A CASE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF CURRENT AND FORMER

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS OF A RECENTLY ANNEXED, RURAL,

IMPOVERISHED, SOUTH TEXAS, LATINO SCHOOL DISTRICT IN A

HIGH STAKES ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

A Dissertation

by

CLAUDIA G. RODRIGUEZ

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2007

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Kathryn Bell McKenzie
Committee Members,	Virginia Collier
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ABSTRACT

A Case Study of the Perceptions of Current and Former School Board Members of a

Recently Annexed, Rural, Impoverished, South Texas, Latino School District in a

High Stakes Accountability System. (December 2007)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Kathryn Bell McKenzie

This research study was a qualitative study involving eight current or former school board members of a recently annexed, rural, impoverished, Latino school district in South Texas. The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to highlight the plight of rural education, specifically the plight of a poor school district by examining the perceptions of the school board members. This study was organized around the following sensitizing concerns (Blumer, 1969; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2001): What were the school board members' perceptions about the school district prior to the annexation? What were the school board members' perceptions of the factors that contributed to the annexation? What were the school board members' perceptions of the effect of the annexation on the community?

The method of inquiry was conversational information interviews (Patton, 2002), two unstructured interviews with each school board member, going where the interviews took me (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The themes revealed in the research included (1) power dynamics, with three sub-themes, (a) trusting those in power, (b)

deferring to those in power, and (c) becoming those in power; (2) denial of the obvious, and (3) unspoken paternalism—the Anglo patron system.

This study offers implications for policy, practice, and additional research in the areas of rural communities and rural school districts, but most importantly, it provides evidence that rural colonias located along the U.S.-Mexico border have unique educational needs. Rural school districts located along this border need strong school leaders with "a critical leadership of place that support community as a context for learning, understand that schools and their local communities are inextricably linked and that the ability of each to thrive is dependent upon the other" (Budge, 2006, p.8).

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to:

- My husband and best friend, Oscar, without your encouragement, quiet support, and unabashed love, I could not have achieved this goal. Thank you for the sacrifices you made.

- My mom, Maria Filippini, and sister, Michele Hockemeyer, who love me unconditionally and always believed that I could do it, and the memory of my dad, who would have been proud of me.

- The residents of La Vista, for accepting me so graciously into their school, into their homes, into their community and into their hearts; but most importantly, for having trusted me with their most precious possessions—their children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Foremost, my chair, Dr. Kathryn Bell McKenzie—you drove me crazy, you made me laugh and cry, but more importantly, you made me question myself, my values and my beliefs—why I do what I do and think the way I think. I am a different person today than I was three years ago and a better person for it. Thank you.

Members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Mario Torres, Dr. Gwen Webb-Johnson, and Dr. Virginia Collier, muchísimas gracías for your support, your encouragement, your commitment, and your confidence.

My fellow doctoral student and special friend, Sylvia Reyna, thank you for being my sounding board, my classmate, my roommate, my dissertation partner, but most importantly, for being my friend.

The Laredo Cohort, where this long arduous journey began, thank you for accepting me into your group. Adelante!

The research participants interviewed for this research study know that the two years I spent in that quiet, off the road, rural community, was a humbling, yet amazing experience. Thank you for your time and for allowing me to ask all those questions I always wanted to ask.

Friends, extended and immediate family, and coworkers, thank you for accepting what often seemed like poor excuses when I declined invitations to lunches, dinners, family gatherings and parties, and exclaimed that I had to complete coursework, class assignments, research, and write a dissertation.

Thank you to all of the A&M professors that taught the cohort: Dr. Hoyle and Dr. Trevino for traveling to Laredo and the encouragement you brought with each trip; Dr. Torres, for your willingness to change the schedule to accommodate the group during the spring and summer residency requirements and your faith in the cohort; Dr. Slater, for your patience with us during the online course; Dr. Collier, for your patience and determination to get us together and on the same path; Dr. McKenzie for believing that failure was not an option; and in loving memory of Dr. Garcia, a kind and gentle soul who lived what he preached, "students first."

Writing a dissertation and working full time is not an easy task; however, working with numerous thriving rural Latino school districts in the Rio Grande Valley and South Texas inspired me to stay the course.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

"Consolidation." The word alone generates fear, anger, and fury across hundreds of communities in Texas. Every biennium in Texas, small, rural schools come under attack as legislative bills are enacted and submitted that would require the consolidation of small districts with larger ones. Fortunately or unfortunately, because it is a matter of opinion, the bills have been defeated or lacked the support or votes needed to move forward. Yet, one consolidation order made headlines recently as evidenced below:

February 17, 2005

The purpose of this letter is to provide La Vista Independent School District* ... with preliminary notice that I intend to order the annexation of the La Vista Independent School District* ... and open the 2005-2006 school year as one school district. (Texas Education Agency, 2005)

May 2, 2005

The purpose of this letter is to reiterate the steps the Texas Education Agency will take to assist the transition activities related to the annexation of La Vista Independent School District* to Branch Independent School District* in the coming months. Understandably, two major issues are at the forefront of concerns regarding the annexation: financial support and student test scores. (Texas Education Agency, 2005)

The style and format for this dissertation follow that of the *Journal of Educational Research*.

May 3, 2005

Chronically poor academic performance and health and safety issues are causing the Texas Commissioner of Education to order the annexation of La Vista Independent School District*.... (Texas Education Agency News, 2005)

May 4, 2005

La Vista Independent School District* trustees, however, have hired an Austin attorney to sue the Texas Education Agency.... In previous board meetings, trustees said they oppose the annexation because it would shut down their school, which is 'the heart' of their community. (Cortez, 2005, p. 5)

May 9, 2005

State-ordered annexation.... The heart of the community, the school, will close July 1. All that will be left ... will be memories and the painting of the mascot on the town's water tower. (Borgan, 2005, 1A)

(*To protect confidentiality and identities, the names of the city and school district have been changed.)

America's public schools have been increasingly under attack (Herbert & Beardsley, 2001) since a *Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was published. Numerous studies have identified serious problems in the education of our young people and much of the heat has been on urban public school systems (Hill & Celio, 1998). Adding to these identified problems, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, putting an end to what he called "the soft bigotry of low expectations" (Peterson & West, 2003, p. 19). This law made the national government a prominent player in the effort to use high-stakes accountability to drive school improvement (Peterson & West, 2003). Suddenly, the U.S. Department of Education was requiring all states to test students regularly and it began holding schools and districts accountable for student outcomes. The No Child Left Behind legislation included student, teacher,

and school accountability, mandating that disaggregated student performance data be made public.

Although rural schools are not new to public attacks (Nachtigal, 1992), they suddenly find themselves under as much scrutiny as urban and suburban schools. With student performance data made public, the plight of some rural schools intensifies, and rural consolidation resurfaces as the flash point of an enduring social tension (Post & Stambach, 1999).

Suddenly finding itself in the spotlight was a small, rural, impoverished, Latino school district in South Texas. The school district received an annexation order from the Texas Education Agency, and I happened to serve as the superintendent. Poor student performance, dismal facilities, and noncompliance with state mandates triggered the annexation mandate. Prior to becoming a rural school superintendent in 2003, I had always lived and worked in large urban, metropolitan areas. I had never lived or worked in a rural community; therefore, I, too, questioned whether it was in the best interest of the students to continue to operate knowing full well that educational standards, high stakes testing, and No Child Left Behind demanded more. I believed that the district had no more to give. No matter what we did, efforts were not equal to those of the neighboring school districts. Salaries in neighboring districts were $10,000 higher than what the district offered. There was not enough money to repair and update the district's facilities nor were there funds to offer programs and resources that the students deserved and needed.

Even with the threat of annexation, members of the school board and the community did not want the school closed down and urged me to do everything I

could to keep it open. The Texas Education Agency, however, was insistent that the quality of education being provided to the students of the district was inadequate. In addition, the Texas School Performance Review (TSPR) report, conducted in 2002 by the State Controller's Office, had a similar position when it reported:

> The district is struggling to meet very basic criteria usually associated with operating a viable school district. Some members of the board are not fully engaged in performing their duties; three of the seven board members are inactive and do not attend meetings. The district's facilities are unclean and in poor and unsafe condition, uncertified teachers and substitutes are regularly employed, the district lacks a special education teacher though it enrolls children with special needs, student performance on standardized tests consistently lag behind all peer districts and statewide averages, financial practices lack sufficient internal controls, the superintendent has not completed the administrative certification for superintendent, although she is working on it and the district is not partnering effectively with parents. (Strayhorn, 2002, p. 3)

In the midst of this annexation conflict, I often wondered how the district got to this point. What events transpired in the course of the district's history to cause such dismal conditions, as outlined in the TSPR and that ultimately lead to the annexation? Furthermore, I wondered if there were other rural schools facing similar struggles?

The consolidation of rural schools in the United States has been a controversial topic for policymakers, school administrators, and rural communities since the 1800s (National Rural Education Association, 2005). The literature is replete with concerns of the academic performance of rural students, the lack of curriculum offerings, the decline in student enrollment, the failure of recruiting and retaining qualified educators, and the bleak economic picture facing rural communities (Alford, 1960; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Cuban, 1979; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sher, 1995). Throughout the history of schooling in America, school consolidation has been a way to solve rural issues in the eyes of policy makers and many education

officials (Lyson, 2002). Today, faced with declining student enrollments and financial cutbacks, many rural schools and communities continue to deal with challenges associated with possible school reorganization and consolidation (National Rural Education Association, 2005).

Perhaps the events that led to the eventual closing of this rural district might have been avoided. Through my research, I examined this particular poor, rural, Latino community with the challenges imposed upon them by today's high stakes accountability standards. Additionally, I examined the school board members' perceptions of the annexation and explored the impact the annexation had on the community at large.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the literature that framed this problem, as well as a brief description of the methodology and researcher's positionality.

Review of the Literature

The problems facing rural education today are numerous. Rural education continues to be marginalized because little or no focus on the plight of rural schools exists. Davidson (1996), in his book *Broken Heartland* contended that social critics use the term "marginalization" to refer to those individuals who have been pushed beyond the edges of society's consideration—people who are poor, the homeless: people who no longer count (p. 68). Many rural communities, especially those not near metropolitan areas, are experiencing population loss, are poor, and offer little or no opportunities for educational or occupational advancement.

On the other hand, diversity now describes rural America. *Rural* no longer means *farm*, and rural places make up more than 90% of our nation's space. The rural economy has moved far beyond agriculture, and many rural communities are booming as newcomers flock to a scenic lifestyle (Drabenstott, 2002). Drabenstott maintained, however, that a deep divide exists in economic performance across rural American and that rural America today is a striking picture of the best and worst of times. Many assume that quality of life is a rural asset. This is often not so. He further claimed that dwindling populations are putting enormous pressure on the rural tax base, raising fresh doubts over rural education and other public services. These doubts often manifest themselves in the form of consolidation efforts that encourage and often require smaller school districts to merge with neighboring school districts to create larger, more efficient systems. Large schools have been touted as the best way to efficiently and effectively educate the nation's young people. According to Tyack (1974), believing that professionals knew better about educating children, experts were more interested in centralizing control rather than leaving decisions to members of a local community. He maintained that the easiest way to curb the influence of school trustees in rural districts was to eliminate as many districts as possible, by consolidating them.

The absence of rural education and the presence of consolidation discussions among policy makers and governmental agencies is an added concern facing rural education. As schooling, equity, educational reform, and accountability are discussed, urban education, which now educates the majority of the children, takes the forefront, the question of whom the schools should serve, the local community, the larger

society, or some combination of both (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999) is at the heart of the issue and remains unanswered.

Rural communities, furthermore, have image problems that stem from long-standing negative attitudes toward ruralness. Modern American society does not value ruralness; prejudices against rural people and places are deep-seated (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Rural America also continues to be far poorer than metropolitan areas, and poverty is especially prevalent among rural Latino and African American communities (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Kannapel and DeYoung's statistics also show that since 1980 unemployment and poverty have been higher in rural areas, and that this rate is increasing twice as fast as metropolitan areas. Moreover, Davidson (1996) contended that this level of poverty is nearly as high as in the nation's inner-city neighborhoods. In Texas, for example, over 3.3 million people live in rural communities and one-tenth of Texas students attend public school in a rural community (Beeson & Strange, 2003). More than one-third of these students, however, qualify for free lunches, and nearly one-third of them are Hispanic or African American.

In the United States, four states share the border with Mexico in an expanse that features deserts and dusty plains, urban centers and farms, affluence and poverty. This area is the home of more than 10 million people, a population that is half non-Hispanic at the California end and almost entirely Hispanic in Texas (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004). In many of the region's bi-national twin cities, daily life across the two cities is so intertwined that if it were not for traffic jams at bridges and customs, people crisscrossing for work or socializing would nearly forget they are changing municipalities, much less traversing a border (McRobbie & Villegas). Today many of

these cities are boomtowns, energized by jobs and growth, and also feeling the burdens of fast-paced change (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004).

Yet, despite the boomtowns, McRobbie and Villegas (2004) contended that 3 of the 10 poorest counties in the U.S. are located in the border area, and 21 of the border counties are designated as economically distressed areas. Approximately 432,000 people, priced out of conventional housing, live in 1,200 *colonias* in Texas and New Mexico. *Colonias* are unincorporated, semi-rural communities characterized by substandard housing and unsafe public drinking water or wastewater systems (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004). This border region, comprised of hundreds of small rural districts, is characterized by poverty, a prevalence of English learners, and low education levels.

Yet, proponents of rural schools argue that rural schools have the kind of qualities that American schools and school reform models are touting, because they are smaller, friendlier, and more intimate. Nonetheless, much of rural America is still being coerced into accepting school consolidations as the proper implementation of the factory model of education (Sher, 1995). Rural schools continue to face many of the same pressures as urban schools such as an increase in diverse student populations, federal and state accountability, and a declining tax base. Yet, added challenges facing rural schools are their geographic isolation, lack of infrastructure, poverty, and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining teachers and administrators.

Research reports teachers and administrators hired in rural areas are less experienced and often lack the appropriate certification (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Teachers and administrators also report feelings of professional isolation. The

same challenges facing rural teachers and administrators also face rural superintendents. In many rural school districts, the superintendent is also the principal. The rural superintendent is expected to be an expert in everything and is regularly called upon to drive school buses, teach classes, do minor building maintenance and repairs, and substitute where needed.

Adding to these challenges faced by rural superintendents is yet another important factor, i.e., school board members and superintendent relationships. This relationship is generally not depicted as a positive one and is often strained. Studies suggested that a poor relationship between the school board members and superintendent prevents school improvement from occurring, creates morale issues, affects the quality of education, impedes reform, and continues the "revolving door syndrome" of district leaders (Alsbury, 2003).

Another problem facing rural schools is not being able to offer a comprehensive curriculum and not having the infrastructure to connect students to the World Wide Web. Rural schools also tend to focus on vocational programs due to the schools' and communitys' beliefs that rural students will remain at home in laboring jobs instead of being college-bound.

Although the economic and educational picture of rural communities and school districts is a depressing one, community identity and social life are quite the opposite. The most important attribute of a small community seems to be the relationships that are forged. Schools become the social and cultural hub of the community. Moreover, knowing your neighbors, leaving homes unlocked, and maintaining safe environments for children are some of the reasons rural residents remain.

Methodology

This study documented the perceptions of current and former school board members of a recently annexed, rural, impoverished Latino school district and the school board members' perceptions of the factors that contributed to the annexation order by the Texas Education Agency. It was an intrinsic case study (Stake, 2002) to examine, in depth, what led to the demise of this rural school district. The purpose was to gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information (Patton, 2002) and to draw attention to what specifically could be discovered about the case and all its idiosyncrasies. It could have been simple or complex, but it was a study undertaken because of an inherent interest in the case (Stake, 2002). Much can be learned about a particular case (Merriam, 2002). In this intrinsic case study, purposive/purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002) examined the annexation of a small rural school district and organized around the following sensitizing concerns: What were the school board members' perceptions about the school district prior to the annexation order? What were the school board members' perceptions of the factors that contributed to the annexation? What were the school board members' perceptions of the effect of the annexation on the community?

Qualitative research design seemed appropriate for this type of study because of the ability to offer thick, rich descriptions of people in their natural settings (Patton, 2002). The purpose of this research was to add to the body of literature on rural education, specifically as it pertains to a poor, rural Latino school district by

examining school board members' beliefs and attitudes about the roles they played or did not play in the annexation of the district.

For this study, eight school board members were chosen by snowball sampling, an approach for locating information-rich key informants (Patton, 2002). The process began by contacting and asking current school board members for input and getting them to provide additional names of others interested in being a part of the research group. Ultimately, four of the research participants were school board members during the annexation process, and four of the research participants had served as school board members prior to the annexation. All of the participants lived in the community in which the school district was located. Most of the school board members, as well as their children, and some of their grandchildren, attended the schools in the district. The majority of the school board members were Latino, although several Anglo community members also served on the school board.

The eight school board members were interviewed two times via information conversational interviews, the most open-ended approach to interviewing (Patton, 2002). Interview questions included the school board members' motivations for running for the school board, decisions that they made concerning district leadership and financial issues, decisions made about their facilities, their thoughts on governance and the status of the district prior to the annexation, and finally, their beliefs about what led to the ultimate closure of the school district.

To establish trustworthiness, the data were triangulated using multiple data sources such as audiotapes, interviews, transcriptions, field notes, researcher's reflexive audio journal, and non-human data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The

non-human data sources included letters from the Texas Education Agency, school board meeting agendas and minutes, newspaper articles, financial records, and copies of the district's Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports. Transcription and coding followed each interview session. To establish additional trustworthiness, member checks were conducted on an ongoing basis by taking the findings back to the participants.

Researcher's Positionality

This intrinsic case study was undertaken because the circumstances surrounding the annexation of this particular school district may be useful to other rural Latino school districts facing similar conditions. In addition, this research may create an awareness for current rural school board members to set aside personal agendas, to marshal efforts to keep their districts financially solvent, and to focus on the accountability standards mandated by both the state's accountability system and the No Child Left Behind legislation. Finally, this study may draw the attention of policy makers and educational officials to realize the impact school consolidation has on small rural communities. Equally, this study is specific to this rural Latino school district and tells the story of current and former school board members and myself as a former superintendent of the district. The research examined the roles we played, if any, that led to the school district's annexation and what the annexation ultimately meant to the community.

I must acknowledge that I wrote this research from the lens of an Anglo female doctoral student, a veteran teacher, and school administrator, with experiences in

mainly large urban school districts in Texas. It was important to be aware of my own positionality, and that I understood that I am a mosaic constructed by my life's experiences, which tended to influence my perceptions and outlooks. All attempts were made to recognize that positionality as I interacted with the research participants during the interviews. It is important to note that my experiences and biases were not the only ones reflected in the research, because reflected also are those of the research participants. The intent of this research was to bring a fresh look at the justifications for consolidation and to reexamine the practicality for the existence of small rural school districts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I revealed various challenges faced by small rural school districts and their communities' survival as they strive to cope with today's high stakes accountability standards and dwindling financial resources. I further outlined and discussed the literature surrounding rural schools and rural conditions, which seemed to support consolidation as the only solution for their survival. In addition, I gave an overview of the methodology I used to conduct my research and how the research participants were selected and interviewed for this inquiry. Finally, and before the final report was written, the data were triangulated, coded, and analyzed for patterns and themes.

In Chapter II, I delineate the literature as it pertains to rural education and the most challenging issues facing rural education today. Chapter III is a description of the district and surrounding community, and introduces the eight school board

members interviewed. The poem at the beginning of the chapter provides a detailed description of my initial response to the district. Chapter III is additionally a detailed description of the method of inquiry and includes a detailed portrayal of the participants, how they were selected, the research design, the data analysis, and the limitations of the study. In Chapter IV the analysis is found, delineating the interview sessions, with a discussion and analysis of themes that surfaced. Last, Chapter V is a summary of the data and wherein I make sense of this project.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Nearly one in three of America's school-age children attend public schools in rural areas or small towns of less than 25,000, and more than one in six go to school in the very smallest communities, those with populations under 2,500 (Beeson & Strange, 2003). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2003/2004, schools in rural areas or small towns accounted for about 47% of all schools in the nation and 20% of all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Over half of the rural population in the United States lives in 13 states, which include our most populous states and some of our most urban states such as California, Michigan, New York, and Texas (Beeson & Strange, 2003). Although rural schools account for about 47% of all schools in the nation, rural education continues to be marginalized, especially in Texas where little or no focus on the plight of rural schools exists.

Although politicians profess a deep and abiding love for rural values, thousands of small towns spread out across America are left to wither on the vine (Davidson, 1996). Whether at the local or national level, moreover, there is little or no talk of rural education as a policy issue. Rural schools are under continual examination: for being too small, for being located in communities characterized as "not valuing education," for not offering a comprehensive curriculum, and for being inefficient. The

very survival of rural schools—and, some think, of rural communities—is in doubt (Howley & Howley, 1995).

One of the many troubles facing rural education today is the lack of a definitive understanding of the meaning of *rural*. In other words, what is rural? The word is often defined from an outsider's and urban perspective, in much the same way that the dominant culture has traditionally spoken for minority groups (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Researchers often define rural by the number of students attending rural schools, but depending on the definition one uses, that number can range from 1.1 million to 11.6 million. The lack of a common, consistent, and explicit definition of *rural* makes it difficult, if not impossible, to compare results among the studies conducted on any particular rural issue. That challenge is further enhanced along the U.S.-Mexico border where the definition of rural also includes *colonias*, unincorporated communities, which are characterized by substandard housing, with no public water or sewage systems (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004).

The United States government's definition for *rural*, however, is non-metropolitan (Arnold et al., 2005), but what does *non-metropolitan* mean? Does it mean a community without skyscrapers, restaurants, traffic lights, and big business? Or does it mean a community with no public water or wastewater systems? A commonly used definition belongs to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, which currently defines *rural* as a residual category of places "outside urbanized areas, in open country, or in communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants, or where the population is less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Still, a better definition of *rural* must be crafted. According to Sherwood (2000), "There is

'poor rural', and 'wealthy rural.' There is 'rural' with no minorities, and 'rural' with high minorities. There is 'rural' with high limited English proficiency ... and big rural communities versus small rural communities" (p. 161).

In addition, the U.S. Department of Education's (2006), definition of small rural schools is schools that are eligible to participate in the Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program. SRSA includes districts with average daily attendance of fewer than 600 students, or districts in which all schools are located in counties with a population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile, and all schools served by the districts are located in a rural area with a school locale code of 7 or 8.

These school locale codes, also known as Beale, Metro Status and Locale Codes, are all classification systems that have been used to determine what schools are considered rural. The Beale Code, named after its creator, Dr. Calvin Beale, is basically calculated by examining the size of a county and its proximity to a metropolitan area. The Metro Status Code, developed in the l960s by the National Center for Education Statistics after the 1960 Census, is perhaps the simplest code. This system determines the location of the superintendent and assigns a 1 if that physical location is within the central city of a Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) or Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). It assigns a 2 if the physical location is with a CMSA or MSA, but not in the central city, and a 3 if the location is outside a CMSA or MSA. The Locale Code was developed in the early 1980s by the U.S. Bureau of Census to deal with problems inherent in the two code systems described above. This coding system is based on both the proximity to metropolitan

areas and on population size and density. As a further aid to users, these codes are assigned based on the addresses of the individual schools and are assigned at the school level. Thus, it is possible to identify areas within school districts as being different types of localities.

