Using Risk to Conceptualize Rural Secondary School Parents' Sense of Community

Bonnie Stelmach

Abstract

The question driving this study was: What makes rural secondary parents feel in community with their children's schools? Using a sociomaterial approach, data were collected from three rural schools in northern Alberta, Canada using walking interviews with parents in the schools, site observations, focus groups, and individual interviews with 21 parents. Data were viewed through a risk lens to gain insights into how parent–parent interactions entail risk, and how this may impact upon their sense of community. Three categories of risk were developed: social and personal risk that emerges from being familiar, known, or part of a "legacy family"; political risk was experienced through parents' influence (or lack of influence) in school decisions, and the extent to which they could authentically express/live their perspectives; and moral/ethical risk related to the expectation and responsibility to engage with the community in good ways to prove one's right to belong. This research adds to the scholarship on parent involvement generally by highlighting the parent–parent dynamic as possibly creating tensions and barriers for the home–school dynamic. Most research focuses on teacher–parent or principal–parent relationships. This research adds to the scholarship on rural parent involvement specifically in three ways. The concept of legacy parents is introduced and the role interrogated. Second, the view of rural schools as close-knit is challenged by bringing to light how collective identities create hierarchies and entrench time-honored expectations of engagement. Finally, the seamlessness of boundaries between rural schools and their external communities is emphasized.

Key Words: risk, rural, secondary schools, parents, involvement, legacy family, community, Canada, home, relationships, dynamics

A Vignette

> *"Sometimes it feels like junior/senior high all over again. It's like you're the lone person standing in a room, and if you're not willing to go and introduce yourself and push yourself into the social situation, you're not necessarily getting invited in, and it's not because people are mean…."* (rural school principal)

The above remark came to mind at a recent experience I had at a book club in my local town in Alberta, Canada. Resolving to increase participation in my rural community, I joined the library book club. I knew the book club had been in operation for a few months, but assumed it was the kind of club where people could come and go. After introductions, the book club leader explained the six women had been together for years. It was clear from the comfortable way these women bantered that they shared a bond. I was attentive and interested, and they said they were happy I had joined them. But I was aware that I had no entry point into their circle.

We had read *The Rosie Project* by Graeme Simsion (2013). The main character, Don Tillman, is a geneticist working at a university. He suffers from social awkwardness and cannot find an appropriate mate. Given his scientific acumen, it made sense to him to design a study, The Wife Project, to help him identify the perfect partner. At one point in the meeting the book club leader stated, "Well, academics are [she paused] WEIRD!" Everyone laughed, and to the leader's credit she explained that she once worked at a university and so she knew this to be true. There seemed to be consensus about this. I chuckled along with the others, just like a junior high teenager going along with a joke they secretly find unfunny. But I had to because my identity as an academic was concealed; the only thing the group asked about me was my name.

At some point, I thought, surely someone will ask where I work and what I do. Should I confess now? Will this be embarrassing for them? Will they then think I too must be weird? How do I play my cards to fit in and prove I am not? In fact, no one asked anything about me at subsequent meetings.

The book identified for the following month did not sound appealing to me, so I thought about opting out. However, I worried that my discontinuing might be interpreted as my having judged and rejected the group. What if I encountered one of them at the gas station or post office? How would I explain my fleeting membership?

While driving home I reflected on the assumptions of sameness that made it acceptable for the book club members to generalize academics, a group that was "not them." I grew up in rural Alberta where I currently work and live, and so it was somewhat surprising that I felt I was on the periphery in a context which was rather familiar. I took a risk in joining the group mid-year, but I also realized there was potential risk if I did not complete the year with them. The experience made me wonder what it is like for parents who try to become part of the school community.

Background to the Study

This article evolved out of a study that sought insight into what makes secondary school parents feel in community in their children's schools. While parent involvement has been a subject of academic interest for decades, there is increasing recognition that race, ethnicity, socioeconomic group, and gender are privileging or deprivileging conditions affecting how parents are positioned in schools (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010; Chang et al., 2015; Cooper et al., 2010; David, 1993; de Carvalho, 2001; Rollock et al., 2015; Shuffleton, 2017; Vincent, 2017). Entrenched school practices tend to overlook the above factors, and so nonmainstream parents are usually outsiders and labeled as uninvolved or hard to reach (Epstein, 2011).

The field has grown in sophistication as a result of interrogating the school-centric (Lawson, 2003) nature of parent involvement and the assumptions undergirding the term itself. As a result, researchers have introduced conceptual specificity regarding parents' participation along a continuum of involvement to engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), and the field has evolved around models with social justice aims, including funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), ethic of community (Furman, 2002), communities of parental engagement (Torre & Murphy, 2014), parent knowledge (Pushor & the Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2005), and collective parent engagement (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2016). Similarly, the aim in this study was to challenge binary thinking and moral categorizing of parents as involved/uninvolved or good/bad that tends to emerge from the involvement/partnership discourse that has prevailed since the 1990s (Christenson & Reshly, 2010; Laureau & Shumar, 1996; Thomas et al., 2015). Instead of the age-old question, "How can we increase parent involvement?" my starting point was, "What makes parents *feel in community* with their children's schools?"

A focus on community entails ontologically different questions than the ones that emerge from the involvement or partnership domain. Community attends to the experience of belonging, rather than the factors that encourage

or impede parents' ability to perform teacher-prescribed actions (e.g., helping with homework). This question is communal in nature, rather than contractual or transactional, and is based on the expectation that teachers are curators of the parent–teacher dynamic. Community, Bauman (2001) claims, is a word that has a "feel." In keeping with the positive feelings that the term community evokes, parents in this study described their schools and towns as friendly and supportive. But some parents were in conflict with this depiction, indicating that there were complexities and nuances in their community scripts that demanded exploration. Like my book club experience illustrated, a decision to be in community with others in a rural setting is less straightforward than one might assume. These parents' descriptions and experiences were complex and meaning-full; risk was not in their words, but it shaped their decisions, performances, and retellings. Risk was like a door that at times and for some could be opened and walked through to reach rewards; risk was a wall that for others took work to scale and involved compromise. In the realm of this parent work we often hear, "it's all about relationships," and risk helps us explore in more fullness what that might mean.

I focused on secondary school because at this level of schooling there is a marked shift in parents' participation *at* school (Catsambis, 2001; Epstein, 2011; Sanders, 2011; Sanders & Simon, 2002). Teachers often complain that parents "disappear" at this level. In past research I learned that parents' interest in their children's schooling is sustained, but they feel displaced from the school landscape compared to their elementary school experience (Stelmach, 2016). Indeed, it was parents' repeatedly saying they were "not needed" by teachers in secondary school that prompted my further exploration. Jensen and Minke's (2017) literature review of secondary school parent involvement confirmed that school-based parent engagement becomes less important as children age, primarily because there is an expectation in western society that teenagers should develop autonomy and independence. Indeed, shifting relationships between parents and their teenage children demands more scrutiny of statistical claims. For example, Robinson and Harris' (2014) finding that traditional parent practices like helping with homework negatively impacts student achievement has inspired methodological debate over the assumptions upon which their analyses were conducted (Shumow, 2014). Further, the extent to which contexts surrounding the reasons parents might help with homework in high school (e.g., their child is struggling)—or students' perceptions about their parents' behaviors—might contribute to negative outcomes. The key point is, if engagement in schooling is less straightforward for secondary school parents, thinking beyond traditional school–home relations is required. This motivated my focus on parents' sense of community.

More attention is being paid to rural schools, but by comparison, the urban context is still more studied. The most recent published literature review on rural parent involvement was conducted by Semke and Sheridan in 2012, which included 18 studies. Among those, one was conducted in Canada, and that study was situated in a remote First Nations community which is not representative of rural Canada in general. More recent literature reviews, such as Kim's (2018) focusing on parent involvement in developing countries, considers rural contexts incidentally. Thus, Coladarci's (2007) call for rural-specific research still needs answering to expand beyond the metrocentricity (Campbell & Yates, 2011) that characterizes this topic and educational research in general.

Literature Relevant to Parents in Rural Schools

Parent involvement in rural schools has been shown to positively impact minority children's achievement (Brody et al., 1995), social/emotional behavior (Owens et al., 2008; Xu, 2004), and students' expectation for high school completion (Dalton et al., 1996). In a survey of rural teachers' perceptions of parent involvement in three American states, Lin et al. (2014) reported that student learning was the most important outcome of enhanced collaboration between teachers and parents. Teachers in that study viewed parent involvement in teacher-oriented terms, including parents helping with homework, volunteering, and attending parent–teacher interviews. Parents were seen as a means to an end. These authors critiqued the operational definition of parent involvement as teacher directed.

