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THE LAST THING WE HAVE LEFT: A SINGLE-CASE STUDY OF A SMALL, RURAL, MILL-TOWN SCHOOL CLOSING

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THE LAST THING WE HAVE LEFT: A SINGLE-CASE STUDY OF A SMALL, RURAL, MILL-TOWN SCHOOL CLOSING

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Curriculum and Instruction

by
Amy Talitha Hallenbeck
August 2012

Accepted by:
Dr. Suzanne Rosenblith, Committee Chair
Dr. Mindy Spearman
Dr. David Fleming
Dr. Mike Coggeshall
This qualitative, single-case study explored the closing of a small, rural, historic, mill-town school in the southeastern United States and why people were upset with the closing of the school. Through the responses of 12 purposefully selected participants, the study focused on attitudes, perceptions, and values of students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents as they relate to functions of school and schooling, culture of school and schooling, the school itself, and relationships between school, community, and individual. Findings indicate that participants fought the closing of their community school not because they perceived the nearby receiving schools as unable to provide for the formal academic needs of students but because they valued in their own mill-town school the functions of school and schooling and how they were offered, the culture of school and schooling and how it was provided, and strong, positive relationships between school, community, and individual that they did not perceive as part of or possible in the receiving schools. In addition, the closely intertwined history of the mill village and mill school, as well as the loss of the mills, contributed to their perceptions of the school as a symbol of community, as a vehicle through which memories and traditions were passed to younger generations, and as the last remaining entity through which community cohesiveness and collective identity were retained. The study addressed psychosocial aspects of school closings and consolidations that are missing in school closing and consolidation research, provided additional research regarding the closings of elementary schools, and contributed to education research about salient features and symbolic aspects of public education.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family:

To my husband, Doug Hallenbeck, who has motivated and supported me all the way through the doctoral process and dissertation, thank you for listening, allowing me to find my way, and understanding how important this journey has been for me.

To my three children—Sydney, Ainsley, and McKinley—who have really never known a time when I was not in school, thank you for your hugs, for believing that I could do it, and for trying to understand why I was always working on something for school.

To my parents, Karen Redwine and Dennis Rice, who impressed upon me from a very early age just how important education is, thank you for bringing me up to value education and to look at the world with inquisitive eyes.

To my siblings—Nathan, Anna, Ben, and Mark—who have not always understood exactly what I have been working on all this time but have supported me anyway, thank you.
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American societal and educational systems are not the same in the twenty-first century as they were in the 1800s when Horace Mann proposed a more organized system of public education in order to improve American schools. Nor are they the same as when immigration, industrialization, and factory proliferation caused rapid urbanization of United States cities, pushed schools to engage in Americanization of students, and nearly forced schools to model themselves after the streamlined operations and efficiency of mass production. Throughout the past 150 years, changes in American society and education have developed concomitantly and with the general premise and promise that changes would result in something better—better lives, better living, better business, better education. Framing these changes for better was and is the unspoken certainty that if we continually improve and become better, one day the changes will result in “the best” education that can be offered. According to Tyack (1974), the quest to find and develop “the one best system” for educating the youth of the United States has not ended. And, especially for rural areas, school closings, school and district consolidation, school centralization, and district reorganization have been a continual part of educational change and betterment aimed at actualizing the best system of public education.

Often troubled by issues quite similar to those of large urban schools (Bryant, 2007; Theobald, 2005) and beset with difficulties peculiar to both size and location (DeYoung, 1993), small rural schools are also often ignored (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Bryant 2007). Yet, small rural schools may have important contributions to make toward
our attempts to understand salient features and symbolic aspects of public education. The presence of schools and schooling in the lives of Americans is indisputable, and of heavy emphasis in educational research and literature is the question of what roles school and schooling play in the overall composition of United States citizenry and in the individual lives of its constituents. In addition, an enormous amount of research, literature, and media attention in the past few years addresses high-stakes testing related to No Child Left Behind (e.g., Au, 2007; Baker & Johnston, 2010; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Jacob, 2005; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2011), the perceived failures of public schools to adequately educate their students (e.g., Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Cohen, 2010; Dorn, 1996; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Ravitch, 2001; Rothstein, 1993; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), achievement gaps between the performance of minority and marginalized students and the performance of majority and middle class students on standardized tests and other academic achievement measures (e.g., Anyon, 2005; Biddle, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lee, 2002; Rothstein, 2004; Sandy & Duncan, 2010), and the most recent governmental incentive to improve education—President Barack Obama’s “Race to the Top” (e.g., Kolbe & Rice, 2012; Levine & Levine, 2012; Linn, 2010; McGuinn, 2012; Nicholson-Crotty & Staley, 2012). However, the particulars of small rural schools and communities, what happens when small rural schools close, why people are upset when small rural schools close, and the impact of such closings on constituents’ attitudes, perceptions, and values have not garnered the same levels of attention.
In school closings large schools often subsume smaller schools, and small-school students are often bussed far from their community or residence, resulting in displeasure on the part of students and parents, a sense of displacement among students forced to attend a school neither they nor their parents chose, and discomfort in a school that may be markedly different from their original school (“Shrinking Pains: Rural Schools,” 2008; Silverman, 2005; Slavin, 2005; Spence, 2000). Students must adjust to a new school culture, new teachers and curriculum, new expectations, and new students and student groups (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Yet, the problematic issues surrounding these small school to large school transitions are well documented (e.g., Cotton, 1996; Egelson, 1993; Howley, Howley, & Shamble, 2001; Leisey, Murphy, & Temple, 1990), even if they are not highly publicized. Research also documents the effects of closure and consolidation on the communities of the shuttered schools (e.g., Bryant, 2007; Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, & Witten, 2009; Lyson, 2002).

Contemporary research, Peshkin’s The Imperfect Union (1982) withstanding, fails to examine, however, what it is that rankles in the psyche of students, parents, and community members beyond the issues of unwanted change and troubles adjusting to the new school. Perhaps the question is not so much why students and parents do not want to go to a new school but why students and parents do not want to leave the old school. Is the school so entwined with the community, community identity, and perceptions of school and schooling that to close it will cause irrevocable damage and destruction? In what ways do students, parents, and community stakeholders respond once the school, the symbolic core of the community, is gone, and why do they respond in these ways?
How are they, their identities, and their perceptions changed? How do students, parents, and community stakeholders negotiate the changes in relationship between individuals, school, and community?

In June 2009 a small, rural, historic, mill-town school in the southeastern United States closed its doors, and in the following school year its students were transferred to one of three small rural schools: West Chase Elementary, which was one and one-half miles away from the original school site; Clark Green Elementary, which was four and one-half miles from the original school site; or Creek Elementary, which was one mile from the original school site. Although the school, Chase Elementary, had been threatened with closure on two previous occasions, and each time public outcry had helped to keep it open, this time public fight was not enough. Community response to the proposed closing consisted of a bevy of protests: community members wrote letters to the school district administration and board of education; local television, newspaper, and radio media featured the school and its predicament in several articles and broadcasts; community members and parents of students attended school board meetings to express their dismay and distress; students, parents, and community members shed tears at a Parent Teacher Organization meeting held two weeks prior to the final decision of the school board; and parents and community members picketed the district office. Citing recent budget woes, a higher per pupil expenditure for Chase Elementary School—due to the costs of providing a full staff, building upkeep and maintenance, and operating a separate building for less than 200 students—when compared to other elementary schools in the district, and the need to cut expenses, the school district opted to close the school.
Members of the mill town in which the school was located and members of the school community viewed the closing as a traumatic event, but why?

In a society that figuratively has the world at its electronic fingertips, one may be hard-pressed to imagine that an investigation of a small, rural, mill-town school closing would have much to offer to our understanding of the power and importance of education in the United States. In fact, simply by nature of ease-of-access, it might be far easier to examine research, literature, and media accounts of federal and state educational policy, financial incentives, high-stakes testing and accountability, school reform, urban education, and myriad other “problems” with American education. But amidst all of the educational hype and woes of past years, there is something more than quantifiable input and output to the idea of an education system that provides its constituents with the means and resources to be successful in American society: there are people—people whose attitudes, perceptions, and values should be considered not only because of their value as human beings and citizens in American society but also because our collective attitudes, perceptions, and values influence our conceptions of school and schooling and thus the ways in which we structure our debates over how to provide the best education for the next generations of American citizenry.

The purpose of this study was to explore the closing of a small, rural, mill-town school—closely entwined with its small, rural, mill community—and why people were upset about the closing. Through responses to the closing, I examine student and parent, school district employee and affiliate, and community constituent attitudes, perceptions, and values as they relate to (1) the functions of school and schooling, (2) the culture of
schools and schooling, (3) the school itself, and (4) the relationships between individuals, school, and community. This study is intended to address a gap in current research of school closings and consolidations—an omission of information pertaining to the psychosocial dimensions of the relationship between small rural school constituents and their community schools; to explore why small rural school stakeholders are upset with the closing of a small rural community school; to provide additional research concerning the closings of elementary schools; and to contribute to education research focused on salient features and symbolic aspects of public education.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Overview of School Closings and Consolidations

School closings and consolidations are not new phenomena within the realm of education and public school in the United States. In fact, such events have a history nearly as lengthy as that of public education. The first big push for school consolidation came in the mid-1800s with the advent of industrialization and an influx of immigrants. Horace Mann, then the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, and several other consolidation supporters from New England states pointed to lack of support for schools and unqualified teachers and attributed the many problems associated with schools to a “haphazard, inefficient, and inappropriate” method of school organization (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977, p. 13). In city schools, properly training students for industrial jobs and turning immigrant students into “Americans,” quickly became critical issues, but in rural schools there was little industry or immigration to confound matters. Nevertheless, Mann and his supporters urged education reform through the creation of school districts supervised by the state, regardless of the particular circumstances of the state and its schools as rural or urban, industry-based or agriculture-based (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977).

Although educators were busily advocating for centralized control of schools, their world views were heavily influenced by the factory system and its emphases on task, time, authority, and production. By the late 1880s educators across the nation were
pushing for consolidation and centralization, but convincing small-town citizens to relinquish local control of schools proved difficult. Nevertheless, by the 1890s, changes in American society and economy, attributable in part to growth in mass journalism and railroad transportation, brought changes in social attitudes and a new awareness of the world in which Americans were living (Henderson & Gomez, 1975; Kliebard, 2004). Throughout the United States, progress became synonymous with bigger and better, city schools became “the accepted model of educational excellence,” and small rural schools were viewed as neither progressive nor excellent (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977, p. 20; see also DeYoung, 1993).

According to Henderson and Gomez (1975) and Zimmerman (2009), from the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, many rural schools were dilapidated one-room structures with poor lighting, insufficient heating, and untrained teachers. All students were in the one room, books and resources were scarce, attendance was erratic and often reflective of the farming and agricultural needs of families and communities, and school sessions were short, seasonal, and inconsistent. Some schools were overcrowded while others lacked pupils, and disparities in financial support from school to school led to significant differences in the education students received. Teaching and learning generally consisted of rote memorization and recitation. Student discipline was a major problem for male and female teachers, and misbehavior was often met with corporal punishment, degradation, and humiliation. Zimmerman (2009) provides an early 1900s example of such conditions and circumstances for a teacher who, unlike most, actually had studied at a teacher-training school:
Teaching eight subjects to fifty-seven pupils, Hamby [the teacher] had to conduct twenty-seven different recitations per day. “And with a class of 15 in the fourth reader and 15 minutes for recitation,” Hamby recalled, “how was I to teach Tommy to follow his historical bent in reading, lead Jimmy to love Robert Louis Stevenson, and cultivate Mary in literature, and give Bob the desired start in political research?” (p. 32-33)

Not only did the small rural school have problems, but the small rural school was a problem.

By the end of the nineteenth century education was compulsory in most states, and, in idea if not in reality, education was a state function and responsibility. Although many individual schools were still operated by their local communities—communities that had no real desire to relinquish local control—ultimately the state had the responsibility of providing public education. A new set of educational leaders, most of whom “were professionals, immersed in educational affairs throughout their careers and deeply concerned about the inner workings of schools and the intricacies of school management” (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977, p. 22), emerged in the early 1900s, and once again consolidation and centralization became critical to educational reform. Concerns of the education leaders were further supported by the Country Life Movement, a government group whose goal was to improve rural life. To improve the rural schooling situation, Country Life advocates urged consolidation (Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Reynolds, 1999). Because most policymakers and education leaders were located in urban areas, decisions about what needed to change and how to change it were based on urban models of school and schooling. As a result, rural schools were still perceived as being behind,
and fixing the ever-problematic rural schools was the focus of nearly all education reform (Reynolds, 1999).

A new twist undergirded education reform, however; schools needed to become more efficient and more economical—much like the industries that permeated cities (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977). Once consolidated, the new schools, educators claimed, “would result in better supervision, age-graded schools, specialized teachers, broader curricula, increased professionalism, and expanded resources” (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977, p. 25). At the same time, a flood of immigrants were entering the United States, and a final ploy to convince rural constituents to band together and turn over local school control relied upon rural citizens’ fear of immigrants. Through what Rosenfeld and Sher (1977) call “an absolutely ingenious political strategy” (p. 26), reformers argued that lest rural areas want recent immigrants to take control of their schools, they needed to consolidate and centralize power. Thus, arguments for progress combined with fear of losing control to immigrants succeeded in spurring rural school consolidation and centralization onward (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977).

Shortly thereafter, when legislators passed a variety of laws promoting consolidation and when states addressed public transportation and state aid, consolidation began in earnest—though not without reservations. In rural areas, where students were more likely to need transportation to and from a centralized school, parents worried about children’s safety, immoral influences and behaviors along the way, and longer periods of time away from home—time that could be spent doing chores (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977). In these same rural areas, poverty and the sheer and utter lack of finances made building
new, consolidated schools difficult, although state aid in the form of financial incentives both allowed and encouraged consolidation and centralization.

Following World War I, rural parents and citizens who had once clung to traditional rural values such as self-sufficiency, the family as the central focus and most important entity for production, and power and control over one’s own life, became “more urban” (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977, p. 35; see also Henderson & Gomez, 1975), and a receptiveness to new ways emerged. Seizing this opportunity, educational administrators pushed for additional education standardization across the nation; from teacher training to state regulations, every facet of education reflected a contribution to developing an ideal system that would serve urban and rural schools. Once again, consolidation was urged upon rural areas of the country. The Great Depression both impeded consolidation (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977) and propelled it forward (Jolly & Deloney, 1993). As it was financially impossible to fund construction of new schools, many schools and districts could not have consolidated even if they had wanted to. Somewhat ironically, however, some rural communities that had fought to keep control of their local schools—which also meant funding them—were now forced to consolidate and centralize control due to the dire economic circumstances (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977). Also ironically, a few years later, as World War II loomed, Americans railed against anything that remotely resembled fascism—including centralization of schools, and once again the drive for consolidation and centralization was foiled.

Although consolidation and centralization slowed with the growth of anti-fascist sentiment of United States citizens, they were far from gone. Participants in the first
White House Conference on Rural Education, held in 1944 near the end of World War II, purportedly met to examine the connection between rural life and rural education, but “the recurring theme of the conference was centralization; that is, the argument that adaptation to a changing, increasingly urban world required large schools and districts providing greater specialization, professional control, and expert management” (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977, p. 37-38). While standards for teacher certification, standardized achievement testing, and standardized curriculum packages, among other reforms, now permeated American education, there was still too much variation between rural and urban schools; uniformity with and conformity to the educational measures and methods of urban schools were the end desires. Nevertheless, administrators and policymakers realized that lack of proximity and low population in many areas made further school consolidation nearly impossible (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977).

Not to be thwarted, district consolidation—rather than school consolidation—became the reform of the day, for if rural districts became larger, like their urban counterparts, then control would have to be entrusted to “a more remote, more professionalized bureaucracy which could (and would) consolidate schools as it became technically possible to do so” (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977, p. 39). However, to rural constituents the plan could be presented as a way that allowed them to have the local control they wanted to maintain while still providing their children with a modern education: by becoming part of a larger district, they would be able to partake of modern education without losing their local school (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977).
Throughout the 1950s and 1960s heavy consolidation continued. From 1950, when 83,718 school districts existed in the United States, to 1960, the number fell to 40,500 (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977). By reorganizing districts and transferring control away from local communities, consolidating schools became easier. This rapid consolidation was influenced by several factors. When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957, both policymakers and educators urged educational reform that emphasized math, science, and student preparation for college. Small schools, still viewed as inadequate and limited in their ability to provide a rigorous education, were led to believe that the only way they could properly prepare their students, now deemed “natural resources,” was through consolidation (Jolly & Deloney, 1993).

Another strong influence was James Bryant Conant’s 1959 release of The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens. The book provided 21 recommendations for improving schools; the one that garnered the most attention was Conant’s recommendation that small high schools of fewer than 400 to 500 students be eliminated. Conant’s position was that only larger schools could offer advanced courses such as math, science, and foreign languages, and therefore only larger high schools could effectively prepare students (Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Sher & Tompkins, 1977). This recommendation, combined with the American fear of “falling behind,” resulted in massive consolidation and the beginnings of the comprehensive high school. By 1970 the number of school districts in the United States had shrunk to 17,995 (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977).
During the rapid consolidation of the 1950s and 1960s, problems related to consolidation itself became apparent (Jolly & Deloney, 1993). Consolidation greatly increased teacher-student ratios, splintered community cohesion, resulted in a loss of community spirit within the schools, and financially drained geographically large districts faced with transporting students long distances (Jolly & Deloney, 1993). Rosenfeld and Sher (1977) write that as of the 1960s consolidation was no longer viewed as a reform but as an accepted educational standard. Yet, consolidation stopped nearly altogether during the 1970s, in part due to increased costs of transportation but also because of the aforementioned difficulties associated with consolidation. In the latter third of the twentieth century, declining school enrollment and financial troubles forced many districts to consider closing down schools (Dean, 1981).

Much of the research literature surrounding school closings during the 1980s and 1990s focuses on declining enrollment, factors to consider when faced with the possibility of school closure, how to close a school, and what to do with the school building once a school is closed (e.g., Benton, 1992; Cummins, Chance, & Steinhoff, 1997; Dean, 1981; Self, 2001; Sell, Leistritz, & Thompson, 1996; Weatherley, Narver, & Elmore, 1983). Additional school closing literature includes research about the effects of school closings in terms of student performance and community decline (e.g., DeYoung, 1992; Edington & Koehler, 1987; Montana Rural Education Center, 1994). However, a major distinction should be made concerning the targets of consolidation: the school closings of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s were across all types of schools and districts—urban, suburban, and rural. Closings and consolidations were neither restricted
to small rural schools nor related to the perceived inadequacies that for over 100 years had served as the catalyst for small rural school reform through consolidation.

Consolidating schools and districts was neither simple nor speedy, and the reasons given for consolidating schools are as numerous as the attempts made at widespread consolidation. Rural school and district consolidation as educational policy was successful, Sher and Tompkins (1977) argue, because it represented a reform that would supposedly solve the problems associated with rural education—inadequate funding, low achievement, poor staffing, and substandard course quality and offerings. If rural schools consolidated, the reasoning went, it would save money, attract more highly qualified teachers and administrators, and be able to provide more curricular offerings (Sher and Tompkins, 1977). Sher and Tompkins (1977) write that rural school and district consolidation has been “the most successfully implemented educational policy of the past fifty years” (p. 43), yet debates for and against consolidation continue into the twenty-first century.

**Contemporary Debates over School Closings**

For most schools and school districts the reasons for closings and consolidations from the 1980s to the present fall into four broad categories: financial difficulties, academic deficiencies, declining enrollment, and the need to meet state or national standards. Often, these issues are inter-related and associated with mandated reforms. For example, schools receive funding based on average daily attendance, but if the school enrollment drops, then the school receives less money. Less money leads to problems
providing appropriate courses and extracurricular activities, keeping up with building maintenance and repairs, and paying for other nonessential areas such as professional development (Dillon, 2008; Sack-Min, 2008). Although schools of all sizes and locations are subject to the possibility of closure and consolidation, Jackson and Gaudet (2010) attribute the most recent push for closure and consolidation to the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and specifically address the effects on small rural schools:

The requirements of NCLB, without accompanying funds to implement federal mandates, result in a nationwide push for larger schools especially in the rural areas of our country. The drive toward school consolidation in rural areas is directly related to the lack of resources required to sustain smaller school districts. . . . NCLB requirements, combined with funding inequities and other economic issues, have placed unnecessary pressure on public schools and are forcing many districts to eliminate educational programs from their curriculum. In many areas of our country, the only recourse for school districts is to consolidate or close district doors. (p. 62)

Nevertheless, contemporary debates about school and district closings and consolidations began prior to the 2002 reauthorization of the 1994 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and they establish a pattern of school and district troubles.

Several studies provide insight to the reasons for closings and consolidations during the 1980s. During their discussion of opposition to district consolidation in Illinois, Ward and Rink (1980) highlight reasons such as lower enrollments, population migration, increased performance standards, and increased operating costs. Dean (1981) points to decreasing enrollment and declining funds. Reduced enrollments, rising costs, unused building space, increased constraints on the financial base, “unmet public
expectations for schools,” and “divisive effects of a massive desegregation program” all contributed to school closings and consolidations in Seattle (Weatherley et al., 1983, p. 10). All of the above reasons indicate significant difficulties in sustaining public schools during the 1980s.

Research on school and district closings during the 1990s echoes the aforementioned struggles and expands upon these by including information pertaining to schools and districts that expect positive outcomes as a result of closings and consolidations. In 1990, Leisey, Murphy, and Temple examined a forced high school consolidation in Georgia. The district had three high schools, and in order to keep them operating, had tapped out the local millage rate. A state requirement to submit a five-year plan forced the school board to examine their options, including the possibility of consolidation. In addition to dire financial circumstances, the group found that two of the three high schools were below the state’s recommended base size and that the district had an extremely high dropout rate. Realizing that they could not increase their revenue and that attempting to operate in deficit would lead to a state takeover, the school board voted to consolidate schools. Although residents of the two communities whose schools would be lost fought vehemently to keep their community schools, they were unsuccessful.

The financial benefits of consolidation for this Georgia district were crucial factors in the final decision of the board. If the district consolidated the high schools and restructured their middle school program to meet the state recommendations, the district would receive an additional 13% of state funds provided for the middle school program. In addition, the state provided monetary incentives for consolidating by promising to
fund 90% of construction costs for consolidation. With the consolidation of the high schools, restructuring of the middle school program, and the financial incentives, the district hoped to decrease the dropout rate by expanding its vocational program, to provide improved facilities, and to strengthen its extracurricular programs, especially athletics (Leisey et al., 1990).

Additional studies repeat similar situations. Detailing the consolidation of six small-town schools in Arkansas, Benton (1992) notes that in their pre-consolidation condition, none of the schools was able to meet state requirements for certain courses, they all believed they were unable to adequately provide for students’ educational needs, and they were all under severe financial constraints. After the consolidation, standardized test scores improved, the dropout rate decreased, and students had opportunities to engage in more extracurricular activities (Benton, 1992). In a 1996 study of school closures and school consolidation affecting eight communities, Sell, Leistritz, and Thompson (1996) assert that declining enrollments, the need to maintain accreditation, the mandate to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and declining federal financial support were all instrumental in the decisions to close several North Dakota schools and to consolidate.

Post and Stambach (1999) examined the closing of a Pennsylvania community high school and its consolidation with another in-district high school. Reasons given by the school board for deciding to consolidate included declining enrollment, a shrinking tax base, out-migration, financial savings through economies of scale, and the possibility of improved technology once the consolidation was complete. The board members
believed that “a larger school [would] be able to provide more students with the opportunity to study more and more specialized subjects, including courses. . . in computer technologies and communications” (Post & Stambach, 1999, p. 110). Thus, the problems experienced by many schools and districts were indicators of significant and sustained difficulties across many states, and the perceived benefits of consolidation often outweighed arguments against closings and consolidations.

Research highlighting the reasons for school closings and consolidations during the first decade of the 21st century does not vary widely from that completed in the previous two decades: a substantial portion reiterates lack of financial support and resources (e.g., “Shrinking Pains,” 2008), the need to provide more advanced and more specialized courses and to broaden the curriculum (e.g., Self, 2001), and inability to meet new mandates and requirements (e.g., Purcell & Shackelford, 2005). However, it is important to note that from the 1980s to the present, debates over the benefits and detriments of school and district consolidations as they relate to finances, student achievement, and community impact have become much more prevalent in education research and literature and remain as primary foci in school and district consolidation research. Researchers called (and continue to call) into question purported financial savings through economies of scale and better management (e.g., Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Sher & Tompkins, 1977); Cotton’s (1996) extensive review of research pertaining to relationships between school and district size and academic achievement reveals strong evidence of the impact of small schools; and literature examining school or
district closings and consolidations and their impact on communities demonstrates far more than economic impact (e.g., Lyson, 2002).

The problems faced by small rural schools and small rural school students of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are serious. Rural school districts continue to suffer from financial problems, population decline, staff problems, and student problems (Jolly & Deloney, 1993). Jolly and Deloney (1993) write, “The combination of increased pressure brought on by the education reform movement and the economic difficulties of the 1980’s [sic] has fueled a renewed interest in rural school district reorganization” (p. 7). District consolidation and reorganization often lead to school closings or school mergers. Economic struggles and increasing calls for education improvement through a series of reform efforts have continued to plague public schools, and although school and district consolidation may not be the only means by which to address the ongoing difficulties of rural schools (cf. Beckner, 1983; Howley & Eckman, 1997), they do not appear to be the least viable option. Theobald (2005) writes, “While naïve views related to consolidation still exist, and the practice continues to be one of the first ‘cost-cutting measures’ examined when states face serious fiscal difficulties, we have at last reached the point where consolidation advocates are forced to submit evidence for claims of greater efficiency and improved instruction” (p. 121).

Despite research that disputes claims of improved efficiency and better instruction, there is, as Slavin (2005) notes, irony in the fact that as some states openly encourage or even force rural school consolidation, many states are openly and vigorously endorsing school-within-school models, charter schools, or similar measures
intended to improve education and student achievement in super-sized urban schools. For examples, Medina (2007) reports that New York City schools are undergoing massive restructuring that includes closing over a dozen underperforming schools and constructing dozens of small schools on the same campuses; Maxwell (2007) highlights controversial school closings in Washington, D.C. as part of an education overhaul intended “to redirect money from under-enrolled schools to new academic initiatives” (“Moving Quickly,” para. 5); and Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 school improvement plan includes closing “at least 60 CPS [Chicago Public Schools] schools and open[ing] 100 new schools, one-third as charter schools, one-third as contract schools (schools that operate much like charter schools), and one-third as CPS performance schools (public schools subject to Ren2010 funding and policies)” (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 474). These reform initiatives, all of which consist of reorganization measures intended to improve schools—and which in part include creation of smaller schools, however, do not detract from the continued closings and consolidations of existing small rural schools in order to improve education, at least in part, through the formation of larger schools.

**Literal and Affective Hardships**

Once a school closing has taken place and consolidation is implemented, students, parents, and teachers must adapt to the new circumstances. Generally, rural students are bused out of their communities and into a more heavily populated, if not more centralized, area. This often means long bus rides, and sometimes the bus rides are so long that rural students feel they cannot take advantage of the expanded curricular and
extracurricular offerings that a larger school provides. In addition, the longer distances inhibit parental involvement during school hours and in afterschool events. Small-school teachers involved in school consolidation are faced with many more professional peers, and staff relations are altered. Research reveals literal hardships such as long bus rides, affective dilemmas such as the worry parents experience, academic issues such as large class sizes, and social and professional problems such as inclusion of new teachers. Although specific research pertaining to the academic experiences of consolidating students is limited, academic challenges emerge throughout the related research findings.

**Busing and Transportation**

The most frequently discussed literal hardship on students involves long bus rides or other transportation difficulties. In a case study of marginalized students’ transitions to a consolidated high school, Sias (2008) shows that transportation to and from school as well as to and from extracurricular activities inhibited a successful transition. One student “explained that because of the mountainous terrain, it could take up to two hours to cross the mountain in the snow” (Sias, 2008, p. 183) to get to the consolidated high school. Some students had to wait in the morning for a bus to pick them up at home, ride to a designated location, debus, and wait again for a second bus to take them to school. Another student wanted to participate in football, but the lack of transportation to and from after-school activities kept him from being able to do so (Sias, 2008). “Rural children are most affected,” writes Spence (2000, p. 7). “They are the ones who have
most often had their community schools closed, and they are the ones who are enduring the longest bus rides” (Spence, 2000, p. 7; see also DeYoung, 1993).

Moreover, long bus rides are more than an inconvenience to time; they impact student well-being, activities, and academics. Slavin (2005) tells the story of a West Virginia high school student who rides the bus 90 minutes each way. The student fainted at school, and it took her mother two hours to find a ride and get there. The student reported that the commute is so time-consuming that she cannot come to practices for extracurricular activities. She also says that her parents do not attend school functions because they cannot afford the additional gas that the trip requires. Spence (2000) notes that a male student who rides the bus four hours per day to get to and from school reported avoiding higher-level courses because he lacked the time to complete homework.

West Virginia, one of the states with the hardest push and most concentrated efforts to consolidate schools, also has some of the longest bus rides. State guidelines stipulate that elementary students should ride the bus no more than 30 minutes one way, middle school students should ride for no longer than 45 minutes one way, and high school students should endure rides no longer than 60 minutes one way; yet, in 1996, largely due to school closings and consolidations, 7,938 West Virginia students rode school buses for more than two hours per day (Purcell & Shackelford, 2005). Despite busing 25,000 fewer students, from 1995 to 2005 school transportation costs in West Virginia nearly doubled (Purcell & Shackelford, 2005). West Virginia, however, is not the only state in which consolidation has had a strong impact on transportation, school
budgets, and students. Regardless of the specific state, long bus rides may have a detrimental effect on student academic performance, student ability to participate in the complete school experience, and family life (Spence, 2000).

Parents indicate misgivings about long bus rides for children, and educators acknowledge “transportation challenges with extra-curricular participation and parent participation (Nitta et al., 2010, p. 12). Parents worry about students being on buses for long periods of time and about the amount of time they would be out of their respective communities (Lawrence, 1993). In addition, parents express concern about the possibility of elementary students being on the same buses as high school students (Kearns et al., 2009) due to differences in maturity level, influences older students may have on younger students, and the physical safety of younger students. Some parents and teachers worry about the possibility that long bus rides will be hard on students and ultimately cause more student dropouts (Leisey et al., 1990).

For students who are already contemplating dropping out of school, long bus rides would provide one more difficulty with which to contend and may increase the reluctance to come to school. Howley, Howley, and Shamblen (2001) conducted a study of the nature and experience of suburban and rural bus riding and found that rural elementary schools are:

(a) more likely than suburban schools to have longest bus rides of 30 minutes or more [students with the longest rides ride for 30 minutes or more]; (b) more likely to have attendance areas greater than 10 square miles; (c) more likely to have bus routes with rougher rides [rides on unpaved dirt roads]; (d) less likely to be located in districts that employ a full-time bus supervisor; and (e) more likely to
include middle-school and/or high school students on the same bus runs as elementary students. (abstract, p. 41)

**Affective, Academic, Social, and Professional Problems**

Change is more difficult for some than for others. School closings and consolidations “clearly involve changes of a non-trivial nature, in that they affect a community by closing its school and affect a group of children by necessitating their accommodation to new children, new teachers, new physical settings, and, possibly, new routines, procedures, and expectations” (Peshkin, 1982, p. 166). After learning that the rural community middle school at which she was teaching was going to be closed and the students sent to a consolidated school, Egelson (1993) assigned her students the task of interviewing one person in the community who had attended a community school. The collected responses of the interviewees, some of whom had been through the process of consolidation in earlier years, indicated that while in the community school, there was a sense of closeness among students and teachers, a spirit of camaraderie in learning, and an atmosphere of safety and security (Egelson, 1993). After the closing of the middle school and the consolidation of her students with a larger school, Egelson writes, “They [students] are surrounded by people, but go through school alone with no sense of community to guide them. Students don’t know everyone in the school and the majority aren’t involved in school activities” (p. 11-12).

Research on overall student achievement as measured by dropout rates, graduation rates, and standardized test scores in conjunction with economies of size as related to school or district consolidation is abundant, though not necessarily consistent in
its findings (cf. Andrews et al., 2002; Fox, 1981). Yet, research centering upon consolidated students and how they experience and perceive academics is not as plentiful. Limited post-consolidation inquiry revealed that in some cases students believed classes were too large (Sell et al., 1996), and in other cases larger classes led some students to believe that it was harder to ask questions (Nitta et al., 2010). Sias (2008) reports that academic success for students was hampered by a “loss of familiarity with former school and teachers” (p. 178) and “trouble staying focused in classes with high expectations” (p. 188). As such, even if a school or district provides additional courses or enhanced academic programs, consolidating students may not be able or prepared to benefit from them.

Leisey et al. (1990) found that students were not only fearful of being looked down on and not fitting in, but they were also wary of an ongoing rivalry between students at two of the consolidating schools—a rivalry that would be exacerbated by close proximity and that the students viewed as having potential impact on their safety and security. Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel (2010) in their study of consolidations in Arkansas reveal that students moving to the new school carried the burden of fitting in, and that the burden of blending in “was particularly true when the moving students were different racially and socioeconomically than the receiving students” (p. 9). The authors also note that some students could not or did not fit in, that there had been student fights, and that others could not negotiate the larger school environment and left the school. Generally, consolidating students did eventually find their niches in the new schools (Nitta et al., 2010), although the direct impact of such adjustments upon student academic
performance is unclear; however, parents and teachers demonstrated more difficulty adjusting.

Parents of consolidating students expressed worry and uncertainty beyond the aforementioned issue of busing and transportation. “To some degree,” write Duncombe and Yinger (2010), “consolidation may break parents’ valued connections with existing schools (“Non-Cost Effects,” para. 1). This is supported by parent responses gathered by Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, and Witten (2009); parents were unsure of their future level of participation in the new school. In part they were frustrated by the process of the school closure, and in part they believed that the bigger size of the new school might inhibit them from becoming as involved as they had been. Their perception was that their involvement would not make a difference, would not be acknowledged, and might not be as gratifying as their participation in the small community school had been (Kearns et al., 2009). Considering the implications of the importance of parent involvement to student academic success, parent unease with the consolidation and the new school may affect student outcomes.