Furthermore, the Texas Education Agency (2007) states that a local education agency (LEA) is eligible for rural school funding if: a) the total number of students in average daily attendance at all of the schools served is fewer than 600; or each county in which a school served by the LEA is located has a total population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile; and b) all of the schools served by the school district are designated with a school locale code of 7 or 8 by the National Center for Education Statistics; or the Secretary has determined, based on a demonstration by the LEA, that the LEA is located in an area of the State defined as rural by a governmental agency of the State.

Many rural communities that are not near metropolitan areas are experiencing population loss, are poor, and offer little or no opportunities for educational or occupational advancement. High-poverty counties with poverty rates of 20% or higher are concentrated in the Black Belt and Mississippi Delta in the South, in Appalachia, in the lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, and in counties containing Indian reservations in the Southwest and Great Plains (Miller & Weber, 2004). According to Miller and Weber, poverty rates are highest in more remote rural counties and persistent poverty is most prevalent in the most remote rural places. There are 382 counties in the United States that have had poverty rates of 20% or more in every decennial census between 1960 and 2000 and those counties are labeled as persistent

poverty counties (p. 1). Several South Texas counties, especially those along the U.S.-Mexican border, are among them.

In all four U.S.-Mexico border states, adults living closest to the border are also less likely to have at least a high school diploma than those living 100 miles from the border. A look at student achievement in rural areas near the border reveals a mixed picture and a couple of factors make it impossible to compare student achievement across states. First of all, each state administers different assessments. Second, some have criterion-referenced tests while others rely on norm-referenced data. In Texas, however, students living on the border consistently score lower than students statewide (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004).

Further challenging rural education today is the matter of local control. Functions common to most school boards include hiring the superintendent and setting policies (Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005) and although school board members shoulder a great deal of responsibility in ensuring a quality education for all students, local politics get in the way. Often, local political positions in rural and small communities are about status and power (i.e., power created by the opportunities school board members have to award bids and contracts and to hire personnel). Yet, it is precisely these characteristics of school board members that provide insight into the political dynamics of local communities (Hoyle et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, one of the most controversial topics facing rural education today is consolidation (National Rural Education Association, 2005), also referred to as unification, merger, reorganization, or annexation. Consolidation efforts encourage and often require smaller schools and school districts to merge with neighboring schools

and school districts to create a larger, more efficient and effective school system. School consolidation has been the bane of rural communities for at least the past 50 years (Lyson, 2002). In fact, the prevailing theme of rural and small city educational policy making has been, and remains, the continuous confrontation of these districts with efforts to consolidate them into larger districts. The specter of losing local schools and/or districts is not new, but an ever-present threat to small rural cities and localities (Burlingame, 1979).

Advocates for consolidation argue that small schools cannot offer an extensive curriculum, lack the funds to hire experienced and qualified administrators and staff, and cannot provide the educational opportunities or learning experiences that larger schools are able to provide. On the other hand, challengers of consolidation contend that small schools do more than just educate students; they are places where the community gathers and comes together and community identity is forged (Lyson, 2002).

On top of district mergers, another challenge facing rural schools appears to be their geographic isolation. While rural and urban schools tend to have some of the same needs, they face very different challenges. Those challenges involve the recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators due to persistently lower wages for rural educators. Additional factors contributing to the needs of rural schools is professional isolation (Beeson & Strange, 2003), long student bus rides, teachers teaching multiple subjects and grades, both in and out of their areas of certification, and high per-pupil costs. The geographic isolation and distance, furthermore, makes it difficult to connect the students and teachers in rural areas to the digital world.

Meanwhile, the absence of rural education discussions among policy makers and governmental agencies is an added concern facing rural schools. As schooling, equity, educational reform, and accountability are discussed, urban education takes the forefront. The question of whom the schools should serve—the local community, the larger society, or some combination of both (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999) is at the heart of the issue and remains unanswered, however. It is specifically the rural schools that often play multiple roles in their communities. Not only do they provide a basic education, but they also serve as social and cultural centers and are often employment sources for community residents. Rural schools create community identity, promote community values, and foster community ideals (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lyson, 2002). Theobald (1997) advocated strongly for the need to foster a sense that community is a valuable societal asset, something to be promoted rather than destroyed. He further argued that rural schools "can rekindle community allegiance and can nurture that suppressed part of us that finds fulfillment in meeting community obligations" (p. 1).

Gemeinschaft Community

Community means many things to many people, or, more complicated still, the concept may mean different things to the same person (Woodrum, 2004) depending on the circumstances of its use. Woodrum (2004) drew from the work of Tonnies (1957), when he applied the terms of *gemeinshaft* and *gesellschaft* to describe how differing concepts of community often lie at the heart of the policy debate regarding the role of schools in rural communities. Both terms were coined by Tonnies (1975)

at the end of the 19th century, to describe the then-recent phenomenon of workers in industrial societies moving from agrarian to industrial societies, and as a result, creating communities with different cultural values. Tonnies stated:

> *Gesellshaft* is transitory and superficial. Accordingly, *Gemeinschaft* should be understood as a living organism, *Gesellschaft* as a mechanical aggregate and artifact. In other words, *Gesellschaft* is to be understood as a multitude of natural and artificial individuals, the wills, the spheres of whom are in many relations with and to one another, and remain never-the-less independent and devoid of mutual relationships. (p. 76)

Both terms describe sets of social and cultural relationships and values. In other words, in *gemeinshaft* communities, people are close-knit, their lives are intertwined and dependent on one another, neighbors are important and friendships a way of life. In *gemeinshaft* communities, beliefs and values are agreed upon and understood by all. Woodrum (2004) maintained that in rural *gemeinshaft* communities the school reflects and shapes a sense of community. There is also a strong belief that the role of the school is to educate its students for membership in their communities and, thus, the school itself becomes one of its fundamental institutions (Woodrum, 2004).

In *gesellshaft* communities, people separate from other people and peoples' values or opinions stand alone. Consequently, advocates of consolidation then support and encourage a *gesellshaft* America where formal social controls are set by law and enforced by governmental agencies instead of maintained through customs and traditions. The role of the school in these societies is to educate students for a future distant from and distinctly different from the lives their parents currently lead (Woodrum, 2004).

The smallness and uniqueness of rural communities also appear to give the residents a feeling of unity and togetherness. The most important attribute of a small community seems to be the relationships that are forged. People are hesitant to leave *gemeinshaft* communities because of their connections to the people and the place. Knowing your neighbors, leaving houses unlocked, and creating safe environments for children are, moreover, just some of the reasons rural residents remain. Similarly rural communities have no bureaucratic layers and information is disseminated by word of mouth, often at the post office, local store or the school. The validity of information is based as much on who said it as what is said, and a person's word is considered a binding agreement (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

Repeatedly, the center of information in a rural community revolves around the school, which is host to social events such as plays, athletic events, meetings, and other community activities (Lyson, 2002). Schools become the social and cultural hub of the rural community. Often school settings contribute to the sense of survival of adults in the culture and serve as symbols of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition and personal and community identity (Lyson, 2002). Finally, the ability to retain a school, according to the perceptions of its residents, is an indicator of the community's well-being (Davidson, 1996).

Nevertheless, rural communities also have image problems that stem from long-standing negative attitudes toward ruralness. Rural people are often referred to as ignorant and rural communities are often labeled as backwards and unsophisticated (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Furthermore, according to Herzog and Pittman, modern

American society does not seem to value ruralness; prejudices against rural people and places are strong and rural students seem to have internalized those rural prejudices, and they exhibit an inferiority complex about their origins. Many interpreters of these statistics, though, remain convinced that the more aesthetic values of rural life are not captured by numbers, and that the rural quality of life in America remains important (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

Rural America, additionally, is far poorer than metropolitan areas as a whole and nearly as poor as central cities (Beeson & Strange, 2000). Poverty is especially prevalent among rural Latino and African American communities. In fact, Latinos and African Americans living in rural America have a greater chance of living in poverty than if they lived in an inner city (Davidson, 1996). A comprehensive report on rural schools and communities found high rates of poverty and low levels of educational attainment (Davidson, 1996). Of the 54 million people living in rural America today, over 9 million exist below the poverty line, a level of poverty that is nearly as high as in the nation's blighted inner-city neighborhoods (Davidson, 1996).

Along the U.S.-Mexico border, by Mexican standards, workers in the region are, overall, economically ahead, but on the U.S. side, per capita income lags considerably behind the national average (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004). According to McRobbie and Villegas, communities in this region are marked by more low-income households. In three of the four states, the percentage of households with incomes less than $25,000 is greatest within the 20 miles of the border. In Texas, the percentage within 20 miles of the border is the same as statewide. Additionally, the unemployment rate

along the border in Texas is 250-300% higher than that of the rest of the U.S. (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004).

Of special significance to education is the fact that the percentage of school-age children in poverty continues to grow (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). The problem of hunger and malnutrition is especially severe for the children of the rural poor, who are far more likely to have inadequate diets than are the children of the urban poor (Davidson, 1996). For many of them, the school lunch is the only hot meal of the day. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), 45% of all rural children participate in the National School Lunch Program.

Furthermore, communities closest to the border tend to have the lowest incomes and have significantly higher percentages of children ages 5-17 living in poverty. Higher percentages of student populations are Limited English Proficient (LEP) or English Language Learners (ELL) and migrants. Thirty-five percent of Texas' La Frontera border students are classified as English Language learners while 14% of students statewide are deemed ELL (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004).

Texas also receives roughly 20,000 migrant students a year. This bilingual and bicultural nature of the districts closest to the border is both an integral part of the culture of border communities as well as a challenge for educators. For example, McRobbie and Villegas (2004) reported that La Frontera students in Texas consist-ently pass the TAKS math and reading assessments at rates lower than students state-wide. From sixth through twelfth grade, moreover, statewide passing rates in mathe-matics significantly outpace those along the border region. Furthermore, the No Child Left Behind law calls for all English language learners to be tested in English and

make adequate yearly progress once they have attended U.S. schools for three years. Common to all border districts is a need to support English language learners with appropriate instruction, textbooks, and certified bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers.

In addition, school enrollments are decreasing in rural areas. Declining enrollments mean declining budgets. School funding formulas are based on either average daily attendance or per pupil cost, and when students leave, so does the funding. Rural communities that are not close to large cities or metropolitan areas are also experiencing a population decline because they offer fewer opportunities for employment than urban cities.

Since 1980, statistics show that unemployment and poverty have been higher in rural areas and that since 1986, poverty rates have increased twice as fast as unemployment rates (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003). This suggests that the outlook for rural communities is not promising, although it needs to be understood that the value system in regards to economics in many rural communities differs from urban value systems. Staying close to home is often more important than relocating and finding high-paying jobs. Many rural residents think in terms of jobs that will allow them to stay close to their community and, although employment is considered important, it may not be as important as family, friends, and home (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The jobs that allow them to stay close to home are frequently laboring jobs and, with no other job opportunities available, it is no wonder that fewer numbers of rural youths aspire to go to college than their urban counterparts. As long

as there are jobs of any kind, they see no reason to attend college since there are no career opportunities available within their communities.

Bourdieu's research (as cited in Bredo & Feinberg, 1982) further suggests that the chances of entering higher education are also dependent on direct or indirect selection varying in severity with subjects of different social classes throughout their school lives. According to Bredo and Feinberg (1982), the son of a manager is 80 times as likely to get to the university as the son of an agricultural worker, 40 times as likely as the son of a factory worker, and twice as likely as even the son of a man employed in a lower-salaried staff grade. The attitudes of parents and children, as members of the various social classes, both parents and children, and in particular their attitudes towards school, the culture of the school, and the type of future the various types of studies lead to, are largely an expression of the system of explicit or implied values which they have as a result of belonging to a given social class (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). Therefore, expectations in rural communities may be different. Even though wage labor is considered important, it may not be important enough to leave family, friends, and home.

Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Research reported that when teachers are hired in rural areas, they are less experienced than their urban counterparts and often lack the appropriate certification (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003). The rural location of some districts often discourages teaching applicants, as do the low salaries that often accompany these positions. When qualified teachers are found, they tend to have less

teaching experience and often cannot find jobs elsewhere. Although the success in education reform lies directly with teachers (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999), universities have done little to provide teachers with the training needed to work in rural areas. Since rural communities are often located so far away from urban centers, it makes the distance teachers might need to commute impossible. Some rural communities have built apartments and offer housing for teachers, but more often than not, it is not available. Living outside of the community and commuting is, therefore, often the only option.

A group of rural teachers interviewed drew connections between schooling and success, particularly for poor children. One ninth grade teacher remarked: "Most of these kids are caught up in a cycle of poverty, and if they don't get a good education, they are going to wind up in the same situation their parents are in: teenage pregnancies, McDonalds kind of jobs—you know what I mean" (Woodrum, 2004, p. 9). Woodrum further reported that a group of rural Appalachian teachers maintained that the poor parents of their children did not participate in the life of the school and therefore did not value education for their children. One teacher went as far as to ask, "Isn't teaching them to get out of this area what we're here for, really?" (Woodrum, 2004, p. 10). Unfortunately, nowhere do we encourage teachers to inquire who their students really are or encourage them to develop links to the often rich home lives of students, yet teachers cannot begin to understand who sits before them unless they can connect with the families and communities from which their students come (Delpit, 1995).

Questions about the knowledge and skills that teachers need to be successful, furthermore, may depend upon the community in which they work. Delpit (1995) asserted that it is unreasonable to expect teachers to automatically value the know-ledge that parents and community members bring to the education of diverse children if valuing such knowledge has not been modeled for them. This knowledge needs to be modeled for them by those who teach them in universities and teacher preparation programs. In addition, Delpit (1995) asserted that university classrooms do not make available to aspiring teachers the many success stories about educating poor children or children of color. Nor are they ever told about those educators who are quietly going about the job of producing excellence in educating poor and culturally diverse students. If rural educators do not connect to the families and communities from which their students come, in all likelihood it will be these same families and communities that will determine the success or failure of these educators. This lack of connection between families, communities, and educators often contributes to the consolidation move-ment, giving proponents of this movement more impetus.

Whether they live in the community or commute, teachers in rural schools often report feelings of professional isolation. They do not have the opportunities, as do their urban counterparts, for in-service trainings, professional seminars and staff development; many rural districts cannot afford to send them. In addition, the pre-service training of teachers in issues specific to rural education is limited, at best. Due to the small size of rural schools, teachers are often asked to teach a multitude of subjects and grades. Given that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires that all

core subject teachers must be highly qualified, rural administrators voice concerns that they are unable to fill teaching positions.

When educators, live outside of the community, moreover, this type of arrangement does not allow for the development of relationships. Often teachers are considered "outsiders" who do not understand the community's values or belief systems. Oftentimes, these educators look down upon rural students and parents due to the image of rural communities as poor and uneducated. According to Woodrum (2004, p. 14), teachers are products of a system whose aim is to transmit an aristocratic culture and that minor signs of social status such as "correct" dress and the style of speech and accent are minor class signs, and again most often without their knowledge, help to shape the judgment of teachers.

At the same time, schools in many rural districts are hours away from a university and too remote for universities to provide field-based learning, yet rural school educators are eager for information about research-based strategies (Sherwood, 2000) and programs that increase student success in rural communities. Sherwood maintained, however, that due to the lack of high-quality research in regards to rural education, identifying such strategies is very difficult. Relatively few scholars are studying rural education issues, and almost no funding is available to conduct education research in specifically rural contexts (Sherwood, 2000). Rural education, due to its challenges of recruiting and retaining high qualified teachers and administrators and providing effective staff development that is aligned with research-based strategies, may need to collaborate with higher education institutions to revisit how they prepare and train rural educators

Rural Superintendent Recruitment

Similar to the issue of teacher quality is that of superintendent quality. The problem may begin in university administrator preparation programs that are normally geared toward urban and suburban school leaders. Although technology is emerging as a solution for professional development in rural areas, the effectiveness of this type of training remains in question. In many rural districts there is only one administrator, who ultimately must wear numerous hats. Rural leaders have to be generalists because oftentimes the superintendent and principal are one and the same. Since there is only one administrator, the superintendent is expected to be an expert in everything and cannot delegate or collaborate with anyone.

A rural school leader is expected to have greater visibility within the community with less compensation than their urban counterparts do. Additionally, rural school superintendents are regularly called upon to drive school buses, teach classes if there is a shortage of teachers, do building maintenance and repair, and substitute as needed. With school positions difficult to fill in rural areas, superintendents are routinely expected to substitute as the school custodian, cook, office manager, or teacher (Franz, 2003). Unfortunately, rural superintendents often do not have additional administrative staff, thus causing even further feelings of aloneness and isolation. In short, rural school leadership positions become extremely difficult to fill because of these challenges.

Recruiting outsiders, moreover, is difficult and often unsuccessful. School board members are skeptical of applicants who have no ties to the community or who depart from the community's view of what a school leader should look like and of what a

school leader needs to know and be able to do. As a result, turnover rates among outsiders are usually high, especially among those who do not take the time to understand and learn to work within the formal and informal local community structures.

Superintendent and School Board Relations

Adding to the challenges facing not only rural superintendents, but all superintendents, is school board members and superintendent relationships. The most crucial relationship in running a school system is the interplay between the superintendent and board of education (Petersen & Short, 2001). To the casual observer, the roles that the superintendent and board of education play in the leader-ship and governance of the district appear well-defined, yet a myriad of investigations examining the subtleties and dynamics of this relationship and the impact it has on the leadership of the school organization indicate otherwise (Petersen & Short, 2001). Studies consistently and clearly conveyed that a bad relationship between the superintendent and school board hinders school improvement efforts, affects educational programs and school reform attempts, and results in an increase in the "revolving door syndrome" (Petersen & Short, 2001) of district staff and district leaders. Frequent administrative turnover may adversely affect a school's ability to provide staff with a feeling of stability and continuity of purpose, especially in an environment of change (Alsbury, 2003).

In fact, the relationship between school board members and superintendents is often characterized as controversial, arduous, and challenging; yet it has been difficult for researchers to agree on the causes of such difficulties (Mountford, 2004). One

such cause may be that educators have been socialized throughout their careers to have nothing to do with politics, thereby lacking political acumen and skills to make decisions that resolve differences (Hoyle et al., 2005). According to Mountford (2004), the relationship between the superintendent and the school board is generally not depicted as a positive one and is often strained. Yet, in spite of this negative depiction, the American Association of School Administrators' study on superintendents found that 91% of superintendents reported evaluations from their boards as "excellent" or "good" (Mountford, 2004). Mountford maintained that one does not need to spend much more than one or two hours with a superintendent or school board member before hearing a horror story in which the "other" stakeholder is to blame. Other reasons for the difficulties found in relationships between school board members and superintendents point toward questionable motivations for school board membership and power struggles between school board members and superintendents (Mountford, 2004).

Several theories have been proposed to explain how local school politics can influence the relationship between the community and local school board members and superintendents. These theories include the Continuous Participation theory (Zeigler & Jennings, 1974), the Decision-Output theory (Wirt & Kirst, 1992), and the Dissatisfaction Theory of Democracy (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970) (as cited in Alsbury, 2003). The Continuous Participation theory cites the "lack of voter turnout, a lack of serious competitors for school board seats, and a lack of differing political platforms between candidates as indicators that "democratic control of school policy is more illusion than reality" (Alsbury, 2003, p. 668). This theory also suggests that these

factors disallow the local school board from being truly representative of their constituency and, therefore, undemocratic in its composition and function.

Another research-supported theory Alsbury (2003) applied to understanding local school board governance is the Decision-Output theory. It contends that local citizens can influence school governance by local school board elections. Yet, "Wirt and Kirst (1992) insisted that the promise of referendum control by citizens in school governance has not been matched by reality" (Alsbury, 2003, p. 668), resulting in the view that local educational governance as undemocratic.

Finally, the Dissatisfaction Theory of Democracy suggests that the local school board is a democratic process and further affirms that a change in the composition of a school board can happen through the voting process (Alsbury, 2003) especially when citizens are dissatisfied. This change often facilitates the replacement of the superintendent. Alsbury maintained, however, that frequent superintendent turnover may cause discontinuity in organizational goals, policy, and procedures and may negatively affect the entire organization (Grady & Bryant, 1989, as cited in Alsbury, 2003). The key factor in this theory is the public's ability to impact the educational system. Sometimes the political climate in a school system is calm and it is not until community residents are dissatisfied that political upheaval occurs. When this dissatisfaction results in the change of school board members and superintendent turnover, it also causes a change in community values, in community participation, in school board member values, and finally, in school district policies and procedures.

Alsbury (2003) further contended that research time after time stipulates that a poor relationship between the board of trustees and superintendent prevents school

improvement from occurring, creates moral issues, affects the quality of education, impedes reform and ultimately results in an increase in the "revolving door syndrome" of district leaders. Although these issues apply to both urban and rural schools, they are exacerbated in rural communities due to their small size and because the climate and culture in a rural district is less formal.

School board membership, moreover, is often without great rewards, and the work required of school board members is increasing. Therefore, the next logical question would be what motivates a person to seek to be elected to a school board? Although many board members report altruistic reasons for boardsmanship, the final outcome of a citizen's decision to serve is some amount of community prestige and power (Mountford, 2004). This power and prestige, however, is often challenged with increased federal controls and mandates and has made school board members' roles more difficult, often pitting school board members and superintendents against each other. A superintendent must then walk a fine line in determining what issues get priority and the consequences of not addressing a particular board members' issues. In light of No Child Left Behind, superintendents feel more and more pressure and have less ability or time to attend to the personal agendas of school board members. Yet research has indicated that the association of the district superintendent and board of education has far-reaching leadership and policy implications that greatly affect the quality of a district's educational program (Petersen & Short, 2001).

An important association in the relationship between superintendent and school board, moreover, is the relationship between the superintendent and the school board president. Petersen and Short (2001) contended that the school board president is

crucial to the success of a district. Interestingly, in a research study completed by Petersen and Short (2001), board presidents perceived their role as limited and narrowly defined and the board presidents suggested that superintendents possess interpersonal characteristics that facilitate their governance of the school district. They saw their role as running school board meetings rather than participating in policy matters. On the other hand, superintendents also perceive their own roles as limited and narrowly defined depending on the board presidents' involvement in day-to-day school affairs. Interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, trust, persuasiveness, and clarity of role are clearly crucial to the development and maintenance of a cooperative relationship between school board president and the superintendent. If rural superintendents, therefore, do not possess these skills when hired, developing these skills becomes almost impossible due to a district's rural location with no access to professional training or development.

