of the statutes and rules that apply to other public schools and districts. Each charter school receives state funding as if it were a school district but cannot levy taxes or issue bonds” (Larson, 2005, p.1).

Authorizer/sponsor (as defined by Minnesota law). “An authorizer is permitted to authorize one or more licensed teachers to operate a school, subject to the approval of the Commissioner of Education” (Larson, 2005, p.1). In Minnesota, there are five different types of organizations that may authorize one or more charter schools, including “a school board, an intermediate school board, or an education district; certain charitable organizations; a Minnesota private college, a college or university that is part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, and the University of Minnesota; a nonprofit corporation; and single-purpose authorizers that are charitable organizations formed solely to operate charter schools” (Larson, 2011, p.1). The role of authorizer has changed since charter school legislation was first passed in Minnesota. Originally known as sponsors, they served as a supporting organization to the schools and regulation fell to the State Department of Education. Now as authorizers, they are responsible for not only supporting, but improving and enhancing student achievement.

Environment as an integrating context focus. The EIC environment based education model was developed by the State Education and Environmental Roundtable (SEER) based in Poway, California. Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning (EIC) is designed with flexibility to allow schools and communities the opportunity to develop programming that suits their needs. "The model combines best practices into a comprehensive educational framework that simultaneously addresses content standards in schoolwork that they [students] perceive as relevant to their daily lives, thus increasing their motivation for learning and academic achievement" (Lieberman, 2005).

Culture as defined by Schein (1999). “Culture is a pattern of shared tacit assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 27). Schein clarified this as the “sum of all the shared, taken-for-granted assumptions that a group has learned throughout its history” (p.29). His caution was that only statements on the elements of culture can be made; it is not possible to explain culture in its entirety. Culture is not a superficial phenomenon. Its broad scope is reinforced within the mindset and beliefs of each individual and therefore one of the most stable and guarded facets of an organization.

Explicit artifacts. These elements of a culture are the most superficial and evident to even the casual observer. This includes behaviors, rules, systems, structures, symbols, ceremonies, language, stories, jokes, etc. and are considered explicit. Schein (2010) describes one such element of this layer of culture is climate. While some see climate and culture as the same, climate is “better thought of as the product of some of the underlying assumptions and is, therefore, a manifestation of the culture” (p. 24).

Espoused beliefs and values. “All group learning ultimately reflects someone’s original beliefs and values, his or her sense of what ought to be” (Schein, 2012, p. 25). The espoused values are adopted to explain what is important, not important, good, bad, and have been shown to last. Espoused beliefs and values are an organization’s stated or desired cultural elements. They serve as the justification for organizational strategies, goals, and philosophies and can shape or contradict norms and behavior.

Basic (and tacit) underlying assumptions. As the ultimate source for action and behavior, these unconscious elements of culture are often hidden and taken for granted with little variation within the group. Examples are the nature of reality and truth, human relationships, time and space, etc. within the organization. They tend to be non-confrontable and non-debatable. Schein (2010) explained their depth by describing how “reexamination of basic assumptions destabilizes our cognitive and interpersonal world, releasing large quantities of anxiety (p.28).

Chapter Summary

The intention of this chapter was to establish the research problem and purpose and the common terms needed in preparation for the topics herein. Charter school law varies from state to state in the United States, and the main elements of Minnesota law have been covered here. The Environment as an Integrating Context description serves to assist with the understanding of the findings, most notably the focus on the outdoors. Schein’s (2010) model of culture is the basis for organizing this study’s findings as well as Chapter Five’s discussion.

Chapter 2

Rural Public Schools

Unique qualities. The rural value of community is defined differently from suburban/urban areas that are delineated by city borders, blocks, developments, and highways (Mathis, 2003). One third of students in the United States go to school in towns of less than 25,000 people, one sixth of them in towns less than 2500. In Minnesota, 200,246 students live in towns less than 2500 people, an agreed upon level to consider a town rural. Of Minnesota's schools, 43.9% are considered rural (Johnson, 2012). The schools that service these communities are small by choice and by necessity. They are foundational to the cohesiveness of the community and, in many cases, may be the one strong factor in ameliorating social problems. A rural farming community may lose much of its social cohesiveness that was previously focused on family based vocational agricultural production (Purcell & Shackelford, 2005).

Poverty. It is generally agreed upon in the literature that rural constituents receive less attention as urban poverty catches the eye of both legislators and the popular media (Mathis, 2003). Of rural students, 35% live below the poverty level; 38% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch subsidies. In a 2012 report from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, researcher Kenneth Johnson described the economic factors that affect rural students and has the following to say about those rural areas with persistent child poverty:

By definition, persistent poverty is high levels of child poverty for at least thirty years. In all, 571 of the 706 U.S. counties with persistent child poverty (81 percent) are in rural America. More than 26 percent of the rural child population resides in these counties with persistent poverty. This compares with just 12

percent of urban children. The recession has only worsened this situation with the proportion of children in poverty rising in these already disadvantaged counties...The social and economic isolation fostered by distance and limited transportation that many of the rural poor face are among the reasons why welfare reform, expansion of government health insurance, and education reforms affect children differently in rural areas than in cities and suburbs. In the face of government spending cutbacks and two decades of shifting policy-making responsibility from the federal to state and local governments, it is imperative that policymakers be cognizant of the continuing vulnerability of the rural child population. (Johnson, 2012, p. 8)

Rural school challenges. Rural schools get little attention in the federal spotlight (Bryant, 2010) compared to their urban counterparts; subsequently far more research has been conducted on urban districts and their achievement in comparison to their rural public school district counterparts. This deficit of research is behind the concerns of many advocates of rural schools. A perceived “policy tilt” toward urban funding favors education improvements that meet urban needs, but not the needs of rural districts (McNeill, 2009; Bryant, 2010) that are approximately 20% of the U.S. school age population (Lockette, 2010). The challenges of less tax capacity, low salaries and geographic isolation make it difficult to attract great teachers who meet the requirements of “highly qualified” as required by the federal government as well as excellent leaders and principals (Mathis, 2010). The forced solutions of No Child Left Behind, the U.S. federal mandate for accountability in student learning, have affected specific funding for students who are disadvantaged and live rurally (this funding is referred to as Title 1 funding). “One-size-fits-all standardization forces rural districts to implement policies ill-suited for their communities” (Bryant, 2010, p. 56).

Rural districts must make difficult choices between facilities and qualified teachers and compliance with government regulations (Lockette, 2010). There is a

“willful ignorance – particularly on the part of the federal government – of the conditions in rural areas and schools. The challenges of rural schools seem to always be overshadowed by a focus on urban districts” (Bryant, 2010, p. 55). “The point of conflict is where the softly measured values of community, affiliation and socialization collide with state budget makers and economic calculations of fiscal efficiency” (Mathis, 2003, p. 4).

Sense of community. In answer to the rural challenges, many school districts are choosing to consolidate and join forces with surrounding remote districts in an effort to share limited resources (Lockette, 2010; Mathis, 2003; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005). While supposedly benefitting from an “economies of scale” approach, consolidation can threaten the educational and social environment of rural communities (Bryant, 2010). Purcell & Shackelford (2005) also found in their research that “a rural farming community may lose much of its social cohesiveness that was focused on family based vocational agricultural production” (p. 2) when schools are consolidated and students are further from their local community and family. Schools can be a vital part of the fragile rural community infrastructure.

Rural charter schools. North Shore Community School currently is one of 146 operating charter schools serving 39,129 students in the state of Minnesota. In 1991, Minnesota was the first state in the United States to enact a charter school law and pave the way for innovation across the country (Reichgott-Junge, 2012). The subsequent rewrite of the law in 2009 earned it the Top State Charter School Law by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2009, 2010) and the state has remained in the top

two positions in the rankings since that time. While models differ across the country, Minnesota is one of 21 states where law dictates that schools run as fiscally and legally autonomous schools with independent public charter school boards, operating as a self-contained “school district” (MN Statute 124D.10).

Of the nation’s charter schools, approximately 20% operate in rural and small towns (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010). In the state of Minnesota, this number swells to 55% of charter schools that operate outside of the metropolitan area of St. Paul and Minneapolis. While policy and expectations are high, these rural charter schools generally possess different characteristics from their suburban and urban counterparts; quite like rural public schools do. Rural charter schools have been slower to gain momentum as a rural option. Rural charters can be seen negatively if opened as competition to the school district, drawing upon a limited student population. More rural charters are opening as a replacement option when a school district is forced to close or consolidate a school (Courrege, 2012; Richard, 2004). Those that do open as an alternative have been creative in establishing themselves. One school filled three empty store fronts on main street and contracted with the local café to feed the students who came from nine surrounding school districts (Thomas & Borwege, 1996).

Due to the autonomy awarded to charter schools in general, rural charter schools have the opportunity to engage creatively with their local community by integrating programming that may not fit into the typical school district curriculum. Communities, therefore, have more freedom to shape the way their children are educated (NAPCS, 2012).

Culture

The culture of an organization develops over time in a way that allows “life to become predictable and manageable” to the actors within it (Schein, 2009). Schein suggested that the deep assumptions held within each participant creates a stability in three areas: External Survival Issues, Internal Integration Issues, and Deeper Underlying Assumptions. External Survival Issues include: (a) mission, strategy, goals. (b) structures, systems and processes, (c) error detection and correction. Internal Integration Issues include: (a) common language and concepts, (b) group boundaries and identity, (c) nature of authority and relationships, and (d) allocation of reward and status. Deeper Underlying Assumptions may include: (a) human relationships to nature, (b) the nature of reality and truth, (c) the nature of human nature, (d) the nature of human relationships, (e) the nature of time and space, and (f) the unknowable and uncontrollable. “It is tempting to say that culture is just the way we do things around here” (Schein, 1999). The explicit forms of culture that we see only touch the surface and do not describe the deeper layers that shape culture.

The essence of culture is then the jointly learned values and beliefs that work so well that they become taken for granted and non-negotiable. At this point, they come to function more as tacit assumptions that become shared and taken for granted as the organization continued to be successful. It is important to remember that these assumptions resulted from a joint learning process (Schein, 2009, p. 26).

Deal & Peterson (2009) described culture as a “shared webbing of informal folkways and traditions that infuse work with meaning, passion, and purpose.” This definition is noticeably more superficial than Schein, but their efforts are to help explain culture in ways that can be measured and altered. These explicit elements are certainly a

binding element and without them, “any organization would become a confusing cacophony of actions” (p.91) that would not make sense or have meaning to those within it.

Within the organizations, Deal & Peterson (2009) described cultural roles that develop including the “priests and priestesses” who guard the sacred values and beliefs, informing newcomers and reminding those who will listen; there are the “heroes and heroines” who serve as exemplars for the others; and there are the “spies” who pass intelligence and opinions covertly in an effort to control direction. Schools, they added, have additional, unique roles: “navigators” help to safely steer in unknown territory; “nodes” are formal and informal information carriers; “compasses” who hold the deeper purposes and point to True North when others become distracted; “explorers and pioneers” do not mind the risk and uncertainty of innovation and the latest research and developments; and those who dwell in the philosophical and spiritual realm of the work, referred to as “spirit guides.” The challenge in school culture is that not only is there the culture of the internal actors, but serving in the public realm invites that interpretations and perceptions of that culture from external audiences. “Knitting the elements of culture [of schools] into an artistic tapestry is like creating a word from the letters of the alphabet or string words together to create a sentence” (p.129).

Ethnography in Education

“Ethnographic work is not always orderly. It involves serendipity, creativity, being in the right place at the right or wrong time, a lot of hard work, and old fashioned luck” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 2). *Ethnography* literally means writing about nations, tribes,

or people. As an exploratory methodology, ethnography approaches research with an inductive lens intended to generate more hypotheses rather than strict findings. The plan is to collect, analyze, reanalyze, and collect more in a holistic effort. Fetterman (2010) stated that success depends on how the participants (natives) see the accuracy of the information. This is called emic view and is the insider perspective in ethnography and one that is highly reliant upon the indoctrination of the culture. The etic view is that of the observer, one that is considered more neutral. It is important to describe both in as much richness and detail as possible. “The longer an individual stays in a community, building a rapport, and the deeper the probe into individual lives, the greater the probability of his or her learning about the sacred, subtle, elements of the culture” (p. 16).

Educational ethnographer Henry Wolcott (1999) explained that integration is critical – it is important to strive for rich detail not endless detail.

The underlying purpose of ethnographic research is to describe what the people in some particular place or status ordinarily do, and the meanings they ascribe to what they do, under ordinary or particular circumstances, presenting that description in a manner that draws attention to regularities that implicate cultural process. (p. 73)

Much of the ethnographic research on schools that populates the academic journals and education magazines tends to be superficial, seeking replicable results.

Wolcott (1997) in his article “Ethnographic Research in Education” stated that, “We have not yet found or created a strong constituency of informed consumers who have realistic expectations about ethnographic research in education” (p.167). In a field that is looking for the quick, replicable answers to school and student success, the holistic approach of

ethnography reveals elements that are complex and cannot necessarily be “boxed up” and sold as a remedy for what ails education.

It is easy to consider school as a small community, and perhaps tempting to think of it as holographic of the larger community. Erickson (1984) expressed that only partial transmission of the larger community culture can occur in the school. A school contains only some of the community members, who gather for limited amounts of time, for only half of the days of the year. One of the most poignant gems of advice from Erickson is for the researcher to constantly ask the question, “Why is this _____ (act, person, status, concept) the way it is and not different?”

Chapter Summary

This chapter covered the preliminary literature that I found to better prepare myself for the research. The areas explored included rural schools, charter schools, culture, and the methodology of ethnographic research in education.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

In honoring the deep story-rich culture of North Shore Community School and my personal interest in the culture and environment of organizations, it is more important to share as comprehensive a view as possible, rather than to limit my discoveries to simple cause and effect relationships or any method that would shape the study to my own assumptions. The choice of ethnography allows the research participants to define what their experience and culture means to *them*. (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

The methods and paradigm of ethnography suit the research participants and community of North Shore Community School well. By directly participating, I served not as a detached observer in a case study, but as one who is interested in understanding what the participants find meaningful and important (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This “meaning making” is central to this social constructivist approach. This is about a community; the best method to understand it is to become a participant within its culture. Schein (2010) suggested that as a participant researcher, one must carefully consider what is genuinely being given back to the organization through symbolic or actual contribution. “The important point is to approach the organization with the intention of helping, not just gathering data” (p. 184).

Spindler (1982) offered helpful criteria in educational ethnographic research design including the contextualization of observation and interviews, emergent hypotheses and questions, a number of different data collection forms, stating explicitly

what is implicit to study participants, disturb the setting as little as possible, and “promoting cultural information in its most heuristic, natural form” (p. 89).

Site

North Shore Community School is located in Duluth Township, MN, a rural community between Duluth and Two Harbors with a population of 1,941 people occupying 750 homes as of the 2010 U.S. Census. The area is known for its agriculture, commercial fishing, and tourism industry along the north shore of Lake Superior. In 1961, the school opened as North Shore Elementary School, run by the county board of St. Louis County, Minnesota. In 1974, the school was required to join the Lake Superior School District #381 to serve as the easternmost of their three elementary schools. In 2001, it was announced that the district would be closing the school as a cost saving measure in the geographically diverse district. Families in the surrounding communities of Duluth Township, Clover Valley, Knife River and the French River area on the north shore of Lake Superior sought a one year grace period to charter a community school. After securing sponsorship from their environmental learning partner, Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, they received approval from the Minnesota State Department of Education to open North Shore Community School in the fall of 2002 as a vibrant part of the community. The school offers grades Kindergarten through sixth to students in the immediate community and those who open enroll from the surrounding areas. Once the students “graduate” from sixth grade, most attend the Lake Superior School District #381 in Two Harbors. The building is currently owned by Duluth Township and is leased to the school. Outside of the school day, the building serves as

the Community Center for the Township with an offering of Community Education courses and activities, a new soccer field, nature trail, facility rental for the community, and adjacent hockey and pleasure skating rink complete with warming house.

My interest for possible research began in casual conversations with the school board, director, and teachers of the school while I was engaged in strategic planning work with the school in 2011. The language and behaviors of the adults affiliated with the school reflected a passion for the way they deliver education to the students of their community and beyond. This initial introduction encouraged me to pursue the possibility of a full ethnographic study.

Participant Selection

The design of the research was to observe and interview adults who were directly related to the work of the school and/or involved in the Community Center aspect of the building. Interviews were conducted with 22 adults; the majority of interviewees fulfilled multiple roles with the school including employees, current or former board members, volunteers, parents or grandparents of current or former students, and community members.

Human Protection

It was of the utmost importance to provide study participants with the highest ethical and professional standards and assurances in this research. Site permission was given by the North Shore Community School board of education (represented by their school board Chair) and the school's director. No "vulnerable" individuals were participants in this study as defined by IRB guidelines. The research throughout this

study was focused solely on the adults directly affiliated with North Shore Community School. Students (children) were not interviewed and any interactions have been referenced superficially in the researcher's notes.

Study participants were initially made aware of the process through information that I provided in an email letter that the school secretary sent out to the full list of staff. I had the opportunity to address employed staff at a monthly staff meeting to describe the study and answer their questions. The original email asked people to reply to me directly at my personal email if they desired. In each interview, I asked the participants to suggest people who they felt would be valuable resources to my data collection. As the observation period ended, it was necessary to solicit participants through two reminder emails that were sent to everyone as well as through direct conversations with potential participants.

Every participant interviewed submitted a signed Consent Form and the interviews began with a discussion of Informed Consent demonstrating that the participant fully understood the nature of the research and the confidentiality assured. The interviews were all conducted with individuals in a private area in the school building or off site at a restaurant or coffee shop according to their preference. The interviews were recorded on a password protected digital recorder and downloaded to a password protected laptop at the end of each day's interviews. Notes were taken in a notebook kept in my possession and also on a password protected iPad. All paper notes were secured in a locked file drawer in my home office desk.

The moral principles guiding the IRB process were upheld throughout this process including: (a) Respect for Persons: human participants must be treated as autonomous and able to make responsible choices. This principle leads to the requirement of informed voluntary consent; (b) Beneficence: participants must be protected from harm and their wellbeing must be secured. This principle leads to the requirement that the benefits to participants or to humanity generally must be judged to outweigh the risks to participants; and (c) Justice: the risks and benefits of research must be distributed fairly without creating differences in treatment for ethnic, racial, religious, sexual or age-defined classes. This principle leads to the requirement that investigators take care not to exploit *special classes of persons* less able to refuse participation in research.

Methods of Data Collection

Data collection occurred through the following avenues and in this order.

Internal documents. Analysis of the school's documents and artifacts including newsletters, their collaboratively written history book, *Roots in the Past, Seeds for the Future*, parent communication, school board minutes, website, and other written or electronic communication kept within the school's records.

External documents. Analysis of the Duluth Township Newsletters, articles from local papers, historical narratives and the Master's Thesis of Ms. Vicki Nelson who worked closely with the school and township at the time of the chartering.

Observation. Time spent in direct observation of the environment, including staff meetings, family and community events, the school day, the staff lunch room, school board meetings and other social activities. As a participant observer, I sought to identify

the explicit language and actions evident within the interactions between those involved in the day-to-day work of the school.

Focused interviews. Focused interviews with 22 adults who work and volunteer at the school and community center. All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed electronically using voice recognition software. The interviews had some very general questions that nearly every participant answered, but I did not limit our discussions to those. When curious, I asked about a specific detail that they mentioned and let them shape the conversation. The questions that were common to all of the interviews were:

- Could you describe for me what you understand about my research and the confidentiality of our interview (Informed Consent)
- Tell me about your role at North Shore Community School and how you got involved.
- Describe for me the groups of adults within the school.
- What are some of the spoken and unspoken elements of NSCS that you (or new people if the participant had been at the school since before 2002) learned immediately? What did you (or new people) find out after a while?
- On the front display case of the school is the phrase, “We are of this place, not just from it.” How do you interpret that school saying?
- Are there others who you believe it would be important for me to talk to?

Personal journal. While personal notes and perceptions may be recorded during observations and interviews, a separate personal journal served as a tool for me to pursue

and interpret the possible meaning of what I had seen and heard. Journaling is a method that I use regularly in my personal life and professional work; it is a useful tool for assessing my experience and differentiating my response to the data from the data. The reflections from my journal are interwoven into the observation portion of the findings.

