

Rural and Urban Teaching Experiences: Narrative Expressions

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This qualitative exploration of rural and urban teaching experiences encapsulates the experiences of 8 Western Canadian teachers. A literature review outlines the benefits and challenges of rural and urban education. Stemming from narrative inquiry data, I present the study's results in the form of two composite stories, which depict the lived experiences particular to rural and urban teachers. Overarching themes emanating from these stories show that rural schools nurture close teacher-student-community relationships, while urban schools serve a larger, culturally-diverse student populace. Theoretical aspects of the study include the notion that teacher identity is influenced by one's rural and urban background. I suggest that through teacher mentorships programs and forms of professional development, teachers be supplied time to reflect on how their past rural and urban life experiences affect their present teaching attitudes and behaviors.

Cette exploration qualitative portant sur les expériences rurales et urbaines résume les expériences de huit enseignants dans l'Ouest canadien. Une analyse de la littérature dresse les grandes lignes en matière d'avantages et de défis liés à l'éducation en milieu rural et en milieu urbain. Puisant dans des données découlant de données d'enquêtes narratives, je présente les résultats de l'étude sous forme de deux histoires composites illustrant les expériences particulières d'enseignants en milieu rural et en milieu urbain. Des thèmes fondamentaux en ressortent et indiquent que les écoles rurales encouragent des liens serrés entre les élèves et la communauté alors que les écoles urbaines desservent une population estudiantine plus grande et diverse sur le plan culturel. Parmi les aspects théoriques de l'étude notons l'idée selon laquelle l'identité des enseignants est influencée par leurs antécédents ruraux et urbains. Je propose qu'on offre aux enseignants le temps de réfléchir sur l'impact qu'aurait leur vécu en milieu rural ou urbain sur leurs attitudes et comportements en salle de classe et qu'on le fasse par le biais de programmes de mentorat et de développement professionnel.

About 25 years ago, Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1990) endorsed narrative inquiry as a research methodology for social sciences, and, although still in a stage of infancy, narrative research has flourished during the past two and a half decades (see Kitchen, Ciuffetelli Parker, & Pushor, 2011; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; McAdams, 1993; Vaz, 1997). Narrative inquiry is a type of research methodology, which stresses that knowledge is personal, embedded in people, and shaped and reshaped through a lifetime of experiences (Clandinin, 2007). Narrative inquiry research involves collecting data that is expressive, in that it details the complexity of professional practices and offers lived solutions to an array of personal-professional challenges. Specifically within the realms of education, via narrative expression, students, teachers, and education stakeholders communicate their personal and professional knowledge, practical

realities, moral debates, and contextual experiences, as well as explicate the complex human and philosophical relationships that exist between these concepts.

This article, grounded in narrative inquiry data collection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), contributes to a growing appreciation for narrative inquiry research. More specifically, the purpose of this article is to describe aspects of rural and urban¹ education as experienced by 8 Kindergarten to Grade 12 teachers. The information collected for the study was based on the personal reflections of teachers, who each had the experiences of teaching in *both* rural and urban schools located in Western Canada. By communicating stories of teaching experiences, participants demonstrate an array of comparable and contrasting characteristics of rural and urban education, while also revealing a number of contentious issues attributable to both rural and urban education. Theoretical aspects of the study include the notion that teacher identity is influenced by an individual's rural and/or urban background(s). Implications arising from the research highlight the importance of self-reflection and its impact on professional growth.

A Rural-Urban Backdrop

Statistics highlight that 19% of Canada's population is rural (Statistics Canada, 2009). Within Western Canada (where this research was conducted), 35% of Saskatchewan's population and 18% of Alberta's population is rural (Statistics Canada, 2009). Not only do these numbers underline the significant presence of rural education across Canada, these figures indicate the need for research to focus on the rural learning environments. While a large portion of Canada's public education system is delivered to students living in rural areas, logically the remaining portion of students are being taught in urban centers. In turn, to position my study, I provide a review of the literature pertaining to the advantages and challenges commonly associated with rural and urban education.