Although students had some difficulties making social and academic adjustments, and parents struggled to understand their new roles in the consolidated schools, staff members had the most difficult time adjusting to the consolidation (Edgerton, 1986; Nitta et al., 2010). Consolidation affected their attitudes, their relationships with students, and their professional relationships. Nitta et al. (2010) report that teachers felt grief as well as anger and resentment when they learned their school would be closed and they would be consolidated. One teacher from a smaller district that joined a larger district compared the
consolidation to her mother’s death and the burning of their store. Another small school teacher reported that she did not feel like she was accepted by the staff at the new school (Nitta et al., 2010). In mergers of equal-sized districts, teachers at the receiving school did not want to change their previously-formed groups. Although there was not an implication that teachers from smaller schools were less qualified than teachers from larger schools, teachers and students moving from smaller schools to larger ones described the teacher-student relationships at the new school as being more formal and as unsatisfactory in comparison to the close relationships and caring environment of their old schools. Nitta et al. (2010) state:

Moving teachers were most critical of consolidation. Several moving teachers expressed dissatisfaction with consolidation because of the disruption to their relationships, mourning the loss of the old ‘tight-knit family.’ Many moving teachers struggled to adjust to their new social environments. . . . Perhaps most problematically, these problems often extended to their relationships with students, which became more distant and bureaucratic. (p. 14)

Positive Outcomes Related to Consolidation

Despite the controversies surrounding school closings and consolidations, existing research does reveal some positive outcomes and experiences for students, parents, and school-community constituents. According to Benton (1992), consolidation of schools from six small towns in Arkansas led to increased achievement on state and national tests for elementary and secondary students as well as an expansion of curricular offerings and extracurricular opportunities. In this same study, the percentage of high school graduates
going to college increased, teachers reported salary increases, and the consolidation led to improved school facilities (Benton, 1992). A post-consolidation study of school and district consolidation in an Ohio district (Self, 2001) revealed that eight years after the consolidation took place, the number of courses offered had increased, students had more extracurricular activities and athletic programs from which to choose, and that even students and parents who were not as positive about the expanded curriculum acknowledged that students had more opportunities than those provided in the pre-consolidation schools (Self, 2001). Teachers involved in the study reported benefits of consolidation that included professional growth, increased teaching tools, salary increases, more opportunities to share ideas with peers, and non-tangible benefits to their careers. These teachers also believed that the students, especially secondary students, benefitted from additional course offerings and better opportunities for involvement (Self, 2001).

Sias (2008), in a case study of marginalized students involved in school consolidation, found that expanded curriculum such as vocational courses and Advanced Placement classes often enabled student success. When asked if they would return to their previous small rural high school, four of the six students involved in the study indicated that they would not because they had more courses to match their needs and interests (Sias, 2008). Among two community groups involved in school and district consolidation in North Dakota, both the group that lost their school and the group that retained their school saw improved educational opportunities for students as the primary benefit of consolidation (Sell et al., 1996). Even constituents who had not yet completed
consolidation and for whom consolidation was a bitter process perceived expansion and strengthening of curriculum and more opportunities for students to be involved in extracurricular activities as primary benefits of consolidation (Leisey et al., 1990).

These findings were echoed in a 2010 study of four Arkansas high schools that consolidated. Nitta et al. (2010) found that “students unanimously appreciated the broader social opportunities consolidation afforded” (p. 9). They also report that students, teachers, and administrators who changed schools perceived the increased course offerings as an expansion of academic opportunities for students, and that teachers noted benefits such as a reduction in the number of classes for which to prepare and improved opportunities for “more targeted, helpful professional development” (Nitta et al., 2010, p. 13).

**Impact of School Closings on Community**

Bryant (2007) claims that the closing of small schools is also killing the small rural communities in which they were previously located. Because the school often functions as the community center—literally and figuratively—when a school is closed it has dire effects on a community; communities struggle to find ways to revive and to survive. Howley and Eckman (1997) write, “Schools and communities are part of one another. . . . Closing a school is like removing an essential organ from a community” (p. 3). When a community school closes, residents feel as though a part of their lives, as well as their physical surroundings, have been taken from them. Small rural school closings
not only affect a community economically but also affect the cultures, traditions, identities, and lifestyles of the community members.

**Economic Impact**

From an economic standpoint three primary concerns emerge: loss of the major employer in the rural community, a decrease in the values of residential and commercial properties, and loss of retail businesses and their associated dollars. In comparison to other employers, “the relative size of its budget and payroll often makes a school the major ‘industry’ in a rural community. . . . Schools also maintain residential and commercial property values. . . .” (Bailey, 2000, p. 3). Sell et al. (1996); Howley and Eckman (1997); Purcell and Shackelford (2005); and Kearns et al. (2009) note similar consequences of small rural school closures. Lyson (2002) arrives at the same conclusion concerning home and property values and also examines per capita income and household income. “Income inequality (i.e., the gap between the rich and the poor),” Lyson writes, “is greater in the smaller rural communities [500 or fewer residents] without schools than in communities with schools” (2002, p. 133). While this economic impact does not go uncontested (cf. Self, 2001), “for the smallest rural communities, the presence of a school is associated with many social and economic benefits. . . . Schools serve as important markers of social and economic viability and vitality” (Lyson, 2002, p. 136).
**Impact on Community Culture, Identity, and Lifestyle**

As Lyson (2002) implies in the previous statements, community members facing school closure or school consolidation perceive difficulties beyond those related to economics and finances. Community members dealing with school closings or school consolidations fear the social ramifications of a school loss upon the culture, identity, lifestyle, and interactions of the community and its members. Cummins, Chance, and Steinhoff (1997) note that even the threat of school closure leads to fear of the loss of community identity. Peshkin’s *The Imperfect Union: School Consolidation & Community Conflict* (1982) details the decades-long saga of a school district in Illinois that attempted to shut down one of its elementary schools in order to consolidate. Simply the threat of closure sent the entire host community into spasms of fear and anger.

According to Kearns, et al. (2009), “The closure of rural schools disconnects communities from their past, shuts down a crucial focal point and meeting place for the community, and blocks the path to other resources” (p. 139). Lawrence (1993), in a study of rural villages in Maine considering consolidation, found that “cultural factors were more important to residents . . . than the financial benefits their children might enjoy” (p. 11). In addition, participants worried about children not being part of community life and about community cohesion and pride that could be lost if individual town athletic teams merged (Lawrence, 1993). Their respective teams provided a focal point around which each community could rally. Pride in their team and in the community children who played on their team gave each community an element that set them apart from the other communities.
Collective community identity, community spirit, and community members’ connections to the community and to the school are often tied to community schools and school activities (Bailey, 2000; Kearns et al., 2009; Leisey et al., 1990; Sell et al., 1996). Benton (1992) notes that in the consolidation of six rural schools in Arkansas, the school buildings were left to serve as community centers that would help the towns keep their identity. Shutting down rural schools “may threaten the educational and social environment of rural communities in ways that would not impact the urban environment in the same way—particularly if the rural school is one of the community’s primary institutions” (Purcell & Shackelford, 2005, p. 2).

A lack of school events that bring the larger community together may lead to difficulty sustaining the community, and Fanning (1995) posits that “By separating schools from communities, consolidation may be contributing to the social problems that concern parents and educators” (“Conclusions,” para. 1). Even school closings and consolidations that are peaceable and successful involve high emotions and a willingness to sacrifice (Benton, 1992; Self, 2001). Nevertheless, the demise of the small rural school and the possibility of community disintegration may affect what Taylor (1997) terms as collective identity. In addition to loss of community spirit, loss of connection to the community, and loss of connection to the community school, the lack of or loss of collective identity may have implications for student success in school (Taylor, 1997).
**Student, School, and Community**

Student success in school may be affected by a number of factors outside of the school curricula, and several studies examine factors specifically related to small rural communities and their schools. For example, Bickel, Smith, and Eagle (2001) found that despite the extreme poverty in many rural West Virginia neighborhoods,

if a sense of safety, stability, social cohesion, and shared world view pervades the neighborhood, students bring this with them to school. This provides the basis for an in-school neighborhood, a secure and hopeful environment where children are not socially isolated nor culturally adrift nor morally indifferent. . . . This kind of neighborhood provides the social and cultural wherewithal for learning to occur. (p. 23)

Furthermore, “very poor, rural neighborhoods can—and do—contribute to a social and cultural foundation which has a surprisingly consistent and strong effect on early student achievement” (Bickel, Smith, & Eagle, 2001, p. 25).

Sometimes resistance to school consolidation is due to community members’ beliefs concerning the importance of parent involvement in student education (Post & Stambach, 1999). Sometimes the resistance includes more than belief in a need for parental involvement and also includes belief in the need for involvement of multiple generations and the community-at-large. Kearns et al. (2009) write that “the social dynamics prevailing at small rural schools lend themselves to intergenerational support and community cohesion” (p. 136). Subsequently, closing a school—even one in an impoverished community, involves much more than dealing with parents of students or planning for logistical issues.
Functions of School and Schooling

Of significant consequence is the question of what roles school and schooling play in the lives of students; schools and schooling, after all, were not intended solely to serve the community, per se. Schools are places where meaning is constructed; schooling is the process of teaching—a pedagogically-based system for providing instruction and learning (DeYoung & Howley, 1992). Schooling serves several functions, only one of which is to provide formal academic knowledge. From a historical perspective, schooling has included basic literacy, strengthening of the mind, vocational skills training, post-secondary academic preparation, and enculturation to American society, among other aims (Kliebard, 2004). Schooling may also seek to teach students to be good citizens and positive contributors to larger society and to prepare students for life after school. Writes Sanderson in 1941,

The education of the individual is not the sole objective of the school; it must also aid in creating a fine social environment, for otherwise the school will be unable to achieve its primary function of giving the individual the best sort of education. (p. 410)

More recently, DeYoung and Howley (1992) argue that the United States is striving to equip students with skills and values necessary to attain national goals.

DeYoung (1992) posits that in modern American education, schooling is valued because it serves economic purposes for individuals and society. As such, for mainstream America, completion of high school is “an ultimatum rather than an opportunity” (DeYoung, 1992, p. 20). Yet, schooling in public high schools does not tend to equalize the knowledge or socioeconomic status of students (e.g., Lee & Bryck, 1988; Rouse, &
Barrow, 2006; Weaver, 1977), and academic success for the purpose of supporting national endeavors may not have school constituent support in all cases. The specialized circumstances and often isolated locations of many rural schools pose unique characteristics that may be incongruent with educational endeavors intended to make students nationally and internationally competitive. DeYoung (1993) states that in rural schools “people. . . recognize they are enmeshed in an economic, historic, and cultural battle, not just an instructional one” (p. 410).

According to Bauch (2001), the goals and purposes of schooling are controlled by those who control the schools. Should guidelines for school improvement continue to be promulgated by the federal government, and should educators and policymakers continue to view school improvement through an urban lens, rural schools will continue to struggle for control of schooling and for schooling that is based on community values and priorities (Bauch, 2001). The incongruence between education goals of national import and education desires and aims of rural communities contributes to an oppositional relationship characterized by an “us” versus “them” mentality.

In his 2007 book *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*, Corbett provides evidence in support of Bauch’s (2001) claim, postulating that formal education is closely linked to movement out of rural areas. He argues that educational practice and curriculum, policy, and mindset work to minimize the importance of place in the lives of rural students. Success in formal schooling, Corbett explains, equates to an acceptance of placelessness in that those who are successful in
formal schooling leave their communities, while those who have less academic success and less formal education tend to stay.

In the Atlantic Canadian communities serving as the context of the study, Corbett observes that those who have already chosen to stay in their local community view those who are successful at formal education—and who subsequently choose to leave—as deficient. Those who are perceived as successful in the reality of community life are “able to handle a complex and difficult life of entrepreneurial risk-taking, raising a family on limited resources, and the physical toil and manual skills” needed to survive in the fishing community (Corbett, 2009, p.2). This antithetical view of formal schooling, in which place is of utmost importance, clashes against “standardized accountability schemes and centralized curricula. . . . [designed] to create an acontextual, standard comparative metric which functions independent of the particular places in which it is applied” (Corbett, 2009, p. 4). If formal schooling strips away the connection to place and succeeds in producing students prepared to enter the larger workplace, economy, and society, students must leave the community in order to enter the national competition.

Woodrum (2004) provides similar evidence of the conflict between formal education with a nationalistic purpose and education that takes into account and provides for consideration of local community needs and values. In this study, Woodrum (2004) explores varying understandings of the role of schools and the value of state-mandated academic proficiency testing in an Appalachian region of Ohio. Interviews with parents of fourth and ninth grade students from differing socioeconomic levels and locations within the region, as well as interviews with fourth and ninth grade teachers, reveal
differing perceptions and values. Of the study participants, all of the non-Appalachian families and all of the teachers perceive formal schooling as central to the children’s future success; they believe that the purpose of education is to prepare students to be competitive with students across the nation. Among these families and teachers, it is expected that after graduation, most students will leave their families. Non-Appalachian parents believe that breaking ties to and leaving the community is a part of children’s identity formation; it is a natural progression in becoming an adult.

However, Woodrum (2004) believes that school consolidation has significantly weakened the relationships between communities and their local schools, and this is supported by the opinions of Appalachian families participating in the study. Appalachian parents, especially those of the working class, want the role of schools and education to be one of support for and extension of the values taught at home. Poor Appalachian families believe that schooling is “a challenge to, and often rejection of, their local values” (Woodrum, 2004, p. 7). Additionally, when facing the loss of the community school, Appalachian parents perceive the closing as further evidence of powerlessness and a negation of their value as individuals and as a community. Woodrum (2004) writes that in light of an impending consolidation,

Poor Appalachian families . . . see in the loss of their local schools further evidence of their own social and economic dispossession. As a father of a fourth grader insists: “It seems like they’re moving everything away; things like grocery stores and such. . . . Here, we’re just forgotten. So it don’t surprise me they’re taking the school away; they’ve took everything else.” (p. 8)
In contrast with non-Appalachian families, middle- and working-class Appalachian families place more value on “interrelationships, their sense of community and their attachment to ‘our home’” (Woodrum, 2004, p. 8). The local community, they believe, should be the basis of the school, and thus, the school should be an institution that reflects and endorses community values. The differences in what is valued nationally and what is valued locally, combined with the disparity of power, reinforce resistance to the closing of a small rural school. Weaver (1977) concludes, “To the rural poor and working classes, consolidation represents an attempt to destroy what is often their only sphere of public influence and their last vestige of control over their children’s education and socialization” (p. 161).

**Culture of School and Schooling**

Education research demonstrates that individual schools have, transmit, and reproduce a unique culture that includes situation and location-specific traditions and certain expectations. Peterson and Deal (1998) write,

Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools. (p. 28)

For example, Anyon (1980) found that working-class schools, middle-class schools, and upper-class schools have very different curricula, approach teaching and learning in very different ways, and foster differing expectations and attitudes. For these schools, teachers, and students, material that is taught and learned, how material is taught and
learned, and expected outcomes of the materials and the teaching methods are influenced by differences in cultural attributes associated with socioeconomic status. These schools served to maintain the status quo.

In separate research, Ogbu (2008) found that even when African-American students were in schools that offered upper-level classes, many of the African-American students avoided them because the students in these classes were predominantly white, the African American students did not feel that they fit in, and to participate in those classes implied that they were somehow being dismissive of their community culture. These students were caught between school culture and community culture. Woodrum (2009) asserts that Native American students who live on reservations and Hispanic youth in New Mexico face similar cultural dilemmas, separation, and stigmatization because they are often taught by teachers who are not aware of or do not understand the cultures, traditions, and languages of their students. Because public schools reflect values and norms of White, middle-class America, students who are not part of that structure may experience “a clash of cultures” (Woodrum, 2009, p. 3).

For students living in small rural communities, similar quandaries arise, as “ties to community, place, and family are often strong. . . , and it is in the local schoolhouse where many of these attachments are formed and solidified” (DeYoung and Lawrence, 1995, “Cultural Contradictions Today,” para. 4). When the local school is closed and students must attend schools outside of their community, they may face a cultural disconnect in that what was valued in their community school is not necessarily what is valued in their
new school. Conversely, the values and culture promoted in the new school may not align with the values and culture promoted at home and in their local community.

DeYoung and Lawrence (1995) state: “Educators have themselves been schooled to believe that the traditional values expressed by rural residents are somehow illegitimate” (“Why Postsecondary Education?,” para. 7), and this only serves to exacerbate the confusion and frustration of students, parents, and teachers. Blake (2003) notes that in regard to proposed school consolidation, school culture has had a significant role in neither the discussions nor the decisions. However, as efforts to create a national curriculum for American schools become more prevalent and gain momentum, “rural students, especially those from cultural and linguistic minorities, run an increasing risk of being ‘disembedded’ from their historic roots” (Woodrum, 2009, p. 3).

The lack of attention to school and community culture in policy affecting school closure and consolidation is problematic precisely because it fails to take into consideration “local school and community histories and cultures” (DeYoung, 1993, p. 386; underlining in original) and because it often pits traditional rural values of place and community against academic skills and values that are part of current education reform efforts—efforts that often include closing and consolidating schools. According to DeYoung and Lawrence (1995), “This contradiction [of cultures] is particularly visible in places where personal relationships and attachments to place go back for generations” (“Cultural Contradictions Today,” para. 4). Howley and Eckman (1997) state, “Rural communities and their schools are linked in ways that urban and suburban schools cannot be” (p. 4); a school is guided by the community, and the community’s human resources,
values, and perspectives influence the educational means, ways, and ambitions of the school (Howley & Eckman, 1997). From an operational standpoint, a school supports and reproduces community culture—its values, perspectives, and mores (Peshkin, 1982), and historically rural communities “operated schools and dedicated instruction to local needs” (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995, “The History of Rural School ‘Reform,’” para. 2).

Operation and instruction based on local needs, however, are especially problematic when the needs and the local culture are not congruent with the values and culture of the White middle-class. Yet, community culture is important beyond the collective good or the sustainability of the community. According to Fanning (1995), the “collective wisdom, beliefs, and values of [one’s] community, or in other words, its culture” (p. 4), are key to helping people make wise decisions. Thus, students need “strong positive cultures. . . with a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 29) both within the school and within the community. When a rural school is closed and separated from its local community, this “erodes the meaning of community and whatever traditional culture remains” (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995, “The Social Purpose of Schooling,” para. 1). Consequently, students are also affected.

**Schools as Symbols, Community Institutions, and Community Centers**

According to Peshkin (1982), “A school enters the lives of members of its host community by means of a set of functions, which may be defined as the status of the school building itself, the school’s operational functions, and its symbolic functions” (p.
Discussed in earlier sections, the operational functions of school do not need to be reasserted, but because rural schools and communities “have traditionally been tightly linked” (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995), research addressing the school building and the symbolic functions and meanings attached to small rural schools needs to be explored in order to better understand the nature of community and individual resistance to the closing of a small rural school.

Although the educational purposes of schools are important, in many rural communities the school serves as a symbol of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition, and personal and community identity (Peshkin, 1982). When compared with suburban and urban schools, “the small-town school has a different kind of symbolic meaning. Schools... [are] valued in themselves, quite apart from the goal of teaching cognitive skills and the specific knowledge required to enter professional and managerial careers” (Weaver, 1977, p. 201). Historically, the school has had an immeasurable influence on the formation of rural communities (Sanderson, 1941) and “has served as a community nucleus, with strong support from parents and community members” (Beckner, 1983, p. 14). Sanderson (1941) remarks that a community school “commands the support of all the people in the community” (p. 402). Rural schools serve as community centers, cultural centers, and centers of community life, and they host festive activities, provide community entertainment, and offer cultural enlightenment (Beckner, 1983; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Lyson, 2002; Slavin, 2005). With these multiple functions, it is nearly
impossible to tell where or how school life and community life can be separated, and the school and community share responsibility for one another (Beckner, 1983).

The symbiotic relationship between a small rural school and its community may be exemplified in several ways. For example, Lawrence (1993) writes,

Attendance at school games, concerts, and productions is high; children are invited to display art projects in the Bank, Town Hall, and many storefronts; the school band plays at many public functions such as parades, the Town Christmas party and the entire school dresses up for Halloween and parades through town to the enthusiastic applause of almost everyone in the town. (p. 28-29)

One of the school principals involved in Lawrence’s study remarked, “‘It’s like the school is an extension of the family’” (p. 27). Bauch (2001) recounts the story of a principal of a small rural school who often called on the community for financial support. The principal related that she was from the community and had known all of the local business owners since she was a young girl. When she needed funding for a project, she simply picked up the telephone and started calling, and the funds and support were made available. This principal reported that the school is the focus of the community and that the community members would do anything to help the school (Bauch, 2001).

Impoverished communities show similar support for their schools. For example, Woodrum (2004) relays the words of an Appalachian mother discussing the upcoming closing of the elementary school: “I enjoy all the stuff the school does: the plays and the like. They have Halloween parties every year and the whole town turns out to see the kids parade by in their costumes” (p. 7). Woodrum (2004) also includes the story of a working-class Appalachian father who gathered together community members to help
paint the school: “Well, once a few years back they were complaining about the school needing painting. . . . I told them, if you’ll supply the paint, I’ll get the people to do the painting. And I did” (p. 8). Communities and community members support the school, its endeavors, and activities, and the school supports the endeavors and activities of the community.

The small rural school and its traditions hold valuable meanings for communities (Bauch, 2001) and community members. In addition to what schools do—their activities and events—Peshkin (1982) notes the importance of the physical school building: “As a graphic reminder of an often hallowed past, it is the physical embodiment of old friendships, old fun, old contests, and as well, an old self” (p. 160). The school building serves as a symbol of individual lives as they were lived as well as a reminder of ongoing life. Egelson (1993) confirms this assertion, writing, “Respondents. . . missed the physical presence of the now demolished community school buildings. . . . Several older interviewees mentioned that they had a brick or a desk from the old school that they had saved as a remembrance” (p. 8). Thus, the school building itself holds individual as well as community meaning and value. Peshkin (1982) asserts that all of the symbolic dimensions of the school lead to personal and community identity:

The answer to the questions ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is this community?’ derives, at least in part, from the impact of the school’s building and of its operational and symbolic functions on individuals and on the collectivity of individuals who constitute a community. (p. 164)
Identity, Place, and Belonging

According to Theobald and Nachtigal (1995), knowing one’s own identity is “intertwined” with knowing where one is and from where one comes: “Place holds the promise of contributing to the development of meaningful identity” (p. 9). Although aforementioned research (Corbett, 2009) presents the idea that current educational curricula attempt to negate, or perhaps eradicate, sense of place, “historically, rural communities placed high value on traditional family (and extended-family) relationships, sense of community, and the importance of ‘place’” (DeYoung, 1993). The relationships, the feeling of belonging to a community, and the value of understanding where one is help to form individual identity.

Corbett (2009), writing of a personal experience that occurred while he was teaching in a small rural Canadian village, conveys how working with a group of local community members helped him to understand the importance of feeling a part of one’s community and to comprehend the power of place. This experience provided meaningful insight as to why many of his students did not appear to be interested in leaving “the cocoon of the community” (p. 4):

I remember the evening when this struck me for the first time while building a trapper’s cabin with a group of academically marginal students and men from the community. It finally dawned on me that this group of people, for all of their challenges and what might be characterized as poverty, possessed something none of my teaching colleagues had: they had community and deep knowledge of place. They knew with a remarkable clarity who and where they were. (p. 4)
This sense of place and sense of belonging to a community are what allowed Corbett’s students to feel secure in their identities and content with staying in their community, and therein lies the rub for communities and schools that are inextricably connected.

Communities have what Peshkin (1982) describes as “integrity... Completeness, wholeness, unity” (p. 157). For a small rural community, its school and the school events are inseparable from community identity and “the collective life of the community” (Peshkin, 1982, p. 162). The school activities may lead to “the development of pride in our students, our teams, our school. Such collective pride has the potential of attaching people to each other and to the place” (italics in original; Peshkin, 1982, p. 162). Thus, the community and the community members perceive the closing of their school—the cessation of its activities and existence—as a threat to community identity, to the ongoing life of the community, to personal identity. The school symbolically belongs to the community and to its individual members; the community and its individual members symbolically belong to the school; without one another, each is lost.

**Southern Mill Communities and Their Residents**

Mill towns in the South have a unique identity. Created literally and figuratively around the mills, “the cotton mill village,” writes Herring (1949), “has long been an important feature in the physical and social landscape of the South” (p. 4). In the southeastern United States only a few mills and mill villages existed in the latter part of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries (McHugh, 1988; Mitchell, 2001). However, post-Civil War Reconstruction necessitated a new type of economic base
beyond that of the pre-war years, which were dependent upon slave labor and agriculture. In addition, advancements in farming machinery and agricultural production greatly reduced the ability of the small independent farmer to actually earn a living.

From a broad perspective, the South needed to create jobs in order to rebuild; from a narrow perspective, individuals and families needed a steady source of income. “The Cotton Mill Campaign,” writes Nichols (1924, p. 351), “was started with its outstanding argument, if not object, in the necessity of employment to the poor whites; and cheap water power, closeness to raw material, cheap labor, home markets and competition with New England, northern factories, as other arguments” (Nichols, 1924, p. 351). Textile mills, and especially cotton mills, appeared to be the solution from both perspectives. “The industry,” writes Coggeshall (1996), “was hailed as a savior that would effectively reconstruct the South, salvage indebted (white) tenant farmers, and restore the pride of a defeated people” (Coggeshall, 1996, p. 18). Mitchell (2001) marks that the “complete genesis” of mill and mill town development in the South began around 1880 (p. 9), and Rhyne (1930) writes, “The years immediately following 1880, when the industry was expanding at a phenomenal rate, witnessed the development of the cotton mill village to the point where it became a traditional part of the industry” (p. 24-25).

Jacobs (1932) writes that the first mills tended to employ people from the immediate vicinity of the mill, often located near a waterway in order to provide power and often located in a rural area with room for expansion. As mill number, size, and production increased, more workers were needed. McHugh (1988) states, “In the early stages of the cotton mill boom, labor was generally plentiful. Whole families relocated
from southern farms to mill villages. Parents and children obtained jobs together in the mills” (p. 7). With an increasing need for work, mountain people and more farmers, often who were destitute, poverty-stricken, illiterate, and near starvation, moved out of the mountains and off of their farmlands to seek steady employment in the mills, which continued to need more workers (Herring, 1949; Jacobs, 1932; Kohn, 1907; Mitchell, 2001).

Mitchell (2001) writes that “when the ‘poor whites’ entered the mills, they reentered the life of the South. . . . Cotton mills. . . opened the way to a rational economic future” (p. 162). According to Rhyne (1930), in the development of the mills and mill towns, often the mill houses were built before the mills themselves. Building supplies were brought in along with building laborers and construction workers, and because these people needed shelter and a place to live while they constructed the mills, they quickly erected simple dwellings (Rhyne, 1930). When potential mill operatives arrived, “The poverty-stricken condition of the people. . . made it impossible for them to build their own homes” (Rhyne, 1930, p. 21). The first buildings, then, were what would later constitute the residences of the mill workers and the beginning of the mill village. “The houses built,” writes Heiss (1924), “were necessarily cheap structures and the groups of homes that soon became known as the ‘Mill Village’ were naturally primeval. . .” (p. 346). The need for mill operative housing and the ability and willingness of the mill companies to provide it set the stage for a mill village system viewed by some (e.g., Andrews, 1987; Heiss, 1924; Jacobs, 1932; Nichols, 1924; McHugh, 1988; Nichols, 1924;
Rhyne, 1930) as the beginnings of a paternalistic system that would ultimately cripple the ability of mill operatives to become fully and independently functioning members of the larger society.

Due to the needs of mill operatives for food, clothing, and other basic necessities, as well as the distance to stores and businesses, mill companies often established their own retail establishments and service enterprises, essentially creating a mill town. Herring (1949) writes that nearly all of the mill villages followed a pattern that included “a few houses, a little school, a little church, a handful of families, and an owner-manager who ran the mill and community benevolently or otherwise according to his disposition” (p. 4). A handbill distributed by Pacolet Manufacturing Company, as quoted by Kohn (1907), states,

“We furnish you good, comfortable houses. . . . wood, coal and provisions laid at your door at market prices. . . . We have good water, a splendid system of free schools, churches of different denominations; in fact everything that appeals to one who wishes to improve the condition of his family.” (p. 23)

Thus, the nature of the mill work, work schedules that provided little time to go anywhere else even if one wanted to, the probability that one could purchase goods and services from establishments just a few steps away from one’s home and the mill, and the opportunity to participate in social and religious activities without ever leaving the mill village led to the establishment and continuation of mill village life and living that catalyzed a worker dependency upon the mills and mill companies while simultaneously fostering a dependency of the mills upon the contentedness and welfare of the mill operatives and their families. “The southern cotton mill environment,” writes McHugh
(1988, p. 4), “was neither a community created entirely by mill management, nor was it a community created entirely by the workers” (McHugh, 1988, p. 4). Nevertheless, this mutually dependent relationship, combined with the realities of mill operative lives and traits and characteristics associated with the whole of the mill workers, appears to have contributed to the formation of a unique group and class of people, a “social type” (Nichols, 1924; see also Coggeshall, 1996), who has been both exalted and scourged.

Jacobs (1932) characterizes the ancestry and the nature of the mill operatives and their families:

Of Anglo-Saxon blood, he comes from that courageous band of pioneers whose ancestors fought against odds for religious and civic liberty. . . . They were men and women of strong will, of unswerving determination. They would not be ruled by an autocrat; nor would they allow a principle to suffer, even at the sacrifice of their lives. . . . They are themselves individualists, self-determined, and in many instances self-opinionated. (p. 36)

Furthermore, Jacobs (1932) describes the mill operatives as “of the same stock, of the same blood, with the same ideals, with the same needs, with the same tastes, speaking the same tongue, worshipping the same God” (p. 36); “courageous” (p. 37); “native born” (p. 37); “by his very nature decidedly opposed to work with ‘foreigners’, and distrustful of all who are of foreign tongue, parentage or inclination” (p. 37); “independent” (p. 38); “law-abiding” (p. 38); and “patriotic” (p. 39). Nichols (1924) provides additional perspective and describes mill workers as “naturally dependent” upon mill owners and operators (p. 351), desirous of companionship (p. 352), lacking in “daring and ambition” (p. 355), having a “natural nomadism” (p. 356), desensitized “to social approval and
disapproval” (p. 356), and yet tenaciously convinced of their “superiority to the immigrant” (p. 356). Heiss (1924) asserts that

the people in these villages, not infrequently, because they knew no better . . . ,
seemed not to care whether their premises were clean, and, with only a few
exceptions, they were not interested in education, sanitation or in adequately
developing themselves or their children. . . . The people who had formerly been
looked down upon as the ‘poor whites’ and called ‘poor white trash’ began to be
known as ‘factory bats,’ ‘mill hands,’ and ‘lint heads.’ (p. 346)

Yet, Kohn (1907), writes, “Those who are to-day in the cotton mills of South Carolina are
as good and as honest people as can be found in this country” (p. 21).

Even as the textile mill heyday ended, and after many of the mills closed in the
post-World War II years, the mill villages and their residents frequently remained—
although diminished in size and population, respectively, if located in the rural areas, or
subsumed by nearby cities if positioned near more urban areas (Carlton, 1982; Herring,
1949; McHugh, 1988). The lack of a mill and a mill worker routine does not seem to
have substantially altered the qualities, characteristics, or values of the mill operative

Country, examines the people and “the area roughly between Charlotte, North Carolina,
and Greenville, South Carolina—Carolina cotton country” (p. 3). Of this area, known as
the Piedmont, Coggeshall (1996) writes, “Probably the single most noticeable type of
community scattered throughout the landscape. . . is the mill town” (p. xv).

Acknowledging differences, Coggeshall (1996) also notes that “there remains an overall
commonality of beliefs and behaviors among long-term residents throughout the region”
The mill workers and their families were often “scorned by their farming or town neighbors” (Coggeshall, 1996, p. 19), an assertion supported by other researchers (e.g., Carlton, 1982; Herring, 1949; Mitchell, 2001; Rhyne, 1930). Thus, the mill operatives, their families, and their descendants appear to have developed and to continue to demonstrate a sense of defensiveness in response to derisive attitudes and derogatory stereotypes. In addition, a set of shared values, beliefs, and characteristics, many stemming from and concomitant to the descriptors used during years of mill predominance, seem to continue to influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of Carolina Piedmont people, many of whom are also mill village people and their progeny.

Of these values, beliefs, and characteristics, Coggeshall (1996) includes “an emphasis on ‘heritage’” (p. 47); “conservatism” (p. 47) that leads to “resistance to change” (p. 47); a near-obsession with family, kin, and “family connections” (p. 49) that dictates and affects “appropriate or inappropriate social interaction” (p. 49); a strong sense of “individualism” (p. 51) and belief in “individual freedom” (p. 51); national patriotism tempered by “antagonistic feelings toward centralized control [that] leads to support of states’ rights and the heritage of ‘The War’” [the Civil War] (p. 52); “racism” (p. 54) that extends not only to African Americans but also to other racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants; a paternalistic “deference, both in behavior and address, toward those in authority” (p. 56) as well as a “concern for others deemed less important” (p. 57); “southern hospitality” (p. 57) that includes “food contributions to mourners

(p. 3), and that “for the previous century this heritage has been shaped by the production and processing of cotton” (Coggeshall, 1996, p. 3).
during wakes, family generosity during reunions, labor exchanges between farmers, and even... porch visiting between neighbors” (p. 57); “southern chivalry” (p. 57) that extends to doing what is honorable and virtuous and upholding “a sense of obligation to inferiors” (p. 58); and an appreciation for a “slower pace of life” (p. 58). Mill work, asserts Coggeshall (1996), was associated with “an entire lifestyle for the workers and their families: one’s standard of living, one’s social position, one’s values and outlook on life, one’s forms of recreation, and perhaps even one’s religious background” (p. 188).

**Mill Village Schools**

Researchers differ with regard to both why mill schools were established and the extent to which the schools established by mill companies served the interests of students or served the interests of the mills and mill management. Rhyne (1930) writes,

> The ignorant and illiterate condition of many of those brought into the mill villages from the farms and their lack of knowledge as to methods of health and sanitation and of correct living habits generally gave to manufacturers the final inducement needed to institute industrial welfare work. (p. 27)

Schools were a significant part of this welfare effort. Identifying four types of cotton mill towns, Rhyne (1930) asserts that “the extent to which the [mill] company supports the school depends upon the type of mill village in which the school is located” (p. 31). Manufacturers often subsidized public schools, paying salaries for teachers and superintendents, and in many situations, the mill corporation built the schools (McHugh, 1988; Rhyne, 1930). The “typical ‘mill schools’” (Rhyne, 1930, p. 31), however, were “located in the unincorporated towns or suburban mill villages” (Rhyne, 1930, p. 31). As
a result, those who had proffered significant financial support, the mill companies, were able to “exercise considerable control over, if not actually dictate, the policies of the school as well as hire and fire the teachers just as if they were regular employees of the mill” (Rhyne, 1930, p. 31; see also McHugh, 1988). Thus, the public schools associated with mills and the schools established by the corporations were mechanisms of the mills.