Method of Reporting and Analysis

Reporting. The observation portion of the findings is direct reporting of my experiences, reflections, and discoveries as a researcher within the culture of the school. Indicative of the nature of observation, many of the discoveries are at the artifact level of the culture and serve to vividly illustrate the environment. While some observations may begin to reveal some of the most superficial and obvious of espoused beliefs and values, I will directly address those in the analysis.

Analysis. For the analysis, I began with the structure of the three layers of Schein's (1999) culture: (a) artifacts, (b) espoused beliefs and values, and (c) basic underlying assumptions. The first portion of observation was to collect the outermost layer of culture, the artifacts. Documents from the school, the environment of the building and property, and my casual conversations raised topics and questions that I presented to those who volunteered to be interviewed. The interviews provided more detail to the artifacts and increased my understanding of the deeper layers of culture. More importantly, they yielded themes that described the espoused beliefs and values; these themes were emergent and not prescribed beyond the questions that were referenced in Data Collection. I relayed the shared themes and individual comments that

illustrated multiple perspectives in preparation for showing alignment or misalignment to the reality of how the school operates and what the groups of adults hold sacred.

The analysis also served to reveal some of the basic underlying assumptions shared by the adults in the culture; these are the unquestioned elements that are “so taken for granted that you find little variation within a social unit. This degree of consensus results from repeated success in implementing certain beliefs and values” (Schein, 2010). The basic underlying assumptions create stability for the culture and questioning their premise is perplexing to the participants and creates anxiety.

In the final steps of analysis, I pondered on how each of the tacit underlying assumptions have been reinforced or challenged over the years. To explain it, I have utilized Schein’s cultural model, the Corporate Lifecycle model of Adizes, and the Learning Organization context of Argyris.

Delimitations

The delimitations of the study are the study site and participants. North Shore Community School’s unique characteristics and the history of rural Duluth Township set specific boundaries of the study and the pool of participants that are described in the research findings. Participants are limited to those individuals with a direct tie to the school, through their employment or choice of regular involvement. By studying only the culture as defined by adults, the children’s experiences are not taken into account and families do not have a voice in the study unless they are directly involved in activities within the building.

Chapter Summary

This chapter set the process and structures for the research including background of the site, the people who will be invited to participate, and the methods for collecting and analyzing the data. The groundwork laid by the considerations above allowed for a smooth transition into the role of researcher and participant through observation and interviews on site.

Chapter 4

Findings

I chose to present this chapter's findings in two distinct ways. The observation portion of my research is presented as an etic (external observer) narrative of my day-by-day process of learning more about North Shore Community School. Most obvious in this approach are the immediate superficial observations of the artifacts of the culture, deepened daily with casual conversation, participation and my own reflection. I entered into this research seeing the school from the perspective of an hired consultant, replete with knowledge of the school's planning process, yet limited by my perspective as an outsider. Beginning with my first day, I carefully observed the environment and the interactions of the participants in their daily routine and activities; a markedly different perspective from one who comes in simply to lead clients through a process.

The second portion of my study, conducted as interviews, puts the initial considerations into an emic (insider) context of meaning and assumptions held by those who have shaped the culture of the school. Through the interviews, I learned more about the artifacts, but more importantly, the conversations expanded upon the espoused values and beliefs held by those with whom I spoke. I conclude my findings with the basic underlying assumptions that are taken for granted and how they tacitly guide the culture, behaviors and values of the group at large.

Observation Findings

September 28, 2012. The scene changed quickly as I left Two Harbors, Minnesota on Highway 61. I made the decision to motor along the Scenic Drive instead of jump on the expressway. They parallel each other and, while both would get me to the same place, I found myself choosing the slower one along the shoreline with stops off the shoulder that beckon travelers to pull over and watch the rolling water of Lake Superior, even if for just a few minutes.

I contemplated this first day of embarking on the research. I knew some of the school's way of working through the strategic planning I did with my company – it seemed to be one of inclusion and I could not help but be entranced with the school and the people committed to it. After all, I enjoyed it enough to have it be the focus of this intense time; yet, I knew that it would be important to set aside my own assumptions to discover theirs.

The houses on that scenic stretch looked out over the road to the dark rocks and waves beyond. Some were newer and ornate, built with large logs, carvings, and picture windows, some were older and in need of a new roof or a couple more matching pieces of siding. Surprisingly, many were for sale and a part of me wanted to abandon the hum of my suburban life to attain some dream of quiet and the rhythmic cycles of seasons, weather and waves.

After fifteen minutes, I came upon Ryan Road and took a right turn away from the Lake. I headed up the hill, S-curved over the rocky French River riverbed, and rose up from the woods with Lake Superior in my rearview mirror. The road cut through

farmland with the occasional dip, rise, and pothole. Houses sparingly dotted the way. Some appeared lived in and kept up well, some were abandoned and looked to have been that way for a while. I passed the Apostolic Lutheran church on my left; in the times that I spent here, I have only seen the gates open once. Curious, I once sought out a satellite image of the area and it showed a full parking lot on what was apparently a worship day.

North Shore Community School's building was on the right marked by a sign constructed the year it shifted to a charter school. According to the Duluth Township newsletters that I read through in preparation for my research, the wood and stonework was completed by local craftspeople; the sign and logo designed by another local artisan. The school building looked typical of those built in the early '60s. It was one story with large, multi-paned windows that started about three feet from the ground; blue tiles brought color to the exterior. Yet, there were aspects that differentiated it from other schools: large solar panels angled up from the roof above the bank of cafeteria windows and next to them, wind gauges and antennae of the school's weather station gathered data broadcast on the flat screen computer monitor in the foyer.

According to what I had read, the parking lot was expanded last year and I pulled into a far parking space on the new gravel section in order to leave easier access for the people coming later that day. It would be a busy day at the school, one reason why I chose that day as the kick-off to my work. The day's events on the website calendar were confirmed through email with the director, it was the annual Grandparents' Day in the morning and Community Barbecue that evening.

It was hard for me to suppress a smile when approaching the school and I walked in to the front doors with the same anticipation (and perhaps trepidation) as a student on the first day of the school year. In between the outside doors and the set of inside doors that led into the foyer, I noted a variety of recycling efforts that were stationed there. Glossy paper (magazines and catalogues), ink cartridges, and cell phone recycling helped as a fundraiser. A clothes rack had lost and found jackets hanging from hangers, a perfect spot for parents to see a child's forgotten items. I turned into the office and was greeted by the familiar faces from the strategic planning process and enjoyed a warm, welcoming hug from a bubbly staff member. The usual quiet time of the day when students retire to their classrooms for the morning opening was broken by the excitement of the day and bursts of preparation for the guests arriving. My next hour was a mixture of offering help and not wanting to burden them with my arrival.

One-by-one, the cafeteria filled with the students' grandparents as they filed in to receive their cup of complimentary coffee. Fifth grade students were recruited to serve, a challenge as they discovered how much coffee a cup can hold; the floor smeared with the spills from their learning. The line for expectant coffee drinkers headed out the door and into the foyer, where the crisp fall air has scented the entryway.

The cafeteria was soon filled with grandparents who had to awkwardly maneuver their legs over the lunch table benches. The din of discussion was punctuated by greetings among acquaintances who evidently had not seen each other in a while. My drive up to the school with the few homesteads visible contrasted the full parking lot; I

did not imagine that this many people lived nearby. Once finished with coffee they dispersed into the classrooms of their grandchildren.

I walked through the building quite a bit that morning, re-familiarizing myself with the hallways, classrooms, library (with its temporarily assembled book fair) and peeked in on the few teachers who I remembered most easily. I discovered that it was important to come up with a 30-second explanation of my new role as researcher as I greeted people in passing.

I departed from the bustling building and headed outdoors. The colors of the trees were changing and the school's nature trail beckoned me to investigate the outdoor classrooms that I had heard about in the strategic planning process. I walked first to the greenhouse that stood beyond the windows of the library and in my path out to the woods. Small plants were growing in the filtered morning sun designated with classroom names and labeling that indicated students were observing and comparing different growing conditions.

I exited and headed across the field to the trees beyond. The trail was marked by a sign, Phil Carlson Trail, a name I did not yet recognize, and I ventured in. The path was marked with wood chips covered in the few colorful leaves that had already dropped from the trees. It was not far before I came upon a classroom shelter. The three sided log structure had benches protected under the shingled roof and a blackboard on one of the short walls. I thought how fun it would be to spend time out here as a child and wondered how often it was utilized. I did not go much farther that day; I suppose the city girl in me found it intimidating to walk into unknown areas. I took a few pictures and headed back

to the school, hoping that this lone woman walking across the field would not disrupt the classrooms that looked out that direction.

On that day of firsts, I found myself feeling awkward and out of place. Certainly, it was not as a result of anyone's reception, but in my own rumination about fulfilling the role of participant researcher. Was I seen as an intruder? Would I really be able to observe them and interview them as an outsider? How would I get involved? Do I hang out in the staff lunch room during their mealtime - was that even where they eat? Where are other gathering places? Was there a sense that I was there to check up on whether or not the strategic plan was being implemented?

As I approached the front door, a staff member was outside with a smile, taking a panoramic photo of the full parking lot to show those who did not have the view from their classrooms. I went in and took a metal chair in the far back corner of the gym and waited for the people to begin filling in for the Grandparents' Day program. The hundreds of chairs faced the risers up front, on the back of each was stenciled "North Shore School." I was greeted by one of the teachers whom I had met in the planning process. She explained that she had been challenged to use some new techniques in her Physical Education classes, bringing the kids out for unstructured play in the woods. She provided ropes and buckets and charged them with using their imagination for the ways they could play with them. As we talked, a girl was assisting her in the equipment room. I learned that the local school district where most kids go to after North Shore Community School has only a four day school week giving the opportunity for some of the "graduates" come back on Fridays to volunteer.

Shortly after our conversation, the grandparents left their grandchildren's classrooms and found seats in the gymnasium. Again, it was remarkable the number of people attending and as the group quieted down, the children entered grade by grade to perform. I watched the family members straighten up and wave exuberantly as, I presumed, their grandchild entered. Grade by grade the children performed sweet songs about grandparents and love. The obligatory joker fell off the back of the risers and the crowd collectively laughed in relief as he jumped back up to his perch with a smile on his face. While the younger ages captivated the audience with song, the last group of the oldest students impressed me with their group recitation of a lengthy poem that they had been memorizing in conjunction with their study of the indigenous people of the area. The children went back to their classrooms and the grandparents laughed and spilled out from the building.

As the school day came to a close, the next event's preparations began. There was a buzz of children despite the busses' departures. Children continued to mill about, teachers checked in with each other in the hallway about curriculum or behavioral issues that occurred that day. Many of the teachers seemed to have kids in the school and they followed their teacher-mothers back to classrooms. Parents walked through the school with their children.

I was told that the Community Barbecue was a tradition that hearkened back to before North Shore was a charter school. While no one I immediately asked could remember how far back, it was smiled off more than once with a comment to the effect, "We have been doing this forever." Their preparation was evidence that was the case.

Two local churches had loaned the school numerous fold-up dining tables. As we set them up outside, we had to look and make sure from which church the table came because Church A had a stipulation that the tables from their congregation were not to go on the grass. I helped to bring out the metal “North Shore School” chairs from the gym and put the ones we did not use on the large wheeled carts. Food distribution tables were set up in a prescribed in a way to accommodate the huge lines of people that were expected.

The 65 degree autumn evening was a beautiful backdrop as the families emptied from their cars and kids from the few homes nearby rode their bikes into the parking lot. I recognized some of the grandparents that I had seen earlier that day; the staff that attended were either socializing with students and families or assisting in the setup of enough food to feed the anticipated 600 people.

The hamburgers and hotdogs were cooked on a huge grill and brought over to the plastic gloved servers armed with tongs from the cafeteria. The buns were all donated from a grocery store “in town” (I forgot to ask if town was Duluth or Two Harbors). Piles of packaged cookies were on the next table and the last table was the drink table. All of the cups had been counted out, as the left over number told them how many people came through the serving line.

The queue of people was continuously 150 people long at the high point of serving. I watched the families waiting and tried to identify where one ended and another began. The variety of people was remarkable. There were those who seemed to not be from around there, and those who clearly had come from a day’s work on their local

farms. There were families of three people and families of seven or more (though they were harder to keep track of once they exited their vans). Despite the physical characteristics that marked their lives as considerably different, they all talked and laughed during the very long wait to snake up to the serving tables.

At one point, I spotted the school board chair serving food and offered to relieve her of her duty so she could talk to others. I donned a pair of plastic gloves and had a chance to look into the faces of the families coming through the line. From my new perspective, I noticed a bucket that had been hidden by bodies from my earlier perch. It was an overflowing donation jar. In answer to my question, I was told the event was a fundraiser and grateful people took care to generously show their appreciation.

As the seconds were served and the pace slowed, people visited and I was able to talk with some of the staff I remembered that I did not connect with during the day. There were so many kids who continued to run around and excitedly pointing out their teachers to their parents. North Shore graduates now in high school talked with their friends and the staff they remembered from their years there. Unfortunately, I had to get on the road before the fun was complete to make the three hour drive home.

October 4, 2012. The morning was a beautiful one, but the winds changed and a threat of winter weather was reported. The trees were in their full fall color with the smaller leaves easily carried from their branches to the road and swept in a rotating flurry when I drove to the school.

I arrived after the students were settled into their classrooms for the day and entered the front office. Apparently, it was another day of celebration and the school

secretary approached me with a green ribbon, told me to hold out my arm, and tied it around my wrist. The school was celebrating the U.S. Department of Education's Green Ribbon Award that the school received over the summer. An assembly was planned later in the day for the students.

I found myself walking around the building wondering what to do. Where would I observe people? What was I looking for? Would I be able to describe it well? The awkward feeling of the first day continued as I put myself in the shoes of the people with whom I was interacting. How would I feel if there was a woman that I did not know very well lurking around my school watching me and potentially listening in on conversations? It was a delicate balance between moving around enough to give people space, yet be with them enough to truly observe them. I was also conscious of my note taking. Scribbling things down in the midst of an observation would construe my work as a passive researcher, not the participant researcher who must strive for the trust of those in the culture.

There were three initial perches where I spent the morning: the front office, where I was able to have lively conversations with the school secretary and others who came through; the staff lunch room, behind the main office where there was usually a pot of coffee going; and, the library where I could sit at a table in the corner and look through documents or pause to write down my thoughts.

I sat down in the staff lunch room from 10:30 to 11:40. Waves of staff moved through for what seemed to be half hour breaks. I did not know them well enough yet to determine if they were staff, teachers, paraprofessionals, substitutes, or volunteers. While

people dined at the tables, others wound their way busily through the room to the copy room attached. Conversations shifted quickly as people had to return to work and more came in to occupy their warm chairs. I struck up a conversation with two teachers who recommended a second hand store where I could purchase a warmer jacket than the one I brought along. It was considerably colder along the north shore of Lake Superior than it was in St. Paul.

I was surprised by a conversation that started with two young female teachers talking about an elk recipe. Clearly, my urban assumptions were challenged when their conversation shifted to hunting, camouflage and the season that the two of them had so far. The talk of deer in the lunch room turned to a NSCS graduate who was jogging with her teammates during soccer practice at the high school when a deer ran out from the woods, hit her and ran off! The running joke was that she should accompany some of the deer hunters since she seems to have a knack for attracting the elusive game.

Other conversations rolled through as people talked about mutual friends, students who had either presented a behavioral challenge or a laughable comment, and a few people's discontent with something that was happening in the special education department. I wondered if I would hear more about that as the days progressed.

I mentioned to someone that I had heard of a book called *Roots in the Past – Seeds for the Future: The Heritage and History of Clover Valley, French River, and Surrounding Communities* and I asked if she knew where I might be able to find one. She knew that the school had a classroom set or two of them and directed me to the Library. The librarian explained that the copies were in the 5th and 6th grade classroom for their

study of the indigenous people of the area. The teacher gladly handed a copy over for me to look through and I was thrilled to see it filled with the history and photographs of the people and land. She explained that the students use it as a text in nearly every grade and encouraged me to read through it. I had another conversation shortly after when I had quickly described why I was there and it was recommended I talk to certain “historians” about the school and the area.

I also met a legendary volunteer (I will call her Ellen) at the school. I had been told about her in last year’s strategic planning and was honored to meet her in person. She is 93 and has been involved with the school in one capacity or another since the building first opened in 1962 and with the neighborhood school before that time. I understand that she volunteers a couple of times a week to work with kids who are behind or having troubles with their reading. I hoped that I would get a chance to talk to her and hear more about her from others in the building.

Another annual tradition occurred that day. The kindergartners made and baked apple pies. Volunteers came to assist the kids in peeling the apples and filling the crusts. It was not until later in the day after all the lunches had been served to the students that the pies could be baked in the school ovens. Once they were, the whole school smelled wonderfully. The pies were served to the kindergartners and one by one the tins made their way back to the staff lunch room; one was labeled gluten free. By 3:00 pm there were six assorted pie tins with slices that combined could make two full pies and the teachers filed through the staff lunch room grabbing a slice with a dollop of vanilla ice

cream. Some passed up the offer, laughing that they were not sure they wanted to eat something that kindergartners had made.

After asking a few times if I could store my bag and jacket behind the desk in the front office, I was asked if I would like a locker. The idea was proposed by the business manager and she walked me out to locker number 17 which was open for my use. I noticed at the end of the day that the lockers alongside mine near the front foyer held the jackets and belongings of the school's paraprofessionals. As small a gesture as the locker may have been, I smiled about it later, feeling one degree closer to being a part of the school.

The afternoon assembly was in the gymnasium. In contrast to the chairs for Grandparents' Day, the seating was delineated by orange cones on the floor with classroom signs and a teacher close by. Other adults had stopped in and stood along the back wall, some with younger children in their arms. The assembly went through the environmental, nutritional, and fitness initiatives that the school did and wrapped up with the Green Ribbon Award. Such a prestigious award needed a little extra description for those too young to recognize the magnitude of the distinction. Afterward, the award was added to the display case in the front foyer that contained the weather station monitor.

As I wrapped up the day there, I wondered about the school's director whom I had gotten to know quite well over the span of the strategic planning. Her encouragement had been integral to pursuing the board's approval to do my research at North Shore. I missed her the previous Friday and did not see her on this second day. I had not heard anything about her absence in the conversations that I have been around and did not ask.

That evening, I sat down with the *Roots in the Past – Seeds for the Future* book. It was published in 2000 by the Clover/French River Community History Committee and North Shore Elementary School (its name before it was chartered). The dedication in the front is “For all the people who have made this community and this land their home for the last 10,000 years.” In the preface of the book, Dr. David Smith, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota Duluth, wrote about the sense of community in the area, but one paragraph commanded my attention as I read specifically about the school.

But the North Shore Elementary School, which replaced the older Bloomingdale School that served the community for 40 years, has remained a powerful focus of people’s interest and a vital locus for community activities. In spite of all the many forces in modern life that cause community to wither away, the North Shore Elementary School still serves to unify the Clover Valley community. If the school were to close, I think it will be a social disaster of incalculable proportions. Closing the school could spell the end of the community and the end of something humanly important (Smith, 2000, p.9).

I continued reading well into the night, captivated by the sections of the book, including Our History, Our Schools, Our Heritage, and Our Landmarks, the facts and names of which I hoped to be able to retain and understand better.

October 5, 2012. It was pleasant to return for another day with everyone; my drive to the school was that much more interesting as I recognized the names of the roads from some of the families I had read about the night before.

Upon greeting people in the hallways as the day began, I had, apparently, made contact with enough people to warrant a warmer welcome. The “Hellos” were less business-like and softened with eye contact and a smile. My assumption was that people I did not know as well from my work at the school had made the connection between the

email preceding the research and my presence. When I spoke with the teaching and learning specialist, she invited me to address everyone at the staff meeting that afternoon on their early release day; she could give me about 15 minutes because, in her words, it was going to be a big day. Not quite sure what that meant, I looked forward to the chance to do an informal “Informed Consent” discussion and spent a bit of time in the library in order to put the critical points together.

I also took the opportunity to walk around the inside of the building and make notes about the artifacts that told some of the school’s story. I began in the sunlit foyer. Along with the display case that housed the weather monitor was another case surrounded by terra cotta tiles created by students back when the school was a district school. Each vignette was a collection of individual tiles, carved with pictures to tell a story of the area. One collection showed the wildlife of the area, another showed the local history. The display case held the prizes for the latest fundraiser and on the glass in sticker letters were the words, “We are of this place, not just from it.” I pulled the *Roots in the Past – Seeds for the Future* book from my bag recalling the phrase and found it on the back cover as well.