Strained relationships with school board members can cause a rural superintendent to express even more profound feelings of professional isolation. The geographic isolation of many districts makes it difficult for a superintendent to seek counsel from colleagues or network with other superintendents. Moreover, the low wages, the remoteness of the community, the many different roles an administrator has to play and the often strained relationships with school board members make recruitment and retention of a rural superintendent a major challenge. Some rural communities even share superintendents as a way to achieve greater efficiency. In some cases, this double duty becomes a first step toward a merger. In others, it is primarily seen as a money-saver (Archer, 2005) by school board members.

The Consolidation Debate

More than one in six of America's school-age children go to school in the smallest communities, those with populations under 2,500 (Beeson & Strange, 2003). Rural schools serve 21% of students who go to school in communities under 2,500 (Beeson & Strange, 2003). Although over 3.3 million people live in rural Texas, it is only 20% of the state's population (Beeson & Strange, 2003). In addition, one-tenth of Texas students attend public school in a rural community, and more than one-third qualify for free lunches, and nearly one-third are minorities (Beeson & Strange, 2003).

Before the close of the progressive era, consensus was reached that would define public schooling in the United States, that is that "one best system" was identified and promulgated as the way schools should be. An inherent assumption within the one best system, that bigger is better, proved to be inordinately popular, and it continues to serve as conventional wisdom regarding the proper way to formally educate young people (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Inherent in this thinking is what Theobald and Nachtigal categorized as a "'cultural assumption' that if our cities and factories are growing larger, so must our schools, right?" (p. 133). They further argued that there is simply no evidence for this view. Additionally, whatever the reason, the industrial model of schooling is under attack. Sher (1995) contended that at issue is not the future of the industrial model but which alternative model(s) currently being pro-posed, implemented, touted, and "brought to scale" will prevail.

On the other hand, many rural schools now have the kind of qualities that American schools and school reform models are encouraging. School reform models, such as Breaking Ranks, Stanford Redesign, First Things First and High Schools That Work are encouraging smaller, friendlier more intimate schools, with schools within schools being created to address the needs of all students. Much of rural America, however, is still being coerced into accepting school consolidations and school district mergers as the cornerstone for the proper implementation of the factory model of education (Sher, 1995). Perhaps an anecdote from Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) will make this point clearer.

> A front-page story in a large midwestern newspaper told of a little town with a little school that folks were campaigning to save. After reading the article, a few teachers in a nearby district that was much larger expressed their belief that all such small schools should be closed. The irony of this anecdote is that, at that very time, these teachers were working on ways to divide up their school into teams of teachers and students—schools-within-a-school—in an attempt to make themselves small. While they recognized the trend toward making small, friendly, invited places out of schools, these teachers were nevertheless unable to use this as intellectual leverage to dislodge the shallow assumption that being big means being good. Because such cultural givens are rarely ever analyzed, these teachers were not able to see the contradiction. (p. 133)

Yet, school consolidation as a means of both cutting costs and improving quality has been the single most frequently implemented educational trend in the 20th century (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Peshkin (1982) defined consolidation as the merging of two or more attendance areas to form a larger school. He described reorganization as the combining of two or more previously independent school districts in one new system (Peshkin, 1982). Efforts to decrease the number of schools in the 1960s were referred to as unification. Sometimes reorganized school districts are called unified school districts as opposed to consolidated districts or reorganized districts. Although

consolidation is most often used throughout the literature, in Texas, *annexation* is another term used to describe the merger of two or more school districts into larger ones; with one exception, when the merger is mandated by Texas Education Agency (Texas Education Code, 2005).

The prevailing theme of rural and small city educational policy making, more-over, has been and remains the continuous confrontation of these districts with efforts to consolidate them into larger districts. Those who seek to consolidate districts do so in the name of equality; they believe small schools are not only economically inefficient but also are inferior in creating educational opportunities for students which are essential for improving American society at large (Burlingame, 1979). Opponents of consolidation regard these mandated equalities as governmental inter-ferences on personal freedoms and a blow to incentives such as stability and continuity. Despite the fact that stability and continuity, for example may result in unequal distributions of fortune or opportunity (Burlingame, 1979), proponents believe small is beautiful. In rural areas the closing of the local school can mark the beginning of the disappearance of the community as a social center. Many times, economic and political atrophy follow. For many communities in the heartland of the nation, "the effect of consolidation on a town's pocketbook is slight, however, com-pared to the damage the process does to the heart of the community, for the red brick schoolhouse sitting squarely at the center of most small towns is to be found at the crux of community life" (Davidson, 1990, p. 62).

In a little more than a century, however, a majority of the nation's common schools were consolidated into much larger graded schools. In American cities,

schools were built to resemble factories and able to realize the economies of scale, schools grew very large indeed. In rural America, scattered, community-based schools were increasingly consolidated into district-wide or countywide systems, usually over the vehement objection of local communities (Woodrum, 2004). The decline of the number of small school districts at the national level is well-documented. In 1930, there were more than 130,000 school districts in the United States (and many more individual schools). By 2000, the number of school districts had dwindled to fewer than 15,000 (Lyson, 2002). Similar numbers according to Burlingame (1979) affirmed that in the 1960s while the total number of school districts declined 53%, these smaller school districts disappeared at a rate of 208% (24,539 to 5,112). In 1961-1962, two of every three districts enrolled less than 300 students, and by 1971-1972, less than one of every three districts did.

These declines have touched off a debate over the issue of school consolidation. Faced with declining student enrollments, many people argue that it makes good sense to merge schools and many, in fact are already the products of mergers. There is a long-standing argument in this country over whether the quality of education in large schools is superior to that in small schools (Davidson, 1996). It is, however, usually not the size of the school but financial considerations that lead to consolidation efforts. When student enrollments decrease, financial losses occur.

Consolidation is often encouraged by federal and state agencies in the creation of more efficient and effective school systems. The Department of Education is one such agency that in many states has been putting pressure on local districts to unify. Since, however, a school is both an organ of the national society, educating its citizens, and

also an important social institution in its local community, rural school consolidation remains the flash point of an enduring social tension (Post & Stambach, 1999). The question of reorganization of school districts exposes the conflict between these functions of a school: to unify adjacent districts in the interests of national educational efficiency may threaten local autonomy and self-esteem (Alford, 1960).

Many opponents of consolidation want to remain as "big fish in little ponds"; this being especially true for school board members, school administrators and for students as well who do not want to lose the advantages resulting from less competition for sports teams or individual attention in class. Convenience is another factor because people like the convenience of a school in their own local community and complain about additional driving that results from consolidation. Alford (1960) further posited that the attempts by many states to unify their school systems provide an example of the centralizing and standardizing tendencies which occur as various social agencies, entrusted with raising the level of various services, whether education, public health, utility regulation, or any other, attempt to eliminate "backward" types of organization of those services within their jurisdiction.

Since the mid-60s, national, state, and local agencies have engaged in a continuing debate of the value of community and the conflict over the purpose of schooling. A wealth of studies has discussed the social significance of school district organization in rural communities in the United States. This research further highlights the critical importance of the rural school as the last bastion of symbolic identity for the community, loss of which is contested whenever possible by parents who grew up in the area or arrived hoping to find a *gemeinshaft* community (Post & Stambach, 1999).

The annexation or consolidation of any school district, moreover, should be a monumental decision for any governmental agency. "Few public policy issues touch the heart of a community more than the loss of the local public school through reorganization or consolidation of school districts" (Ward & Rink, 1992). In rural areas, the closing of a school often leads to the death of the community because often the school is the heart of the community.

Schools in rural communities play many roles and these roles are vital to the survival of the community. Often, all social events revolve around the school, including meetings, holiday celebrations, academic and athletic activities, and even employment opportunities. It is a place where generations come together and where community identity is forged (Lyson, 2002). According to Lyson (2002), schools are especially critical to the social and economic well-being of the community and the money that might be saved through annexation or consolidation could be forfeited in lost taxes, declining property values and lost businesses.

Although consolidation advocates can sometimes make an economic argument for merging districts and closing schools, they have not been able to marshal evidence to show that educational quality improves as scale increases (Lyson, 2002). Since 1970, however, the overwhelming consensus among educational researchers is that the advantages of consolidation on academic performance and achievement are greatly outweighed by the disadvantages (Lyson, 2002). Yet, there is a definite national trend toward making small friendly places out of schools and a focus on smaller learning communities. Furthermore, consolidation has not resulted in improved education for students nor substantial financial savings. Recent consolidation studies suggest that

when generic reforms are imposed on rural schools, the reforms are often short-lived because they are not meaningful for local residents (Lyson, 2002). Frequently, school reform is tantamount to school consolidation and the loss of local control. The subject of consolidation often occurs after considerable debate about whether rural schools have adequate financial resources and funding to successfully comply with federal and state mandates.

Like all schools, rural schools receive the majority of their funding from state funding formulas, but must rely heavily on local taxes to equalize expenditures, which leads to significant funding inequities (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). These inequities usually translate into fewer higher level mathematics courses, advanced placement classes, fewer gifted and talented programs, and sometimes even the failure to provide transportation to and from school. Additionally, many rural taxpayers fail to make the connection between higher taxes leading to better schools, which lead to better jobs. Many believe that their property taxes have increased needlessly. The local taxpayer does not see a "nation at risk" (Seal & Harmon, 1995)—only his or her own livelihood being placed at risk from rising taxes. Standards for student achievement and school accreditation that evolved from national and state concerns are not the top local concerns.

Another factor affecting consolidation is the decline in student enrollment and student enrollment drives state funding formulas. With the tightening of state budgets, lawmakers are seeking ways to reduce public education costs. Rural schools have become easy targets because of higher per-pupil costs in the smallest schools and districts and as a result, lawmakers turn to school district consolidation as an answer

to reducing state education budgets. Some rural advocates maintain that rural schools are more instructionally efficient because the cost of educating a child all the way through graduation is lower in rural districts than in urban districts, which typically have lower graduation rates (Arnold et al., 2005). Yet, opponents contend that it costs more to educate children in rural districts because there are certain positions that must be funded regardless of student enrollment numbers. Often the per pupil cost is high due to these compulsory allocations.

The issue of cost is also of special concern for schools and districts with growing numbers of English language learners. These students often enter school with limited or no formal schooling adding to the burden of increased costs because of programs that need to be designed and implemented. For rural schools this means additional recruitment challenges such as finding certified English as a second language or bilingual teachers.

Furthermore, as student enrollment decreases in many rural communities, most school boards are forced to further reduce the already small number of teaching positions. Reduction-in-force (RIF) policies, developed and approved by the school board, often erode what gains a school system makes in increasing the number of available teaching positions and also the number of minority teachers. Over and over again the most recently hired staff, who are often minorities find job security shaky and weak. When, therefore, seniority is the basis for firing, losses in a diverse staff occur (Cuban, 1979). What's more, with fewer students and highly experienced teachers on the payroll, per pupil expenditures continue to rise.

Nevertheless, those individuals who choose to live and defend life in small rural districts and cities have chosen to be members of a minority group, subject to intense discrimination (Burlingame, 1979). Burlingame contended that even those who do not live in rural communities but who still choose to defend them, see small communities and their residents as part of an endangered species. This minority status ensures limitations of the school and the curriculum it is able to offer. This lack of curricular offering further causes inspection teams from governmental state and accreditation agencies to descend upon a rural district citing numerous federal and state violations. Rural districts constantly lose these political battles and are hard pressed to maintain control over local institutions whose aim is preserving their way of life. Those living in small districts have few political weapons to resist assimilation and consolidation and find themselves at the mercy of those who find them "obsolete" or those who find them "interesting." Neither of these views does much to enhance the sense of worth of those who choose to live in rural communities (Burlingame, 1979).

If the purpose of consolidation, furthermore, was to produce specialized, cost-effective buildings and broader curricula with greater opportunities for students to participate in sports and other leisure activities, then much of that was achieved. If, however, the goal of consolidation was to improve the level of education that students receive, particularly in rural areas, then the results seem far less clear. What is clear is that consolidated schools have largely lost their significance for local communities and their connections to people's daily lives (Woodrum, 2004). Woodrum contended that many rural communities, in losing their small local school, have also lost one of the few practical venues for training citizens in democratic participation. As school

districts get larger and become economically and politically important entities, local participation in the public governance of schools becomes far more limited.

Rural Schools Grapple with National School Reforms

Central to the discussion of these limitations are two inter-related issues: (a) who controls the schools, and (b) whom do the schools serve? One is an issue of local control and the other brings to light the tension between the desire for local control and battle for school reform (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Many proponents of rural education criticize the use of schools to serve national goals that include making the United States economically competitive. These same proponents believe that outcome-based education, in the sense that it seeks to obtain the same results for all schools, devalues any local goals for schooling, and further separates rural people from the education of their children. They argue that the purpose of schooling is for global competitiveness and economic opportunity—not to advance intellectual pursuits in their own right (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Local control of schools is a deeply held value in many rural communities yet many educators and policy makers think that local control is an outdated notion that hinders rather than facilitates successful school improvement (Arnold et al., 2005).

Rural schools go largely unnoticed in the national debate over the direction of American education reform; it may be difficult, if not impossible to convince law-makers and the private sector that metropolitan living is not the ultimate human experience (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). The professional education community, furthermore, has historically ignored questions of the social purpose of schooling in

the United States when it comes to rural schools. Rural education continues to be the stepchild of national research since it fails to address conditions specific to rural education.

Rural schools enroll a disproportionately large share of the poor and at risk students of the United States and often lack the means to effectively address the needs of these children (Beeson & Strange, 2003). In addition to the poor and at-risk students, little is discussed in the rural literature about meeting the needs of students of color. Research indicated that schools across the United States serve increasingly diverse student populations, while our teaching force is becoming less and less diverse. In rural schools, student demographics are changing as well, with rural schools in the 21st century serving student bodies with 18% minority students (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). In some homogenous rural communities, however, 100% of the students being served are Latino or African American. Yet the current number of teachers from non-White groups threatens to fall below 10% and additional data suggest a continued downward trend due to the large numbers of minority students in urban areas and the ability of those areas to pay higher teacher salaries (Delpit, 1995).

Considerable empirical evidence exists that academic achievement levels in U.S. public schools for African-American, Latina/o-American, Native-American, and some Asian-American children remain significantly below those of their White peers, regardless of how that achievement is defined or measured, i.e., standardized test scores, graduation rates, college admission rates, and enrollment in advanced courses (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001). Students of color and those living

in poverty, whether in rural or urban communities, are performing at lower achieve-ment levels than their White counterparts, are overrepresented in special education and lower-level classes, are dropping out of school in higher numbers, frequently have teachers who do not believe they can learn or are actively negative in their attitude toward these students, are underrepresented in gifted and talented classes, are oftentimes educated in schools with fewer resources and the least experienced teach-ers, and are more likely to be suspended or expelled (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). These obvious and glaring disparities have caused a movement for school accounta-bility, which has taken the nation by storm.

The message is clear. The public schools should have strong academic standards; tests should be administered to determine what students are learning; and students, as well as the people responsible for teaching them, should be held accountable (Peterson & West, 2003). Thus, the No Child Left Behind Act, signed by President Bush in January 2002, set into motion the most sweeping reform of U.S. federal education policy since the 1960s. At the center of this reform was the direct commit-ment of the federal government that the achievement gaps that have long existed between the academic success of White and middle- and upper- income children and that of children of color and children from low-income homes are unacceptable and must be eliminated (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004).

Rural schools do not have the financial resources to comply with many of the No Child Left Behind mandates often leading to a very constrained curriculum and limited opportunities for children of color. Nonetheless, the ability of our public education system to be as successful academically with children of color, particularly

with those from low-income families, as it is with middle-class White children is a direct threat to our claims to be a truly democratic country (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000). Scheurich et al. also asserted that to date we have posted a miserable academic record with the great majority of low-income children and children of color. Several studies over the last couple of years provide evidence that there are schools and districts successfully serving low-income children of color based on the data from various accountability systems. What has not been discussed, however, in this national educational accountability agenda, is whether or not rural schools are successfully serving them. Yet it makes sense that equality of educational opportunities for low-income rural children of color may be best served by recognizing the differences that exist and by seeking ways of responding to them rather than by imposing a common educational experience on all children (Scheurich et al., 2000; Ward & Rink, 1992).

While policymakers, advisors, and scholars debate the wisdom of alternative policies for urban schools, and for special education students or language learners, or for poor and minority students, rarely seen is a serious analysis of the particular policy issues faced by students who live in rural places (Beeson & Strange, 2000). While rural teachers and administrators do not oppose the intent of No Child Left Behind, many suggest the lack of flexibility thwarts efforts to address the unique problems faced by rural schools.

Results indicated, however, that small rural districts face unique obstacles in implementing the No Child Left Behind law. For example, the No Child Left Behind requirement for all teachers of the core content areas to be "highly qualified," mean-

ing a teacher that is fully certified by the state and must demonstrate competency in his or her field, has a profound effect on rural teacher shortages. Rural schools already have a tough time recruiting and retaining teachers and the certification requirements will more than likely increase that quandary. Teaching "out of subject" is common in small rural high schools and an issue of economic scale. Small high schools cannot afford to hire teachers for every subject, nor do they have enough students to demand it. Requiring certification for one teacher in more than one subject will be expensive, time consuming, and almost impossible.

Historically, rural districts employ higher numbers of emergency and provisionally certified teachers, with 35% of rural teachers uncertified compared to 11% of all schools nationally (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005). Unfortunately, No Child Left Behind's strategies for easing teacher shortages, are unrealistic for rural schools. There are not many adults with degrees in rural areas willing to teach or willing to obtain alternative certifications, nor do rural schools have the financial resources needed to engage in aggressive recruitment campaigns.

Like so many other school reforms throughout history, No Child Left Behind targets large urban and cosmopolitan schools (Peterson & West, 2003). The components of the law that pose the greatest problems for rural schools and districts are those focused on school accountability and teacher qualification. Small schools also face the likelihood of being mislabeled in terms of student performance due to small enrollment counts. If fewer than 100 students are tested in each grade, averages may fluctuate significantly from year to year for reasons that are often unrelated to overall school performance (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003). Provid-

ing parents with school choice also poses a problem. Many rural districts have only one elementary, middle and high school, hence there are no alternatives within the district for school choice.

Again, rural schools and residents are often isolated, and as a result, that they are politically invisible and politically disenfranchised. According to Beeson and Strange (2003), rural schools and residents are a political majority in only five states (Maine, Mississippi, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia). Although Texas has a little over 3.3 million rural people, they still constitute less than 20% of Texas's population. Rural communities are so widely scattered and in such remote places, each with distinguishing socioeconomic characteristics, that fact finding is difficult and conclusions elusive (Beeson & Strange, 2000).

Rural school districts must implement education reform in the context of scarcity (Seal & Harmon, 1995). The customary characteristics of small scale, isolation, and sparsity are difficult to overcome. The scarcity of human resources in small rural school districts arises from a small administrative and community leadership base, a restricted pool of qualified instructional personnel, and, often, a lack of a "critical mass" of students and teachers for certain course offerings (Seal & Harmon, 1995). To further add to this dilemma, the United States Department of Education's efforts to support rural communities is disappointing at best and no one in a position of authority is committed to addressing the unique education needs of rural communities. Although former Education Secretary Rod Paige grew up in rural Mississippi, he was not an advocate of rural education. He went on to serve as super-

intendent of the Houston Independent School District in Texas and also established the Center for Excellence in Urban Education.

Currently under the direction of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, the U.S. Department of Education only addresses the needs of rural schools when forced to or when an initiative also deals with issues relevant to urban or suburban situations (Arnold, 2005). What is needed is for the U.S. Department of Education to allocate funds to produce a rural education report, similar to the one published in 1994, i.e., *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools* (Arnold, 2005). In addition, Arnold (2005) lamented that there were discussions about updating this report, but officials at the U.S. Department of Education decided instead to develop a Web site containing recycled data from the National Center for Education Statistics. He further argued that it is time for the U.S. Department of Education to back rural schools with substantial and significant action that would provide tangible benefits for rural Americans. Failure to do so will most likely negatively affect rural children, youth, and communities, which ultimately hurt all of us (Arnold, 2005).

Many rural education scholars believe the rural school problem today is that generic, standardized modes of reform continue to predominate in education policymaking (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The strengths and needs of rural schools have been ignored at the national level in conversations about school reform. Reform strategies which attempt to destroy local traditions, values and beliefs rather than building on them are less likely to succeed. Rural g*emeinshaft* communities are important because they are based on common interests and common values. Equality of educational opportunity may be best served by recognizing differences that

inevitably exist and by seeking ways of responding to them rather than by endeavoring to impose a common educational experience on all children (Lyson, 2002).

Conclusion

Rural education continues to be marginalized across America, therefore, intense efforts need to be made to overcome the problems of geographic isolation, declining population, inadequate financial resources, and other impediments to the educational success of children residing in rural areas (Sherwood, 2000). Very evident throughout rural research is the need for reform efforts to focus on the strong link between school and community. Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) maintained that rural improvement efforts need to be grounded in a sense of place and need to invite contributions from those who are usually marginalized in community development and reform efforts.

There are positive attributes associated with schools, and it is not surprising that when threatened with consolidation most small rural communities mount vigorous campaigns to keep their schools open, no matter the cost (Lyson, 2002). Lyson claimed that school consolidation is likely to remain a threat to many rural communities in the coming decades because for at least a century rural areas in the United States have been marked by a serious decline in student enrollment.

There are, however, rural communities that are thriving and retaining populations or even growing because their citizens are civically engaged and active in community matters (Lyson, 2002). There are, however, rural communities that are not thriving and not retaining populations that also need to be addressed in research and public policy. Specifically needed is specialized training for educators who work in rural

areas that go beyond content to examination of the way prejudices are developed against rural people and places. Nevertheless, a concerted effort needs to be made to ensure and provide all children, regardless of socioeconomic status or color, whether in urban or rural schools with a quality educational experience.

According to (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999), accountability, however, can be found in community satisfaction with the schools, and in the students' ability to succeed after school in ways that are sustaining to themselves, the community, and the society at large. The use of current accountability systems may not be enough to determine whether a school should be closed. High stakes testing, a new hurdle, exacerbates the attainment of school success in a terrain where obstacles, inequities, and adverse conditions abound. Valencia and Guadarrama (1997) contended that this accountability is grounded in deficit thinking in that the practice ignores the schooling problems that abound in Texas, such as inequities in school finance, under serving of the limited English proficient student population, and school segregation (Valencia & Guadarrama, 1997). There must be room for local standards, not just national ones, and accountability systems may need to afford more flexibility to rural districts.

Although many rural districts have consolidated or unified, and these communities cannot be rebuilt, it may be time to revisit rural education by inviting policy makers to read the research on rural education and give more than a cursorily look at the need for communities to maintain their schools, their identity, and the social and economic heart of their community. In order to get additional insight into rural education issues, my study will address the perceptions of former and current school board members as they relate to the recent consolidation of their school district.