Rural Education

An acclaimed feature of rural schools is the tight social bonds that exist between/among school staff, parents, and community members (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Erickson & McBeath, 1999; Ralph, 2003), the repercussions of which positively affect the school culture and teaching pedagogy. For example, rural parents, as compared to urban parents, tend to be more actively involved with their schools (Erickson & McBeath, 1999; Howley & Eckman, 1997). Also due to well-established relationships, rural teachers often possess personalized knowledge of their students, which then empowers teachers to engage in high levels of individualized instruction (Collins, 1999; Jimerson, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009, Sullivan, 2000; Warick, 2006). Studies show that, on a per capita basis, rural students participate in more extracurricular activities than urban students (Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2004). As one Saskatchewan rural principal stated: "On our [extracurricular] teams, there are no cuts. Everyone gets to play" (Warick, 2006, p. E1). The literature also highlights how limited enrollment creates challenges for rural students. In particular, rural communities, faced with financial and geographical restraints, often deal with aging school infrastructures, fewer classroom resources, and a limited range of support services (Barter, 2011; Looker, 2002; MacKinnon, 1998; Nielsen & Nashon, 2007; Sullivan, 2000). Attracting qualified teachers who are willing to teach in rural regions or northern provincial/territorial/band schools can be challenging, as isolation and high cost of living are deterrent factors for

teaching in some rural areas (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). Furthermore, rural teachers are often expected to teach subjects outside their areas of specialization (MacDonald & Farr-Darling, 2011); this difficult situation is then compounded by the fact that rural teachers assuming multi-subject-specialized teaching positions are often provided with limited access to quality staff development and/or professional advancement opportunities (Herrington & Herrington, 2001; Hodges, 2002).

Urban Education

As compared to rural education, because of numbers, urban students can more easily access a variety of subject choices. Coupled with this point, urban students, especially high school urban students, tend to be taught by teachers who are specialized in the subject they teach (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Kuziemko, 2006). Again, due to numbers, urban students interact with a greater variety of teachers (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009), which ideally exposes students to a larger pool of teacher role models and other influential and academic contacts and influences. The urban school body often portrays socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity (Foote, 2005; Kincheloe, 2004; Marquez-Zenkov & Zaharias, 2002). Accordingly, the urban student has a greater capacity to celebrate his/her unique identity, as compared to a more homogenous rural school environment where there is often pressure to assimilate into one dominant group norm. Because of location, urban schools are in an ideal position to take advantage of the diverse pool of community resources available within the city. For example, due to proximity, urban schools can potentially establish partnerships with postsecondary institutes, collaborate with a variety of businesses, and formulate volunteer services with a great number of diverse community associations (Council of the Great City Schools, 2006). Urban schools, however, also face a number of challenges. For instance, within urban schools, parents are less likely to have pre-existing relationships with the school or its educators (Barley & Beesley, 2007), and students are more easily overlooked by teachers simply due to the larger size of the student body (Kincheloe, 2004). Shields (2002) explained that as schools become larger and more formalized, norms of bureaucracy take precedence over human relationships, creating an impersonal aspect to urban school culture.

Research Methodology and Participant Description

The purpose of this study was to describe the differences between rural and urban education as experienced by teachers. To acquire teacher volunteers, I used purposeful sampling (Mertens, 2005) and snowball sampling (Wellington, 2000). In total, 8 teachers (6 females and 2 males) were selected, all of whom had experience teaching within rural and urban schools. The data were collected over a 4-month period through semi-structured individual interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005), which included the majority of interview questions conducive to narrative answers. Interviews were audio-taped, and transcripts were returned to participants for member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each participant was interviewed twice; the average length of each interview was one hour. The ages of the teachers ranged from 25 to 60 years; these participants had from 5 to 25 years teaching experience. Six of the participants were classroom teachers, 1 participant was specialized as a resource room teacher, and 1 participant had been an administrator for most of his educational career. The selected group had a diverse range of teaching interests and specialties within the areas of Language Arts, Math, Science, Fine Arts,

Theatre, Drama, French, and Special Needs. The data collected from participants were based on their teaching experiences acquired while teaching within Saskatchewan and/or Alberta's public schools.

Presentation of Results: Composite Stories

Data collected for the study were in the form of autobiographical teaching anecdotes that were documented within the participants' transcripts. McAdams (1988) acknowledged that when analyzing autobiographical interview data, rich nuggets of information are encoded through event-specific knowledge that he referred to as *nuclear episodes*. As I read through the transcripts, I documented the participant's nuclear episodes and analyzed these events by searching for the key themes, commonalities, and patterns (Basit, 2003). Once thematically processed, I amalgamated the participants' rural and urban nuclear episodes into two fictional narratives or *composite stories* (He, 1998, 2002a, 2002b). One composite story depicts a rural teaching experience; the other represents an urban teaching experience.

In support of representing data results via composite stories, Polkinghorne (1988) indicated that narrative meaning can only be expressed through descriptive, richly-contextualized information. In the presentation of my research results, the two composite stories portray the lived experiences of rural and urban teachers and highlight their nuclear episodes bounded within rural and urban educational landscapes. These composite stories are not intended to represent one participant; rather, the story-form represents a holistic account of the explicit details of all the participants' rural and urban autobiographical teaching accounts.