The gym and cafeteria are immediately off of the front entry. The cafeteria, quiet after the breakfast service, had its kitchen at the far end. I could see the preparations for lunch going on and I walked in to take a look around. The food service coordinator told me about the changes to the lunch menu that have taken place with new nutritional guidelines. The school also took measures to reduce waste: plates and silverware were washable, there was a bucket for garbage and one for composting the food scraps. The

kids were not only familiar with the process in the lunchroom, but the composting process afterward.

I left the cafeteria to observe the gym class. Careful to not disrupt the activity, I looked in from the windows. One long wall of the gym was covered by a rock wall with small children skillfully hanging on to the steps and hand holds that jutted from it. Some children had carpet squares and what appeared to be ski poles and slid along the floor as if cross country skiing. More children occupied the middle of the gym, and pushed themselves around on rolling miniature dolly-like contraptions. The whistle blew, and they put away their activities and lined up at the door. Their teacher greeted them and the next class came down the hall and waited patiently for them to exit. One child leaving leaned in to another who was arriving and said, “It’s rock climbing and kayak day!” This created quite a stir of excitement among the other children.

I turned from the gym and walked down the hall toward the classrooms. Cork bulletin boards lined the hallway to my right. The first one was titled “North Shore in the News” and was covered with a collection of articles from local papers highlighting the stories and achievements of community members, NSCS graduates, current students, and staff. Each classroom along the hall had a display case with assorted items, some highlighting the “Star Student” of the day, some with projects and information about nutrition or wildlife. I turned and went out the doors and up the ramp of the portable classrooms. The 5th and 6th grade students spend time moving between the classrooms to acclimate them to the secondary school model. Back inside, I headed to the staff lunch room.

Except for the gurgle and hiss of the coffee maker, there was little happening in the room. The counter had a dish rack with numerous coffee mugs and plates propped against the others drying. Also, on the counter, was the compost bucket for food and coffee grounds. The obligatory microwave ovens and refrigerator sat along the walls and two thin rectangular tables were in the middle surrounded with chairs. A corkboard was up on the wall with a request to write out a note about another staff member's good work. In a magazine sorter on the wall were samples of a couple of curricula, a book with activities, a notebook where teachers can write stories about funny things kids say, and a Duluth township newsletter. The 50th anniversary of the school was outlined in the old newsletter. The article made the point that while there was a changeover in how the school was governed during those 50 years, North Shore was considered the community's school from the time it opened to the present. I questioned the history that I was trying to piece together about the school's roots. When I asked others, they remarked they were not sure, but (again) that I should talk to "the historians."

I was hesitant to pursue people who historically were a part of the school, but who did not have a place in cultivating the current culture. I began to question the line between past and present influencers.

I walked through the door that connects to the front office and asked Heidi if there were some other newsletters that I could look through. She went to her file drawer and pulled out a thick folder containing all of the newsletters from the time the school opened as a charter school. I brought them down to the library and asked for permission to use one of the tables in the corner. The newsletter from Fall of 2002 when the school opened

as a charter, was especially poignant, a front page note from the curriculum director at the time read:

For the past two years, the community has worked with hope and perseverance to accomplish this miracle. Hope is not the same as optimism; it is the conviction to work for something because it is good, regardless of the outcome, rather than because you know at the outset that it will succeed. Perseverance is more rare and valuable than energy, talent or money, it is the courage to carry on in the face of adversity and discouragement.

I spent hours going through the consecutive newsletters. There were fundraising and volunteer requests, a request to families that might have a spinning wheel, and a contest for the largest pumpkin. There were informational stories, one of them about the moose head that was peering down from the peak of the library. Its name was Bullwinkle and it took eight slugs for a teacher's father, grandfather, and brother to bring it down. The beehive atop one of the bookcases was found in a great uncle's barn.

From the newsletters, I began to see that the school has always been the school. It perhaps did not matter that it has had a couple of transitions. It is still the school that always served the community. I wondered if perhaps it was not regarded as a "death" when it stopped being a district school and started being a charter - it was simply a new chapter in the same book.

I found out that North Shore was not a district school until 1974. It was an unorganized county school before that. According to the *Roots* book, the schools in that area rose up from the people who lived there, sometimes meeting in homes until a church could be found or a school building built. At some point the counties created county school boards to govern over the resources of rural schools.

The day was an early release for the students, meaning that the busses came around 1:00 to shuttle them home for the day and the staff has an opportunity for meetings and staff development. I understood that there would be some announcements, an activity, my chance to address everyone, and then groups would break off for their own meetings. The meeting place was the library, again under the watchful gaze of Bullwinkle and numerous other animals donated by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The tables were moved aside and chairs were set up to face the bank of windows that looked out to the greenhouse and the playground in the distance. People seemed cheerful as they entered and took seats. It was the first time that I saw the larger group together and not just lunching factions enjoying their mid-day break. We sat down and were addressed by the board vice chair in a serious tone; the director would be out for three months. He admonished the group to continue with their good work and the physical education teacher would serve as the interim director in the meantime.

I had a moment of panic with the news. The director was a big part of why my path to this research flowed so nicely. Was this unique situation for the school going to potentially taint the research as the culture may not be the status quo. I wrote down my immediate sentiments in my journal, "This is an all-around bummer."

The meeting continued with a learning style activity. Everyone spent a couple of minutes filling out an inventory of preferences; I joined in on it. Once complete, we were asked to go to the corner of the library with the appropriate sign to discuss our results. People's spirits seemed to lighten as we rose from our chairs to discover our comrades in learning. Not surprisingly, I was an abstract random and joined the others for an

entertaining discussion about our style. Once complete, everyone went through an ice cream buffet that had been set up atop some book cases. The special education teachers and paraprofessionals left for a separate meeting and the group fell to about half its size. About 15 teachers remained for my discussion about my research time with them.

I spoke and then answered a limited number of questions. “Will we get a copy?” I explained that the dissertation is a public document. “Is this tied to student achievement?” I spoke about the characteristic of an ethnographic study and its look at culture not cause and effect results. “Why did I pick North Shore?” I softened with this one. “Honestly, I fell in love with the place. You are pretty unique and so I asked the board if they would allow me to do it. Thankfully for me, the answer was yes.”

I left and spent the evening reading and looking through the school’s website. There were helpful links and good information. I looked through the staff page, attempting to match up names and positions with the faces I saw over those first three days in the building.

October 8, 2012. I arrived at the beginning of the school day as the pledge of allegiance was recited by two brave 6th graders on the public address system. I proceeded to the staff lunch room and found a seat to read the *Roots* book and enjoy a cup of coffee. Next to the coffee maker is a can with a slot cut into the lid; the words in black permanent marker beckoned those who did not donate cans of coffee to please donate money to purchase more. I donated and grabbed a mug from the cupboard. Teachers and paraprofessionals still walked quickly through the room to the copy machine, exchanging assorted greetings and quick conversations before getting back to their classrooms. Two

events monopolized the conversations that morning. A bird hit the windows in the portable and people were relieved that it fared well and flew away, according to the facilities manager who was changing the towels in the dispenser by the sink and mug cupboard. More concerning was an accident that had occurred at the intersection by the school. It did not look like anyone was injured and there was relief that it was not anyone that staff members recognized, especially a parent of one of the children who rode past on the busses.

I took a couple of minutes to visit with the physical education teacher and interim director for the next three months. She described her caution about taking the position, but her “strong maybe” was enough for the board to pursue her as a candidate. Amidst the pressure, she was thankful for the support she received since the announcement. An apple was left on her desk that morning with an accompanying note that said, “Have a great first day!” punctuated that sentiment.

The morning brought the opportunity to talk more with the school secretary. She described the time of the school’s change from district school to charter school as tension filled. The transition, from her perspective, was contentious and tensions with the school district were very high; they wanted to close the school and keep the students (and the state dollars that they brought with them) in the district. I found her story interesting because in perusing the Duluth Township newsletters, I did not discern that the transition was anything more than a challenge that progressed smoothly. She pulled down a three ring notebook of board minutes from that time and I retired to my table in the library corner to look through the documentation.

The windows above the library bookshelves along the wall peeked out over the back acreage of the school. The walls, and table tops were a sea green color and the carpet mirrored the color with a marbled design, except for a large circle of deeper green that the children sit around when it is their class's time to see the librarian and check out their books for the week. Skylights brightened the room and the overhead lights were off. From where I sat at one of the tables I saw three owls, a bald eagle, a hawk, and a moose looking over it all. A volunteer sat at another table playing a game with two young students.

The board minutes provided a timeline from the year leading up to the school's opening as a charter school. April 19, 2001 was the first board meeting that was called with volunteer, interim board members. One of their first actions approved a letter that invited the school district to be the charter school's sponsor as allowed in Minnesota law. They discussed a mission statement and agreed to continue additional sponsorship discussions with Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center should the district pass on the opportunity. A fundraising committee was suggested, a list of contacts assembled for the community, and packets of information on creating charter schools were distributed.

Subsequent meetings that spring and summer described the discussion with Duluth Township regarding the township's purchase of the school building, the current efforts at the school for fundraising for the district, and budgetary plans and start up grants. A community visioning night for gathering input was proposed to give suggestions about what the school should be.

June 27, 2001, Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center agreed to formalize the sponsorship and the curriculum and paperwork was ready to send to the state's Department of Education. The minutes from October 11th announced the letter approving the sponsorship and the permission for North Shore Community School to begin operations the following year. The email from a board member announcing it to the interim members was included in the minutes and stated "Congratulations to us all, and thanks to each of you for your hard work and perseverance. The stream always overcomes the rock; not because of hardness, but by softly persevering."

The transition began, with teachers weighing their future between district benefits and pensions and the risks associated with a new charter school. The environment and local history were declared as the school's unique focus in one of the longest entries of all the minutes. By February, 176 students had already enrolled for the coming fall. The last days were difficult as most of the teachers needed to retain positions with the district in order to continue with insurance and other benefits. The paraprofessionals stayed. Summer of 2002, the school began the hiring process with the former principal as a consultant. That summer the nature trail was completed and named after him.

My weary eyes were offset by my deep interest in those extensive records of the end of one chapter of the school and the beginning of another. I appreciated the timeline as a reference that began to clarify the questions and correct some of the inaccuracies that I had in my initial research proposal.

At lunch, I discovered that my comfort with the staff might not yet equate with their comfort with me. The situation was in no way malicious, but I perceived that I made

someone uncomfortable as she talked about how she had to go all the way to the “Cities” and was weighing the pros and cons of a hotel stay with her conversation mates. I said, "Well, you could stay with me!" which was met with a slightly startled look. Perhaps a more passive approach was more appropriate while I developed trust with everyone.

I recovered and decided to participate in a different way. I made a pot of coffee in the staff lunch room and noticed that the composting bucket was at its limit. From the look of some of its contents, it had been for a while. The lid was already off-kilter from its contents, and there was no room left for me to dispose of the old grounds, so I took it upon myself to empty it.

I figured that a composting bin was located in the greenhouse, but I sought out the environmental educator to ask about the "proper procedures." I located him in a classroom filling in for an absent teacher and interrupted long enough to get my answer. "Out in the greenhouse are two big worm bins, just put on the gloves, dig in, and dump the contents. When you are done, cover it back over and put the plastic back over the top." It seemed pretty elementary and at the time and I overlooked his comment about calling it a worm bin. I grabbed the pail and walked out to the greenhouse, assuming I was about to embark on a procedure that was similar to my compost bin at home.

The greenhouse was lovely. The bins were hard to miss, there were two large blue Rubbermaid™ containers. The thick, rubber work gloves hung above the bins. I slipped them on and felt grit in the fingertips, perhaps from the hands of students hasty to dig in. Above the bin, records were kept on a clipboard scrawled in child’s writing about where and when the last pail of compost had been buried.

This is where, if there had been a camera, someone could have had a good laugh at my expense. I pulled off the protective layers to reveal the dirt and was greeted by hundreds of fruit flies that flew up into my hair and the air around me. After exhaling abruptly to keep them from my nose, I prepared to dig in. There was a moment's pause when I looked and saw the teeming earthworms and meal worms clearly enjoying the goodies within. I wrinkled up my nose and dug deep into the goo.

My digging unearthed the most ghastly smell, but there was no going back. I hit a squishy, creamy mess of old food, opened the composting pail, and dumped its contents into the void I had created. I covered the mess over with worms and dirt and covered up the whole mess before I began to gag too violently.

I carried in the rancid smelling pail and found the facilities manager to see if he would direct me to a utility sink. After a bit of clean up, I returned the pail to its place on the counter. Adventure complete, I quietly celebrated another foray as a participant researcher.

A couple of times over the course of that day I talked with people about my research. In each of the instances, people had recommendations of specific people to whom I should talk. In some cases they were not at the school any longer either because of retirement or because they stepped away from their role. I contemplated how to incorporate those who were not members of the current groups of adults in the building. There seemed to be a close tie between the stories of the past and the school of the present.

I also made a note about the clothing. Two of my days at the school were Fridays. Those who had been dressed casually in a North Shore Community School sweatshirt or t-shirt were in sweaters and shirts. My assumption was it is a Friday tradition.

This fourth day, I still find myself feeling awkward with my choice of perches. I left the library when the children arrived so that I would not be distracting. The staff lunch room was nice for a time, but I felt awkward if I were perpetually in there. I enjoyed the front office, yet I did not want to disrupt the work of the school secretary. I sat down by the display case that said “We are of this place, not just from it” and pulled out my journal.

I thought about what that phrase might mean to people and wondered if it I should ask about it in my participant interviews. Is it that they grew up in this area and “this place” has shaped them into who they are? What about those who do not live in the immediate vicinity? I cannot help but contrast that to the messages from the suburban schools I know near my home. I considered my own teaching and parental experience with my children in their school. The values of community were relayed and state history was covered, but I had not seen a focus on the immediate land, lakes, and settlement of the specific area in which we lived. Our suburb had separate neighborhood parks, a large community center, a public library, many spiritual communities, multiple stores and restaurants, all convenient amenities that had compartmentalized our routines. In the suburb, we were part of a larger city with blurred lines between one town and the next.

In my reading that day, I learned of something so incompatible to my understanding of the area that I was dumbstruck. Approximately a mile from the school

was an abandoned installation of housings that were designed to launch missiles to intercept Soviet nuclear warheads. Not surprisingly, it was a concern when the school building was originally built in 1961. The area was closed and serves as a storage site for local businesses.

As I wrapped up what turned out to be an intensive study day, I was greeted by the food services director with an envelope. It was an invitation for a jewelry party she was having at the restaurant in Knife River. Grateful, I looked forward to the opportunity to get to know her and some others a bit better in a social setting.

October 15, 2012. I set aside the day to drive up and observe the school's board meeting. I had read through minutes of previous ones and wanted to observe the interactions of the board members and the style with which they conducted their meetings. It was also an opportunity to enjoy the company of some of the staff at the jewelry party that went on beforehand.

Happy to have been invited to a social event outside of the school day, I arrived in Knife River at 4:30 pm. This short stretch of Scenic Highway 61 and the few blocks of homes, churches, and businesses is the closest thing to a town in the immediate area. I was warmly welcomed in the back porch area of the Lighthouse at Emily's restaurant and introduced to those whom I did not know. I had read about this building in the *Roots* book. After its opening in 1929 as a general store, it has served the community as a post office, bed and breakfast, and restaurant. Framed black and white photographs on the walls depicted the history of the commercial fishing families and the boats of that trade. The group was casually sitting around, a mixture of people, all with North Shore

Community School ties. One was a former student, another was the food service coordinator who had invited me, joined by a teacher, a paraprofessional, and a retired teacher. They talked of the students and events in their lives, a pleasant conversation with laughter and stories. The jewelry was lovely and I ordered a few pieces.

After a while, I headed up to the school building approximately 10-12 minutes away. There were cars in the lot, but far fewer than the daytime numbers. I entered the foyer; the school office to my right was dark and locked, yet the cafeteria and gym were lively. The squeak of shoes on the gym floor drew me to peek in the windows where men and women were playing volleyball. The cafeteria had a group of children who looked to be completing a craft with their leader.

I headed to the library where the board meeting customarily takes place. The tables were set up in a u-shape with two rows of chairs set up for a potential audience. I was fifteen minutes early and had the opportunity to greet people as they came in. The greeting and handshakes were genuine; during the strategic planning process, I had the pleasure of getting to know the board members. While they knew that I was coming to do my research, I had only chatted with the board chair and school staff who served on the board. It was a very comfortable environment, everyone was casually dressed. A representative from Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center and I were the only audience there.

The meeting was called to order; board packets had been administered electronically to conserve paper and some members printed them in order to reference them more easily. The board's process followed a casual version of Robert's Rules,

updates and cordial discussions were given with a joke thrown in to punctuate a point. My impression was that the board enjoyed and respected each other.

The interim director spoke about the encouragement of the staff in assuming her role and the board reiterated its desire to support her. She was grateful and the discourse was one in which their tone attested to the genuine nature of their offer.

The order of business progressed to goals, policies, bylaws, and academics with questions and times of silence as everyone read the information in front of them. One point of discussion that stood out was around the state's initiative around teacher evaluation. There was a palatable frustration regarding the metropolitan schools shaping legislation that would negatively impact or not address the needs of rural schools. Another frustration was the requirement to post the minutes of committees on the webpage, apparently a mandate only for charter schools.

More information was referenced in the electronic copies of the materials, once again, accompanied by a mention about saving paper. Business discussions continued to be friendly and punctuated with laughter and some poking fun at each other. The meeting wrapped up with assorted motions and recognition of work done well by some teachers.

After the adjournment, I had a chance to visit more with the board chair. She asked how the research was going and discoveries I may have made. She asked if I would write an article that could be placed in the Duluth Township newsletter about my research (Appendix D). I gladly obliged and told her that I would have it to her in the next week. I left and drove back the three hours to my home.

October 22, 2012. For this stretch of days at the school, I rented a small, log cabin at one of the lakeside resorts. That particular two room cabin would be closed down for the winter the following week, but the gas stove and little kitchen offered a retreat for me. It sat atop a hill overlooking Lake Superior and Knife Island where the waves rolled over the dark rocks on its point.

In pondering the week ahead of me, I questioned my work and its design as I learned about some people's concerns. The special education rumblings were about changes to the requirements for delivery of services and possible insecurity of their jobs. That, coupled with the director on leave, had apparently increased tensions in the building. I was concerned about the integrity of the study when factors had changed that certainly could affect the "normal" culture. I spoke with my dissertation chair over the phone about my concerns. Was I really measuring the culture if there are temporary things that might impact the way people are making meaning of their culture? Her perspective was appreciated; though there were circumstances that may be visible in the outer layers of the culture, the circumstances may make the underlying assumptions more obvious: they may be revealed through the tensions that the uncertainty had caused and drive people's reactions to what had happened. For better or for worse, what the people hold as shared assumptions may be revealed during this time of doubt and change. I wondered what this research would yield. Perhaps it would reveal what knits the community together. Was there concern among people because of the threat of change, or the concern that change altered that which was "sacred" to those in the school?

In an effort to squelch my assumptions, I decided to focus on the last days of observation and allow for that information to be revealed in the interviews. I needed to trust the process and the people. I was at a point where I felt saturated with this explicit level of the culture that could be revealed through observation, but happy that I had invested in time in it.

I went to my perch in the staff lunch room and visited with people throughout the morning. I was greeted by name by some of those who came to fill their coffee or make a copy. As the early lunch breaks began, I enjoyed conversations with people. A few of the staff I talked to live close to the school and have utilized it as a community center, too. One of them attended the yoga class that meets in the library, another's child was a member of one of the local soccer teams that used the new field.

On one of the tables was a pan of homemade bread pudding. One who partook from the delight said, "Oh, ___ is here! Which room is she substituting in today?" I asked about it and found that this woman brought a homemade treat for the others whenever she substitute teaches. She was a former teacher at the school and still, apparently, very appreciated by everyone.

On my way out, I went to where the children were playing. The playground is behind the portable classrooms. New rain gardens were planted this year but have gone brown with the changing of the seasons. They are tended by the students and volunteers and line the portables and the main building to catch the water running from the roof on rainy days. Beyond the playground is an outdoor restroom, I remembered hearing about it being a special, compostable toilet or something of the sort. A pavilion is beyond, used

occasionally for classes as well as community events outside of the school day. On the other side of the property is what appears to be a skating rink.

