Do we still have small schools?

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Abstract

The path to my becoming a researcher was not predetermined. In fact it really makes no sense for me to be where I am today. My life history and professional and academic background before joining the Faculty of Education at Memorial University did not make a focus on rural education an obvious choice, perhaps not even a remote possibility. In this study I take a narrative approach to investigate the path that lead to where I find myself today. Similar to Heikkinen (1998) I attempt to answer the question, how did I become who I am? As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest, narrative inquiry is the construction of narratives at various levels and in this narrative I am "compelled to move beyond the telling of the lived story to tell the research story" (p. 10). The purpose of this essay is to try and explain how an urbanite became committed to rural education and schooling. I believe that in telling this self-narrative, rather than just producing data, it can "[lead] to new knowledge and /or new understanding of areas of known knowledge" (Arnold, 2011, p.70)

Introduction

> *Dear Dr. Mulcahy: Thank you for a great learning experience in Current Issues in Rural Education. I was amazed to discover that someone who has never lived or worked in a rural community, a "townie," could know and understand so much about rural school issues.*[1]
> *Imagine for a moment a developed nation that regarded its rural schools as its elite and as models to be envied and emulated by metropolitan schools. Imagine a system in which rural schools were the prime beneficiaries of educational research, the recipients of a steady stream of the nation's best educators, and the bastions of the education world's power prestige, and resources. - Jonathan Sher*[2]

As I enter my 25th year as a member of the Faculty Education at Memorial University I find myself, a born and bred townie, considered by some an expert in Rural Education. For the last 20 plus years I have made the provision of education and schooling in rural communities the primary focus of my research and development work. My scholarly activities in terms of

[1] An unsolicited note from a rural graduate student

[2] Sher, J. (Ed.). (1977) *Education in rural America: A reassessment of conventional wisdom*. Boulder, CO:Westview Press. Sher is a pioneer in rural education studies and a true inspiration.

publications and conference presentations are mostly related to rural education.[3] I serve on the editorial board of the major rural education journals in the USA and Australia. My engagement in public discourse on education is also focused on rural education. The most recent example[4] of this being my active role via presentations at public meetings and commentary on CBC radio and television this past fall. This was in an attempt to halt the latest attempts by educational authorities to close several small rural community schools.

Yet, my life history and professional and academic background before joining the Faculty did not make a focus on rural education an obvious choice, perhaps not even a remote possibility. The purpose of this essay is to try and explain how an urbanite became committed to rural education and schooling.

A totally urban experience

I was born and grew up in a distinctly urban environment. All of my schooling was in a large urban school[5]. Growing up in St. John's I had no consciousness of rural places or rural life styles. My family had no rural connections and as a family we made but one trip out "around the bay" to Trinity and Bonavista when I was eight[6]. I do not remember anything about rural Newfoundland and Labrador being part of the K-12 curriculum.[7] I would have to say that rural was irrelevant to my existence growing up. I was simply unaware and oblivious to rural life styles and the rural environment.

I completed my undergraduate education degree at Memorial University in the early 1970's but I cannot recall ever hearing anything about rural education in any of my courses. There was not a word about small schools, multi-grading, bussing, closure and consolidation battles. The focus was totally on generic schooling, which really translated to a focus on large urban schools; it was as if schooling outside the larger urban centers simply did not exist as far as my professors were concerned.[8]

My first teaching assignment was as a high school English teacher in an urban school of 1,000 students. I taught at that school for 12 years and the student enrolment was always around 800-1000 students. After 12 years as a high school teacher I decided to go back to university and pursue a master's degree in education. Over the years I had become heavily involved in high

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[3] WebPage**: http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~dmulcahy/**

[4] "Education professor warns rural communities that their schools could be next for closure" CBC Radio, Nov 12, 2012: http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/Local+Shows/Newfoundland/Central+Morning/ID/2303234831/?sort=MostPopular
Mulcahy, D. (2012) Children are not fish. Morning Watch. http://www.mun.ca/educ/faculty/mwatch/current.htm

[5] Ironically, I attended the last all grade school in St. John's. Today all grade schools are primarily a rural phenomenon.