Lasater's (2019) recent action research study in an American secondary school similarly concluded that without teachers' self-examining their ideological assumptions about partnerships with parents, it is difficult to change the school–home dynamic. In that three-year study, improvements were made, but there was still a lack of consensus between teachers and parents, and teachers were more likely to view parent involvement as serving teacher needs. Others have leveled the same concern in the urban context (e.g., Watson & Bogotch, 2015). The reliance on a schoolcentric definition of parent involvement is unsurprising, given that a persistent division of labor between parents and teachers has been noted elsewhere in the literature (Flessa, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; McGrath, 2007; Plevyak, 2003).

While an instrumentalist approach has a stronghold in practice, scholars have attempted to reframe this by emphasizing relational aspects. Sanders (2009), for example, promotes the concept of relational power whereby parents and educators acknowledge their interrelatedness and independence. She has also suggested teachers be border crossers (2009), working to erode the

perceived or real barriers that exist between parents and teachers. Home visits are concrete examples of how teachers disrupt entrenched practices and relinquish control and power (Cremin et al., 2015), a practice that has been shown to improve relationships between parents and teachers in rural schools as well (Meyer & Mann, 2006). Along a similar vein, Ruitenberg and Pushor (2005) and Pushor (2017) argue that educators should be more hospitable toward parents when they come to schools. They emphasize creating school as a space that helps parents experience ownership, much like they might in their own homes. Pushor (2017) gives examples of schools in Saskatchewan, Canada where parents or grandparents serve as greeters and ensure all parents enter the school with their "name called in love" (p. 19). Pushor further proposes a curriculum of parents, which is constituted by educators honoring parents not only for their knowledge about their children, but also for their knowledge about teaching and learning.

These researchers make an important contribution to the interrogation of power. However, because their findings emerge from primarily urban contexts, there is an assumption that power is confined to the school and held primarily by teachers and parents with the right capital. Rural schools and their external communities, however, are considered to have a seamless connection, with power distributed broadly and entrenched in histories external to the school. This dynamic becomes exaggerated in debates about the fate of small schools, for instance. Corbett and Helmer's (2017) study of school closure in Atlantic Canada is instructive in this regard; their interpretation of parents' interests in terms of "archetypical identity positions" (p. 4) makes it plain that parents enact power in varying ways and based upon divergent interpretations and appeals to a range of emotional, rational, and material claims.

The blurring of boundaries between rural schools and their communities is further emphasized by the fact that collaborating with the community is identified as key for success in the rural school principalship (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Preston et al., 2013). Resource scarcity is a main reason why rural schools must develop effective relationships with parents and community members (e.g., Nichols et al., 2017), but more pressing is the need for principals to demonstrate allegiance to the community. For example, Browne-Ferrigno and Allen (2006) argue that rural school principals are under a magnifying glass and are expected to be "on call" for parents at any time of day (Lock et al., 2012). Rural school principals are relationship brokers; not only do they play a role in fostering effective relationships between school, parents, and community, but they often have to navigate parents' diverse views and reconcile them with those of the teachers (Blakesley, 2012). We know through McHenry-Sorber's (2014) and McHenry-Sorber and Schafft's (2015) work that the divide between educators and the rural community can be insurmountable and the consequences

egregious. Power is not simply positional in rural communities; it is also situational and contingent, and not always in educators' favor.

Rural school principals spend a lot of time interacting with the external community as a way to understand the range of perspectives and to show they value community as the locals do (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Principals know that fitting in can make or break their tenure in a rural school. School councils typically serve as conduits for principals to get the pulse of parents and the community (Foster & Goddard, 2003; Preston, 2010). While useful in this regard for principals, whether the parent representatives on the councils are representative of all parents remains a key question.

While most studies depict educator–parent differences as the source of contestation in rural schools and examine this from the perspective of educators, McClelland's (1997) is an exception. He interviewed five American families about their experiences with their children's schools in the rural community in which they were raised and continued to live. Though dated, his study has relevance for my research purpose. Central to McClelland's findings is the idea of "multiple, thickly layered relationships" (p. 110) among parents and teachers. Rural school parents reported familiarity to and with educators through a range of roles and circumstances: as members of community groups and churches, neighbors, and shared interests in recreation. Overlapping associations created complexity for these families, especially when parents and teachers engaged over contentious issues regarding students. McClelland highlights the personal and high stakes nature of parent–teacher and parent–parent relations in rural communities. Risk is implied. Whereas urban parents are more likely to maintain anonymity and separate school from their private lives, rural parents' professional and personal relations are inevitably intertwined. Thus, rural parents' school-related issues can turn into deeply personal ones if friendships become strained or broken. As one parent in McClellend's study noted, "it's so well known what your school stature and status is. And it carries out into other things within the community" (p. 110). Such perspectives are rarely documented. By exploring parents' experiences through the lens of risk, I hope to balance the romanticized view of rural places (Baeck, 2016) and the "apple pie" (Shuffleton, 2017) metaphor for parent involvement. Nuanced narratives may dislodge these stereotypes.

My work assumes the importance of parent voice, which has been a recurring theme in the study of parents (Lumby, 2007; Martin & Vincent, 1999; Stelmach & Preston, 2008). This strand of literature informed my study because the concept of voice—whether one feels compelled to withhold it or free to share it—is influenced by how they sense their place in the school community. The social justice agenda has generated momentum for studying parents

from ethnically marginalized groups (e.g., Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Crozier, 2000; Gillborn et al., 2012) or parents whose children are considered disadvantaged (e.g., Gallagher et al., 2018; Hess et al., 2006; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Ryan & Quinlan, 2018). As a result, the field is well-informed that parents who possess the right capital as determined by race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic class are more likely to know how to navigate and negotiate for their children (Vincent, 2017). Yet, Lin, Isernhagen, Scherz, and Denner's (2014) survey showed that rural teachers were blind to ethnicity and culture and did not feel it strongly impacted parent involvement. This begs the question of how parents themselves consider diversity in their conceptualizations and experiences of community.

Finally, while research aiming to amplify parent voices presumes parents are unheard and therefore lack power, there is research to suggest that rural parents exert considerable power in subtle and tacit ways. For example, Freie and Eppley (2014) and Miller and Hellsten (2017) reported that principals and teachers new to a community feel pressured to align with parent expectations and face resistance if they do not follow traditions and norms in the community. Establishing trust inevitably involves managing risk (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015). My research may yield deeper understanding of this within the context of rural school parents' sense of community.

The Concept of Risk

Theoretically, risk has been defined in various ways (Renn, 1998). A common element, however, is that uncertainty about outcomes and the elimination or reduction of negative consequences is central to the risk agenda (Rosa et al., 2014). While a rationalist approach has dominated the risk field, another perspective recognizes that risk is a social function (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982) involving the negotiation of one's position vis-à-vis social arrangements and structures. Joffe (2003), for example, is situated in this latter camp. Arguing from a social representation approach based on Moscovici's (2001) theory, Joffe provides a constructionist account of risk. Emphasizing that risk is both material and symbolic, Joffe argues that risk messages are interpretations based on individuals' past experiences, assumptions, preferences, and tolerances. Her project was to demonstrate how external forces shape "consensual understandings of phenomena" (Joffe, 2003, p. 60) as risky, and while my concern was not on the way events become constructed as risky in a social context, her emphasis on the "complexity of the meanings made of risks by people positioned within specific social contexts" (p. 60) is valuable for examining how parents negotiated the school context and the potential barriers they experienced in developing

a sense of belonging. Though associated with "losing something of value" (Fischhoff & Kadvany, 2011, p. 41) prevails in risk theory, I also considered how parents might risk as a means to reward.

Understanding risk as socially constructed corresponds with Beck's (1992) notion of individualization that categorizes risk as a personal burden. The neoliberal architecture of contemporary society perpetuates this, and Masquelier (2017) describes personal responsibilization as the mechanism that encourages individuals to be "responsible for their own fate" (Masquelier, 2017, p. 57). The prevention and management of risk is presented as a liberty accrued to those who are self-enterprising (Foucault, 2008). The capital value that results from risk prevention and management in the parent context comes in the form of social inclusion, status, reputation, and rights, rather than direct financial benefit. The socially negotiated nature of risk was helpful for my project because as parents mediated community spaces, they ultimately engaged in risk prevention and management as an interpretive act, rather than a cold calculation of probabilities.

Risk in Educational Research

In educational research, risk is a relatively recent phenomenon of interest (e.g., Hameiri et al., 2014; Helstad & Møller, 2013; McWilliam & Perry, 2006; Starr, 2012). Principals are the subjects of these studies, presumably because risk is thought to be a consequence of accountability (McWilliam & Perry, 2006). Citing Taylor (2005), for example, Perry and McWilliam (2007) situate principals within an "attentional economy" that renders them not only publicly accountable, but also publicly exposed to "anyone and everyone" (p. 32) who has the ability to weigh in on school matters as a result of readily available performance metrics. Further, in times of shifting demographics, unstable economies, and conflicting policies and politics, Dempster and Berry (2003) argue that "the educational terrain principals now traverse is strewn with many decision-making dangers" (p. 457). Social media, for example, was found to be risky terrain for a group of Alberta school leaders who prioritized mitigating parents' ability to distort messages about the school (Stelmach & Hunter, 2019).