Mill schools served multiple purposes. McHugh (1988) posits that schools served initially to attract high-quality workers by offering education for their children. In the absence of a comprehensive public education system, mill schools were important in assuring a continuing supply of literate workers to the mill. Furthermore, mill owners believed the schools to be effective instruments for inculcating acceptable patterns of behavior among the young workers. Finally, the establishment of schools provided the mills additional leverage during job negotiations with family units. (p. 16)

Although mill town parents did not always avail their children of this opportunity, possibly due to “the high cost to the family and the relatively low perceived benefits” (McHugh, 1988, p. 57), the mill school curriculum included “general topics such as the ‘Three R’s’” [sic] (McHugh, 1988, p. 61), “played a central role in developing noncognitive or affective skills” (McHugh, 1988, p. 62), and served a socialization function that included the teaching of “punctuality, regularity of attendance, reliability, attentiveness, respect for authority, and ambition” (McHugh, 1988, p. 63) in order to create a disciplined workforce. All of these combined to further “a set of social norms conducive to improved productivity in the factory setting” (McHugh, 1988, p. 63) but
also contributed to the dual role of the mill village system as a means of paternalism as well as beneficence.

Schooling through the elementary grades was seen as all that was necessary for mill worker children because “the prevailing view [among managers] was that... too much education spoiled the worker” (McHugh, 1988, p. 65). Jacobs (1932) writes that “education for these people [operatives and their children] has not until recent years been popular, for the very good reason that the need has not been to them clearly apparent” (p. 50). Rhyne (1930) found that a significant enrollment drop “came in the fifth grade, with further rapid declines in the sixth and seventh grades” (p. 151), noting also that “a large number of cotton mill children stop school at fourteen and begin their contributions to the family income” (Rhyne, 1988, p. 151). The age of fourteen as the allowable age for employment in the mills signals the passage, or at least reticent acceptance, of child labor laws. Prior to this time, writes Carlton (1982), “Schooling was offered primarily as a frill, an inducement to rural parents, who, while poor, wished to provide advantages to their children” (p. 120).

Jacobs (1932) asserts that cotton manufacturers had “no desire to work minors in the mill” (p. 130), yet mills were well-known to employ children under the age of fourteen in menial jobs and as fill-ins during times of peak production (McHugh, 1988). According to Jacobs (1932), “Most important to the moral, spiritual, and even the physical welfare of the average cotton mill village is the sentiment that its young people be learners or producers rather than loafers” (p. 130). Thus, if children could not work in the mills, school was the alternative “holding ground,” and not necessarily intended to
further the minds of children beyond what was needed to work productively in the mills once the children were old enough to do so.

The problems associated with mill schools of the late 1800s lasted into the mid-teens of the twentieth century. Social reformers of the early twentieth century “confronted the social changes brought about by the cotton mill in a recognizably ‘modern’ manner, dealing with them as ‘social problems’ to be solved by concerted rational effort” (Carlton, 1982, p. 111). Schools became a critical part of this effort:

 Particularly was it important to control the children of the mills. Not only were they the future citizens . . . , but the plasticity of their young minds afforded an opportunity for the middle classes to breach the wall of hostility and lack of education separating them from the operatives, and to imbue the upcoming generation of mill workers with the ‘proper’ values. (Carlton, 1982, p. 170)

Social reforms included child labor restrictions and compulsory school attendance, although in at least one southern state “statewide compulsory education with attendance officers did not come until 1919. . . , and its enforcement was not effective until the late 1930s” (Carlton, 1982, p. 212). Rhyne (1982) posits that high school education for mill operative children was especially controversial because manufacturers feared the loss of employees but also because these older students wanted to go to work in the mills as soon as they were legally able to do so. “The tendency for many parents to keep their children out of school,” asserts Rhyne (1982), “possibly arises from a deeply embedded feeling that any expense and sacrifice involved in education would be of little or no benefit to the children” (p. 202). However, the need and desire for additional family income was also a catalyzing force in these decisions.
According to McHugh (1988), beginning in the 1930s and increasing in the years after World War II, mill companies began selling company-owned housing; this corresponded with a decrease in mill company controlled schooling. Remarking on the sale of mill villages, Herring (1949) writes,

> Whether they are directly concerned, like the employer who makes the decision to sell and the worker who buys, or indirectly like the school principal in the area and the casually observing citizen, they know something significant is going on. (p. v).

Increased worker opposition to company welfare programs, including heavy influence in schools, and the advent of industrial engineering and scientific management led companies to substantially decrease company supported welfare programs and to back away from paternalistic practices of the early mill years. As larger responsibility for improving education fell to public school districts, mill company need and the importance of supporting separate mill village schools drastically decreased (McHugh, 1988). Although schools built by cotton manufacturers remained in operation, the schools, employees, and students steadily came under the purview and policies of state officials rather than company supervisors and managers.

**Variations of This Case from Existing School Closing Literature**

This case diverged from the literature about historical reasons for school closings in that the closing of Chase Elementary School was not a formal effort at consolidating several small rural schools, as had been the impetus for many school closings in the early- to mid-twentieth century (Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977). Chase Elementary was not a
symptom of “the rural school problem” (Henderson & Gomez, 1975; Rosenfeld & Sher, 1977; Zimmerman, 2009), and closing the school was not part of a larger plan aimed at centralizing control of schools. Chase was a textile mill village, not an agriculture-based community, and though the area is rural, at one time Chase was a thriving, “model factory town” (Carlton, 1982, p. 90) complete with its own hospital, library, and petting zoo.

Although Chase Elementary School was tiny, serving approximately 175 students in eight classrooms during its last year, there were no indications that at the time of the closing Chase students were academically underperforming or that the school was unable to meet the academic needs of students, which are also reasons for school closing and consolidation addressed in the literature (Benton, 1992; Dillon, 2008; Sack-Min, 2008; Sell et al., 1996; Ward & Rink, 1980; Weatherley et al., 1983). The presence and use of interactive white boards, document cameras, a computer lab, and a computer-based library system indicate that Chase students were taught with and provided opportunities to use modern electronic instructional technology. Thus, the inability to provide teachers and students with education technology items and experiences, which has been cited as a reason for school closings (Post & Stambach, 1999), was not a factor in the decision of the Board. Chase Elementary students participated in field trips and other endeavors outside of the immediate community, and they did not appear to be lacking in educational opportunities. As such, the academic performance and opportunities provided to students at Chase Elementary were features that deviated from research descriptions of the situations of other schools faced with closure.
Unlike school closing research that includes discussion of the economic impact a school closing may have on a community (Bailey, 2000; Howley & Eckman, 1997; Kearns et al., 2009; Lyson, 2002; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005; Sell et al., 1996), at no point did any participants indicate that the loss of the school would have a negative economic impact on the community. The school was not a primary source of employment for community members, and it did not generate significant revenue for the mill town (Bailey, 2000; Howley & Eckman, 1997; Kearns et al., 2009; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005; Sell et al., 1996). There were few indications that an abandoned school building would negatively impact the financial worth of other real estate in Chase.

Final variations from the literature pertain to the lack of busing and transportation hardships associated with small rural school closings and the noted difficulties of student and parent transitions from small rural schools to larger, culturally and academically different schools. Students of Chase Elementary would attend a school no more than four and one-half miles away from the existing school structure. Student well-being, involvement in extracurricular activities, struggles with academics, and long periods of time spent out of the home community due to long distances between student and parent homes and the school sites (Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Nitta et al., 2010; Sias, 2008; Slavin, 2005; Spence, 2000) were not mitigating circumstances in this case. Thus, busing and transportation as impediments to student success and inhibitors to parental involvement, as noted in the literature, were not factors in the resistance to the school closing. In addition, because students and parents would be transitioning to nearby small rural schools, problematic issues of adjustment to much larger environments (Egelson,
1993; Kearns et al., 2009; Sell et al., 1996); clashing cultures, world views, and values (Bickel et al., 2001; DeYoung, 1993; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Kearns et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Ogbu, 2008; Woodrum, 2004; Woodrum, 2009); and academic agendas that promoted nationalistic goals as superior to those of local communities (Bauch, 2001; Corbett, 2007; DeYoung, 1993; DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Woodrum, 2004; Woodrum, 2009) were not complications in the closing of Chase Elementary School.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative, single-case study stories the closing of a small, rural, historic, mill school in the southeastern United States. The purpose of this research was to explore the responses of students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents to the closing of Chase Elementary School and to understand why participants were upset about the school closing. Through the responses of 12 purposefully selected participants, I focused on attitudes, perceptions, and values of students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents as they relate to functions of school and schooling, culture of school and schooling, the school itself, and relationships between school, community, and individual. Most current education research on school closings and consolidations does not include examination of participants’ perceptions of school and schooling, perceptions and value of the school itself, or the relationships between school, community, and individual. Therefore, through the aforementioned components, the study addressed psychosocial aspects of school closings and consolidations that are missing in school closing and consolidation research, provided additional research regarding the closings of elementary schools, and contributed to education research about salient features and symbolic aspects of public education.
Research Questions

The central question of this study was: Why were people upset with the closing of Chase Elementary School, a small, rural, historic, mill-town school in the southeastern United States? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What contextual features contributed to this case?

2. In what ways did students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents respond to the announced closing of the school?

3. What attitudes, perceptions, and values did students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents reveal toward functions of school and schooling?

4. What attitudes, perceptions, and values of students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents emerged in relation to culture of school and schooling?

5. How did students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents perceive the school itself?

6. How did students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents characterize the relationships between school, community, and individual?
**Case Study Design**

I selected a case study design based on its affordances and in spite of its challenges. Case study allowed me to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (Merriam, 2001, p. 19), place emphases on “context” and “discovery” rather than on “a specific variable” and “confirmation,” and potentially impact “policy, practice, and future research” (Merriam, 2001, p. 19). This study was an opportunity to delve more deeply into the lives and experiences of a contextually distinct group of individuals in a specific situation and setting; yet, I also perceived larger implications for small rural schools and communities faced with school closure. Yin (2009) tacitly affirms my choice of methodology in writing that case study is appropriate when the researcher desires “to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding. . . [encompasses] important contextual conditions—because they were highly pertinent to. . . [the] phenomenon of study” (p. 18).

As may be seen in Figure 1, I explored these context-specific responses and the corresponding foci through a qualitative “single case study with embedded units of analysis” (Yin, 2009, p. 46). By focusing on a single case, I hoped “to uncover the interaction of significant factors” (Merriam, 2001, p. 29) related to what happens when a small, rural, historic, mill school closes. An additional reason for selecting case study methodology was due to its “unique strength,” the case study’s “ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (Yin, 2009, p. 11). My case study research design primarily relied upon participant interviews, but it also included use of formal and informal observations, artifacts, documents, and online
and printed media related to the history of the school and community, as well as to the school closing, in order to construct the fullest possible portrayal of the school and mill town, the circumstances surrounding the school closing, and the experiences and perceptions of participants engaged in this research. Observations, artifacts, documents, and online and printed media allowed me to provide contextual wholeness and depth when describing this case, its context and setting, and the participants.

![Figure 1: Visual Model of Single-Case Study with Embedded Units of Analysis](image)

Those who express skepticism about case studies and their viability as a methodology of inquiry point to several concerns, among them “lack of rigor,” “limited scientific generalization,” incredibly long timeframes resulting in “massive, unreadable
documents,” and inability to “establish causal relationships” (Yin, 2009, p. 14-16).

Nevertheless, to some degree, these claims depend upon the perspective of the critic and on the willingness of the researcher to consciously and intentionally address these perceived weaknesses. For example, Merriam (2001) addresses the issue of generalizability by asserting that “in qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of many” (p. 208). The same holds true for dissenters who want research that reveals causal relationships: qualitative case studies are not necessarily intended to illuminate cause and effect, although it is possible for them to do so (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Allegations of never-ending data collection and overwhelming documentation may be countered by specifically defining the boundaries of the case (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2001) and by establishing a research protocol (Yin, 2009). Finally, claims of soft research may be disproven by the researcher’s design, actions, and attention to detail and record-keeping. In forthcoming sections, I address all of the aforementioned downfalls as they specifically relate to this study, and I include evidence of a credible, confirmable single case study.

Qualitative case studies involving human participants, in spite of thorough planning and well-designed procedures, are always subject to change because they require the researcher to collect data, analyze data, draw inferences and tentatively construct themes and categories, and then return to the participants in order to clarify data interpretation and collect additional data. Qualitative studies are recursive (Yin, 2009;
Creswell, 2001) in that the researcher continually refers to gathered data in order to discern what data need to be collected next. Although prior studies guided the overall structure of this study, I was aware that I must be able and willing to adapt my study design in conjunction with the data collected. Yin (2009) cautions: “You [the researcher] should not think that a case study’s design cannot be modified by new information or discovery during data collection” (p. 62). Merriam (2001) states that “The qualitative researcher must have an enormous tolerance for ambiguity. Throughout the research process—from designing the study, to data collection, to data analysis—there are no set procedures or protocols that can be followed step by step” (italics in original, p. 20). For these reasons, I openly acknowledge that the research design, especially the originally-planned phases of interviews, changed over the course of the study.

**Case and Context**

The context of this case is a small, rural, historic, mill school and community in the southeastern United States. In Chapter Four I have provided a full description and history of the town and the school, and in Chapter Five I have provided specific connections to applicable research from the literature review. I chose this case out of opportunity, convenience, and personal interest.

In part I selected this case because at the time that the decision was made to close Chase Elementary school I was working as the project director for an afterschool program located at the school, and through this experience and its responsibilities, I had been able to observe the inner workings of the school—its people, its formal operations,
and its informal functions. In part I selected this case because I was present at the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting during which one of the first en masse discussions of the potential school closing took place. Through their emotionally-charged responses, I heard and felt the fear, grief, and loss the students and parents had in response to the potential closing of their school. At this meeting, a woman in the back of the small cafeteria stood up to speak. She read aloud a letter she had written to the Parker School District One Superintendent and Board of Trustees. In the closing line of the letter, the woman read: “Please don’t close our school. It’s the last thing we have left.” I, too, was affected. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not convey that in part I desired to explore this case because I have lived in a small rural community, attended small rural schools, and taught in small rural schools, and these experiences have led me to have a personal interest in small rural schools and the ways that they serve their students and their communities. Yet, I also sensed larger implications for coming closer to understanding responses to small rural school closings and how particular features and characteristics of small rural schools impact student and parent, school district employee and affiliate, and community constituent attitudes, perceptions, and values associated with school and schooling and with the relationships between school, community, and individual.

**Researcher Subjectivity**

I grew up in a tiny rural town of approximately 500 people, am a graduate of a small rural high school, and am a former teacher in two small rural schools. Having never held the position of a school- or district-level administrator, I was aware that I had a
tendency to identify with, and perhaps more easily understand, the perspectives of students, parents, and community members of Chase Elementary and the mill village of Chase than to identify with and understand the perspectives of school- and district-level administrators. In addition, because I had been working with students and staff of Chase Elementary almost daily for approximately six months in conjunction with the afterschool program, I had formed personal relationships with some of the students and families of Chase Elementary and professional relationships with many of the teachers and staff of Chase Elementary. During interviews, I was also cognizant of the ongoing emotional turmoil several participants displayed with regard to the school closing.

Early in the processes of designing this study, collecting data, and conducting interviews, I became aware that I would need to make a conscious effort to hear, consider, and understand, as well as fairly and ethically present, all perspectives—those of the individuals ultimately charged with the responsibility of determining whether or not to close Chase Elementary, those of the individuals navigating the formal and the emotional processes of school closure, and those of the individuals coping with the loss of their school. As a result, as I was analyzing data and compiling my interpretations, I regularly asked myself, “Have I tried to hear what each participant shared, have I provided data from multiple perspectives, and have I presented data in a way that accurately portrays the thoughts, ideas, and emotions of all?” I attempted to minimize researcher bias through triangulation of data, member checks, and peer debriefing (Merriam, 2001), as well as the use of “rich” (Merriam, 2001, p. 211), detailed descriptions. In circumstances during which participant emotions were high, I
acknowledged those reactions and attempted to allow participants to negotiate through and cope with their emotions without intervention from me. Finally, in presenting the research findings and providing discussion of the findings, I was always respectful of the emotions participants had displayed.

Although the potential for researcher bias exists, I have attempted to provide careful, respectful, and accurate accounts and interpretations of the closing of this small, rural, historic, mill-town school and the perspectives and emotions of those affected by its closing.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The participants for this study were selected through convenience sampling, snowball or chain sampling (Merriam, 2001), and purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990; cited in Merriam, 2001). Initial participants for this study were recruited through churches in the community; word-of-mouth; my awareness and knowledge of school, district, and community constituents; and my previously established relationships with families of students attending the school and participating in the afterschool program—all convenient ways of accessing potential participants. Because sampling in the aforementioned circumstances required very little money, provided multiple locations, and had a high likelihood of readily available participants (Merriam, 2001), it served well as a starting point.

In the town of Chase and surrounding areas, as with much of the southeastern United States, Protestant churches and church activities are a mainstay of community and
social life. For this reason, to begin the process of recruiting participants, in June 2011 I prepared a short announcement-type description of the study and its purposes, included my contact information, and wrote a letter to church offices asking if they would print the announcement in the church newsletter or Sunday bulletin. In the letter, I also asked if I could attend a church function to introduce the study and to solicit participants. I mailed this packet to sixteen churches, all of which were within five miles of the school site. Two weeks after mailing the packets, I followed up by calling the church offices. Through this process, one church indicated that they would put the announcement in the church newsletter, and I was able to participate in church activities of two additional churches in August 2011.

At these activities, I introduced myself, briefly explained the reasons for and purposes of the research, and asked those in attendance who would like to participate to complete a sign-up sheet that requested name and basic contact information. I also asked that those in attendance share the study announcement, of which I had brought multiple copies, with others in the community who might be interested in participating. This strategy, called snowball or chain sampling, relied upon asking potential participants and actual participants to provide additional potential participants (Merriam, 2001). One individual obtained my contact information from a member at one of the churches, and this individual, who became a study participant, led me directly to two more participants and indirectly to several more.

Next, I slightly revised the letter I had mailed to churches, making it appropriate for the public as opposed to specifically targeting churches, and I created check-box-style
postage-paid postcards. I left five to seven copies of the letter and the postcard at each of
the churches I visited, either on a table in the entrance to the sanctuary or on a bulletin
board, and I gave a copy to anyone at the churches who indicated they might know
someone interested in participating in the study. I also placed five to seven copies of the
letter and postcard at three additional locations—the Town of Chase Office, the local
library, and the United States Post Office in Chase. None of the postcards were returned
to me, and no participants indicated that they came forth as a result of the postcards.

I then began contacting by telephone and email individuals I had met while
working with the afterschool program—families of students, two former principals of the
school, and other school employees. I obtained work-place contact information for
potential participants employed by Parker School District One through the district
website. The Town of Chase maintains a website, and through this website I was able to
locate contact information for the town mayor’s administrative assistant, who had been
quoted several times in media coverage of the school closing, had formerly attended
Chase Elementary, and whose child had attended Chase Elementary at the time of the
school closing.

After making contact with the town’s administrative assistant, who became a
study participant, she guided me toward two non-profit groups associated with the town,
and this led me to several more participants as well as to opportunities to observe a group
with a vested interest in the town. I also joined a Facebook group moderated by a resident
of Chase and designed for people who were “from” the town of Chase. On this Facebook
page, I explained who I was, posted brief information about the research study and why I
was conducting the research, and placed an open invitation with my email address for anyone who might be interested in talking with me. No interviewees or participants resulted from this endeavor. One individual who became a participant was initially contacted through my supervisor from the afterschool program. Additional potential participants were contacted by email and telephone.

Upon interviewing the participants, I again utilized snowball or chain sampling, asking interviewees if they could recommend or suggest other individuals I might be able to speak with concerning participation in the study. I asked that initial interviewees who had potential participant suggestions either contact these individuals and provide them with my contact information or ask the other individuals if I may call or email them, thus avoiding “cold calls” or conditions that might compromise the identities of the existing participants. In this way, I had a larger potential participant pool from which to purposefully select students and parents, district employees and affiliates, and community constituents for interviews. According to Merriam (2001), “Data collection in a case study is a recursive, interactive process in which engaging in one strategy. . . may lead to subsequent sources of data” (p. 134), and this is exactly what happened during the participant recruitment and selection for this study.

**Purposeful Sample**

I had originally intended that a large, initial group of participants be interviewed once, and that from the initial group, a primary sample of six individuals would be selected. In this original design, each individual would have been interviewed a total of
three times each—once during the initial round of interviews that would serve as a screening process and twice more thereafter. My plan was to purposefully select a participant sample consisting of two students who attended the school in the year it closed, two parents of students enrolled in the school during its final school year, and two community constituents who either held formal, paid positions at the school or had particularly close ties with the school and community. Merriam (2001) writes that “purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) echo this description: “Purposive sampling. . . may be defined as selecting a relatively small number of units because they can provide particularly valuable information related to the research questions under examination” (p. 25). I had planned that the six individuals selected for the two subsequent rounds of interviews would, in part, be selected in order to include responses to the school closing from individuals who had differing relationships with and statuses within the school and community. However, I had also anticipated that additional selection criteria based upon participant responses from the first round of interviews would be used to purposefully select the six individuals whom I would ask to participate in the two additional rounds of interviews.

In my naïveté as a new researcher, a linear, step-by-step interviewing and participant selection process seemed logical in spite of the need for flexibility noted above (Merriam, 2001). In reality, the interviewing and participant selection processes were dependent upon each interviewee and participant. Factors such as access to the
potential participant, availability and willingness of the potential participant to complete additional interviews, and the potential participant’s relationship to and position within the school and community affected the interview process and the purposeful selection of participants. Nevertheless, I selected 12 participants with whom to conduct in-depth interviews. These 12 participants and the experiences and information they shared allowed me to provide multiple perspectives of the school and town, to explore responses to the school closing that emanated from individuals in varying positions within the school and community, and to ensure inclusion of multiple types of school and community experiences.

I selected these twelve participants because they represented: (1) students and families of Chase Elementary School, (2) individuals employed by or having close affiliation with Parker School District One and Chase Elementary School, and (3) at-large community constituents. Some participants overlapped in these criteria in that they represented two groups. For example, one participant was a parent of a student at the school but also a community constituent, employed by the town of Chase. Participants I selected who “crossed” the aforementioned categories ultimately provided an additional layer of quality and complexity within the data collection and data analysis precisely because their values, attitudes, and perspectives encompassed multiple positions and relationships within the school and community. In two instances, participants were grouped: a family of three participants and a set of three community constituents.

This study was not intended to explore specific issues of socioeconomic status, age or generation, race, or level of educational attainment, although earlier research
indicates that attitudes, perceptions, and values related to school and schooling differ in association with these characteristics (e.g., Anyon, 1980; Corbett, 2009; Ogbu, 2008; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). In making the decision not to focus on these constructs of human individuality, I was not denying their importance; rather, I made a conscious choice to focus on specific education-related aspects of the case through the participants’ positions in relation to the school and community. Thus, a purposeful sample of twelve individuals provided an opportunity to examine responses to the school closing from multiple perspectives.

**Data Collection**

**Interviews**

Merriam (2001) states that interviewing is appropriate “when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 72). Marvasti (2004) posits that “the choice of interview technique should be in synch with the topic of . . . interest and the questions you [the researcher] wish to answer” (p. 31). Because the event of the school closing had ended before I could begin formally collecting data, and because exploring individuals’ personal thoughts and feelings is impossible through observation alone, I chose to conduct interviews as a primary means of gathering data about this case.

I conducted the interviews with potential participants and the selected participants at a location of each individual’s choosing—a local restaurant or coffee shop, the
participant’s home, or the participant’s place of work. With the permission of the school principal, two school employees were interviewed at a school work place. During this time, participant consent forms and other necessary paperwork were completed and copies distributed, the purpose of the study was further explained, participants were encouraged to ask questions they may have about the study and how their responses may be used, participant anonymity and confidentiality were discussed, and participants were asked to select a pseudonym for use in this study.

During the course of data collection, I interviewed 17 individuals. From these interviews, I selected 12 participants. With interviewees’ permission, I audio recorded nine interviews from July 2011 through June 2012; two of the interviews involved multiple participants. One participant interview was conducted by phone. During the interviews I took field notes in addition to the audio recordings. As soon as possible after each interview, I added observer comments from the interview and more fully completed the notes I had taken. Follow-up questions were asked and answered through email and subsequent telephone interviews.

Because one participant interview was conducted via telephone, and because I was unable to record it, for the duration of the interview I took copious notes. Immediately after the phone interview, I transcribed all of my notes and completed the transcription with details based upon my recall of the interview. For any portions of the transcription about which I was uncertain, I contacted the participant by email for clarification and elaboration. This person was selected as a final participant, and follow-up questions were asked and answered via email. The shortest recorded interview was
approximately thirty minutes; the longest was over one hour and fifteen minutes.

Because some individuals shared valuable historic information with me but did not participate in formal interviews, I used data collected from these conversations to provide descriptions and accounts of the town history and the events of the school closing, even if an individual was not selected for in-depth participation.

I had originally planned that the first round of interviews would be unstructured in that they would “simply provide a general sense of direction and allow respondents to tell their stories” (Marvasti, 2004, p. 21). According to Merriam (2001), “One of the goals of the unstructured interview is. . . learning enough about a situation to formulate questions for subsequent interviews” (p. 75). The questions I anticipated asking during this first interview were broad, open-ended questions that centered on:

- participant experiences and interactions with the school that is the focus of this study (Chase Elementary),
- participant experiences and interactions with the community (Chase) in which the school is located, and
- participant recollections of their responses to the closing of Chase Elementary School.

Through the responses gathered during the initial round of interviews, I believed that I would be able to provide a holistic description of the case and its context—one that included a range of responses related to the aforementioned topics. Once the initial interviews were completed and I had analyzed the corresponding audiotapes and transcripts, I had planned to use participant responses to purposefully select the six primary participants for the second and third rounds of interviews.
In my original research design, after having purposefully selected six participants from the first set of interviewees, in the second round of interviews, I wanted to use in-depth semi-structured interviews as my primary method of data collection. According to Marvasti (2004), “In-depth interviewing is founded on the notion that delving into the subject’s ‘deeper self’ produces more authentic data,” and it offers the opportunity “to reveal multiple, and sometimes conflicting, attitudes about a topic” (p. 21). Because this study examines multiple, inter-related topics through the vehicle of participants’ responses to the school closing, I understood the importance of providing for “the complexity of respondents’ attitudes,” perceptions, and values (Marvasti, 2004, p. 21) and creating “a particular kind of conversation between the researcher and the interviewee that requires active asking and listening” (italics in original; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Open-ended questions would elicit responses to participants’ attitudes, perceptions, and values as they related to:

- functions of school and schooling at Chase Elementary,
- culture of school and schooling at Chase Elementary,
- the school itself,
- relationships between school, community, and individual, and
- specific aspects of participants’ responses to the threat of school closing and the actual event/phenomenon

I had planned for the third round of interviews to provide opportunity for me to further probe participants about their responses to questions from the second round of interviews. Merriam (2001) writes,
Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection, which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions and so on. It is an interactive process throughout that allows the investigator to produce believable and trustworthy findings (p. 151).

Because I could not predict participant responses provided during the second round of interviews, I had intended to compose the third set of interview questions after completion of the second round of interviews and in conjunction with analyses of additional data such as newspaper articles and media reports. The questions I anticipated composing would have been based upon collective responses of participants that revealed common themes as well as upon each individual participant’s responses. Both unique and collective attitudes, perceptions, and values revealed through those responses would guide further questioning.

As discussed earlier, contacting interviewees and selecting participants did not, in actuality, proceed in an overall linear fashion. However, the initial contact with, interviewing of, selection of, and follow-up with each participant progressed in a generally linear manner. In fact, the difficulty in locating and procuring interviewees and potential participants led me to think that I needed to collect as many responses as possible and delve as deeply as possible while actually involved in the interviews. As a result, I created a set of questions that began with open-ended questions focused on the general nature of the interviewee’s relationship to and experiences with the school and town and that progressed to more structured, more specific questions. Closing questions
in the interview “widened” to provide participants with the opportunity to share
information they felt and thought was important but that I had not asked about or
addressed with previous questions. Probing questions were used throughout all stages of
the interviews and interview process. As I conducted more interviews and reviewed more
data related to the town of Chase and the event of the school closing, I modified the
questions.

However, the overall design of the interview questions could be described as an
hour glass. I asked general, open-ended questions similar to:

1. Tell me about your relationship to and connections with Chase Elementary
   School.
2. Tell me about your relationship to and connections with the town of Chase.
3. Describe to me what you know about the history of and the relationship
   between the school and the town.
4. Tell me about the closing of Chase Elementary School.

More structured and more specific questions I asked depended upon the relationship of
the participant to the school and to the town, but generally included:

5. What was it like to go to, work at, or participate in activities of Chase
   Elementary School? Could you describe some examples or events that would
   help me understand?
6. What were the strengths, weaknesses, benefits, and challenges of Chase
   Elementary School?
7. What is or was it like to live or work in the town of Chase? Could you share
   some stories or events that would help me understand?
8. What are or were the strengths, weaknesses, benefits, and challenges of the
town of Chase?
9. Walk me through the closing of the school from your experience and perspective, beginning with how you first learned that the school might close.

10. What were your fears and concerns about the school closing? Could you help me understand why you had these fears and concerns?

11. How would you describe the relationship between the community and the school?

12. Did or does it make a difference that the school building has not been abandoned but is being used for adult education programs?

13. There are people who might say that Chase Elementary was “just a school” and that it should have been closed a long time ago or that they don’t understand why it was such a big deal. How would you respond to those statements?

“Wide” questions I used in closing the interview were similar to:

14. If you were writing a book about Chase Elementary and the town of Chase, what would you be sure to put in it?

15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that I should know about Chase Elementary, the town of Chase, or the school closing?

The final question in each interview was: Who else would you suggest that I talk with?

I created follow-up questions specific to each participant, sometimes asking the questions as the interview progressed and sometimes asking the questions after I had listened to audio recordings of the interviews, read interview transcripts, and reviewed field notes and observations. I developed some additional questions as I analyzed other data sources or others’ interview transcripts and worked between and among data to develop categories and themes.
With the assistance of a paid transcriptionist, audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed. During the time that the transcriptionist was working to transcribe the audio recordings, I repeatedly listened to the audio recordings and began making notes and memos of themes and ideas that emerged. I also used that time to review my field notes and observations. For all typed transcriptions, I listened to the recordings as I proofread and annotated the scripts, I referred back to my field notes and observations, and I listened to the audio recordings as I read transcripts. This allowed me to immerse myself in the interviews and responses and to remain highly cognizant of the subtleties of the spoken word that would not be apparent simply from reading typed transcripts. To organize themes, concepts, and ideas from the transcripts, I used colored highlighters to mark important quotes and ideas for each category or research question, created tables in a word processing program, and then typed key quotes, concepts, and ideas into the tables. This allowed me to move related quotes, concepts, and ideas into different table cells until related themes emerged.

**Observations and Personal Reflections**

I engaged in formal and informal observations and utilized personal reflections throughout this study. Because I had worked with the afterschool program at Chase Elementary four to five days per week for one year prior to the closing of the school, I had been noting personal thoughts and recollections about the school, its students and parents, its employees, and its community constituents before I knew that they would become part of this study. In addition, I had attended school events such as a “Back-to-
School” night, a Halloween bazaar-type festival hosted by the school Parent Teacher Organization, and Parent Teacher Organization meetings. I had taken field trips with students of the school who participated in the afterschool program and with employees of the school who also worked for the afterschool program. I had worked with school-level and district-level administrators on behalf of the afterschool program. On the night that the idea for this study was born, I was at a PTO meeting in a formal capacity as a representative of the afterschool program—not as a formal researcher. As such, I had to attempt to reconstruct some of my personal thoughts and feelings about these events after the fact. In addition, I continued to work with the afterschool program once the decision to close Chase Elementary School was made, but because the district declined to participate in the study at that time, I could not ask any formal questions of parents, students, or school/afterschool employees. For personal thoughts, ideas, and emotions during the time of the proposed closing (February 2009), the closing itself (February through May 2009), and for the year-and-a-half after the closing during which I continued to work with the afterschool program (June 2009 through December 2010), I created personal reflections in the form of journal-style notes as soon as I could after the study-related event or conversation.

Formal observations included an afternoon-long combination school and town reunion hosted by the town’s Heritage Commission (November 2010), attendance at a regularly scheduled Heritage Commission meeting (June 2012), and two driving tours of the town of Chase (August 2011 and May 2012). For the school-town reunion and the Heritage Commission meeting, I took field notes during the event and then completed my
notes as soon as possible afterward in order to include details and descriptions that I could not write as I was observing. The school-town reunion also provided me with an opportunity to view an extended community of individuals associated with the town of Chase and Chase Elementary School as well as a large number of artifacts representative of the school and the town. I made notes about the artifacts as I observed them, and when given opportunity to do so during interviews, asked participants about the artifacts. With regard to the two driving tours of the town, I wrote cursory notes about the first tour at stopping places along the drive. For the second driving tour, I audio recorded my observations as I drove, and I then transcribed the audio recording into notes.

**Documents, Artifacts, and Online Media Reports**

In addition to interviews and observations, I used newspaper articles, media videos, online media coverage stories, and official minutes of the Parker School District One Board of Trustees meetings posted on the school district’s website to construct a chronological description of the events leading up to the school closing, the actual school closing, and the public responses to the school closing. These documents were not explored and examined with the intention of analyzing the documents themselves; rather, I reviewed them in order to assist in the formulation of a complete case and context constructed from multiple perspectives and multiple sources. All information from the newspaper articles, media videos, online media coverage, and board meeting minutes is acknowledged and cited as such, and in any cases in which I found discrepancies in “facts” from source to source, I included the information from each source that addressed
that specific “fact.” For example, differences in how much money the school district anticipated saving by closing Chase Elementary existed among these sources; thus, I included the specific dollar amounts from differing sources that provided this information and then noted the respective source.

Printed descriptions and video coverage of meetings, events, and people involved in the events of the closing are noted as such. In some instances I utilized quotes that media sources attributed to a specific individual. I was able to contact three of these individuals, all of whom were quoted in several sources and all of whom became participants in the study, to affirm that the respective quotes were theirs, that the quotes were accurate, and that they had no objections to my use of the quotes; the names of these individuals were changed to protect their identities and to maintain confidentiality. Any quotes from anonymous or unidentified individuals were noted as such. In all uses, the sources were cited, and the quotes and descriptions were used to assist me in providing contextual wholeness and thorough, accurate representations of the case and context.

I used a locally compiled book of memories and information about Chase and Chase schools, local newspaper feature stories, historical photographs, an informational pamphlet, the town’s website, and the website of a non-profit town constituent group as additional data sources. I also examined participant-owned photographs of the schools, students, town, mill village residents, and sporting events; a collection of trophies won by school- and mill company-sponsored athletic teams; and a display of school awards and plaques. These artifacts and documents provided me with invaluable information with which to trace the historical development of the school and town, to observe what was
valuable and notable for the school and community, and to complete the school and town descriptions through the present.

**Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Representation**

Because this case study was exploratory, it was difficult to determine precisely how participant responses over the course of the interviews would shape and mold the study, analyses of data, interpretations, and final form. Additionally, Merriam (2001) comments that the process of data analysis is “highly intuitive” and that “the real learning can only take place in the doing” (p. 156). Nevertheless, in qualitative research, data analysis “consists of preparing and organizing the data. . . for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2007, p. 148).

Creswell (2007) likens this process to a “Data Analysis Spiral” (p. 150) during which researchers collect data, organize it, “immerse” themselves in the details in order to have a clear vision of the entire interview, observation, or document, and write “memos” or notes in the margins of the collected data (p. 150). After this, the researcher develops broad categories that are supported through multiple interviews or forms of data—the “describing, classifying, and interpreting loop” of the spiral (Creswell, 2007, p. 151). Through these latter processes, the researcher more fully develops codes or categories and begins to “describe in detail, develop themes or dimensions through some classification system, and provide an interpretation in light of. . . [his or her] own views or views of perspectives in the literature” (Creswell, 2007, p. 150).
The coding process and data collection continue through multiple loops, and the researcher continues to code data based upon the initial set of codes or categories and subsequent modifications or expansions of those codes. Next, the researcher begins to look for overarching themes, “winnowing the data, reducing them to a small, manageable set of themes” that will be included in the findings and discussion (Creswell, 2007, p. 153). During the interpretation phase, Creswell (2007) suggests that researchers “use direct interpretation” and “develop naturalistic generalizations” (p. 157). Finally, the researcher will “present [an] in-depth picture of the case (or cases) using narrative, tables, and figures” (Creswell, 2007, p. 157).

Merriam (2001, p. 162-163), citing Bogdan and Biklen (1992), provides ten recommendations for researchers to keep in mind while analyzing data. In addition, Merriam (2001) differentiates between coding and categorizing. Coding is a system the researcher develops in order to “easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 2001, p. 164), whereas categorizing involves developing categories or themes as concepts or constructs that reflect pertinent aspects of the data; “the categories are abstractions derived from the data, not the data themselves” (Merriam, 2001, p. 181). Constructing categories “is largely an intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study’s purpose, the investigator’s orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves” (Merriam, 2001, p. 179). According to Merriam (2001), the constant comparison method of data analysis, in which the researcher continuously compares sets of data to affirm, negate, or expand previously formed categories, is commonly used to arrive at these central themes.
Based on the suggestions of Creswell (2007) and Merriam (2001), I engaged in data analysis beginning with the “first” set of data and interacted with the data through note-taking, memoing, and questioning. I often wrote directly on documents and transcripts and highlighted and underlined parts I wanted to revisit, review, or combine with other ideas. As discussed earlier, data included formal interviews with 12 participants, formal and informal observations, artifacts and documents, online media and printed media stories, and information and responses collected from 17 individuals. I used my preliminary ideas to guide me in designing interview questions and in creating notes and lists about areas and ideas I needed to further explore with participants and through additional forms of data. As I continued conducting interviews with participants, I actively coded data, made notes for further data collection, and compared and contrasted subsequent data and ideas collected throughout the study. I moved recursively through all forms of data, working with each item multiple times and in conjunction with other pieces and types of data. Throughout data collection and analyses, I consciously and intentionally referred to and engaged in the aforementioned list of ten suggestions (Merriam, 2001) for qualitative researchers.

**Validity, Reliability, and Ethics**

**Internal Validity/Trustworthiness**

Internal validity or trustworthiness of a case study hinges upon the extent to which research findings are congruent with reality (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2001). In addition, in qualitative research, “it is important to understand the
perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest, to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (Merriam, p. 203). Because I was the only individual conducting interviews and gathering data for this research, and as such served as the research instrument, I employed several strategies to ensure that my interpretations were accurate interpretations, depictions, and representations.

Merriam (2001) suggests six basic strategies, of which I used four: (1) the process of triangulation, in which I used multiple sources of data, namely, multiple participants, but also observation, documents, media reports, and artifacts; (2) member checks, in which I asked participants to clarify comments and responses as I conducted the interviews; repeated or reframed to participants my understanding of what they were saying in order to give them an opportunity to gauge, correct, or amend my initial understanding; and went back to participants with questions throughout the data analysis process; (3) peer debriefing, in which I sought comments and feedback from members of my dissertation committee concerning the findings that emerged; and (4) disclosure of researcher biases, in which I made known my “assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study” (Merriam, 2001, p. 204-205; see also Creswell, 2007). In addition, I utilized direct quotes from participants to support my interpretations, depictions, and representations of data.
**External Validity/Generalizability**

This study was intended to examine a single case and to explore with depth what happens in a distinctive context based upon a circumstance-specific phenomenon. Yet, the findings of this research are generalizable to other school closing cases. Yin (2009), Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006), and Merriam (2001) make distinctions between generalizability that utilizes a sample and attempts to extend the findings to a much larger body of individuals, as in much statistic-based research, and analytic generalizability in which findings may be extended to another case with a highly similar context. The former type of generalizability, when applied to quantitative research, is analogous to replication, in which a researcher may desire to repeat the study with a different sample (Yin, 2009). Nevertheless, several strategies I employed will allow readers and other researchers to compare and contrast the findings of this study with their own school closing cases. First, I utilized “rich” descriptions (Merriam, 2001, p. 211; see also Geertz, 1973/2000, p. 6) of the context, phenomenon, and participants. Although some descriptions excluded certain information in order to protect the participants, every effort was made to provide as complete a picture as was ethically possible. The verbal pictures, histories, and descriptions I created of the context and the school closing were designed to have multiple dimensions in that they were informed by a variety of data sources; incorporated the idiosyncrasies of the historic mill community, the once mill-owned, now-public school, and the events of the school closing; and portrayed the historic and current “living” of the mill town and school. Because the school district in which this phenomenon took place declined to participate in the study, some contextual information
was unavailable, and this, too, affected the degree to which some descriptions were
developed. Nevertheless, the use of purposeful sampling allowed me to provide a variety
of perspectives, thus strengthening external validity and the degree to which others could
apply the findings to similar cases.

**Reliability/Dependability/Consistency**

In general terms, reliability ascertains the extent to which a study and its findings
can be repeated using the same individuals, circumstances, and procedures (Yin, 2009;
Merriam, 2001). In qualitative studies, however, the researcher attempts to describe
reality as individual participants experience and perceive the event(s) (Merriam, 2001).
Because individuals have unique perspectives of a given experience and assign varying
interpretations and meanings to that experience, to guarantee that a study and its findings
may be repeated with 100% accuracy is fallacious. Instead of referring to reliability of a
qualitative study, “Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 288) suggest thinking about the
‘dependability’ or ‘consistency’ of the results obtained from the data” (as cited in
Merriam, 2001, p. 206). The integrity of the study, then, depends not on the extent to
which another researcher can conduct the same study and arrive at the same conclusions
but “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (italics in original;

To provide evidence of dependability and consistency, I engaged in three
techniques recommended by Merriam (2001): explication of my position as the
researcher, triangulation, and a rigorous audit trail (see also Yin, 2009; & Creswell,
As stated earlier, I explicated my position as the researcher and attempted to reveal my subjectivities, and I also ensured triangulation of data through the use of multiple data sources. In order to establish a high-quality audit trail, I maintained extensive and detailed records of data collection, data coding, thematic and categorical development, and all other decisions guiding this research. Finally, I utilized peer review to ensure that results and conclusions were consistent with the collected data.

**Ethics**

Research conducted with attention to ethics spans quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research. In studies utilizing human participants, ethical behavior on the part of the researcher must include considerations of physical, mental, and emotional distress and repercussions as well as immediate and latent impact upon the participants, whether individually or as a group. Christians (2003; in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) includes four guiding tenets for conducting ethical research: informed consent, awareness of and opposition to deception, rights to privacy and confidentiality, and assurance of data accuracy. To this list Yin (2009) adds “special precautions that might be needed to protect especially vulnerable groups” (italics in original; p. 73). Merriam (2001) writes, “Overlaying both the collection of data and the dissemination of findings is the researcher-participant relationship” (p. 213). Although predicting all possible ethical dilemmas and encounters through the duration of this study and its subsequent release of information was impossible, multiple measures were taken to ensure that study participants were treated in a consistently ethical manner with high regard for human life,
the right to privacy, and the quality of human life. High ethical standards were maintained throughout the processes of data collection and data dissemination and in all aspects of the researcher-participant relationships.

First, I completed all required online courses for human subjects research as provided by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative. Second, I submitted a research protocol to the IRB Committee of Clemson University and had that protocol approved prior to beginning data collection. Third, in order to maintain participant privacy and confidentiality, participants were allowed to choose pseudonyms and to select locations for interviews. Transcripts were coded to match the true identity of the interviewees, but actual names of the interviewees were replaced with the participant-chosen pseudonyms. The researcher maintained the secure, private list of participants’ real names and their self-selected pseudonyms. In addition, when not in use, all electronic files and paperwork that could inadvertently reveal the identities of participants were kept in a locked drawer in the researcher’s home office. Last, the names of the school upon which the study focused, the schools to which students were transferred, and the involved communities were changed. I informed participants of the measures I would take to safeguard their privacy and anonymity, but I also made clear that breaches of privacy and confidentiality outside of my control might occur.

Preventative measures intended to guard the privacy and confidentiality of participants were not the only ethical precautions for which I needed to prepare; ethical dilemmas of many types may arise over the course of a study. As Merriam (2001) writes, “While policies, guidelines, and recommendations for dealing with the ethical dimensions
of qualitative research are available to researchers, actual ethical practice comes down to the individual researcher’s own values and ethics” (p. 218). First, I directly informed participants verbally and in writing that they had the right to withdraw from the interviews at any time, that they could also decline to answer any interview questions that caused them mental or emotional distress, and that if a breach of privacy or confidentiality occurred, I would notify them as soon as I became aware of the situation. I made clear to all participants that this research, once completed, would be accessible to the public. Second, I built and maintained relationships with participants that were professionally appropriate, nonjudgmental, and friendly—the type of relationship that would allow me to identify with the interviewees—not the type of relationship that implies “I’m one of you” or “I’m in your corner.”

I was also aware that I must be conscious of real and perceived power structures as well as power of agency: “Scholars,” writes Ladson-Billings (2003; in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), “must be challenged to ask not only about whom is the research, but also for whom is the research. The question of for whom is not merely about advocacy, but rather about who is capable to act and demonstrate agency” (p. 415). In the event that I was unsure of how to proceed in a situation of uncertain ethical actions or indications, when possible, I sought the advice of more experienced qualitative researchers. If an immediate decision had to be made, I carefully weighed the potential benefits and potential detriments to participants, to the study, and to myself. At all times I sought first to maintain the safety, integrity, and confidentiality of the participants. Stake (2006) notes that:
It is an ethical responsibility for us as case researchers to identify affiliations and ideological commitments that might influence our interpretations—not only for the contracting parties but for the readers of reports, and, of course, for ourselves. But there is no way for us as evaluators to identify all relevant dispositions, or even to know them (italics in original; p. 86).

I was mindful that my personal background and experiences, mindset, and perspectives not only shaped my interpretations of the data, but they also affected all other aspects of the research—including ethical decision-making. Last, but certainly not least, as I moved through data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting, I guided my actions, decisions, and writing through a set of questions presented by Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 199-201). I revisited the directly aforementioned set of questions throughout the data analysis process, the interpretation of collected data, and the creation of data representation.
CHAPTER FOUR

PARTICIPANTS, SITE DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY, CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE SCHOOL CLOSING, AND FINDINGS

Participants

**Dr. Margaret Smith**

Dr. Margaret Smith served as principal of Chase Elementary School for a short time. She grew up in an area adjacent to Chase and was very familiar with the background and history of the school and town. Chase was her first principalship, although she had taught school and worked for Parker School District One in several coordinator positions that gave her a working relationship and familiarity with Chase Elementary School. She is still employed by Parker School District One.

**Lynn Brown**

Ms. Lynn Brown worked in the front office of Chase Elementary School. Her father graduated from Chase High School, but she has never lived in the Chase community. She continues to work for Parker School District One.

**Dr. Justine Ever**

Dr. Justine Ever served as the principal of Chase Elementary School for several years. Prior to that time she worked for Parker School District One in several coordinator positions that allowed her to develop a working relationship and to become familiar with
Chase Elementary School. She does not currently work for Parker School District One but holds a district-level position in a separate school district.

**Brian Grimsley**

Mr. Grimsley has served on the Parker School District One Board of Trustees for several years. He is not from Chase, but he is from and continues to live in the general area. He is a businessman and part-owner of a company he helped begin. His children attend Parker District One schools.

**Freddie, Colleen, and Tony Murphy**

The Murphy family moved to Chase from the northeastern United States several years ago. Mr. Freddie Murphy and Mrs. Colleen Murphy said that they were drawn to Chase by the size of the town, the way that townspeople treated them when they were visiting the area, and the fact that the elementary school their son Tony would attend was small and within walking distance of their home. Mr. and Mrs. Murphy were both quoted several times in media coverage of the closing of Chase Elementary School, and both spoke at the Parker School District One Board meeting during which the Board of Trustees voted to close the school.

**Violet Hunt**

Mrs. Violet Hunt attended Chase Elementary School as a student. Her son Benjamin was enrolled at Chase Elementary at the time it was closed. She is a resident of Chase and works in the town office, although she has not lived in Chase all of her life.
Mrs. Hunt was moderator of the community gathering during which parents, grandparents, and residents of Chase met to discuss ways to halt the school closing. Mrs. Hunt was quoted numerous times in media coverage of the closing of Chase Elementary School and spoke at the Parker School District One Board meeting during which the Board of Trustees voted to close the school.

**Greta Coe**

Ms. Greta Coe graduated with honors from Chase High School in 1940. She attended Chase schools for all but her sixth and seventh grade years of school. At the time of the interview, she was 88 years old. She worked in Chase all of her life in retail stores and in the United States Post Office. She now lives in West Chase.

**Anna, Emmalee, and Betty**

Anna, Emmalee, and Betty declined to choose last names for themselves. They all attended Chase Elementary School in the 1950s and 1960s. Although Anna and Betty had moved away from Chase in earlier years and neither of them lives within Chase now, they both indicated that when they were deciding where they wanted to spend the rest of their lives, they chose to come back to the Chase area. Emmalee has not lived anywhere other than Chase. Her children, now adults, also attended Chase Elementary School. All three women are members of a non-profit group called Chase Heritage Commission.
Site Description and History

Down a winding state road named Maxeys Highway, where small homes and even smaller businesses edge the road and mingle with one another, lie a succession of small communities and the remnants of a once-thriving mill town named Chase. On the west edge of Chase, Maxeys Highway perpendicularly intersects with a north-south state highway named Crawford Highway. The west side of Crawford Highway is West Chase; on the east side is Chase proper. The four corners of the intersection host a Bi-Lo grocery store, a CVS drug store, a Hickory Point gas station, a tiny mom-and-pop Mexican restaurant, and a sign that lists all of the local churches and points the way to each with small arrows. Other small towns and communities lie to the north and south, and roughly 20 miles to the northeast is a city in which, according to the 2010 United States census, approximately 451,000 people reside (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

If one continues driving east from the highway intersection, on the left (north) side stand several churches, a white-columned brick building with “Chase Auditorium” emblazoned at the apex of its roof, a two-story brick building with a sign that reads “Parker 1 and 2 Adult Learning Center,” and a small line of brick storefronts—many standing empty and a few others sporting small businesses such as Mama Mia’s Pizzeria and Ammo Dump. A medical office, three more churches, a United States Post Office, a white wooden building labeled “Chase Community Gym,” and a few more small old buildings dot the right (south) side of the highway. On both sides of Maxeys Highway, named Hettie Street for the section that is within Chase, a few narrow paved roads veer off—none of them divided by a yellow or white line.
Parker One and Two Adult Learning Center and Chase Auditorium are the buildings that formerly made up Chase Elementary School. Looking from Hettie Street at the school grounds and buildings, Chase Auditorium is on the back left edge of the campus. Chase Auditorium is a beautiful, two-story, red brick structure with four white Doric-style columns edging its portico. Entrance through the front of the building is gained through three sets of white doors. Closer to Hettie Street and in the approximate center of the campus is the school building itself. Connected to the school building by a small breezeway is a flat-roofed, one-story, red brick building that served as the cafeteria for Chase Elementary School. Half-way between Hettie Street and the school is a gigantic oak tree, and while the campus was still used as an elementary school, the playground was in this front section of the campus. There is no playing area behind the school, only a small parking lot and a small, black-top basketball area. The school building is a flat-roofed, two-story, red brick building in a 1950s style. The sole front entrance is set off from the rest of the building by concrete framework and simple embellishment. The words “Chase Elementary School” are engraved in the concrete above the doorway. The entire building consists of 13 rooms, and at maximum capacity it served approximately 200 students.

On its far eastern edge, a mere half-mile from the former Chase Elementary School campus, Chase is bordered by the Samson River, its town-side bank revealing salt box-style houses left from the mill days and a crumble of bricks and mortar outlining the remains of a mill. A lone, rusted water tower juts into the skyline, and its faded lettering reads “Gerber Children’s Wear.” The opposite bank, which also designates the start of
the next county, is lined with trees, and far up on the hillside, one can barely see the roofs of a few houses. To the north of Hettie Street are the majority of mill houses. From the on and off ramps of the interstate highway, which is to the west of Chase, to the nearest town border, is five miles; from the state highway intersection that marks the western border to the eastern boundary of Chase, the Samson River, is 0.7 miles. Only four streets in Chase are incorporated, and only the individuals living on these four streets are eligible to hold the position of mayor or to serve on the town council. Official jurisdiction and responsibility for the unincorporated parts of Chase lie with the county. The whole of Chase—incorporated and unincorporated—covers approximately 1.5 square miles (personal communication, June 4, 2012).

Chase began its history as a mill village as a section of 500 acres of land owned by a cotton textile company formed with capital from three Charleston business families. Construction on the first mill began in 1881, and it “had the first electric lighting system” ever installed in a cotton mill (Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 18). The second and third mills began operating in 1885 and 1888, respectively. With the river to power the mills and Piedmont and Northern Railroad to carry supplies and finished products, Chase flourished. The fourth and final mill, “the first manufacturing facility in this country [the United States] to be operated with electricity that had been generated at a distance” (Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 14), was completed in 1895 (Cobb & Welborn, 1995). Like many of the mill villages described by Jacobs (1932) and Rhyne (1930), Chase grew as the number of mills and the need for workers increased. Carlton (1982), citing the July 9, 1885, Charleston News and Courier, writes:
A single street, entering the town from the south past the mill buildings and the officials’ houses, connected the inhabitants to the outside world, it ended in a central square on which the school was built and from which radiated the residential streets. There were one hundred and fifty “comfortable houses” of from four to six rooms each. . . . The government, of course was completely in the hands of the company, which enforced its own regulations and employed a town marshall [sic], appointed by the governor but paid by the mill. (p. 91)

As of 1890, Chase was home to approximately four thousand people, and “by 1900 boasted a population of around forty-five hundred” (Carlton, 1982, p. 90). In its prime it included four textile mills; two hotels; a bank; church buildings for use by the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations; a baseball field; a horseracing track with grandstands; tennis courts; a golf course; and a variety of independently owned and operated stores, although the buildings themselves were owned by the textile company. A skating rink, community building, movie house, lyceum and library, park that included a small zoo, playground, swimming pool, and band concert building provided additional entertainment (Carlton, 1982, and Cobb & Welborn, 1995). These features and endeavors contributed to what McHugh (1988) described as “the southern cotton mill environment” (p. 4) and to the mutually dependent relationship between the mill company and the mill workers and families also discussed by McHugh (1988). Carlton (1982) writes that the manufacturing company “was a rousing success; by 1907 it was the second largest mill corporation in the state” (p. 45). Furthermore, Chase was considered a “‘model factory town’” (Carlton, 1982, p. 90), and it far exceeded the basic mill village pattern noted by Herring (1949).
According to Cobb and Welborn (1995), the first school in Chase was organized, run, and built by the textile company that had built the mills. As Rhyne (1930) asserts, this was typical of unincorporated mill towns. The school began operating in 1882, and classes for its 13 enrollees were held in a two-room house. The first schoolhouse was erected by the mill company in 1885 or 1886, and “an observer in 1886 found [the school] well-equipped and presenting ‘the air of a city school’” (Carlton, 1982, p. 92). The second school was built in 1896 to accommodate additional students who enrolled as the result of the completion of the fourth mill. Between 1899 and 1900 the company constructed a third building, which housed a kindergarten, the first kindergarten in the county (Cobb & Welborn, 1995). The schools were an integral part of the mill town, an important aspect of what Rhyne (1930) terms as “industrial welfare” (p. 27) efforts, and, along with the church, “at the heart of mill philanthropy” (Carlton, 1982, p. 91). This appears to be especially notable for Chase:

The pride of [the town]. . . is its graded schools, maintained for ten months in the year entirely at the Company’s expense, and free to all residents. . . . Every teacher is chosen with special reference to his or her capacity for this distinctive work. Last year about eight hundred pupils enrolled and the examination papers showed an excellent average of scholarship. Night classes are always open to such operatives as most devote their days to earning a livelihood and yet are desirous of acquiring an education. Some children, whose families need their help, work in the mills at stated hours of the day. . . these children, having earned from twenty five cents to fifty cents a piece [sic] for their half days labor, hie hie [sic, in original] away to school, where special provision is made for them, the hours being short and the teaching largely individualized. [The]. . . Manufacturing
Company required those seeking work with the company, beginning in 1902, to sign an agreement which included the following clause:

“I do agree. . .

That all children, members of my family, between the ages of five and twelve years, shall enter the school maintained by said company at. . . [Chase], and shall attend every school-day during the school session, unless prevented by sickness or other unavoidable causes.” (*Forum* 1901, as quoted and cited in Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 86)

In addition to the above stipulation, which set Chase apart as one of the first places in the state with compulsory education, Carlton (1982) states that children over the age of twelve were required to go to work in the mill unless the mill superintendent excused them from this expectation, and that families neglecting to fulfill the directives of the contract could be dismissed and evicted from the village (p. 92). As an additional incentive, students with perfect school attendance were paid ten cents per month (Carlton, 1982, and Cobb & Welborn, 1995). Carlton (1982) also asserts that the manufacturing company “stood to reap great benefits from its educational philanthropy” (p. 93), and that although the company president was interested in improving mill workers’ and their families’ “‘ideals of life. . . and appreciation of the responsibilities of citizenship’” (Jacobs, *The Pioneer*, 93, as quoted and cited in Carlton, 1982, p. 93), “the presence of the school. . . assured the outside world that. . . [Chase] was not a festering sore on the body of civil society” (Carlton, 1982, p. 93). Thus, the nature of the school and its educational goals, the relationship between the company and the school, and the perceived benefits to mill children and the mill company were similar to those of other
mill schools, mill companies, and mill communities (see Jacobs, 1932; McHugh, 1988; Rhyne, 1930).

Around 1900 a new two-story school building, “one of the largest in the state at the time” (Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 87), was built by the company, but it burned down in 1902 and had to be reconstructed. By 1908 two side-by-side graded schools existed, along with a separate building for kindergarten students, and by 1916 a high school was added. In 1918 total school enrollment consisted of 832 students, 46 of whom were high school pupils (Cobb & Welborn, 1995). The four schools in Chase were constructed and maintained by the manufacturing company, and according to an article written by A. D. Oliphant printed in the Greenville Daily News on February 29, 1920,

. . . the company is building a handsome, new high school as well as a large brick auditorium that will be used in school exercises, lectures and the like.

Besides the regular grade teachers, the. . . school employs a teacher of music and expressions and a teacher of domestic science. The domestic science course is compulsory for girls from the first grade through the seventh. It is probable that the present school auditorium will be converted into a special classroom for domestic science when the new auditorium is completed. The. . . schools are also planning to put in a manual training course for the boys. It will be seen from the above that the. . . schools are modern in their scope. They are also modern in their teaching methods. The report of the. . . schools for the month ending January 9, 1920, showed 742 pupils enrolled and an average attendance of 618. (as quoted in Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 89)

The article also discloses that three boys and three girls graduated from the tenth grade in 1919, and of those six students, five enrolled in colleges. This indicates that, as
Rhyne (1930) noted was typical for mill schools, there was a significant decrease in the enrollment of students as they came of work-eligible age. However, in addition to regular school day students, 75 individuals were enrolled in night school, which held classes four times per week (Greenville Daily News, February 29, 1920, as cited in Cobb & Welborn, 1995). The manufacturing company constructed a new high school building and an 800-seat brick auditorium that were completed in 1920 (Cobb & Welborn, 1995), and the auditorium continues to be used today, over nine decades after its construction.

In 1923 the manufacturing company was purchased by Lockwood-Greene of Boston. There is some discrepancy as to when the schools in Chase became public. According to Olin D. Johnston, writing for the Anderson County Economic and Social, as of 1923, the school at Chase was “the largest mill school in the state,” offered “a good course in vocational training,” and operated “a night school. . . graded from the first through seventh grade” (as quoted in Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 91). However, a Greenville Daily News article dated November, 4, 1922, states, “The faculty of the. . . [Chase] public schools consists of 23 teachers, all college graduates, while the enrollment for the present term is 750” (n.a., as quoted in Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 93). Regardless of the schools’ status as public or mill-owned, however, the same article details a large room. . . fitted up with oil ranges, kitchen cabinets and other articles where the young girls may try their hand at the cooking game, and . . . [there are also] excellent athletic games, including football, basketball and baseball teams. A splendid glee club and two literary societies. . . are a credit to the school [and] are also a part of the school system. (n. a., as quoted in Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 93)
The article also notes that “The school district is confined to the town. . .” and that “during the two years that Prof. Derrick has been at the head of the public schools, the enrollment has increased considerable [sic] while the high school department has increased in that time from 40 to 75 students” (n. a., as quoted in Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 93).

Although McHugh (1988) notes that in the 1930s many mill companies began to relinquish control of mill community schools, Chase schools in the 1930s were still subject to the desires of, if not controlled by, the mill company. According to Cobb and Welborn (1995), female teachers were required to be single, reside in the Teacherage, sign in and out of the Teacherage, attend church, and uphold moral behavior. During a mill strike, the superintendent, who “abided by the wishes of the mill officials—sometimes direct from the official and other times through the trustees of the school” (Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 100), called a meeting of the teachers to warn them against talking about the strike or taking sides. In another incident, when a teacher commented on the potential sale of the company and what she believed would be the subsequent firing of many of the mill executives, the mill manager visited the superintendent and “told him to get rid of. . . [the offending teacher]” (Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 100).

In 1936 the Kendall Company of Boston purchased the mills, but little seemed to change with regard to the schools. The superintendent believed that, “‘Boys and girls need to be taught occupations’” (as quoted in Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 101), and he helped begin the Chase High Textile School and Adult Textile Class. Cobb and Welborn (1995) write that in 1938 a physics course was offered at the high school, but due to lack
of student interest “the course was dropped and a textile math course added” (p. 101).

This focus on a type of education deemed appropriate for students destined for mill and textile employment is similar to the curricular goals of other mill schools (see Carlton, 1982; McHugh, 1988; Rhyne, 1930). By 1935 the high school had both football and basketball teams for boys, and by 1938 the extracurricular activities included a girls’ basketball team, a school newspaper, Beta Club, literary club, and a senior class play.

Cobb and Welborn (1995) write,

> During this decade, the school campus was not only the learning center for the teenager but also the center of social activities. In addition to the structured activities such as plays, literary society debates and movies; after school and on the weekends the young people would gather on the campus to talk, play games, or just socialize. (p. 101)

Total school enrollment for the 1938-39 school year was just over 900 students.

World War II negatively affected school enrollment as well as the number of extracurricular activities available to students. Cobb and Welborn (1995) note that the 1943 junior class experienced a 40% reduction between its junior and senior years, going from 60 to 36 students, and that in the 1942-43 school year, football and basketball were suspended altogether. In the mid-forties, once the war was over, previous extracurricular activities and organizations recommenced and new activities were added, among these, band, Glee Club, and the publishing of a school year book (Cobb & Welborn, 1995). The school building constructed in 1923 burned in 1949, and it “was replaced on the same site by a fourteen-room brick building of modern design in 1950” (Cobb & Welborn, 1995, p. 116). A merger of five school districts effective January 1, 1950, included Chase schools,
and a 1952 subsequent division of the county-wide school system placed Chase schools in Parker County School District One. In order to maintain control of the mill village, the mill owners incorporated only four streets in Chase—the streets on which mill supervisors lived. As a result, the supervisors were able to make decisions for the entirety of the village because they were the only ones who could hold official positions for the Town of Chase (personal communication, June 4, 2012).

Like many mill-town schools in the post-World War II years, Chase schools were no longer formal extensions of the mill company (see McHugh, 1988). Upon completion of a new high school building in another area of the district, in 1953 Chase High School closed, leaving Chase Elementary School as the only operating school that remained in the mill town of Chase (Cooper, 1957). In the same year the Kendall Company began to sell the mill houses to the public (personal communication, June 4, 2012).

In 1986 the mills were sold to the Gerber Company, but Gerber ceased operations in Chase in the late 1990s (“Brownfields 2010 Assessment Grant Fact Sheet”). In 2003 the mills were purchased by Greenlight Enterprises, LLC and Brickyard Trucking, Inc. These companies demolished the mills, collecting salvage material for resale, and once the desired materials were removed, stopped work at the old mill sites (“Brownfields 2010 Assessment Grant Fact Sheet”). At what Chase residents call the Upper Mill are the remains of one badly burned and gutted warehouse. At the Lower Mill, piles of demolition debris, one barely standing warehouse, and one partly burned warehouse are all that remain. According to “Brownfields 2010 Assessment Grant Fact Sheet,” these two sites are composed of thirteen “non-contiguous parcels totaling 1,679 acres” and are
now being evaluated for potential environmental contaminants and problems through an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant designed to assist with Brownfields Assessment of the mill sites. As of the 2010 United States Census, 97 people resided within the incorporated sections of Chase (United States Census Bureau, 2010), and although only 33 homes are within the legal town limits (the four incorporated streets), altogether approximately 600 homes make up the mill village which surrounds the former mill sites and spills just outside the legal town limits (personal communication, July 13, 2011).

**Circumstances of the School Closing**

At the Tuesday, January 27th, 2009, regular meeting of the Parker School District One Board of Trustees, the Superintendent informed board members that within the past 90 days the district had lost three million dollars in state budget cuts (Havird, 2009, January 27, p. 1). Measures taken to cut district spending included implementation of a hiring freeze and reductions in “travel, staff development, curriculum development, after school, and summer school accounts” (Havird, 2009, January 27, p. 1). In order to save additional money, through the attrition process, 5.0 full time employee positions vacated due to resignations and/or retirements had been reassigned. The director of finance reported that the district projected additional budget reductions of 5-7% in the upcoming months. The Superintendent informed the Board of Trustees that in planning for the next year, he had been told to cut funding by 15%, thus decreasing the district’s state funding

After discussion of the loss of state funding and the difficulty of the budget process, the Board voted on and passed a resolution to request flexibility in state funding. Just prior to adjourning the meeting, board members were reminded of an upcoming budget work session scheduled for 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday, February 10, 2009 (Havird, 2009, January 27, p. 2). Based on “Minutes of Meeting of January 27, 2009,” in addition to the six board members and five district administrators present, three journalists from local newspapers and seven other individuals attended the meeting.

The Parker School District One Board of Trustees met for less than ten minutes on Tuesday, February 10, 2009, in a special session meeting just prior to the scheduled budget work session (Havird, 2009, February 10). According to “Minutes of Meeting of February 10, 2009,” all seven board members were present, five district administrators were present, two reporters from local newspapers were present, and 22 community members and parents from Chase were present (p. 1). The meeting minutes do not detail why the 22 parents and community members of Chase were present or whether they were there because of the special session meeting or the budget work session. The meeting minutes do not indicate that any of these individuals addressed the Board. However, the attendance of a sizable group from one very small area of the school district implies that, at the very least, these parents and community constituents perceived something within the school district that either had affected or would affect them. An online press release dated Wednesday, February 11, 2009, from a local television channel further supports
this inference: Parker County School District One “is considering a reduction in some of its operations, including the possible closing of an elementary school, due to state budget cuts” (Landreth, 2009, para. 1). According to a quote attributed to the Associate Superintendent of Parker County School District One,

“The closing of . . . [Chase] Elementary is very difficult. . . , but it could save the district approximately $734,819 annually, which results in job retention. The faculty and staff at . . . [Chase] are very competent and caring individuals. It is not an easy time for many teachers and administrators.” (Landreth, 2009, para. 6)

Landreth (2009) quotes the Superintendent of Parker County School District One as saying:

“The consideration to close. . . [Chase] Elementary School is only one of many painful, but necessary actions to be implemented during the 2009-10 school year. . . We know that closing the school is hard for the families, staff and the community, but we do believe it is in the best interest of everyone. The result of the budget crisis has caused us to do things that we never anticipated.” (para. 8)

Although the latter half of the quote attributed to the Superintendent implies that the school closing was imminent, the Board had not yet voted to close the school.

Community members, including parents and grandparents of students attending the school, quickly mobilized to fight the potential school closing, circulating a petition to keep the school open (DiBagno, 2009, February 12, para. 1) and planning a community-wide meeting to generate ideas for keeping the school open (“Concerned Citizens Meet,” 2009). Spruill (2009) reported that on Thursday, February 19th, 2009, approximately 50 Chase residents met to discuss the potential closure, and “according to many of the people in attendance. . . budget cuts and revenue shortfalls are temporary
problems with a variety of possible solutions. Closing... [Chase] Elementary, however, would be a permanent, and potentially devastating, decision...” (para. 9). One resident is quoted as saying, “’If this school dies... [Chase] dies with it... Families will leave and never come back. If they close that school, they’re killing this town’” (Spruill, 2009, para. 13).

Questions and topics brought up in the meeting included the way in which budget cuts were being handled by the district administration and the use of tax money to pay administrators’, assistant principals’, and football coaches’ salaries rather than to funnel tax dollars directly into classrooms (Spruill, 2009). One attendee questioned what was perceived to be a lack of district notification about the possible closure to parents of students at the school (Keeney, 2009, para. 2), and another suggested cutting administration and travel costs (Keeney, 2009, para. 7). One parent expressed concern that “There are a few children in each classroom that need extra help and they’re not going to get it” (Keeney, 2009, para. 8). The community meeting moderator, who was also the administrative assistant to the town’s mayor, acknowledged that she and five other community residents had requested to be on the Parker School District One Board meeting agenda for the following week’s scheduled meeting. She indicated that there were plans in action to try “’to help [the] mill village grow and flourish and bring young families here to raise their kids... One of the main attractions is our school and to lose that would be devastating’” (Keeney, 2009, para. 6). Furthermore, the meeting moderator described the school as “’a center of activity for us, something to focus on, to look forward to... We see our children grow and learn there’” (“Budget Shortfall,” 2009,
Finally, she commented that “... [Chase] Elementary is worth saving, but, do I think they’ll listen? Probably not. ... But, we have to try. We can’t just let this happen” (Spruill, 2009, para. 18).