[6] I do remember jigging a cod on that trip! Could that have been foreshadowing?

[7] Doing this project has lead me to wonder what if anything about rural life and communities was present in the school curriculum during that time or since. An issue even more important for rural students. This thought may lead to my next project. Perhaps there was information presented but I have forgotten about it.

[8] Ironically, many members of the Faculty at this time had rural roots included Phil Warren who headed the first Royal Commission on Education (1966/67). But again, perhaps the message was there but I did not hear it? The one major study related to rural schooling in the seventies was completed by Jit Singh and Ismael Baksh, neither of whom is from Buchans!

school drama and theatre as an extra-curricular activity. The province was planning to implement a drama/theatre course as part of the curriculum. I decided I would do a master's degree in curriculum studies with a focus on arts education and drama in education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. My intention at the time was to return to my high school and urban life style and live happily ever after teaching drama and theatre in high school.

A funny thing happened at Toronto: I became a genuine student for the first time in my life at the age of 33. I fell in love with learning. I found the courses I was looking for in the arts, but I found so much more. I don't think I ever took education courses seriously while pursuing my undergraduate degree[9]. While at OISE, however, I developed an interest in educational issues that previously I had given little time or attention. Along with my interest in the arts and education I developed a passionate interest in curriculum studies, a passion I still have to this day.

On a more personal front, my experience at OISE was a very affirming one for my views on teaching and how students should be treated, especially those who in those days were designated as "general" or "basic" students. I was well liked and respected by my colleagues in high school because they knew I worked hard and carried more than my share of extra-curricular activities. However, I was always considered a bit odd because of my critical views of the education system. I was very critical of the Literature curriculum for being totally out of touch with the realities and interests of young people. But I was particularly critical of the way the less academic students were treated in the school. They were definitely regarded as second-class citizens whose learning could be interrupted for any reason, who always seemed to in the largest classes and who always ended up with the less experienced and interested teachers.

One of the joys of my time at OISE was an affirmation of what I learned to call my implicit educational philosophy. I discovered that I was not really that odd or at least I had lots of company! There were many who shared my criticisms of the curriculum and I now had the language of social justice to describe the unjust treatment of many students.

As I was finishing my Masters degree my advisor asked me if I had ever considered doing a Ph.D. It had never occurred to me to even imagine this. My agenda was to return to my high school to teach drama and continue my work in extra curricular theatre. I did not have the confidence to think this was a possibility for me. But my supervisor persisted and encouraged me to think about it and to stay in touch. He said he had enough confidence in me for both of us.

I returned to my high school job for one year but returned to OISE to pursue Ph.D. studies the following year. My doctoral dissertation was an extension of my work in arts education, drama, and curriculum studies. I really enjoyed my time at OISE and loved living in downtown Toronto. Once again, however, at no time during this period did any rural issues become part of my studies.[10]

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[9] I pursued my education degree on a part time basis while teaching English full time in high school. I have to say I found the courses (with one exception) totally irrelevant to what I was doing and encountering in an actual classroom.

[10] Once again, I don't remember anything at OISE that suggested rural education issues.

In the Fall of 1987 I was teaching undergraduate drama education courses at the University of Toronto and working on my dissertation. Out of the blue I was invited by the Head of the Student Teaching Division[11] in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University to apply for a tenure track position with the Division. I had not finished my dissertation at this point but the best advice at the time was don't turn down a tenure track position. I started working at Memorial in the Winter of 1988. I did not finish my Ph.D. until 1991.

My first three years at the Faculty were consumed with dissertation work and supervising interns and teaching a graduate course in curriculum studies. Once I had my dissertation finished I started to think about a research focus for my work in the Faculty. The obvious direction for me to go in was to build on the work of dissertation: the arts in education.

But that's not what happened.

One day I happened to be in the office of Frank Riggs who was at that time the Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies in the Faculty of Education. I had told him I was just finished my Ph.D. and was now ready to begin some new research. He handed me a copy of a research report he had completed several years previously entitled, *Report of the small schools study project (1987).* He suggested that I might find something of interest in that report. He also said I might find it useful to take a break from my main research focus and do something else for a change.