There is increasing recognition of parents as one source of danger in the decisions principals make because of research that explores the potential conflict or negative outcomes inherent in parent–teacher dynamics (Beauvais, 2017; DeWeile & Edgerton 2016; Fernández & López, 2017; Zaretsky, 2004). Micropolitics is one explanation, for it brings to the forefront how actors strategize and position themselves for power and advantage or activate power through position (Ryan & Higginbottom, 2017). A micropolitical lens views schools as distribution systems, and power is the concern. That was not mine here, but

rather how relationships in rural contexts are entangled and influenced—and risk-laden—even when reward is the intention and end result. Risk tends to be implied rather than fully examined, however, and while parents might be a suggested source of risk, there is no consideration given to how risk is a practice of parents themselves. Given risk is most often raised within the context of health, crime, violence, insurance policies, and cost-benefit analyses (Fischhoff & Kadvany, 2011; Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006), I hope to offer a new direction for educational research.

Research Design

The Research Settings

This qualitative case study (Stake, 2005) was conducted in three rural schools situated in two rural, northern Alberta communities in Canada. Population in these research sites was less than 3,000 inhabitants each, which classified them as towns in Alberta (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2017). Statistics Canada defines rural as those communities that are outside of commuting zones of urban centers that have 10,000 or more inhabitants (du Plessis et al., 2001). In Canada rural is denoted by the presence of a "0" in postal codes. According to Cichinelli and Beesley's (2017) definition of rural in the American context, these Alberta communities were "rural remote" because they were more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. Further, these schools were located in the provincial north (Coates & Poelzer, 2014), which is in contrast to territorial or arctic north that people often think about when they hear the word "north," especially with reference to Canada. One can think of provincial north as the north below the north (Coates, 2014).

When asked about their communities, however, these participants' understanding about where they lived defied these sanctioned definitions. For example, they overwhelmingly denied their towns were remote or isolated; some considered a six-hour drive to the nearest city a reasonable commute and "just what you do" (parent) when you lived there. Families drove over an hour one-way so their children could participate in activities. One mother said her town was perhaps north, but "not *north* north." Technology has made irrelevant the concept of isolation that has long been characteristic of rural and northern communities (Berg et al., 2017; Tunison, 2002).

Natural resources drove the economies in these communities, and because of the volatility in the natural gas and oil industry in Alberta the last few years, the effects varied. When I drove around the towns, I noticed many houses for sale and businesses boarded up, and yet, a new hospital was being built in one of the towns. One principal claimed that student population had been steadily

falling, while in another community there was some growth because young families had come home from the city to live with parents after a downturn in the job market. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the economic reality of these towns. The current provincial premier has forecasted an unemployment rate exceeding 25% (The Canadian Press, 2020). This explains why these communities were intolerant of anyone whose agenda did not support the oil industry. In fact, on my drive I saw a billboard with disparaging comments about the then premier, who was known for her environmentalist sensibilities.

Small towns tend to be recognizable (Wuthnow, 2013), and there was a predictability about these towns, too. Main streets were wide and often marked by a wooden marquis advertising a Christmas supper or hockey game. Post office, banks, gas stations, barber shops, and grocery, drug, and dollar stores were street staples. These towns had fast food establishments, family restaurants, and modest department stores where one could do one-stop shopping. One town had a movie theater that offered two choices—one that was geared toward children when I was on site. Grocery stores had gluten-free sections, and there were wellness spas, fitness centers, and advertisements for art classes, challenging stereotypes of small towns as uncultured and behind the times. Gas was 10 cents more per litre compared to the capital city, and some grocery items were almost double the price one would normally pay. Participants complained about the cost of groceries and household items and admitted they drove to the nearest city (over two hours for some of them) for bulk shopping to support their growing families.

The schools in this study ranged in composition, and included two K–12 schools and one that served Grades 7–12. Two schools were public, and one was Catholic, which is publicly funded in Alberta. Student populations ranged from about 200 to about 600. The largest school served students who were bussed in from First Nations reserves and Metis settlements. Some students had lengthy bus rides as a result. Parents in these towns had choice about where to send their children, as there was more than one school in each community. These schools provided extensive programming and opportunities for students considering their size—drama, robotics, cosmetology, and mechanics, for example, complemented academic and nonacademic core programming. Sports were privileged in extracurricular activities, which was lauded by some parents but considered a limitation by others. Except for the one school with a high Indigenous student population, walkabouts suggested the student population reflected the European settlement of the area.

The Participants

Twenty-one parents participated in this study via individual interviews. Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were promised to them; therefore, my description of them is purposely general.

After obtaining ethics approval from my university, I contacted superintendents of school divisions to invite their participation, who relayed the study information to principals. I accepted into the study schools that were located in communities that met the classification of rural described above. Based on the principals' wishes, I attended (via Skype in one instance) the school council meeting to introduce myself and the study or asked the principal to provide a list of potential parents to create a purposeful sample (Patton, 2015). The study was advertised in school newsletters and automated phone call-outs. The sample was increased through snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) in which I asked volunteer parents to recommend other parents. In one school I had permission to recruit parents at a school event.

Of the 21 parents, five were fathers. Three of them were interviewed with their wives. Most mothers worked outside of the home as professionals, in retail or hospitality, and a few were self-employed or full-time parents. Fathers worked in the oil/gas industry and retail. One was a full-time parent. Three parents identified as Indigenous. Most had completed high school, and some had postsecondary education or training. The key selection criterion for the participant sample was that they had children in Grades 7–12, and all except one parent had more than one child in a nuclear or blended family.

Methodology and Data Collection Methods

A sociomaterial (Fenwick et al., 2011) design was used to conduct the study. A sociomaterial approach has ethnographic sensibilities, for it considers not only what people say, but the potential influence of environment, artifacts, and gestures on the creation of meaning. This aligns with case study, which affords "phenomenological attention to lived experience" (Schwandt & Gates, 2018, p. 344) by accounting for contextual detail.

In keeping with the sociomaterial approach and case study, I used multiple data collection methods. The first step in data collection was walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011) throughout the school with parents at each school. Considering the school as an artifact, I was interested in parents' responses to it, as well as the nature of the conversations they had while touring the school. Immediately following the walking interviews, focus groups (Janesick, 2016) with those parents were conducted; a total of 12 parents participated in the walking interviews and focus groups. This afforded an opportunity to ask general questions and to follow up on what was observed and heard during the

walking interviews. Later, semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2018) were conducted with those parents who volunteered after the focus group, as well as other parents who were invited through the school newsletters or automated phone messages, totaling 21 parents.

Parents chose where they wanted the individual interviews to take place. In two of the schools, the principal designated a room during data collection periods. Other parents were interviewed in meeting rooms at hotels, in cafes, or in their homes. We followed up initial interviews with in-person interviews, phone conversations, and email. Additionally, individual interviews with four administrators were conducted to gain insight into the school context. In total, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and administrators. Transcripts were returned to participants, along with a synthesis of key impressions from the interviews as a form of member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Interview data were augmented with my observations of the schools and towns, as well as review of documents such as school newsletters, websites, regional newspapers, bulletin boards around town, and by attending school and town events. I made two site visits for each school over a two-year period, spending at least a week during each site visit.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I was not deeply concerned with comparing these cases, but rather, earning the right to provide general interpretations of the data given the exploratory nature of the research question. Two complementary approaches to data analysis and interpretation were used.

Supported by *NVivo* qualitative software, preliminary data analysis began with open coding (Saldaña, 2016), which means I initially ignored the conceptual framework to honor the richness of the data. This was followed by structural and provisional coding to examine the data for "commonalities, differences, and relationships" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 84). For example, the closing of a new bistro in town was related to the idea that difference was perceived as a risk. A parent disclosing individually why she did not challenge the focus group comments generated a category of "silence as a way to manage risking being different."

My second and final approach to the data was intended to "story" the data, using Maietta's (2006) sort, sift, think, and shift method (see also Fryer et al., 2015). Maietta describes this approach as "diving in" and "stepping back." In the diving in step, transcripts were read and memos written to capture "pulse quotes" from each participant that provided insight into how risk plays into parents' experiences of community. Five or six quotes from each transcript that captured the essence of the participant's narrative were then displayed on

a PowerPoint slide creating an episode profile, and another memo was written to capture what emerged from the combination of quotes with respect to the research purpose. This constituted the stepping back phase. This method of analysis encourages a nonlinear approach to the data through periodic memoing and diagramming, with a central focus on creating a constellation of meaning from the pieces of data identified as insightful. This, in combination with coding, ensured a thorough, careful review of the data. It also ensured that imposing the conceptual framework did not limit my view of the data. This was important because of the constructivist assumption undergirding the study; attending to the data in this way provided insight into the complexity of parent relations.