The next chapter is a discussion of the methodology for this study, which employed a qualitative design involving eight school board members of a recently annexed, rural school district. I used a snowball technique to identify the participants and conducted in-depth individual interviews.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

FIGURE 1. The High School in La Vista Is a Texas Historical Landmark

Deep in South Texas near Old Mexico
To a sleepy little town once I did go.
Driving out on Highway Three Fifty-nine,
Forty miles east of ***, I followed a sign.
One look around me, what's there to see?
What possible interest could this place be to me?
I've seen many small towns, it's just like the rest,
And certainly it isn't one of the best.
Whoever named this place must have been a clown,
*** City for such a small town?
In disgust I began to look around;
No bank, no store – oh - What a town!
Sipping a coke, my glance happened to fall,
On a book on a table right near the door.
Being bored as I was, I took a look
History of *** was the title of this book (Figure 1).
Opening it up, I started to sneer.
History of this place, what have they here?
Flipping idly through it, my interest was awakened.
When I realized how engrossed I was, I was shaken.
This nothing of a town has an interesting past.
So I read this book, from first to last.
Founded by ***: first settled by tents,
The population was fluid – people came and went.
Oil was the factor that brought them together.

*** was South Texas' first oil center.
As many as 4,000 people came here to dwell,
As they kept on drilling well after well.
A passenger train, stores, saloons and more,
A bank opened up, then folded its door.
The author - *** - tells the story with flair.
He must have composed it with a lot of care.
The people living here were many and varied,
Throughout Texas ***'s name has been carried.
The theme that the book has clearly shown,
Was the civic pride in the town that has grown.
Through thick and thin in any kind of weather,
For civic or sports events, the town sticks together.
Never prejudge a place – my lesson was taught.
Of this sin I never again will be caught.
Behind this town's dusty, old exterior,
Lies a long history that seems superior. (Black, 1972, p. 93)

*** Names omitted to protect identities.

FIGURE 2. Deer and Cacti Around La Vista

Introduction

This poem very accurately described my own first and subsequent reactions to

this "sleepy little town." One can drive for many long, blistering hours deep in the

heart of South Texas brush country and suddenly encounter one small community

after another; communities hidden among undisciplined mesquite trees, wild cacti, rusted oil wells, skittish deer, and treacherous rattlers (Figure 2). Veiled among such a vibrant and colorful section of the South Texas *frontera* (border) is La Vista, a community whose school district was recently annexed to a neighboring school district while I served as the superintendent.

Founded during the oil boom in the early 1920s, this particular rural *colonia* now consists of approximately 500 residents. The bustling hotel, saloon, railroad station, and bank are all buildings of the past. Little remains of the once flourishing oil town except broken old houses, several mom and pop businesses, dilapidated structures, and empty, overgrown lots. The annexation order received by this school district, whose city at one time was at the center of fast growing oil and gas industries, was mandated due to a lack of educational quality for its children and a myriad of financial deficiencies.

FIGURE 3. The La Vista Elementary and Middle Schools

Having always lived in large, bustling, urban Texas cities, I was quite taken aback by the poverty, desolation, and bleak surroundings of this United States-Mexico border region known as La Frontera (the border). Students in this region tend to come from high-poverty homes, speak Spanish as their first language, and have parents with low education levels. Many have little or no access to health or dental care, and their families lack needed social and/or housing services (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004).

FIGURE 4. The La Vista High School After It Closed in 1994

My first visit to the La Vista had me in awe. The district's elementary school (Figure 3) was dirty, was wrought with broken windows and was in need of paint. Bulletin boards and decorations from the previous year were still mounted and the classrooms were not clean. The administrative offices were cluttered, housing items such as lawn mowers and other yard equipment in doorways. In addition, an old, dirty couch was left leaning against the office wall. An unused office space, in plain view, housed numerous other items from ancient athletic equipment to current audit documents and teacher grade books. Another sad edifice was the old high school

building across the street (Figure 4). With a caved-in roof, cracking mortar, and peeling paint, it served as the district's storage facility since its closing in 1994. Inside, was total chaos, with papers, books, and old furniture strewn everywhere.

FIGURE 5. The Superintendent's House on the Corner

From the early 1970s to the early 1990s, the district provided housing for some if its faculty members. These homes had been abandoned long ago and now were old, tired, often vandalized structures (Figure 5). The gymnasium was in equally dire condition. While it had been in use the previous year, it was, in my opinion, not fit for student use. It did not have running water, air conditioning or heating. The bleachers and most of the light fixtures were broken, and bat, rat, and mice droppings were everywhere. The athletic field was nothing but one big overgrown pasture; tall grass, tough mesquite trees, and other wild shrubs had overtaken its bleachers.

FIGURE 6. The La Vista ISD Cafeteria

The cafeteria, whose entrance featured an open cesspool, was a stand-alone structure. Air-conditioning and heating had been recently installed; however, it, too, needed maintenance and repair work. More than anything, it needed a septic tank system to replace the cesspool so that raw sewage and an assorted variety of varmints could not be seen by the students as they made their way to eat breakfast and lunch (Figure 6).

According to Strayhorn (2002), the LVISD facilities were in disrepair and, in many cases, unsafe. The physical and aesthetic condition of the facilities were not conducive to a positive learning environment. The offices had worn and stained carpeting with many fallen ceiling tiles. Electrical wiring appeared to be exposed and water fountains were rusted. The report further described playground equipment that was old and worn. Seesaws and a merry-go-round were made of wood that was splitting. There was no designated site for physical education classes. The report maintained that the facilities were inadequate and inappropriate as they existed for

educational purposes and that the district's staff and students were at risk (Strayhorn, 2002).

In addition to the dismal conditions of its facilities, the district's finances were also in equal states of disorder. There were violations cited by the district's financial auditing firm, by the Office of Civil Rights, and by the Texas Education Agency. Violations ranged from the financial audit reports containing numerous infractions that demanded corrections, to the Office of Civil Rights demanding compliance with the American Disabilities Act. Additionally, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) had conducted various audits that led to numerous reprimands and threats of annexation. As a result, a TEA monitor had been assigned that summer to attempt to bring order to the district by attending school board meetings and to assist the new superintendent during the 2003-04 school year.

La Vista ISD was a very small district with only one campus that served children in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. During the 2004-05 school year, LVISD had an enrollment of 50 students. Student enrollment, however, had dropped steadily over the past ten years by at least 50 students (see Table 1).

TABLE 1.   La Vista ISD Student Enrollment, 1992-2005
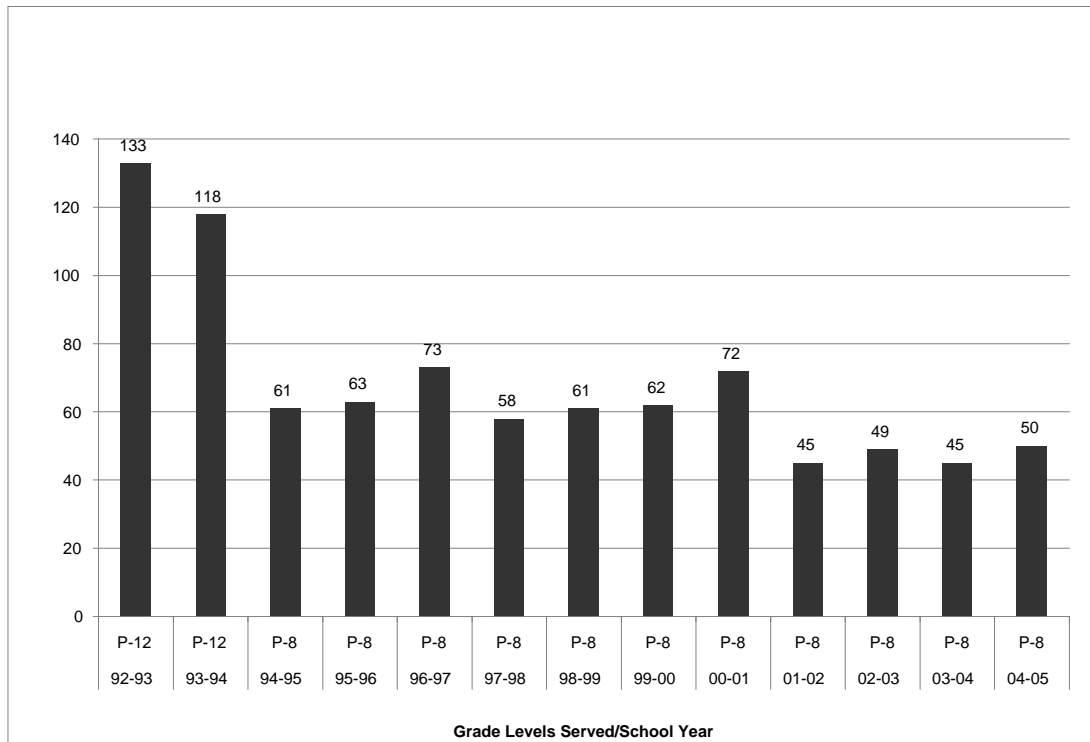
According to TEA's Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) database, an overwhelming majority of the students were both economically disadvantaged and Hispanic (see Table 2). TEA assigns annual ratings to each Texas school district on the following criteria: student Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores, data quality or factual information about the district submitted to TEA, attendance and dropout rates. The possible ratings include Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, and Low Performing. La Vista ISD held a rating of Acceptable its last year, and ratings of Unacceptable the four previous years, with one Recognized rating in 1998-1999 (see Table 3).

TABLE 2.   **La Vista ISD Free and Reduced Lunch Program Compared to Student Enrollment and Ethnicity, 1992-2005**
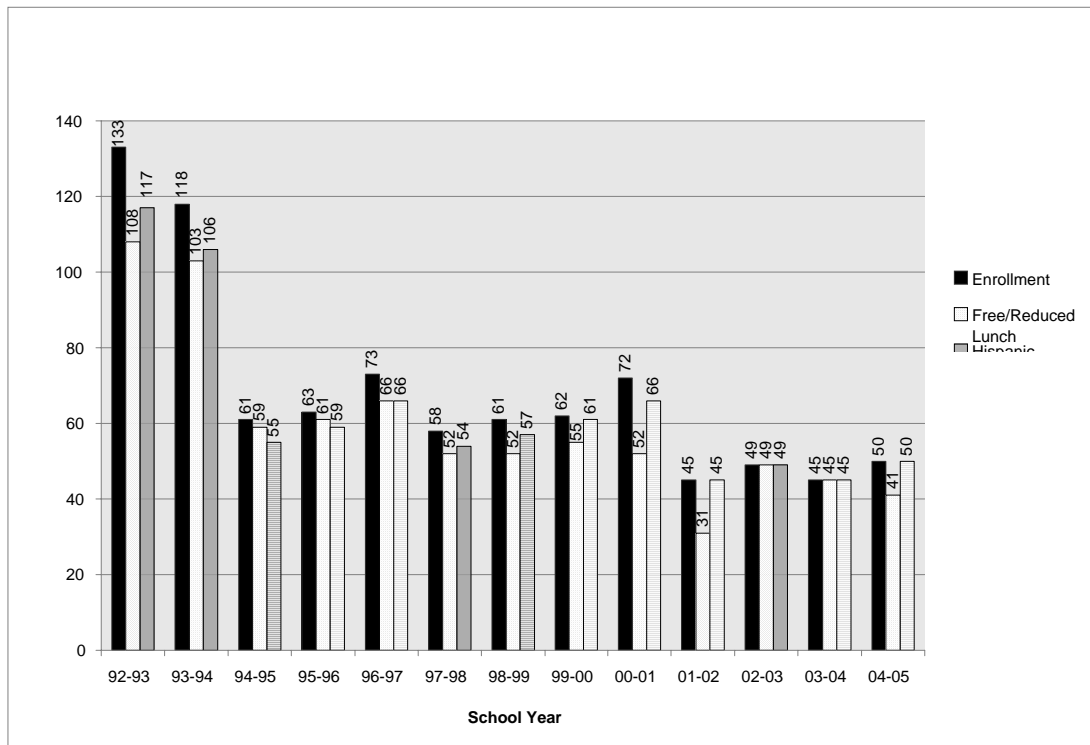
TABLE 3.   **La Vista ISD State Accountability Ratings, 1993 - 2005**

School Year	Rating
93-94	Acceptable
94-95	Acceptable
95-96	Acceptable
96-97	Acceptable
97-98	Acceptable
98-99	Recognized
99-00	Unacceptable
00-01	Acceptable
01-02	Unacceptable
02-03	Unacceptable
03-04	Unacceptable
04-05	Acceptable

La Vista ISD student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) or on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) fluctuated

considerably over the past 10 years as evidenced in Table 4. The district's best performance occurred in 2001-2002 when 89.5% of all students passed the TAAS. Its worst performance occurred in 2003-2004 when only 14% of all students achieved passing scores on the TAKS (see Table 4).

TABLE 4.   **La Vista TAAS/TAKS Meeting Standards (Passing Rate)—All Students Grades 3-8, 1994-2005**
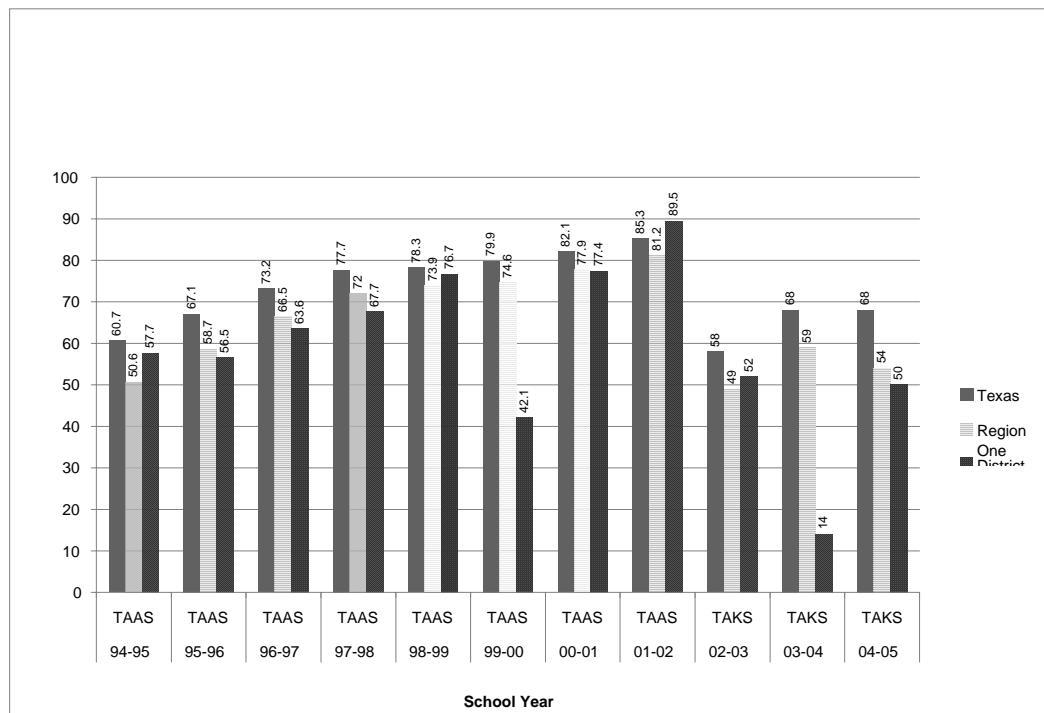
Despite the dire circumstances of the district's student performance, finances and facilities, the school board members did not want the school closed and urged me to do everything I could to keep it from being annexed. The district did manage to stay solvent for two more years. There was improvement in the district's academic rating during the two years that I served as the superintendent. The district accountability rating improved from "Unacceptable" to "Acceptable." Needed repairs were made to the facilities, the grounds were cleaned up, and the simple act of mowing became a

priority. The school district adopted a year-round calendar, the students were required to wear uniforms, and the community became actively involved in school activities intent on instilling school pride. Unfortunately, all these efforts could not make up for years of unacceptable student performance, deteriorating facilities, availability of funds, and a declining student population. As the superintendent of this district during its last two years of life, I would often wonder what would eventually become of this community when the school district ceased to exist.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to document, through in-depth examination, the perceptions former and current school board members held about the annexation of this South Texas school district, their perceptions of the district prior to the annexation, and the impact the annexation had on the community. For the purpose of this study, current school board members were defined as those individuals who served on the school board during the year the district was annexed. Former school board members are defined as those individuals who served prior to the annexation process.

Methodology

I did not pick this case study; "it picked me." Stake (2002) confirmed that it is not uncommon for researchers to receive their cases instead of choosing them. A case study draws attention to the question of what specifically can be learned about a single case. Stake, however, asserted that if a study is undertaken because, first and last, one wants to better understand a particular case, and if the case, "in all its particularity and ordinariness" (Stake, 2002, p. 445) is of interest, it can be reported

as an intrinsic case study. The intent, therefore, of this intrinsic case study was to examine, in depth, what led to the closing of this small, rural, Latino school district and to have a better understanding of the impact of the annexation order in a high-stakes accountability system.

Yet, the idea of a purely intrinsic case study is resisted by many qualitative researchers (Silverman, 2005) if all that is desired is simply to "describe a case." In the intrinsic case study, according to Stake (2002), no attempt is made to generalize beyond the single case or even to build theories. Silverman (2005), however, contends that generalizability can be obtained in an intrinsic case study through purposive sampling because purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying and choose our sample case carefully on this basis. According to Patton (2002), the logic and power of purposive/purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for an in depth study. He further asserted that information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposive/purposeful sampling. In this case study, purposive/purposeful sampling examined the annexation of a small rural school district and organized around the following sensitizing concerns: What were the school board members' perceptions about the school district prior to annexation order? What were the school board members' perceptions of the factors that contributed to the annexation? What were the school board members' perceptions of how the annexation affected the community?

This study drew on the works of Arnold (2005), Howley and Howley (1995), Lyson (2002), Theobald and Nachtigal (1995). Whereas much of their work focuses on the plight of rural communities and school districts in Appalachia, I chose to study a recently annexed, poor, rural, Latino school district in South Texas. The choice to study this district and the experiences of its school board members was based on the belief that it is these individuals who, as an elected, governing group, had first-hand knowledge of the operations of the district and its subsequent annexation. In addition, I was the superintendent when the district was finally annexed.

The methodology also drew on the work of Stake (2002) and his contention that case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied. It draws attention to the questions of what specifically can be learned about this single case. Qualitative research design seems particularly appropriate for this type of study because of the ability to offer rich, thick descriptions of people in their natural settings (Patton, 2002). Silverman (2005) contended that:

- Qualitative researchers are prepared to sacrifice scope for detail.
- Qualitative researchers tend to use a non-positivist model of reality.
- Qualitative researchers believe that qualitative methods can provide a deeper understanding of the social phenomena.
- Qualitative research works with a relatively small number of cases.
- Qualitative researchers find detail in the precise particulars of such matters as people's understandings and interactions. (p. 9-10)

The goal of this research was to begin a discussion by examining school board members' beliefs and attitudes about the roles they played or did not play that led to the annexation of the district. I used myself as the primary instrument to collect and analyze this data and for that reason I used the naturalistic paradigm as my guide.

Although there are no specific steps outlined in naturalistic inquiry, Lincoln and Guba

(1985) described five axioms as guides:

- Axiom 1: The nature of reality (ontology). Naturalistic version: There are multiple constructed realities that can be studied only holistically, inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge so that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes although some level of understanding (*verstehen*) can be achieved.
- Axiom 2: The relationship of knower to known (epistemology). Naturalistic version: The inquirer and the "object" of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable.
- Axiom 3: The possibility of generalization. Naturalistic version: The aim of inquiry is to develop an idiographic body of knowledge in the form of "working hypotheses" that describe the individual case.
- Axiom 4: The possibility of causal linkages. Naturalistic version: All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects.
- Axiom 5: The role of values in inquiry (axiology). Naturalistic version: Inquiry is value-bound in at least five ways, captured in the corollaries that follow:
  --Corollary 1: Inquiries are influenced by inquirer values as expressed in the choice of a problem, evaluand, or policy option, and in the framing, bounding, and focusing of that problem, evaluand, or policy option.
  --Corollary 2: Inquiry is influenced by the choice of the paradigm that guides the investigation into the problem.
  --Corollary 3: Inquiry is influenced by the choice of the substantive theory utilized to guide the collection and analysis of data and in the interpretation of findings.
  --Corollary 4: Inquiry is influenced by the values that inhere in the context.
  --Corollary 5: With respect to the corollaries 1 through 4 above, inquiry is either value-resonant (reinforcing or congruent) or value-dissonant (conflict-ing). Problem, evaluand, or policy option, paradigm, theory, and context must exhibit congruence (value-resonance) if the inquiry is to produce meaningful results. (pp. 37-39)

In addition to the contention that inquiry is value-bound, Lincoln and Guba

(1985) asserted that naturalistic inquiries are influenced by inquirer values as

expressed in the choice of the problem, and they are further influenced by the choice

of the paradigm that guides the investigation. These statements unsettled me. If

indeed my values influenced my choice of this particular intrinsic case study, then the

question begged, why did I want to tell this story? I knew, moreover, there were multiple realities, the participants and mine, but did my values and choice of paradigm get in the way of my eventual *"verstehen"* (understanding) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)?

I asked this because as I thought back to my reactions when I first entered this community and school district and I must ask the reader to go back to the poem at the beginning of this chapter. That poem described accurately how I felt. Although I liked, trusted, and respected the people I encountered, worked with, and aligned myself with every day for two years, I was always stressed thinking about La Vista and its poverty, its dismal surroundings, and its hopelessness. Did my middle-class Anglo upbringing, prevent me from telling the school board members' stories? Did the fact that I was the superintendent get in the way of the narrative?

Participants

This narrative began with eight school board members chosen by snowball sampling, an approach for locating information-rich key informants (Patton, 2002). In this form of sampling, I identified a few members of the phenomenal group I wished to study. These school board members were used to identify other school board members, and they in turn helped identify others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process began by asking current school board members for input, a process that according to Patton (2002) began by asking: "Who knows a lot about ___? Whom should I talk to?" (p. 237). These questions were critical in finding former school board members who might be interested in being interviewed and part of a research

group. All of the participants, however, lived in the community in which the school district was located. Most of the school board members, as well as their children, attended the elementary school in the district and most of them graduated from the high school before it was closed in 1994. The majority of the school board members were Latino, although the board had had several Anglo members over the years and had one Anglo member when the annexation occurred. Interestingly, the majority of the current school board members were female, a very different gender makeup than that of the district's previous boards.

In order to understand the participants, a brief description of each school board member is offered to reveal their background and character. Each school board member was assured that his/her responses, insights, and experiences would contribute significantly to understanding the challenges faced by rural school districts and what rural districts need to know to avoid annexation. The Institutional Review Board, furthermore, approved the research, and each participant was given an Information Sheet before the interviews commenced. Pseudonyms were used and confidentiality was guaranteed. The geographic location of this school district and community was also generalized to ensure additional anonymity.