Riggs' report served as my introduction to rural education in Newfoundland and Labrador. I was surprised to learn that "Newfoundland still has 30% of its schools with less than 100 students…"(Riggs, 1987, p.1)[12] and the vast majority of these were situated in small rural communities.

I would only realize later the importance of Riggs using the word "still". Later, I would come to understand that he felt the need to remind everyone that small rural schools still existed and were playing a significant role in our education system. Twenty years earlier, the province's first Royal Commission on Education (Warren, 1967/1968) had recommended the wholesale closure and consolidation of small rural schools. In the intervening twenty years hundreds of schools had been eliminated.

In addition there had been a declining birth rate and the infamous resettlement program[13] of isolated rural communities. All of which resulted in a decline in enrolment. Consequently, there seemed to be the perception among educational leaders and bureaucrats, as well as the general public in urban areas, that small schools were no longer part of the educational landscape. Riggs' report demonstrated that rural schools were *still*[14] out there. The apparent lack of concern,

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[11] When I joined the Faculty there were separate departments, one of which was Student Teaching. I am not even sure at this point I knew exactly what this was.

[12] Today (2013) approximately 28% of our schools have less than 100 students. As Riggs noted small schools are going to be with us for a long time to come!

[13] Resettlement Program: http://www.mun.ca/mha/resettlement/index.html
http://www.heritage.nf.ca/law/resprogram.html

[14] Many times during my initial research project (1992) I was asked the question, "Do we still have small schools?" And every once in a while I will get this question when asked about my work. Even today, occasionally, a student

indifference, and insensitivity on the part of educational authorities to the various challenges and inequities associated with small schools often left educators in rural areas with feelings of "impatience, helplessness, anxiety and frustration" (Riggs, 1987, 3).

Similar points would be later made to me in my research:

> *There seems to have been some "denial" or refusal to acknowledge that these (multi-grade and small school) situations still exist in our province. Everyone likes to think we've "progressed" and these 1950s/60s type conditions no longer exists ... (Respondent- Mulcahy, 1993).*
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> *Most multi-grade classrooms are outside the larger centers and [located] in rural Newfoundland, and not many people worry about those little people who are already at a disadvantage anyway -- resource wise and that sort of thing. Also there's an attitude problem. They think bigger is better and that's not always the case (Respondent- Mulcahy, 1993).*

I remember being amazed to discover how many small schools were in the province. I was puzzled as to why these rural schools were being ignored and neglected. It did not seem fair or right to me. Did not they deserve equal treatment and consideration as their urban counterparts?

Riggs' report introduced me to many rural issues that would later become central to my work: small schools, teacher education, recruitment and retention, bussing, and consolidation. In 1991 they did not mean very much to me.

The one issue that caught my attention the most on that first reading was multi-grading. Riggs had reported that rural teachers identified multi-grading[15] as the number one challenge they faced in their small rural schools (Riggs, 1987). This was a new concept for me. Reflecting back on this time, I think what really attracted me to multi-grading was pedagogical curiosity. I am a teacher first and last. In the school system I was a classroom teacher, never an administrator, not even a department head. Even today as a professor I think of my self in the first instance as a teacher.

So initially, I came to rural education studies with the sensibility and orientation of a teacher reflected through the lens of my experience and understanding of how teaching and classrooms work. Hence the idea of one teacher having responsibility for all subjects and more than one grade level in a single classroom seemed a little crazy. As a high school teacher, I had been responsible for one subject, English, in one grade level. I wanted to know how any teacher could manage to teach multiple subjects in two or three grade levels at the same time in a single

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from a urban area taking one of my rural courses will express amazement that we still have so many small schools. Rural folks do not ask the question.

[15] A classroom in which one teacher is responsible for instruction of two or more grade levels of students. While two grade combinations are most common, classrooms with three or four or more grade levels also occur.

classroom? How could any teacher be effective or even survive in such a situation. The teacher in me was curious to find out.