Indeed, creating composite stories may be viewed by some readers and researchers as a somewhat unusual way of handling interview data; a more traditional approach to present qualitative results would be to interpret dominant themes that emanate from the data (Creswell, 2005) and to utilize the selected participant quotations to ensure data credibility. However, in articulating a study's results in a more traditional manner, Richardson (2000) indicated, "[Researchers] write the body of the text as though the document and quotation snippets are naturally present, valid, reliable, and fully representative, rather than selected, pruned, and spruced up by the author for their textual appearance" (p. 928). In turn, I argue that the following composite stories have as much merit (maybe even more) than traditional ways of expressing qualitative results, because these stories are contextualized examples of teaching, while simultaneously providing detailed and peripheral information about rural and urban education. The descriptive particulars of composite stories *show* rather than *tell* the reader what it means to teach in rural and urban environments, thereby, increasing the potential for the information to resonate with the reader. Furthermore, although this research involved a small sample size and generalization cannot be bestowed upon the general population, due to the specific and peripheral details that are woven throughout the composite stories, readers are empowered to judge the usefulness and transferability of this study's results to similar contexts.

Rather than attempting to present an unattainable objective truth, narrative researchers seek to represent a subjective reality (Atkinson, 1998). In my attempt to articulate a subjective reality, within the composite stories, I use literary devices including "internal monologue . . . scene setting, character development, and flashbacks," (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). These literary devices may result in the past being somewhat distorted; however, the purpose of narrative inquiry is not to present factual accounts of one's life; rather, it is to capture the participants' reality as they re-experienced and expressed it during the interview process. My

belief is that composite stories are a credible way of representing and valuing a contextualized description of the participants' nuclear episodes.

Before embarking on reading the stories, I make a final remark pertaining to rural and urban stereotypes. In writing the composite stories, it is not my intention to present one educational setting as superior to another; however, it is my intention to position rural and urban experiences somewhat dichotomously. I write this way, as mentioned, not to emphasize or propagate unhelpful binaries. Instead, the composite rural and urban teaching stories are intended to stimulate within educators a deeper comprehension of perceived rural and urban educational cultures, a stride toward respecting the values, norms, and perspectives of rural and urban teaching experiences.

Mrs. Schultz's Rural Teaching Day

The harsh sound of the alarm clock roused Mrs. Schultz from a deep sleep, and her initial thoughts were: "It's Wednesday, the half-way mark, supervision day, and after-school choir practice."

She lay there for a minute, thinking about the 8 girls and 1 boy enrolled in extracurricular choir. She never intended to schedule choir practice on the same day as her supervision. Ideally, she wanted the choir to meet during lunchtime, on a day she did not supervise; however, as it turned out, her 9 choral students were involved in so many other types of extracurricular activities, like yearbook, drama, team sports, and community volunteer work, that Wednesdays at 4:30 p.m. was the only time these musical neophytes could accommodate a choir practice. Moreover, these students were an utter delight to teach; the only problem was protecting John from the emotional abuse he had to deal with—the backhanded remarks from the boys and those community members who thought it was absurd for a *boy* to sing in high school choir. She was doing what she could to transform these offensive attitudes. She was an active member of a school committee, which specifically addressed bullying issues, but she knew the school needed to do more. In particular, she was annoyed that the school division did not provide on-location professional counseling/guidance for students like John, who was tormented because of gender preferences. Nonetheless, John and the girls were so musically competent; being with them was a highlight of the week. She also coached junior girls' volleyball, which she did not enjoy that much. By no means was she an athlete; however, she knew very well that teacher credence was partially based on extracurricular involvement. As a past principal once said to her, "Thou shalt do extracurricular!"

Outside Mrs. Schultz's window, the sun was shining and the birds were singing. After getting dressed, Mrs. Schultz and her family enjoyed a quick breakfast together. Tim, her husband, indicated he was going to Blair's Repair to pick up the much-needed parts for his air seeder. Last night at supper time, Blair had phoned Tim saying that farm supplies had arrived on the Greyhound. Mrs. Schultz's daughter, Samantha, reminded her parents she was babysitting her two-year old cousin, Zachary, after school and would not be home until after supper. After a final gulp of no-name coffee, Mrs. Schultz was ready for her walk to school. She reconsidered this idea after remembering the box of resources she had just purchased—bulletin board borders, science posters, and a new computer program for individualized reading lessons that she knew Cody, her special-needs student, needed. Directly after school the previous day, Mrs. Schultz had driven an hour and a half into the city for an optometrist appointment. Following the check-up, she had just enough time to visit *The Teacher Store* before it closed. Now, armed

with both the resources and her teacher enthusiasm, she decided to drive to school.