October 23, 2012. Overnight the wind blew strongly and I came out of the cabin to find my car covered in pine needles; the lake is ocean-like with large waves pounding the rocks. The power went out for a time during the night and apparently there were many children who arrived late at the school because of it. I chatted with people in the office and staff lunch room about the power outage and my adventure the previous day searching for agates on the lake shore. I was told that the record flooding that had occurred over the summer had unearthed countless agates and the best place to search for them was in the river beds that fed into the lake. I hoped to have more opportunities to find more of the beautiful treasures.

I saw a new face in the staff lunch room and started up a conversation with her. She was a speech therapist who was told about the position opening by a friend. She was happy to be there and just learning her way around. I also realized how many faces I do not see in that room. There are familiar rounds of people who eat there and others that find another place. It is very small and cannot accommodate everyone, but I wondered if it was a matter of elbow room or something not as tangible.

My treat for the day was to spend time with Ellen as she prepared for her day of volunteering. I asked if the night's power outage had caused her any problems. She recounted that she hardly noticed it as her alarm clock is a wind up one. I told her that I had heard people speak very highly of her and asked her about her involvement at the

school. She shared her story and because of people's high regard for her, I was captivated.

After she graduated from high school, she had hoped to go into nursing, but after getting into the Mayo's nursing program in Rochester, she discovered that each nursing student had to purchase their own wristwatch, an investment of \$65. This was quite a burden at the end of the Great Depression, and she took a year off to decide what to do.

When her sister graduated the next year, they had a penny between them and went to the post office to buy a penny postcard and wrote to the teacher's college in Duluth (now University of Minnesota-Duluth) and got the brochure for entrance. They could work for room and board at the college, the tuition was \$10 dollars a quarter with \$5 student fees.

She came away with her teaching license and started out in a two room school house teaching 5-8 grades, choosing that older age group because she did not want to teach kids how to read. She knew that to keep disciplinary issues at bay, she had to keep them busy - and she did, rarely having any problems with the students. She enjoyed that time and after she married and started her family, she stopped teaching and they moved out to the Clover Valley area. During Thanksgiving of one school year, her son's first grade teacher fell ill and she volunteered to step in as a substitute. The teacher never returned and they asked if she would stay.

The board rallied and got her a provisionary teaching license (as hers had expired) and she took a couple of classes to reactivate it and spent the rest of her career teaching

first grade. She taught at Bloomingdale Elementary that was moved to North Shore Elementary School and now volunteers at North Shore Community School.

I asked if I might interview her for my research, she let me know that she would think about it.

I have gently asked many different people if they would be interested in being interviewed, always supplemented with the fact that it is completely voluntary. My question was received in many different ways, some agreed immediately and some brushed it off with a smile. I hoped that those who may not initially entertain the thought would be more agreeable as the research continued.

Over the course of my time spent at the school, the school secretary became a friend and was invaluable to me in answering questions and connecting with people. I could not imagine accomplishing what I needed to accomplish without her. In preparation for the next phase, I asked if she could to send out an email to everyone to solicit interviewees. I asked people in the email to get back to me with a convenient time slot either in the building or at an off-site location that was comfortable for them. The initial response of five people was appreciated, but slightly discouraging. I needed to nudge those who had mentioned that they were willing and the school secretary suggested I also post the time slots on the dry erase board on the staff lunch room door. It served as an announcement place for people who may not check their email as frequently or were volunteers and substitute teachers.

Attached to the email was the consent form for their information. Also available to everyone was the description of my research that was housed on the school's secured server. Again, thanks to the school secretary.

December 4, 2013. During the interview phase, I attended the Organizational Meeting of the Board that took place after the November board elections. The board after the elections was made up of seven members following the design of previous board with new faces in the roles. The positions have three members of the community, three teachers, and one unlicensed staff person. The staff person role expires in 2013 and Minnesota state law has mandated that staff members may no longer serve unless they are licensed teachers.

The meeting was an overview for the newest member who had not had experience as well as the election of officers and designation of the committee that each would be appointed to oversee. The group was welcoming to the newest member and the meeting was characterized by conversation and good natured banter about taking on the committee roles. After a motion to approve a policy revision, the meeting adjourned and, as the only member of the audience, I had the distinct pleasure of taking their picture for the website.

Interview Findings

Artifacts. The observations served as a foray into what I noticed as a participant researcher. I found that I gained a deeper appreciation of the elements that I noticed as a consultant with the school a year before. The artifacts that I had heard about previously in the strategic planning process actually existed as a cherished part of the environment. As

I interviewed people who were integral to shaping the culture, deeper value and meaning was given to these elements. The interviews yielded the connections with traditions and people in a way that mere observation could not.

Environment and local history focus. I understood from working with the school and through my observations that the school placed high importance on operating with sustainable practices. The interviews yielded important aspects of *how* that is accomplished that I will describe here in artifacts and *why* the environmental focus is important that will be covered more completely in the espoused beliefs and values.

The practices include the Environmentally Integrated Curriculum (EIC) and the role of Environmental Educator that were both referenced often as critical for the curriculum design and innovative classroom learning, even the core classes of Reading and Math. The EIC curriculum was brought in through the relationship with Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center before the school went charter and sought a partnership with them as sponsors of the school. The Environmental Educator visits classrooms for a variety of lessons and administers the grants awarded to the school and licenses needed to maintain the school's specimens. "We have a license to collect protected species for educational purposes...so if a kid brings in a dead bird, we report it to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and take proper measures so we can use it." This role is one noticed readily by parents.

When I was volunteering in my son's classroom our Environmental Educator did a lesson about birds and different types of beaks and what they're good for. He had stations set up outside in the pavilion by the playground and had different things that mimicked beaks. The kids worked out which worked best for catching bugs and cracking seeds and the like. I love that. There is so much in our world that if we're not careful, we'll miss.

The physical education teacher was mentioned as one who has more opportunity to utilize the outdoor space for class time than others. Her hope for the future development of outdoor activities includes the innovative idea of a kayaking pond. The rock wall in the gym was described as an extension of the school's philosophy. "The rock wall was a dream...because of the outdoor theme and, on the North Shore, it's an easy connect for a lot of kids because of the area that they are growing up in." Funding for the rock wall was collected for a number of years and a generous donation from a charity started by a local high school student who knew how important it was to the teacher.

The school facilities have been an asset throughout the school's history. Set on 40 acres, the outdoors is integrated as much as possible. The nature trail, cleared by its namesake with a chainsaw, is a mile long and "a wonderful place for kids." He "spent days and weekends carving out a trail and had an idea to bring it to an aspen tree and go around it to a spruce tree, and made the trail from point to point." The trail gives access to numerous traditions including the spring tapping of maple trees. "They pick their tree and take turns checking the bucket. They take it to the kitchen and dump it and when they get enough, they boil it down and have it on French toast for lunch."

The greenhouse, I discovered, is solar heated and insulated with straw bales; it was built by community members and a volunteer, who holds the distinction of Master Gardener is responsible for its impressive operation. "We didn't used to have vegetables growing in there, it used to be kind of creepy in there and now we're using it for food because of her." In the spring, the Environmental Educator makes "worm tea" created by the worm castings from the bin in the greenhouse as a fertilizer for gardens.

The main school building models environmental sustainability as well. “We do an awful lot to make sure the environment is at the heart of everything we do, all the way down to the cleaning products.” Other accommodations include low energy lighting and reminders about shutting down computers for the weekend. “Everybody’s got it somewhere in the back of their mind to do things that are furthering our recycling efforts and conservation. I could do with no trashcan, nothing really goes in it.”

The local history tie was one initiated before the school went charter. It integrated the agricultural lifestyle inland with the commercial fishing of the lake. Both were covered in the curriculum delivered in the *Roots in the Past – Seeds for the Future* book in the classrooms. Trunks filled with tools and artifacts from the time accompanied the lessons and invited speakers told stories of their endeavors and answered eager students’ questions. The logging of the area and gradual growth of amenities came alive as community members and elders described what life was like in the past.

There are people here who have lived here for generations, immigrating from Finland, Sweden, and Norway. There were commercial fishing families and farming families inland. In those days, land didn’t go up for sale, they didn’t leave. There seemed to be a real strength in that...Just last year we had some commercial fishermen come in to talk with the students...

Stories and myths. The most frequently referenced story was that of the district’s desire to close the school and what it took to keep it open. “I witnessed all of the kids crying in the hallway about their school closing. The conversations had gone on for a while and parents were activated.” Two visuals illustrated people’s concern: “the thought of sending my kindergartner on a 45 minute bus ride just broke my heart,” and the empty façade of the old Clover Valley High School building that looms up the hill from nearby

Homestead Road. The story speaks about being the “stepchild” of the school district after Minnesota required the consolidation of county schools into a school district. It always seemed like the district was one step away from closing the school despite the area being the only part of the district that had demographic growth. Once the board of the school district decided to close, it was a rallying cry to the community, led by a few key men in particular. They led the way and were quickly joined by others who helped them seek out the information necessary to pursue the status as a charter. An interim board was put in place; once the charter was approved, the school opened the following fall with an emphasis on a fresh start. “The director popped into my classroom and said, ‘A classroom can’t look like this,’ and within days I had new carpet and new paint. It was wonderful that aesthetics were acknowledged right away.”

A tangent to the story cited, is the one of the “Founding Fathers.” With each interaction before the interviews and during, I learned more and more stories about the three men whom many referred to as the reason the school was there. While many were involved in the veritable “resurrection” it was these three who received the most praise from others. One was a local businessman who “didn’t have a horse in the game,” meaning children at the school. Another was the principal of the school when it was a district school who was invited back to propel the efforts with legitimacy. He “was born and raised in the area...it has a little to do with knowing the area, knowing the community, knowing a lot of families, the personal involvement.” The third was a strong educational advocate, also with roots in the area who “is larger than life” and worked with the earlier referenced businessman to approach the more difficult of meetings and

negotiations. Retold stories include purchasing the building and land for one dollar from the school district, a full cafeteria of parents and families with the board of the school district voting to close, and the tireless work and values of the interim board that pushed the charter through.

Traditions. Particular events were cited as recognized traditions of the school, some more adamantly than others. During the observation portion of my research, I described my experience of two such events, Grandparents' Day and the Community Barbecue. Three other events were frequently referenced, only one of which still exists.

The existing Halloween Carnival was an event that I had missed during my observation phase. One day in the lunch room, I had been privy to a conversation about preparation and fretting over getting enough volunteers for the activities. A big event for the children in the community, it is one that brings North Shore Community School graduates back and other volunteers from the students' families. "There is a lot of involvement; the Halloween Carnival usually has a pretty big turnout. There are parents and staff setting up and people are pretty receptive when help is needed. I've never shown up and felt like I was in the way."

One of the events that faded from practice was the Community Celebration with the elders of the area. "That was a big deal, the first community celebration...it went hours longer than expected because so many people were having a good time talking." Interviewees considered why it was discontinued. "It focused on people who lived here and the generations that followed them...and they're gone." Another interviewee described how, "it was a celebration honoring elders with songs, and art, and photos, and

stories...we did it for several years and then it got to be so detached.” Even the organizers realized, “Gosh, there’s no one left really...the fact is that it has changed.” At the celebration’s peak “the gym was packed...not just parents of the school kids, but it seemed like truly people from the community and I think they looked forward to it every year.”

Perhaps because of the time of the year, the discontinued Christmas Program was, by far, the most referenced of all of the school’s traditions. A wide range of viewpoints accompanied the explanation of its release as an annual celebration. “They can be construed as unconstitutional.” “We had a bit of an uproar...calls and emails about how we took God out of the school.” “It’s hard at our school to figure out what to let go of and what to keep. The Christmas Concert was huge...the community wants to come to a Christmas concert...the local churches...but we know there’s a separation between church and state.” “We had alternated between winter and spring concerts...but [the music teacher] would like to do more with the kids than just prepare for the next concert or the same concert year after year.” People continued to be confused about the decision. “It’s hard to get used to the fact that some of the things we treasured as traditions weren’t important to the younger staff...the Christmas Program was wonderful every year. There was excitement the whole week before, making decorations and practicing.” “When people found out that there wasn’t going to be one, there were a lot of calls to school wondering why. And, to this day, people still don’t quite understand it.” “We don’t know the background of it. I’m sure they have good reasons, whatever they might be.” “People are just mad. They do not like change around here.”

Internal groups. About midway through each of my interviews, I invited the participant to describe the subgroups of adults that were involved in the culture of the school. The responses were quite varied, some chose job areas, others chose social groups, and others philosophical. I have described the most frequently referenced groups, they represent all three of the areas listed above. There are not definitive boundaries for any of these groups, there are people who identify with more than one group, those who float between them, and those who do not identify with any of them. When possible, I describe the groups as they describe themselves.

Paraprofessionals/title one paraprofessionals. Some in this group have been with the school for over 30 years. They are “like the mothers of this school family” and were very close with each other and the former teachers with whom they worked in the days when the school was a district school. “[Those teachers] had to leave for insurance and benefits reasons when we turned charter; that was the hard part of it, losing them, part of our core.”

Special education staff. This group is one of proximity and interest. They experienced exponential growth over the years from a single teacher to a group of 12 and have offices and instructional areas together. At the time of the research, there had been changes that left them uncertain about their work, the circumstances of a dismissed employee and new service model “lowered the comfort level for a lot of us.”

Nutrition services. This group is comprised of four people, three of whom have been together for a number of years. With the kitchen the farthest from other areas of the building, “we used to joke that we don’t hear about something until two weeks after it

happened.” The newest member is the Food Service Coordinator who was formerly office and preschool staff.

Office staff. There were only a few mentions of the office staff as a separate group. Perhaps because each of them has a unique story of fulfilling multiple roles over the course of their time at North Shore Community School. Their characteristics included a few who are related, some who have been parents of students, and others who began as volunteers or employees in other areas of the school. The director was not referenced as part of this group.

Grade level teaching teams. Three grade level teams stood out in the comments, kindergarten, second and third grade. Also a subgroup of the portable classrooms was referenced as its “own little corner of the world out there.”

The group that went to school together. Easily identified (even through my observation) by their conversations in the staff lunch room were those who had gone to school together. “Any time you hear people talking about families and reminiscing, you know that’s the group!”

The guys’ group. Some of the men identified as a casual group that chose to socialize occasionally outside of work. “Last year there were a couple more of us, we’d get together and do guy stuff.” Others noted that some of them were around the same age or in the same stage of life, newly married or young children.

The “love my job” group. This group described themselves as seeking “new ways of doing things...thinking outside of the box.” They were more interested in keeping to

themselves, enjoying their job at hand, and not in getting involved in what they saw as the more political aspects of the school or in other people's business.

The "go to" group. This smaller group of teachers described themselves as active in the school processes and the core group that steps up to "lead the change." They feel the pressure to protect the way the school was designed to run.

I assumed that I would hear more about those who lived in the area versus those who moved into the area (transplants, newcomers, etc.); while mentioned occasionally, it was not an automatic distinction. In fact, almost all who referenced it described the environment as a welcoming place for those who were not from the area.

Interviewees spoke of a time in the past when the school was smaller and groups were hard to distinguish as the small number of staff could conduct discussions and business in an informal, relational way. A timeline of past subcultures were defined as cohesive at times and, at other times, split into licensed and non-licensed hierarchical relationships. A general consensus of recent groups was that the school's growth had accentuated the work area groups more than in the past (special education most notably). All of the groups were far less noticeable to those who were not in the building full time, "I can't tell if they are volunteers or paid...I see some grouping in the different spaces in the school, however I don't believe that this interferes with their capacity to work together for the good of the child."

Preschool. In my observations, I knew that there was a thriving preschool in the building and had the pleasure of meeting one of the teachers on my first days of observation. I learned much more however in the interviews. Again, some of this topic

will be discussed in the espoused beliefs and values of the school, but its structure will be presented here.

When the school was a district elementary school, there was space that was unused in the building. “There was no just reason why we wouldn’t allow that preschool [a locally run one] to be there. It would cost nothing for the district.” When the preschool started up, it joined the district community education and affiliated with them for a time after becoming a charter school. “When we [the school] changed over to the charter, we were still part of the school district. They would not promote the preschool program out here.” The population that the preschool serves falls in the middle of the road, “there’s Head Start on one end and the wealthy who are fortunate and can afford preschool, but there are those who are lost in the middle.” Now funded through tuition, it is supported with fundraising and the school’s endowment fund that covers the gaps.

Espoused beliefs and values. Analysis of the espoused beliefs and values allowed me to take a deeper look at what the interviewees expressed. This layer of the culture became evident in the opinions and judgments of the participants within. This section serves to explain through the words of the interviewees the cultural beliefs and values that they strive to achieve.

I stray from the interviewee’s responses momentarily to make reference to the school’s strategic plan. A written document that declared the school’s intentions, it could be construed as an artifact, yet I present it as a precursor to the discussion of the interviewees input. In the planning process, a large number of the staff were a part of

creating the document and it exemplifies the highest vision of what the school hopes to be.

The school's core purpose is described in the mission statement "North Shore Community School excels in connecting our students' academics and learning with their natural and social environments in a nurturing community setting."

The following vision was set for what they hope to attain over the next number of years: (a) The natural world is integral to who we are, what we do and how we learn, (b) Children and adults co-learn together with respect, ownership of learning, compassion and acceptance, (c) Technology is an integrated tool for learning in preparing our students for a broader world, (d) Collaboration and collegiality is experienced in our daily work and relationships, (e) Our enrollment, facilities and programming is intentional, planned and sustainable.

The following core values were modified only slightly in the strategic planning process from the values that had existed in the original documents from the charter school's beginning. (a) Kids First: students' diversity and needs drive decisions and actions; (b) Partnership: together, we achieve more than alone; (c) Knowledge: skill in accessing, navigating and using a broad array of facts and viewpoints from a global perspective; (d) Stewardship: care and responsibility for our natural and social environments.

There was not complete alignment of the emergent themes to the strategic plan statements because the interview was about the cultural, not curricular work of the

school. I chose to begin with two of the values stated above and expanded the list with other themes revealed.

Partnership: together we achieve more than alone. This was chosen as an encompassing statement that honored the history of the community, the collaboration it took to create the charter school, and the current ways they desire to operate. The value “Partnership” replaced the former word “Teamwork” in the documents to broaden the inference of internal to include the external personal and organizational relationships that support the school.

Historic internal community. Interviewees who were affiliated with the school for at least eleven years looked back at the past with a sense of longing to ways of operating that had been lost. Those who had been there for a while “have seen us from fledglings to bursting at the seams...there was a big connection with knowing who you are, where you come from...it was that close.” Staff at that time were described as local, they knew their families, the families of the community and the school was a direct extension of those relationships. “We all had some tie to the community because it had been a community school for a long time. When I started, the sixth grade teacher had been there since it opened in 1961.” The small atmosphere allowed for an informality of structures and processes, such as decision making and the daily structure. “The aides would take the children out to the playground and the teachers would gather for coffee and cookies.” “Getting consensus between 12 of us was just a meeting in the hall.”

There was a time as a district school where they had a principal who made a point to eliminate the difference between levels of staff. His “style was to treat everyone at the

school equally, the custodians, the cooks, the aides, the teachers, there was not one group allowed to set aside from another.” “Whenever there was a meeting on anything, we were all there and we could all share our thoughts. We were all one...our say was as important as everyone else’s.” “There was a time when one of the aides was spoken to not nicely by a teacher and it really bothered her and she went to [the principal] and the next day that teacher apologized...that’s just something we don’t do” reinforcing the importance of speaking to each other as colleagues on an equal standing, not in a hierarchy of roles. They described another span when they were able to run the school themselves in the tenure of a part time district principal who had days away from the building. The school “just rolled along, they knew what had to be done and they just did it.”

“In the early design of the charter, the governance model was exciting...the committee decision making. The board had a lot of faith and trust in the work of the committee and the decisions of the staff.” “We had a lot of freedom and different things that we could do.”

Recent internal community. The general consensus of the current internal community was characterized by an appreciation of the people and the opportunity to work at North Shore Community School. “The teachers are better now, the building is nicer, cleaner, bigger, it serves more kids.” “Once you’ve been there, you wouldn’t want to take a job anywhere else if you can help it.”

I guess I see it as an evolving culture as new people come, bringing their views, their talents, their skills. The common thread that I’ve heard from student teachers is that they love it out here and wished that there was a position open...most of the people out here are devoted to doing the best they can and the best for their students.