From the night of the Board meeting during which the severe budget woes were publicly introduced to the Board of Trustees until the night of the Board’s budget work session, two weeks passed. From the night of the Board’s budget work session to the night of the community-wide brainstorming meeting, one week and two days transpired. On Tuesday, February 24, 2009, at the regularly scheduled 7:00 p.m. Parker School District One Board meeting—two weeks after the budget work session and less than one week after the community-wide meeting—the Parker School District One Board of Trustees voted to close Chase Elementary School effective at the end of the 2008-2009 school year (Havird, 2009, February 24, p. 2). Prior to the vote, the Superintendent presented information concerning between four and six-and-one-half million dollars in state budget cuts for the upcoming school year. Proposed measures for reducing the district’s budget included: “administrative costs, staff development, travel, maintenance, program reductions, instructional supplies, computer leases, support staff, salary supplements, higher per pupil-teacher, [sic] allotment, reducing all employee contracts by 5 days and the closing of. . . [Chase] Elementary” (Havird, 2009, February 24, p. 1).

According to “Minutes of Meeting of February 24, 2009,” 59 guests were present at the meeting in addition to six members of the news media. The meeting minutes state: Nine parents and/or community members addressed the Board regarding the issue of closing. . . [Chase] Elementary School. . . . Each individual spoke in favor of
keeping. . . [Chase] Elementary School open and opposed the consideration of closing the school. (Havird, 2009, February 24, p. 1).

Attendees who spoke at the Board meeting in efforts to halt or delay the school closure provided several ideas for cutting district costs without closing Chase Elementary: eliminating administrative positions and a 3K program at Clark Green Elementary, asking the town to pay the utility costs for the school, consolidating the five Parker County school districts into one large district, and slashing assistant principal and nurse positions (DiBagno, 2009, February 26). Exactly four weeks had elapsed between the first indication of extreme financial shortfall and the Board’s decision to close the school in order to reduce district expenses. In the same meeting, after the Board voted to close Chase Elementary, the then-current principal of Chase Elementary School was recommended for and approved by the Board to fill the position of principal at Clark Green Elementary School, one of the three schools that would receive students from Chase Elementary for the 2009-2010 school year (Havird, 2009, February 24, p. 3).

News coverage and media reports of the February 24, 2009, Board meeting demonstrate that the meeting itself was volatile, that the amount of money the district anticipated saving by closing the school was somewhat uncertain, and that even after the Board’s vote and the adjournment of the meeting, some community members and parents were very active and vocal in expressing their displeasure with the process leading up to and the decision to close Chase Elementary. A news story titled “School Officials Say School’s Closure Will Save $735K” (2009) noted that the district believed closing Chase Elementary would “save nearly $735,000 that will help close a $6.5 million budget gap
projected for [the] next school year” (para. 3), and it also detailed “angry reactions from some parents” (para. 1), parents who “were outraged and stormed out” (para. 8), parents “in tears” (para. 9), and a parent who “screamed” (para. 10) after the meeting: “‘They don’t care. They don’t care about our children at all’” (para. 10).

Another news story described how “Tempers flared as parents expressed their outrage” (Bradley, February 25, 2009, para. 1) and stated that “The district hopes to save half a million dollars by closing the school” (Bradley, 2009, para. 1). A newspaper journalist who was a regular attendee at Parker School District One board meetings described the scene:

Some of the students and parents held signs asking that the board not close the school.

“Please don’t close my school,” “Give our children a future,” “Preserve History—Save. . . [Chase] Elementary,” “Listen to our prayers. Save. . . [Chase] Elementary.” (DiBagno, 2009, February 26, para. 13-14)

Later in the meeting,

As all seven. . . [Parker] School District One board members raised their hands to approve the closing. . . [of Chase] Elementary at the end of the school year, several women cried out in dismay and some in the audience promised the board they would vote them out of office next time. (DiBagno, 2009, February 26, para. 2).

The same article also noted that the expense of operating Chase Elementary was “about $9,700 per pupil, well above the district average of $6,751 per pupil, according to
district and state figures” (DiBagno, 2009, February, 26, para. 7). A Chase resident commented:

“The situation regarding the proposed closing at . . . [Chase] Elementary could and should have been handled in a different way. . . . The district office should have contacted the town and should have had a Q and A meeting with parents and community members.” (DiBagno, 2009, February 26, para. 15 and 17)

Not all parents and community members expressed vehement responses to the Board’s decision, and some were not pleased with the dramatic outbursts and behaviors exhibited by others (“School Officials Say,” 2009). Although Board members commented on the difficulty of the decision to close Chase Elementary (DiBagno, 2009, February 26,), one parent asserted “the decision was made before we even got here” (“School Officials Say,” February 25, 2009, para. 18). The Superintendent, who had once been principal at Chase Elementary and who is a member of a church in Chase, “said he understood the citizens’ attachment to the school and to the community” (DiBagno, 2009, February 26, para. 32). The last paragraph of “School Officials Say” (February 25, 2009) stated: “Parents feel like they’re being picked on because a majority of students at the school come from low to moderate income families” (para. 22), but the Superintendent assured those at the meeting that the education of children from Chase would not suffer, regardless of which one of the three receiving schools they attended (DiBagno, 2009, February 26). Nevertheless, parents and community members continued to verbalize the importance of Chase Elementary “as much more than a school” (“School Officials Say,” 2009, para. 15). Another parent commented, “They are taking the heartbeat out of this
town. It was the last thing that we had at this point after the mills closed’ (“School Officials Say,” 2009, para. 16).

On May 26, 2009, Parker School District One Board of Trustees voted unanimously “to lease the. . . [Chase] Elementary Classroom Building and Cafeteria to the. . . [Parker] District One and Two Career and Technology Center” (“Minutes of the Meeting of May 26, 2009, p. 2) at one dollar per year for twenty years for the purpose of adult education classes. Although the town of Chase had expressed interest in leasing the buildings, they were unable to do so because of the cost of building maintenance (DiBagno, May 31, 2009). According to the Superintendent, this would allow the building to continue as “’an educational institution with a different mission’” (DiBagno, 2009, May 31, para. 5). In addition, the Superintendent stated, “’I assure you, that if the career and technology center gets this, it will look better than it ever looked—outside and inside. . . . Because the career center. . . will enhance the building” (DiBagno, 2009, May 31, para. 9). Between June and November 2009, the Parker District One and Two Career and Technology Center renovated and updated the Chase Auditorium, the Chase Classroom Building, and the Chase Cafeteria, as well as the grounds and landscaping. The campus and buildings are considered part of the school districts’ adult education program. The Parker One and Two Adult Learning Center offers GED courses, WorkKeys Certification, Computer Applications, English as a Second Language, Para-Professional Certification, and Family Literacy courses.
Participant Perspectives of the School Closing

This section presents the perspectives of 12 study participants as they faced and navigated the closing of a small, rural, historic, mill-town school. These participants were school district employees and affiliates, students and parents, and community constituents. While at times their perspectives are similar and at other times their perspectives differ, there are common elements that transcend their stories and thematically help to answer the question: Why were people upset with the closing of Chase Elementary School, a small, rural, historic, mill-town school in the southeastern United States? These themes fall into two broad categories: pivotal factors and psychosocial aspects of the closing.

(Caveat: In discussing the elements and themes related to the pivotal factors and the psychosocial aspects of the school closing, “all participants” does not refer to Dr. Justine Ever, Ms. Greta Coe, or to Anna, Emmalee, and Betty unless specifically noted. Differences in their perspectives and responses, and possible reasons for those differences, will be discussed in Chapter Five.)

Pivotal Factors of the School Closing

Four pivotal factors emerged in association with the closing of Chase Elementary School and participant perceptions of the closing: finances, size and setting, time and planning, and communication.
Finances.

According to Mr. Grimsley, as part of the general budget-setting process, Parker School District One began examining its fiscal circumstances and preparing for the 2009-2010 school year in the fall of 2008. Although the school district projects each budget based on anticipated revenue and plans expenditures based on those projections, it was not uncommon for the Board to make adjustments to the actual expenditures as a result of changes in state revenue. Due to the national recession and the timeline by which public schools in this southeastern state are informed of state financial support, Parker School District One began reducing expenditures for the 2008-2009 school year while simultaneously planning for drastically reduced state funding for the 2009-2010 school year.

As noted earlier, Parker School District One lost three million dollars in state revenue during the months of November 2008, December 2008, and January 2009, and it anticipated losing six million dollars for the 2009-2010 school year. Also as discussed earlier, the Board considered and implemented immediate actions to reduce expenditures for the remainder of the 2008-2009 school year. They then turned to the 2009-2010 budget, which also had to be severely cut. Mr. Grimsley said,

The first thing we asked for was the data—per pupil expenditure, what does it cost to keep the building going, and what does it cost us if we take these students and send them to Clark Green, Creek, and West Chase. We wanted to make an informed and accurate decision. Once we got the data, we realized that from a fiscal standpoint, this [closing Chase Elementary] is probably a good option for us to cut the budget.
Board members looked at other options for substantial budget cuts as well as at “the ramifications and the impacts outside of the money. Other options were to let teachers go, and we looked at other things we could cut,” said Mr. Grimsley. It was a matter of “saving ten teachers [from unemployment] or one school setting. . . . If we looked at [keeping] the building versus people, we choose people every time.”

Dr. Ever, who had already begun working for a different school district emphasized that school districts across the state were facing similar extreme circumstances:

When the economic tsunami hit, it took everyone by surprise. There were people that I knew would never leave the district [Parker One] until they closed its doors. When the district started saying that the eligible retirees will retire, and moving people, and downsizing—and even here [her own district]—I was like, “What’s happening to all of my people?!”

Dr. Smith indicated that when one looked at the financial details for Chase Elementary and the district, she believed it was obvious that the district would need to close the school. Ms. Brown also indicated that money was a primary factor. Thus, school- and district-level affiliates participating in this study perceived the financial circumstances of Parker School District One as a pivotal factor in the decision to close Chase Elementary School.

Financial themes arose within the discussions of parent and community member participants as well. Although Dr. Smith said, “I think they [families] understood economically,” the Murphy family and Mrs. Hunt continued to question the purported financial reasons given for closing Chase Elementary. Mrs. Hunt acknowledged the cost
differential per student between Chase Elementary and other schools; however, she expressed frustration with other financial expenditures that, in her opinion, did not make sense:

All the things that were added, and all the football fields, and some of the things that seem unnecessary compared to keeping a school open. We realized a lot of that was from grant money, and it is allocated for certain things. You cannot use it to keep a school open. But, it just doesn’t make sense, and it hurts. They are adding to [expanding] Clark Green and West Chase. Was there not anything that could have been done?

In addition, Mr. and Mrs. Murphy questioned current expenditures such as having four assistant principals at one high school, district-level administrator salaries, and the number of support staff employed by the district office. Mrs. Murphy collected information about the administrator salaries for four neighboring school districts and concluded that the salaries for Parker School District One were very high:

I dug up all the salaries in May County [a large, single, county-based district with approximately 65,000 students]. Now, the comparison. . . . You would think that their salaries would be like up here [uses her hand to indicate height above her head]. No, Parker [salaries are higher]. . . . Boy did they shut me up when I was bringing that to the table.

According to school- and district-level affiliates, parents, and community members participating in this study, financial factors, concerns, and frustrations played an important role in both why and how Parker School District One decided to close Chase Elementary and why and how parents and community members perceived and reacted to the closing of the school.
Size and setting.

All participants noted and agreed upon the difficulties associated with the physical size and setting of Chase Elementary, and all participants spoke about the historical setting and significance of Chase Elementary. Differences in perceptions about the value of the school’s historical setting and significance emerged between Mr. Grimsley and other participants.

All participants perceived and acknowledged that the small class sizes and low student-to-teacher ratio were problems due to the costs associated with operating the school, including teacher and staff salaries; yet, the “luxury” of having a student population of less than 200 students was also noted by all participants, as were the potential benefits and “ideal” circumstances of having only 20-25 students per class. In addition, all participants acknowledged the limitations for physical expansion due to property constraints. For example, Mrs. Hunt said, “We realized that per child it was so much more expensive to keep Chase open, and that property-wise there was no way to expand.” In discussing the small student-to-teacher ratio, Mr. Grimsley pointed out that “People pay big money to send their kids to private school for that very reason.” The danger of being such a small school was tacitly acknowledged by Ms. Smith, who recalled that at least one time before Chase had been on the brink of closure due to low enrollment. This continuing danger was directly addressed by Dr. Smith, who said, I understood very quickly that it is a luxury to have that few of students at a school, and we needed to be more viable in that way. I felt like we needed to reach capacity for that reason, and that was before the economic downturn. It is
just good, common business sense that if you are a small school and not careful, and even if you are high-performing, you can be targeted [for closure].

Differences in perception regarding the importance of historical setting and community cohesiveness emerged between district employee and affiliate participants and Chase community members and parent participants. These varying perspectives emerged when participants were asked to respond to the statement given in the PTO meeting: “If they close our school, it’s the last thing we have left.” From Mr. Grimsley’s point of view, this individual was implying that Chase Elementary School “was all the community had left because the mills had gone.” He also noted that

If you grew up in Chase, you wanted to maintain your identity. . . . But if you go to Chase and you go into West Chase, and you kind of go in and you go out, and then you go down here to Clark Green, you really don’t know [which town you are in] unless you grew up there.

As Mr. Grimsley drew a small diagram of the schools’ locations in relation to one another, he continued:

It is the end of Mayberry if you are her [the woman making the statement]. But here is Chase Elementary, and here is West Chase. Here is Clark Green. From here [Chase] to here [West Chase] is 1.2 miles, and from here [Chase] to here [Clark Green] is 2.3 miles. There was nobody in the rest of Parker District One that had that tight of a race. . . . It was only ‘the last thing we have left’ if we [the district] did not steward and handle it. . . . We did not close that school; we turned it into the adult learning center.

From Mr. Grimsley’s point of view, only individuals who grew up in Chase or one of the other communities during the time that they were thriving towns continued to
make specific distinctions between communities. Mrs. Hunt also commented that she did not share the same separation of communities as many older individuals did, and she commented that her grandparents continued to have very strong views about the distinctiveness of Chase and West Chase. Mr. Grimsley also did not view the transfer of students to neighboring schools as being problematic because “they were basically going to disseminate into current situations where there was capacity.” In addition, Mr. Grimsley perceived the school building, its preservation, and the continued use of the building for the adult learning center as having provided

an opportunity for folks who are adults who are of working age who probably are not maximizing their gifts and talents because of opportunities lost or decisions made. . . . It [the adult learning center] made it a shining star for Chase instead of a black eye.

Dr. Smith and Dr. Ever supported the view of the adult education center as a benefit to the Chase community, with Dr. Smith describing it as a “win-win” and “the best scenario possible,” if Chase Elementary had to close. Dr. Ever said,

Maybe they didn’t know it then, and I don’t know if the district did either, but putting the adult learning center in there really added to that [the community]. It was a good resource because people—adults—could go and get their GED or whatever. They were having educational opportunities to come back. And, it could help rejuvenate the area. It needed that. You know, it furthered the community. They could go get jobs and make money.

While parent and community member participants agreed that having Parker One and Two Adult Learning Center in the Chase school building was a positive effect of the
school closing, they viewed the loss of the school as only having been minimized by the presence of the adult education programs.

Despite the preservation of the building itself, the use of the building for educational purposes, and the opportunities for adults to further their education, participants who were parents and community members continued to feel a sense of loss and disconnectedness. Mrs. Hunt said that parents, grandparents, and community members used to visit the building and recall memories of their times there, but that is not the case now. We have talked with the people that run the adult education center, and when they came in they let us know that if we ever needed anything that the school district would let them know. I can’t say that they have been rude or did not want to work with us. It is just that we feel like there is nothing there for us. It is just not the same.

Mrs. Murphy agreed, saying,

I agree with the mother that said, “This is the last thing Chase has” because Chase has nothing. It is a very old town. We have a lot of old people that don’t want to change with the times. That is sad for Chase. . . . The school was probably the best thing that Chase had.

Thus, while maintaining the school building and having the adult learning center were perceived by all participants as better than having the building empty, the size and setting of the school—and what that afforded students, parents, and community members—was of high importance to parent and community member participants.
Time and planning.

From the perspective of the Parker School District One Board of Trustees, time and planning were driving forces in the need to make a decision about whether or not to close Chase Elementary. Mr. Grimsley asserted that the need to approve the 2009-2010 budget in mid-spring in order to have enough time to manage the logistical considerations of closing a school, reconfiguring the district’s attendance zones, and ensuring that teachers and staff had placements for the upcoming year all contributed to the timeline that the district believed it needed to follow:

It was never the intent, and I don’t think it was an intentional strategy by us [School Board Trustees], to drag it out nor to rush it through. We were just trying to go through the process logically and sequentially, and it was necessary because we needed to pass the budget and we needed that HR time. We needed to reposition a principal and an assistant principal and guidance counselor and teachers. There was a lot to do, so if we waited and gave three or four months then [it would be too late].

Dr. Smith indicated that time and preparing families and staff for the closure and planning were also primary concerns for her:

When we realized, when I realized, that because of the tough economic times that the closure was going to be something that was really going to happen . . . , we immediately called a family meeting on Monday night. I tried as best I could to say something to prepare our families for the reality of that.

Once the School Board vote was taken and the decision was made, she and the staff intentionally planned celebrations and events to commemorate all that Chase was and meant and would continue to mean. “We did anything we could do,” said Dr. Smith, “to
tie the past to the future.” She detailed teacher and staff placement, hands-on assistance for teachers as they were packing up to move, preparing the building for its next use, and “meetings with families and children to make sure that they had placement for the next year.” Ms. Brown also indicated that time and planning had been important aspects of the closing, especially with regard to staff placement and student placement.

However, more time and planning (and consideration) were exactly what parent and community member participants felt was needed leading up to the decision. To them, the process was rushed, and although they hurried in response to the threat of closure, they perceived lack of time as a constraining factor in their ability to take action against the closure. Mrs. Hunt provided her perspective:

I got a phone call that morning. . . “Did you know that they are going to close Chase?” We had heard that before, and actually I think it had been brought up at meetings over at the school district [office]. . . . But apparently, this time they had already made up their mind. I did not realize that in the beginning because I thought we still had a good fight. I called around and found out that the next school board meeting, which I think was the Monday night of the next week, they were actually going to talk about it. This was serious. So, we realized pretty quick that we had to do something. We went to the meeting and asked some questions. Sure enough, they were going to vote on this the next month.

Mr. and Mrs. Murphy had similar misgivings, and at the February 26th, 2009 meeting, Mr. Murphy and several other individuals requested that the Board table the vote for 90 days. The Board did not. Mrs. Murphy said, “They did not give us enough time to do anything,” and Mr. Murphy said, “It was about a month because it was two full Board meetings.” Responded Mrs. Murphy:
But still, 30 days to raise that kind of money. If we were given a fair amount of time, we could have put all our heads together and done some serious fund raising and some charity work. I mean, when there is a will, there is a way.

Parent and community member participants considered the short time between learning the school might be closed and the time of the actual vote as a pivotal factor in their ability to combat the closing.

Time and planning also played a role in how parent and community member participants responded after the vote was taken. Mrs. Hunt said,

After that [the vote], it was just a couple of other meetings of like, “Is there something we could do? Could we start a charter school? Could we do this? Could we do that?”

According to Mrs. Hunt, ultimately she and others realized that they did not have enough time to plan and operationalize any alternatives that would allow the village to maintain its school.

Communication.

Participants had differing perspectives about the communication between district and parents and community members, but it was an issue evident throughout the case. From the perspective of district employees and affiliates participating in the study, significant efforts were made to communicate with parents and community members. Parents and community members participating in the study, however, did not perceive communication from the district as forthcoming or as a strength in this case.

When asked if he could make any recommendations to other districts that may be facing similar situations, Mr. Grimsley said,
The only thing that comes to mind is encouragement to over communicate. I don’t think you could ever go wrong because of the sentimental, emotional, and personal side of this. I believe we did a good job of communicating, but here is what I know. It doesn’t matter how much you communicate, or how much you put in the paper, or how much you tell people. We wanted to [communicate] because that Board and that administration care deeply about the people in Chase. . . . I don’t know if there was anything that we could do differently, because I felt like we communicated really well, but I think the reality of it is, that people perceive sometimes what they want to or don’t perceive what is right there in front of them. I do the same thing; it is a human thing. My only advice would be just to be deliberate and consistent in your communication.

Although Mr. Grimsley was aware that communication might be perceived as a problem, he did not perceive a lack of communication between Parker District One and Chase parents and community members. As indicated in the previous section on time and planning, Dr. Smith believed that at the school level significant efforts had been made to keep parents and community members informed leading up to the decision to close and afterwards in the efforts of both school and district to communicate with staff and parents about placement for the upcoming school year. Thus, two school- and district-level affiliates participating in the study believed that communication was a key factor in the closing of Chase Elementary.

Parent and community member participants, however, believed that a lack of communication was problematic, specifically in connection to the events leading up to the Board’s decision. Both Mrs. Hunt and the Murphy family revealed frustration about what they believed was a failure to communicate on the part of Parker School District
One. Mrs. Hunt asserted that upon receiving the telephone call about the possible closing, she had, in turn, called the Town of Chase Mayor, and he also appeared unaware of what was transpiring. According to Mrs. Hunt, after she found out that the district was seriously considering closing Chase Elementary, she and others attended the February 10th, 2009, called meeting of the Board, which was directly followed by a budget work session. Said Mrs. Hunt,

    At that time, I still felt like we had a chance. We pulled out numbers, and we researched, and we asked the district office for different things. We asked, “How are you making this decision?” In the beginning I think the biggest thing was, “Why didn’t you come to us? Why didn’t you [the School Board] meet with the district, and meet with the people over here? Why did we have to hear it the way we did? Why weren’t we given an opportunity to do fund raisers, to seek grant money, or to do anything we could to keep our school open?”

Mrs. Hunt believed that earlier communication from the Board would have provided parents and community members with much needed time to examine options, and possibly take actions, to keep Chase Elementary open. Mr. Murphy said, “What upset us the most is that all of this was done under the radar. No one knew anything about it. It was all done under the radar. No one was made aware, and there was no discussion.”

Neither Mrs. Hunt nor the Murphy family perceived the communication about or the actual processes of preparing students for transfer or closing the school building as problematic. However, communication leading up to the night of the Board’s vote emerged as a pivotal factor to parent and community member participants.
Psychosocial Aspects

Five psychosocial aspects emerged in association with the closing of Chase Elementary School and participant perceptions of the case: threat assessment, anxiety, frustration, sadness, and acceptance and resignation.

Threat assessment.

Participants became aware of the threat of school closing at different times. However, as participants learned that closing Chase Elementary might come to fruition, they individually assessed the threat and the seriousness of the threat. Mr. Grimsley and Dr. Smith, for example, were aware of the threat of closing earlier than parents and community members. Mr. Grimsley acknowledged that preliminary consideration of the budget began in the fall, and at that point in time, the Board asked for financial information concerning Chase Elementary. The Board needed to evaluate its finances and the threat to its anticipated budget. Once they examined the data and began considering options, the threat to Chase Elementary emerged. Dr. Smith indicated that once she looked at the data, she realized that closure was imminent. In assessing the threat to the school and to parents and students, Dr. Smith “felt fortunate to find that out prior to the board meeting that was held on the Tuesday night,” and that was when she called a parent meeting.

Parent and community member participants found out about the proposed closing by word-of-mouth. Mrs. Murphy said, “I heard at Bi-Lo when a mother stopped me and said it. I was like, ‘What?!’” The Murphy family perceived an immediate threat, and Mrs. Hunt perceived a real and serious threat as soon as she called the Parker School District
One office. As soon as parent and community member participants realized that Chase Elementary was being threatened, they planned a community meeting apart from the meeting held at Chase Elementary and the budget workshop meeting held at the district office.

School- and district- affiliate, parent, and community member participants all engaged in threat assessment. Although the threats themselves were slightly different, depending on the participant’s position within the district, school, and community, all participants became aware of a perceived danger, assessed the seriousness and immediacy of the threat, and then planned their actions and responses based on their evaluation of the danger.

Anxiety.

Three school- and district-level participants and student, parent, and community member participants exhibited anxiety associated with the closing of Chase Elementary.

Mr. Grimsley revealed anxiety about the process leading up to the closing, the decision of the Board, and the process of closing the school. While considering options for cutting the budget and the possibility of closing Chase Elementary, Mr. Grimsley conveyed that he had been worried about saving the jobs of teachers, and prior to the vote of the Board, Mr. Grimsley consulted the older Board member who had originally joined the Parker School District One Board to prevent the closing of Chase and Clark Green over 40 years earlier. Mr. Grimsley recalled, “I looked at him, and I said, ‘Mr. Dave, I know this is harder on you than anybody here. You need to tell me if you are at peace with this.’” In addition, Mr. Grimsley said, “Personally, I prayed before I went in [to the
February 24th, 2009, Board meeting] for a spirit of peace in there—knowing that there were going to be people with opposing opinions on the decision and the situation.” Mr. Grimsley felt some personal anxiety, and he also realized the anxiety others at the Board meeting would be feeling.

A final part of the process about which Mr. Grimsley exhibited anxiety was in the determination of what could be done with the school building once the school was closed. He referenced a town near Clark Green Elementary that had just declared bankruptcy, and remarked,

Now, I know you asked about Chase, but when Jamestown declared bankruptcy, that was a tough thing because you were like, “What does that mean when a town declares bankruptcy? What do we do?” Well, a lot of times when you cannot have a police force or a fire department [of which Chase no longer has either], grocery stores are going to leave, and people are going to leave, and all of a sudden it becomes a ghost town. We did not want that to happen to Chase. I think that is why we worked very diligently to make sure that we put something in [the building] as best we could.

Mr. Grimsley acknowledged that for him personally some of his anxiety would have been alleviated if the Board had been able to immediately lease the Chase Elementary building to the Parker One and Two Career and Technology Center; however, he also indicated that it was not possible to do so at the time the Board voted to close the school.

Dr. Smith conveyed anxiety about how parents and community members would respond to the closing as well as anxiety about the school building. As discussed earlier, Dr. Smith called a parent meeting prior to the vote of the Board of Trustees. In that meeting she tried to make clear to parents that this pending decision was not a “them”
versus “us” issue. When asked why she had felt it important to convey that to parents, she responded:

I knew very clearly that it was going to be a very emotional issue for our families and how emotionally tied they were to the school. . . . But knowing all of that, I knew that it was going to be immediately perceived as a death, and they were going to grieve. If you know anything about the stages of grieving, you know that after you get over the denial, which, there was no denying it, the next piece is anger. So, I knew the anger was going to come. I truly did not want them [parents] to allow that anger to get the best of them.

Thus, Dr. Smith experienced anxiety about the emotional responses of parents and students as well as the possible behavioral responses. Dr. Smith and Ms. Brown both indicated that they worried about the placement of children and employees and about the overall effects of the closing on families.

Tony was anxious and said that when his parents told him what was happening, he replied, “They better not close my school!” Mr. and Mrs. Murphy were also quite anxious about sending Tony to West Chase, and when asked why, Mrs. Murphy said:

Because West Chase, I mean this is no lie and it is not just me because I am from the North—there are even people that are from the South that did not want their kids going there. It is horrible. When you are a Chase resident, they don’t want anything to do with you. . . . In reality, I was thinking of taking him [Tony] out and home schooling him because of the whole West Chase-Chase thing.

Thus, the Murphy family was anxious about the possibility of Chase Elementary being closed but also about the prospect of Tony’s enrollment at West Chase Elementary. Mrs. Murphy believed that there would be discrimination against Tony because of where they
lived, which also indicates that she perceived differences in the community and school cultures.

**Frustration.**

Mrs. Hunt and the Murphy family expressed frustration about several aspects of the closing. They were frustrated by the process leading up to the Board vote, especially because they believed that they had been excluded from the process leading up to the vote and misled to think there was a possibility that the school might remain open. Said Mrs. Hunt:

> It was a very emotional thing. But I realize we elect people and put them in that position to make decisions for us. I understand the hard job that they had. But what I could not understand was why not let the community be involved? Even if it had the same ending. If we would have been able to see from the beginning what we were looking at—what we were facing—and that we did not have a choice. It would have been easier to accept to know that we were at least considered and included, and that never happened. We really felt like we had a chance. . . until the meeting that night, and it was so obvious. . . just from the looks on their [Board members’ and district administrators’] faces when they walked in. There was no eye contact.

Mrs. Hunt was also frustrated by the reactions of some of the parents and community members after the vote was taken:

> Well, it was unanimous because they all voted to close Chase Elementary, and there were a few idiots from Chase who decided to, you know, act out and make us all look stupid. So, we had to address that with the media the next day.
While the Murphy family did not indicate frustration with the behaviors of Chase parents and community members after the vote, as referenced earlier they were frustrated by the feeling that the work they had done to try to keep the school open had been in vain from the beginning. They were frustrated by what they perceived as the unwillingness of the Board to consider alternatives to closing Chase Elementary, by the lack of time to seek resources that might allow the school to remain open, by the lack of inclusion in the process leading up to the Board’s vote, and by the knowledge that Tony might need to attend a school they perceived as unwelcoming and biased against them because they lived in Chase.

**Sadness.**

All participants, including Ms. Brown, Dr. Ever, Ms. Coe, Anna, Emmalee, and Betty, expressed sadness about the closing of Chase Elementary School. When interviewed, Dr. Smith and Ms. Brown were very emotional and shed tears as they talked about Chase Elementary, all that it had meant to them, and all that they believed it had meant to the parents, students, and community of Chase. The interviews took place three years after the decision was made to close Chase Elementary School. Ms. Brown relayed the following story about the sadness of the students after Chase Elementary closed:

There was a parent [from Chase] who would call me. She said, “I do not know what to do. We go by the school, and the kids are sitting in the back seat, and they are just sitting there and crying. They do not understand why.”
Dr. Ever recalled that when she heard that the Parker School District One Board had voted to close Chase Elementary, she went to the school and took the teachers to a restaurant because they were still part of my family, and I just wanted to offer them emotional support. I just told them that, you know, they should take comfort because the school was set to close because of performance, but they changed that.

Dr. Smith, Ms. Brown, and Dr. Ever all experienced sadness related to the closing of Chase Elementary School, and during their interviews, I could hear the sadness in their voices.

Parent and community member participants also demonstrated sadness in response to the closing of the school. Mrs. Murphy said, “The last thing we wanted to see was our town lose that school, *that* school. . . . It was *that* school. That school stood for more than any other school I had come across in my life.” When asked how they felt about the closing of Chase Elementary, Ms. Coe, Anna, Emmalee, and Betty all responded with “It was sad,” or some slight variation thereof. According to Dr. Smith, 

> It was a very sad time. . . Kids were going to be sad about losing their school. . . . I remember standing in the breezeway [of Chase Elementary] with mothers who were just tearful and realizing that this was really what it was about. But they weren’t tearful because they were angry; they were tearful because they were sad.

Mrs. Hunt also indicated sadness and hurt associated with the school closing.

Although Mr. Grimsley was not sad about the closing of Chase Elementary in the same way that other participants were, he did acknowledge that he understood how
emotionally difficult the closing was for others and that if the decision to close had been in reference to the elementary school he attended, which is also in Parker School District One,

    sentimentally it would have been different. . . because I am human. That is where I went to school. But, I would like to think that I could have taken the high road like. . . some of the men I respect that did represent that area and make the tough decision because it was the right decision.

Student and parent, school- and district-affiliate, and community member participants, including Anna, Emmalee, Betty, and Ms. Coe, experienced sadness of varying degrees in association with the closing of Chase Elementary School.

Acceptance and resignation.

Participants came to accept the school closing, although some participants appeared to be more resigned to the closing than accepting of it. Mr. Grimsley indicated that leading up to the vote of the School Board, he and other Board members, as well as Parker School District One administrative offices, had received telephone calls and letters. Parents and community members had called various media sources, and as described in the previous sections “Circumstances of the School Closing” and “Anxiety and Frustration,” immediately after the February 26th Board meeting and vote, some parents and community members continued to express their volatile emotions.

Mr. Grimsley indicated that he had come to accept the school closing prior to the vote of the Board. Nevertheless, according to Mr. Grimsley, “That is where we had to take our beating as a Board and go, ‘Look, this is the right decision for Parker One public
schools. It is hard, and we don’t like it, but this is right.’” Once it became evident that they would need to vote to close Chase Elementary, the Board and district administrators resigned themselves to what they knew would be a difficult and emotional time. Dr. Smith also indicated that she had accepted the closure of the school as a necessity and a reality once she looked at the financial information provided by the district. As indicated previously, neither the Murphy family nor Mrs. Hunt accepted the financial information they were given by the district.

Mrs. Hunt indicated that after the vote, “The rest of us just went home—feeling like we did not have a chance.” As noted in an earlier quote from the Murphys, they too believed that there had been no real opportunity to save Chase Elementary from closure. Dr. Smith indicated that part of her role as principal after the vote had been to help students and parents accept the closing of Chase Elementary:

Obviously if they had a choice, they would not have let it happen. They [parents] could cognitively understand what was happening, and it was just true grieving. They handled it with as much dignity and grace as they could, and I think teachers and staff did as well.

Thus, participant accounts imply that students, parents, teachers, and staff resigned themselves to that fact that Chase Elementary would no longer be in operation, and the level of acceptance or resignation felt by participants was conveyed through their words and their actions.
Summary of Participant Perspectives of the Closing

Participant responses imply that when a small, rural, historic mill-town school closes, a range of stakeholders are affected, and the reasons for their actions, responses, and emotions vary widely. Four pivotal factors were common to the participants of this study: finances, size and setting, time and planning, and communication. In addition, five psychosocial aspects infused participant responses to and discussion of the school closing: threat assessment, anxiety, frustration, sadness, and acceptance. The following six sub-questions further examine elements related to this specific school closing as well as participant responses to and perceptions of the closing of Chase Elementary School.

Contextual Features Contributing to This Case

Data revealed several contextual features contributing to this case. I grouped these features into three categories: variations from existing school closing literature; the history of and historical relationship between school and village; and school location and size and building use. Variations of this case from existing school closing research were discussed at the end of Chapter Two in order to demonstrate elements of this closing that were inconsistent with existing historical and recent school closing research and that needed further exploration, as well as to illustrate how this case is unique with regard to the literature. The latter two categories are discussed below.