Themes were created using what Freeman (2017) describes as categorical thinking. Categorical thinking is essentially naming, and as Freeman notes, when we name something we are also "framing it conceptually" (p. 17). This allowed me to account for the participants' descriptions in terms of risk. The creation of categories supported understanding the nature of the risk for the purpose of developing themes as discussed in the following sections.

Parents' Sense of Community Viewed Through the Lens of Risk

Sense of school community does not exist in isolation from parents' sense of belonging to the external community. The permeability of boundaries between school and town was evident in parents' examples of how they felt part of the school community. This had implications for the scope of their risk behavior—whether intentional or inadvertent—and the degree to which they felt a sense of community with their children's schools. In the following sections I discuss three categories of risk that I interpreted as influencing parents' sense of community in positive ways and in ways that compromised a full experience of community. First, participating in the school and external community made parents feel familiar with and to others, which created a sense of security and safety for themselves and their children. Knowing others and being known was understood in the context of *social* and *personal* risk. Second, parents felt in community as advocates for their children, in particular, and children and the school generally. The *right* to advocate or dissent was a feature of parents' sense of community in which they felt they had influence or democratic participation. I categorized the underlying risk involved as *democratic*. Third, when parents talked about supporting the school and town, they simultaneously implied what was the right and expected thing to do in a rural town and school. Their descriptions carried judgment, and I gathered these perspectives under a theme called *moral/ethical risk*.

Social and Personal Risk

Feeling in community was tied to being accepted by others. Familiarity was the base for being accepted, and even though some parents admitted that the description of "everyone knows everyone" was mostly "surface level" knowing, familiarity determined one's place. When asked, for example, if those parents who were never seen at the school were considered part of the school community, it was unequivocal that they were not.

The importance of familiarity was internalized. For example, one parent said that she got involved in things so that others could say, "Hey, I know you, and I've seen you do this, so you're okay." Being "okay" meant one was accepted as a good citizen and trustworthy person. Absence and invisibility leads to doubt about others and ultimately rejection in rural places (Preston et al., 2013; Wuthnow, 2013). Newcomers are especially susceptible to judgment. Parents assumed that those who kept to themselves chose isolation. One parent described this as having a "snotty attitude." The Doctor's Wife was a repeated trope in one community. Seen as "too good" to mix with others, parents concluded this kind of person was destined to be an outsider. This included new teachers, as this parent described:

> It's the ones that come in that are missing their Starbucks and can't wait to get out of town for the weekend….They feel isolated. But there are some teachers that have been here a long time, and it's like, you know, you're part of the community now, let's see you.

The reference to Starbucks coffee materially and symbolically emphasized an expectation to accept and align with the values, practices, and assumptions that held the community together. "Big city" wants and needs, like Starbucks, signaled rejection of rural offerings and violated the principle of reciprocity that seemed at play: "If you want the community to give to you, you have to give to the community," one parent said.

Some of these parents were once newcomers who moved into their communities for employment or marriage. They recalled how they joined clubs or churches or volunteered as a way to develop relationships. Parents who wanted to feel in community did so by "stepping up," believing one had to "make your environment your home." We interpreted the potential risk of social isolation to be severe, given this parent's comment:

> I'm not sure how many people are going to keep asking you to join, asking you to join, asking you to join, and you refusing….Everybody has their own friends, and so if you don't want to join us.…It doesn't hurt me…I already have my life established. It's you I'm trying to help.

Those who experienced a strong sense of community in their schools and towns created the impression that finding community was simply a matter of newcomers responding to invitation. But other parents provided insights that suggested invitation was not always there. For example, one parent said, "The ones that have been together, have been together for years, you're lucky if you get to go for coffee with them." Marrying into a legacy family (described below) seemed to erase one's outsider status. The parent I quoted at length in the paragraph above was one of those parents. Her suggestion that she was "established" confirms others' suggestions that the ticket to belonging was through a legacy family.

A unique feature of rural communities, and an important insight gained from this study, is the existence of "legacy" or "generational" families, as these parents called them. Legacy or generational families had longevity in the schools as former students, whose parents, grandparents, or other family members also attended and/or worked at the school. It was easy to identify the legacy families. Names on current student honor walls and in trophy cases matched those in the graduation composites that dated decades back. These parents were the ones who reminisced during the walking interviews, pointing out a locker that was theirs when they were students and sharing memories of teachers who were now their children's teachers. Legacy parents had historical, insider knowledge. During an individual interview, a legacy parent speculated,

> I think to be somebody that isn't a generational person here would be hard because there are so many generational families that I think it's a little bit hard to break into that. I think the generational families are the ones that have the real sense that—well, I still feel like [this school] is *my* school.

A parent in a different school confirmed this concept of generational parents. She had lived in her town for over a decade, but said she was constantly reminded she was an outsider and said that she was "lucky" to have met a parent from a generational family, otherwise she would not have the same information about or opportunities to participate in the school. Her sense of community was impeded because she believed her influence was not as strong as parents from legacy families. She waited to tell me this during an individual interview:

> Everyone was talking about community, and once you get into the school there is a sense of community, but it's hard to break that barrier. You talk about rural, small town. These families have been here—like those four people sitting around the table—those families have been around here for generations…you gotta almost connect with a family that's a legacy family.

In a way, legacy families were keepers of the school, ensuring their work on school council included preserving what once was. I heard about parents working to "bring back" the milk program, reading program, and taking over the high school yearbook even though students did not show an interest in it. These legacy parents decided what was important, and those who were not part of this group felt these were the parents the teachers and principal "defaulted" to when it came to feedback, support, and contribution.

Outsider status was a permanent marker. Time had the potential of bringing parents closer to the inner circle but not necessarily to complete insider status. One parent described it this way: "It's not how many years she's been here, it's how many new ones do we have to get to know." The arrival of another newcomer elevated the most recent newcomer's status; however, we learned that one could live in the community for 50 years and still be considered "not from here." Some parents learned to carefully navigate discussions and censor their statements to avoid reminding legacy parents of their outsider status.

Belonging was represented in a sociomaterial sense by small town spaces, events, language, and history. For example, when describing what makes them feel in community, parents frequently joked that trips to the post office and grocery store were drawn out because they always ran into people with whom they ended up chatting. Neighboring, as Wuthnow (2013) calls it, was not simply a nicety or "charm" of small town living; it was how familiarity was performed. Moreover, the places one frequented were noted and archived. For example, one parent who had owned a business in town claimed, "I can tell you exactly which teachers have been in my store and which ones have not." Parents in Catholic schools noted who attended church and who did not. Being seen mattered.

Further, despite renaming of commercial establishments, old names endured. Some parents were aware of this, such as this parent who said,

> We all know what the DMI is because we've lived here all our lives. So, then you want to tell [new parents] all about it because they don't know the history. Everything that you take for granted living in a small town they don't know. And I learned very quickly to stop doing that because it was irrelevant.

These emphasized the recurrent discourse of familiarity that played out in sense of community for some and served to keep others on the outside. Although those on the inside suggested being in community was a simple matter of choosing it, in fact, parents had to navigate the social structures and show a personal investment in a form of community that was established.

Political Risk

Conflict and dissent were carefully managed, and for the most part, avoided. Open debate and discussion of divergent perspectives was considered unwelcome, and adherence to entrenched norms and values was tacitly understood as a requirement for belonging. Given these communities depended on a natural resource economy, it was considered dangerous, for example, to question educational program decisions that focused on skill acquisition to meet the demands of the local labor market. One parent expressed concern to me that resource allocation was based on a limited view of education and the purposes of schooling but admitted she did not raise this with the school because she knew many families depended on those jobs.

Sports were also sacred in these schools, and it was the perception of some that "sports parents" had a stronger voice in the school community. Parents whose children were not involved in sports tried to resurrect fine arts programs or academic skills competitions, which was reported to take years and in some cases was not supported by the school. Those parents were more likely to retreat and seek influence elsewhere in the external community to avoid being labeled as difficult or demanding. Youth groups or community clubs were common pathways for these parents to make connections to students. This made their relationship to the school somewhat precarious; some parents found that through knowing the students, they knew the school, but other parents felt particularly disconnected.

There is an assumption of sameness and mutuality regarding traditional values in rural communities (Barrett, 2015), and this resulted in parents silencing themselves in other ways to avoid exposing themselves as potential outsiders. One parent said, "I used to be a roaring feminist, and now I'm more of a closeted one." She described the town as rigidly conservative, where "women are women, and men are men." She did not admit to others who she voted for in the provincial election because she knew it was the unpopular party.