The value of more diverse viewpoints with students and staff is important. “I think it’s good to draw from out of the community because we touch on some diversity.” For many, the benefits of diverse thinking overrides the frustration of it. “There are people who need to be in everybody else’s business, but that’s life. That’s the beauty of public school, not like private schools where you get all these like-minded adults...That’s always been my love of a public school.” Another interviewee responded,

I think the biggest thing at North Shore is that we’re such a small school that everybody knows each other and everybody seems open to hearing new ideas and working through problems. There is a sense of collegiality here and professionalism and I never really feel worried about bringing anything to the forefront with issues. We’re a good team working together. We work together really well.

The way people work together is constantly evolving. It was recognized that there is significant effort in continuing to grow as a school and not become stagnant. “The fact that these teachers and employees can sit down and have a meeting and discussion and come up with a thought or idea or plan and have the opportunity to have that opinion heard is very, very unique.”

“We’ve totally built who we are, it’s more than the charter school model.” The school’s internal culture cannot be static. “We always need to be moving forward.” “There are things we need to do and learn to balance...It’s an interesting, delicate balance and I don’t know if everyone realizes that...how really tender it is.”

When asked what are the top values for which the school strives, “Respect for one another and the world around us, be kind, be safe, be responsible, have fun. Love one another in spite of their differences.” Other described the value in maintaining the size and the commitment to a cap on the students in a classroom. “I hope it doesn’t get any

bigger. Then I think it will lose its 'specialness.' It'll be more of a business than a school...I kind of see that now."

Others agreed that the school's culture outwardly conveys the espoused beliefs and values to someone who is present part-time. "People are very respectful to their coworkers...I appreciate it...I don't hear the gossip, just the positive." "It's a very special kind of bonding between all of the people that work there, it seems to me...they seem to bond well and cooperate very well."

The school unifies the external community. There are fewer residents of the surrounding area involved in the school than had been in the past according to some, yet the school and the building still serve as a central part of the rural community.

Without the school being there we would never have known our neighbors. When you move into a rural community, there's no opportunity. We lived in our home for several years before we know anyone except for the people across the road and only because their cows wandered into our yard. It was through the school that we met this neighbor and this neighbor and all of a sudden you know people...that's when your community gets built.

"I think we have moved away a little bit from the general involvement of the rest of the community." The school is "one of those places that binds us...this community is unique...there are all of these components that make up the community."

The interviewees spoke about the groups of the community and their tangential influence on the school. There are the generational families whose immigrant grandparents and great-grandparents moved to the area to fulfill their dream of owning land for agriculture and fishing operations. The members of the Old Apostolic Church are a growing group in the area who follow strict codes of religious conduct and their very large families make up more than a third of the students at the school. There is the "back

to the land” group that moved up to the area from Minneapolis and St. Paul or other areas to pursue a different paced life. Other small groups were mentioned who were not as involved. What interviewees valued was the cooperation that happened not only with the formation of the charter school, but the continued community support. “We still have a strong sense of community out here that is very important.”

All of these different groups that wouldn’t usually mingle together or have anything to do with one another and maybe would argue about certain things...this place has a way of breaking down the walls. What can we do to make the school better...it’s a unique place.

Stewardship: care and responsibility for our natural and social environments.

Natural environments – the connection to the outdoors. Both the historic connection to the sustenance of the land and the more recent focus on environmentally sustainable practices are instilled in the students and are evolving with the adults. The students benefit from the “surroundings and what it offers for children and families. What they can learn outside just by being outside with the kids...the nature connections.” “Our kids can get physical education three days a week and get outside for environmental education a couple of times per week, it’s awesome.” This emphasis has been in place for years. “Our EIC curriculum came through [our authorizer] and we had it in place before we became a charter school...now the emphasis is greater.” The teachers are “going through a process, a continuous effort to match our [environmental] practices to what we promise...there are some who are totally aligned.” “One reason I came to teach here was the whole outdoor theme and the north shore [of Lake Superior] is an easy connect for a lot of kids...” An appreciation of what the school has was accentuated by what others do not have. “On my way to work, I drive by one of the elementary schools [in our area]

with a concrete playground. I think, ‘Oh my gosh, we have forty acres fifteen minutes away!’”

Social environments – “family.” The intent of including social environments in the school’s core values was to emphasize the skills needed to approach a variety of people and situations, locally and globally. I adapted that to the importance that interviewees assigned to their immediate working culture and the sense of family. Staff “had a feeling they were part of the family, and that it just doesn’t operate any other way...it’s a family operation.” Maintaining that sense of family brings the good and bad of family dynamics. “It’s kind of like a family that has a dysfunctional reunion here and there.” It also brings with it the longevity of lessons learned. “I’m proud...it’s made me a better person...I’ve grown up into a responsible adult. This is home – I have two homes in a sense and I’ll do anything for both of them.” “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep this place going. When I talk about how it’s a piece of home...if I had a bad day, if there’s someplace else that I would go besides my home, I would seek this place out as a place of comfort.” “I love this place...it’s part of who I am...I suppose some would say your job shouldn’t be that deeply embedded...ha ha.” “For me, this is like grandma’s house, the sights, smells, feelings...it is safe and secure and this is part of my home.”

For some, the context of family extends beyond the relationships with colleagues to actually having their own families who attend the school. Among my interviewees, 14 of the 22 people had children and grandchildren who either were attending the school or graduated from it.

The deep commitment to the students creates a type of extended family as well.

I'm so very vested in these students. I watch them grow up from kindergarten to sixth grade and when they leave, I'm crying my eyeballs out. You watch them struggle and succeed and they grow into these lovely preteens...it's my other family.

Autonomy. Inherent in the charter school model is the trade of more autonomy for higher accountability. This applies to both the autonomy experienced internally with the teachers instructional and curricular decisions as well as the school's autonomy from districts and the state. "The hiring committee said, 'This is a charter school and it's a lot of work, are you willing to put in extra time?' I paused and they got a little nervous and I said, 'I can guarantee that I'll give you 110%.'" "I have a chance to decide what I'm going to do. I have a say in it, that's one of the huge things. I feel strongly about that." The school has sustained the emphasis on creatively deciding what serves the students' needs. "I can't even think of one limitation...nobody's ever said, you can't teach that." "I get to be flexible and put my personal twist on a subject. I can bring in things from my own experiences and my own expertise." The control of curriculum or instruction that occurs in traditional schools takes away from the differentiation possible with the students and decreases the level of connection that the teacher has to the subject. "We aren't told what to do by someone, we are actually deciding and taking ownership of it and I think that helps in the pride department. You are not just somebody else's monkey."

Autonomy is also mentioned at the level of the whole school. The story of becoming part of the school district and then released from the school district is one that exemplifies the idea that "we can get along just fine." When the school was part of the district "it seemed that we had an anchor around our neck...we were always the step child." Earlier in my observations, I reported that I was sensing that the school is viewed

as having always been there. The interviews confirmed that hunch. The moves from local to county to district to charter each have their chapter of that history, but it is all the same book. Much of that history is characterized by the philosophy that the school has always existed for the community. It may have been affiliated different ways, but it remained “our school” with its own identity.

Site-based management. Upon its chartering, the school followed the model set forth by the state to have its own board that works in governance and committees and director that are accountable for its management. “We try to have the right committee and the right people that are experts in their field be running the school basically. That’s what the committees are for and they make recommendations to the board.” “I really like the site-based management, all of these people have skin in the game.” The board’s purpose has morphed over the years. The first board was comprised of nine members who took it upon themselves on behalf of the community to “get the ball rolling.” “We had a great board, hardworking. Everyone was there for the right reason...we set a list of best practices about how we would manage ourselves and how we were going to manage ourselves from a finance point of view.” Since that time, many of the teachers and staff have served on the board. “I learned so much about the different side of a school, the business aspect. I take off my job hat and think about the school as a whole and what’s best for everybody.” It is a difficult shift for some teachers to make as the governance role of a board does not leave room for representation of a specific group. “When we did governance training I thought how beneficial it would be for the whole school to go through it because there are those who don’t get it.” Recently the non-licensed staff

position was eliminated through state legislation and many mentioned about how they felt it took away a key perspective from the board. Non-licensed staff “still have the same stake in this place...the same feelings about it...we can get a random community member [on the board], but not someone who works here?” “There is a unique perspective that comes from those in the building who move across different areas of the building or spend time in different classrooms during the day.”

The six committees of the board are Communications, Curriculum/Staff Development, Personnel, Development, Finance, Facilities. Over the last few years, the structure has strengthened:

I think people have gotten to the point where they understand how the committees function and they understand that if they want to be part of the change or the dynamics of the school, they need to serve...if you complain about something, you are directed to go to the committee and even serve on it...ten people then figure out how it will work.

“It’s great to be able to serve on the board because we have a more holistic view than those on the outside. There are always people who do want to push their own agenda, here or anywhere else.”

Potential for the future. There was little in the interview responses to allude to North Shore Community School’s resting on its laurels. As mentioned earlier, the dynamic characteristic of always thinking about the next step was familiar in the descriptions of what the school can strive to accomplish in the future. “We do amazing things here...we’re agile...there is so much potential here. It will be interesting to see how the next five to ten years go.” Enthusiasm for the potential of influencing the broader world of education was evident as well. “The school is so well positioned resource-wise,

site-wise, building-wise, and the staff. We're positioned to be a model in the state, region and country. We can always do better." "We don't quite have our shit together. We know where it is, we just haven't pulled it all together yet." The growth brings broader philosophical viewpoints. "There's a larger pool of people and it's becoming a lot easier to swim."

Excitement for the potential of the director was expressed as well. "Her hands can get tied with paperwork and the dynamics of being essentially a principal. If she could be allowed to move the vision of the school forward we would not be just the little school on the north shore."

Leaders as shapers. In the interviews, the timelines of different principals and directors tenures were the gauge of the attitudes and characteristics of the group as a whole, i.e. things were good with ____ and things were bad with _____. I learned through these historical accounts that leaders were appreciated when they served as harmonizers or moderators of the cultural interests and were scorned if it appeared that their leadership styles were creating any division or hierarchy.

Stated values from a staff meeting. The school had an all staff meeting during one of the days that I was there researching. When the interim director and I talked briefly about it, I volunteered to sit out for the meeting as a researcher because of the sensitivity of the discussion. She planned to walk the group through all of the recent changes and the subsequent anxiety that they had expressed to her, visiting daily with her in her office. I believe that she was relieved that I had suggested the idea and I respectfully stayed away during the meeting time. When it was over and everyone left for

the subsequent smaller group meetings, I entered into the library and took a look at what the interim director had written during their discussion. In the midst of the doubt and changes happening, she asked them to report about what held them together. It was a moment in time list, but one that reiterates some of the earlier points and seeks to label their espoused beliefs and values. Because I was not in attendance, I do not know in what order the suggestions were offered, I present them here alphabetically: Belief in Education, Collaboration, Commitment, Communication, Compassion and Passion, Connect to our outdoor environment, Friendship, Fun, Future Community, Kid's First, Laughter, Love of Learning, Respect, Support, Tradition, Teamwork.

“We are of this place, not just from it.” I separate this out, because it was posed by me as an interviewer and conceivably may have elicited skewed responses in some individuals. One of the interview questions that I was curious about had to do with the phrase, “We are of this place, not just from it” and what it meant to them personally. My question was received different ways, some enthusiastically responded and had given it much consideration, others had forgotten about it, or did not find it as relevant anymore. Within the answers, are shades of the espoused beliefs and values that did emerge, and perhaps some added nuances as a result of a leading question. All 22 interviewees are represented in the quotes below.

One interpretation of the saying among interviewees was the literal interpretation of being deeply rooted in the community and school through generations and familial ties.

I have lived and worked here for 65 years and raised my son here. I've seen many changes and my husband helped clear the road sides so they could run a telephone

line from Duluth out here. Many of the children I work with now, I had their parents as first graders years ago.

The ties to “this place” were expressed both personally and through a spouse. “It’s telling people that my husband went here and my kids went here and I have roots here.”

To me it means the generations of people that have gone here. That’s what it means to me. Like putting my heart in the school for all those 35 years and in my children and all of their children. That to me it means it’s a special place and it should be kept going.

“I could argue both sides of it. I am of this place, I am also from here and I’m proud of both of them.” The long term connection to the land was also important. “This place is us, it’s is our home, this is our heartland, this is our school.” “We want to help kids understand from whence we came. There is a good deal of history in this area...we’d like these kids to be aware of some of that.” “In some rural communities like this one, family and friends are such a close-knit group that they want to stay at all costs if they can. For a lot of them, loyalty and ties to family and friends is a virtue.”

Two dissenting views, but perhaps representative of some others I did not have a chance to talk to, described how the literal view is too restrictive for the way the school is changing. “Truth? I’m not sure anymore – when I was in the neighborhood, it had more meaning to me.”

The fact is that it’s really changed...all the eggs aren’t in this basket anymore... But every school is a community school, every single one, we are no different that way, and our demographics have changed and people need to stop loving that word so fervently in order to move forward.

Others viewed it with the lens that even though one is not born or even raised here, they can still be of it. “It’s an inclusive phrase. Even though I’m not from here I can be of here.” Belonging is not measured by time spent in the area. “It is that I choose to be

part of that community. There are people who are from the area, but they are not of it. Some people come and in less than two years they are already of this place.” A certain type of person becomes of a place. “It resonates with me personally even though I was a transplant out here. Because of the way society has become, so many people are not as settled as they used to be... The word ‘of’ holds a deeper meaning than ‘from.’”

I find it amazing that here I am, somebody from so far away, working in the school. That people wanted me and my knowledge and to that degree I feel like the school is part of my extended family, the people in it. We have had some horrible times and some horrible disagreements, but I kind of think that if push came to shove I could probably go to any of those people that I’ve butted heads with over some issue before and say, “Hey could you help me?” and I would get that help. I think that we have that and hopefully that will continue. I think we do well in bad times - circle the wagons. We have our ups and downs, but oh gee, you watch us if you think you’re going to mess with a good thing.

Another “transplant” expressed it this way.

This isn’t just where you were born this is where we were created and developed as people, I think is the spirit of that quote. I can relate to that quote even though I’m a transplant. I appreciated seeing that [phrase] because as a kid my family had a place on the Gunflint Trail and I always drove through Duluth. I said when I was 10 years old that I wanted to live in Duluth someday. 15 years later, there I was.

Some respondents internalized its meaning and described it as the root of who they were. “I think what it means is that it becomes a part of your life... You’re attached to it. It’s who you are, it comes about from living, breathing, eating, sleeping, communicating...it becomes like a living thing.” “I take pride in being of this place. I’m proud that it’s made me a better person. And it’s helped me grow up.”

There were interviewees who linked it directly with the immediate relationship with the school and the people within it. “I know that me and my family feel very connected to the school. We are newcomers to the north shore, but, there is a different

culture here.” Another mentioned, “I think it goes back to the small community, small setting, intimate...they do a great job of making everybody feel part of the school no matter what.”

One interpretation described all of the different adults who support in delivering on the school’s mission.

Here’s what I think, I believe that the children, staff, the parents, all come here for one main reason but we all bring different values. We all support each other in the process of educating and being part of that child’s life. From the minute they walk in the door to the time they go home.

Some saw it as an effort to create something welcoming. “I think that we have made the school what it is today. A lot of investment into the school, and we care about it. We care about the kids, we care about the employees, the community around the school.” That effort and care were intensive.

We live and breathe our jobs and what we do here. That we totally immerse ourselves in being part of what makes North Shore, North Shore. And that’s from our faculty, staff, kids, parents, community members that don’t have children here. It is a privilege and an honor to be part of what this is; we take great pride in it.

“I have thought very deeply about what does that mean for me. For me, I could be just an employee, I go, I come home, it’s not who I am. But not here. It’s my second family.” Even for those who felt the phrase was not used much any longer, there was a connection with its meaning. “I think anyone who would hear it, would relate to it...even in the parents that aren’t necessarily as involved they see the education their child receives... its more than that they went to school there.”

I haven’t heard it said anymore. To me it means that all the people here make it what it is. We have to celebrate our history here, as an elementary school and the community school. We need to celebrate all of the values that have been brought

up here and continue to support and nurture those values, but yet, as things change and we grow we need to make sure to incorporate those new things.

Basic underlying assumptions. The basic underlying assumptions reflect the years of learning that North Shore Community School has experienced. As ways of doing things show repeated success, they are taken for granted and become the school's reality. The basic underlying assumptions are, for the most part, shared in the social unit and exist because the espoused beliefs and values have been proven to work. Elements that push against these assumptions create anxiety.

It is in this psychological process that culture has its ultimate power. Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations (Schein, 2010, p. 29).

Reactions serve to bring those incongruent circumstances back to a level of comfort for the participants in the culture. One way to discover these assumptions is to consider the conflicts that are happening. Most likely, the tensions increase when one of the assumptions has been questioned or events have happened that are contrary to it. Assumptions can also be discovered through alignment with the beliefs and values described and the resulting observable artifacts. The following is a discussion of the basic underlying assumptions that were revealed; there are, undoubtedly, assumptions that were not revealed in my time with the school; I provide this with the disclaimer that there may be additional ones that exist.

- Our strength is in upholding our past.
- We are unique and must fight to stay that way.
- We run best as a family.

- Our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work.
- It is best to not get any larger.

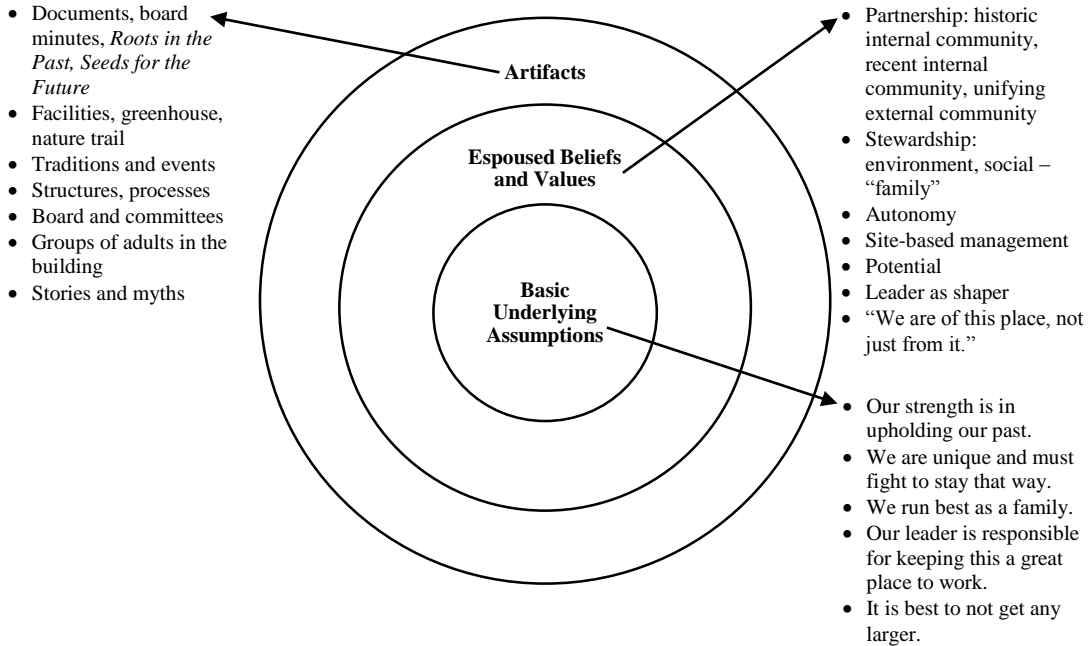


Figure 1. The layers of the North Shore Community School culture. This figure consolidates the elements discussed up to this point in Chapter Four.

Discussion of issues of external survival and internal integration. Through the analysis of observations and interviews in Chapter Four, I have described the elements of the culture discovered during my research at the school. In the figure above, I have listed the three different layers, the basic underlying assumptions that provide stability and meaning, the espoused beliefs and values that are the accepted ways of doing things and the artifacts that exist as a result of the former two.

When there is not complete alignment, an organization's culture is challenged and change can occur if it is deemed necessary to shift past practices. The challenged elements create anxiety, and North Shore Community School, as in every organization, was faced with specific tensions while I was conducting my research there. There are issues that interviewees shared and, in some cases, I observed in casual conversations that pushed against the group's sense of reality and meaning held at the deep level of reinforced assumptions.

Schein (2010) adapted two archetypes from the realm of social psychology and group dynamics to describe the arenas in which the aforementioned anxiety is felt. First, survival in and adaptation to the external environment and second, integration of the internal processes to ensure the capacity to continue to survive and adapt (p. 73). The basic underlying assumptions stabilize these two functions of the culture. Change disrupts that stasis and the group experiences anxiety from the challenge to what they understand to be true.