Initial rural research project: multi-grading

To satisfy that pedagogical curiosity I designed and implemented a qualitative study. First, I immersed myself in the literature on small schools and multi-grade classrooms. I also selected a number of small rural schools to visit. I would spend the day observing the teachers and then interview them about their work. The survey questionnaire I later developed was based on my reading and the observations and interviews. There was opportunity on the questionnaire for participants to respond in an open-ended fashion to any issues they thought important that I had not raised. This was sent to every school that had K-6 classrooms[16].

I would like to emphasize that at this point in time, 1992, I was interested in multi-grading as a distinct phenomenon. I was not interested in small schools or the rural context. My intention was to conduct this study, find some straightforward answers to my methodological inquiries; write a report detailing the strategies used by multi-grade teachers and move on to something else more related to the graduate work I had completed at OISE. That was the plan.

Twenty-one years later I find myself totally immersed in rural education studies and totally committed to sustaining and supporting community based small schools. How did this happen? How did I get from what was supposed to be a quick "how-do-you-do-it" study to where I am at today fighting at every opportunity to preserve community based schooling?

I chose to start my research by visiting rural communities and spending time observing classroom activities and talking with multi-grade teachers[17]. The first school I visited was a small two-room school in a rural community approximately 227 km from St. John's. The last part of the trip, 25km, took about an hour over a narrow, gravel road. The whole journey took about two and a half hours each way.

I have quite distinct memories of this initial experience into the world of small rural schools. Just before I got to the school a young boy, no more than twelve passed me, riding a horse at quite a gallop. This was not something one would see in St. John's! At the school I learned that the entire school, twenty K-3 students, had just returned from a visit to a barn in the community where they had been present for the birth of a calf. Naturally they walked to and from the barn. It did not take a Ph.D. to realize I was now in a rural environment.

I split my time during the rest of the day between the two classrooms observing and taking copious notes and beginning the process of learning "how they did it". I particularly noted the warm family-like atmosphere in the school and the way the students helped each other with their work quite naturally and spontaneously. I found it interesting that I could not tell the older from

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[16] I had decided to limit the study to K-6 classrooms because that was where most multi-grading occurred and to make the study more manageable. Multi-grading, however, does occur at the 7,8,9 levels and multi-course teaching occurs in high school.

[17] Sometimes, I wonder if that first research project had been restricted to a simple questionnaire with yes and no answers, a likhert scale, and no space for open ended responses I may not have been drawn into the universe of rural schooling.

the younger children. After school was over and the children went on their way walking home (no busses needed here) the two teachers generously gave me an hour of their time.

The second rural community I visited was located about 200 km from St. John's and very much like the first one well off the beaten track. The school was "sole charge" which meant there was just one teacher who also served as principal, secretary and everything else. There were ten students spread over six grades. It was to be the last year for this school as it was scheduled to close the following year with the kids being bussed to a larger center.

Again I spent the day observing and helping out later spending about an hour talking with the teacher who had been in that school alone for the last ten years. She told me something that really made a deep and lasting impression on me, perhaps influencing the course of my future work as much as anything else. She told me that, when younger, if she went to a workshop or professional development day in a larger centre, when people asked her what grade she taught she would say grade four. She would do this because she did not want people to know she taught in a multi-graded school. I asked her why not? She said she would be "ashamed" to say this was her teaching situation. People thought such classrooms were old fashioned and ineffective, she said, and a teacher was doing no more than baby-sitting.

I was truly flabbergasted by this revelation. I had witnessed the way she worked in her classroom tending effectively and efficiently to her students and it was far from *baby-sitting*. It was more a form of pedagogical wizardry.

A third journey took me to a small isolated community on the south coast of the island. To get to this community one had to drive about three hours from St. John's and then take a ferryboat ride of two hours. This was the only way to get to this community other than by helicopter. This was truly a unique experience for a life long townie. There were no roads in this community and of course no cars. My first impression was of going back in time. I had no idea such communities still existed.