Pseudonym A, Veronica Quintana

Veronica was a middle-age Latina and homemaker, who was born and raised in La Vista. She served as a school board member for close to 15 years. Although her parents encouraged her to attend college, she chose to get married after high school and not to pursue a post-secondary education. She admitted that she still has plans to

attend college, just does not quite know when that will be. Her child was also born and raised in this community and graduated from La Vista High School. Her husband runs a local business and was at the receiving end of a lot of criticism from community members and locals when Veronica was elected as a member of the Board of Trustees.

Pseudonym B, Gwen Miller

Gwen, an Anglo female in her early 50s, was a transplant, although she has lived in the community for more than 25 years. She moved into the community when her husband accepted a teaching job with the La Vista Independent School District. They lived in free teacher housing for many years, ultimately purchased their own home and remained in the community. Her husband was not only a teacher in the district, but also the tax-assessor collector, but left the district for a higher paying teaching job in a neighboring city. Gwen's children attended school in La Vista, but graduated from the neighboring district. In addition, Gwen is a college graduate, has served a number of times on the school board, not necessarily consecutive times and is employed. Her husband was also a school board member at one time.

Pseudonym C, Carlos Robles

Carlos, a Latino in his late 40s is another local resident, born and raised in La Vista. He graduated from La Vista High School and holds a college degree and remains a resident of the community, employed by a local oil company. A divorced father, his daughter attended La Vista Independent School District until the seventh

grade at which time she chose to live with her mother and attend a high school in a large urban city. Carlos served one term as a school board member and readily admitted that his daughter was receiving a better education elsewhere than La Vista provided.

Pseudonym D, Andy Smith

Andy, Anglo and in his mid 50s, was born and raised in a neighboring community, although both of his parents were born and raised in La Vista. After receiving his bachelor's degree and getting married, he made La Vista his home. His children attended La Vista schools until high school when they transferred to the neighboring district due to the programs and services that were available. Andy was also employed by a local oil company. He emphatically stated that there is no other community where he would rather live. He served this community in the capacity of a school board member for close to 10 years.

Pseudonym E, Mike Reynolds

Mike, a weathered old Anglo cowboy in his late 60s, was yet another resident transplant. After working 30 years at an oil refinery in a large Texas city, he retired, purchased ranch land in La Vista, and moved his family, ultimately building a home in which he and his wife still reside 45 years later. He confessed that ranching is all he has ever wanted to do and to date still runs cattle. His reminiscing and tales about the "good ole' days" left one wondering what happened to the once happy, friendly, cohesive community he described. He served two consecutive terms in the 1980s.

Pseudonym F, Mario Estrada

Mario, was Latino, in his early 50s, an oil field employee, and yet, another transplant. His wife, however, was born and raised in La Vista, and his children attended La Vista schools until they chose to attend a high school in a neighboring district. Mario served two terms as a school board member and then chose not to run again due to the controversies surrounding the school district and the board.

Pseudonym G, Ricardo Lovejoy

Ricardo was Latino, in his early 60s, and another local resident. He was extremely proud that both of his parents were born and raised in La Vista. After serving in the Army and attending college classes, he and his wife chose to move back to La Vista. All his children graduated from La Vista. He was the most outspoken of the group in his opinions of the district and the community, and has served several terms as a school board member.

Pseudonym H, Sara Gomez

The last research participant was another local resident. Sara's entire, large, extended family was born and raised in La Vista. All attended and graduated from the local high school. A high school graduate and quiet spoken, Sara is a Latina, in her early 50s and employed outside of the home. She has served on the school board for close to 18 years, one of the longest tenured interviewed.

All of these school board members were contacted individually to ascertain whether they were comfortable speaking about the school district and the factors that lead to the annexation. While I knew all of them, the one-on-one contact gave me an opportunity to bond again since it had been a year or more since I had last seen or worked with them. Lincoln and Guba (1985) called this part of the research or inquiry Phase 1, "orientation and overview" (p. 235), where the initial approach to the participants is made in a very open-ended way. Questions are broad and seem to say to participants "Tell me what you think I ought to know about you (or this place, your involvement, and so on)" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 235) and rapport is established. According to Lincoln and Guba, the object of this first phase is to obtain sufficient information to get some handle on what is important enough to follow up in detail and to establish rapport. Fontana and Frey (2005) insisted that it is paramount to establish rapport with respondents and that the researcher must be able to take the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their point of view rather than superimpose preconceptions on them.

I knew that I was going to have to be careful not to impose my own views during the interviews, especially because of my involvement with the district. I was also very cognizant not to get caught up in the interviews and conversations or answer questions that the participants posed of me because we were intertwined in complicated ways. I did, however, involve myself in some of the "real" conversations, although that involvement was limited.

Researcher

Due to my prior relationship with the research participants, the interviews were comfortable, straightforward and effortless. It is, nevertheless, important to reveal again that I was the superintendent and an active participant in this school district during its last two years of existence. I mentioned earlier in this chapter that I did not pick the (case study) district; the (case study) district picked me. I was employed with a local education service agency when I was asked by my employer whether I would be interested in an interim superintendent assignment for not more than six months. Revealed at this point must also be that I was advised about the dismal learning environment, low test scores, ineffective administrative leadership, ineffective teaching practices and a school board unwilling to change. Nevertheless, excited about the prospect of a superintendency, I readily agreed and was granted a six-month leave of absence from the education service center. I served as the interim superintendent for six months, and was then appointed as superintendent as the school board chose not to do a formal search. I served in that capacity until the annexation was complete.

Despite the fact that the school board members and I had a comfortable working relationship, I think they were a little taken aback when they first met me for my name belies the fact that I am not a Latina, but an Anglo female. I have been immersed, however, in the Latino culture for over 25 years. I speak Spanish, am married to a Latino, and am often mistaken for a Latina. The Latino culture is second nature to me and is an environment in which I am extremely comfortable. I have lived within this culture ever since immigrating to the United States from Germany over 25 years ago. I must remind the reader, however, that I can only know this culture from

the lens of an Anglo female. By trying to know this culture, however, I also learned about myself and the community in which I served.

Methods

Given this background and having laid out the plan for identification of the research participants, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Phase 2 comes into play. This is the "focused exploration" (p. 235) phase, and sufficient time was allowed between Phase 1 and 2 for Phase I data to be analyzed and for more a structured focus to be developed. I conducted information conversational interviews, the most open-ended approach to interviewing (Patton, 2002). Patton maintained that the conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking with one of more individuals in that setting. Additionally, unstructured interviewing can provide greater breadth (Fontana & Frey, 2005) than structured interviewing. As the interviewer, I went where the interviews took me, although just because an interview was unstructured, does not mean that it lacked focus. This conversational interview appealed to me because although sensitizing concepts and the overall purpose of the inquiry informed the interviewing, I was free to go where the data and the respondents led (Patton, 2002). Patton, however, did emphasize a weakness in this type of interview in that the interviewer must be able to interact easily with the participants, generate rapid insights, formulate questions quickly and smoothly, and guard against asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation by the structure of the questions.

During Phase 2, the participants were interviewed twice in a more formal venue conducted in a minimum of two-hour sessions. Information conversational interviews were once again conducted, however, a framework was established and the sensitizing concepts reviewed. Interview questions included the school board members' motivations for running for the school board, decisions that they made concerning district leadership and district financial challenges, decisions made about maintenance and facilities, their thoughts on governance, and finally, what they believe led to the ultimate demise of the district. The data were analyzed after the first set of interviews during Phase 2, and a second set of interviews were conducted to expand and elaborate on the analysis of the first interviews.

During Lincoln and Guba (1985) Phases 1 and 2, the participants were asked to reflect on the interviews and jot down notes if, in between the interview sessions, something jogged their memories. Each session began by encouraging participants to share their reflections and recollections. The researcher also kept a reflexive journal via audiotape which helped analyze and structure the later interviews. Fontana and Frey (2005) contended that researchers are becoming keenly attuned to the fact that in knowing "others," we come to know "ourselves" (p. 697). As the researcher, I had to be careful that my motives, feelings, and biases did not become known, and self-restraint was required. Again, Fontana and Frey urged "the researchers not to privilege any ways of looking at the world, but rather continue to question, question, question (p. 697)." Gubrium and Holstein (1997), moreover, also urged researchers to be reflexive about what the interview accomplishes, thereby uncovering the ways in which we go about creating text.

After obtaining permission, the interview sessions were audio taped, and field notes were taken. These notes included researcher observations of the non-verbal cues, body language, gestures, reactions, and important comments made by the participants.

Data Analysis

To establish trustworthiness, the data were triangulated using the audiotapes, transcriptions, individual interviews, field notes, researcher's audio journal, observations, and non-human data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Documents and records were extremely useful as additional sources of information. The terms *document* and *record* are often used interchangeably; however, they do represent different purposes or intentionalities because the modes of analyses for these two source types are different (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the use of this research, I used Lincoln's and Guba's definition of *record* to mean any written or recorded statement prepared by or for an individual or organization for the purpose of attesting to an event or providing an accounting, such as audit reports, minutes of meetings. The term *document* is used to denote any written or recorded material other than a record that was not prepared specifically in response to a request from the inquirer, such as letters, newspaper editorials, and photographs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My goal for the use of documents and records was to gather additional infor-mation about the sensitizing concerns and to use them as springboards for discussion during the interviews.

Audio taping the interviews allowed me to review the tapes, replay particular discussions or pieces of conversations, and develop additional questions for the next

session. Moreover, I transcribed the tapes within a week of the interviews, developed my own matrix of themes and codes as well as coded, and analyzed the data manually.

Finally, member checks were conducted by taking the findings back to the participants in order for them to review the information they provided and to search for themes and patterns to further inform the research. The task during this "member check" phase was to obtain confirmation that the report had captured the data as constructed by the participants, or to correct, amend, or extend it in order to establish the credibility of the case (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Only after this was done could the final version of the report begin.

This reporting phase, also known as Phase 3 by Lincoln and Guba (1985) contends that time must be allowed between Phase 2 and Phase 3 to analyze the information from Phase 2 and to write a report. Once the data were collected and the interviewing had formally ended, however, the final analysis began. According to Patton (2002), data can be organized and analyzed by drawing from two primary sources: the sensitizing concerns that were developed during the design phase of the study prior to the fieldwork and from analytical insights and interpretations that emerged during the fieldwork. The data were organized according to key issues, critical incidents, and by the questions asked during the interviews. Once completed, an inventory of what had been completed was conducted that included but was not limited to field notes, transcripts, observations, documents, records, and audio tapes. This inventory constituted the raw data for analysis purposes and amounted to large

amounts of material and helped the researcher get a sense of all the data available for analysis.

Interestingly, case studies themselves are units of analysis (Patton, 2002), although the case or unit of analysis is usually determined during the design stage and is the basis for purposive/purposeful sampling. In addition, new units of analysis might emerge during fieldwork or from the analysis after the data is collected. Patton contended:

A case study should be sufficiently detailed and comprehensive to illuminate the focus of the inquiry without becoming boring and laden with trivia. A skillfully crafted case reads like a fine weaving. And that, of course, is the trick. How to do the weaving? How to tell the story? How to decide what stays in the final case presentation and what gets deleted along the way. (p. 450)

In order to write a skillful report, a thorough analysis occurred with a careful search for recurring words, key phrases, or themes. A content analysis, furthermore, was conducted in order to discover patterns and themes. *Patterns* refers to a descriptive finding, such as all interviewees reported feeling overwhelmed or under utilized, while a *theme* takes a more categorical or topical form such as fear or power (Patton, 2002). The search for these patterns and themes is called inductive analysis due to the researcher's interactions with the data. As the inductive analysis occurred, a codebook was used to track and figure out possible categories, patterns, and themes. Developing some manageable classification or coding was an important step of data analysis.

According to Patton (2002), critics of qualitative inquiry have often charged that this approach is too subjective, in large part because the researcher is the instrument of data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation and because a qualitative strategy includes having personal contact with and getting close to, the people and situation under study. From the perspective of advocates of a supposedly value-free social science, however, subjectivity is the very antithesis of scientific inquiry (Patton, 2002).

Conclusion

This study employed a qualitative design involving eight school board members of a recently annexed school district. I used a snowball technique to identify the participants and met with each participant two times in order to conduct in-depth individual interviews lasting one to two hours, in addition to the pre-interview conducted to reconnect and establish rapport. Data was manually analyzed and coded using a matrix developed around themes that developed from the data collected.

There were no major challenges along the way. It was my hope that the participants, like myself, came to know themselves better and to recognize their own involvement in the annexation of their school district.

The next chapter includes the analysis, summarizing the interviews with a discussion of patterns and themes that surfaced, as well as quotations that support the themes.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This was a story about La Vista ISD, a small, rural, Latino school district that ceased to exist. I am not arrogant or foolish enough to believe that I uncovered *the truth* about what caused the annexation of this rural school district; neither is my research an attempt to find fault or to figure out if the annexation could or should have been prevented. The research, however, is an effort to make sense of the school board members' perceptions and historical accounts of their community, their school, and their eventual annexation. My interpretations, as well as the school board members' recollections and chronicles, depend on the epistemological schema that we all bring with us. This is not my story, nor is it the school board members' stories; rather, it is my perceptions of their perceptions—my story of their stories. Every reader, moreover, will construct this narrative differently.

This chapter reveals the themes that evolved from analyzing the interviews, the records, the documents, the transcriptions, the audio tapes, and the researcher's audio-tape journal. Discussed in depth are the school board members' thoughts, reflections, and perceptions as they relate to those themes. The names of the people and of the places were changed to ensure anonymity, and I use the school board members' pseudonyms to designate their responses.

Although enthusiastic about interviewing the school board members and listening to their perceptions, I was a bit uncertain about going back to the community where I

served as the superintendent. Two questions I did not ask the school board members, but I often asked myself are: (1) What role did I play in the annexation? and (2) Should I have done more to intervene on the district's behalf so that the annexation could have been avoided? I was anxious to hear the reactions I would get from the school board members since some of them served on the school board at the time I was hired to be the superintendent. They hired me to guide the district to success, not to support an annexation, which, ultimately, I did. In spite of this, my worries soon dissipated as each former school board member welcomed me back into the community with kindness, grace, and cooperation.

Their sincere welcome made the long, endless drives through the lush South Texas brush country on sunny, bright, fall mornings more enjoyable. I was, however, nervous at the same time since I was a neophyte researcher. I checked and double-checked my supplies before leaving the house, making sure I had packed the audio equipment and extra batteries. During each trip, I worried about whether or not the school board members would be able to recall significant issues and whether or not their answers would be forthcoming and honest. I reflected on the school board members' terms in office, terms that ranged from three years to almost 20 years. Much had transpired during their terms in office such as the closing of the high school, the changes in superintendents, the compliance visits from the Texas Education Agency, and the annexation. I also wondered how the school board members' tenures influenced and shaped the school district's business decisions and actions.

I made initial contact with all the school board members to encourage their recollections prior to conducting the first interviews. These preliminary conversations occurred at their places of employment, at their homes, or at the community center. Some of the conversations also took place over the telephone. These short and informal conversations were scheduled at their convenience, some during the week and others on weekends. It gave me an opportunity to explain my research, to reacquaint myself with them, and in some instances, to make new acquaintances.

Once the introductory conversations were concluded, the formal interviews began. The focus of these formal conversational interviews was to get the perspectives of former and current school board members in regards to the annexation of the school district. I found all the school board members willing to share their points of view, to converse about their roles and responsibilities, and to answer questions. Often, there was little time for small talk since the conversations, without prompting, almost immediately turned to the annexation. One of the board members secured permission for me to use the newly built church hall for all interviews. I arrived early, set up my equipment, and when time permitted, walked around the community, enjoying the solitude, silence and the time for reflection. My walks always took me to the now-vacant and boarded-up school. Similar to my arrival as the interim superintendent, the grounds were once again ignored, untended, and overgrown with weeds.

It was during one of these brief walks that I encountered Veronica Quintana, one of the first interviewees. Mrs. Quintana seemed as anxious and nervous as I was, although small talk ameliorated most of the tension. She constantly insisted during

the interviews that the other school board members had more to add and that her recollections of the district would be difficult. The interviews always lasted longer than I anticipated, however. Another school board member I spoke to, Gwen Miller, seemed genuinely happy to see me and seemed eager to be interviewed. Carlos Robles and Andy Smith, two other school board members, were very business-like when we met, but they were also very accommodating. They seemed to enjoy reminiscing about their community's and their school district's past. School board member, Mike Reynolds, like Veronica Quintana, insisted immediately that recalling anything from his time as a board member would be difficult and that he probably would not have anything of value to contribute. Another school board member, Mario Estrada, seemed to enjoy the interviews and always stayed long past the scheduled two hours. Ricardo Lovejoy and Sara Gomez, the last school board members to be interviewed, were equally as accommodating and did not hesitate to talk about their involvement with the school district and their perceptions of it.

During all of the interviews, it became apparent that issues such as the district's leadership, the power and influence of the superintendents over the school board members and the community, and the influence and control of the school board members over the superintendents were topics of interest to both current and former school board members. These interviews, along with the documents and data analysis, revealed three themes. The three themes, discussed in the subsequent section, are: (1) power dynamics, (2) denial of the obvious, and (3) unspoken paternalism—the Anglo patron system.

Power Dynamics

During most of the interviews, the topics the school board members were most eager to discuss were their perceptions of the leadership of the district and the influence of that leadership over the past 25 years. These areas of interest uncovered the first theme—power dynamics. As the interviews were analyzed and the documents and the records were read, moreover, additional sub-themes emerged: (1) trusting those in power, (2) deferring to those in power, and (3) becoming those in power.

Trusting Those in Power

In discussing the district leadership, all the school board members recalled the tenure of one superintendent, Mike Rainey. There were, however, mixed sentiments regarding his leadership. Rainey was the superintendent in La Vista ISD for nearly 20 years. His tenure began in the early 1970s. Several of the school board members spoke about him with reverence, with respect, and often with admiration. Yet, others described him as a man with too much power, who did what he wanted without considering the opinion of others. Through the course of the interviews, it was evident that the school board members never questioned his activities, that they supported his efforts, and that they were pleased with the direction in which the school district was heading under his leadership.

An example of this support was Carlos Robles when he said, "Rainey was very efficient. He got things done. I mean everyone was pleased with the job he did. He

did a lot for the district." Mike Reynolds said, "He had a lot of power. People did what he said but he did 100% for the school."

Ricardo Lovejoy, however, thought that Rainey had too much power because of his long tenure as the superintendent. He said, "After so many years that a person runs a school district, it becomes very dangerous because they begin to believe they are untouchable...." Superintendent Rainey was neither a local citizen nor a resident from the surrounding towns. Upon his appointment, however, he immediately moved into the community. A rent-free, three-bedroom home adjacent to the high school was made available to him and his family. According to district records, he also negotiated an insurance policy for himself, received a school car, and secured a very robust travel budget.

Several of the school board members shared that Rainey traveled often. They spoke openly about the many trips he took and the sizable amounts of his travel expenses. Mario Estrada said, "He would attend many out-of-town meetings and out-of-state conferences, but no one ever said anything because we all knew he was in charge." All of the school board members agreed that Superintendent Rainey was never required to report on his travels, and he rarely requested permission from them for these travel expenses.

Several of the school board members revealed that Superintendent Rainey traveled to Austin countless times. He would visit the Texas Education Agency if new mandates were issued that he thought would be a challenge for the district. The school board members believed his visits were attempts to delay the implementation of new mandates or to get additional funding for them; in other words, they perceived

that he knew how to "play the game." The school board members shared that he had made many important contacts in Austin and that it appeared he had the power to keep the Texas Education Agency from scrutinizing the district too closely. This perception by the school board members of "playing the game" was important because from time to time the school district was not able to immediately implement required State-mandated programs or was, on occasion, not in compliance with State and federal regulations. One school board member, Mr. Robles, believed that Rainey had so much influence, that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) allocated additional monies to the district because of Rainey's relationship with the agency. He said, "As soon as Superintendent Rainey left, we got in trouble with the State, and when he was here, he took care of business."

Similarly, Mr. Reynolds stated:

He had all these contacts and he was well-known at TEA. That's why when he left everyone [in the community] said, "You guys don't know what you did [when you ran him off]." They said, You don't know what kind of can of worms you are opening. Who's going to help us now?

In addition to Superintendent Rainey's many trips to Austin, his trips to Dallas made for lively conversations during each one of the interviews. Several of the more affluent oil and gas companies that were operating wells in La Vista were located in Dallas. According to the school board members, Rainey would meet with the oil and gas companies' representatives to encourage them to pay their taxes early so that there would be enough cash flow to open school every year. Mr. Robles stated, "Of course, he had to stay in a good hotel. It was important when he dealt with the oil companies. He would also have to take them to restaurants—good restaurants." It

appeared that these expenditures were seen as good uses of the district's finances, and the trips were seen as good uses of Superintendent Rainey's time and efforts.

A couple of Latino school board members, however, believed that Rainey's travels and expenditures were excessive. They also alleged that his power and control came as a direct result of the majority of the school board members being Anglo males. During Superintendent Rainey's tenure, there were several wealthy Anglo families living within La Vista ISD's attendance zone whose children attended the schools in the district. The fact that Rainey was also Anglo, according to Mrs. Quintana, prompted the community to refer to Rainey and the school board as the "good ole boys' club." Rainey's inner circle of friends included several of these school board members in addition to influential Anglo ranchers and landowners.

Yet, according to Mrs. Quintana and Mr. Robles, even individuals [in the community] that did not like him, acceded that he was a very effective superintendent and that he got things done. Likewise, Mr. Reynolds said:

> After he was here, the school started to change in every respect. I think he [Superintendent Rainey] just ran a tight ship. But when you do that you're making mammas and daddies angry all over the place and they'll cause a problem. He wasn't liked by some people here, but I think he did a tremendous job with this little school [district].

Rainey's period of influence lasted for so many years that sometimes, according to Mr. Estrada, he was referred to as the mayor of the city. Not only did he rule the school district, but he also attempted to influence community affairs. As Mr. Estrada stated:

> If Halloween was on a Tuesday, and he decided that Halloween would be celebrated on a Sunday, then that is what happened. But who was he to tell me and my kids when we could or could not go trick or treating.

He also said:

> Rainey had a particular chair at Sylvia's Café and the friends I was with told me to get out of his chair one day when he walked in. They said that's where he always sat.

It seems that Superintendent Rainey frequented this restaurant on a regular basis and always insisted on sitting at the same table, in the same chair. Restaurant patrons would vacate the seat if they happened to be sitting in it when he walked in, deferring to his position and power within the community.

Although several school board members described Superintendent Rainey as efficient and effective, there were some who were concerned about his use of power. For example, Mr. Lovejoy said, "People need to look at the length of time a person is in a certain position because that's what makes them think they are untouchable and they become like dictators."