Social diversity was a changing characteristic of these rural places, but it was not readily understood or accepted. Provincial mandates for schools to provide gender neutral washrooms to accommodate transgender students, for example, was received with an air of civil compliance, but parents' comments suggested they did not fully endorse it, as the following comment demonstrates:

> So part of me thinks, okay there's money they're going to spend to redo all these bathrooms, but I bet there's a school that could use a nice kitchen, or God forbid they need a new floor. Why wouldn't you pull those for something that is a necessity?

And others simply denied the concept of gender dysphoria:

> I don't know how anybody in elementary or even at a junior high level even knows anything about themselves to be so determined to say, "I'm transgender." By the time junior high and high school come, there's no way they want to get segregated out.

The above comment reinforces the tacit expectation for sameness, the danger of being different, and explains why nonconformity was a risk to be avoided. I learned in one site that some First Nations parents refused to self-identify, even though it meant forfeiting financial supports for their children. "We're all the same, aren't we?" was the reason provided. On one hand, such a comment is surprising considering Canada's official commitment to truth and reconciliation with Indigenous communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). On the other hand, Scott and Louie's (2020) recent qualitative study in a northwestern Canadian community reported that Indigenous students continue to be "singled out in negative ways" (p. 123). It makes sense, then, that First Nations parents in my study might choose to emphasize sameness, rather than risk their children being othered. The desire for homogeneity flies in the face of contemporary cries for social justice in education (2020), but viewed from the perspective of risk, it is understandable that parents navigated what West (2005) might call the "old" politics of difference. Bifurcation of public and private self was a mechanism for managing risk; parents participated in a process of unbecoming in the face of political risk.

Democratic rights also had to be protected. One parent said,

> If I want to be an advocate for my child, then I have to be involved in the school…Like, what happens if my kids get bullied? What do I do? So, I wanted to know how the system worked or get in the know.

School council membership afforded parents influence over school decisions and a venue for obtaining information that might have future utility. This gave parents capital over others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). School council did not always satisfy these parents' needs to feel purposeful, however, because teachers and principals either censored ideas or dominant parents discouraged authentic engagement of others. One parent described her school council as having "a lot of drama…because of different personalities and different opinions."

Some parents chose to avoid school council because of micropolitics, but this created a tension for those parents who believed volunteering in this capacity gave them the right to act on behalf of their children's needs. Others recognized the need to compromise their positions for the sake of harmony in the external community: "because it's a small town…there might be out of school connections and histories." One father suggested that you had to compromise instead of engaging in debate because the parents one might disagree

with in a schooling context were also likely part of their social circle. "We don't have a lot of choices," he said, "so you appreciate the good qualities and try to turn a blind eye to those ones that just bug you." Parents admitted that they had to be careful around conflict. The politics of relations in a rural school are impossible to contain (McClelland, 1997); therefore, navigating social arrangements was necessary to maintain the right to be heard.

Moral/Ethical Risk

It has been argued that both teachers and parents are complicit in perpetuating the notion of an ideal parent (Thomas et al., 2015) and that educational policy plays a central role in naturalizing and moralizing good parent behavior (Beauvais, 2017; Fernández & López, 2017). Positioning oneself as a "good" parent or citizen in the school and town was underscored in these parents' messages about the importance of supporting school initiatives, attending school and town events, and helping others in need. Feeling in community was perceived as a choice articulated through one's actions and attitudes, but this was couched in the language of responsibility, moral choice, and ethical duty.

At the end of an individual interview a parent expressed doubt about the study: "I think it's a good idea. It's fabulous that you're trying to figure out how to get people involved, but the people that you want to get involved, don't want to get involved." Personal responsibilization (Masquelier, 2017) and accountability was central to feeling in community as noted by claims that parents should "step up" and "band together." "Put yourself out there" was a frequent phrase I heard, associating community with the vulnerability of risk. Although constructed as choice, parents implied the choice was mandatory. For example, one parent said, "I know we have busy lives, but, you know, spending an hour here, spending an hour there makes a big difference in [students'] lives." For her, not being involved risked fulfilling the role to "teach children the importance of community and being involved." One mother reported that her self-employment had prevented her from contributing to the school. When her work situation changed, she joined the school council but still found herself on the outside: "I sat on the outskirts because I was a newcomer and God forbid did I speak up or offer my opinion in any way." Fulfilling one's obligation, then, was not as simple as showing up, for the right to speak seemed to be a matter of seniority.

When I asked what bonded people in these schools and towns, participants shared stories of illness, death, and losing homes or crops. These experiences brought people together and reinforced confidence that if tragedy visited, the community would "have [their] back." Emotions tend to harmonize during crises and natural disaster (Bruhn, 2011), and regardless of school or town, I

heard similar stories. Material supports given in response to tragedy, such as time or money, constituted emotional investments which are necessary not only for fortifying relations, but for creating a history to which everyone could refer (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Knowing the narratives of tragedy signaled belonging by giving consensual validation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986); for those who knew about and experienced these events in a similar emotional way, togetherness was reinforced.

Some parents, however, had ambivalent relations with the histories of the school and town. For example, in one school that served a number of Indigenous students, one participant explained that Indigenous students came to their school because historically they were banned from the nearby town. Canada's blemished history regarding Indigenous people is well known, and yet racism was rarely raised. One Indigenous father shared that he himself was accused of being racist, and this was because he married a White woman. It was noticeable that school councils excluded First Nations or Metis parents despite the fact that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action* (2015) demands "parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability" (p. 6). In fact, when asked about multiculturalism in their schools and towns, parents suggested their towns reflected Canadian diversity, but they attributed the absence of ethnic minority parents on school councils and school initiatives to the minority parents' choice to interact primarily with members of their own ethnic community.

Social, political, and moral/ethical risk intersect. For example, if feeling "in community" oriented parents towards moral and ethical categories of membership, they earned the label of supportive, involved, and responsible parents. Membership afforded them the right to advocate for their children and have input into school decisions. Their involvement translated into leadership, which was honored in school newsletters, the local paper, and on "walls of fame" in the school. This positioned these parents as morally superior in contrast to parents who were never mentioned. Absence risked advantage, influence, and emotional payoff.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that most of the parents who volunteered to participate were those who had continuing contact with the school through school council and multiple means of volunteering with students. Twenty-one apparently like-minded parents for whom community was relatively unproblematic do not represent the population of these schools. For most, community was part of what Bauman (2001) called doxa, something they knew without having to think about it. But as Theobald and Nachtigal (1997) argue, analysis

must cleave the surface; understanding how and why sense of community had entered a state of "discursivity" (Fernández & López, 2017) matters as much to the story as the story itself. Qualitative case study nuances experiences in ways the scientific method overlooks, thereby offering new avenues into the discussion. What key insights contribute to advancing the conversation about rural school community?

Insights and Implications

Corbett (2015) writes, "rural schools are very often presented by those who study them…as quintessentially safe, cozy, 'community' spaces" (p. 16). Indeed, community is available to parents, and it does feel good for parents to feel they have found it. But community is also a negotiation in rural school contexts—for some parents more than others—and community does not exist without prefixed entanglements and consequences that are part of the weave of the external community's social fabric. We could say community is embedded in a choice architecture (Lister, 2015) that requires parents to opt into ways of being that have been predetermined and entrenched over time. This was initially captured by the concept of personal and social risk which allows us to consider how parents' feeling in community may be viewed as an individual matter of adopting the right attitude toward community. School community differs from generic community because when parents register their children in schools, community is imposed. Parents are forced to adjust personal preferences and goals and to align with a prevailing set of expectations set by other parents.

The categories of risk—social and personal, political, and moral/ethical—have been articulated as conceptually distinct, but given how the school and external community overlap in rural contexts, experiencing and negotiating risk is a complex undertaking because these categories of risk intersect. A parent who supports climate change initiatives in a region that relies on the petroleum industry, for example, faces political risk by introducing alternative views. Like the doctor's wife who seeks out forms of leisure other than the community curling league, an environmentalist may be interpreted as rejecting and threatening a community's history and way of life. Since ideas are emotional commitments and personal convictions, it is not simply the idea that will be rejected, but the person who holds the idea. Thus, one's beliefs become a social and personal risk, as well as a moral/ethical risk because that parent might be viewed as standing on the "wrong" side of the debate. Further, a parent with environmental sensibilities might have to conceal those thoughts if their child were dating the son or daughter of parents who owned a business related to the oil field. Thus, it makes sense to understand risk as a web; in navigating rural networks, one is potentially entangled in multiple risks.