I followed a winding path up a hill to the school. The school offered all grades from K-10 and was staffed by two young female teachers, one of whom also served as principal. When I arrived at the school I noticed that there were ten or twelve people of different ages seated along a corridor. I was to discover later that these were people waiting to see the doctor. This was his day to visit and in addition to classrooms this school had a small medical clinic.

Because of the ferry schedule I would have to spend two nights in the community. The two teachers told me I would be staying with them in their "shack." And shack was a good name for their accommodations. It was an old one-bedroom cabin that served as the official teachers' residence.[18] Despite my protestations, they insisted I take the one bedroom and they would sleep on a couch and an inflatable mattress on the floor. I was truly touched by their generosity and hospitality during my visit. They said they were delighted to have someone from the "outside" visit.

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[18] The lack of suitable, even adequate accommodations for teachers in smaller and more remote communities is an ongoing serious issue. It is a major impediment to the recruitment and especially the retention of teachers in these communities.

These two teachers like other participants in the study were quite willing to have me come to their schools and classrooms. They were quite eager to answer my questions. They were quite delighted that someone was actually interested in what they were doing and where they worked. All participants, however, were not just interested in answering my questions. They insisted on asking me a few of their own.

They wanted to know, for example, when the University was going to start preparing teachers for multi-grade classrooms. With so many small schools and multi-grade classrooms in the province, didn't I think that this was an issue the Faculty of Education should be addressing? This point was made many times later in the survey questionnaire:

> *The Faculty of Education has, for too long, ignored what it is like out here. It is so easy to prepare teachers for the 'average' student in the 'average' class (not multi-graded) in the 'average' school in the 'average' town (*original emphasis) ... *(*Respondent*)* Mulcahy, 1993).

Other questions they asked included: Why do the curriculum guides produced by the provincial Department of Education provide no advice or guidance as to how to implement the prescribed programs in multi-grade situations? Why is it that when multi-grade teachers go to a professional development workshop and ask a question about how to do something in a multi-grade classroom, the presenting "expert" confesses she/he has no idea what the multi-grade teachers are talking about? Why were the needs of teachers and students in multi-grade classrooms and small rural schools almost totally ignored by all agencies responsible for education in the province?

The teachers in the schools were willing to share with me the strategies and approaches they used in their multi-grade classrooms. I, the expert educational authority, was unable to answer their questions. More to the point, I had to confess that *it never occurred to me even to ask these questions because I did not know at that point they needed to be asked.*

My first rural school contacts also asked me one more question: What was I going to do with the information I was collecting? What they were really asking was: Was it my intention to use the data I was collecting to help improve their situation. They were assuming and hoping that my interest in their work was an indication of my commitment to help. I think there was an assumption on their part that somehow I cared about their situation and was interested in doing something about it.

> *This kind of questionnaire is long overdue. Thanks for maybe opening the eyes of people in prominent places. My instincts tell me that, finally, we've reached the turning point with regards to multi-grades. Maybe this questionnaire has instigated something positive for us multi-grade teachers- (*Respondent)(Mulcahy, 1993).

> *I hope these surveys serve some useful purpose; a lot of <u>very busy</u> multi-grade teachers took the time to reply –(*Respondent) *(*Mulcahy, 1993).

I have to admit that at that point in time their assumptions were mostly wrong; for the most part I was more interested in my study than their problems.

To communicate with people in person where they work and live can lead to unintended consequences. To spend an extended period of time in a school and a community with the teachers, the students and sometimes the parents is a very different research experience than gathering data at a distance. It provides people with an opportunity to elaborate on issues and to identify additional issues. It also means that the participants in your study are not abstractions but real people that you have met in person. This is very different (not necessarily better) than receiving several hundred (possibly anonymous) completed questionnaires in the mail with the appropriate boxes ticked to the predetermined set of questions.

These initial encounters with rural teachers in small schools changed the nature of my first research study and began to reset the course for my future work in the Faculty of Education. Two things struck me very forcibly. One of these was the distinctive and inviting atmosphere of small schools. The human scale of the places, the relaxed informality, the family-like atmosphere, and the style of interaction between teachers and students were all very appealing to me.