Towards the latter part of Rainey's tenure, a small group of disgruntled Latino citizens concerned about Rainey's power and influence began attending board meetings. They also began to voice their dissatisfaction with the school district. Mrs. Quintana was one of those citizens and said:

> I didn't think the board was aware of what was going on in the district. They needed to know what was going on in the high school and apparently it was not being related to them [by the superintendent]. When you asked them [the school board members] a question, they never knew what was going on [in the district]. I started attending board meetings and I noticed that there wasn't any discussion as to what was going on in the schools. I thought the school board was about kids. It [school board meetings] was like an all boys type of deal. All the board members were men and it was like this little club. Everyone knew before hand what was being discussed that evening. It was like we're here to make it official, get things done with no reason to discuss anything.

With little to no school district business discussed during the school board meetings, several of the community members believed that decisions were being made before the meetings began. They also began to feel that the school board was not honest during its meetings. For instance, Mr. Lovejoy said, "There were a lot of people that thought there was a lot of money being misused and [the district] had a superintendent that manipulated [the board meetings and the school board members]."

Encouraged by their peers to run for the school board, a couple of the school board members that participated in this study did and won, thereby changing the dynamics of the school board and the superintendent's circle of influence. Two years into their terms, these new school board members became aware of a retirement scheme concocted by Superintendent Rainey and approved by the previous school board. According to school board meeting minutes and the school board members' recollections, board action had been taken to increase the salary of the superintendent (although memories and board minutes were unclear and vague as to the exact amounts). The increase was only approved so that the salary reported to the teacher retirement system would be inflated, thus increasing Superintendent Rainey's future retirement payments. Superintendent Rainey had assured the school board members that he would refund back to the school district the difference between his salary increase and his actual contractual salary. Mrs. Quintana stated:

> So he had this idea that we could ... show on paper that we were paying him more so that his teacher retirement would be higher. I guess he would get more benefits or whatever. The agreement was that he would return that money back to the district. And he extended the offer to include any of the teachers that wanted in on it, but they were much wiser and said no. I always felt uncomfortable about that,

but there were people on the board that had been there much longer than me. They should know.

Describing this same issue, Mr. Lovejoy said:

We got the board minutes and got the proof that he had been involved in a scheme where he was getting ready to retire. He'd asked the board to approve on paper a raise for himself—a tremendous raise. Later on, he would reimburse the district just so his higher income would be reported for retirement purposes.

Mrs. Miller stated, "Well, to their, you know, on their behalf, they [the school board members] did ask him, 'Is this legal'? He assured them he had checked into it and it was perfectly legal." This action, however, turned out to be illegal. I asked Mr. Smith, "You were on the board at the time. Did you not think his suggestion to defraud the retirement system sounded dishonest"?

Mr. Smith stated:

I remember questioning it and his explanation was "Well, it's not costing the district anything, just my salary." I know when it all started out I didn't realize, you know, how the teacher retirement system works. He told us it was so that he'd have a better retirement. He would just end up contributing more money to the teacher retirement system so he could end up getting more money out. I thought if it's not illegal....

Eventually, the Texas Education Agency was notified, an investigation was conducted and Rainey was placed on administrative leave. As Mrs. Quintana recalled this event, she also stated:

One day here comes TEA. They just drop in on you with no advance warning and went through all the books. They also found that the money was not being returned. Superintendent Rainey kept arguing that there was nothing wrong with it [retirement scheme] and that he shouldn't be terminated.

According to school board minutes, the investigation found the actions to be fraudulent and although the board had an opportunity to prosecute, they chose to allow Superintendent Rainey to resign; thus ending his long-lasting reign. Mrs. Miller

said, "We heard from the agency though that this is basically fraud and that Rainey could be charged with defrauding the retirement system." Whereas another school board member, Mr. Smith, recalling the same events, said:

> We allowed him to resign. That is what we finally came up with rather than drag it out forever and ever because it would have involved the media. He also refunded, I want to say, $116,000 to the district.

Further commenting on this issue, Mrs. Quintana said, "The attorney advised us that it was better for us to allow him to resign. It would put an end to it and it would spare the school all the unnecessary publicity."

One cannot help but wonder why the school board members allowed this deceptive retirement scheme to move forward. Rainey was in control and seemed to exert power over the school board to travel, to defraud the teacher retirement system, and to run the school district with very little input from the school board. Mrs. Miller stated, "And you know, all the trainings you go to, you're always told, 'Trust your superintendent, trust your superintendent.' What if they [superintendents] are not worthy of your trust? And how do you become aware of that?" Whereas, Mr. Robles said, "I mean you have to be able to depend on a superintendent to make those kinds of judgments and decisions." Finally, Mrs. Quintana said, "He knew what he was doing. He was in charge and they [the school board] trusted him."

Although the retirement scheme was the grounds for Rainey's resignation, it appears that close to two decades, Rainey did what he wanted. Furthermore, the school board members trusted him; he was, after all, the superintendent.

Deferring to Those in Power

Trusting those in power led to the second sub-theme, deferring to those in power. This theme emerged as the school board members began reminiscing about the superintendents that succeeded Rainey. The following timeline (Figure 7) is meant to give a chronology of the superintendents' tenures and the tenures of the school board members as they relate to the terms of each of the superintendents.
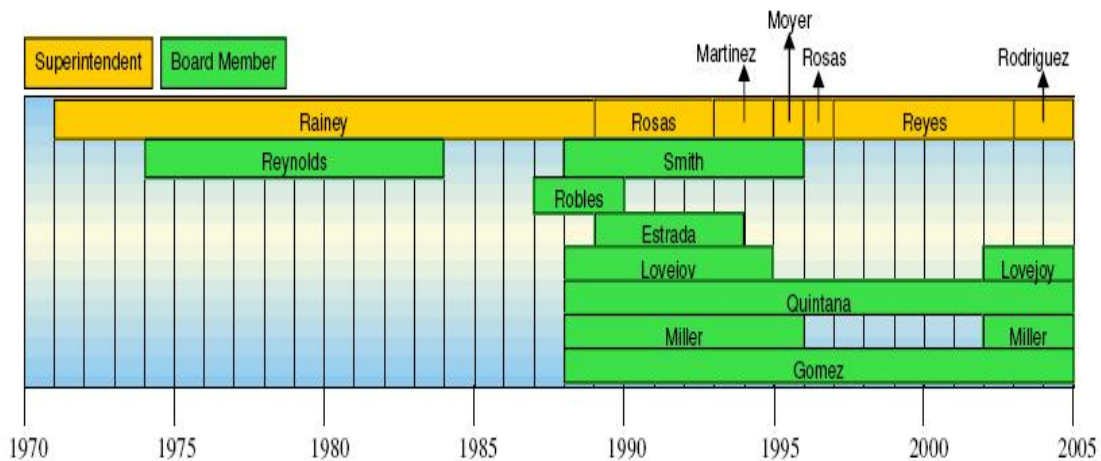
FIGURE 7. Chronology of Superintendents' and School Board Members' Tenures as They Relate to the Terms of Each of the Superintendents

Rainey's resignation resulted in a succession of short-tenured superintendents, during whose terms critical events began to unfold. Suddenly, the district was wrought with financial woes, faced with investigations by the Texas Education Agency and confronted with declining student achievement and student enrollment. The school board members, however, accepted all the superintendents' explanations about the financial challenges, about the TEA investigations and about the declines in student achievement and student enrollment. They accepted their assurances that

proper corrective measures were being taken and deferred to their judgments as to the best corrective actions to take.

The first of many superintendents to follow Rainey was Andres Rosas. To the best of the school board members' recollections, he was the first Latino superintendent hired in La Vista ISD. All of the school board members agreed that he did a good job and that he was well-liked in the community. Yet, the school board members seemed to believe that Rosas was always looking for a more lucrative, larger district. He also chose not to live in the community, commuting approximately two hours daily one way. Moreover, the school board did not require him to move. Still, from all accounts, he was an effective superintendent, always placing the needs of the school and the children first. Mrs. Quintana stated, "We had a better working relationship with Rosas than we had working with Rainey." Mrs. Gomez said, "The parents found him easier to talk to. You know, he always had time, at least the first time he was here."[1] While Mrs. Miller stated, "Parents thought he was the greatest because he would come to all the functions and they could walk up to him and he would walk up to them to say hello or whatever."

A couple of years into his employment contract, however, Rosas accepted another superintendency and resigned from the district. His departure was followed by superintendents, Gilberto Martinez and Aaron Moyer whose tenures were short-lived. Martinez insisted on being hired with the understanding that he be granted time off from work to pursue a doctoral degree. The school board members deferred to his wisdom about this choice and agreed to his terms. Once again, the superintendent was not required to live in the community and allowed to commute. It was during

Superintendent Martinez's brief tenure that the high school was closed, and money was borrowed from the neighboring district to remain solvent. Plus, several of the board members felt that Superintendent Martinez was not accessible and that he did not enjoy working in their community. They also regretted permitting him to work on his degree because it seemed to them that he was rarely at work. Yet, they never challenged him about his absences or his time away from the district. Mrs. Miller said, "Martinez had the most potential. But then he got here and got so involved with getting his doctorate that everything else fell by the way side and took second place. So, in the end he really let us down."

During Martinez's tenure, the school district ran out of money. Unable to make payroll and unable to borrow money from local banks, Superintendent Martinez entered into merger discussions with a wealthy neighboring school district. The school board members did not necessarily agree with these merger deliberations, but deferred to Martinez's position and his acumen about school district matters. Consequently, the neighboring district agreed to give La Vista ISD close to one million dollars in return for allowing La Vista ISD's high school students to transfer to their high school. A verbal agreement was reached between both school districts; however, Superintendent Martinez resigned from the district before the transfers of students and money were finalized. Mr. Lovejoy said, "He told us the best thing for this district is to close the high school. But he didn't help with the closure. He left us to do the dirty work." Left without a superintendent, it was up to the school board members to negotiate the written terms of the agreement with the neighboring school board and superintendent.

The school board members were upset about Superintendent Martinez's abrupt departure, especially in the midst of the turmoil caused by the closing of the high school within the community. Although Superintendent Martinez's tenure was short-lived, prior to his departure, the school board members deferred to his judgment and permitted him to recommended Aaron Moyer as his successor.

Moyer also did not live in the community and chose to commute. His tenure was so fleeting that his name did not come up during the interviews unless I specifically asked about him. The point here is it seemed that the school board members relied on the people in the leadership positions to suggest their replacements, usually deferring to their expertise and authority.

It is the vacancy caused by Superintendent Moyer's resignation that allowed a former superintendent, Andres Rosas, unemployed, to apply for the superintendent's job posting again. Excited about getting Rosas back, the school board rehired him. He reassumed the superintendency for two tumultuous years. Mrs. Quintana said of his tenure, "So when he said that he was looking to come back, we thought, 'Well, ok, he's going to pick up where he left off.' But we were wrong." Whereas, Mr. Lovejoy said, "He needed a job. He came back because he couldn't find another one."

According to records reviewed, it was during Superintendent Rosas' second term, which lasted approximately two years, that the district began receiving letters of concern and monitoring visits from the Texas Education Agency. The financial picture continued to be bleak. Yet, the school board members and the community assumed that the leadership of the district knew what needed to be done and would do right by them. In the midst of these challenges, Rosas began applying for other super-

intendent vacancies throughout the region. With another job offer, he asked to be released from his contract and recommended his replacement. Once again, the school board members trusted that the superintendent knew who would be a good replacement and deferred to his recommendation.

Interestingly, Superintendent Rosas' successor was an elementary teacher from within the district, Jessica Ybarra. Not only did she lack any type of administrative experience, but she lacked the appropriate superintendent's certification. Moreover, she had only four years of teaching experience. The board went along, however, with Rosas' recommendation and hired her. Two school board members, Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Quintana, felt that she was a good candidate since she was the only one in the district with a Masters degree. They both thought she would know how to get things done. Mrs. Gomez said:

> I mean, she didn't know some of the stuff but we were depending on her and she never told us that she didn't understand. She would come to the board meetings saying, "We have this money and we're going to do this", and I believed her. In the end, we didn't have anything. I believed her because she was a teacher. So, every time [the board met], I would think she was right [with her explanations] because, she was a good teacher.

Just as Mrs. Quintana said:

> Rosas wanted to leave in a hurry. He pulled her out of the classroom because she was the only person I think at the time in the district that had a Masters degree and was the most qualified. He really wanted to leave, and you know, there was no one else.

In comparison, Mr. Esparza said, "Well, number one, at that time they [school board] didn't have a lot of choices. I don't want to be mean or anything, but the way I saw her work, she didn't care and the board wanted somebody cheap."

Convinced they could not afford a search firm, let alone find an affordable, certified, and qualified superintendent willing to relocate to a small rural community, the school board hired Ybarra. The district records indicated that she was paid an annual salary of approximately $45,000, an increase of almost $15,000 over her teacher salary. Interestingly, according to copies of school board minutes and contracts, Rainey was paid approximately $80,000 ten years earlier.

Ybarra remained for five years during which time the district saw a steady decline in student enrollment numbers, student achievement, and financial security. In addition, the Texas Education Agency conducted two investigations during her tenure, both, which demanded immediate corrective actions. According to district and State records, however, those corrective actions were never made.

District audit records also indicated that the superintendent was insufficiently trained to perform financial duties. The district did not have a formalized budget process, which is the responsibility of the superintendent. The lack of a budget process led to under-budgeted revenues two years in a row forcing the district to forgo needed repairs to facilities and other expenditures that would have improved the operation of the district. It was during this time of Superintendent Ybarra's tenure that the school board members began to involve themselves more and more in the daily operations of the district, perhaps signaling that a new board attitude was emerging. Although they had deferred district decisions and day to day operations to previous superintendents, they began to assert themselves in some district issues.

Ultimately, it was the lack of the superintendent's certificate that caused this superintendent to be recommended for termination. The recommendation to termi-

nate, however, did not come from the school board, but from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Even with the challenges the district faced, the majority of the school board members did not want to terminate Ybarra. Mrs. Quintana said, "Everyone still blames me because I stood by her. I just couldn't get past that she stepped into a job that she wasn't qualified for. She did us a favor." Under pressure from TEA, however, the school board decided to comply, deferring yet again to those they perceived to be in charge and who knew best. Therefore, the school board placed Superintendent Ybarra on administrative leave and recommended her for termination.

Along with TEA's request to terminate Ybarra, came the request that school board members allow the education service center to recommend an interim superintendent for a period of no less than six months. During this time, I worked for the local education service center and was the one recommended to serve as the interim superintendent for La Vista ISD. Although the school board members voted unanimously to hire me as the interim, the vote was merely a formality, due to the directive from TEA. The Texas Education Agency, however, assured La Vista ISD's school board that it would be permitted to conduct a new superintendent search after six months.

In addition to being pressured into hiring an interim superintendent, TEA also assigned a monitor to the district to observe all school board meetings and report any board governance violations. Mrs. Quintana said:

> What choice did we have when you receive a letter from the Commissioner [Commissioner of Education]? It's like with the annexation, we tried to fight it, but how can you fight the Commissioner and TEA when their mind is made up?

Six months later, a unanimous decision not to conduct a new superintendent's search was made and the board of trustees asked me to stay on as the superintendent. Like some of my predecessors, I, too, commuted almost an hour one way from a nearby city.

It was during my own tenure as the superintendent in La Vista that I began to realize the high opinion of and respect for the superintendent's position held by the school board members. Very seldom did the board members raise questions or concerns about the agenda items I recommended. During the two years that I served as the superintendent of the La Vista ISD, the school board members supported all my recommendations unanimously, with the exception of one—replacing the cesspool with a septic tank system.[2] The point I make here is the regard they showed to the position. They always supported my recommendations, even though it sometimes appeared they did not understand the intricacies of school district operations. During my tenure, they rarely involved themselves in the daily operations of the school district, reverting again to their historical position of deferring to those in charge and in power.

Becoming Those in Power

While most of the daily operations of the school district may have been left up to me, school board members did seem to enjoy the authority that came with being an elected official. Suddenly they found themselves in a position with power and, especially during Superintendent Ybarra's tenure, they admitted to often micromanaging school district affairs and savoring it. It was not uncommon for school board

members to show up unannounced at the school demanding Ybarra take immediate

action on complaints and grievances. It appears that up until Superintendent Ybarra's

tenure, they trusted the superintendents they hired and deferred all minor and most

major decisions to them. Yet, some of the school board members admitted to enjoy-

ing the power and authority that came with the position. Mrs. Miller said, "Ybarra

wasn't strong enough to stand up to us and stop it [the micromanaging]. We tried not

to micromanage with you, plus I made a concerted effort to back off." While Mrs.

Gomez stated, "Sometimes she [Ybarra] wasn't doing her job, and sometimes a board

member would go to the teachers and tell them this or that [what to do]." Also

admitting to micromanaging was Mrs. Quintana who said, "She [Ybarra] depended a

lot on the board to guide her and to lead her. And, yes, we did it and so you got a taste

for micromanaging and it's kind of like addictive." Even Mr. Smith said:

> We had board members that wanted to run every little detail of the school. It got
> so bad there were three board members that walked into a teacher's classroom and
> told her how and what she needed to teach. The board wanted to control the
> school.

However, the interplay between the school board members and Superintendent

Ybarra may have also been prompted by some underlying gender inequality issues.

The school district hires a female as their superintendent, and the school board

members suddenly begin to micromanage the day-to-day operations of the district. In

this small rural Latino community, it is not uncommon for traditional roles of gender

to prevail. It is taken for granted that the men work and provide for their families, and

that the women maintain the home and care for the children. During my tenure, of the

30 families with students enrolled in La Vista's elementary school, 28 of the mothers

were stay-at-home moms. Given these traditional views, women may not be held in the same regard as men, just as female superintendents may not be held in the same regard as male superintendents. Although women now expect to work for much of their lives and are as ambitious as men to develop careers, they continue to face stereotypes and discrimination from some managers (Bradley, 1999) and maybe in this case from some school board members.

While it could be perceived as a gender issue, perhaps the school board members were also beginning to realize that they should not blindly trust, nor blindly defer to the leaders of their district. Thus, it was their desire to become directly involved with the issues, the concerns, and the daily operations of the school district, which prompted several of them to run for this office. Mrs. Miller said:

> While my husband was employed here [with the school district], we kept seeing things [about the district] and kept saying they were not right. He [Superintendent Rainey] shouldn't be able to do that. We [another school board member and Mrs. Miller] began reading through board minutes and started questioning some things.

In addition, Mrs. Quintana said:

> People asked me to run. I didn't want to be a board member. Yet, I went there with the notion that I was just going to make sure that the teachers being hired were good ones and that the children were being educated like I wanted my child to be educated. I wanted to make sure that all students were treated equally.

Whereas, Mrs. Gomez said, "There was one teacher and, well, I didn't like her. That's why I got on the board." Mr. Estrada said, "I was motivated to get on the board because I could see a lot of things that needed to be changed." Even Mr. Lovejoy professed that he wanted to become a school board member because he felt the superintendent had been in the position much too long. He was adamant that long tenure was a dangerous thing in terms of the power of one person. He said:

It's just that someone [referring to himself] needed to get in here unbiased and look at things as they are and try to bring some sense to it all. I just needed to be on the board because I don't trust a lot of people. I chose to run because there were a lot of conflicts within the school district.

Later during the interview, he further stated, [A spouse of a school board member] "was in the process of getting fired ... so I promised [another school board member] to put them on the board and secure [their spouse] a job for a certain amount of time."

Only a couple of the board members gave altruistic reasons for serving. One of them explained that while they were in school other board members had given of their time to ensure they received a good education and they only wanted to give back to their community. It was Mr. Robles who said, "I felt this obligation to serve because somebody gave up their time when I needed to go to school."

Although each one of the school board members had different motivations for wanting the position, the majority of their reasons dealt with the power and the influence of the position. This power included the hiring and firing of teachers and superintendents, the hiring and firing of family members as school district employees, and the micromanagement of the daily operations of the district.

Denial of the Obvious

Although the school board members attempted to involve themselves in the daily operations of the school district, they seemed to ignore the serious financial and academic challenges facing the district. The school board members were oblivious to the bleak future of the district, which leads to the second theme, denial of the obvious.

Over the years, the financial woes that plagued La Vista ISD caused many discussions and speculations of consolidation with a neighboring school district. This neighboring district, also rural and small, was considered a property-wealthy district. It had beautiful facilities, high-paying salaries that attracted qualified and certified teachers from neighboring cities, and high student performance results. This school district's elementary, middle and high school facilities were all within a 15-mile radius of La Vista ISD.

Several of the school board members recalled meetings and discussions that occurred several times over the past 20 years between school board members and superintendents to discuss the possible or eventual consolidation of their two districts. An agreement between both districts, however, was never reached given that the La Vista school board members could not come to any consensus on the issue. They wanted to keep their own school district.

This sentiment became clearer when in the early 1990s the school board president, Mr. Smith, initiated talks with the neighboring district. Mr. Smith said:

> Our board met with their board on more than one occasion and myself as president of our board met with the president of their board and superintendent on several occasions. The neighboring district was very receptive to everything we offered and to what we wanted. They had agreed that they would probably use this campus [La Vista ISD's elementary and high school] as a middle school campus. They were willing to set up board elections where we would have two board members from our community and things like that. If they would have worked something out, this school, this campus would still be in operation. They [both school boards] could have merged and compromised, like let's do fourth, fifth and sixth over here or part of the high school or junior high. This discussion went on for years before it got to this point, but some board members are just very hard headed. Everybody needed to see the reality that it [the end of the district] was coming. To me it didn't need to get to that point. I had a pretty strong opinion on the district needing to consolidate then. I could see the direction of our

tax base and the direction we were going as far as enrollment and couldn't see a solution to the problem. That's why I pushed for consolidation.

Perhaps school board members came to the inevitable conclusion that doing what was best for their students and their community was to join the neighboring district. Consequently, Mrs. Quintana said:

I think when they [school board members] started talking consolidation was around the time the high school was going to close. And, yes, I think there were also some other attempts to talk. I know we had asked them [the neighboring district] about taking our seventh and eighth graders and different things.

According to records, both districts agreed, at some point in the late 1980s or early 1990s, to vote to have an election that would allow the voters to decide if they wanted the two districts to consolidate. Thinking he had secured four votes, Smith, who was the school board president, placed the election on the board agenda. However, no one would make a motion on that particular agenda item. The motion died, thereby preventing the community from having a voice in a merger decision. Mr. Smith stated:

We never got to see what the community wanted to do. The reason for the board vote was really to bring this proposition to the voters of the district. Really, that's all I was asking and the board wouldn't do that. I know we had some very vocal business owners at that time that felt that any consolidation would be the end of the community as we know it.

Whatever the reason, the board members prevailed, and the motion to hold an election to place the consolidation issue before the voters was never made, thereby ending all consolidation discussions. Although Mr. Esparza said, "I think that if the consolidation had ever gone to the community [to vote], it would have passed because I think the majority of the community at that point realized it was a lost cause." In addition,

Mr. Smith said, "I still swear to this day that if we would have done it [consolidated], we could have compromised, and we'd still have a school here."