I chose to present these issues not because they are tidy "containers" for categorizing tensions, but because they were a helpful filter for assisting me in the differentiation of the basic underlying assumptions.

Tacit content of the culture.

General discussion of external survival issues. This realm of issues gave perspective to the school's operating in the context of external measures. They describe the school's abilities to meet its obligations to (and meet the needs of) the various stakeholder groups inside and outside of the organization. Internally, those groups are

represented by staff (licensed and non-licensed), students, volunteers, families, and community groups. Externally, the stakeholder groups consist of the community, the authorizer, the Minnesota Department of Education, the school district with whom they were affiliated, and perhaps the greater Minnesota charter school movement. Schein (2010) described these issues as: (a) mission, strategy, goals or the core reason for the organization's existence (b) structures, systems and processes about how things should be accomplished and (c) error detection and correction that frame what should be measured and problem solving when it contradicts the mission.

General discussion of internal integration issues. Internal integration ensures the capacity to continue to survive and adapt is described by Schein as Internal Integration Issues. Within these issues, there must be consensus on the following: (a) common language and concepts, (b) group boundaries and identity or who's "in" or "out", (c) nature of authority and relationships markedly the "pecking order" of power, and (d) allocation of reward and status for behavior that is correct (or heroic) as well as discipline for what is wrong (or sinful).

Explanation of basic underlying assumptions. It would be a luxury as an ethnographer for the participants in the culture to explain the basic underlying assumptions, yet, as stated earlier, those elements of the culture are so deep that they are not communicated explicitly. A path to understanding them was for me to listen closely to the tensions that each of the interviewees shared. These communicated tensions signaled external survival issues or internal integration issues that disrupted the established culture. Once those issues became clear through Schein's archetypes, I could

look back to the interview data and ask, “What basic underlying assumptions might normally stabilize that issue?” “What do they take for granted that is being challenged?”

In the basic underlying assumptions that follow, I offer five tacit elements that emerged from the interviews.

Our strength is in upholding our past. The current North Shore Community School is the latest manifestation of the community’s school. The hallways look different from before it was a charter school, Promethean Boards have replaced the dusty chalkboards, yet for many it continues to be “the school up the hill.” The current students are the latest version of all of those who have gone before, some possessing the same characteristic noses or eyes of their parents and grandparents, some as the newcomers, not unlike the immigrant families who came seeking opportunity and freedom not accessible in the lands of their origin. The immediate surrounding (and historical) community continues to be the main context for how the school is described, those from outside the area are warmly welcomed as guests. It is the highest compliment to the school that others see the value of it, often traveling from a distance to attend or work there.

Nearly everyone I spoke with formally or informally shared some part of the school’s past with me and watched to see what I would do with it. There were occasions where a person was surprised at what I knew and had taken time to learn. After reading the *Roots in the Past, Seeds for the Future* book, driving the roads and lanes of the area, I found myself at the places mentioned, and met some of the people who were featured.

In the interview phase of my research, I enjoyed hearing more of the stories and interpretations of my questions. Looking over the transcripts, I wondered if I had asked too many questions about the past because of the information that so many spent time talking about. My only planned interview question that alluded to the past was about their role and how they became involved at the school. Nearly every conversation contained a personal reflection of how things used to be in the previous five years, decade, or quarter century. In some cases, I pursued it, hoping to fill in the holes of my understanding of the school's timeline, in others I steered it back to the present.

The strongest point of discussion of the past was the community, both the township's and the school's, and how they have changed over the last decade. Since the first settlers in the area declared that they would start meeting in the living room of a neighbor's house for reading, writing and arithmetic, the school was defined by the families that lived near the building. Subsequently, those families' descendants as well as "transplants" who had committed and moved to the area, were the ones who came together to save the school and set its mission in 2001 and 2002 for its next chapter as a charter school.

It was around that time that the phrase, "We are of this place, not just from it" came into use at the school. My interview question about what that meant personally elicited as many varied answers as the 22 people who gave them. The fact that the phrase was easily interpreted speaks well for it, but while everyone's answers mentioned something about community, there was no consensus on what it meant.

The current internal community of North Shore Community School is less concrete than the historic community of the school. In the past, the people who worked there were nearby residents and the children, who attended, were within specific attendance boundaries. The school now employs and enrolls more people from outside of the historic community than ever before. Everyone with whom I spoke acknowledges the welcoming nature of the school and many seem to be exceedingly happy that they are there. Yet now that they are there, no one is quite sure how to redefine their school community. The historic sense of community is written about, taught, spoken about, chronicled on a DVD I had heard about, and even longed for. It was far more present in the conversations than any new, encompassing definition of what the school's community is now and will become.

The challenge for the school is to discover where the balance is between the strength in the past and the strength for the future. The anxiety comes from internal integration issues of group boundaries and identity; the new definition of community brings the inviolable historic community context into question. While the new sense of community may be evident in the hard work and implementation of visionary instruction and practices, they are not the comfortable slippers of the past. How does a group of people describe their future selves? Where is the balance between what the school used to be and what it is becoming? Is there a tipping point for it or a point where it is decided to preserve it? Is there common language or a shared concept that presently exists that can help to redefine it?

We are unique and must fight to stay that way. There are many unique elements that stand out at North Shore Community School, and I hope that I have recounted enough here to provide multiple examples in the layers of culture. When I would return from working with the school during the strategic planning process, I would recount with other people what I had learned. Usually prefaced with, “Maybe you have seen this before, but...” I would describe some artifact of the culture like the rock wall or the outside classroom or tapping maple trees for syrup. The uniqueness of the school, especially in comparison with the surrounding school districts, is important to North Shore Community School and a source of pride. People from the school are invited elsewhere to speak and present, demonstrating how education can be more innovative and when speaking with educators from elsewhere, they find themselves in an enviable place.

The environmental focus is another way that the school maintains its uniqueness. Rooted in the traditional belief that the land provides and the current value that it must be protected, the practices that the school has adopted bring recognition and confirmation that they are succeeding in doing something outside of the traditional.

From the school’s perspective, this uniqueness has come under fire throughout their history from prohibitive external forces resulting in tension around reconciling external survival issues in the systems, structures, and processes of the school. In particular, the former school district and the Minnesota Department of Education and state legislature have limited the school’s potential.

The school district governed the school from 1975 to 2002. Times were best when there was limited involvement, especially with part-time principal oversight. During the district's discussion of closing the school, the feeling of being underrepresented or outcast was countered by efforts to prove the benefits of the school. The district's attitude to the school and the school's reinforcement of why it was special preserved the notion that the school was a unique entity, different from the district's schools.

Through years of threatened closure and ultimately the real closures, the school fought back. They rallied at different times and most impressively when the community came together to organize the charter school. Even in casual conversation, people expressed the uphill battle against circumstances and adversaries.

The Minnesota Department of Education and state legislators were the nation's innovators when it came to designing legislation for allowing the formation of charter schools. Despite that innovation, there is a concern that sweeping decisions of policy and statute are made that lump North Shore in with the rest of the charter schools in the state, urban and rural, high performing and low performing. It is necessary to conform in order to avoid the risk of penalty, but begrudgingly. The decisions are regarded by some as not applicable to North Shore or other rural charter schools. Most cited in my conversations was the elimination of a staff board member position. As I have mentioned before, that perspective was appreciated and valued and while it may have made sense to tame the activities of one or a few other schools, the fact is that in the realm of charter schools, "One bad apple doesn't spoil the bunch."

We run best as a family. The hallmark of a deep assumption is that it has been repeatedly reinforced to the point where it is second nature. The school has benefitted greatly from the support of a family of community, families and teachers. The transition from county-run to district run was so smooth that some people described it as barely noticeable. The family continued on, with minor changes to their daily routines and relationships. The story was quite different for the transition to a charter. Members of the family had to choose a life away from it for the most practical of reasons, they would lose the benefits that they had built up with the district. The pain of losing close colleagues was compounded by the stress of not knowing if the family as a whole would survive.

The community stepped in as extended family to assist in the fight. Perhaps the informality of the distinction as family allowed for them to brainstorm and present creative ideas to deal with a system that was treating them as a statistic and not a valuable relationship. The ability to remain nimble during the process, allowed them to accomplish the retention of the school and negotiate with the powers that be.

There is one external force that was always referred to as a close ally and family member. The Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, the authorizer of the school, was regarded as a strong neighbor to the school despite its location an hour and a half away. The people and relationship was necessarily formalized when it authorized the school, but the connection was rooted in the relationships that had been nurtured through collaboration. They benefit from each other in that relationship, the school through curriculum and the authorization necessary to stay open and the Center from an innovative learning lab where ideas can be developed in a school setting.

That tie to the Center and the internal ties of the people in the school are built on a relationship that is deeper than affiliation with an institution. It is inconceivable for many at the school to consider their life would be better working someplace else. Some have experience in school districts or other schools that reinforce that notion; others, who have never worked anywhere else, assume that is the case from what they hear. The allegiance is similar to a family or community as well. There are stories, true and false about what it is like to work elsewhere that reinforce the reasons to stay close. This devotion is reinforced by actual blood ties between people in the school. Even those who commute to the school bring their own children along to attend and be a part of the family. I am reminded of my teaching experience at a middle school about 25 minutes from my home. I taught there for over six years and when colleagues mentioned that I should have my own children attend, it made no sense to me. The school was my work, as it was for almost all of the teachers there.

As can be expected in any family, there are dynamics that also cause anxiety at the school. One area is communications and problem solving. Despite formal structures to properly channel information, the informal is often chosen. Again, reinforced by the underlying assumption of *we run best as a family*, solutions to problems are often first investigated personally or through the groups of people and their immediate networks. Conversations as such allow for the analysis and judgment of a situation. Sometimes the analysis of all of the angles and nuances will straddle a fine line between concern and gossip. By keeping it out of the formal communication path, the family can let information sink in before needing to come up with a solution or in cases where they are

farther removed from the actual event, they can build up stories that reinforce their own points of view. As soon as information becomes formalized, it moves from the family structure to the formal structure, perhaps taking the control away from those who are willing to be burdened by it.

Another source of anxiety is the fragility of the family concept within a system governed by policies, state statute, external mandates, and a board. I wonder if it could be likened to a playground with a high fence around it. There is a certain amount of freedom, but the boundary is a solid one. During my time there, this anxiety was mounting in a conversation that I understand has happened a couple of times. There are a group of teachers who have taken the steps to reintroduce the idea of the teachers unionizing into a collective bargaining unit. In direct conflict with the historical family context, it is also seen as necessary to reinforce at least a portion of the family into a stronger unit with power that simply being a member of the family cannot afford. It was mentioned in various interviews that the idea of being an at-will employee lends itself to being fearful for one's job. This is especially so in education when all of the surrounding districts' employees are "protected."

An issue that certainly reinforced the perceived need for action was the recent dismissal of a teacher. This official process runs contrary to discipline within a family structure. When people perceive to be connected at a deeper level than just colleagues at a job, poor performance should be dealt with forgiveness, patience, and support rather than a development plan and documented disciplinary actions as prescribed in a policy. Firing someone equates to disowning them. I would offer that because the system took

over and overrode the general consensus, that possibly the fear that it could happen again to the family strengthens the feeling of security that a union could offer. And because those personnel issues must be treated with the utmost confidentiality, the family can only speculate, informally, as discussed earlier.

North Shore Community School had the luxury of operating more like a family and the distant past afforded less external regulation. The tensions above reflect the push of the internal integration issues of group boundaries and identity, the nature of authority and relationships, and allocation of reward and status.

Our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work. I introduced this initially in espoused beliefs and values and reiterate it here as it has been reinforced often enough in the school's history that it is now taken for granted. For those who had worked at the school for longer than the current tenure of the director, there were regular comparisons made between the leadership styles of the various directors and principals. A high amount of attribution was given to the leader for the climate and culture of the school during particular spans of years. Certainly, that is the case with many organizations, but I found it a bit incongruent with the pride in site-based management and the sense of informal familial strength and it points to the group's wrestling with the internal integration issues of the nature of authority and relationships.

In the formal structure, the leader serves as the intermediary between the authority of the board and staff. Even though there are staff and teachers serving on the board, the board is regarded as a separate, collective "they" that can potentially make unpredictable

moves threatening the order of how things are done. The director is the middle, present at the meetings and entrusted with doing what's right.

It is best to not get any larger. People acknowledge that the school's growth has been managed well to this point. Preserving the current size is viewed as critical and any more growth is seen as a threat. The tension comes in the internal integration issues of the nature of authority and relationships and group boundaries and identity. Additional growth could cause the school to look more like a traditional school in a district; if expansion continues there is a perception that more of the old ways of operating will be lost and new structures would be needed to handle what used to be accomplished through relationships. Akin to the sense of family noted earlier, the best solutions are when everyone can talk them through, and, it is believed, that cannot happen if the school is any larger.

Director's Role in Shaping the Culture

Aside from the underlying assumption of *our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work*, I would like to consider the findings regarding what the director has shaped in the school's culture over the years. Schein (2010) wrote about leadership's shaping and maintenance of an organization's cultural paradigm in the midst of growth. It begins with the initial cultural drive instilled by founders and supported through the leaders of the organization. The school's directors over the years have shaped the culture during their tenure and created a lasting imprint. Schein explained that:

...if the organization succeeds in fulfilling its primary task and survives, [the cultural paradigm] can then be viewed as the organization's distinctive competence, the basis of member identity, and the psychosocial glue that holds the organization together. (p. 274)

The culture at the beginning of North Shore's charter school phase was a combination of some old and some new and those elements defined the school as a special one. The culture was explicit, integrated, and taught to newcomers. Those who were hired for the charter school were indoctrinated in the elements that were old and carried over from the school's history. Some elements were new and open for input and design in the charter school model. Schein (2010) described how leadership's presence in a younger organization impacts it:

...(1) the primary culture creators are still present, (2) the culture helps the organization define itself and make its way into a potentially hostile environment, and (3) many elements of the culture have been learned as defenses against anxiety as the organization struggles to build and maintain itself. (p.274)

The school has had three directors. The first was the former principal of the district school, the second was one of the teachers from the school who was named interim director for a span of three to four years (from what I gathered in the interviews), and the current director. As people spoke of each of their styles and what benefited and did not benefit the school, it was evident that there is a constant struggle to understand exactly what the expectations of director are, yet some elements of the culture are uniquely upheld by the director as evidenced in the interviews. As mentioned in Schein's (2010) quote above, if we take a look at what has been created as the organization creates itself, there are cultural elements that exist because of the past and current directors' influences.

The director's role is in the middle of a structure that is designed to work upside down in comparison to traditional schools. The committee structure is set up to be the

true leadership that reports to the director and to the board. The director then supports the committees by assisting with resources. Serving in the resource role, the director allows for innovation to come from those who are closest to the work and students. Times when the director operated as a filter or barrier to committee suggestions were regarded as tumultuous. As the school has grown larger, the adding of an additional layer of a special education specialist and a curriculum specialist looks to some like additional resource help and to others as a potential barrier.

The director is the one responsible for urging that the employee groups work together. This began with the style of the first director who disallowed hierarchy between employee groups. By contrast, it was during the second director's tenure when groups divided between licensed and non-licensed staff, and the third director needed to come in and smooth out the rift.

In the informal structure of the school, the leader is seen as a moderator of the family dynamics. A leader's success was often measured by interviewees through how well the groups got along during that leader's tenure. I would offer that when the groups saw isolation or formation of hierarchy, it was the leader's responsibility to ameliorate it, not those involved. It is the director's charge to recognize when the groups are operating too informally and draw them out of that mode and into the formal structure. When that was the case, success in alleviating the tensions between members and groups was attributed to the effective director, not the self-regulation of the adults in the building. Their role outweighs the formal structures of the school and because it has historically been reinforced by the directors, it is seen as their duty by everyone else.

External Environmental Factors that May Shape Culture

Old apostolic Lutheran community. The first that I had heard of the Old Apostolic Lutheran community was when I worked with the school in the strategic planning process. As the school discussed caps on enrollment numbers, they were faced with a unique discussion of how to accommodate sibling preference for families that had as many as 17 children. Among the students of North Shore Community School, I was told that between 35% - 40% of them are Old Apostolic Lutherans. As with any large segment of a population in any school, there are ways that they shape the day-to-day activities of the school and possibly the culture.

The Old Apostolic Community has been a valued partner in the construction and growth of the school. Many of the men of their community are contractors and construction businessmen and have assisted in the school's classroom addition, the skating rinks, the new warming house, and other necessary projects.

In classrooms, modifications of activities become necessary as, I understand, the students who are Old Apostolic Lutherans are not to engage in watching movies or T.V. shows. Because they do not have computers in their homes, they need extra attention when it comes to learning in the computer lab. Additional interventions have been set up to bring students up to speed in reading and vocabulary. The preschool program is an important way that is accomplished.

It is a tacit assumption that as a parent base, they have substantial power in the school board elections as well. Teachers recognize that there are teachers who the Old Apostolic Lutheran parents would and would not vote for and that creates a struggle to

recruit teachers as candidates. Also, the school has found it beneficial to encourage a member of the Community (always a male) to run for a position on the board in order to foster a better understanding between the school and the Community.

I had hoped to speak with someone who was a member of the church, but did not have the opportunity. As I prepared to write this, I felt an obligation to be cautious in reporting on the church's Community as a *non-dit*. Despite that, it is important to mention the member's influence for there were staff at the school who spoke of the necessity of keeping the practices and responses of that church often in mind.

School District 381. Most of the students completing 6th grade at North Shore Community School continue on to the school district that once governed them. The surrounding community has a representative who sits on the district's board and many who have close ties to North Shore have served. It was evident that tension lingers from the closing years ago; I heard from interviewees about how North Shore students could be differentiated from their 381 counterparts especially regarding their behavior. Also in the stories, two interviewees recounted how the district recognized the school's success and asked if the school would come back. More tangibly, the district has the option to give North Shore Community School some of the Early Childhood funding that it receives from the state, but does not and North Shore must continue an endowment fund for the preschool. Community Education at North Shore is run separately as well.

Historic community, fishing, and agriculture. Generations of people from the area of French River, Clover Valley, and Duluth Township have left an indelible mark on the school and what is valued. One area where I heard evidence of the community's

values was in the fiscal management of the school by its board. This philosophy regarding money was attributed in two of my interviews to the frugal upbringing of many in the area. Another area was in representation of the agricultural practices and fishing traditions in the classrooms and units of study with the students. The stories and myth still speak of a time when those who fished traded with those who farmed – the work was hard and is still honored.

Highlights from the Findings

Looking back at the findings of Chapter Four, the following elements stand out for me as highlights.

- The daily journaling of activity was an effective way to convey many of the artifacts of the school's culture. It allowed for the emergent discovery of that outermost layer of culture. Yet, there were Artifacts that could not be revealed through observation and had to be conveyed by participants in the culture through the interviews, such as stories and myths and the internal groups of adults.
- The espoused beliefs of people and values of the culture were shared among the participants in the culture and the gap between what is espoused and people's actual behavior (that I witnessed and heard about from interviewees) is narrow.
- I was amazed by the high level of connection that the people had to the school and their role. Interviewees did not refer to themselves as employees, but part of the group or family. Not only did they commit to the school as an employee or volunteer, but they brought their children along with them.

- The basic underlying assumptions that I identified are ones that have provided strength and assurances to the school through its history – even before it was a charter school. As the school grows there is increasing pressure on what has been taken for granted.
- External environmental factors do not overtly shape the culture, but their presence is in the back of the mind of those in the school who consider making decisions and planning that might offend or threaten the strong support from the community.
- The perceptions of what the director was responsible for moderating in the culture has been historically supported, and it seems that an enormous amount of time is spent mediating the concerns of others and keeping harmony among the groups.

Chapter Summary

The findings of Chapter Four are written as a complete account of my experiences and interviews on site at North Shore Community School. The data gathering of observations and interviews was remarkably rewarding and provided a foundation for the analysis of how the adults at North Shore make meaning of their culture through the distinct layers of artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and the resulting basic underlying assumptions. Chapter Five seeks to take a deeper look at the relationships between cultural elements and the significance for organization development practitioners and future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion of Research Findings

The time spent mapping out the observation (emic) and interview (etic) findings proved enlightening for me as a researcher. The notes of my time at the school and the transcripts of each interview held value in and of themselves, yet it was not until I laid them out step by step that the concepts came together in a cohesive, interrelated way. My hunches of participants' excitement of what they have accomplished together and the tensions that their success and next steps brought to them were both solidified and contradicted. The narrative of Chapter Four was a valuable exercise in discovering the deeper meaning of the culture that is maintained by North Shore Community School to be discussed here in the first part of Chapter Five.