Secondly, as I talked with the teachers, and importantly the more they talked and the more I listened, increasingly, I became convinced that our system of education was not treating them (or their students) in a fair or just manner. They appeared to have the most difficult of teaching situations yet they received the least help and consideration from our provincial educational authorities.

I was also becoming aware from this field-work and from my extensive reading how important rural schools were to their communities. They were not just places where the young were educated. They were important cultural and social institutions and quite vital to the life of the whole community.[19]

These initial encounters forced me to broaden the scope of the inquiry. I was still interested in the methodology issues (the how-do-you-do-it questions) but I decided to paint a more comprehensive portrait of multi-grading in the province. I decided to document the number of multi-grade classrooms in the province and their great diversity in terms of the number of grades combined and the grade combinations that existed. Also, I was determined to provide the opportunity for multi-grade teachers to describe the challenging nature of their teaching situations. I provided them with a forum to express their frustrations and anger with the lack of attention small rural schools had generally received from the educational establishment and its leaders in the province.

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[19] "Communities, the Minister was told, take pride in their schools; many were built by volunteer labor. In rural Newfoundland and Labrador the whole community supports and assists the school in myriad ways. The school helps define the community and give it an identity. It is a connection to the past and represents a hope for the future. Most importantly, a school is a sign of the community's viability as a place to live, a place to stay, and a place to move to. The presence of children and the sounds of their play throughout the day are signs of life and vitality sorely needed by our rural communities. When community leaders claim that the loss of the school will lead to the death of the community they know what they are talking about. If they have a choice, families with school age children will not move to a community that doesn't have a school" (Mulcahy, 1999).

The report based on the study, *Learning and teaching in multi-grade classrooms* was published by the Faculty of Education Publications Committee in 1993. One chapter of the report focused on methodology (my agenda); the other chapters of that report reflected the concerns that had been identified by rural teachers. The final chapter entitled "Future Directions" consisted almost entirely of their suggestions as to how the various educational agencies in the province could do a better job of preparing and supporting multi-grade teachers in our small rural schools.

With the publication of *Learning and teaching in multi-grade classrooms (1993)*, my research project was complete. As I indicated earlier, my original plan was to engage in research more related to my graduate work at OISE. I should have been ready to move on. But that is not what happened.

From Multi-grading to small schools and the consolidation wars

Around the time of publication of *Learning and teaching in multi-grade classrooms* (1993), the provincial government was gearing up to initiate another round of small community school closures and consolidations.[20] The drum role for the start of the consolidation wars started with the second Royal Commission on Education Report, *Our Children Our Future* (Williams, 1992). This commission introduced the concept of "school viability." The provincial government would spend most of the rest of that decade in a determined effort to reform as many small community schools out of existence as possible.

The government's basic position was in order for a school to be "viable" i.e. capable of providing a quality education it had to be of a certain size. In a document (*School Viability*) released in 1995 the government claimed that only schools with at least 20 students per grade[21] were capable of providing a quality educational environment.[22] Smaller schools with enrolments of less than twenty students per grade level, were to be considered "non viable" and would be targeted for closure. Under these new rules as many as 150 small community schools could cease to exist and thousands more students would be riding busses for increasing amounts of time.

In 1996 the government introduced the term "necessarily existent small schools." These were schools that should be closed according to viability guidelines but because their location did not make bussing feasible or possible they would be given a reprieve. I have always found the term "necessarily existent" particularly offensive. The government is saying to a community that we do not think your school is educationally viable and we would like to eliminate it but for now we can't. There is an implication of contempt for the school and the community.

To explain to rural communities how the new viability guidelines would be implemented and to give rural folks the opportunity to respond a series of public consultation meetings were scheduled around the rural regions of the province in 1996/1997.