In the mid-90s, however, the tax base continued to dwindle as oil wells stopped producing. Several years after the failed consolidation negotiations, the La Vista ISD found itself with a severe shortage of funds, a dwindling student population, a decline in student performance, and an unbalanced budget to operate a new school year. Mrs. Miller said, "Yes, we had value, but it was tied to an unstable commodity. And the oil fields come and go. Exploration comes and goes. What it was is that we got our boom early. Ours was playing out when theirs [the neighbor district] was coming in."

In 1993 and 1994, with no money to finance another school year, the school board members, in denial about the eventual end of their school district, contacted the neighboring district and asked for assistance in the form of a loan. In the past, the school district had often borrowed money from local banks to finance the start and end of a school year. Bank loans, however, were getting more difficult to obtain due to the financial quandaries of the district. During the interview with Mr. Robles, he stated, "Well, there was always this thing that the school had to borrow money to start and have to borrow money to end the year. Getting the [tax] money as early as you could was not having to borrow as much." Similarly, Mrs. Miller said:

> We've always done that. We've always borrowed money to start the year. The thing that I couldn't make him [the superintendent] understand was that we were having trouble finding someone who would lend us the money. The bank is not that willing anymore and, you know, they could see what our income in taxes was going to be. To them and to me it was like, it was going to cover the loan but what are we going to do the rest of the year and all those unforeseen things that can happen?

Likewise, Mrs. Quintana said:

> I didn't know until I got on the board that that's how the school had been going on for so many years. That they borrowed money to start and they would borrow money sometimes to end the year.

At the same time, Mr. Lovejoy said:

> They [neighbor district] came with this idea that we needed to close the high school and to a point, they were right. We were having trouble finding good teachers and our salaries weren't competitive to attract the kind of people we needed. The facility needed a lot of repairs and upgrading. We weren't offering athletics because we didn't have enough kids to put on a program and we didn't have money to fund the athletic program.

Realizing that many of their high school students had already transferred to the adjoining district once the football program was dissolved and that they could no longer finance a high school with 60 students enrolled, the board members agreed to the merger terms of the neighboring district. Just as Mrs. Miller said:

> We could not make a budget. We couldn't balance a budget in any way, shape or form. What's bad is when they gave that million dollars to [she names several other school districts from the area] with no strings attached. They gave us the same million dollars but we had to give them the high school.

Equally important, Mrs. Quintana stated, "Neither one of us really had sufficient numbers to carry out a real complete program. I think we already did not have a football team which you know in Texas is practically sacrilegious."

Consequently, the high school was locked up, the students were transferred, the money was paid to the district, and a pact was made among the board members to concentrate on preserving the elementary school. Several of the school board members and many community members believed the high school move to be temporary and had no doubt that they would reopen the high school once the district became financially solvent again. Mrs. Quintana said:

The rest of the kids wanted to go so there was nothing we could do because the parents thought that athletics was more important than the education. But we sent them over there thinking that maybe later on we could reopen the high school. I don't know. We had that idea.

The closing of the high school was believed by many to have led to the eventual end of this district. The high school was the heart of the community and brought together the town for Friday night football games and school events. There was a definite lack of interest in the school district once the high school no longer existed. Mr. Robles said:

If you think about it to me the community, and I guess it comes from me growing up here, but to me, it doesn't seem as tight-knit a community as it was when you had a [high] school here; when you had a football game to go to on Friday night or whatever. That kind of thing would bring people together.

Meanwhile, insufficient funds continued to trouble the now pre-kindergarten through eighth grade district. Money was in short supply even though the district received additional monies from the State under the small school adjustment tenet. La Vista ISD also received additional funding because the majority of the students enrolled were classified as limited English proficient and economically disadvantaged. Finally, the district was also identified as a Chapter 41 school district.

According to the Texas Education Code (2007), a district is categorized as a Chapter 41 school district if it had more than $319,500 of property wealth per student. Property wealth occurs when a district applies a tax rate to its property values. As in the case of La Vista ISD, if a district has a high property value, it collects considerably more money than a district with same tax rate, but with a much lower property base. This difference produces disparities in the districts' abilities to hire

qualified teachers, build appropriate facilities, offer a sound curriculum, and purchase important equipment like computers.

To remedy this inequality, the fourth court decision for *Edgewood ISD et al. vs. Kirby et al.*, in the early 1990s, stated that all districts should get the same revenue for the same tax effort. Being that La Vista ISD would get more money for the same tax effort of other districts, the Edgewood decision required La Vista ISD to send money to the State to be redistributed to other districts in need of equalization. The irony here lies in the fact that although designated as a Chapter 41 school district due to its tax base, the La Vista ISD was still poor. After the wealth reduction, also referred to as recaputure or Robin Hood, a property wealthy school district, like La Vista, with very few students enrolled, is left without sufficient funds to operate.

Being of that same opinion, Mr. Lovejoy said:

And then we became Chapter 41. It wasn't too bad when we became Chapter 41 the first time [because we could still operate the school]. But what really, really hurt us was when the Robin Hood bill came around. We had to share part of our money. And numbers [student enrollment] have always been our problem and without the numbers [students], we couldn't have money because most of the money was going to go back to the State and not staying here [in the district]. I think that Robin Hood, not Chapter 41, was the killer [referring to the closing of the school district].

The school board members also shared that they never fully understood the wealth reduction law that left the district in a financial quandary. Neither did they seem to feel that the State's small school adjustment funding formula provided adequate financial support.

The school board members, however, denying yet again that the obvious choice was to consolidate the school district, convinced themselves that it was still in the

best interest of the community to keep the school open. According to school district records, teacher positions were cut, forcing those remaining to teach multi grades and multi subjects. Support positions were cut which included clerical and custodial staff. Teacher and administrative salaries were frozen, although they were already at the state minimum and could not compete with the surrounding districts' pay scales. To further save money, records indicated that repairs to the school building were postponed and that the surrounding properties were left unkempt and neglected. Teachers and administrators suddenly became even harder to recruit. Offering free housing to teachers was no longer an option because the rental houses were now in a state of disrepair, with no money available to refurbish them. More often, the topic of school board member budget workshops focused on having to cut programs and services instead of adding them.

Further challenging the financial difficulties faced by the district was the lack of community support when the district needed it the most. Three years prior to the annexation, the school district asked the voters to support a tax rate above the tax rate allowed by the State and up to the maximum permitted by statute [$1.50]. The vote did not pass. Even if the vote had passed, according to the financial records of the district, the money would have been insufficient to operate a school district the size of La Vista ISD.

Mr. Esparza said:

> A lot of people didn't believe the board members. There were a lot of problems with prior activities of the superintendent and I think there were too many lies. I think that was partially the problem why it didn't pass.

Similar to Mr. Esparza, Mrs. Quintana said:

> There were people that were on the board and in the community that were saying "They're raising your taxes, they're raising your taxes." And we weren't going to raise them [taxes], we wanted to keep them where they had been all along.

Whereas, Mrs. Miller said:

> So those of us that tried to talk to people about let's just keep the tax rate as it is. We've been paying it all this time, you know. We're used to it. And I kept trying to tell them, you're not really the ones that are going to pay. It's the oil companies and the people out there that we don't see who really don't care. They get to write it off instead of giving it to the government. Let them give it to us. Your tax bill is going to stay the same. But they just saw it as the board was just spending the money because we didn't do anything with the money we had. But a lot of people didn't see it that way and so the rollback, you know, it was bad and it hurt that we didn't get it.

Likewise, Mr. Robles said, "You could see what happened in that election. The majority of the people didn't care if it was going to affect the condition of the district or not or they would have voted to go for the rollback."

A failed rollback tax election, a closed high school, a large number of student transfers, a scarcity of superintendent candidates, and a shortage of funds did not prevent the school board members from wanting the school to remain open and operational. Whether allowing the school to remain open was in the community's best interest remains arguable, however.

In the meantime, the neighboring district continued to flourish, with an increase in their high school enrollment and the discovery of uranium within the school district boundaries. The neighboring district, however, was not satisfied with just the high school enrollment numbers and began accepting student transfers from kindergarten through twelfth grade from all surrounding communities. In La Vista, with many of their brothers and sisters already enrolled in the high school, parents began asking for

transfers for their smaller children enrolled at La Vista Elementary School in order to have all of their children in one school district instead of two. Mrs. Gomez said:

> Well, at first people were saying if they want to go, let them go. But then it started little by little to deplete the students we had left here because of the perception that the kids were getting something better there.

Equally important, Mrs. Miller said:

> A lot of the kids that did get selected were the better students. Toward the end, yes, it started to hurt because we were losing kids. We were losing money and so it hurt that the kids weren't here. And then a lot of the parents were starting to wonder if Jane Doe pulled out her child because they weren't getting a good education here. So, it started causing doubts so everyone starts trying to apply over there but like I said, not everyone got picked. Not everyone got accepted.

In comparison, Mr. Smith stated:

> It would have been the school year '91-92. They [the neighboring school district] were accepting them [students] then. I don't remember if they [the neighboring district] were accepting them [the La Vista students] prior to that. I know that there was a drain on our district with students transferring over there for several years and I'm sure that drained the enrollment here [in La Vista ISD] and further complicated the situation.

Since not all the families that requested transfers were accepted, these actions lead many community members to believe that the neighboring district was only accepting the best and brightest. Mrs. Miller said, "He [the neighboring superintendent] began picking and choosing who he would accept as transfers and so he only took the good students." It was also evident that enrollment numbers in La Vista ISD were on a steady decline, with only 45 students enrolled when the district was annexed. The community had spoken, as evidenced by the lack of support of the rollback tax election and the numerous student and parent transfer requests. Yet the school board members continued being in denial, keeping their poor district alive for several more years.

Unspoken Paternalism—The Anglo[3] *Patron* System

Towards the end of La Vista ISD's existence, the school board members' continued efforts to keep the district operational caused differences of opinion in the community. It was these differing opinions that triggered the final theme—unspoken paternalism and the Anglo *patron* system. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2006), the term *paternalism* is defined as a policy or practice of treating or governing people in a fatherly manner, especially by providing for their needs without giving them rights or responsibilities. In Texas, the term *patron* is used to describe the unspoken paternal, political, and social relationships that have histori- cally existed between wealthy American ranchers and landowners and their Mexican workers (Foley, Mota, Post, & Lozano, 1977).

In South Texas and along Mexican-American borders, these wealthy ranchers and landowners were referred to as *patrones* by the Mexican laborers that worked for them. According to Foley et al. (1977), the relationships between the *patrones* and the Mexican workers were frequently paternalistic yet complex. Although many *patrones* seemed to develop relationships with their workers, class and ethnicity were never forgotten. Historically, many Mexican workers often described the *patron* as benevolent and charitable, because he frequently brought gifts, clothing, and food to their families (De León, 1983; Foley et. al, 1977). Sometimes they learned Spanish. They repeatedly graced each other's tables, and their children played together. According to De León (1983), however, the *patrones* continued to perceive them-

selves as representatives of a superior culture. The *patrones*' benevolent gestures were subversive efforts to buy loyalty and gratitude from their workers.

Furthermore, the paternalism of the Anglo *patrones* and the loyalty of their Mexican workers did not obscure the anti-Mexican and anti-Anglo sentiments and divisions of the ranch world (De León, 1983; Foley et al., 1977; Montejano, 1987). According to Montejano (1987), these divisions of the ranch world between the Mexican vaqueros (cowboys) and the *patrones* (ranchers), developed from Texas history and the stories of the Alamo and the Mexican War—a common justification for anti-Mexican prejudice. In all historical accounts, the Mexicans were portrayed as the enemy that Texans had fought and defeated (Montejano, 1987).

During the late 19th century, the cattle kingdom unexpectedly collapsed and many wealthy *patrones* sold their ranches, their cattle, and their land. Suddenly, anti-Mexican prejudices became more overt with the introduction of commercial agriculture. The cattle ranches were bought and sold to landowners who made a living farming the land, instead of grazing cattle. Montejano (1987) maintained that in the context of the Texas border, this transformation assumed a sharp racial character with generally tragic consequences for the Mexican worker. No longer living safely on the *patrones*' ranches, the Mexicans were compelled to seek farm and migrant labor jobs. They went from being powerful vaqueros on horseback, mounted equally with their *patrones*, to being on foot and picking crops for a living. Consequently, the Mexican worker faced a new patron, one who no longer perpetuated the perception that they were equals, but to one who imposed a quasi slave system. With the farmers' needs to organize and control the Mexican laborers, violence, coercion, and legal means to

attain desired outcomes were often the norm. In contrast to the master-servant bond of the ranch life, the new Anglo-Mexican relations were cold, anonymous, and imper-sonal affairs (Foley et al., 1977; Montjano, 1987). In spite of these events, this racism imposed on the Mexican workers goes back further than the collapse of the cattle kingdom in the late nineteenth century. De León (1983) contended that from the moment they landed on the American continent, Anglos manifested unique feelings toward the colored or *mestizo* [mix-blood] people they encountered. He further insisted:

> The austere Anglo-American moral code that translated the morality of Mexicanos into a "defective" one, ultimately aided and abetted white Texans in keeping ethnic minorities subordinated. They probably felt they were doing the proper and Christian thing. After all they were coming to the assistance of cultur-ally lost folks. Implicit in their compassion, however, was the belief that Mexicans were less deserving of humaneness and respect than members of the white society. (p. 32)

The many negative attitudes Anglos held toward Mexicans went hand in hand with attempts toward oppression. Anglos believed that they were superior and Mexicans were not; thus creating an elevated place for whites and a subservient one for Mexicans (De León, 1983; Foley et al., 1977; Montejano, 1987). De León further asserted that Tejanos[4] or Mexican Americans continue to date to be victims of psychological violence in more subtle forms of discrimination, predicated on the old notion that Tejanos are "not the white man's equal" (p. 107).

Based on my lived experiences in the La Vista ISD, it appeared to me that the notion "not the white man's equal" continued to be embedded in this South Texas culture. Although the school board members did not openly engage in discussions that labeled the power dynamics as the *patron* system, from my perspective of having

been the superintendent and my experience as a researcher, the Anglos in La Vista continued to be elevated in status, and thus power. It seemed that they were perceived and treated as powerful and smart and that the Latino residents and school board members alike seemed to defer to their superiority.

However, I understand that the appearance of deference may be a reduction of the complexities of the relationships between the Anglos and Latinos within this community. This being said, though, I will attempt to show the reasons I perceived the *patron* system as alive and well in La Vista. In regards to the power dynamics, describing Superintendent Rainey, Mr. Robles said, "He had a blank check where the district was concerned. He was in charge. You either did what he wanted or he fired you." Additionally, Mr. Reynolds stated, "He controlled the board." Similarly, Mr. Lovejoy said, "He was a dictator and had too much power."

An example of the deference of this Anglo *patron* system became apparent when the school board members spoke about the Anglo residents in La Vista and those on the school board. For example, Mr. Robles, one of the Latino school board members, was quite upset as he remembered that some Latino board members would side with the Anglo school board members. He said, "They voted Anglo when they voted. I mean, everyone asks for his [referring to an Anglo school board member] opinion, everyone goes to him, because he is, you know, Anglo. He must know more." Mr. Robles also said, "The people here figure they [Anglos] must know more than we do, so they will make better decisions."

This deference might also have been the reason for the failed tax election. According to some of the school board members, one of the wealthiest Anglo land-

owners, who also employed a large portion of the male citizens, did not support this election. Thus, the school board members speculated that he exerted his influence on his employees to vote a particular way, which would have benefited him and his company and not necessarily the school district. One of the school board members, who asked to remain anonymous, not even using the pseudonym, revealed, "[They] were asked not to support the rollback." I asked, "But they don't know who votes or how you voted?" He said, "Yes, they do. It's a small community. Everyone knows everything."

A final example of the deference paid to the Anglos is the incident recalled by Mr. Estrada, one of the school board members, when he was asked to vacate the chair that was normally reserved for Superintendent Rainey at the local café. These are all examples where authority went unchallenged and where there appeared to be a culture that elevated Anglos in status and power.

Above were examples of the way power and deference operated within the *patron* system and how people appeared to respond to toward them. However, another aspect of the *patron* system is the way, the *patrones* often engaged in benevolent acts in efforts to buy loyalty and gratitude from their workers (De León, 1983; Foley et al., 1977; Montejano, 1987). I recalled an incidence that appeared to be a benevolent gesture by a prominent, wealthy, Anglo landowner who donated money to the school district during my tenure. The money was to support a school-wide field trip. At the time of the donation, the school and community had already raised sufficient money to take all students on a field trip. At the time of this after-the-fact donation, I wondered what might be the motivation for giving the money when the money had

already been secured and the community knew it had been secured. Regardless of this individual's motivations, the school board members wanted to be sure that ample appreciation was shown. Comments such as, "He cares so much for our children." "Is it not great that he gave us the money?" "You must call and thank him personally." "We need to be appreciative." "Do not forget to send a thank you letter." This was not the first time a wealthy community resident had donated money to the school, but it is my belief that these monetary donations were all attempts to sooth discontentment and keep the community and board members in control.

Another example of perceived benevolence is the school board members' perceptions of the relationship with the superintendent from the neighboring district. The school board members all recalled this superintendent's willingness, in the early to mid 90s, to give the La Vista ISD almost one million dollars in exchange for the transfer of all the La Vista high school students to that district. Although the money helped the district remain viable for several years, this superintendent often talked about "the favor" he did for La Vista by giving them the money. Mrs. Miller said, "He wanted our kids. That's why he gave us the money." Whereas, Mrs. Quintana said:

> He always said he was helping us. Yet, he took all our kids and we never stopped him… He gets what he wants. They needed the high school students and we gave them to him. And then we were grateful he gave us the money. Why give us the money to stay alive when you're going to take our kids?

The above examples of the uses of power, the appearance of deference to the uses of power, and the benevolent acts of the Anglos illustrate the complexities of the *patron* system within the possibility that the Anglo was and may still be "*el patron*."

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the themes that emerged from the analysis of the research. The three overarching themes were (1) power dynamics, (2) denial of the obvious, and (3) unspoken paternalism—the Anglo *patron* system.

The next and final chapter will offer a summary of the themes of research study and position them within the literature. Furthermore, Chapter V will place those themes in context of the findings, conclusions, and suggestions for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, I conclude with several points. First is a summary of the research study on which this dissertation is based. Following the summary is a review of the themes framed around the sensitizing concerns and their position within the current literature. In conclusion, the final section re-examines the limitations of the study and offers suggestions for policy, practice, and future research.

Review of the Research Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the annexation of a small rural impoverished Latino school district and was organized around three sensitizing concerns: (1) What were the school board members' perceptions about the school district prior to the annexation order? (2) What were the school board members' perceptions of the factors that contributed to the annexation? (3) What were the school board members' perceptions of the effect of the annexation on the community?

This intrinsic case study is a portrayal of the La Vista ISD and "reads like a novel, but it does so for the same reasons that novels read like novels—in order to make clear the complexities of the context and the ways these interact to form whatever it is that this case study portrays" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 214). No attempt was made to generalize (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 2002) beyond this particular case. Purposeful/purposive sampling allowed me to think critically about the parameters of the population studied and to choose my sample case carefully (Silverman, 2005).

Qualitative research seemed an appropriate choice for this type of study because of the ability to offer rich, thick descriptions of people and place (Patton, 2002) so essential for enabling transferability judgments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Eight current and former La Vista school board members were chosen by snow-ball sampling (Patton, 2002). The data were collected through information conversational interviews, conducted to allow me the flexibility to pursue whatever emerged during the interviews. Critics argue that information conversational interviews are too subjective because the researcher is the instrument of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Patton, 2002). Patton further wrote that the critics also contend that the researcher's personal contact with the research participants furthers even less objectivity. I believe, however, that it is precisely this personal contact that permitted the board members to share their thoughts, frustrations, and opinions of the district and the annexation.

The majority of the interviews were two or more hours in length. All interviews were audio taped and immediately transcribed after each interview. Field notes and observations were also recorded and a reflective audio journal kept. In addition, school district documents and records were studied and examined. They included news-paper articles, district financial statements, school board agendas, minutes of school board meetings, and other communications between the Texas Education Agency and the district. All transcriptions were coded and early interpretations were prepared after the initial interviews to further the dialog and the investigation during the second interview. Member checks were conducted after the first and second interviews.

The data analysis of the interviews, documents, records, transcriptions and audio tapes revealed three major themes. The first theme was power dynamics and included three sub-themes: (1) trusting those in power, (2) deferring to those in power, and (3) becoming those in power. The other two themes were denial of the obvious and unspoken paternalism—the Anglo *patron* system. In the next section, I will review the themes and the research and align them to the existing literature regarding rural education, rural communities, and superintendent and school board relations. In addition, I will frame my research around the three sensitizing concerns.

The Research and Current Literature

1. What Were the School Board Members' Perceptions About the School district prior to the annexation order?

Throughout the interviews, the two themes of power dynamics and the Anglo *patron* system were pervasive and often intertwined. Both of these themes emerged as I addressed the first sensitizing question with the school board members. Power dynamics, however, is addressed first, with unspoken paternalism—the Anglo *patron* system discussed later in the chapter.

It was apparent by most of the school board members' positive reflections that prior to the district's annexation they were supporters of the school district and held most of the superintendents they hired in high regard. They trusted the superintendents to do what was right for the children of their community. Yet as evidenced by the interview responses and by the documents that I examined, their trust was almost a

blind trust, because they rarely, if ever, questioned the individuals in charge and in power.

One La Vista ISD superintendent, for example, traveled extensively on a large travel budget that was never questioned. This same superintendent persuaded the school board members to take illegal action as it pertained to his retirement plans. Other superintendents used the La Vista ISD as an avenue to gain entrance to larger and more prestigious school districts or employment opportunities. Another superintendent did not have the skills and technical knowledge required of the superintendency. The school board members, however, supported this unprepared superintendent and went along with the instructional programs that were suggested, the teachers that were recommended for hire, and the budget that was prepared annually.

When the district, furthermore, was faced with turbulent times, the school board members deferred to the superintendents they had hired and trusted that matters were handled and in control. Still, student performance results began to plummet, the school facilities began to show serious signs of disrepair, and the district's financial picture began to look bleak. In addition to these challenges, several superintendents also chose not to live in the community and the La Vista school board acquiesced to their requests. Two superintendents, moreover, demanded to break their employment contracts and the school board members conceded to those demands. When La Vista ISD became a property-wealthy, Chapter 41 district, the school board members, again, deferred to the superintendents' experiences and expertise to lead them through the challenges faced by the Chapter 41 regulations. Unfortunately, it might have been

the explicit trust and deference to those in charge that caused the decline of the district.

Although the superintendents of the La Vista ISD seemed to be held in high esteem and wielded a lot of power, the school board members, too, seemed to enjoy the power their elected positions produced. Although most of the data indicated the school board members deferred to those in power, two of the newer board members during Ybarra's tenure made comments regarding the way they ran the district when Ybarra was named superintendent. It appears that as the first female superintendent, Ybarra may not have been viewed as legitimate as the male superintendents of La Vista ISD. Once she was hired, some board members that had previously deferred power to her predecessors suddenly began to interfere with the daily operations of the school district.