Mrs. Schultz opened the unlocked door of her car and put the box of resources in the front seat next to her. After three tries, the engine started, and she backed out of the driveway. Half way to school, she heard a menacing clonking emerge from the engine. Parking the car on Main Street, she got out and kicked the tire in frustration. Coincidentally, Blair, the local mechanic, was driving down the road in his tow truck en route to work, and he stopped and offered Mrs. Schultz a ride to school. She climbed into the 4 x 4 red truck somewhat reluctantly, as she suddenly had a pang of concern—what might the neighbors think? In his loud jovial voice, Blair greeted her and commented on how the weather was ideal for seeding. He then proceeded to ask Mrs. Schultz about Danny, his son. Blair was aware that Danny had done poorly on his last English test, and a brief parent-teacher conversation about Danny and his academic performance ensued. Mrs. Schultz informed Blair about the novel study the class was currently undertaking and the fact that there was one additional assignment scheduled for this term. If Danny did well on that project, he would maintain an average mark for the term. Mrs. Schultz suggested that Danny come and talk to her after class, and together they would adapt the assignment to better suit Danny's interests, which Mrs. Schultz knew all too well were hockey and softball.

Having regular and impromptu interactions with parents was common for Mrs. Schultz. Luckily, she enjoyed socializing with parents and other community members; it simply was a way of life. She sang with some parents in the church choir, caught up on the news when meeting them at the local post office, and, intermittently, shared a cup of coffee with them at the café. From working so closely with her students, she even knew particulars about their grandparents and about the 120-year-old history of the community. With such regular contact with community members and personal knowledge of the community, one would have thought that Mrs. Schultz was a prime candidate for the Town Council, for which she was thinking of running.

Ironically, although she had lived and taught in this small town for 10 years, sometimes she had this niggling feeling that she still did not belong. Perhaps it was because she possessed a slight French accent, acquired from growing up in a nearby town established by French pioneers. Tim had told her, "If your family doesn't have three generations laying in the town's graveyard, you're an outsider. That's just the way it is in this town." Such comments made her think about the community's sometimes tangible and sometime intangible subculture, which endorsed the existence and propagation of a racially- and culturally-homogenous community population. Mrs. Schultz was frustrated by those community members whose aspirations were for their children to merely exist in this inflexible and somewhat stagnant rural community. She had hoped to change some of those mundane views if/when she became a Town Councillor.

As Blair turned the corner, the K to 12 school came into view. Mrs. Schultz picked up her supplies and said that she was looking forward to seeing Wendy, Blair's wife, after school. Not only was Wendy the pianist for Mrs. Schultz's choir, Wendy was a close friend. As Blair dropped off Mrs. Schultz, he told her he would check her car later in the day. Mrs. Schultz gave Blair her car keys and walked toward the Canadian flagpole that stood directly in front of the school. Mrs. Schultz put the box of resources on her knee as she put the key in the lock and opened the front door of the school.

By the time she entered her classroom, it was 8:15 a.m. She opened her desk drawer and took out her daybook to review the day ahead. With only one preparatory period per week, she needed to do all her marking and planning after school hours. As was the norm, she had been at

school all day last Saturday to prepare for the week. Today, her teaching duties included: English 7/8, Algebra 10, Science 8 (a double period), Fine Arts 7/8, Health 7/8, and Social Studies 7/8. In her 10 years as a rural teacher, Mrs. Schultz's subject elasticity had served her well. She had taught everything from Grade 1 Music to English 30.

She was pleased with the progress her current students were making on their character sketches in English class. She believed that some of their progress was attributable to the ranch setting of *Shane*, Jack Schaefer's noble cowboy. The students, many of whom enjoyed a farming or ranch-style home life, were especially attentive and productive during this unit. When asking the students to participate in role play, even Rob, who was often disengaged from academic work, brought his spurs and chaps as character props. Reviewing the success of that role play made Mrs. Schultz think about Rob's best friend, David. Recently David had been a bit temperamental. He just was not acting like the boy she had known for the past 10 years. She reminded herself that she needed to be extra patient with him. The recent separation of his mother and father has been very difficult for David, his siblings, and for many community members.

The second period of the day was Algebra 10. Back in her high school days, Mrs. Schultz was a proficient Math student, but it had been years since she was faced with algebraic equations. She remembered late last year when the principal asked her to teach this subject. Mrs. Schultz initially thought this was a ridiculous request. The principal explained that with dwindling student enrollment, Mrs. Schultz would have to teach several split grade classes and Algebra 10. What choice did she have? Throughout the past few months, she had regained her Math confidence while re-learning various algebraic concepts from an outdated textbook. Actually, she was surprised how much she was enjoying this new subject, but she was also concerned about the new Math program that the school division was already implementing in Kindergarten to Grade 9. Next year, the new program would be implemented into Algebra 10. She had no background in this innovative way of teaching and learning Math, and she needed to talk to the principal about next year's schedule. If she was slated to teach Algebra 10 next year, she would need to get involved with a host of professional development activities now, which would equate to extensive travel and time away from her family. The only other alternative would be to teach the new Math curriculum to herself with some additional help that she assumed she could get on-line. She suspected that with the high school Math teacher retiring in three years, she might soon have a new teaching portfolio bestowed upon her.