This discussion is intended to provide more clarity to the school's culture through Schein's culture framework and additional insight provided by Adizes's Corporate Lifecycles. As with any phenomenon, there are limitations to describing all facets; I cautiously use the following theories (or frameworks) with that in mind and have noted the incongruent elements.

The school's tacit assumptions of growth. The school's growth and service to the community is seen as a well-managed evolution. The current size is acceptable, perhaps beyond comfortable for some who remember a time when they knew every family in the school's community. The strengths in the school's larger size are the diversity that they have been able to draw in and the regional recognition and resources that come from their approaches to learning and the environment. Preserving the current

size is viewed as critical, expanding the caps on class size unthinkable, and the grass is still growing back in the construction area of the four classroom addition completed a year and a half ago.

I would offer that the basic underlying assumption of *it is best to not get any larger* (and it's unknown, accompanying circumstances) was the overarching assumption under which the others fall. The interviewees described concern over how the school would continue to change, potentially eliminating what endears it to each of them. The resulting tensions can be seen in each of the other basic underlying assumptions:

- a) *Our strength is in upholding our past.* The past that has been treasured is potentially threatened. The concern is that it will need to be abandoned because it is no longer relevant and serves only as a barrier to welcoming new perspectives and philosophies. If it does need to be abandoned, we would offend those who put their heart and soul into the school, i.e. those people who were integral to the school in years past including employees, directors, community members, and residents who are well-respected and still tied to it.
- b) *We are unique and must fight to stay that way.* Growth might mean that the school could lose its uniqueness because of a necessary bureaucratic system that will need to be set up to deliver services and result in the school looking like all the other elementary schools. The school would no longer need to fight to stay unique and a large sense of identity (the "little engine that could") would disappear.
- c) *We run best as a family.* With growth, there might be too many people to support a sense of family. The separation that currently is experienced on occasion would

be heightened; formalized communication and structures would diminish relationships and we will merely be colleagues at work.

- d) *Our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work.* A larger school would mean the leader will just be the boss and become part of a hierarchical authority structure. The director's dynamic, flexible service to the school would end and anybody could be hired to fill it and run the tactical business.

The school's lifecycle. There was a point in my research where I realized that the school has always been the school; the charter school version of it was just the latest chapter. I wondered about the school's growth since 2001 in this chapter, what was indicative of the stages, and what might assist in describing the current tensions or fear around growth. I chose to temporarily move away from the discussion of Schein's culture to look at North Shore's lifecycle so far.

In his book, *Corporate lifecycles: How and why corporations grow and die and what to do about it*, Adizes (1988) described the phases of corporations from their formulation to their potential death. The structure described for-profit organizations, but there are characteristics of the growth cycle that were evident in the issues that North Shore Community School was facing at the time of my research. It is important to note that Adizes's cycles refer to stages and not necessarily the culture of the school, yet these cycles may provide a lens for elements of the culture that have been nurtured and reinforced in the school's natural growth cycle. While the participants in the culture would be much more adept at declaring when each step in the cycle ended and the next started, I attempted to describe the approximate timeline that I could discern from my

research. The cycles of a growing, healthy organization are Courtship, Infant, Go-Go, Adolescence, and Prime; I believe that the school is in the midst of wrapping up Adolescence and beginning Prime.

Courtship. In Courtship, organizations are in the dream phase. Every conversation is dominated by the discussion of what could be; the launch happens when there is a tangible commitment made and the risk is undertaken. I would place this time from Spring 2001 to mid-summer 2002 as the span between the time when the district declared the school's closure to the time when the interim board and community secured the possibility of opening as a charter. The interim board moved through the process of taking over the school from the district, secured the sponsorship with Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, and received the documentation from the state that gave them the green light for the school's transformation. It was a time characterized by excitement and rewards for hard work accomplished. Once the commitments were in place the school entered into its Infancy.

Infancy. North Shore was different from organizations that Adizes's model describes in the Infant stage because of the advantage of a solid start. The facilities, materials, and resources were either in place or were promised upon the acceptance of the charter from the Minnesota Department of Education. The board put policies into place, guided by state statute, and procedures of hiring and instruction could be assimilated from the historical operations of the school in its previous iteration. The community was highly supportive and involved in the next steps. Families had a good idea of what to expect, and had enrolled in the charter the spring before it opened when it was still

running as a public school. This is quite different from many organizations in this phase where the “customer” has yet to be wooed!

Yet there were characteristics congruent with Adizes’s Infancy phase. With little time to continue dreaming, North Shore’s Infancy moved from the thinking of the Courtship phase into a new focus of what needed to happen for the children who arrived that first day, September of 2002. At that point, the risks were lowered and action was the determiner of success. The school could be responsive to families, students, and the community, involving them in a vast array of opportunities and celebratory events.

The commitment of the former principal to come on as director of the new school provided the stability and moderation needed by a “founder.” His commitment was mirrored by the staff and numerous people were hired with the Infancy in mind. They understood that they would be working hard to develop the school into the vision of a well-running, site-managed, entity. The director was supported by the community, from which he had hailed, and the staff was supported with visible commitment of the families displayed through their confidence to send their children there.

Because of the constant din of action, there may have been systems put in place that had the feel of “building the plane while flying it.” Job descriptions were described as basic and did not describe everything that those hired were *really* required to do. Essentially, they needed to “do whatever needs to be done.”

Contrary to the corporate lifecycle stage and supportive of the intent of a charter school, everyone at North Shore needed to feel as if they were the “founder.” Empowerment at this level allowed for stable delivery of day to day activities and student

learning, but perhaps at the cost of creating sound organizational systems. This was not a fault of the system, many considerations were taken by the board before the start-up, but inconsistencies existed that would take some time to iron out.

The school, in its growth, could not remain in Infancy for long. The first two years got the school running with an enormous amount of energy from the community. “The energy for takeoff is greater than the energy necessary for maintenance” (Adizes, 1988, p. 33). Once the school began to stabilize, it entered the next phase.

Go-go. Go-go is characterized as entering the groove; the idea was running and running well. Opportunities were abundant and they were all given priority by one or all of the groups of adults who were involved in the school. Not only were there multiple “irons in the fire,” staff were encouraged to maximize the search for more.

One area that Adizes (1988) described in the Go-Go stage that does not show up in the history of the school is the leader’s difficulty with delegating and letting go of power. Because the original plan of the school was built on decision making and action that happened in the ranks, there was not a release of power that needed to be made by the director. Yet, the director was still regarded as a keeper of the culture, the one who set the tone and moderated the issues that arose between employee groups or through procedures that had to shift as the school grew. As challenges were successfully met, the school entered the next phase of Adolescence.

Adolescence. For North Shore Community School, I would venture to say that Adolescence began around 2004. The school was at a point when it was “being reborn apart from its founder [the original director and board] – an emotional birth. In many

ways, the organization is like a teenager trying to establish independence” (Adizes, 1988, p. 45). Just like individual people’s teen years, this is more prolonged and, at times, more painful than being born according to Adizes (1988).

This was at a time when the school was refining its practices and defining itself in the area. Two to three years into this stage one of the teachers stepped in as the interim director. Interviewees who were present at the time, regarded it as a difficult one for the school and the interim director, as everyone attempted to make sense of this new stage of their growth. Characteristic of this phase in organizations, the school was experiencing a “us versus them” feeling between different employee groups and perhaps even between those who had been there for a while and those who were joining as a result of the growth. Systems, policies, and procedure that had been set up, were not necessarily followed. Adizes also described this as a time when the goals and vision for the organization can be inconsistent, carried over from the Go-Go stage, such as inconsistent compensation systems. Two interviewees mentioned a time in the school’s history when it came to people’s attention that the benefits packages varied for the different employee groups. Teachers received a higher life insurance package compared to other groups. While it may have made sense in the harried pace of start-up, it was a concern as to whether or not it reflected the philosophy that everyone was critical to the school operating at the highest level. Changes ensued, I am sure there are other stories of refinements necessary as the school matured.

During the time of the interim director, there were issues of the early Adolescence phase that needed to be resolved in its growth. Generally, organizations in this phase of

their lifecycle require a precarious shift to more structure that can resolve issues or backfire and amplify them. The intuitive nature and reactivity of the Go-Go phase gives way to proactivity including delegation of authorities, decision making, and roles. These changes are magnified under new leadership and morale usually declines; in some circumstances, people leave. At the school, there was ambiguity around performance, preference given to some and not others, and unsatisfied staff members who left, again typical of an organization at this point in its growth.

When the current director took the helm, interviewees agreed that there was an infusion of energy, perhaps hearkening back to the Go-Go stage. Her style was engaging, inviting input, and allowed some of the frayed relationships to strengthen. In the interviews, the current director seems to be highly respected and the school has been refocusing its efforts to the next stages of where it wants to be. Indicative of late Adolescence, there is disenchantment with how some things are going that results in tension.

I believe that the school is teetering on the cusp of the next growth phase of Prime and in many ways that shift to Prime is pushing against the basic underlying assumptions that have served the school up to this point. First, I will characterize the Prime phase and then discuss more deeply why there is excitement for and fear of the transition.

Prime. The Prime phase is when an organization enters and maintains a high level of performance and predictability with the right people in the right jobs. The structure is controlled and functional, guided by a shared vision. Continuous improvement efforts and productive creativity are standard practice. Despite the predictability of Prime, an

organization is not stagnant. The whole organization understands what is required, how to measure it and harnesses that to continue growth and vibrancy. As mentioned previously, it is my opinion that North Shore Community School is right on the edge of Adolescence and Prime; the shift challenges some of the deep underlying assumptions that created the stability in the culture up to this point.

The shift from adolescence to prime in the basic underlying assumptions. In the school's culture, three of the five assumptions discussed in the findings are those that are indicative of an Adolescent or "younger" organization; the school's growth and structures challenge them. They are also challenged internally as people begin to push on whether or not the assumptions continue to serve the school well.

We are unique and must fight to stay that way. When people referenced times that the school was shaped by external influences or mandates, it was with a sense of reactivity. Something, like the removal of the staff seat on the board, was being done to them. Changes, such as the decline in community involvement, or state mandated testing, could potentially affect their unique delivery of education to the students. Therefore, uniqueness was often referred to as something that others might be able to take away and there were rewards for fighting for it. The assumption is perhaps left over from the fight to keep the school and the gumption that it took to get it started and growing.

We run best as a family. Shared among participants who have likely been at the school for a longer period of time, this assumption remains from the historical generational strength of the community and perhaps the high growth time of getting the school on its feet and running well. Everyone needed to carry their weight in an informal

way. The end of Adolescence and beginning of Prime requires that same accountability and commitment but within a more formal structure of success and refinement. The school had experienced success being nimble and flexible. As it grew, the accountability for the functions could have become more confused. Change used to happen at the drop of a hat or in a discussion at a meeting; in Adolescence, change requires more to accomplish it as the functions have become more complex. North Shore's continuation into Prime, relies on a deliberate balance between keeping the espoused social value of family without sacrificing excellence in serving students. Some areas in the school have succeeded in that shift and can support those who are going through change and uncertainty, such as the special education department's service delivery model.

During my observations, I was introduced to the tensions that were occurring with the special education delivery model. I would like to spend a moment taking a look at that area for it is a microcosm of the larger school shift. There was, perhaps, a time over the last few years where the department felt as if it was making its way from Adolescence into the Prime phase along with the school. Structures seemed sound, planning had been completed, and there may have been sense that things were under control and guided by a shared vision.

In most people's opinion, special education had served the students of North Shore well over the years, growing from one teacher to a department of 12. More families chose the school for their children with special needs, drawn by the sense of family and nurturing provided in a school that integrated its students into small class sizes. As the number of their students grew, the structure that had been based on function and proved

sound in the past began to show gaps between the vision for service and the capacity for delivering on it. People close to the department described that the way it had been set up allowed for quick shifts in scheduling and nurtured a sense that they were one large team. On a day when one of the teachers or paraprofessionals fell ill, the group came together, figured out how to cover it and moved forward. While it seemed like a solid way to accomplish the work, Adizes would characterize it in the Go-go stage, because of the reactivity of it.

The gap between the vision for service and the actual delivery of service was addressed in the spring before my research through structure and reporting changes. It was difficult for the group, and there was a sense of loss for the way they had taken care of their duties in the past. The structure introduced was cumbersome and it seemed for many that they had lost ground. Additional structures were being put into place in the fall along with expectations that were a shift. Again, the group understood that the changes were necessary but they described it as a difficult time when they no longer felt as if they knew what they were doing.

I would be interested in visiting with the group now to see how they are settling in with the new system and see if they are moving deeper into the Adolescent phase. What were the major roadblocks to it? What have they tweaked or eliminated? Their movement toward Prime is critical for the continued health of the school. As Adizes (1988) mentioned, the whole system can be held back by a facet of it. My confidence in their ability to advance lies in the competence, skill, and focused vision of everyone in the school that I witnessed as a consultant assisting them with their strategic planning.

As a side note, this was a natural time for the topic of unionizing to be proposed in the organization. A union might serve as a predictable structure that provides assurances in an Adolescent phase that can be wrought with conflict. It is a serious conversation for the participants to determine if a union is a structure required to continue their success and growth or if the desire to organize simply results from the tension of their movement from one phase into another.

Our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work. The leader of the school up to this point was required to be a single, impressive person - a figurehead. Moving to Prime, it is essential to define the *role* of director. In my work, we often refer to it as “the office” of director. As impersonal as it may sound initially, the foundation of it is that the school can only go so far when it looks to a future built on the success or failure of a single person as leader. The director in the Prime stage of growth would back out a step to the big picture as the self-discipline of process and roles can handle the minutia that used to go straight to the director. That is where the excitement lies as people verbally acknowledged the continued great things that the school could achieve. From my research, I see that transition has begun, to the joy of some and the chagrin of others who are accustomed to rely on relational channels and not structure. Conflict is dealt with through a transparent process by groups who take ownership of resolving it. And, it is the natural cycle of moving into the next step. When the shift happens, the health of the school continues; “organizational momentum was generated in Courtship, tested in Infancy, refueled in Go-Go, institutionalized and channeled in Adolescence, and is being fully capitalized on in Prime” (Adizes, 1988, p. 59).

What Does This Mean for the School?

North Shore Community School has many strengths as they approach the future. They collectively share their espoused beliefs and values and speak quite openly about how their behaviors can better match what they hold so deeply. Argyris (1991) contended that if a group can discuss and distinguish the underlying reasons they unconsciously set up and act in ways that they do not intend, they are open to a learning process that is deeper than mere problem solving. The strategic planning process with them displayed what I believe were very authentic conversations about the nature and meaning of their organization. The culture of the school is one that has invited this deeper learning in the past and can tap into that repeatedly as they face the future together. Their issues, when put into the context of Schein and Adizes are very natural, and they have the capacity to analyze their next steps. The differentiating factor from their past ways of operating is the shift from approaching the learning as a family to supporting the structures of an organization that is entering their Prime phase. It has been necessary to implement structures as part of their growth; these structures can be seen as burdensome, rooted in the fear of becoming like any other elementary school, or they can be seen as the vehicle to stabilize their work as they enter into a functional, predictable phase that elicits high performance to achieve a shared vision.

This next phase may shift some of their tacit assumptions, but does not need to eliminate the foundation of what brings stability to the school. I would offer the following insights again, using the assumptions stated earlier:

- a) *Our strength in upholding the past* is an important basis of the charter's founding purpose. It is still stated as important and may continue to shape how the school looks to its future, but it need not hold them back from declaring the best next steps for the school to pursue. If their identity is rooted in who they are and looks out to the potential of what they can be, there is no need for abandoning what grounds them. I am reminded once again of the saying, "Roots in the Past, Seeds for the Future."
- b) *We are unique and must fight to stay that way.* The shift to the school's next phase is what I heard from three of the interviewees as they talked about their hopes for the future. It is a shift from the reactive fight to the proactive design inherent in *we are unique in everything we do and seek to do.*
- c) The best parts of *we run best as a family* will continue to strengthen the school. Transparent conversation and the flexibility to innovate are enhanced, structures could allow for the deeper conversations without the dysfunction of informal problem solving and story making.
- d) The use of structures release the moderation of the sociocultural dynamics by the director and could shift the current assumption that *our leader is responsible for keeping this a great place to work.* The Prime phase asks for accountability for that regulation to occur at all levels and shifts the assumption to *we each are responsible for regulating our culture and keeping this a great place to work.* With that comes the responsibility of looking deeply at self and what

responsibility each person has to bridge the gap between the made up story and the reality, the espoused beliefs and values and actual behavior.

- e) *It is best to not get any larger* is rooted in the concern that something special may be lost. Growth into the next phase does not necessarily equate to growing larger. Growing is a result of the measured planning and vibrancy that comes from moving into Prime and possessing either a confidence in the school's size or confidence and capacity for expanding to serve more students.

Thoughts on the Absence of the Director During My Research

It is worth taking a moment to look back at my concern over not having the director present during my time there. My first assumption was that her absence could greatly affect the findings of the research and I am pleased to say that I did not find that to be the case. The sentiment that “we know what we need to do and we’ll do it” was espoused and, I believe for the most part, acted upon. The participants were not without concern for both the director and how things would go without her, yet the majority of the group’s response was to move forward with what was known and be patient about dealing with the unknowns. The interim director brought them through well, filling in as the moderator that the groups needed during the difficult time.

Her return may serve as the stabilizer necessary for the school to complete the alignment of all the areas of the school in order to continue of the path of reaching their vision.

Personal Reflection of My Experience as a Participant Researcher

I mentioned previously what an honor it was to have been involved in the school; I am grateful for the honesty and kindness shown by the people with whom I interacted. Yet, the benefits to me of this research extended beyond the walls of the school to the community as well.

In the warmer months of the year, summer vacationers flock to the area to enjoy the outdoors, events, and the famous Grandma's Marathon that runs from just outside Two Harbors, down the lakeshore and into Duluth. The snowiest months bring the winter sports enthusiasts who arrive with their snowmobiles, skis, and even dog sleds in tow. My time for research was just as the fall leaves fell and the area quieted down to prepare for winter. That respite before winter is a great time to get to know the people who call the area home, not a vacation destination. During my time there, I tried to stay in the community as much as possible and enjoyed engaging people who could broaden my view of why people sought out the area as their home.

My first day there, I pulled my car into a Swedish craftsman's shop; ornate carving accentuated the unique style of the building and I found myself in conversation with the owner, looking over the beautiful Norse inspired jewelry that he had created. He was interested in my research and knew of the school. I wanted to leave with some sort of token of my research journey and purchased a small Swedish troll that accompanied me in the drink holder of my car and even sat beside my computer as I completed writing.

Upon the store owner's suggestion, I went into the town of Knife River to a gallery where one of his artistic compatriots was showing her work. I pulled into a

parking space in front of the Lighthouse at Emily's restaurant and followed a path back to the sunlit studio. The floor boards creaked as I walked in and was met with large, sweeping paintings and a woman who I assumed was the artist. I posed the question and discovered that she was not, but we immediately began a lively conversation once I told her about my reason for being in the area.

She was a retired teacher from North Shore. She had chosen to retire when the school district board decided to close the school and described the sadness and stress of leaving the work that she had loved for so long. I told her some of the things I had hoped to learn and she shared with me a couple of stories from her time there. Not long into our conversation, a man walked in, weathered and with kind eyes. She introduced us; he was the town chair at the time of the school shifting to a charter. He told me of the day when the local businessman (who is one of the "founding fathers") gave him a call and asked if the township wanted to own a school. The idea was far-fetched at the time, but they got to work to do whatever was necessary to save the building. It was then that I first heard about Clover Valley High School and he advised me to drive up Homestead Road to take a look at the disintegrating structure. He also mentioned the *Roots in the Past, Seeds for the Future Book*, which I had seen online during my research but did not know that copies of it still existed. We parted ways and he informed me that if I wanted to get to know a bit more about the area, his book was for sale next door at the candy store.

I thanked both of them for a wonderful kick-off discussion for my time up there and headed next door for a homemade cashew "turtle" and a book written by my new

acquaintance who has, for years, set his nets each day for herring in the waters of Lake Superior.