The literature is replete with school district politics and the relationship between the superintendent and the school board members (Alby, 1979; Arendt, 1972; Brunner, 1988; Cistone, 1975; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Mountford, 2004; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2002; Vidich & Bensman, 1969). Specifically, Mountford (2004) addrdessed two concepts of power, *power over* and *power with*. These concepts demonstrate that what motivated individuals to become school board members affected the way they wielded their newly acquired power. Mountford further contended that school board members (and I would include superintendents) who practice power in a dominating or oppressive manner can overtly and covertly disrupt a school district's democratic foundation.

The *power over* exerted by the superintendents and by the school board members may add to the appearance that the motivations of those in power led to the end of La Vista ISD. Furthermore, the following examples seem to support the way *power over* was wielded by those in charge. School board members admitted to interrupting teachers' classrooms. School board members disclosed storming into the principal's office demanding answers to complaints. School board members acknow-ledged that they had promised jobs to community and family members. Mountford (2004) defined this type of power as "the ability to control or influence others at lower levels of the organization and in educational circles" (p. 710), and for this reason it is often referred to as *power over*. Evident from the data is that the majority of the superin-tendents and school board members in La Vista ISD appeared to prescribe to this power over theory. *Power with* would suggest those in charge initiated and facilitated distributive and collaborative leadership. The data suggested otherwise.

On final example in this study of the theme of power dynamics has to do with the consolidation issue and how it was kept from the voters in the community and only discussed and controlled by either the superintendents or school board members of the district. Several of the school board members were adamantly against any type of consolidation, although in the end it cost them the entire district. Mountford's (2004) research supports that the motives for holding on to the La Vista ISD were often per-sonal in nature and caused those in power to take a singular role in decision making thus keeping those who held the power in power.

2. What Were the School Board Members' Perceptions of the Factors That Contributed to the Annexation?

In addition to the theme of power dynamics, the data revealed that the La Vista ISD school board members appeared to be in denial about the eventual closing of their school district. There were numerous district issues that seemed to be ignored or wished away. One factor, for example, that led to the annexation was that the facilities needed serious repairs and teachers and superintendents were getting harder and harder to hire. Furthermore, the letters from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) citing numerous violations became more frequent, as did the compliance visits from TEA personnel. Exacerbating the situation, there was a decline in student enrollment as well as a decline in student achievement. In addition, La Vista ISD's financial future was bleak, and the school financial records were in disarray. A very serious factor included the fact that the oil wells were not producing, and the tax base could not support the district at a level it needed to survive. The school board members, however, seemed to deny and ignore the seriousness of the hardships faced by the district and appeared to believe that if the school district were forced to consolidate, the community would die.

Based on some of the literature of rural communities, particularly, the literature regarding "sense of place" (Bauch, 2001, 2006; Gallagher, 1993; Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Theobald, 1997), one might have expected the La Vista ISD to overcome these challenges. There is something powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that helps them transcend the challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources (Budge, 2006). This sense of place appeared to be strong in La Vista. According to

the La Vista school board members, however, it did not help them overcome the challenges the district faced during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Budge (2006) further maintained that each rural community is unique and La Vista appeared to possess the strengths and the challenges matching many unique rural places. Budge described these strengths and challenges as: "(1) school and community interdependence, (2) oppression as lived experience, (3) low population density and geographic isolation, (4) a history of purpose regarding schooling, (5) an 'out migration' of the young, and (6) a salient attachment to place" (p. 3).

This sense of place was not enough to keep the La Vista ISD from being annexed. The issue of annexation is discussed by the work of Theobald and Curtiss (2000) who argued that closing down small rural communities condemns those places to hopelessness about their vitality, both present and future. They further argue that policymakers have sent the message that community is unimportant and that the destruction of American communities via school consolidations may yet come to be viewed as one of the colossal mistakes of the 20th century. This is not a new issue because the consolidation of rural schools in the United States has been a controversial topic for policymakers, school administrators, and rural communities since the 1800s (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005).

At issue, however, in La Vista ISD were concerns about student achievement, school size, efficiency, economics, and community identity; and consolidation was a way to solve these rural issues in the eyes of policy makers and education officials (Theobald & Curtiss, 2000). Today, faced with declining enrollments and financial cutbacks, many rural communities such as La Vista continue to deal with challenges

associated with possible school reorganizations and consolidations. Bard et al. (2005) believed the conversation surrounding school consolidation has, to some extent, become polarized. At one end are the state policymakers, and, to a lesser extent, school officials, who argue that the consolidation of small rural districts is fiscally prudent and in the best interest of the students. At the other end are community members who argue that the loss of the school means the loss of the community (Lyson, 2002).

This similar sentiment was voiced by the school board members during the interviews. On one side were the school board members in La Vista ISD who thwarted the initial consolidation attempts in what appeared to be efforts to keep their community, but they were unsuccessful at the end. On the other end was the Texas Education Agency, stating that the annexation was in the best interest of the students. Furthermore, on another end, were school officials and community members believing that the community would not survive without a school. Yet an important factor in the annexation was that the parents and students of the La Vista community were demanding transfers into the neighboring district unaware of TEA's annexation order and the school board members' desire to keep the school operational.

Even in Texas, school consolidation continues to be a hot topic as legislators study ways to improve public education. As early as the mid 1800s, consolidation of schools was thought to provide students a more thorough education by eliminating small schools in favor of large ones (Bard et al., 2005). Recently, the 2007 Texas legislative session saw a House bill submitted calling for counties with 300,000 or fewer residents that hold multiple school districts to consolidate and form a single

county school system (The Monitor, 2007). Texas districts, however, have been powerfully resistant to meaningful change when that change includes plans of merging the 1031 school districts ranging from 211,499 students in Houston to 10 students in Kerry County's Divide School District (Bogan, 2005). According to The Monitor, a local South Texas newspaper, there have only been 20 school district consolidations since the 1980s, and La Vista ISD is one of them.

Researchers (Hoyle et al., 2005; Lyson, 2002) further theorized, that as in La Vista ISD, the issue of local control continues to challenge rural education today. Opponents of consolidation assert that consolidation should be a decision made by the local school districts. Sher (1988) contended that there is no evidence suggesting a compelling reason for the state to intervene by encouraging, let alone mandating, such mergers. Nonetheless, TEA did intervene in the case of La Vista ISD.

Conversely, Drabenstott (2001) suggested that many rural observers blithely assume that the quality of life is a rural asset. He argued that it is not necessarily so as dwindling populations throughout much of the nation's heartland are putting enormous pressures on the rural tax bases, thus raising fresh doubts over rural education and a host of public services (p. 12). What it takes to boost the rural quality of life in communities such as La Vista is not known, but it certainly goes beyond rural electricity and mail delivery, two battles over rural quality of life in decades past (Drabenstott, 2001).

Not addressed in the literature is the quality of life of rural *colonias*, found along the U.S.-Mexico border, another factor that may have contributed to the annexation of La Vista ISD. La Vista is such a *colonia*. According to the Texas Secretary of State

(2007) Website, approximately 400,000 people live in over 2294 *colonias* located along the Texas-Mexico border. The majority of the residents of these unincorporated communities with little to no infrastructure, are Latino and of low income. These communities are often characterized by substandard housing and unpaved roads. Furthermore, there is often no access to electricity, water, or wastewater systems (McRobbie & Villegas, 2004).

With unpaved roads and no wastewater system, La Vista was such a *colonia*. The school district's location within this *colonia* caused additional infrastructure challenges. These challenges included a cesspool near the entrance of the school cafeteria and unpaved roads between the school building, its cafeteria, gym, and portables. The cesspool was one of the factors that the Commissioner of Education cited as cause for the annexation. I, too, was shocked that a cesspool existed, let alone an open cesspool in a school district, next to the cafeteria. Yet, the school board members refused to support my recommendation to build a septic tank system stating that the district could not afford the expense and, at the same time, hoping that a wastewater system would soon make its way to their community. To date it has not.

Although La Vista ISD was a poor district that could often not afford to maintain, repair, or upgrade their facilities, research showed (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997) that economically depressed communities may have a strong sense of community and desire to keep their school, even they often experience severe problems in their educational system. In fact, in economically depressed areas, such as La Vista, the diminished ability of many school districts to maintain and increase educational spending is a major concern (Khattri et al., 1997). One could look at the enrollment

numbers and the financial records of the La Vista ISD and immediately realize that the demise of the district was inevitable. In spite of that, the school board members continued denying the obvious and continued their quest to keep their school district operational.

Two of the school board members, Mrs. Quintana and Mrs. Miller, shared with me that if I had not resigned because of my need to relocate to another city due to an employment opportunity offered to my spouse, they would have given serious thought to litigating against the Commissioner of Education and the annexation order. Hiring another superintendent for a year or two, one who did not understand their community or the politics of the annexation, was a distasteful challenge they did not want to undertake, however. The comments from Mrs. Miller supported this sentiment when she said, "We didn't want to train another one for such a short time." Here again they actually considered searching for another superintendent, still in denial that the district would and should have closed.

All three themes in this research study overlapped and interconnected. The denial of the obvious theme intersected with the power dynamics theme, which in turn tied back to unspoken paternalism—the Anglo *patron* system theme, and the final theme addressed under this second sensitizing concern.

The history of White racist oppression of Mexican people in the United States has been amply documented (Barrera, 1979; De Leon, 1983; Foley et al., 1977; Montejano, 1987; Tijerina, 1979); however, one could argue that the Anglo patron continued to be in charge and in control in the La Vista community. A factor that may have contributed to the annexation is the fact that the school board members appeared

to seek out and relied on the opinions of the Anglos in the community. These Anglos included superintendents, landowners, and ranchers, many of whom are also the largest employers in the area. The jobs they provide include those of housekeepers, errand runners, oil well workers, ranch and farm hands, and *palomitas* or caregivers. Thus, it is possible that the community often feels beholden to them because of the employment opportunities they provide.

Campbell (2005) claimed that these paternalistic relationships are not easy to dismiss. He believed that ethnic relations often shifted in which the status of some Mexican farm workers were improved while some Anglos were learning Spanish and accepting Mexican ways. He did not deny the racial divisions that existed, but rather argued "the complexities of border interethnic interaction on the margins in which Mexicans and Anglos constructed and borrowed culturally from each other" (p. 25). On the other hand, according to Foley et al. (1977), the Mexicano adapted to his subordinate, inferior position, and the ordinary Anglo probably never questioned the morality or immorality of the suffering the economic and political system inflicted upon his workers. Mike Reynolds, one of the Anglo research participants, insisted that La Vista was quiet, peaceful and wonderful "back then," referring to Mike Rainey's tenure and when he served as a board member with predominantly Anglos on the board. The Anglos supported the school, they supported the community, and they joined many community activities, but it seems only when it was advantageous to them.

Additionally, Foley et al.'s (1997) interview with an old *quartero* describes the patron and worker relationship as follows:

No, I do not think the gringos were being good to us, but I believe they used us like work animals. For many of us the patron was our only hope. But we were never close, not truly *compañeros*. The gringos were only nice so we would work harder and stay with them until they no longer needed us. If we could have left, we would. If the gringos didn't need us, they would have sent us away. (p. 14)

It is the social inequality in such a paternalistic system that is often hidden. In La Vista, for example, the district flourished when the Anglo residents had children attending the school. Once the students were gone and the Anglo school board members defeated, the Anglo support of the school district also ceased, another factor that may have led to the annexation.

3. What Were the School Board Members' Perceptions of the Effect of the Annexation on the Community?

The long-term prosperity of places such as La Vista is closely linked to two key elements; the ability to promote the educational advancement of young people and the capacity to create local economic opportunities that successfully retain or attract talented, well-educated youth (Beaulieu & Israel, 2005). In spite of this and without a school in its midst, La Vista has not died but appears to continue as a quiet and peaceful *colonia*.

The only difference is that instead of walking through the community, the students of La Vista are now bussed to a school district labeled by the State's accountability system as recognized, the second highest label that can be awarded. Unlike La Vista ISD, this district has beautiful facilities, highly qualified and well-paid teachers and administrators, and many sound educational programs and curricula.

None of the school board members volunteered information about the economic impact of the annexation. Therefore, I pointedly asked about the effect of the annexation, and no one seemed to believe that the community had died, and no one felt that the annexation had created economic hardships. Mrs. Miller stated, "There is a good school just down the road where all kids are going. So, we haven't died." Mr. Estrada also stated, "I don't think the community is going to die. The only way it will is if there is no water." A more widespread belief seemed to be that the closing of the high school in 1994 affected the community more so than the closing of the district in 2005. Most of them, however, seem to have hopes of the school district reopening one day.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Without changes in State and federal policies, it is my contention that the dream of reopening La Vista ISD can never become a reality. Even more importantly, without changes in policy and practice, other small poor rural districts in South Texas may be faced with orders by the Texas Education Agency. Therefore, this section of the study offers implications for policy and practice in the areas of rural communities and rural education. This study adds to the research that rural *colonias* located along the U.S.-Mexico border have unique needs and reinforces the research studies that exist in regards to the importance of school boards'/superintendents' relationships and local politics.

Policy: No Child Left Behind

A crucial consideration for policymakers is to re-examine the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) that requires every classroom to be staffed with highly qualified teachers. The Texas Education Agency (2007) defined highly qualified teachers as teachers who are fully state-certified and hold a license to teach. In addition, both elementary and secondary teachers must have, at minimum, a bachelor's degree and have passed rigorous State tests. At the secondary level, teachers must also pass a rigorous test in each academic subject that they teach. Furthermore, under the NCLB law, all states were required to meet the highly qualified teachers legislation by 2005-2006.

Allowing rural districts flexibility as it relates to NCLB's definition of highly qualified teachers would help rural districts like La Vista ISD, have an easier time securing the teachers they need and alleviate the financial burdens that the highly qualified requirement places on rural school districts. Even though the NCLB law has recently provided some flexibility to rural school districts in meeting this mandate by providing additional time for teachers who are highly qualified in one subject, but teach multi subjects, to become highly certified in all subjects they teach—it is not enough to ease the burden it places on them.

While rural teachers and administrators do not oppose the intent of No Child Left Behind, and agree that they need qualified teachers, many suggest the lack of flexibility thwarts efforts to address the unique problems they face. (Brownell et al., 2005). Rural schools, like La Vista, are often hard to staff because of their geographic isolation. For example, once teachers in La Vista ISD were hired, they were often

asked to teach multiple subjects and grades, therefore making it more difficult to keep them, but more importantly, violating the highly qualified teachers legislation.

Historically, rural districts also employ higher numbers of emergency and provisionally certified teachers. Thirty-five and eight-tenths percent of rural teachers are uncertified compared to 11% nationally (Brownell et al., 2005). NCLB's strategies for easing teacher shortages are also unrealistic. Two strategies, extension of compliance time and effortless entry to the classroom for individuals with degrees who are willing to teach, are unrealistic for rural schools. First, La Vista ISD was unable to identify and secure teachers, therefore an extension for being highly qualified is moot if teachers are not available. The second strategy assumed that there were ample adults with degrees within and around La Vista willing to pursue an alternative certification route in order to teach. If rural school districts were to have different standards in implementing the NCLB's highly qualified requirements, districts like La Vista ISD would have an easier time securing the teachers they need. Furthermore, different standards may help alleviate financial burdens that the highly qualified requirements place on rural school districts.

A final consideration for policy makers is to review the unintended consequences of an aggressive equalized funding policy which attempts to equalize property wealth in Texas, but leaves very small districts, like La Vista ISD, without sufficient funds to operate

Practice: Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

If flexibility were afforded to rural school districts like La Vista ISD in meeting the highly qualified requirement, colleges and universities need to consider supporting rural schools by ensuring that the students graduating from their institutions are equipped with the skills necessary to promote student achievement in rural areas. Furthermore, colleges and universities could provide rural teachers with the content knowledge to effectively teach several subjects. They could further ensure that teachers graduating from their programs are exposed to the many success stories about educating poor children and children of color (Delpit, 1995). In my own experience as the superintendent of La Vista ISD, it was difficult to find certified teachers, let alone, teachers with a desire to work in an impoverished rural Latino *colonia*.

Once teachers are hired in rural school districts, however, they need to be supported and provided with ongoing quality professional development that is aligned with research-based strategies and school improvement goals. This, too, is a challenge due to the geographic isolation of many rural districts and the limited professional staff available to provide professional development. Although in Texas the education service centers play an important role in providing technical assistance, support, and training to rural school districts, additional funding needs to be allocated to these centers to continue to support their work in rural areas.

Practice: Administrator (Principal and Superintendent) Preparation Programs

Not only do colleges, universities, and alternative certification programs have a responsibility to teach the fundamentals of leadership, governance, politics, policies and social justice in administrator preparation programs, but they also have a responsibility to teach the importance of the relationship between the schools and the community. Successful rural leaders must understand the importance of place (Budge, 2006). Budge insisted that there is something powerful about the sense of place in rural communities. She further contended that scientists from various disciplines have confirmed that our behavior, emotions, dispositions, and thoughts are shaped not just by our genes, history, and relationships, but also by our surroundings.

As a superintendent of a poor rural community, I had no prior experiences in rural schools, but, fortunately, I had successful experiences teaching Latino and African American students in large urban areas. I had also been a high school principal of a very large urban high school that was comprised of 98% Latino and African American students, and that was labeled as recognized by the state's accountability system. Yet, a formidable task lay before me since this small rural school was labeled unacceptable by the same accountability system. It was, however, the sense of place (Theobald, 2000) that was foreign to my thinking. Physically I was an outsider in La Vista. This was magnified even more so because of my lack of understanding of a sense of commun-ity, which I now realize prompted my support of the annexation of the school district. Budge (2006) argued:

> A critical leadership of place expands the notion of leadership for social justice and equity beyond the current emphasis on closing the achievement gap— measured as higher test scores—to one that demonstrates an understanding of the

interdependence between people and the places in which they live. Leaders with a critical leadership of place support community as a context for learning, understand that schools and their local communities are inextricably linked, and that the ability of each to thrive is dependent upon the other. (p. 8)

Scholars, however, have argued that the dominant culture does not value rurality (Herzog & Pittman, 2003). They have further argued that education reform initiatives that concentrated on the promotion of the national and global economy have resulted in an overemphasis on workforce preparation, an anti-intellectualism of the school curriculum, an out-migration of bright youth from rural communities, and a disregard for the importance of attending local places (Hass & Nachtigal, 1998; Howley, 1997).

Practice: Professional Development for School Board Members

If, indeed, a strong, healthy and professional relationship between the school board members and the superintendent is vital for a quality educational system to exist, providing quality professional development to interested school board members and citizens with the "right" motivation for serving is necessary (Boyd, 1975). In Texas, one of the few professional development venues that exist for school board members are the annual state conferences sponsored by the Texas Association of School Boards and the updates of the legislative code training sponsored by the education service centers. Although this is valuable training, there needs to be more training available in order that more school board members can understand the roles and functions between themselves and superintendents, as well as the power that underlies this division (Boyd, 1975).

Policy and Practice: More Dollars for Technology

In order to support rural communities, more money for technology needs to be allocated. Rural communities need access to high-speed delivery systems needed to make on-line technologies work. Many rural communities and school districts do not have the budgets to arrange for the infrastructure, or to purchase, maintain, and up grade their technology systems.

Fortunately, in La Vista ISD, the State's local education service center absorbed the cost of the server and the wiring of the school district for their on-line technology needs. Then again, the money to buy the needed equipment to support the infrastructure took several years to accrue. The education service center also repaired and maintained, free of charge, all the technology equipment in the district. It is not common for them to provide such extensive assistance at no cost to a district in the region. With the challenges La Vista ISD faced, however, the Texas Education Agency and the education service center wanted to provide the needed technology tools to the students of the district until the annexation was complete.

It is clear that more resources are needed for technology connections in rural areas. These dollars will allow access to distance learning, the Internet, interactive computer-based classes, video conferencing, and the possibility of virtual schools and opportunities for professional development for both teachers and administrators.

Future Research

A lack of detailed knowledge about rural education and rural schools, as my own initial lack of knowledge showed, makes it easy for policymakers and program developers to assume that what works for urban schools will work equally well in rural areas. For example, most of the available research on small schools looks at enrollments between 400 and 600; little is known about the approximately 1000 rural schools that enroll fewer than 150 students (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). In addition, there are significant differences between rural schools in various regions of the country as evidenced by La Vista ISD.

La Vista ISD was a small rural Latino school district located along the U.S.-Mexico border. Yet, the majority of rural research addresses the needs of America's heartland (Archer, 2005; Davidson, 1996) or the needs of rural schools in Appalachia (Kannapal & DeYoung, 1999). It is important to unearth the differences among rural regions and the impact of these differences on student achievement.

Consequently, another study might focus on successful rural school districts that are predominantly Latino. Within my current position, I work with several rural Latino school districts that are thriving, both financially and academically. Similarly, another area of research might include a similar project as this, but with more focused, systematic case studies of poor versus wealthy rural school districts that are successful along the U.S.-Mexico border to assess similarities and differences. It is also important to uncover the impact of rural student performance as it relates to life in *colonias*. Furthermore, qualitative case studies would highlight issues not reflected

in national quantitative data such as characteristics of effective rural, poor, *colonias*, or characteristics of effective, rural, poor, Latino schools.

It would be relevant to review and research whether local, state, and national initiatives support rural education. To date, my research, as it relates to my specific case study, has uncovered very little support, but support, both financially and in policy and programs, and money does matter, especially to poor rural Latino school districts.

Conclusion

The research does show there are tremendous challenges facing rural schools today. They are confronted with declining student enrollments, challenges of geographic remoteness, insufficient financial resources, teacher and administrator shortages, and an inability to offer an extensive curriculum.

In addition, rural schools are particularly constrained by the demands of the NCLB legislation. Each rural school is unique and there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to rural education, although consolidation proponents argue otherwise. The very survival of rural schools is in doubt and school consolidation will likely remain a threat to many of these rural communities in the coming years (Howley & Howley, 1995).

NOTES

[1]Andres Rosas, the superintendent that followed Superintendent Rainey, was hired by La Vista ISD on two separate occasions. The first time he was hired as the superintendent, he followed Rainey, however he resigned after two years because he accepted another superintendent's position. Several years later, La Vista ISD initiated another superintendent's search. Rosas applied and was offered the position once more. His second tenure followed that of Superintendent Moyer.

[2]The only recommendation that the La Vista school board did not support during my tenure as the superintendent was the recommendation that we replace the cesspool outside of the cafeteria with a septic tank system. The lack of support for this recommendation is important as it relates to Chapter II and the dismal conditions that district found itself in the last two to five years of its existence. Furthermore, this cesspool was also cited in one of the documents from the Texas Education Agency as a reason for the annexation order by the Commissioner of Education.

[3]De León (1983) defined Anglo as "any white, English-speaking, non-Mexican American" (p. xiii).

[4]De León (1983) defined Tejano as a Mexican resident of Texas, whether born in Mexico or the United States (or Republic of Texas) (p. xiii).

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*A pseudonym is used to protect the name of the district used in the research study.

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