The concept of legacy parents provides insight into community as tension-laden. Legacy parents are guardians of prevailing norms and attitudes about ways in which parents should be. As the go-to parents in the school, legacy parents set the agenda for others and, through their sense of ownership, establish the boundaries around which others must navigate. They do so unconsciously and with good intentions to advocate for their children and uphold what is assumed to be important for all. Legacy parents feel entitled and compelled to contribute as a point of protecting the school as a sacred icon for their community and for themselves personally. Their sense of community comes from social spatial attachments (Wise, 2015), which affords them the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) to solidify their agency. They know what is meant by "the old co-op," their daily excursions always reinforce their "known and knowing'ness," and most importantly, the school is a constant in their family history. By maintaining the community of their memories, these legacy parents are anchors to the past, ensuring the values, norms, and traditions of the rural school are reproduced and the boundaries entrenched.

This means nonlegacy parents, even those who have lived in the community for years, feel making connections with legacy parents is the only way to position themselves in the school community. Nonlegacy parents conceal how legacy parents' power affects or displaces them for fear that they will lose opportunities to fulfill their own community needs. If this characterizes rural communities, then what are the "pedagogies of connection" (Comber & Kambler, 2004, cited in Hardy & Grootenboer, 2016) for parents on the outskirts? If collective identities have primary importance in small towns, how can the vitality of these small towns be nurtured?

In the parent involvement research, the preoccupation with democratizing schools and flattening hierarchies to make school more hospitable (Pushor, 2013; Ruitenberg & Pushor, 2005) presupposes that the teacher–parent relationship and institutional structures are the primary impediments. The family metaphor is appealing but perpetuates the idea that all parents have equal status, when it is clear that they do not. A key finding in this study is that rural schools are not simply ecological and based on relationships within school, but are embedded in the larger organizational context of the external community (Arum, 2000). There is a collective identity in small towns that is tied to a hierarchy of those who have position, privilege, and power. Because it is unnoticeable to locals and is in fact interpreted as a strength to have continuity of support for the school, these identities have subtle, but divisive effects.

Further, an understanding of school community requires mindfulness about the environment in which they exist (Norton, 1970) and how external factors and social networks shape relationships internally. The focus on teacher–parent

relationships is premised on the idea of school community as contained. This means that educators—principals especially—may have to manage relations more than they do if they want to eliminate the inadvertent gatekeeping that goes on. Ultimately, they can have a role to play in brokering the families and traditions upon which a rural community is built, with the possibilities for growth that comes with newcomers and new ways of being.

The rhetoric of partnership does not serve rural schools if one considers that political risk undergirds parents' decisions to participate in the school. Partnership assumes mutual agreement about the end goal, but as we learned in this study, some parents adopt the attitude that lack of presence on the school landscape forfeits a parents' right to raise concerns. Because rural parents are committed to the idea that rural communities succeed only by the hands of those who pitch in, then it explains why they assume the right to influence decisions is the reward for their labor. These parents did not jockey for power, per se; however, it was clear that they believed being seen as a contributor was like an insurance policy in the event that they had a future concern regarding their children.

Finally, familiarity and interactions with other parents in contexts outside of school required parents to navigate parent–parent interactions in particular ways. This corresponds to McClelland's (1997) description of rural relationships as layered. Parent involvement literature does not identify parents' relationships with each other as a particular challenge in urban contexts, presumably because outside of school, parents from urban schools form relationships with other school parents by choice only. This is not so in rural contexts. As we learned from these parents, one's social circles are not necessarily chosen, but rather, they are formed because of who is there. This means that parents must conceal their true thoughts and feelings, or ideologies and opinions, for fear of being outcasted. The risk is not only professional but personal. To become part of community and reap its rewards, some parents may see no choice but to "unbecome" who they truly are. Those parents who admitted to doing so seemed to accept this as a compromise, but it begs the question of how or whether authentic community exists in rural contexts.

The need to cloak one's true self for the sake of fit-ness implies a lack of trust; to disclose difference would risk being vulnerable to rejection. As Adams et al. (2009) note, "perceived vulnerability and risk are central to trust…without these cognitive conditions, there is no need to trust" (p. 8). Much of the parent involvement literature emphasizes relationship building as a key strategy and trust as an essential condition. Yet trust, like relationship, is often treated as a matter of simply wanting to trust. Risk and vulnerability, however, are the underbelly of trust. Tschannen-Moran (2014) defines trust as "the willingness

to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the other party is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (p. 57).

Trust, like relationship, however, is not a monolithic concept. For instance, Bryk and Schneider's (2002) conceptualization of organic trust might be reflected in rural communities, where there are unquestioned beliefs about the good and the moral authority of the unquestioned beliefs. Legacy families could be considered the core of organic trust in these communities I studied. Organic trust, however, is exclusionary. As Bryk and Schneider argue, modern institutions like schools are diverse, and while there may be consensus around global values such as democracy, total consensus around a complete value system is not possible. Instead, they characterize the dynamic of school as a set of role relationships. For them, relational trust captures the kind of trust that evolves when role-defined groups can trust each other to fulfill the obligations based on their role. Relational trust enables diversity to work as an asset since each group depends on others to behave in expected ways. While this captures the social dynamic of schools more fully, it does not account for diversity *within* groups, such as parents. While trust between parents and schools, between teachers and colleagues, and between students and teachers has been examined theoretically and empirically (e.g., Tschannen-Moran, 2014), trust between parents and other parents remains uncharted.

Practical Considerations for Schools

Rural schools are presumed vestiges of the past when "school and community were organically related in a tightly knit group" (Tyack, 1974, p. 17). While familiarity creates the impression that this assumption of rural contexts still holds, my interpretations shine some light on the dark side (Delanty, 2010). This dark side is where a long-term resident of a small town likens her experience to the loneliness of junior high, and where a community member wanders into the local library to find herself locked out of the privately public world of a group of women with a long history. So what does this mean for educators?

My findings advance the conversation about school–home dynamics by calling attention to parent–parent relationships as a source of or impediment to inclusive school communities and parents' sense of belonging. The current focus is on what educators, especially school principals (e.g., Fitzgerald & Quiñones, 2019), can do to foster positive relationships with parents. Parents are typically positioned as equally powerless vis-à-vis educators, but examined from within the context of peer relations, some parents exert considerable influence without even realizing it. Educators might begin by examining the social networks in their rural communities. Who is at the table at school council

meetings, for example, and at what other tables do those parents sit within the community? A walk around the school—as I did with these parents—might reveal how history reproduces opportunities and privilege for some.

Additionally, knowing that even when newcomer parents take the risk by getting involved in opportunities like school council, their risks are guarded and measured. Perhaps educators could initiate safer ways for parents to give confidential feedback (e.g., polls, surveys) to eliminate parents worrying about the scrutiny of parents whose history in the community grants them authority. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to reimagine our interactions; technology affords us multiple options for engaging, and more importantly, for seeking input in ways that can accommodate more than the few who can make it to a meeting. A strong message in the parent involvement literature is that power discrepancies between parents and teachers must be dismantled, but my study suggests that rural contexts have an additional layer of power relations. There has been a tendency to privilege the romantic side of relationships and community, but including risk relations in conversations about parents may yield new ways of thinking about who can contribute to parents' sense of community and how that potential can be harnessed.

References

Adams, C. M., Forsyth, P. B., & Mitchell, R. M. (2009). The formation of parent–school trust. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 45*(1), 4–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08327550

Alameda-Lawson, T., & Lawson, M. A. (2016). Ecologies of collective parent engagement in urban education. *Urban Education,* 1–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916636654

Alberta Municipal Affairs. (2017). *Types of municipalities in Alberta.* http://www.municipalaffairs.alberta.ca/am_types_of_municipalities_in_alberta

Allen, Q., & White-Smith, K. (2018). "That's why I say stay in school": Black mothers' parental involvement, cultural wealth, and exclusion in their son's schooling. *Urban Education, 53*(3), 409–435. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085917714516

Arum, R. (2000). Schools and communities: Ecological and institutional dimensions. *Annual Review of Sociology, 26,* 395–418.

Barrett, G. (2015). Deconstructing community. *Sociologia Ruralis, 55*(2), 182–204. https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12057

Bauman, Z. (2001). Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world. Polity.

Beauvais, C. (2017). An exploration of the "pushy parent" label in educational discourse. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 38*(2), 159–171.

Beck, U. (1992). Risk society: Towards a new modernity. Sage.

Berg, T., Winterton, R., Petersen, M., & Warburton, J. (2017). "Although we're isolated, we're not really isolated": The value of information and communication technology for older people in rural Australia. *Australasian Journal on Ageing, 36*(4), 313–317. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajag.12449

Blackmore, J., & Hutchison, K. (2010). Ambivalent relations: The "tricky footwork" of parental involvement in school communities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14*(5), 499–515. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802657685

Blakesley, S. (2012). Juggling educational ends: Non-Indigenous Yukon principals and the policy challenges that they face. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership, 7*(3), 1–14.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Brinkmann, S. (2018). The interview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.; pp. 576–599). Sage.