Her double period of Science 8 consumed the rest of the morning, and she was excited about the hands-on activity she had planned. The class would walk to the nearby slough to investigate an aquatic microenvironment. In preparation, last week she phoned Mr. and Mrs. Sherbetski asking and receiving permission for her class to conduct an experiment with the slough water on their land.

For the afternoon, she had the paper and charcoal supplies that were required for the cowboy/cowgirl drawings they were creating in Fine Arts 7/8. The resources were lying on the bookshelf. She questioned if she should lock them in her desk for extra security but decided they should be fine where they were. Health 7/8 was slated after Fine Arts, and she hoped Carla remembered the heart in the freezer. The previous day, as they talked about the human circulatory system, Carla told Mrs. Schultz that Carla's dad recently butchered a steer, and the family saved the heart! Mrs. Schultz phoned Carla's dad asking if she could use the organ as a demonstration for Grade 7/8 Health class. Mrs. Schultz knew this activity would be an attention-grabber, if nothing else. If Carla forgot to bring the heart, Mrs. Schultz decided she

would give the class an extra period to work on their character sketches. Last week, they lost an English class due to the school-wide talk on bullying. The last class of the day was Social Studies 7/8, and, for this class, the students would use maps to find the longitude and latitude of towns and cities throughout North America. She thought that she ought to include Wyoming in her list of places, as it was the setting for *Shane*.

As she walked to the staffroom for Wednesday's weekly 8:20 a.m. staff meeting, she noticed the Jenkins kids, Mike, Rhonda, and Chad, entering the school. Although they were not supposed to be at school so early, she knew they were good kids and decided to ignore them. Although the quick ten-minute staff meetings were a bit of a pain, the gathering served to bring all 12 staff members up-to-date on the week's activities.

Hallway supervision started at 8:35 a.m. Mrs. Schultz enjoyed this time and viewed it as an opportunity to informally visit with students. During this morning's before-school supervision, she learned who had won yesterday's senior volleyball game and that last night Mr. Nostbachen (the Grade 11 Biology teacher) had been seen carrying a case of beer from the local bar. She also heard that two days ago Sherri Nolan delivered her baby—a 9 lb 12 oz. healthy boy called Ian: She needed to remember to send her a card. Two Grade 12 students, Jenny and Marie, asked what happened to her car, as they had noticed it was abandoned on Main Street. Such informal conversations would be mirrored during her 15-minute morning recess supervision, her half-hour lunch supervision, and her 15-minute afternoon recess supervision. The bell rang signaling the start of school. Ready for the start of her day, Mrs. Schultz smiled as she walked toward her classroom; she was pleased to find Carla's dad waiting outside her classroom door holding a Ziploc bag containing the bloody heart!

Mr. Patterson's Urban Teaching Day

The loud noise of the radio's pop music instantly roused Mr. Patterson from a sound sleep; his initial thoughts were: "Wow, I'm tired." In an effort to make a solid dent into a stack of 80 essays in need of correcting, Mr. Patterson had stayed up marking until the early hours of the morning. Outside his window, he heard the sound of a bus engine departing from the nearby bus stop. "Half an hour before the next one," he thought. After getting dressed, Mr. Patterson headed to the kitchen to prepare himself a pot of strong, Tim Horton's coffee. Being Thursday, he contemplated the day's events. Today was the first of three after-school drama practices he had scheduled over the next week. His class would be performing in only two weeks, and, although they had practiced during class, they needed the extra time to perfect their performances. Because most of his students walked, rode their bike, or caught the city transit bus to school, it was quite easy for them to stay an extra hour after school. The only challenging part was booking the gymnasium stage. During his preparation period today, he would pop out to *Starbucks* and get Mrs. Hill, the school secretary, a coffee and muffin for resolving the gymnasium scheduling conflict that had arisen due to Mr. Patterson's short notice.