History of and Historical Relationship between School, Village, and Mill Company

The establishment of the school by the mill company, the subsequent direct authority of the mill company over the school for approximately 30 years, and the 130-
Evidence from documents and literature pertaining to Chase and Chase schools, as well as participant stories and reflections, indicate that even after Chase schools became public, the mill company continued to dominate life in the mill village and to have a strong impact on the curriculum and purposes of the school. In addition, the mill company maintained control of the vast majority of mill town entities and amenities until Kendall Company sold out to the Gerber Company. For example, an interviewee shared with me that Kendall Company owned all of the church properties and cemeteries until it sold to Gerber in 1986, and it was at the time of that sale that Kendall deeded all of the church properties and cemeteries to the individual churches (personal communication, June 4, 2012). Ms. Coe, Anna, Emmalee, Betty, and two other interviewees referred to themselves as products of “the mill hill.” Mrs. Hunt made references to the students and parents of Chase Elementary as “all” living in the mill village. Thus, the long, intertwined history of and relationships between the school, mill village, and mill company contributed to this case.

Although Kendall began selling homes to individual buyers in the 1950s, many homes and land lots were sold to Gerber at the same time that the mills and mill properties were sold. As a result of this continued property ownership by the mill company and the lack of incorporation on the part of the village, opportunities for other businesses and industries of any significance were limited, and when Gerber completely ceased operations in Chase, there were few opportunities for work and employment in the Chase community. Many of the former mill employees simply retired and settled down to
live out their retirement in Chase; those ineligible for retirement had to seek employment elsewhere (personal communication, June 4, 2012). This led to an out migration of younger families and a significant decline in population. Whereas at one time in its history Chase needed three buildings to provide space for its school-age children, the mill village could now barely fill the desks in one building. The decline of the community once the mill company left was not necessarily unusual or unique, but the extreme inability of the village residents to provide any of the amenities and entities associated with small townships influenced participant responses in this case.

The history of attempted school closures was an additional feature that contributed to this case. Two previous attempts had been made to close the school, one in the late 1960s and one in 1994. During the first attempt to close Chase Elementary, Clark Green Elementary was also under threat of being closed. A man who currently serves on the Parker District One Board of Trustees ran for the seat at that time, and he is well known and highly respected throughout the district for having joined the Board in order to keep Chase and Clark Green open and operating. I was not able to locate any information about why these two schools were threatened with closing at that time. However, the 1994 attempt to shutter Chase Elementary was reportedly due to low enrollment. In both instances of school closure threat, the school remained open, at least in part, due to the efforts of key community figures. Chase residents were aware that there had been attempts to close the school on previous occasions, and this may have influenced how they reacted to the possibility of the school closing as well as the strength of their reactions.
School Location and Size and Building Use

As discussed at the end of Chapter Two, contextual features of the case that contributed to variations from previous small rural school closing literature included the proximity, size, and school type of Chase Elementary and the three receiving schools. However, additional contextual features of this case included the location of the school at the physical center of the community, its inability to physically expand due to the location, and the extremely small size of the school in a town that is itself so small. Because the school was physically situated in the center of the community, it served as a constant presence in the lives of participants and as a visible representation to residents and passers-by of community viability. In addition, with a maximum capacity of 200 students and no way to physically expand the building—other than to build up—even if there were need and reasons to increase enrollment and create a larger building and campus, to do so would have been extremely difficult. The lack of land property on which to expand the school was a factor noted by several participants, specifically Mr. Grimsley, Dr. Smith, Ms. Brown, Mrs. Hunt, and the Murphy family. For a town as small as Chase to have its own school, especially in consideration of the close proximity of other schools, is unusual. Having retained the school throughout changes in control and operation, after the closing of the mills and most other business entities, and despite a significant decrease in population placed additional emphasis on the school and its importance to participants.

With regard to the building itself, parent and community member participants, including Anna, Emmalee, and Betty, as well as several other interviewees, described
deep concern that it would become “yet another eyesore” or a “haven for drugs and vandalism.” Three participants indicated that the failure of the town to incorporate had been a critical factor in the town’s ability to attract new revenue-generating entities and that there was relatively little movement into or out of the community at this time. Thus, a chief concern for participants was if, and how, the building might be utilized. While this was not an anomaly with regard to school closing literature, it was a significant influence on participants and an important element of the case.

**Participant Responses to the Announced Closing of Chase Elementary School**

Students and parents and some community member participants responded to the announced closing of Chase Elementary School with fear, suspicion, and grief. They feared what would happen to their community, as when the community member said, “It’s the last thing we have left,” and they were suspicious of the motives and reasons given by the Parker School District One Board of Trustees and administrators. Said Mrs. Hunt,

I have a great deal of respect for [the Superintendent]. But for [the Assistant Superintendent], not so much. . . . We found a lot of discrepancies in the numbers that were crunched over there, and that was when he and I started to butt heads. He really did not appreciate us butting in, and he did not want to hear any of our opinions.

Suspicions on the part of Mrs. Hunt and the Murphy family, as indicated by Mrs. Murphy’s earlier quote about administrator salaries and renovation and expansion projects, remain.
Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, describes five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These are the stages through which student and parent participants and some community member and school- and district-employee participants progressed, although Kübler-Ross specifies that the stages are not necessarily linear or exclusive and cautions that not every person experiences each stage.

Upon first learning that Parker School District One was considering closing Chase Elementary school, Mrs. Hunt acknowledged, “We had heard that before. . . . They [the district] had always been able to pull something out of the hat to keep the school open.” She denied the reality that the school might actually be closed. Once the possibility was confirmed, newspaper and television media accounts demonstrate that some parents and community members lashed out at the Board and at district administrators in anger, questioning how “they” could do this and determining, as Mrs. Murphy said, “to fight as hard as we know how.” In addition, Mrs. Murphy said that she was the person to call the local television media, newspapers, and radio stations: “I called them and I told them that they ‘need to be here. This is a small town, and they are taking our school.’ I said, ‘You need to come,’ and they did.”

Next, according to accounts provided by Mrs. Hunt and the Murphy family, parents and community members attempted to “bargain” with the Board, asking for information about salaries and operating costs as well as trying to determine how to raise money to fund the school so that the district would have no reason to close it. They also pointed out problems such as students who needed extra attention and would not be able
to get that extra attention in larger schools with larger classes. Newspaper and television accounts and quotes provide further evidence for this stage of the grieving process.

Although sadness and depression, as indicated by all participant responses, infused the entire event, Ms. Brown recalled, “Lots of us hugged and we cried,” and television cameras showed numbers of people at the Board meeting in tears. For student and parent and some community member participants, there was reluctant acceptance—even if they were not happy about the closing. Mrs. Hunt said, “Basically it became obvious that we needed to just pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off and let’s see what we can do with this. Let’s make the best out of it.” However, there was also a sense of insignificance and a perceived loss of power among parent participants. Mrs. Murphy said, “You know, all I can think of is my southern friend saying that ‘Chase is a no count and the Chase people are of no account.’” Mr. Murphy followed that by saying, “Unless you have power, you are powerless.”

Responses by school district employee and affiliate participants varied, as some individuals, such as Dr. Smith and Ms. Brown, worked at Chase Elementary and had to provide assistance to students and parents while simultaneously trying to personally process and cope with the closing. As indicated earlier, when it became obvious to Dr. Smith that the closing was inevitable, she enacted a plan to assist students and parents as they grieved. Of the few weeks between the announced possibility and the Board vote, Ms. Brown said, “I was just hoping that it did not close.” She also indicated that she was frightened about her job: “I was scared about where I was going to be and who I was going to be with.” Once the closing was confirmed, Dr. Ever attempted to provide
emotional support to her former staff, saying, “I told them that the school wasn’t closing because of performance. It was because of money, and they should feel good about what they did.” Mr. Grimsley said, “It was always about allocation and stewardship of resources, which is our job as school board members.” Once the night of the vote arrived, Mr. Grimsley indicated that

“They [parents and community constituents] pleaded their case of why it should stay open, and we heard that and were sympathetic. We understood why they felt the way they did, but we still had to go ahead and make the hard, but right, decision.

Dr. Smith, Ms. Brown, and Dr. Ever all responded to the closing with acceptance and with actions designed to comfort and assist others.

Although Board meeting minutes, television coverage, and newspaper articles show evidence of actions on the part of the community-at-large, including actions and participation of older community members in efforts to fight the closure, older community member study participants who were less connected with regard to proximity and, perhaps, less connected to the ongoing life of the school did not emerge as a strong separate force in response to the closing. Board meeting minutes and newspaper and television media do demonstrate that older community members attended meetings, including Board meetings and the parent-community meeting, and at least one spoke at the Board meeting on the night of the vote, but the older community members participating in this study were not as vocal in their reactions. The most noted concern of the older community member study participants was anxiety over what would happen to
the school building. The lack of outspokenness by older community members is further addressed in Chapter Five.

Functions of School and Schooling at Chase Elementary School

DeYoung and Howley (1992) identified schools as places where meaning is constructed and schooling as the formal process of educating students. Four constructs emerged from the collected data with regard to the functions of school and schooling at Chase Elementary. Data revealed that participants believed school and the process of schooling facilitated: formal academic success as well as social, civic, and personal development of students; served as a conduit for parent, grandparent, and community member involvement; promoted school and community connectedness; and provided a showcase for the district and community.

Formal Academic Success as well as Social, Civic, and Personal Development

School and the schooling process at Chase Elementary promoted academic success among students, including accomplishment in subject areas such as reading, spelling, math, science, and social studies. Curriculum was aligned with state standards, and teachers worked with students within the formal classroom and outside of the regular school day to enable student academic success. Before assuming the principalship of Chase Elementary, Dr. Ever worked with the school as a district facilitator to develop a vision for the school’s future. This resulted in the formation of a School Improvement Council and a formal School Renewal Plan. Dr. Ever indicated that in working with
teachers and staff to develop the plan, they had demonstrated “what they were wanting for the kids, and that they wanted to help them and improve.”

The 1999-2004 School Renewal Plan shared by Dr. Ever describes the aforementioned subject areas as part of the basic curriculum and emphasizes their importance through formal academic goals for students such as age-appropriate comprehension of reading materials and the use of problem-solving and critical thinking in math. Measures taken to promote student academic success included holding high expectations, providing homework support, provision of challenging academic experiences, utilization of Title I funds, and monitoring of student academic success “through observations, teacher-generated tests, standardized tests, and the state mandated tests. . . . Teachers also record[ed] academic progress on the basal reading sheets, interim progress reports, quarterly report cards, and in writing portfolios” (“School Renewal Plan,” 1999-2004, p. 3). In addition, through the afterschool program, students were offered homework assistance and tutoring in small, teacher-led groups.

Dr. Ever indicated that student academic performance had not always been high: “When I started, everyone was afraid they were going to close the school because of low academic performance and a low reputation.” After learning from teachers that they were afraid the district was going to close the school, she requested that the district Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent come to the school and talk with the teachers. Although the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent assured the teachers and staff that they had no plans to close the school, Dr. Ever said:
When the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent left, I closed the door and looked at the teachers and said, “They’re going to close this school. They aren’t going to keep open a school with below-average performance, and we’re the one that is lowest. We can only be here if we can perform at rates at or above where the others [other elementary schools] are at. We must put all this [the school renewal plan] into action, or they will close us.”

From that point forward, Dr. Ever reported, teachers started telling her all of the things they needed to help the students improve academic performance: a computer lab, interactive white boards in classrooms, classroom libraries, and laptop computers so that teachers could work at home on lessons and other ways to improve student performance. According to Dr. Ever, the teachers began putting the plan into action. They offered incentives to students such as a trip to the aquarium in Atlanta, Georgia, if students earned a certain number of Accelerated Reader points. “Once we did that [put the plan into action],” said Dr. Ever, “the performance started going up, and we went to 100% of students passing [the state-mandated tests].” Chase Elementary students appeared to maintain a high level of academic success, as measured by state-mandated tests, throughout its remaining years of operation as an elementary school, and Dr. Ever reported that “After a while, teachers at the middle school said they knew when kids came from Chase Elementary because they were thinking, and they were just doing so well. They said they loved to get our kids.” Tony Murphy said that while attending Chase Elementary, “I did better in school. I had better grades.”

Although formal examination of school and district documents from earlier decades was not possible, the previously supplied information about the history of Chase
schools implies that the primary purposes of school and schooling during the time that the mills controlled the schools included preparing students for work in the mills. When asked about school and what it was like, Ms. Coe said that there was a real emphasis on education:

I think most of the people in Chase were really interested in their child going to school. Most, well, so many of the parents back then well, you see they did not have the opportunity to finish high school. They were sensible enough to know how important an education was. Most of the parents wanted better for their child, naturally.

She also recalled that she had been valedictorian of her class when she graduated from Chase High School in 1940. When asked about academic expectations during the 1950s and 1960s, Betty indicated that she had been on the Honor Roll throughout elementary school; Anna said that after she left Chase Elementary School, “it wasn’t the same, and I didn’t want to go [to school] anymore.”

Chase Elementary School, according to participants, also facilitated social, civic, and personal development of students. The mission statement for the school was “to develop confident, competent, responsible, respectful, and productive life-long learners by providing challenging experiences that motivate students to reach their maximum potential in a diverse, progressive society” (“School Renewal Plan,” p. 6). The school renewal plan details student involvement in community service through partnership with Meals on Wheels, a non-profit operation that delivers prepared meals to shut-ins and invalids. Student goals in the plan included developmental behaviors and concepts such as personal goal-setting, working cooperatively with others, interacting with different
cultures, developing respect for themselves and others, demonstrating respect for the environment, and becoming an essential part of their community. Mrs. Hunt, who was a student at Chase and whose son attended Chase, recalled:

I can remember my son, who was in four-year-old kindergarten, coming home and telling me that it was important to be a good friend. So, you have character building. How to be a productive member of the community. What you can do as far as recycling and things like that. . . . Listening, and how to listen to your friends, and pay attention. . . . And, how to behave when we are not at school. When we take you somewhere—those children knew.

Expectations for appropriate behavior were emphasized in the stories of Ms. Coe, as well. She recalled that her first grade teacher had a “jail” drawn on the chalkboard:

Every day she would on the board draw a form, and she kind of called it the jail. And she would put lines in it, and everybody in there that talked she would put the name up on the board. Then you would have to stay after school and help clean up the room—dust the erasers and sweep. And I don’t think my name was ever off that board. I think she just kept it up there and left it. I think she thought I was a good sweeper or something.

Dr. Smith also emphasized the importance of the school in the academic, social, civic, and personal development of its students:

A school has to be more than about academic performance because we teach our children so much more than just academics. We teach whole children. . . and for children to truly benefit and accomplish all they can academically, they have to grow socially, they have got to grow emotionally, they have got to grow in their character and their integrity.
Finally, the school motto taught to students underscores the importance placed on non-academic development: “I am a Chase Cheetah, in each and every way. I’m respectful, responsible, and productive every day.”

**Conduit for Parent, Grandparent, and Community Member Involvement**

School and district affiliates participating in this study wanted parents, grandparents, and community members to be involved in school and in the schooling of students. Parents, grandparents, and community members participating in this study desired to be involved in school and in the schooling of students. According to participants, the actions and attitude of the school as well as the activities of schooling overtly promoted parent, grandparent, and community member involvement. Dr. Ever noted that the involvement and support of the parents was part of what drew her to the school as principal. The school renewal plan she helped to compile states:

> The school has an active and supportive PTO. This group volunteers numerous hours of time and help to organize fundraising activities. . . We are in the process of organizing committees that will work on raising money for playground equipment and landscaping. . . In recent school climate surveys. . . responses indicated. . . that [Chase Elementary] fosters home-school relationships. (“School Renewal Plan,” 1999-2004, p. 3)

The School Improvement Council included five parent/community members. Thus, parents were welcomed and involved in formal school activities. In addition, the school maintained relationships with several local business partners.
Dr. Smith, in reflecting on her goals and vision for the school upon assuming the principalship, noted that parent involvement had been good, but she included increasing parent involvement as one of three key goals she established:

We worked very hard to involve our parents, to encourage our parents to be a part, not only in school activities, but in the daily interactions [of school]—whether it would be to come and have lunch or volunteering—to get them more involved in what was going on with the children.

She continued by saying that part of that goal was to be sure that parents knew: “We want you in our building, we want you to volunteer, and we want your participation.” For annual activities such as the Christmas program, the Spring Fling, and the end-of-year awards ceremony, participants reported that parents, grandparents, and community members were invited to attend and to participate, and they did. During the end of year ceremony for the last year of operation, according to Dr. Smith, parents and grandparents were invited to speak about their own experiences at school. Dr. Ever observed, “The parents just took such ownership and had so much pride. It was a part of who they were.”

Mrs. Hunt provided the perspective of a parent and a community member who had experienced and observed involvement:

[Chase] was an open house. You know the grandparents and the parents are involved in school stuff, but this is different. At our awards day, the auditorium was packed. Everybody came. Aunts and uncles came just to see if anything had changed, the upgrades, and just to see what was going on. During Open House, people just walked in the school.

In other words, participants believed that one did not have to have a student enrolled at Chase to be part of school and schooling at Chase. Mrs. Hunt, describing the Christmas
program, tells how the Town of Chase used to provide fruit bags to all of the residents. One of the options coordinated by the school and the town was for residents to pick up the fruit bags at the school’s Christmas program. She states that the mayor of Chase would go and read to the children at school, and that an office co-worker who does not have any children is known by name by all of the children at school. Mrs. Hunt also describes how parents and community members were involved through provision of supplies and materials to classrooms and to students who could not furnish their own supplies. Mrs. Murphy further supported this by saying that she had made cupcakes for Tony’s class, and that “When they needed me, I was there.”

The School Renewal Plan (1999-2004) states that Chase Elementary “has a rich history that is grounded in abundant community support” (p. 4). Ms. Coe supported this claim in describing the end of the year banquet held for graduating students. “When I graduated in 1940,” Ms. Coe stated, “the mill boss and all of the officials attended the banquet.” A collection of commencement programs, as well as programs for plays and literary society events, compiled by Cobb and Welborn (1995) demonstrate strong support by local business entities and imply the presence of strong community support even in the very early years of Chase’s existence.

**Promoter of School and Community Connectedness and Pride**

Participants indicated that there were strong connections between school and community, and they believed that a strong sense of pride was promoted through school
and schooling at Chase Elementary School. For example, when asked what people should know about Chase Elementary, Dr. Ever replied,

It was so multigenerational. The teachers were legendary. Parents and grandparents would come in and say, “Oh, I had this teacher or that teacher” [who was still working at the school] . . . . Everyone trusted the teachers and just felt like the teachers were going to do what was best for the kids. The parents knew the teachers, and there were members of families who had gone there and had the same teachers.

This familiarity with teachers, the long-standing relationships, and the personal connections of multiple generations and community members fostered among participants a deep sense that school and community were integral parts of one another.

Dr. Smith echoed this point and elaborated, saying,

Many of our [Chase’s] parents had attended Chase as an elementary school, and their grandparents had attended Chase when it was a high school. What really always impressed me about Chase was that the community-at-large just has this rich history and that Chase as a community was at the cutting edge of doing things to support education.

She noted with obvious pride that Chase was the first school in the state to have compulsory education and to have a kindergarten:

The instructional program was so very strong at a time in our history when education was not valued as much as maybe finishing school and getting a job. And because the mill required that kind of support for the children of their employees to get an education, it made such a difference in the community.
Dr. Smith also felt that it was important for Chase students to be taught by Chase teachers who understood the history of the school and town, who “really wanted to be there,” and who had been teaching at Chase for a long time.

Participants believed that these teachers, who had such long histories and who had built ongoing relationships with the school and community, were able to teach students about the town’s past and to instill pride for who they were and where they lived. Dr. Ever supported this assertion when she remarked that the school was a point of pride for the parents and the community. However, for participants, the connections of teachers and multiple generations to the school were only a portion of the overall connectedness promoted between school and community. “A school has to be an extension of the community because you need your community, because it is in your community, and because it is your community’s most valuable asset,” said Dr. Smith.

In the last year of operation, the connectedness of school and community and the promotion of pride became especially poignant to participants. According to Dr. Smith, “There is a great amount of pride that the community has in itself and the individuals that have lived there their whole lives.” She described Chase’s past history as “one of the premier schools of sport in the state” and indicated, “That last year that we were together, we made a very conscious decision to try to celebrate all of what Chase was and to try to give the families. . . . a voice in that celebration.” As a result, according to Dr. Smith, the staff designed special t-shirts, planned special events, and engaged students in a flag project designed to emphasize their connections to Chase and to remind students to be proud of who they were and where they were from. Of growing up in Chase and going to
Chase Elementary, Anna said with obvious pride, “There were two things we knew how to do; we knew how to play ball and fight. But the school and the town—that was our world.” Emmalee and Betty nodded in assent. Thus, according to participants, promotion of school and community connectedness and pride were a function of school and schooling.

**Showcase for District and Community**

Cobb and Welborn (1995) noted that the “graded schools” were a point of pride for Chase during the early twentieth century. Based on participant stories, documents, and researcher observations and recollections, Chase Elementary School and the process of schooling continued to serve as an opportunity to showcase the accomplishments of the students and teachers, district, and community. The “School Renewal Report” states that the school “was an eight-time Incentive Award Winner” and “was also named as a Flagship School of Promise” (p. 3). Dr. Ever described the willingness of Chase teachers to be innovative and to try new ideas:

Anytime we wanted to try something to help the kids, I didn’t have to convince them [teachers]; they were already on board. For example, when the district wanted to implement the Breakfast in the Classroom program, they, the district, knew we were the place to try it. The teachers didn’t have to be convinced. The buy-in was already there. They didn’t say why we couldn’t do it or complain. They said, “Help us buy the trays and tell us when to start.”

These types of endeavors led to improvements in academics and the overall quality of schooling at Chase. Additions such as a computer lab and document cameras in
classrooms seem to have assisted in improving student learning, and as the academic performance of students improved, said Dr. Ever, “Soon, people were coming to see our school.” She reported that other elementary schools in the district observed their successes and began asking teachers to share innovations they had implemented in the classroom such as closing the achievement gap strategies. As such, a function of school indicated by participants included showing and demonstrating achievements made through the process of schooling. In discussing the state system of ranking schools based on performance, Dr. Ever described the day she found out that Chase had earned the State Silver award:

I’ll never forget doing the happy dance in . . . [the Superintendent’s] office. He didn’t tell me before I got there, and when he showed me the rankings, we were just so happy. There was genuine support, and they [the district] knew we were holding our own.

Inside the school during the last year, one could easily observe all of the state ranking awards hanging on the walls near the front office. Dr. Smith said that when she assumed the position of principal, she “wanted to continue to show and demonstrate the excellence that the school was achieving,” and this became one of her goals. Mr. Grimsley indicated that he and other members of the Board of Trustees had been invited to the school by Dr. Smith “because she wanted to show what a great school it was.” He also indicated that “you had to put great administrators and teachers there and make sure the quality of education was the same [as that of other schools].” Thus, what happened in school and in the schooling process at Chase Elementary was not only important to
participants but also worthy of special consideration and observation by district-level affiliates.

With regard to the community, Ms. Brown indicated that people would come to the school just to look and see how it had changed, what had stayed the same, and to share memories of when they were students at Chase. During the “Blast from the Past” reunion held in the fall of 2009, after the elementary school closed, all ages and stages of students and families commented on extensive renovations to the auditorium and updates to the school building. One lady remarked that the auditorium “looks just as beautiful and elegant as it did in the old days.” The school itself was so crowded that one could barely navigate the hallways, and people continually commented on how good it looked. During my observations at the Chase gym for the gathering and celebration, every individual who spoke with me wanted to make sure I had toured the auditorium and the school. Mrs. Hunt told me that when her father, who lived about an hour away, had come to visit, he wanted to go in the school, and the principal “took him around and let him look, and you know, he just had so many good memories.” When I interviewed Anna, Emmalee, and Betty, one of the questions they asked me was, “Have you seen inside the auditorium and the school?” When I responded that I had, Anna said, “Oh, it just looks so good now.” Therefore, study participants who were school employees, parents, and community members believed that serving as a showcase for the district and community was one function of school and schooling at Chase Elementary.

While on the one hand the aforementioned examples imply a focus on the building itself, it is important to note that these individuals were not admiring the
building simply for its architectural features or innovations, as one might when touring the Empire State Building. They wanted to see the building because of the significant experiences in their lives that had taken place there. Ms. Coe, for example, described numerous plays and performances, a “Miss Chase High School” pageant, and the graduation exercises held in the auditorium. When asked who came to these events, she replied, “Oh, everybody came. Everybody always wanted to see.” Visiting and touring the Chase buildings was similar to visiting and touring, perhaps, the United States Capitol building; one admires the physical and architectural features, but one also contemplates the significance of what happens there. The open invitations to the community and district throughout its history—for everyone to watch and participate in programs, plays, and special ceremonies, for past students to revisit lived experiences, and for demonstrating academic innovation and progress—indicate that for study participants school and schooling were to be showcased to and for others.

**Participant Attitudes, Perceptions, and Values Related to Functions of School and Schooling at Chase Elementary School**

Participants valued formal academic success and social, civic, and personal development for students, and they perceived Chase Elementary as a school that provided these opportunities for students. As a result, their attitude was that Chase Elementary was a good school for students. When formal academic success was not at its strongest, teachers and staff were willing to engage in innovative teaching practices, ask for material support, and work together to improve standardized test scores to an acceptable level. The accomplishment of 100% of students passing the state-mandated achievement
test was viewed as a success by school- and district-affiliate participants, and compliments about student preparedness from teachers at the middle school level emphasized participant belief that students were being well taught. Mrs. Hunt said,

I felt like from the beginning, and I tried to make it well known, that my opinion was that Benjamin was going to get an adequate education at any of the schools. There is not one that is better than the other.

Furthermore, expectations for personal, civic, and social development also were congruent with the values endorsed by parent and community member participants. School affiliates and parents participating in the study wanted students to be exposed to culturally and racially diverse individuals and groups, as well as to provide them with experiences outside of the immediate community. For example, in the last year of operation, Chase Elementary School provided a field trip to an exhibit featuring the remains and artifacts of King Tutankhamen as a reward for completing Accelerated Reader books and assessments. Mrs. Murphy and Tony conveyed that his best friend at Chase Elementary was of a different race, and according to Mrs. Murphy, “There was not a racial thing [problem] at Chase.” Mrs. Hunt agreed with that sentiment. Both Mrs. Hunt and Dr. Smith provided examples and reasoning for learning to behave properly in school so that one could self-monitor and self-discipline in later years, which they valued. Mrs. Hunt said,

They [teachers] care how students are going to act when they are out in the world—how they are going to behave when they are in front of people. They are representing us, and we don’t want them growing up and acting like a bunch of hillbillies.
Participant accounts and documents indicate that Chase Elementary valued parent and community member interaction with the school and provided multiple ways and opportunities for involvement. From serving on the School Improvement Council to baking cupcakes to reading aloud to students, parents and community representatives were involved in the life of the school and the lives of students. Dr. Smith emphasized, “We want you [parents] here.” Parent and community member participants wanted to be involved, and participants perceived their involvement as a benefit to students. In reflecting on the parent involvement, Dr. Smith said, “I think sometimes we talk about it [getting parents involved], but we don’t really put legs to it. I think sometimes you have to put legs to it.” As a result, parents and school constituents participating in this study perceived Chase as a school that wanted and desired parent and community involvement, and they believed that Chase Elementary provided an ideal place and ways for them to be involved. The participants valued this level of involvement.

Participants perceived Chase Elementary as a school that honored connectedness between school and community and fostered pride for oneself, the community, and the school. The influence of the mills on the community and on the education system in Chase was a point of pride. In addition, the school instilled pride in its students through its motto and, based on participant perceptions, provided the community with opportunities to be proud of the students through events such as awards ceremonies that were open to all. In the last year of operation, for another example, special t-shirts that read “I am a Chase Cheetah!” were made for students and for adults—including teachers, parents, and community members. This connectedness to the community, to one another,
and to multiple generations who had attended Chase schools was a part of what generated participant pride. As a result, the school was valued by participants for providing a way to maintain connectedness and pride, and participants believed that this was a valid function of school and schooling.

With pride in their voices, all participants except Mr. Grimsley and Ms. Brown, neither of whom commented on the mill company’s role in the school, pointed out during interviews that the mill company built the school. Because the school had been a celebrated source of pride even in its early years, and because the “legend” of the school had been passed down from generation to generation, Chase Elementary remained a showcase of history throughout its existence. Additional reasons to showcase the school were added over the years—innovative teaching, student performance, new technology, state-determined school achievement awards. Dr. Smith said that for six to seven years prior to its closing, school and community members and district-level affiliates would say that “Chase Elementary is the best kept secret!” Participants were pleased with the school inside and out even though parts of the physical campus had declined. This “showcasing” of the school itself and of the accomplishments earned within it was perceived by participants as a natural part of school and schooling.

**Culture of School and Schooling at Chase Elementary School**

Peterson and Deal (1998) write, “Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges” (p. 28). Three themes emerged from the data
with regard to the culture of school and schooling at Chase Elementary: caring for one another, shared responsibility and high expectations for students, and the importance of strong relationships. A story shared by Mrs. Hunt demonstrates all three of these themes:

My son’s 4K teacher, Miss Komak, called me because Benjamin was misbehaving. I left work, got a hickory, and walked across the street. I took him in the principal’s office, spanked him with a hickory, and came back to work. You can’t do that at [other schools]. I don’t live across the street or work across the street. I don’t know everybody there. . . . I knew these people. . . . Dr. Smith, she loves Benjamin, but she knows exactly how to get his attention. These are people that I know. I know where they went home to every day. I know their children. I know when their children graduated and when they were born. You just don’t find that anywhere else. I don’t know of any other place or school that my kids would go to that I would feel comfortable with them being disciplined. . . if it was [with] corporal punishment.

**Caring for One Another**

To Mrs. Hunt, the teacher’s and the principal’s actions indicated caring for her son. She later said that in her mind the teachers did not only emphasize the academic success of students, but they also cared about and worried about the students. Ms. Murphy agreed with this assertion and explained how the Murphy family was treated when Tony’s appendix burst:

He was in the hospital for a week. I mean, that school was amazing during that whole ordeal. His teacher came to the hospital and visited him. I was the homebound teacher because I was a substitute, but his teacher came to the hospital. She prepared me for all the work that he needed. They really treated him wonderfully through the whole thing. They called us to see how he was doing. I
mean, how many schools will do that? His teacher would call a couple of times to check on him. How many would do that?

Thus, student and parent participants perceived a strong culture of caring at Chase Elementary.

School- and district affiliate participants also directly addressed this culture of caring. Ms. Brown relayed a story about a parent whose child was unhappy about moving upstairs at Chase Elementary and wanted to change schools. According to Ms. Brown, the parent told her child, “Chase is like a private school. Miss Lynn and the staff take good care of you.” Ms. Brown also noted that going to work at Chase “was wonderful because you knew you were taking care of the kids.” Ms. Brown said that sometimes a sick child “stayed in my lap all day because their mother could not come pick them up.” Ms. Brown said that one of the first things she worried about when the decision was made to close the school was the welfare of the students: “Would they be treated the same, and the ones that needed special attention, would they get it where they were going?”

Caring was obvious in the hugging and “high-fiving” actions of teachers and students, but it was also evident in what parents did for the teachers. Mrs. Murphy said that she “put on that whole thing [a big teacher celebration] at the end of the year for the teachers.” In addition, Dr. Smith asserted that at Chase Elementary, “you could not bring a child that we could not serve and help.” When asked what was her biggest fear or concern upon learning that Chase Elementary was to close, Dr. Smith said, “The first thing you always think about is how is this going to affect families and how is this going
to affect children? How is it going to affect employees?” To Dr. Smith and others, it was important that “children have people here that care about them—not just academically but care about them in every facet of their lives.” Anna, Emmalee, and Betty affirmed that this atmosphere of caring was also present in the 1950s and 1960s, explaining that, “Our teachers came to visit our homes and talk with our parents. They were required to, but it was really like you knew one another.” A culture of caring was perceived by student, parent, school- and district affiliates, and community constituents participating in this study.

**Shared Responsibility and High Expectations for Student Development**

Miss Komak’s phone call to Mrs. Hunt about her son’s behavior indicates a school culture that included shared responsibility between school and parent. As discussed in the earlier section on functions of school and schooling, according to participants, parent and community involvement in school was heavily emphasized and sought after. The Parent Teacher Organization and parents in general worked to provide supplies for students and for classrooms; the Parent Teacher Organization took it upon themselves to hold fundraisers in order to purchase playground equipment. Historically, local businesses purchased advertisements in school publications to support the endeavors of Chase High School, and in its recent history, local businesses engaged in formal partnership with Chase Elementary to offer support. At the beginning of each school year, several local churches combined efforts and collected supplies such as glue,
pencils, composition books, notebook paper, folders, crayons, and markers to donate. Teachers provided extra help to students who needed it.

The “1999-2004 School Renewal Plan” indicates that parents believed that Chase Elementary held high expectations for students, and one of its vision statements reads “All school personnel, parents, and students actively share the responsibility for learning and character development” (p. 5). Dr. Ever says of one teacher, “[She] could work with kids and get things out of them nobody else could.” Support for students also came through district efforts to provide needed items and equipment with the use of Title I funds. Of the time period when student achievement was low and teachers and staff were struggling to improve it, Dr. Ever said, “Any time teachers told us they needed something, we would get it. . . . All of the struggles, wins, losses, and gains were ours.” Based on documents and participant responses, responsibility for student academic success was shared by students, teachers, and community members.

Expecting growth from students in personal development behaviors, such as independence, promptness to and attendance at school, self-motivation, and appropriate behavior, was demonstrated in the incident with Mrs. Hunt’s son. Benjamin was not meeting the behavioral expectations, although his mother and his teachers knew that he understood the expectations, and because his teacher understood the importance of having his mother involved in the correction process, he suffered the consequences in a manner that was acceptable to his mother. The 1999-2004 School Renewal Plan indicates that the average daily attendance at Chase was “consistently 96% from year to year” (p. 2). To parent and school- and district-affiliate participants, teaching and supporting
personal development and desirable behaviors were important parts of the school culture at Chase Elementary. Dr. Smith, for example, said:

I think the difference between a good school and a great school that really makes a difference is this connection I want these children to have. I don’t want these children to behave well or to perform well because of some type of fear factor. Now, they know we have rules, but I want them to grow up knowing how to discipline themselves, because when they get to . . . [a university or college], they are going to have to. And if we have done our jobs right, they are going to be able to self-discipline.

Thus, shared responsibility and high expectations for student success—both academically and developmentally—were an important part of what participants perceived as the culture of Chase Elementary.

**Importance of Strong Relationships**

The significance of strong relationships was evident in Mrs. Hunt’s observations about who might be allowed to use corporal punishment with her child and about her familiarity with school teachers and staff. Because she knew the teachers and principal, “where they went home to every day,” she trusted them to do what was in the best interest of her child. Dr. Smith also emphasized the importance of strong relationships in saying that at Chase,

You had teachers and staff that really knew the children, knew the families, and cared about the families. I think you had families that really appreciated and loved that school, not just because of what it provided the children but also because they were able to retain the school in their community.
When asked what I should be sure to include about Chase Elementary, Mr. Murphy said, “Personal relationships between teachers and students. That is my opinion. I think that is one of the most important things.” Based on participant responses, strong relationships among students, parents, and teachers were an important aspect of school culture at Chase Elementary School.