Brody, G. H., Stoneman, Z., & Flor, D. (1995). Linking family processes and academic competence among rural African American youths. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57,* 567–579.

Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Allen, L. W. (2006). Preparing principals for high-need rural schools: A central office perspective about collaborative efforts to transform school leadership. *Journal of Research in Rural Education,* 27(1), 1–16.

Bruhn, J. G. (2011). *The sociology of community connections* (2nd ed.). Springer.

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for school improvement.* Russell Sage Foundation.

Campbell, A. M., & Yates, G. C. R. (2011). Want to be a country teacher? No, I am too metrocentric. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 26*(4), 1–12.

Catsambis, S. (2001). Expanding knowledge of parental involvement in children's secondary education: Connections with high school seniors' academic success. *Social Psychology of Education, 5,* 149–177.

Chang, M., Choi, N., & Kim, S. (2015). School involvement of parents of linguistic and racial minorities and their children's mathematics performance. *Educational Research and Evaluation, 21*(3), 209–231.

Christenson, S., & Reschly, A. L. (2010). *Handbook of school–family partnerships*. Routledge.

Coates, K. (2014, January 22). Why are Canadians ignoring the "North below the North?" *The Globe and Mail.* http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/the-north/why-are-canadians-ignoring-the-north-below-the-north/article16444559/

Coates, K., & Poelzer, G. (2014, April). *The next northern challenge: The reality of the provincial north.* Macdonald-Laurier Institute. https://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/MLIThe-ProvincialNorth04-14-Final.pdf

Coladarci, T. (2007). Improving the yield of rural education research: An editor's swan song. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(3), 1–9.

Cooper, C. W., Riehl, C. J., & Hasan, A. L. (2010). Leading and learning with diverse families in schools: Critical epistemology amid communities of practice. *Journal of School Leadership, 20*(6), 758–788.

Corbett, M. (2015). Rural education: Some sociological provocations for the field. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 25*(3), 9–25.

Corbett, M., & Helmer, L. (2017). Contested geographies: Competing constructions of community and efficiency in small school debates. *Geographical Research,* 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12209

Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Collins, F. M., Powell, S., & Drury, R. (2015). *Researching literacy lives: Building communities between home and school.* Routledge.

Crozier, G. (2000). *Parents and schools: Partners or protagonists?* Trentham Books.

Dalton, D., Dingess, D., Dingess, C., McCann, J., Farley, D., Ramey, C. T., Adkins, D., & Maynard, S. (1996). The Parents as Educational Partners program at Atenville Elementary School. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 1,* 233–247.

David, M. (1993). *Parents, gender, and education reform*. Polity Press.

de Carvalho, M. E. P. (2001). *Rethinking family–school relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Dempster, N., & Berry, V. (2003). Blindfolded in a minefield: Principals' ethical decision making. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 33*(3), 457–477.

Douglas, M., & Wildavsky, A. (1982). *Risk and culture: An essay on the selection of technological and environmental dangers*. University of California Press.

du Plessis, V., Beshiri, R., Bollman, R. D., & Clemenson, H. (2001). Definitions of rural. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin, 3*(3). Statistics Canada 21-006-XIE.

Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (2nd ed.). Westview Press.

Evans, J., & Jones, P. (2011). The walking interview: Methodology, mobility, and place. *Applied Geography, 31,* 849–858.

Fenwick, T., Edwards, R. & Sawchuk, P. (2011). *Emerging approaches to educational research: Tracing the sociomaterial*. Routledge.

Fernández, E., & López, G. R. (2017). When parents behave badly: A critical policy analysis of parent involvement in schools. In M. D. Young & S. Diem (Eds.), *Critical approaches to education policy analysis: Moving beyond tradition* (pp. 111–129). Springer.

Fischhoff, B., & Kadvany, J. (2011). *Risk: A very short introduction.* Oxford University Press.

Fitzgerald, A. M., & Quiñones, S. (2019). Working in and with community: Leading for partnerships in a community school. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 18*(4), 511–532. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2018.1453938

Flessa, J. (2008). Parental involvement: What counts, who counts it, and does it help? *Education Canada, 48*(2), 18–21. https://www.edcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/EdCan-2008-v48-n2-Flessa.pdf

Foster, R., & Goddard, T. (2003). Leadership and culture in schools in northern British Columbia: Bridge building and/or re-balancing act? *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy,* Issue 27. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/42698

Freeman, M. (2017). *Modes of thinking for qualitative analysis*. Routledge.

Freie, C., & Eppley, K. (2014). Putting Foucault to work: Understanding power in a rural school. *Peabody Journal of Education, 89*(5), 652–669.

Fryer, C. S., Passmore, S. R., Maietta, R. C. Petruzzelli, J., Casper, E., Brown, N. A., Butler, J., Garza, M. A., Thomas, S. B., & Quinn, S. C. (2015). The symbolic value and limitations of racial concordance in minority research engagement. *Qualitative Health Research,* 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315575708

Furman, G. C. (Ed.). (2002). *School as community: From promise to practice.* State University of New York Press.

Gallagher, P., Rhodes, C., & Lewis, K. Y. (2018). Family voices in teacher education. In K. Runswick-Cole, T. Curan, & K. Liddard (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of disabled children's childhood studies* (pp. 595–616). Palgrave Macmillan.

Goodall, J., & Montgomery, C. (2014). Parental involvement to parental engagement: A continuum. *Educational Review, 66*(4), 399–410.

Hameiri, L., Nir, A., & Inbar, D. E. (2014). Confronting uncertainty and risk: The contribution of leadership to school outcomes. *Planning and Changing, 45*(1/2), 48–82.

Hardy, I., & Grootenboer, P. (2016). Cultivating community: Detailing school and community engagement under complex conditions. *Teaching Education, 27*(1), 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2015.1034683

Helstad, K., & Møller, J. (2013). Leadership as relational work: Risks and opportunities. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 16*(3), 245–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.761353

Hess, R. S., Molina, A. M., & Kozleski, E. B. (2006). Until somebody hears me: Parent voice and advocacy in special educational decision making. *British Journal of Special Education, 33*(3), 148–157.

Janesick, V. J. (2016). "Stretching" exercises for qualitative researchers (4th ed.). Sage.

Jensen, K. L., & Minke, K. M. (2017). Engaging families at the secondary level: An underused resource for student success. *School Community Journal, 27*(2), 167–192. https://www.adi.org/journal/2017fw/JensenMinkeFall2017.pdf

Joffe, H. (2003). Risk: From social perception to social representation. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 42*, 55–73.

Kim, S. W. (2018). Parental involvement in developing countries: A meta-synthesis of qualitative research. *International Journal of Educational Development, 60,* 149–156. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.07.006

Kutsyuruba, B., & Walker, K. (2015). The lifecycle of trust in educational leadership. An ecological perspective. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 18*(1), 106–121.

Lareau, A., & Shumar, W. (1996). The problem of individualism in family–school policies. *Sociology of Education, 69*, 24–39.

Lasater, K. (2019). Developing authentic family–school partnerships in a rural high school: Results of a longitudinal action research study. *School Community Journal, 29*(2), 157–182. https://www.adi.org/journal/2019fw/LasaterFW2019.pdf

Lawson, M. (2003). School–family relationships in context: Parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement. *Urban Education, 38*(1), 77–133.

Leithwood, K., McElheron-Hopkins, C., & Jantzi, D. (2004). Parent participation in school improvement planning: Results of a recent Ontario study. *Orbit, 34*(3), 43.

Lin, S.–Y., Isernhagen, J., Scherz, S., & Denner, P. R. (2014). Rural educator perceptions of parent involvement in public schools: Perspectives from three states. *The Rural Educator, 36*(1), 40–56.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Sage.

Lister, M. (2015). Citizens doing it for themselves? The Big Society and government through community. *Parliamentary Affairs, 68,* 352–370.

Lock, G., Budgen, F., & Lunay, R. (2012). The loneliness of the long-distance principal: Tales from remote Western Australia. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education,* 22(2), 65–77.

Lumby, J. (2007). Parent voice: Knowledge, values, and viewpoint. *Improving Schools, 10*(3), 220–232.

Maietta, R. C. (2006). State of the art: Integrating software with qualitative analysis. In L. Curry, R. Shield, & T. Wetle (Eds.), *Improving aging and public health research: Qualitative and mixed methods* (pp. 117–139). American Public Health Association & the Gerontological Society of America.

Martin, J., & Vincent, C. (1999). Parental voice: An exploration. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 9*(2), 133–154.

Masquelier, C. (2017). Critique and resistance in a neoliberal age: Towards a narrative of emancipation. Springer.

McClelland, J. (1997). Knowing and being known: Parents' experiences with rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 13*(2), 108–116.

McGrath, W. H. (2007). Ambivalent partners: Power, trust, and partnership in relationships between mothers and teacher in a full-time childcare center. *Teachers College Record, 109*(6), 1411–1422.