Becoming a public intellectual and an advocate for community schools

The middle and late 1990's were to be the turning point for my academic career. From the time I spent visiting rural communities and talking to rural teachers over a ten year period, and the data collected for my initial research project I had become fairly knowledgeable about small schools

[20] The first had occurred following the publication of the first Royal Commission on Education (Warren, 1967/1968) http://www.heritage.nf.ca/society/royal_comm_68.html

[21] This echoes the recommendation from Warren(1967/68) who also set a minimum size for schools

[22] There would be no need for multi-grading in such schools

and their viability. This knowledge was reinforced and validated by my extensive reading of the rural education literature and my participation in conferences on rural education in Canada and the United States.

I knew that what the government was saying about the viability of small schools was largely untrue. Most research indicates that children can learn as well in smaller schools as they can in larger schools. Critically important, given the economic and social conditions in many rural communities, the research literature clearly demonstrated that smaller schools offered at-risk children their best chance of success[23].

I also knew they were underestimating the deleterious impact of long distance bussing on all students especially the younger ones. In addition, they were totally ignoring the important role that small schools played in rural communities not only in terms of education but also in terms of social and cultural enhancement. They refused to acknowledge the role of rural schools in community development and sustainability. And there was no recognition of the heroic work done in small rural schools by dedicated teachers under demanding conditions and often with limited resources.

I felt I had not choice but to get involved in the emerging public debate over the value and viability of small rural community schools. The government characterized their efforts as rural education reform. I viewed it as an attempt to destroy a valuable rural community resource. At best the information being presented by the government as being at best misleading and at worse simply untrue and not supported by research.

I got involved in a number of ways. I made presentations at public meetings, worked with community groups to help prepare their defense of their small schools, wrote letters to the government and local newspapers, and spoke at any opportunity on CBC radio.I also attempted to give voice to the rural perspective in a major piece entitled "Critical perspectives on rural education reform" (Mulcahy, 1999).

Doing simply what I thought was my duty as a university professor I learned that taking a public stand on these issues was not sitting well with the government. The Dean of the Faculty at that time asked me one day if I knew what I was doing. She said you are fast becoming a persona non grata with the provincial Department of Education. They do not like people publically criticizing their policies.

The rest is history

The dye was cast in the 1990's; I was irrevocably drawn into the universe of small schools and rural education.[24] The provision of education schooling in rural communities would become and remains today the main focus of my work in the Faculty of Education. Today I use the term rural education studies as an umbrella term for my work. I am increasingly aware that it is the unique

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[23] Howley, (2011) writes, "Research also suggests that impoverished regions in particular often benefit from smaller schools and districts, and they can suffer irreversible damage if consolidation occurs."

[24] I have always believed that being a bit of an outsider in regards to rural education gave me a certain advantage in my work. I came to the work without baggage either of a negative or positive kind. My investigations were not colored by prejudice, sentimentality, or mythology.

features and characteristics of the rural context that give primary definition and direction to my work.

I can not make a contribution to improving education in rural communities if I do not understand and appreciate the strengths and challenges associated with living in rural areas. Coming to this realization has both complicated and enriched the nature of my work. It would be simpler to ignore the context but to do so would make anything I do less valid.

However, I am still struggling to understand the rural context and its implications for education and schooling in Newfoundland and Labrador. Part of the challenge here is the sheer diversity of that context. Populations vary widely, some places remain remote and isolated, others are well connected to larger places by well- maintained roads, and some are relatively prosperous, others are still reeling economically from the collapse of the cod fishery in 1992.

I feel that I have only scratched the surface in my attempt to understand the contextual realities of rural schooling in Newfoundland and Labrador. Mythology, nostalgia, sentimentality, stereotypes, outdated notions, misinformation, lack of information, and urban indifference create barriers that impede the search for knowledge. One thing is crystal clear: to speak of rural Newfoundland and Labrador in generalities is to speak falsely. I have become very wary of anyone who attempts to make any general statement about rural Newfoundland or rural schools. A typical rural community simply doesn't exist.

The direction of my work continues to be guided by some fundamental questions: What is the purpose of education and schooling in rural communities? Whose interests are being served by current practices and provision? Should not the primary aim be the sustaining and developing of rural communities?

A most important aspect of that work has been the creation of undergraduate and graduate courses that focus on rural education issues. A promise made to some rural teachers in a small, remote rural community has been kept.

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