Mr. Patterson thought about the drama practice today. He had always held a keen interest in acting; thus, he was personally involved with *City Theatre Production*, a volunteer drama group, and he often bought tickets for the popular musicals that made their rounds through the major Canadian cities. He loved teaching Drama and, in particular, he found this class to be emotionally rewarding for his students, because, through the medium of acting, they could openly express themselves. Besides, it was through Drama that he came to know some of his students on a more personal level. He was well aware that with 1,500 students enrolled in the

school, the timid, shy, and/or insecure urban student sometimes fell through the cracks or was unintentionally overlooked by educators. He continually pondered on how, in a classroom of 35 students, he could better serve individual students about whom he really knew very little. In an attempt to partially reconcile this issue, he wanted to teach Drama. His aspirations were addressed when last year the Drama/Band teacher had been transferred to another school, and the high school Drama teaching slot became available.

At 7:00 a.m. Mr. Patterson left his house and headed to a nearby bus stop. As he crossed the street, he thought about how much he enjoyed living here. He had grown up in the city and took no offence being called a “city boy.” The city was an exciting place to be; its environment was rewarding, both personally and professionally. Urban centers had so much to offer including museums, art galleries, parks, libraries, public transportation, employment opportunities, shopping opportunities, supermarkets, restaurants, plus the convenience of choice threaded throughout these points. The city provided ethnic and cultural richness, religious options, the existence of a variety of clubs and associations—something that allowed for a person to deviate from the mainstream hegemony without being ostracized. Perhaps that was why he enjoyed teaching in his large school; it mirrored the conveniences and choices that emanated from city life.

With a hiss from the air brakes, the city transit stopped directly in front of him. Mr. Patterson climbed the steps, showed his bus pass, and proceeded to take a seat. On his 30-minute ride to school, he passed the city library, the *Centennial Science Museum*, the *Cityplex Theatre*, the local university, and a lush park with a paved running track. En route to school, he considered which field trips he might use to support his classes and decided to discuss the topic with his students.

At 7:30 a.m. Mr. Patterson descended the bus steps and arrived at school. After pressing the correct combination to disengage the alarm, he entered the school. It was five years now since he started teaching here, and he thought it might be time to request a transfer. Indeed, he enjoyed this school and its culturally-diverse student population, but, ideally, he wanted to teach in a school located closer to his condo. He remembered his first few weeks at this school. Mrs. Hill was annoyed with him because he did not electronically submit the classroom attendance to the office within the first 10 minutes of class. She was even more annoyed with him when he used the French room during the Open-House Community Night and had not prearranged it through her. She explained to him that there were insurance issues surrounding the use of school property after-hours. Although Mr. Patterson commended Mrs. Hill for her dedication to detail and devotion to her job, he questioned the bigger picture. Was this environment not supposed to welcome input and participation from students, parents, and community members? If so, then why was the system, at times, so inhospitable to the community? Take the parent visitations, for example. Before being allowed to even talk to a teacher, every parent had to formally sign in at central office and receive a clip-on pass. With that said, Mr. Patterson did not have any suggestions as how to make this institution a more inviting, publically-accessible place, while simultaneously ensuring personal accountability, safety, and order.

Mr. Patterson whistled as he walked down the hallway toward his classroom located on the east side of the building. Due to the spatial aspects of the school and the large staff, he saw about half of the teaching staff on any given day. This lack of social and professional contact was also a feature of the administration, too. He did not communicate with the principal often, and sometimes he wondered if the principal knew what he was doing in class? Nevertheless, Mr. Patterson felt that the administration believed in the professionalism of the staff, or, then again,

was it that the principal was so busy with administrative issues that she was unable to be involved in the specific affairs of teachers? Either way, he liked the classroom autonomy he had. Besides, he was supplied with professional and personal support and direction from his French Department. He was considering applying for the position of Department Head next year if he stayed at this school.

After a number of hallway turns, Mr. Patterson entered his classroom. He regularly arrived early, and, this morning, he targeted the extra time before the start of school to correcting the last of the student essays he had almost finished last night. By 8:45 a.m., the task was complete. He pulled out his daybook and reviewed the rest of the day. Today's teaching included six classes and his daily preparatory period. More specifically, his timetable incorporated English 9A, English 9B, Drama, Preparatory Period, French 9B, French 9A, and French 9B.

Luckily, the English classes were, more or less, a repeat of curriculum content and delivery. During these classes, he intended to return the students' essays and ask the students to utilize his written comments as well as the peer comments to create a final draft of their essays.

The Drama class was devoted to perfecting student performances. This semester, the Grade 10 English teacher and he had overlapping preparation periods. They had taken advantage of this time by collaborating and integrating their subjects. During English 10A, students wrote the plays. Correspondingly, in Mr. Patterson's Drama class, students were working on presenting these plays on stage. There were some complications because the enrollment lists for the two classes were different, but the teachers and students managed to iron out the kinks. Mr. Patterson was very proud of the class' effort. He personally invited the principal, superintendents, and director of the school division to the hour-long production scheduled for later in the month. The principal indicated that she would try to attend the performance. He had not yet heard from the other administrators but doubted they would come.