McHenry-Sorber, E. (2014). The power of competing narratives: A new interpretation of rural school–community relations. *Peabody Journal of Education, 89,* 580–592.

McHenry-Sorber, E., & Schafft, K. A. (2015). "Make my day, shoot a teacher": Tactics of inclusion and exclusion and the contestation of community in a rural school–community conflict. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(7), 733–747.

McKenna, M. K., & Millen, J. (2013). Look! Listen! Learn! Parent narratives and grounded theory models of parent voice, presence, and engagement in K–12 education. *School Community Journal, 23*(1), 9–48. https://www.adi.org/journal/2013ss/McKennaMillen-Spring2013.pdf

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology, 14*(1), 6–23.

McWilliam, E., & Perry, L. (2006). On being more accountable: The push and pull of risk in school leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 9*(2), 97–109. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120600697072

Meyer, J. A., & Mann, M. B. (2006). Teachers' perceptions of the benefits of home visits for early elementary children. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 34,* 93–97.

Miller, D. M., & Hellsten, L.-A. (2017). Like day and night: On becoming a teacher in two district professional cultures in rural Saskatchewan. *The Rural Educator, 38*(2), 35–46.

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice, 31,* 132–141.

Moscovici, S. (2001). Why a theory of social representations? In K. Deaux & G. Philogene (Eds.), *Representations of the social* (pp. 8–35). Blackwell.

Nichols, L. M., Goforth, A. N., Sacra, M., & Ahler, K. (2017). Collaboration to support rural student social–emotional needs. *The Rural Educator, 38*(1), 38–48.

Norton, M. S. (1970). School–community relations: New issues new needs. *The Clearinghouse: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 44*(9), 538–540.

Owens, J. S., Murphy, C. E., Richerson, L., Girio, E. L., & Himawan, L. K. (2008). Science to practice in underserved communities. The effectiveness of school mental health programming. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 38,* 434–447.

Perry, L., & McWilliam, E. (2007). Accountability, responsibility, and school leadership. *Journal of Educational Enquiry, 7*(1), 32–43.

Plevyak, L. H. (2003). Parental involvement in education: Who decides? *Educational Digest, 1,* 32–38.

Preston, J. P. (2010). *A school council's influence on community involvement in a Saskatchewan community* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Saskatchewan.

Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. E. R. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *The Rural Educator, 38*(1), 6–15.

Preston, J. P., Jakubiec, B. A. E., & Kooymans, R. (2013). Common challenges faced by rural principals: A review of the literature. *The Rural Educator, 35*(1), 1–12.

Pushor, D. (2013). Regulation or invitation? Creating safe AND welcoming schools. *Education Canada, 50*(3), 39–41.

Pushor, D. (2017). Familycentric schools: Creating a place for all parents. *Education Canada, 57*(4), 17–19.

Pushor, D., & The Parent Engagement Collaborative II. (2005). *Living as mapmakers: Charting a course with children guided by parent knowledge*. Sense.

Robinson, K., & Harris, A. L. (2014). *The broken compass: Parental involvement in children's education*. Harvard University Press.

Rollock, N., Gillborn, D., Vincent, C., & Ball, S. J. (2015). *The color of class: The educational strategies of the Black middle classes*. Routledge.

Rosa, E., Renn, O., & McCright, A. (2014). *The risk society revisited: Social theory and governance.* Temple University Press.

Ruitenberg, C. W., & Pushor, D. (2005). "It's not about colour-coordinating the napkins with the table cloth": Hospitality and invitation in parent engagement. *Principals Online, 1*(1), 32–35.

Ryan, C., & Quinlan, E. (2018). Whoever shouts the loudest: Listening to parents of children with disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 31*(52), 203–214. https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12354

Ryan, J., & Higginbottom, K. (2017). Politics, activism, and leadership for social justice. In D. Waite & I. Bogotch (Eds.), *The Wiley international handbook of educational leadership* (pp. 103–123). John Wiley & Sons.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Sage.

Sanders, M. (2011). Family engagement in high school. In S. Redding, M. Murphy, & P. Sheley. *Handbook of family and community engagement* (pp. 141–146). Department of Education. https://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/downloads/FACEHandbook.pdf

Sanders, M. G. (2009). Teachers and parents. In L. J. Saha, & A. G. Dworkin (Eds.), *International handbook of research on teachers and teaching* (pp. 331–341). Springer.

Sanders, M. & Simon, B. (2002). A comparison of program development at elementary, middle, and high schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools. *School Community Journal, 12*(1), 7–27. https://www.adi.org/journal/ss02/Sanders%20&%20Simon.pdf

Schwandt, T. A., & Gates, E. F. (2018). In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.; pp. 341–358). Sage.

Scott, D., & Louie, D. (2020). Reconsidering rural education in light of Canada's Indigenous reality. In M. Corbett & D. Gereluk (Eds.), *Rural teacher education: Connecting land and people* (pp. 113–133). Springer.

Semke, C. A., & Sheridan, S. M. (2012). Family–school connections in rural educational settings: A systematic review of the empirical literature. *School Community Journal, 22*(1), 21–47. https://www.adi.org/journal/2012ss/SemkeSheridanSpring2012.pdf

Shuffleton, A. (2017). Parental involvement and public schools: Disappearing mothers in labor and politics. *Studies in the Philosophy of Education, 36*(21), 21–32.

Shumow, L. (2014). Is the compass broken or did the nagivators err? *School Community Journal, 24*(1), 9–16. https://www.adi.org/journal/2014ss/EditorialShumowSpring2014.pdf

Simsion, G. (2013). *The Rosie project.* Simon & Schuster.

Stake, R. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.; pp. 443–466). Sage.

Stelmach, B. (2016). Parents' participation on school councils analysed through Arnstein's ladder of participation. *School Leadership & Management, 36*(3), 271–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2016.1247048

Stelmach, B., & Hunter, D. (2019, June 1–5). *Educational administrators' conceptions of risk in the context of parents and classroom assessment: An Alberta inquiry* [Paper presentation]. Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Stelmach, B., & Preston, J. (2008). Cake or curriculum? Principal and parent views on transforming the parental role in Saskatchewan schools. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 36*(3), 59–74.

Taylor, P. G. (2005, August 19). *Managing our attentional economy in a changing landscape: Complexity, learning and leadership* [Keynote presentation]. Queensland Teachers Union's Changing Landscape Conference for Educational Administrators, Brisbane, AU.

Taylor-Gooby, P., & Zinn, J. (2006). *Risk in social science.* Oxford University Press.

The Canadian Press. (2020, April). *Jason Kenney predicts 25% Alberta unemployment rate from COVID-19.* https://business.financialpost.com/commodities/energy/jason-kenney-predicts-25-alberta-unemployment-rate-from-covid-19

Thomas, S., Keogh, J., & Hay, S. (2015). Discourses of the good parent in attributing school success. *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 36*(3), 452–463.

Torre, D., & Murphy, J. (2014). Communities of parental engagement: New foundations for school leaders' work. *International Journal of Leadership in Education.* https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2014.958200

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Calls to action*. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/indigenous-people/new-relationship/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-calls-to-action

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). The interconnectivity of trust in schools. In P. Van Maele, P. B. Forsyth, & M. Van Houtte. (Eds.), *Trust and school life: The role of trust for learning, teaching, leading, and bridging* (pp. 57–81). Springer.

Tunison, S. (2002). Herding elephants: Technology and change in rural schools [Paper presentation]. Seventh National Congress on Rural Education, Saskatoon, SK, Canada.

Tyack, D. (1974). *The one best system.* Harvard University Press.

Vincent, C. (2017). "The children have only got one education and you have to make sure it's a good one": Parenting and parent–school relations in a neoliberal age. *Gender and Education, 29*(5), 541–557. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1274387

Watson, T. N., & Bogotch, I. (2015). Reframing parent involvement: What should urban school leaders do differently? *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 14*(3), 257–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2015.1024327

Wise, N. (2015). Placing sense of community. *Journal of Community Psychology, 43*(7), 920–929. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21722

Wuthnow, R. (2013). *Small-town America: Finding community, shaping the future.* Princeton University Press.

Xu, J. (2004). Family help and homework management in urban and rural secondary schools. *Teachers College Record, 106,* 1786–1803.

Zaretsky, L. (2004). Advocacy and administration: From conflict to collaboration. *Journal of Educational Administration, 42*(2), 270–286. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230410525649

Author's Note: This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Bonnie Stelmach is a professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Her research is primarily focused on the study of parents' roles in schooling, with particular attention to rural schools. She has also conducted research on educational leadership and policy, including moral distress among school leaders, and teacher and leadership standards and certification. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Bonnie Stelmach, 7-104 Education North Tower, Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5G 2G5, or email bonnies@ualberta.ca