Comments provided by school- and district- affiliate participants imply that for these participants, teacher, staff, and administrator relationships were also an integral part of Chase’s culture. In describing what it was like to work at Chase, Dr. Ever said:

You would have to work a million years to get that [work situation] anywhere else. . . . It was small enough that I could be a part of everything, not just someone sitting in an office. And, we all just did everything together. . . . They were as much a part of me as my family. They are still part of my family.

Ms. Brown similarly described the overall staff relationships at Chase, saying, “We just worked together and did what we had to do. Everybody was a big family.” This spirit of camaraderie and the metaphor of family infused all aspects of school and schooling; thus, the overall culture of Chase, according to study participants, included a strong emphasis on relationships.

**Participant Attitudes, Perceptions, and Values Related to Culture of School and Schooling at Chase Elementary School**

Parent participants perceived the culture of caring at Chase Elementary to be of a quality above and beyond what their children might receive at other schools. Ms. Brown’s story about the parent who told her child that “Chase is like a private school”
implies intimacy and caring that the parent did not perceive to be the case at other schools. Ms. Brown’s genuine pleasure in “taking care of the kids” extended to serving as a surrogate mother when a child’s own mother was not available. In addition, the fact that she—and administrators—did not insist that the parent find someone to pick up the sick child indicates a willingness not only to care for the child but also to care about the job or the hardships of the parent. Worrying about how students would “be treated” and if special needs would be met implies recognition on Ms. Brown’s part that Chase Elementary offered something that may not be available at other schools. Dr. Smith’s confidence that Chase Elementary could and would meet the needs of any child who came to the school confirms a willingness to “go the extra mile” from the perspective of a district employee participant. This perspective was also noted by Dr. Ever. Parent, school- and district-affiliate, and some community member participants believed that this culture of caring was a special and essential aspect of Chase Elementary—one that may not be present elsewhere.

Participants viewed the emphasis on shared responsibility and high expectations that they perceived at Chase Elementary as a positive attribute of the culture of school and schooling at Chase Elementary. Perhaps because the school elicited such strong parent and community involvement on behalf of the welfare and success of students, parent and community member participants were very willing to assist and support the needs of all students and the school itself. In addition, the willingness of the district and the village community to provide resources and materials to improve student
performance may have led to the belief that staff was supported from outside the immediate school community as well as within the school community.

Mrs. Hunt was pleased that when her son needed to be disciplined she was notified and consulted prior to rather than after the fact. She was a partner in the schooling of her son. These types of joint endeavors helped participants feel that they were connected to the school, to one another, and “in this together.” Through repeated interactions such as these, a strong sense of trust and support developed, and this was supported by statements such as one given by Dr. Ever: “They [parents] had so much trust for the teachers and for everything they were doing.” When combined with the longevity of many of the teachers and the familiarity of teachers and families, this assisted parents and school staff participating in the study in holding consistently high expectations for students. Thus, when faced with unknown expectations and a possible lack of shared responsibility, Mrs. Hunt and Mr. and Mrs. Murphy did not feel the “connection” that Dr. Smith asserted was so important to student development and to development of the ability to self-discipline.

Precisely because she knew the teacher and principal very well, Mrs. Hunt felt comfortable using corporal punishment on her child and felt comfortable with the principal or teacher using that specific type of discipline. Strong relationships were perceived by student and parent, school- and district-affiliate, and community member participants as an important part of the school and schooling culture at Chase, and the relationships were held in the highest regard. Dr. Ever, Ms. Brown, Mr. Murphy, and Dr. Smith all used the word “family” to describe those relationships, and Mr. Murphy
believed that the personal relationships between students, parents, and teachers were of the utmost importance: “They cared so much about all the children and their parents. It almost felt like you were walking into a family gathering.”

**Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values Related to Chase Elementary School**

“The best school ever.”

Chase Elementary was perceived by participants as the perfect small school. Dr. Smith said, “Chase represented all that was good with a small school setting.” She also described the school as having been loved by the superintendent, loved by people, and loved by the community. To participants, the size and setting were conducive to strong, positive relationships; it was personal; and it had an attractive setting. Mr. Grimsley said, “It was a charming school.” The other participants agreed. As noted in the earlier story relayed by Ms. Brown, study participants believed that Chase Elementary was “like a private school” in that it was small, conveyed personalized attention, and parents felt that teachers and staff cared deeply about their children. Ms. Murphy believed that Tony had gotten a better education and had experienced better teaching with the small class size at Chase Elementary.

Parent and student participant accounts as well as school- and district-affiliate participant accounts imply that teachers and staff were perceived as hard-working and dedicated and that parents and administrators believed that the longevity of the teachers and their closeness to one another—their “close-knit family,” as Ms. Brown, Dr. Smith, and Dr. Ever noted—was beneficial to students. The parent participants trusted teachers
and staff. Mrs. Hunt said, “For the people that do not live here and never experienced [Chase], they could never understand why a school building. . . Well, all they saw was the building. They could not see what was inside.” The functions and culture of school and schooling at Chase Elementary were “inside” the building, and thus what the school represented and embodied was very important to study participants.

In the views of parent and student participants, Chase promoted equality among students and cultural diversity. Mrs. Hunt said,

They [students] all pretty much live on the same mill village, so it is not like one’s house is necessarily better than the other. You might have a little bit of a bigger yard or a few more updates, but everybody was the same. We did have a good mixture of background and race considering we are such a small community. There were Hispanics and Blacks, and I think that is important. In fact, one of Benjamin’s best friends is Black and has been with him from 4K until now. We had it all.

Parents and school affiliate participants believed that Chase offered a good education. Mr. Grimsley said, “It [closing the school] was never about the quality of education.”

Parent and school- and district-employee participants believed that Chase Elementary was the best place to serve Chase children, the best place to work, and the best place to make a difference in the lives of children. For participants, the school and what it did with regard to education were points of pride. Ms. Brown said, “There will never be another Chase Elementary, another school like Chase Elementary.” Participants believed that what the school offered and provided to students in addition to a good formal education—close relationships, a small setting, an attitude of caring, personal
relationships, trust, respect for oneself and others—reflected their values as parents and as members of the community.

As has been previously described, the PTO meeting held a few days before the Parker School District One Board of Trustees voted to close Chase Elementary was charged with emotion. At the very end of the meeting, a young girl who had been a student at Chase but who had progressed to sixth grade tugged gently on Dr. Smith’s arm. After bending down to let the young girl whisper in her ear, Dr. Smith pulled a chair to the front of the cafeteria and helped the young lady climb onto it. Dr. Smith then announced that the young girl had something she wanted to say, and the cafeteria quieted. Loudly and clearly the young girl said, “No matter what, Chase Elementary is the best school ever!” Although not all participants used these exact words, the statement characterizes a sentiment shared by many study participants.

“One of the last bastions of the community.”

Chase Elementary was perceived by study participants as having met the needs of the community, having served the community well, and having provided a sense of cohesiveness and pride for the community throughout the existence of the mill village. Established by Chase Manufacturing Company approximately one year after the first mill was constructed (Cobb & Welborn, 1995), the development of the school paralleled that of the mill town, and the school became almost as much a part of mill life and mill village identity as the mills themselves. From “graded school” (Cobb & Welborn, 1995,
p. 86) to high school to elementary school, from mill school to public school—Chase schools were an integral part of the mill village way of life.

Ms. Coe could remember hearing the mill whistles blow to signal beginning and end of work shifts, lunch times, and dinner times, and the daily school routine mimicked that of the mills so that students went home for lunch at the same time as the mill workers. School events were attended by mill officials and by the community-at-large, providing entertainment and a place for all community members to socialize and stay abreast of one another’s lives. Mrs. Hunt describes attending awards ceremonies at Chase Elementary:

Our awards day was in the auditorium, and it was all at one time. You know at [Clark Green], as much as I love it and as well pleased as I am with everything that happened over there, it is broken up—second, third, and fourth, because it is so big.

According to participants, at Chase, everyone in the town had the opportunity to see the accomplishments of all of the students and visit with one’s neighbors. They could be proud of all of the students and proud of what had been accomplished at the school. Of other social events held at the school, Mrs. Hunt said, “It was small, and I saw everybody I knew. We had time to speak, but we still had space to move around. And you can’t do that at other schools.” These opportunities also helped to construct and support the spirit of community.

Participants indicated that they valued the school for the services and functions it was perceived as providing for the community—educational and otherwise. It was valued by participants because it was a source of pride and a place to show one’s pride.
“Because of the pride that the community had, it was able to stay open,” said Dr. Smith. After the mills closed, the school was the most significant single entity left in the village. Participants valued the school because it provided a place for the community to gather, because it enabled the town members to build and fortify their sense of community, and because it was closely associated with their identity as a mill village. Thus, participants indicated that the attitude toward the school, which strengthened when the mills closed, was that it was an essential part of the community—a part that could not be replaced. As Dr. Smith said, “It was one of the last bastions that the community had. Everything else had closed.”

“I am sure that is set in your memories.”

Participants perceived Chase Elementary as a place and a means by which to remember one’s experiences, carry out traditions, and pass along memories and traditions. Mrs. Hunt expressed the sentiment that lots of people visited the school and told stories of their time there, including herself: “I remember telling Benjamin that when we had tornado drills when I was a kid, we went down to the basement. He didn’t even know it had a basement.” Ms. Coe remembered the traditions associated with high school graduation: “All the girls wore white dresses, and my sister made mine.” Later, she recalled going to the movies in the school auditorium:

I don’t remember what the picture was, but I remember so well going to the movies, and I think back then it was maybe 25 cents to get in. And you kind of had to be rich to go to the movies. Every once in a while we got to go and we enjoyed it.
Anna, Emmalee, and Betty recalled recess on the playground: “There was a big set of steps on the side of the building. All the girls used to jump off the steps so their skirts would fly up.” They pointed out that all of the students rode their bikes or walked to school, and Dr. Smith, Dr. Ever, Ms. Brown, Mrs. Hunt, and Ms. Murphy all commented on the tradition of walking to school. Emmalee recalled lunch time at school:

Not all of the kids ate lunch at school, and this was before they had programs to help out. My parents had six kids at Chase Elementary at one time. My first year, my parents didn’t have enough money to buy our lunch, so we just went outside and played. After that year, my mom became the manager at the cafeteria, so we always got to eat lunch at school.

Schooling itself was viewed as a tradition to participants, and participants indicated that the open door policy of the school allowed and encouraged people to come in to visit and to remember their own school experiences. On Back to School night, parents brought their children, and one could overhear them telling stories about their teachers, sharing activities they did at school, and pointing out things that had changed. Teachers knew students and families by name. At the “Blast from the Past” reunion, one man began reminiscing, “. . . and I’ll never forget the day Ms. Murk pinched me,” and a woman chimed in, “She made me stay after school for talking!”

Participants valued the school because it gave them experiences and traditions and because it was open for them to relive and share those experiences and traditions with others. To study participants, the school served as a connection from past to present, and it provided a reason as well as a place to remember. In the absence of the mills, the
stores, the movie house, and other establishments from earlier years, participants felt that the school was the best place to do that. Ms. Brown said:

You know, a lot of people that used to go there, like I mean from years and years back, they would come by and want to visit. Former students, and I mean coming from way back, would come in. And they would say, “This is where I went to school, and I want to see what it looks like.” I am sure that is set in your memories.

“I’m going to Chase.”

As implied in the previous three sections, the school building and its setting were very important to the study participants. For its atmosphere, its memories, and everything that it represented—a tradition of schooling and education, a place of and for community and community members, an identity that began to form 130 years ago—participants perceived the building as a physical symbol of the past and of the present. In spite of wanting to fill the building to capacity, Dr. Smith, as well as Mrs. Hunt and Mr. Grimsley, all described the school as being “land locked,” “unable to physically expand,” and more costly to effectively and efficiently operate than other schools. Nevertheless, by participants, the school was perceived and valued as “a place for learning” and as an outward demonstration of active life in the community. As a result, their attitude was that it was important to have and keep the building in use. When the Parker One and Two Adult Learning Center was preparing and renovating the building for use as the adult learning center, they took down a red and white “Chase Elementary School” sign that had been hung at the top of the building. Underneath it, engraved in the concrete, were the
same words: “Chase Elementary School.” Dr. Smith said, “I begged our adult education program to please leave that there, and they have.”

Participants believed that keeping the building from dilapidation and ruin was of the utmost importance. Mrs. Hunt said, “We did not want another empty building. We have so many now. We did not want another haven for drug users or vandalism.” Dr. Smith and Mr. Grimsley said the district was very active in making sure the building did not stay empty and that it be preserved. Dr. Smith indicated that she had worried about what would happen to the building, and that after taking care of the students, parents, and staff at Chase, the building was one of her main concerns:

You have right down that road a graveyard where the mills were, and some of it is dug out, and some of it is standing there. It is a sad reminder for that community of what once was, and now how it looks so awful. . . . I did not want that to happen to that school campus or that school building.

Emmalee, who still lives in Chase, said, “I was scared it would become an abandoned building. I am so glad the district has taken care of it.”

Because of its tradition as a place of learning, the pride that was connected to and symbolized through it, and its ability to show signs of life in the town, the building—and what would happen to it once the students were transferred elsewhere—was of deep concern to every participant. The presence of Parker One and Two Adult Learning Center in the building was perceived as an asset by participants. They valued active use of the building and its continuation as a place of learning. When asked if she thought it was a good thing that the building was being used for the adult learning center, Ms. Brown said, “If it couldn’t be an elementary school. Chase Elementary School.” When people talk
with her about going to get their GED or WorkKeys training and she asks, “Where are you getting it?” they reply, “I’m going to Chase.” Thus, participants valued the school building and its setting, as well as its tradition as a place of learning.

Participants perceived Chase Elementary as having been loved by district affiliates, school employees, students and parents, and the Chase village. Its intimate setting; the ways it welcomed, cared for, respected, and served students, community members, and the whole of the community; the quality of education it provided; and the values it instilled and upheld endeared it to many of the participants. Chase Elementary was perceived by student, parent, some school- and district-affiliate, and some community member study participants as “the best school” to meet the needs and support the values of its constituents.

As the last visible vestige of the benefits that had been provided by the mill company, it represented to many of the older community member participants the goodness of a bygone era—a time when, as Anna, Emmalee, and Betty described it, “We were poor but didn’t know it.” Chase Elementary served as a reminder but also as a mechanism by which to keep the remaining people of the village together—even if they were not descendants of the original mill people, as in the example of the Murphy family.

Because the school and its activities transcended generations, each with its own unique characteristics, it provided a way to transmit past memories and traditions to younger generations, thus keeping some portion of mill community identity alive. Participants perceived the school, what occurred inside the school—both formally and
informally, and what had occurred in the school—both formally and informally, as important.

**Relationships between Chase Elementary School, the Chase Community, and Individuals**

The mill village of Chase and the schools in Chase developed simultaneously and symbiotically. In attempting to construct a brief history of each, I found it nearly impossible to extricate the history and development of one from the other. Participants did not identify the relationship, per se; they described what the relationship was like or what it meant to their lives. For example, when asked about the relationship between school and community, Anna said, “Everyone knew everybody. Gossip travelled fast. We knew that if we got in trouble at school, our dads would find out at the mill before we got home.” Emmalee said, “We owe so much to Captain Chase [the President and Treasurer of the manufacturing company]. He was the one who got the school built and made sure that everything was provided.” Anna continued, “We had opportunities on the mill hill that others didn’t have.” The relationship between school and community was so close—even to participants who had grown up in Chase—that it was difficult to discuss one entity without discussing the other.

Chase Elementary hosted community events, invited community members to be part of school activities, and sought input from the community. The village and the school held joint reunions. As Ms. Brown said, “It was a community school.” This sentiment was echoed by many participants. During earlier threats to the school’s existence, Ms. Brown remembered a community member “going around to get petitions
up from our neighbors and taking them to the board meeting, and then coming back and saying, ‘They are not going to close it.’ That is all it took—those petitions from the families.” In the past it appears that the community had rallied on behalf of the school, and the community did so again this time.

Participant stories indicate that parents and community members were involved in the school, and they believed that everyone was welcomed. Said Mrs. Hunt, “There was always an open door. . . . People went, and that was just what we did.” Thus, there was little distinction between a “school” event and a “community” event. Dr. Smith indicated that the community loved the school “not just because of what it provided the children, but also because they were able to retain that in their community.” Mrs. Murphy said, “You know, Chase Elementary, to me, if you look, is a community, a family.” Perhaps the statement that best conveys the relationship between Chase Elementary and the Chase community is one given by Mrs. Hunt: “You know, we lost the mills ten years before, and that was devastating to the community. But we still had our school.”

Isolating the exact relationship between school and individual or community and individual was equally challenging because, as Peshkin (1982) notes, in small rural communities where school and community life are inseparable and contribute to the “collective life” (p. 162) of the community, this collective community identity directly impacts individual identity. Nevertheless, evidence of the relationship between school and individual provided by participants demonstrates that the school had a deep impact on individual lives.
The number of individuals who came back to visit, wanted to see what had
changed or stayed the same in the school, and shared their experiences with younger
students and children indicates that the impact of the relationships was significant and
far-reaching. Students knew that they were cared for and that teachers held high
expectations for them. Mrs. Murphy provided her perspective:

All the teachers knew the kids. Everybody that worked in that school knew all the
kids. Whether it be their families, or whatever, they took the time to get to know
them and who they are. To me, that was a great thing. . . . And when your child
needed extra help, they [teachers] were right there to give it to them.

Parent participants had no doubt that teachers and staff would take care of their children,
just as they believed that many of the parents had been cared for by the same teachers in
earlier years, and this established and fostered extremely strong relationships. Ms. Brown
said that when the school closing was announced, “I was worried about the kids. That
was all I could do was worry about the kids, hoping that they would be okay.” In
addition to Ms. Brown, Dr. Smith, parent participants, and community member
participants valued the strength and nature of the relationships between school and
student.

The relationships between school, community, and individual are revealed
through the functions of school and schooling discussed earlier in that academic success
and personal development for students, parent and community involvement, school and
community connectedness and pride, as conveyed and perceived by participants, and the
showcasing of the school for district and community, also as conveyed and perceived by
participants, would not be possible without relationships between school, community,
and individual. Similarly, the themes of caring, shared responsibility and high expectations, and the importance of strong relationships discussed in the earlier section on the culture of school and schooling would not exist if there were not close relationships between school, community, and individual. Finally, the relationships between school, community, and individual are infused in the discussion of participants’ perceptions, attitudes, and values related to the school.

**Participant Characterizations of the Relationships between Chase Elementary School, the Chase Community, and Individuals**

The relationships between school, community, and individual were characterized by participant use of the collective possessive pronoun “our” and by terms of endearment such as “connected,” “close-knit,” “like a family,” “personal,” and “our world.” Individual participants were strongly connected to the school and the community; the school and community were strongly connected to one another and to the individual participants. The descriptors used to characterize the relationships between school, community, and individual do not imply distance or even objectivity; they imply the kinds of relationships that take time and effort to build, that are worth fighting for, that are mourned when lost. As Mrs. Murphy explained, “Do you see what I am saying? Do you see the difference? Chase Elementary, it is like you could put your arms around it and feel it.” This type of characterization was shared repeatedly by and throughout interviews with study participants.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Study

At a time in the United States during which economic distress is high, the demands placed on schools to prepare students adequately are paramount, and the perceived failures of schools to educate students acceptably are abundant, understanding factors that contribute to student success or failure, community support and “buy-in,” and a collective sense of responsibility for students and school may allow us to serve students and communities better and thus the whole of United States society. Resistance to school closings and consolidations is an important issue for educational researchers and education policy makers because through their resistance, small rural schools may be able to help us understand salient features and symbolic aspects of public education that influence the roles of school and schooling in the larger collectivity of United States citizenry and in the individual lives of its constituents. Thus, examination of how and why students, parents, and community members are attached to a school and the ways in which a specific school contributes to the overall well-being of students, parents, and community members—especially in light of the closing of the school—provided insight concerning psychosocial aspects of school and schooling that are not prominent in other, “unsuccessful,” schools.

Of the utmost importance are people—the people whose collective attitudes, perceptions, and values affect our conceptions of school and schooling and may effect
change in how we determine what it means to provide “the best” (Tyack, 1974) education. The attitudes, perceptions, and values revealed through this study of a small, rural, historic, mill-town school closing and the psychosocial dimensions of the relationships between small rural school constituents and their community schools indicate that the non-academic functions, culture, perceptions and values related to the school, and relationships fostered within and outside of the school are paramount. The findings of this study, then, may help us better understand what and how to provide for future generations of students who will one day be charged with making decisions for and about education and the continuation of United States society.

This research study explored why people were upset with the closing of a small, rural, historic, mill-town school in the southeastern United States closes. Through the case-study exploration of this event, I examined the history of the mill village and mill school as well as the circumstances precipitating the closing. I then utilized four embedded units of analysis: functions of school and schooling at Chase Elementary; the culture of school and schooling at Chase Elementary; perceptions, attitudes, and values related to the school; and the relationships between school, community, and individual. Identifying key themes for each of these four units of analysis allowed me to further explore the perspectives, attitudes, and values of students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents about these aspects of school and schooling as well as how the salient features of Chase Elementary and the mill village of Chase contributed to the strife associated with the school closing and to the resistance of the students, parents, and community members.
This research provided an opportunity to delve closely and deeply into what participants valued about education, functions of school and schooling, culture of school and schooling, the school itself, and the relationships between school, community, and individual for the specific case of a small, rural, historic, mill-town school closing. Although there is some discussion of why students and parents did not want to be transferred to a different school, in essence this study provides information and perspectives about why students, parents, and community members were upset—why they did not want to leave their “old” school. The study also reveals a differential of power and agency between those making the decision to close the school and those who must navigate the closing and the transfer to other schools. Finally, this study helps to fill relative gaps in education research associated with elementary school closings, small-to-small school transfers and transitions, transfers and transitions to nearby schools, and the relationships between small rural communities, their schools, and the individuals who live and participate in the life of the community and school.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The participants in this study were not a representative sample from the community or town of Chase. Due to this fact, the ideas, attitudes, perceptions, and values demonstrated cannot be assumed to be representative of all people in Chase or all people involved with Chase Elementary School. In addition, none of the participants in the study were teachers at Chase Elementary, so the findings cannot be extrapolated to
include this body of individuals. The small sample size of 12 participants is an additional limitation.

As stated earlier, when I initially approached Parker School District One about participating in the study—in May 2009, just a few months after the Board voted to close Chase Elementary—the district declined to participate. In response to a written proposal I drafted with the assistance of my dissertation committee, email correspondence from the Superintendent states:

I will discuss this with my staff but my first reaction is that this research will result in keeping the effective transition from taking place. We have worked to transition the students effectively. Interviewing parents and teachers will not be a positive thing for our school district.

This precluded me from being able to interview students, parents, and teachers at the time of the closing and during the first-year of transitions to the new schools. As a result, information and emotions during the immediacy of the closing, as well as interviews of teachers and other school employees during that time frame, were not possible, and my access to potential participants was greatly reduced. However, when contacted three years after the closing, Dr. Smith and Ms. Brown did agree to participate and indicated that the superintendent had given them permission to do so. I made repeated attempts to schedule an interview with the superintendent but was unable to do so. The inability to interview students, parents, and school employees at the time of the closing, the small number of school employee participants I was allowed to interview, and the inability to interview the superintendent were limitations of the study. Yet, the participation of two
individuals employed at Chase Elementary during the time of the closing did delimit the
study to some extent.

While it is possible that the closing of the school caused some exaggeration or
enhancement of participant perceptions, approximately two-and-a-half years had passed
from the time of the school closing until the time I began conducting formal interviews.
Thus, the nature and psychosocial dimensions of the relationships would not have been
inflamed by the emotion of the moment, and participants could provide reflective rather
than reactive responses. The passage of time between the actual closing of the school and
the time that formal interviews were conducted allowed me to ask participants to reflect
upon qualities and features associated with functions of school and schooling, culture of
school and schooling, perceptions and values related to the school, and relationships of
school, community, and individual without the emotional turmoil that surrounded the
closing of Chase Elementary School.

Nevertheless, some participants were still quite emotional about the closing and
about their perceptions of what the school offered to them and to the larger mill
community. The presence and strength of these emotions further demonstrate the
important role that Chase Elementary held in individual and collective lives of
participants. However, it is also possible that because Chase Elementary School had been
such an integral part of participant lives that in discussing and describing it two to three
years later they did so with the fondness of memory, choosing to remember the positive
aspects.
Discussion of Case, Findings, and Related Literature

Chase, not unlike many southern mill villages (Herring, 1949; Mitchell, 2001; Rhyne, 1930), began with the boom of the cotton industry. Established where there had previously been no industry and few people, and at a significant distance from any other towns or communities that might provide housing and other necessary support entities, the manufacturing company literally built the town (Carlton, 1982; Cobb & Welborn, 1995). Like many other mill towns (Herring, 1949; Jacobs, 1932; Rhyne, 1930), the unincorporated town continued to grow and develop as the mill company burgeoned with success (Carlton, 1982). The mill company needed a steady supply of mill operatives (Cobb & Welborn; 1995), and mill operatives and their families needed places, ways, and means by which to live (Heiss, 1924; Rhyne, 1930). While the amenities, structures, and support systems in Chase surpassed those of the typical mill communities (Herring, 1949), like the relationships between other mill companies and their mill towns (McHugh, 1988) these entities and all of their affordances also helped create a relationship and an infrastructure that were only stable as long as both the mill community and the mill company continued to thrive.

Schooling and formal education in Chase were manufacturing company endeavors (Cobb & Welborn, 1995). Regardless of whether one views the schools and schooling in Chase as philanthropic (Andrews, 1987; Carlton, 1982; Heiss, 1924, and Jacobs, 1932) or paternalistic (McHugh, 1988; Nichols, 1924; Rhyne, 1930), the fact remains that the schools and the process of schooling were under the authority of the mill company through at least the first two decades of the twentieth century (Carlton, 1982;
Cobb & Welborn, 1995). As such, the company had considerable power over who went to school and why, the conditions under which schooling took place, the school curriculum and extracurricular activities, and the operations and employees of the schools (Carlton, 1982; Cobb & Welborn, 1995). Concomitantly, as long as Chase’s mill operative families perceived no harm from the mill school system, there was no threat to the mill company or to its authority over the schools. Thus, the relationship between the manufacturing company and Chase schools were not only as intertwined with one another but also as precariously dependent upon one another as the relationship between the mill community and the mill company (Andrews, 1987; Heiss, 1924; Jacobs, 1932; McHugh, 1988; Nichols, 1924; Rhyne, 1930).

When the pace of and need for cotton manufacturing in the South began to decline (Carlton, 1982; Herring, 1949; McHugh, 1988), and as more southern states began to enact compulsory education laws and other education regulations beyond the authority of manufacturing companies (Carlton, 1982), the mill towns, mill people, mill schools, and mill companies felt the effects (Carlton, 1982; Herring, 1949; McHugh, 1988). Chase was no exception. As manufacturing decreased, so did the number of mill workers needed, the population of the mill community, the number of students enrolled in the mill schools (even if the schools were no longer operated by the mills), and the mill company profits (Cobb & Welborn, 1995). Similar to other mill villages (Herring, 1949; McHugh, 1988), the presence of company-subsidized and company-controlled structures and systems dwindled as a result of downsizing by Kendall Company and ultimately disappeared when Kendall Company sold to Gerber (personal communication, June 4, 2012).
Although regulation and fiscal support of some of the systems, most notably the school system, transferred to state and local agencies (Carlton, 1982; Cooper, 1957) prior to that sale, the relationship between the manufacturing company and the Chase community, as well as the relationship between the manufacturing company and Chase schools, had been slowly crumbling for several decades (Carlton, 1982; Cobb & Welborn, 1995). Without the financial backing and leadership support of the mill company and with the inability of the remaining mill town residents to assume financial leadership and leadership roles (“Brownfields 2010 Assessment Grant Fact Sheet”; Cobb & Welborn, 1995; see also McHugh, 1988; Nichols, 1924; Rhyne, 1930), the infrastructure that had been in place for so long collapsed. The mills, the work opportunities they provided, and the revenue they generated spiraled downward and vanished (personal communication, June 4, 2012); people left Chase. The retail stores and for-profit services moved elsewhere in search of better profits or they closed completely; more people moved out of Chase. Eventually, Chase Elementary School, a few small businesses, several small churches, and a population not quite half the size of Chase in its prime (personal communication, June 4, 2012) were all that remained.

The historical, literal, and figurative intertwining of Chase as a mill town and Chase Elementary School as a mill school, as well as the disappearance of nearly all viable aspects of the mills and mill town life, set the stage for the closing of Chase Elementary School to be a traumatic event. As demonstrated in the literature, small, rural schools often come to represent and provide far more than formal education services (Bailey, 2000; Cummins et al., 1997; Kearns, et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al.,
1990; Lyson, 2002; Sell et al., 1996; Taylor, 1997). Chase Elementary School served not
only as a place for educating young citizens of the small mill village but also as a vehicle
through which memories and traditions of earlier days were kept alive and transmitted to
younger generations (Bickel et al., 2001; Cummins et al., 1997; Howley & Eckman,
1997; Kearns et al., 2009). Chase Elementary was a symbol of community and
community identity (Benton, 1992; Cummins et al., 1997; Peshkin, 1982) and a unifying
element within the community (Bickel et al., 2001).

Although not all residents of Chase are direct descendants of mill families, many
of them refer to Chase as the “mill hill.” In the absence of any other single entity to
which residents could relate, the school came to represent the community identity,
community cohesion, community pride, community spirit, community members’
connections to the school and community, and the collective identity of its citizens
(Bailey, 2000; Cummins et al., 1997; Kearns, et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al.,
1990; Lyson, 2002; Sell et al., 1996; Taylor, 1997). The school embodied pride for the
town, a way of life, and its long history as a model mill village, and it instilled pride in its
students for that past, for its accomplishments as an education institution, and for the
individual and collective achievements of past and present students and community
members. Thus, when Chase Elementary School was faced with closure, the mill town
constituents and the school community constituents felt threatened.

The financial circumstances under which Parker School District One found itself
in early 2009 are not dissimilar to those of other school districts that faced decisions
about school closures and consolidations: low enrollment, increased costs of operating,
higher per pupil costs in comparison to other elementary schools in the district, and severe budget constraints (Benton, 1992; Dean, 1981; Dillon, 2008; Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Post & Stambach, 1999; Sack-Min, 2008; Sell et al., 1996; “Shrinking Pains,” 2008; Ward & Rink, 1980; Weatherley et al., 1983). While there are debates about how much money is saved by closing a school (Andrews et al., 2002; Self, 2001; Sher & Tompkins, 1977), the $3000 difference in per pupil expenditure between Chase Elementary and other elementary schools in the district, plus the lack of significant increase in transportation costs (cf. Purcell & Shackelford, 2005) and the ability to reassign teachers from Chase to other schools and positions within the district were critical factors in the decision of the Parker District One School Board to close Chase Elementary School. These factors were discussed by Mr. Grimsley and by Dr. Smith.

However, Parker School District One did not cite other reasons often given for closing or consolidating schools such as low academic performance, inability to meet public expectations and inability to fulfill state performance standards and other state and federal mandates and requirements (Dean 1981; Leisey et al., 1990; Post & Stambach, 1999; Purcell & Shakelford, 2005; Sell et al., 1996; Ward & Rink, 1980; Weatherley et al., 1983), and in this regard, the closing of Chase Elementary did deviate from the literature pertaining to small rural school closings. In addition, benefits of closure and consolidation such as improved curriculum, opportunity for increased and improved extracurricular activities, and increased academic opportunity through additional course offerings (Benton, 1992; Post & Stambach, 1999; Self, 2001) were not cited in this case. Thus, there was never an argument that closing Chase Elementary would benefit students,
parents, or community—only the argument that doing so would allow the school district to remain fiscally responsible and viable. This, too, was a deviation from much of the small rural school closing literature. Nevertheless, the district perceived closing Chase Elementary School and transferring its students to other elementary schools within the district as a way of cutting district expenses and saving the jobs of teachers and staff (DiBagno, 2009, February 26; Landreth, 2009). While it is important to note that Parker School District One was cutting expenses “in all areas of the budget” (Havird, 2009, February 24, p. 1), school consolidation was still one of the first options considered (Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Theobald, 2005) when state funding was cut.

In much the same way as other communities have reacted when faced with the possible closure of a community school (Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Post & Stambach, 1999), as soon as the Chase community perceived a threat to Chase Elementary School, the community—including parents, grandparents, and at-large community members—began fighting to keep their school (“Budget Shortfall,” 2009; “Concerned Citizens Meet,” 2009; DiBagno, 2009, February 12; Havird, 2009, February 10; Keeney, 2009; Spruill, 2009). The concerns raised by community and school constituents were also similar to those noted in other school closings. As with research conducted by Kearns et al. (2009), Chase residents expressed frustration with the district-provided reasons for considering closing Chase Elementary (DiBagno, 2009, February 26; Spruill 2009) and with the district-guided process of closing (DiBagno, 2009, February 26; “School Officials Say,” 2009;).
Like the community members in other school closings and consolidations (Bailey, 2000; Benton, 1992; Cummins et al., 1997; Kearns, et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Sell et al., 1996), the citizens of Chase feared the effects upon and what might happen to the community (“Budget Shortfall,” 2009; DiBagno, 2009, February 12; DiBagno, 2009, February 26; Keeney, 2009; “School Officials Say,” 2009; Spruill, 2009) if Chase Elementary School closed. They also expressed concern about what would happen to students. Similar to the findings of Sell et al. (1996), some parents worried about increased class sizes (“School Officials Say,” 2009) and doubted whether students would get the help they might need (DiBagno, 2009, February 26; Keeney, 2009). There was fear about what would happen when students transferred to a new school (Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Nitta et al., 2010; Peshkin, 1982; Sell et al., 1996; Sias, 2008; Spence, 2000), and there was a profound sense of loss regarding the community (Howley & Eckman, 1997; Kearns et al., 2009; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005). Participants in this study were not and did not exhibit exceptions to the literature in these fears and responses, and the reported assurances of the Superintendent of Parker School District One that “the children’s education will not suffer by moving to other schools” (DiBagno, 2009, February 26) did not allay the fears, worries, and concerns of school and community constituents.