Mr. Patterson was glad that two of his three afternoon French classes consisted of some of the same students he taught in English. The daily double periods with these students allowed him more opportunity to recognize their personalities, talents, skills, and potential. With large class enrollments, it was difficult to personally understand why the student thought and acted in the way they did. As well, because of the large class numbers, he acknowledged that his instruction and classroom management techniques were more formal than he perceived ideal.

With just over 10 minutes left before the start of the school, Mr. Patterson walked to the staffroom. He made an effort to socialize with the 65 teachers employed within the school, but, as it went, he predominantly sat with his group of French teachers. Their personal and professional closeness was nourished by their regular Friday after-school socials at *McNillie's Lounge*, a nearby restaurant. On the way to the staffroom, he passed a couple of girls talking and giggling and a group of tough-looking boys leaning against the lockers. He heard that this group of boys was referred to as *The Bros*. Last week, the school provided a professional development opportunity for teachers, where the guest speaker was a police officer invited to educate the teachers about gang insignia, regalia, and other gang indicators such as graffiti, colors, tattoos, hand signals, and argot usage. While walking past *The Bros*, he took a targeted look at how they were dressed and how they acted. He thought he recognized some warning signs of gang affiliation. He would need to talk to the other teachers and the principal about these speculations. As he continued walking down the hallway, he passed over 100 students, some of whom he remembered from when he taught them; other students he did not know. Physically, they were adorned with everything from nose, eyebrow, and lip piercings, to ripped jeans, designer skirts, expensive footwear, and hijabs. Often he heard groups of hallway students

speaking different languages. The school had even made arrangements on Fridays for interested Muslim students to exit class for a few minutes to attend to their religious needs and obligations. Ethnically, linguistically, and culturally, the students were diverse.

Upon entering the staffroom, Mr. Patterson saw Mrs. Garnier, another high school French teacher. He greeted her with a nod and a, “Bonjour, comment ça va?” Mr. Patterson reminded himself that he must meet with her in the next few days to discuss the *Provincial French Oratory Competition*, which was scheduled here in the city later in the year. Mr. Patterson walked to the kitchen area, grabbed a coffee, and proceeded to sit down for a five-minute chat with his colleagues. One of the teachers was talking about José, whose mother was very ill. Mr. Patterson struggled to remember José, but pinpointed him to be either the spiky-haired boy or the dark, short-haired boy with glasses, both of whom were in Grade 10B. After asking for clarification, Mr. Patterson was told that José was indeed the spiky-haired boy. The teachers had decided to send flowers and a card to the hospital. Mr. Patterson gladly donated to the fund and suggested that Mrs. Fargo, the Spanish teacher, take the card and translate the staff’s comments from English to Spanish. After all, it had only been a year or so since José and his family had immigrated to Canada.

As the bell rang, the school principal entered the staffroom. Instantly, Mr. Patterson remembered that he needed to schedule an appointment with her. Mr. Patterson was in the middle of his M.Ed. program at the local university, and he recently found out that next January a graduate class would be offered during his school lunch hour. He needed to ask if he could enroll in one of those classes. Fortunately, he had no supervisory duties scheduled for next semester, which allowed him to at least make the request.

Mr. Patterson’s first class was about to start, so he started to make his way back to the classroom. The hallways were buzzing with noise and commotion as students hustled to class. As he turned the corner, his classroom came into sight. He became intrigued, because standing in front of his classroom door was a person wearing clip-on visitor identification.

Discussion of Narratives

A dominant theme threaded throughout participants’ rural experiences was *relationships* and the idea that rural relationships are both advantageous and disadvantageous in the life of a teacher. Possessing close relationships with students, parents, and community members empowered participants when teaching, but often infringed on their personal lives. Due to the existence of strong relationships, participants were able to fluidly communicate with students and parents and effectively incorporate sound pedagogy into their teaching; however, these personal and academic relationships tended, at times, to morph into one entity, resulting in a *fishbowl* teacher lifestyle. Within the study, some participants were comfortable with this way of life, while others were not. Most notably, it was the participants who had grown up in a rural environment, who had the most comfort with teaching in rural schools. Because their backgrounds included personal experience with rural people, lifestyles, and cultures, those teachers who were raised/partially raised in a rural setting, unconsciously and conscientiously, more easily adapted to teaching and living in a rural environment, as compared to teachers who had only urban life experience.

A dominant theme threaded throughout participants’ urban experiences was that relationships were affected both positively and negatively by numbers and choice. On a constructive note, participants spoke about ease of access to professional development, teaching

resources, field trips, and teaching specializations and other teaching opportunities. However, also because of numbers, participants believed that urban students were more liable to “fall through the cracks.” Moreover, because of student numbers, (a) teacher-student relationships were less personal, (b) teacher participants were less involved with the school community, and (c) the parents were less involved with the school community, all of which fostered a structured, policy-driven institution-like school culture.