That was not the last that I saw of him. An article about him was pinned up on the bulletin board in the main hallway of the school and whenever I would mention him in conversation, the person with whom I was talking would smile and acknowledge him.

One day, I left the school to go down to the Scenic Café on the lake shore. It is well known in the area and Duluth and is owned by local people. People I talked to at the school had worked there or had children who did. The restaurant will often prepare or even donate food for gatherings at the school and I knew from a past meal there that anything off the menu was guaranteed to be amazing. Thinking of the hard work of a herring fisherman that I learned from my candy store book, I ordered the herring sandwich. As I finished my sandwich, none other than the author himself entered the restaurant with his wife whom I recognized from the pages of *Roots in the Past – Seeds for the Future* book which I had obtained from the school. She is a harpist and in subsequent days, I found her CD for sale at the same candy store. It became my unofficial soundtrack for the journey.

When I finished the lunch, the waiter confirmed my guess that the herring I had just eaten was fresh from the nets and I had the pleasure of going and thanking my acquaintance in person for my lunch. He introduced me as the researcher who was spending time with North Shore Community School to his wife. I left them to enjoy their soup as I am sure the blustery day had chilled him to the bone that morning in his skiff.

During one of the longer stretches that I was there, I rented the “honeymoon” cabin at a resort just up the hill from the same candy store. The Island View Resort sat up above the road and the lakeshore beyond it and looked out to Knife Island and the very distant shore of Wisconsin.

The resort owners welcomed me and we had a conversation about why I was there and I expressed how much I was looking forward to my stay. They shared that they get a lot of writers up to the resort, in fact one bestselling writer often comes and stays in cabin #10. I took that as a good omen for my own work.

The cabin was a wonderful little two room place that felt a bit like you were walking downhill from the bedroom to the kitchen which consisted of a stove and fridge that hearkened from the 1950s. I had brought along groceries and set myself up in the little log playhouse.

I had some more conversations with the owners in passing and at one point asked about the history of the resort. I was granted a wonderful story.

The resort is on the land that the current owner’s immigrant grandfather had purchased to live out his American dream of land ownership, liberty and happiness. He built the house that the current owner now lived in and began a commercial fishing operation on the shore in front of the property. In 1939, King Olaf V of Norway came to Duluth and the surrounding area to visit the former citizens of his country and be a part of some ceremonies in the area. He visited the family’s home and christened the family’s fishing vessel, a boat that still sits at the base of the Two Harbors lighthouse with a sign declaring this distinction.

Also in the 1930's, the family began building the cabins, adding a few more through the years; the one I stayed in was one of the first. The family ran the resort and then sold it to a family friend. When the friend was ready to get out of the business, he inquired with the family to see if they had interest in buying it back. The tie to the land was too great to let the offer go unanswered. The current owner and his wife bought it back and have been operating it, a seven day a week, 18-hour day task during their busiest season. It is a treasure that the family intends to pass to the next generations, the youngest of whom have attended North Shore Community School.

Other days provided additional pleasant interactions: The woman who directed me to the best place nearby to search for agates along the shoreline; the gas station attendant who offered to give me a preferred customer card even though he correctly guessed that I did not live around there and might not be back anytime soon; the bank teller who was surprised that she did not know me and I had to reassure her it was because I was from out of town. There were the owners at the Lighthouse at Emily's who helped make the connection that they were related to one of the North Shore teachers by marriage. There was the delightful afternoon of coffee at the home of one of the volunteers and another discussion with an interviewee that ended with an invitation to bring my family out on his fishing boat this coming summer. Reminiscing about these experiences once again warms my heart, and for the hospitality, I am truly thankful.

Significance

This research serves to expand the limited body of ethnographic research within charter schools and even more broadly throughout all schools in the United States. This

age of increasing assessment and accountability in schools has, from my experience with dozens of schools and districts, overshadowed the engaged cultures that must support student learning. I would argue, the culture of a school has a significant impact on its ability to deliver on its promise to students. To that end, the research combines the experience of education with the models of organization development to expand the way that educators, public, and policy makers look at the support schools need for a balance between exceptional results and a healthy organization.

I sought to intricately describe a span of time in a successful, rural, charter school, in a way that not only communicates what is unique to North Shore Community School, but also what might be universal in the challenges and opportunities that come from working with other adults to educate our young people. I hope that the stories within touch a soft place in the hearts of those who work with students and inform those, like myself, who work side by side with educators and school leaders to build the capacity of their organizations to maximize the work that they do.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The results and conclusions drawn from the research are limited by the time of the school year in which research is conducted, namely late September through early December of 2012. By focusing on the fall of the school year, unique elements can present. These elements may include, new teachers who are not fully “indoctrinated” in the culture of the school, the introduction of new students in the teacher’s classrooms and getting to know families after the summer break. Staff frustrations with the school board

elections in November, volunteer activity, and numerous events that demanded the attention of staff and volunteers were reported by people to be “a stressful time.”

The information gathered through 22 individual interviews was a broad cross-section of role and responsibilities, but represented only a portion of the 62 employees and other volunteers, board members, and substitute teachers who regularly are involved in the day to day operations of the school and building. Even though every measure possible was taken to ensure confidentiality, it is assumed that there were people who were not comfortable in speaking with me and certain unidentified points of view were not shared that impact the culture. The findings described herein are those that were shared among the group of interviewees.

My personal, unconscious bias must be recognized. As a human being, I bring a lifetime of experiences and beliefs that may have highlighted or ignored elements of the culture that may or may not be evident to another researcher.

I also acknowledge that there were times when I would contemplate the impact of my writing on the image of the school and the relationships that I had established with people there. A sense of protectiveness was present in my mind while writing and may have skewed discussion in Chapter 5 that a more removed researcher would have written about more objectively.

The limitations above might pose areas where future research would be appropriate. For example, how has the school resolved the tensions that it was experiencing during my research? What are the responses of the individuals of North Shore Community School to the findings of this research?

It would be of value to increase the scope of the interviewees to more people, perhaps staying as a participant researcher for a longer period of time in order to foster the trust necessary for those who may have been reluctant to talk to someone they do not know very well. There are additional interviewees that were suggested to me with whom I did not have a chance to connect.

If I broaden the scope to the curiosities that were sparked by my research, I would offer the following questions that linger:

- How similar or different is this from other rural charters that grew out of a formerly district school?
- What is the perception of the school from community members not involved?
- What are the similarities and differences between the school's culture and the community's culture. Is the school still an extension of the community's culture?
- How are schools affected by the temporary and unexpected absence of a leader?
- What is the impact of the culture (or even the climate) of adults on student learning?
- In successful charter schools, are there examples where they are old enough to have built up self-sufficiency and not reliance on a single leader?
- When a charter school grows, when is it most vulnerable? What phase in the lifecycle is most likely to spell their doom or success?
- What do leadership styles look like in successful charter schools? Do they match the intended model?

- How do different times of the year affect the levels of tension on a school's basic underlying assumptions (especially in the spring during mandated state testing where the external influence, rules and regulation frame the daily work)?

Implications for the Field of Organization Development and the Practitioner

It was a challenge at times to be a researcher in the same school where I had previously been an OD practitioner. I found myself required to choose the objective standpoint of an observer in order to repress my consulting tendencies. There was a reward in that, the freedom to really spend time to get to know the school before analysis allowed for a macro diagnosis. In the consulting world, it can be financially burdensome on a client to ask them to submit to that level of analysis before any action is taken.

I must admit that before the research, I truly believed I knew the school well because of the strategic planning process with them. It certainly did provide a relatively transparent view of what made the school special, but on this side of the research, I realize the limits of the understanding and am humbled as a consultant. I do not think it is a surprise to anyone who serves as an external consultant that the layers of the culture evident in an engagement with a client are the artifacts and espoused values and beliefs. Yet, if things go well or things go poorly, it usually has to do with how the consultant's methods align to the deep assumptions of the organization. The gift of being external is also the curse. I can approach an engagement with the eyes of one who is not burdened by the problem, but I am also limited because of that. The trap for consultants is thinking that they have a solid grasp of the tacit assumptions of an organization. While I trust what I have to offer, it would be naïve of me to believe that the superficial contact of a

consulting engagement can fully understand the scope of the passion and challenges that come from living in the organization day by day.

In the larger scope, I hope that this research is valuable not only for those individuals interested in working with educators, but a larger call to the field of Organization Development at large. Countless schools in the United States are having a very tough time. They have the curriculum, structures, professional development that should be solving the problems of the widening achievement gaps between demographic groups as well as the gap between U.S. students and those in other parts of the world. I would venture to say that the focus has been on symptoms. Educators will often say their plates are full and I believe that to be a result of single loop learning. I challenge Organization Development practitioners to find a role in helping schools to take a look at the *plate* and the defensive measures that prevent addressing the double loop for it would mean the overhaul of what has been rewarded for the last 100 years.

Final Thoughts

What a fabulous lesson this has been, learning to slow down and enjoy the stories about what is meaningful for people. I have a soft spot for educators and by “educators” I include anyone involved in the school. Without a shared mission to deliver the promise of learning to the children that come in the doors, a school is no different than any other job.

I have seen schools that have high performance at the cost of the culture of the building; schools like North Shore Community School show that does not need to be the case. In education, there has been a laser focus on achievement, efficiency, and strategy, and now many of those structures are solidly in place. Schools are coming up for a breath

of air and realizing that they have unwittingly lost a bit of what makes them special. For example, schools that are low performing have shaped a new culture with the deep assumptions that they cannot do much of anything right. Perhaps a look at ethnography in schools will allow for a discussion of building and nurturing a balance between results and the capacity to support and sustain them.

When I entered into this process, I knew enough to ask myself if the story I was concocting was an assumption or something actually described to me by the participants. I did not realize that I carried assumptions about how the research process was going to go. I thought I knew what this type of research would entail, I worked diligently on my literature review, calculating which topics were best to research. I thought I needed to enter into it understanding how all the pieces fit together.

I remember the anxiety of going into the first interview and the feeling of incompetence as I got started with a process where the outcome was not a clear one. But it worked – I only needed to step back, take a deep breath of fresh north woods air, and remind myself to trust the journey and the wonderful people who agreed to be a part of it.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Pictures of the Site



Sunrise on Lake Superior, a few miles east



The greenhouse with lettuce growing for school lunches



Outside the greenhouse



Phil Carlson Trail



One of the outdoor classrooms on the trail



The community gathers at the Fall BBQ, an annual tradition in the school's history.



The remains of Clover Valley High School, a reminder for the community of the risks of closing a school.



A panorama shot of the gymnasium set up for Grandparents' Day – the rock wall is covered in blue fabric under the screen in front.



The hallways ready for students



The music room; local musicians assist in the upkeep of the instruments



The front display case declaring, "We are of this place, not just from it."



The school's weather station reports on the current conditions. The measuring equipment is on the roof, behind the solar panels.



Student-made clay mosaic tiles depict the history of the area



Bulletin board with news of current and former students and staff



Panorama of the library – animal specimens are donated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department as well as Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.



“Bullwinkle” watches over



Values stated during a staff meeting exercise about what grounds them in the midst of doubt or change



Full moon on a frosty December morning



Cross country skis & boots are available to any class during the week and to families over the weekend



The School's mission statement, “North Shore Community School excels in connecting our students’ academics and learning with their natural and social environments in a nurturing community setting.”



Appendix B: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Project Name	The Culture that Sustains a Rural Charter School in Northern Minnesota: An Ethnographic Study	IRB Tracking Number	372919-1
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General Information Statement about the study:

This study is being conducted in fulfillment of the Doctrate of Organizational Development requirements for the University of St. Thomas. The methodology of this research is ethnography, a comprehensive look at how participants define their experience and what their culture means to them through observation and interviews.

You are invited to participate in this research.
You were selected as a possible participant for this study because:

You have a regular role within the school building as an employee, school board member, or regular volunteer that is seen as contributing to the internal culture.

Study is being conducted by:	Julie Goldsmith
Research Advisor (if applicable):	Dr. Alla Heorhiadi
Department Affiliation:	Organizational Learning and Development

Background Information
The purpose of the study is:

The purpose of this study is to understand the unique behaviors, language, artifacts, norms, and values that define the culture among the various groups of adults integral to North Shore Community School

Procedures
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to do the following:
State specifically what the subjects will be doing, including if they will be performing any tasks. Include any information about assignment to study groups, length of time for participation, frequency of procedures, audio taping, etc.

<p>Participate in a voluntary interview of approximately 45-60 minutes conducted by me in person or by phone, whichever is most convenient for you.</p> <p>Discuss with me your understanding of the proposed research.</p> <p>Give your permission to me to record your interview with a digital recorder and to type out the transcription of your interview.</p> <p>In some cases, meet briefly with me to clarify points or answer additional interview questions. Again, this is completely voluntary.</p>
<p>Risks and Benefits of being in the study</p> <p>The risks involved for participating in the study are:</p> <p>The risks involved with participation in the study are no more than one would experience in regular daily life.</p> <p>The direct benefits you will receive from participating in the study are:</p> <p>None.</p>
<p>Compensation</p> <p>Details of compensation (if and when disbursement will occur and conditions of compensation) include:</p> <p><i>Note:</i> In the event that this research activity results in an injury, treatment will be available, including first aid, emergency treatment and follow-up care as needed. Payment for any such treatment must be provided by you or your third party payer if any (such as health insurance, Medicare, etc.).</p> <p>There is no financial compensation for participating in this study.</p>
<p>Confidentiality</p> <p>The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report published, information will not be provided that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records, who will have access to records and when they will be destroyed as a result of this study include:</p> <p>Types of records from the research will include consent forms, written notes, audio recordings, and transcriptions and will be kept either on the principal investigators password protected laptop or locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. The only individuals with access to the data will be the principal investigator and advisor, Dr. Alla Heorhiadi. All records will be destroyed upon successful completion of the research and its acceptance by the University of St. Thomas - this is estimated to be April, 2013.</p>

Voluntary Nature of the Study			
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any cooperating agencies or institutions or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until the date\time specified in the study.			
You are also free to skip any questions that may be asked unless there is an exception(s) to this rule listed below with its rationale for the exception(s).			
No exceptions to the rule - all questions are voluntary			
Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you		will be used in the study	
Contacts and Questions			
You may contact any of the resources listed below with questions or concerns about the study.			
Researcher name	Julie Goldsmith		
Researcher email	jwgoldsmith@xxxxxx.xxx		
Researcher phone	(xxx) xxx-xxxx		
Research Advisor name	Dr. Alla Heorhiadi		
Research Advisor email	aheorhiadi@xxxxxx.xxx		
Research Advisor phone	(xxx) xxx-xxxx		
UST IRB Office	651.962.5341		
Statement of Consent			
I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I am at least 18 years old. I consent to participate in the study. By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I give my full consent to participate in the study.			
Signature of Study Participant <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic signature</i>		Date	
Print Name of Study Participant			
Signature of Parent or Guardian (if applicable) <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic Signature</i>		Date	
Print Name of Parent or Guardian (if applicable)			
Signature of Researcher <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic signature*</i>		Date	
Print Name of Researcher	Julie W. Goldsmith		

*Electronic signatures certify that::

The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the policies on research involving participants of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity and privacy of all participants.

- The information provided in this form is true and accurate.
- The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior approval from the UST IRB office for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures.
- Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the UST IRB office and to the subjects.
- The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until final approval is granted.

Appendix C: Original Letter to Staff

September 30, 2012

Staff, Board, and Volunteers
North Shore Community School

To All of You at North Shore Community School,

In my work with North Shore Community School last school year as a consultant with TeamWorks International, I became intrigued with the passion and commitment of the adults who support the work of the school and the delivery of education to the students. As we concluded our work with the board last fall, I introduced the idea of doing my doctoral dissertation on the culture of NSCS. The idea was received warmly and I began the process of putting together my proposal for an ethnographic study to submit to the University of St. Thomas.

Ethnographic research is a methodology of research that, I believe, is underutilized in education. It is an in-depth look at the culture of an organization. In using Edgar Schein's definition of culture it is a combination of the external elements that can be observed, the values that are expressed through the members, and the deep underlying assumptions that define meaning. This type of research involves working as a researcher who gets to know you and interacts with the organization.

This last Friday, I had a wonderful time with Grandparents Day and the Fall BBQ! This fall, I will be spending time at the school and interviewing those who are willing. These interviews are completely voluntary and my hope is that you view them as a time to tell me about your experience at NSCS.

As is customary in dissertation research, I will be working under the guidelines of the Independent Review Board process through my university. What this means is that you, as a participant, are protected with assured confidentiality; I will not be providing lists of names to the school or anyone else, and you will only be referred to by your role and, perhaps, a pseudonym that will be assigned to you.

Attached to this letter, is the official consent form for the interviews. There isn't a deadline, but it is required to be understood and signed by you before I may interview you. The consent form can be scanned and emailed to me at my personal address, sent to my home address, or presented to me when I am on site at the school. Also attached is a tentative schedule for my time.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions you have. I look forward to my time with all of you.

Sincerely,

Julie Goldsmith
Email: jwgoldsmith@xxxxxx.xxx
Cell: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Appendix D: Duluth Township Newsletter Article

The following is my article for the Duluth Township Newsletter requested by the school board chair. The style was altered to read more like an article written in the third person about me.

Throughout the year, your community greets those who head north seeking serenity and the rhythm of the waves. Those of us who live in the suburbs, traffic, and din of metropolitan areas, hop in our cars to escape. It's no wonder then, that when searching out a place to do my dissertation for a doctorate in organization development, I would look for a truly special retreat where I could conduct the type of research I love.

That special place up north for me is North Shore Community School. I was first introduced to your school when my organization was hired by NSCS to facilitate the strategic planning process last year. Throughout the process, I learned about the school's mission and vision, the hopes and expectations of the staff, and the amazing support of the surrounding community. At the end of our work, I approached the board to see if they would be agreeable to me conducting an ethnographic study there for my doctoral research.

When I began taking a look at what sort of study I would want to devote nearly a year of my life to, ethnographic research was a natural for me. Ethnography is a deep look at the culture of a group through observation, analyzing the "artifacts" (bulletin boards around the school, newsletters like this one, and board minutes over the years), interviewing individuals, listening to the stories, and adding my own reflections as a participant in NSCS's daily life.

The specific focus of my research is how the adults in the building create and shape the culture of the school. In order to do this, I'll be hanging out at the school occasionally through the next two months, interviewing the staff, board and volunteers of the school, and generally having a really enjoyable time with all of you (As an official side note, no students will be interviewed or participate in the study in any way). I invite you to contact me with any questions; all of my contact information is available at the front office of the school. See you in the halls!!!

Julie Goldsmith

Appendix E: Email Soliciting Volunteers for Interviewing

October 23, 2012

It has been a real pleasure to spend time getting to know you and your community better over the last month. You have been overwhelmingly welcoming to me and I am thankful.

I'm now entering the next phase of my research which is interviewing those of you willing to tell me about your experience of the culture of the school. As I mentioned before, these *voluntary* interviews are open to every adult who helps to develop the culture of the building; including the board, administrators, teaching and non-teaching staff, and regular adult volunteers.

Please consider how you might fit this into your schedule and, if you can, email me at jwgoldsmith@xxxxxx.xxx with:

1. **Your top two options from the list below**
2. **A specific time you would like within that window**
3. **Whether you would like to meet *at school or off-site***

(Table of dates and times was included here)

I'm happy to arrange other dates and times for phone interviews as well.

Thank you if you have already given me a consent form – for those who haven't, I can get them from you when we meet.

Thank you so much – see you in the halls!

Appendix F: Additional Email Soliciting Volunteers for Interviewing

November 27, 2012

Good Afternoon to all of you -

I have a bit of sadness as I write the subject for my email - "Final Days of my Research." I have had such a wonderful time with all of you. I am hoping that Monday through Thursday next week will conclude my interviews, yet there are many of you with whom I haven't connected who have expressed interest.

I will try this like last time, where I put together slots of time. If you would still like to participate, please send me your top two preferences from the list below **directly to my email: jwgoldsmith@xxxxxx.xxx**

Thank you and I look forward to Monday!

Julie

Monday, December 3:

Lunch (at school)

Afternoon (at school)

After School/Evening (at school or off site)

Tuesday, December 4:

Lunch (at school)

Afternoon (at school)

After School/Evening (at school or off site)

Wednesday, December 5 or Thursday, December 6 (same schedule)

Before the school day (at school or off site)

Morning (at school)

Lunch (at school)

Afternoon (at school)

After School/Evening (at school or off site)

Thank you! See you then!

Julie