In considering all data, the rural and urban teachers maneuvered differently in their school environments. In relation to this point, there are theoretical features attached to the results of this study, one of which is related to teacher identity and prior socio-cultural background. Vygotsky (1978) believed that an individual’s development cannot be understood without considering the historical, cultural, and social networks of that individual. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a social constructivist perspective based on the work of Vygotsky. The theory is influenced by the work of scholars such as Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wells (1999, 2000, 2002, 2011). From the perspective of CHAT, cognition is shaped by the *historical settings* of a learner and the activities that took place within those settings. Settings refer to former people and events that have imparted social and historical meaning for an individual, therein molding the intellectual schema and cultural comfort of an individual. In turn, no two people in a room are “identically situated” (Brown & Duguid, 1996, p. 53), because their historical settings and the interactions within these experiences are unique. Thus, the way to ideally present mathematics concepts to a farm boy from the prairies and a Chinese girl from the city will vary greatly. An individual’s knowledge depends not only on the nature of the teaching and learning, but also on his/her learning dispositions and past experiences, which are influenced by historical settings (Adams, Bondy, & Kuhel, 2005; Gee, 2000; Wells, 2002).

Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi (1992) recognized that prior to the 1990s, little credit was given to research on how teacher identity and its development affected what and how a teacher taught. In other words, how is teacher identity connected to an individual’s historical settings? CHAT and teacher identity coincide ideally with Connelly and Clandinin’s (1988) ideal that the amalgamation of a teacher’s personal and professional experiences is the core from which teachers develop both the curriculum and their teacher identity. Within this study, the participants’ prior rural and urban experiences had an impact on their teaching pedagogy, and the positive and challenging aspects of rural and urban teaching were somewhat dependent upon the participants’ prior levels of social understanding and skills relative to rural and urban cultures. That is, rural and urban teaching experiences were directly affected and reflective of a teacher’s previous rural and urban cultural backgrounds, both personally and professionally. Participants believed that their rural or urban background influenced the way they viewed, acted, and handled classroom situations. This point implies that rural-raised teachers may be at an advantage when teaching in a rural school, and that urban-raised teachers may be at an advantage when teaching in an urban school. This statement does not infer that rural-raised teachers cannot successfully teach in an urban school, or urban-raised teachers cannot successfully teach in a rural school; however, a point emerging from this study is that in order for a teacher to be effective within an unfamiliar school community, it is paramount that he/she is cognitive of the dynamics of the community culture.

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

Within postsecondary teacher training programs and for professional development events, perhaps a place and space could be created to provide teacher candidates/teachers with an opportunity to contemplate how one's background and life experiences influence teacher identity, teacher values, and pedagogical methods. This place and space could be situated in a form of narrative activities and/or research where "the complexity of personal practical knowledge [surface with] a social, public, and self-reflective realm" (Olson & Craig, 2001, p. 669). Educators reflecting upon how they became the teachers they are, has the potential to support those teachers in improving their pedagogical approaches in the classroom to positively impact student learning.

In addition to positively impacting student learning, another implication of this study is the idea of establishing community mentorship programs for new teachers within rural and urban school setting. Much literature addresses the topic of teacher mentorship for new educators, but such programs contain few details, if any, about the importance of community mentorship programs. Established teachers, administrators, school boards, and Ministries of Education may consider that an aspect of teacher mentorship programs could include a type of guided induction or involvement with the school community, where new teachers are provided with time and opportunities to learn about the community and its members, associations, and/or businesses. Guidance in this area would assist newly-inducted teachers of the community in negotiating his/her teacher identity.

The results of this study provide insight into the complexities and nuances of teaching in both rural and urban environments; in turn, interested researchers may want to explore how teachers personally and professionally function within these terrains. More specifically, how do rural and urban teaching experiences influence teacher identity? How does past knowledge and experience of rural and urban lifestyles affect teacher identity? Within rural and urban contexts, how do students, parents, and community members identify with teachers? How do teacher challenges and frustrations relate to cultural and social issues of rural and urban environments? What implications do the answers to these questions have on improving teacher well-being and student success?

Acknowledgement

I extend my appreciation to Dr. Angela Ward (University of Saskatchewan) for the guidance that she provided me throughout my graduate studies and for her editorial comments with regard to this article.

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Notes

¹ Statistics Canada (2003) recommended that Canadian researchers define rural as any center with less than 10,000 people, and urban as any center over 10,000 people. We have incorporated these quantitative boundaries of rural and urban into the parameters of this study.

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