Four pivotal factors related to the closing of Chase Elementary emerged from the research data: finances, size and setting, time and planning, and communication. These pivotal factors were amply noted in the research literature (Benton, 1992; Cummins et al.,
1997; Dean, 1981; Dillon, 2008; Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Post & Stambach, 1999; Sack-Min, 2008; Sell et al., 1996; “Shrinking Pains,” 2008; Ward & Rink, 1980; Weatherley et al., 1983). Similar to existing research on school closings (Benton, 1992; Dean, 1981; Leisey et al., 1990; Post & Stambach, 1999; Sell et al., 1996; “Shrinking Pains,” 2008; Ward & Rink, 1980; Weatherley et al., 1983), participants agreed that the financial straits of Parker School District One and the financial costs of operating Chase Elementary School had a significant bearing on the Board’s decision to close the school. However, the perceptions of how the financial difficulties should be addressed and managed differed between school district employees and affiliates and parents and community members. While school district affiliates and school-level administrators believed that closing Chase Elementary was “a good option” (Mr. Grimsley), “in the best interest of everyone” (District Superintendent, as quoted in Landreth, 2012, para. 8), and something that “they [families and community members] understood economically” (Dr. Smith), parents and community members believed “budget cuts and revenue shortfalls are temporary problems with a variety of possible solutions” (Spruill, 2009, para. 9) and that closing Chase Elementary was “a permanent, and potentially devastating, decision” (Spruill, 2009, para. 9) that might be avoided through other means (cf. Beckner, 1983; Howley & Eckman, 1997).

The school size and setting also played an important role in the decision to close the school. For a school that was so small from the outset, low student enrollment (Dean, 1981; Dillon, 2008; Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Post & Stambach, 1999; Sack-Min, 2008; Sell et al., 1996; Ward & Rink, 1980; Weatherly, Narver, & Elmore,
1983) and the inability to expand the physical school setting were critical problems noted by school and district employees and affiliates and by parents and community members. Nevertheless, student and parent and school- and district-affiliate participants believed that the small class sizes benefited students, and everyone agreed that in spite of the “land locked” physical facilities, Chase Elementary had a great setting.

Chase residents and Chase Elementary parents participating in the study noted that the lack of time to realistically explore and develop other avenues for keeping the school open inhibited their ability to find resources and financial means that might have aided the district in keeping Chase Elementary open, but similar to decision-makers in existing school closing research (Leisey et al., 1990; Sell et al., 1996), school- and district-level employees and affiliates participating in the study perceived the lack of time to prepare the upcoming budget and the need to quickly address the financial difficulties of the entire district as prevailing constraints. Therefore, all participants perceived lack of time and the subsequent lack of time to plan as pivotal factors in the decision to close.

Although school- and district-level employees and affiliates believed that communication had been a strength throughout the time leading up to the Board’s decision, parents and community members participating in the study did not share that perception. Parents and community member participants believed that the district had failed to communicate with them at the onset of the budget crisis. They also thought that during the days immediately prior to the vote of the Board they had been deceived into thinking that there was a possibility that Chase Elementary could remain open. Benton
(1992) and Cummins et al. (1997) noted in their research that clear, open communication was a key factor in successful school closings.

Additionally and despite indications that school- and district-level employees and affiliates had attempted to openly plan for and communicate about student transfers for the upcoming school year, not all parent participants felt that receiving schools were ready and prepared to welcome transferring students or to help transferring students adjust to the new school. As indicated by Egelson (1993), Nitta, et al. (2010), Peshkin (1982), and Sias (2008), student adjustment is a key component for students and parents who are transferring to new schools after their school has closed.

In conjunction with pivotal factors related to the closing of Chase Elementary School, five psychosocial themes of the school closing arose from participant voices and experiences: threat assessment, anxiety, frustration, sadness, and resignation. District-level employees and affiliates first perceived a threat regarding the budget for the overall district, and because of that threat began asking questions about and examining actions that could be taken to minimize the fiscal danger they foresaw for the district. For these participants, the risks of closing Chase Elementary were second to those of the financial circumstances faced by the entirety of Parker School District One. For students, parents, and community members of Chase participating in this study, however, the vulnerability of the school, the community, and all that they perceived the school and community to be and do (Bailey, 2000; Cummins et al., 1997; Howley & Eckman, 1997; Kearns, et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005; Sell et al., 1996; Taylor, 1997) was recognized as soon as they
verified claims that the district was considering closing Chase Elementary. Students, parents, and community members met this peril with questions, rebuttals, and actions.

Although school- and district-level employees and affiliates participating in the study did not experience frustration with the budget process or the closing of Chase Elementary, they did convey the sense of anxiety that they experienced. For Mr. Grimsley and Dr. Smith, the anxiety stemmed from knowing that the closing would be a highly emotional decision with a potentially deleterious aftermath. Dr. Ever felt anxious about the emotional responses of teachers and staff (Edgerton, 1986; Nitta et al., 2010), and Ms. Brown felt great angst and distress about the welfare of students and parents. Parents and community members experienced frustration and anxiety during the time leading up to the Board’s vote, the time of the vote itself, the time immediately after the decision to close Chase Elementary, and in the first few days of the following school year (Kearns et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Nitta et al., 2010; Peshkin, 1982).

Sadness was more acutely felt by those participants with the strongest connections to and most active relationships with Chase Elementary School and the school community (Egelson, 1993; Howley & Eckman, 1997). All participants who worked or had worked at the school, who had students enrolled in the school, and who had ongoing interaction with the school, its students and parents, its staff, and its activities expressed deep sadness and grief. Although Mr. Grimsley did not experience sadness, per se, he understood the sadness felt by others. As previously described in a quote by Dr. Smith, the closing of Chase Elementary elicited deep sadness and grief, much as one might experience the death of a loved one.
Finally, all participants exhibited a sense of resignation. From the perspective of school- and district-level employees and affiliates participating in the study, closing Chase Elementary was a difficult but necessary decision and action. Once closing the school was determined as the best course of action to alleviate some of the financial strain placed on the district, Board members and district administrators resigned themselves to the unpleasant task of closing Chase Elementary, and school employee participants determined a course of action to celebrate the life of the school and community and to plan for the transitions of staff and students. From the perspective of students, parents, and community members involved in the study, closing Chase Elementary may not have been necessary, but once the Board voted to close the school, they believed that they were essentially without recourse, and they resigned themselves to leaving Chase Elementary for one of three nearby small rural schools.

The findings of this study revealed several contextual features contributing to this case, and these factors fell into three categories. The first category to emerge involved variations in this school closing from existing school closing literature. The second category to emerge included the history of and historical relationship between mill village, mill company, and mill school. The third category encompassed school location and size and building use. However, each of these categories and specific aspects of each category are embedded and discussed in other sections.

The announced closing of the school was met with actions, suspicion, fear, and grief on the part of students, parents, and some community members (Cummins et al., 1997; Kearns et al, 2009; Lyson, 2002; Nitta et al., 2010; Peshkin, 1982). They were
suspicious of the reasons provided by the school district, and they attempted to
demonstrate other ways that significant amounts of money could be cut from the district
budget. In addition, they questioned the purported savings that the district claimed would
occur. Participants argued against the closing of Chase Elementary school and actively
participated in efforts to combat the closing. These efforts included letters and phone
calls to the district office and Board members, petitions to keep the school open, signs
and a picket line to protest the closing, and calling local radio, television, and newspaper
media. These participants clearly grieved (Nitta et al., 2010), and through their words and
actions engaged in the five stages of grief illuminated by Kübler-Ross (1969). Last, these
participants recognized the disparity of power noted by Weaver (1977) and displayed a
sense of powerlessness similar to that perceived by Appalachian families whose school
was being closed (Woodrum, 2004). As indicated by several parent and community
member participants, the lack of time between the announcement that the school might
close and the vote of the School Board greatly inhibited their ability to plan a course of
action, seek resources, and raise funds that might have enabled the school to remain in
operation. The dearth of power and agency was apparent in a statement by Mrs. Hunt
who said that once the vote was taken, they left the Board meeting with the feeling that
they “never had a chance.”

School employees such as Dr. Smith and Ms. Brown demonstrated emotional
responses to the closing similar to those of the students, parents, and “close” community
members. However, they were also charged with planning how to help students, parents,
and school staff negotiate their emotions and the logistics of transferring to receiving
schools and to new positions. Similarly, Dr. Ever provided emotional support to teachers and staff. District-level employees and affiliates responded to the announced closing with a mixture of sympathy and acceptance.

As has been illustrated with other school closings (Benton, 1992; Cummins et al., 1997; Dean, 1981; Self, 2001; Sell et al., 1996; Weatherley et al., 1983), school and district employees and affiliates of Chase Elementary who participated in this study recognized the emotional distress to the community, but they also indicated the need to manage the logistical issues associated with an anticipated or actual closing (Benton, 1992; Self, 2001). Dr. Smith, as current principal of Chase Elementary, needed to plan and provide for both emotional issues and logistical issues, and Mr. Grimsley, as indicated in the earlier quote about time and planning, acknowledged that the need to place teachers and staff was an important aspect of the decision to close the school.

Although parent and community member participants have either resigned themselves to or accepted the fact that Chase Elementary is no longer an elementary school, they continue to express anger and distrust (Kearns et al., 2009). For example, when the adult learning center began to renovate the buildings and grounds, Mr. Murphy said he had wondered where all of the money to do the renovations came from, and why some of the renovations could not have been made while the school was still Chase Elementary: “They put a lot of money into that. Where did they get all this money?” Mr. and Mrs. Murphy pointed out that two of the elementary schools to which Chase students were routed were in the process of expanding, and to them, that did not make sense. In reference to the night of the vote, Mr. Murphy said,
It was not a fixed vote, but you could read the writing on the wall. They had spoken about this in private and in advance. This is exactly what their plan was—to close Chase Elementary and immediately turn it into the Adult Education Center.

The anger and distrust exhibited by students and parent, school- and district-affiliate, and some community constituent participants are consistent with the responses of other individuals and communities facing the loss of a school (Kearns et al., 2009).

In addition to the contextual differences noted earlier, the research findings revealed one additional deviation with regard to participant responses to the school closing. Older community member participants did not exhibit the levels of distress demonstrated by parents and community members who were active in the efforts to keep the school from closing. While all four of the older participants involved in the study expressed sadness over the closing of Chase Elementary School, none of the four participated in the community-wide brainstorming meeting or attended the two momentous Parker School District One Board meetings. Yet, three of the four are active members of the Chase Heritage Commission and hold vested interest in revitalizing the town.

Older participants perceived the relationship between school and community as a positive part of mill village life—one that had given them “opportunities.” They made little or no distinction between the mill community and the school community (Beckner, 1983; Lawrence, 1993; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Parents and other participants not of the “older” mill generation viewed the school and larger community as extensions of one another (Beckner, 1983; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Lawrence, 1993; Lyson,
2002; Slavin, 2005), and all four of these older participants shared interesting stories about their experiences at Chase schools, growing up in Chase, the relationship between the school and the village, and the importance of the school and education in their personal lives; however, none of them spoke out publicly at the time of the closing. When asked specifically about the closing and her reaction, Anna said, “I’ve known [the Superintendent] a long time. He had a long history with Chase Elementary. I have a lot of respect for him, and I’m sure he would not have closed it if there were any other way.” Emmalee and Betty nodded in assent as Anna made these statements. Nevertheless, if the school served as symbol of community life and vitality and truly functioned as the community core and center, it is reasonable to expect that these older participants would have been more vocal about and more involved in trying to stop the closing of the school.

Another interviewee and member of the Chase Heritage Commission, like Anna, Emmalee, and Betty, said that when he heard that Parker School District One was considering closing Chase Elementary, his first thought was “The idiots are back at it again.” Acknowledging that he “felt a loss,” this man said, “I knew when the mills died, that was it for the town of [Chase].” It is possible that while older participants and community members did not want Chase Elementary to close, because their current relationships with the school and its activities were not as close as those of participants with a student enrolled at Chase Elementary or as involved as participants who interacted regularly with the school, they did not view the closing as having the same near-catastrophic effects as parents and community members who were more involved in the ongoing life of the school and community. However, it is also plausible that while the
school symbolized past memories and life “on the mill hill,” and that an additional decrepit building would only exacerbate the physical decline of the community, the older participants did not see keeping the school open as a critical element for community revitalization. A third possibility for the lack of strong response on the part of older participants is that of deference to authority figures, as is implied by Anna’s statement of confidence concerning the Parker School District One Superintendent.

Facilitation of formal academic success as well as social, civic, and personal development of students (Bickel et al., 2001; DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Kliebard, 2004; Sanderson, 1941); service as a conduit for parent, grandparent, and community member involvement (Bauch, 2001; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Kearns et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Nitta et al., 2010; Post & Stambach, 1999); promotion of school and community connectedness (Bailey, 2000; Bauch, 2001; Bryant, 2007; Fanning, 1995; Kearns et al., 2009; Leisey et al., 1990; Lyson, 2002; Sell et al., 1996; Woodrum, 2004); and provision of a showcase for the school district and community (Benton, 1992; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005) emerged as four functions of school and schooling at Chase Elementary School. All participants perceived these functions of school and schooling at Chase Elementary as beneficial to students, parents, community members, and the community as a whole. Parent participants did not believe that the three receiving schools would fail to provide a strong, formal academic function—only that they would not provide this function in the same manner as Chase Elementary had. For example, Mrs. Murphy and Tony indicated that although he had not needed any afterschool academic assistance at West Chase, other students had, and they were not sure those needs had
been met (Nitta et al., 2010). Additionally, participants with the most attachment to and connectedness with the school did not believe that the three receiving schools would provide the level or type of social, civic, and personal development that had been provided at Chase Elementary. This is consistent with the research of Duncombe and Yinger (2010), Kearns et al. (2009), Leisey et al. (1990), and Nitta et al. (2010).

These parent participants provided experiences about the failures of the other schools to encourage and welcome multigenerational and community member involvement, to promote connectedness between the school and the Chase community, and to serve as a showcase for the community. Both Mrs. Hunt and Mrs. Murphy expressed unhappiness with other schools’ approaches to parent and community member involvement. Mrs. Murphy did not believe that her involvement as a parent was desired or welcomed at West Chase, and she explained why she felt this way:

To be perfectly honest with you, I felt like I paid my PTO dues, but I felt that they were a clique of the West Chase people, and they wanted to keep the Chase people out. The PTO meetings were at two [in the afternoon]. And some of us have to work to pay our bills. And I have to work, so I felt like I was not wanted, and they kept it nice and small and where they wanted it. Do you see what I am saying?

“Intergenerational support and community cohesion” (Kearns et al., 2009) may also have been perceived as in jeopardy by parent and some community member participants. However, student and parent participant resistance to the school closing was not predicated upon purely academic factors or direct constraints to academic success.
At no point during the data collection process was there any indication that participants or interviewees were unhappy about or discontented with the functions of school and schooling at Chase Elementary School (Bauch, 2001; Corbett, 2009; DeYoung, 1993; Woodrum, 2004). The functions of school and schooling at Chase Elementary, as indicated through participant responses, documents, and observations, are congruent with the historical aims of formal schooling addressed by Kliebard (2004) and the aspects of citizenship and social contribution discussed by Sanderson (1941). In addition, the functions of school and schooling as they emerged throughout the research data, as well as the ways in which participants responded to the closing, reflected attributes associated with mill towns and the residents and workers of mill villages (Coggeshall, 1996; Kohn, 1907). For examples, Coggeshall (1996) noted “heritage” (p. 47), extremely close family ties and relationships, a strong sense of honor, and “a concern for others deemed less important” (p. 57), and these were demonstrated through the emphases on individual and community history, close relationships, the efforts to assist those students who were viewed as unable to help themselves, and the verbal defense on behalf of students that parent participants believed might suffer as a result of changing schools.

Perhaps because this case involved an elementary school rather than a high school, the extent to which schooling at Chase Elementary may have supported or conflicted with national education goals intended to render students nationally or internationally competitive (Bauch, 2001; DeYoung & Howley, 1992) was not indicated as problematic by any of the parents, students, or community members participating in
the study. Neither was there a struggle for control of the school or the schooling process (Bauch, 2001; Weaver, 1977) due to differences between urban and rural perspectives (Bauch, 2001) or differences between nationalistic and local education agendas (Corbett, 2007; DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Woodrum, 2004). However, Mr. Grimsley did note,

What I believe is that we kept the thing that Chase Elementary was doing, which was educating the children, the next generation. Unfortunately, we were probably educating them so they could go find employment elsewhere. . . . So, we are doing the best job that we can with them, like we do with all of Parker One, to [prepare them to] compete on not just a state stage, not just a national stage, but a global stage, because we live in a global economy whether you like it or not.

With regard to serving as a showcase for the district and community and thereby fostering school and community connectedness and pride, it would be difficult to foster or champion a connectedness that is not present to begin with; the other schools may have had connections to and within their own communities, but they would not have had the intimate and intricate connections to the mill village of Chase that Chase Elementary had (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Kearns et al., 2009). The other schools would not have been able to celebrate and showcase some of the historically notable accomplishments (Woodrum, 2009) of Chase schools and the Chase community, such as having the first compulsory education program in the state. This potential weakening of the relationship between school and community is similar to the decline of the relationship between rural Appalachian communities and their schools noted by Woodrum (2004). Participants feared the potential loss of community identity (Benton, 1992; Cummins et al., 1997; Peshkin, 1982) and the inability to continue to instill and
foster community pride (Lawrence, 1993) due to differences in the functions of school and schooling at other schools.

Three themes emerged in relation to culture of school and schooling at Chase Elementary School: caring for one another (Egelson, 1993), shared responsibility and high expectations for students (Bickel et al., 2001), and the importance of strong relationships (Egelson, 1993). Participants perceived these themes as highly significant in the lives of students and parents, school employees, and community constituents (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Fanning, 1995; Peterson & Deal, 1998), and participants viewed the culture of school and schooling at Chase Elementary School as one of its most valuable and salient features.

Student, parent, school- and district-affiliate, and community member participants provided evidence of the ways in which individuals cared for one another, shared responsibility and held high expectations, and demonstrated strong relationships. About Chase Elementary, Mrs. Murphy said,

It is the atmosphere. You felt comfortable when you walked in the door. Every kid felt comfortable, no matter if they had a handicap or a disability or whatever. No matter their background or where they came from.

This welcoming atmosphere echoed what the Murphy family reported they had experienced in Chase when searching for a home; thus to some extent they associated a welcoming, caring atmosphere with school culture and with village culture. This is congruent with Peshkin’s (1982) assertion that a school supports and reproduces community culture, including its values, perspectives, and mores.
Participants did not perceive these three thematic elements as parts of the culture of school and schooling at other schools—or at least not to the same degree that they had been present at Chase Elementary (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). Mrs. Murphy explained an experience she had at West Chase that emphasizes the differences in school culture as she perceived them as a parent participant:

So, did I ever feel welcomed there? No, not at all. You know, I have walked in that school because I had to speak with a teacher for him [Tony] for something. The principal walked right by and could not even say, “Hi” or introduce herself or anything to me. . . . I found that very upsetting. She did not even bother.

Although there was not a fear of a complete “clash of cultures” (Woodrum, 2009, p. 3), the perceived absence of caring, of potential shared responsibility, and of potentially strong relationships affected student and parent, school- and district-affiliate, and some community member participants and their receptiveness to transferring schools.

Fear of a cultural disconnect, the potential loss of “ties to community, place, and family’ (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995, “Cultural Contradictions Today,” para. 4), and the “loss of familiarity with former school and teachers” (Sias, 2008, p. 178) were significant factors in participant responses to the closing of Chase Elementary and the students’ transitions to other schools. A story shared by Mrs. Hunt of Benjamin’s first six days of school at Creek Elementary helps to demonstrate the importance of school culture as she perceived it for her son, who was physically ill for the first six days of school:

Change is inevitable. I knew that I was going to have to prepare him for it. It was going to be a bigger school with a lot more kids. He was going to see people that he did not know, and he was going to meet new people. With Benjamin’s
personality, I thought he would do fine. Never did it cross my mind that there would be any anxiety to the point of him being sick. You know, maybe the first day or two, but nothing like it turned out to be.

After six days of physical illness, Mrs. Hunt requested that Benjamin be transferred to Clark Green, where Dr. Smith had assumed the principalship. Mrs. Hunt indicated that “The first time he walked into [Clark Green] he said, ‘I love you, bye,’ and kissed me, and that was it.” To Mrs. Hunt and to Benjamin, there was too much difference between school cultures at Chase Elementary and Creek Elementary.

Peterson & Deal (1998) assert that students need “strong positive cultures. . . with a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn” (p. 29) both within the school and within the community. The perceived absence of these elements contributed to the anxiety student and parent participants felt upon learning that Chase Elementary might be closed. Bickel et al., (2001) assert that student success in schools is related to “a sense of safety, stability, social cohesion, and shared world view [that] pervades the neighborhood” (p. 23). Indications from participants in this study point to the perceived presence of those features and characteristics, all of which are dependent on the relationships between school, community, and individual. As such, the relationships characterized by participants may have influenced student success at Chase Elementary, understanding of personal identity (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995), and sense of and place in the community (Corbett, 2009; DeYoung, 1993). Furthermore, when a community school and its school activities nurture collective community identity, community spirit, and community
members’ connections to the community and school (Bailey, 2000; Kearns et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Leisey et al., 1990; Peshkin, 1992; Sell et al., 1996), if students, parents, and community members do not feel welcomed and comfortable in the receiving schools, it is not likely that they will become part of the collective community identity, community spirit, or existing community-school relationship for that school.

Participants perceived Chase Elementary School as the quintessential example of what and how schools should be, and they greatly valued the school beyond its formal academic endeavors (Weaver, 1977). For participants, all that Chase Elementary seemed to be and represent was exactly what participants feared losing—closeness (Bickel et al., 2001; Egelson, 1993); safety (Bickel et al., 2001; Egelson, 1993); meaningful relationships (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Egelson, 1993; Kearns et al., 2009; Nitta et al., 2010; Peterson & Deal, 1998); community traditions, memories, and values (Bickel et al., 2001; Cummins et al., 1997; Howley & Eckman, 1997; Kearns et al., 2009); a tradition of educating and becoming educated (Cobb & Welborn, 1995); an extensive history (Cobb & Welborn, 1995, Woodrum, 2009); the physical “something” that sparks a memory or a story (Benton, 1992; Lawrence, 1993; Peshkin, 1982); and the literal and figurative common ground that binds people together (Bailey, 2000; Beckner, 1983; Kearns et al., 2009; Leisey et al., 1990; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005; Sell et al., 1996). With the threat of closure, the close connections between the school and the community (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995) were at stake. The inability of other schools—in spite of their relative proximity to Chase Elementary—to consider or foster
awareness and understanding of Chase’s specific history and culture (DeYoung, 1993) was problematic to many study participants.

The one point that every participant and interviewee agreed upon was that the physical building needed to be actively used and that having the Parker One and Two Adult Learning Center as its new occupant was far better than having the building become vacant and fall into ruins. The coupled concern for property values and concern that the school building might become abandoned and decrepit was not unique to school closing literature (Bailey, 2000; Benton, 1992, Howley & Eckman, 1997; Kearns, et al., 2009; Lyson, 2002; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005; Sell et al., 1996), but only one participant exhibited the former concern about property values. Instead, participants had the greater fear that the building would become another physical sign and reminder of how far the community had declined, and this intensified their responses to the school closing. As one interviewee said, “I just didn’t want it to become a mess and an embarrassment like the mills.” This implies that as long as there is some semblance of activity and life in the school structure, Chase residents will be mollified. The importance of the physical building was noted in the literature by Benton (1992), Egelson (1993), and Peshkin (1982).

The transfer of students to nearby small, rural schools—and therefore a lack of constraining factors such as long bus rides (Howley et al., 2001; Kearns et al., 2009; Lawrence, 1993; Nitta et al., 2010; Purcell & Shackelford, 2005; Sias, 2008; Slavin, 2005; Spence, 2000), adjustment to much larger schools (Egelson, 1993; Nitta et al., 2010; Sell et al., 1996; Sias, 2008), and transitions from rural to consolidated, suburban,
or urban schools (Egelson, 1993; Nitta et al., 2010, Peshkin, 1982; Sell et al., 1996; “Shrinking Pains,” 2008; Sias, 2008)—and the subsequent responses of student and parent, school- and district- affiliate, and community member participants, further highlighted the anguish of and resistance to leaving and relinquishing their community school. In the absence of the mills, which were never referred to as “our mills,” and possibly even before the loss of the mills, the school came to symbolically belong to the community and to the people of the community; hence, it was, as Mrs. Hunt said, “our school.” Student and parent participants were not fighting against going to a different school; instead, students and parent participants were fighting to stay at Chase Elementary School because of the functions of school and schooling that it offered and how it functioned, the conditions and culture under which students and parents were served and how they were served, the values the school instilled and upheld and how it did so, and the relationships fostered between school, community, and individual and how those relationships supported school, community, and individual. Most critical and distressing to student and parent, school- and district-affiliate, and community member participants was the potential loss of connection to and relationship with the school, its informal functions, and its culture (Bauch, 2001; Beckner, 1983; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Egelson, 1993; Lawrence, 1993; Lyson, 2002; Peshkin, 1982; Slavin, 2005; Woodrum, 2004), all of which affect one’s sense of identity, place, and belonging (Corbett, 2009; DeYoung, 1993; Peshkin, 1982; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).
Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

It is a warm afternoon in late March 2009, and I have taken my seven-year old son, McKinley, with me to the last day of the afterschool program at Chase Elementary School. As we walk into the small cafeteria building where the students in the afterschool program are having a snack, a handful of students leave their animal crackers and milk and come over to greet me. “Hey, Miss Amy,” they say as they hug me. “Is this your son?” they ask. After hugs all around it is time for students to go out to the small play area in front of the school, and I tell McKinley that it is okay to go and play with the other kids. The afterschool teachers and I watch the students as they swing, climb on the playground equipment, jump rope, hula-hoop, and throw a football.

When it is time to go inside and all of the children are lined up, a first grade boy named Donovan, who has been playing with my son, motions me over to him. “Miss Amy,” he says, “I’m glad you brung McKinley. We got on real good together. Can he come back next year?” Several other students happily chime in. They are aware that it is the last day of the afterschool program; they seem to have forgotten that “next year” they will not be at Chase Elementary School.

I am momentarily frozen and at a loss for what to say. I feel a bittersweet sting at the knowledge that Chase Elementary will not exist next year and at the willingness of a group of children to accept and “take in” my son, whom they have never met. One could argue that this is the nature of all children—to accept any other child who seems to be a likely playmate, and I would not disagree with that assertion. However, Donovan’s statement and question made me confront a thought and an emotion I already knew existed but had been avoiding: I, too, had been “taken in” by Chase Elementary School. I, too, was sad that this tiny little school would not have dozens of little feet and bright faces coming back to its eight classrooms the following fall.

I was not then, and am not now--at the end of this research study, under any illusions that Chase Elementary School was perfect. Having been a student and a teacher in small rural schools, having taught in a large suburban school, and having studied
schools and schooling for a number of years, I know without doubt that all schools have their problems. Yet, the story and life of Chase Elementary School and the mill village of Chase, the stories and lives other small rural schools and their respective communities, have much to teach us. They hold implications for education, for society, for education and social science researchers.

If we are to develop and maintain a system of education that works for the betterment of individuals and the whole of American society, “the one best system” according to Tyack (1974), educators, education researchers, and education policy makers must continue to examine and strive for understanding of what happens in schools that “work” and that epitomize characteristics, functions, and relationships desirable to students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and communities and community constituents. This research utilized a single-case study of the closing of a small, rural, historic, mill-town school to examine not only what happens, how constituents respond, and why constituents are disturbed when their school closes but also the attitudes, perceptions, and values held by students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, and community constituents regarding functions of school and schooling; culture of school and schooling; perceptions of the school; and the relationships between school, community, and individual. Doing so provided improved understanding of the salient features of education in small rural schools such as the non-academic functions of school and schooling that allow for and encourage active parent and community involvement and that provide and foster pride for the school and for the past and present community. The study also emphasized the importance of a school and
schooling culture for small rural schools and communities that creates a sense of caring, mutual responsibility, and strong, positive relationships.

Additionally, this study examined symbolic aspects of school and schooling such as the role of the school in the community and the role of the community in the school. The data extended prior school closing research indicating that small rural schools, especially ones with long histories connected to their host communities, serve as very strong reminders of the past, as literal and figurative centers of their communities, and as indicators of the well-being and continued vitality of their communities. Thus, this study provided additional support for existing small rural school closing research and helped to address a gap in current education research pertaining to the psychosocial dimensions of the relationships between small rural schools and their constituents. But, it cannot end there.

When a small, rural, historic, mill-town school closes it is a devastating event for students and parents, school district employees and affiliates, community constituents, and the whole of the community. Benton (1992) and Self (2001) posit that even under the best of circumstances successful school closings involve high emotions and a willingness to sacrifice. School districts faced with closing a school need to be aware that open, early communication and transparency in all aspects of the process are critical to those closely associated with the school. For small rural communities, losing a community school often contributes to a sense of powerlessness, heightens the disparity of power between school and community constituents and those who make the decision to close the school, and negates the value of individuals and of a community (Weaver, 1977; Woodrum, 2004).
Although the term *rural* is often associated with being poor and living in the agriculture-based “country,” this is inaccurate, as there are rural towns and schools that are not characterized by low socioeconomic status. Thus, one must wonder to what extent the low socioeconomic level of school and community constituents in the closing of Chase Elementary School impacted the ability of the Parker School District One Superintendent and Board to close the school in the manner and with the rapidity that it did. Additional studies focusing on socioeconomic level, power, and agency in small rural school closings are needed.

Nevertheless, if those who have power develop a preliminary plan and invite those who believe and feel that they have little or no power to contribute to a public plan for students, parents, and staff members who will be faced with transfers, they may allay fears about what will happen as a result of the closing, provide a new avenue for establishing school and schooling that is perceived as a shared endeavor, and avoid severing the ties and relationships that are conducive to positive educational outcomes. This plan could include not only logistical arrangements but also demonstrate efforts that will be made on the part of receiving schools to provide and foster functions of school and schooling and a culture of school and schooling that are acceptable and beneficial for all who are transferring in as well as for those who already participate in the life of the receiving school.

Furthermore, if those who are in positions of power seek the input of at-large community members, working together could result in a plan that includes options for keeping the school building viable, a significant concern for participants in this study.
Steps the receiving school(s) will take to welcome and involve parents and community members, as well as ways to honor and integrate the histories of the former school and community, could also be a part of the closing and transition plan. Demonstrating understanding for the perspectives and emotions of those who will be transferring and providing a plan of action that seeks input from those most affected may minimize the fears, the grief, and the sense of powerlessness participants in this study and other studies (e.g., Woodrum, 2004) felt. It is this sense of powerlessness and the perceived inability to participate in school life that isolates some students and parents and negatively affects the school and schooling experience; this same sense of powerlessness and inability to participate in what Shorris (2000) calls “the political life” contribute to separation and stratification of United States citizenry. As such, additional studies of power and agency in small rural schools that serve constituents of middle and upper socioeconomic levels and continued studies of successful small rural school closings in which constituents do not experience powerlessness may contribute to our understanding of how to work toward a better system of education and a better United States society.

School districts and education policy makers need to understand that community school is not synonymous with small nearby school. A school is only a community school if relationships are strong, positive, and plentiful in the school and if relationships between the school and its community constituents promote a shared sense of responsibility, mutual respect and support, and involvement of parents and community-at-large members. The degree to which a school can accurately be deemed a community school depends more upon the relationships, how it functions, culture, values, and actions
of the school and its constituents than on the proximity of student and community residences to the school building. This distinction holds important implications for existing schools that are “failing” or “unsuccessful.” Studies of these community schools and the aforementioned elements may provide us with ways to assist other schools in establishing similarly salient features that are conducive to student success and mutual community and community support.

When existing schools must merge, this means everyone must adjust—not simply that the burden of adjustment is upon the students, parents, staff, and community members who have been displaced. Studies that examine successful mergers and transitions and that focus on the relationships, functions, culture, and values—rather than on the logistic and technical aspects—in these merged schools may help us understand more about how to create emotionally and psychosocially successful mergers for other schools and school constituents faced with closure. Furthermore, new schools need to plan for and work toward developing the long-standing relationships, mutual respect and support, functions and culture of school and schooling, and values that are conducive to student, parent, and staff comfort and success and to community buy-in, and thus would be aided by research that examines how these aspects are developed and how they are maintained.

If, as Fanning (1995) writes, “The sound development of children is closely linked to the well-being of communities” (p. 5), and if children are schooled outside of their immediate communities or in schools that are without a strong, supportive external community, we must discern more about those students who appear to successfully
navigate school and schooling in the absence of the immediate community. Longitudinal follow-up studies of students and parents who make forced transitions to out-of-community schools—especially in cases “where personal relationships and attachments to place go back for generations” (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995, “Cultural Contradictions Today,” para. 4)—may help us understand the extent to which and how concepts of place and identity (Corbett, 2009; DeYoung, 1993) are reconfigured and how to build a sense of community when a close-knit physical community and its support are not possible.

Educators, education researchers, and education policy makers need to understand that what happens in schools “worth fighting for” extends beyond formal academics and the local, state, or national academic agenda. The ways that school and schooling exist and operate—their functions, culture, relationships, and values—and constituent experiences and perceptions about them are at least as important as, if not more important than, the formal academic responsibilities and endeavors. As such, working to develop and sustain school and schooling functions and cultures supported by school and community constituents, relationships inside and outside the school, shared values that reflect those of the larger community, and mutual respect and support inside and outside the school may do more to foster student academic success than extreme emphases on changes to formal curriculum and national standards or than continued pushes for educator and school accountability.

Continued pursuit of research related to school closings and consolidations might include examination of how receiving schools and their constituents adjust the existing functions and culture of school and schooling in response to the needs of incoming
students and constituents. Doing so may provide us with information about how better to adjust school and schooling for groups of students and parents who do not perceive themselves as part of or wanted in a school or who believe that they do not fit in or belong there. If we have additional research about the psychosocial features of school and schooling, features that are conducive to personal growth and development, this may help to influence and positively impact the school and schooling experiences of those who are cultural “others,” such as African American students highlighted in research of Ogbu (2008) and Native American and Hispanic youth in the work of Woodrum (2009), all of whom were caught between a school culture and community culture that were in conflict.

Education research related to the closures of small rural elementary schools is not plentiful. Elementary schools and their constituents have much different needs than middle and high schools; however, the majority of literature on school closings from the 1980s to the present focuses on middle and high schools and includes elements such as expanded course offerings and extracurricular activities that may not be applicable to elementary schools. In addition, elementary, middle, and high schools function in different ways and have different cultures due to variations in student age, maturity, needs, and academic goals. As economic constraints across the United States continue to have severe effects on school district budgets, more schools and districts may be faced with closures and consolidations of elementary schools—as opposed to the historically well-documented efforts to consolidate middle and high schools. Even less research addresses small-to-small, nearby elementary school closings and transfers. For these
reasons, additional research could provide information valuable to such schools and districts.

The findings of this study confirmed that small rural schools serve as symbols for their host communities. In the case of Chase Elementary School, there are indications that participants anthropomorphized the school. For example, one participant referred to being able to “put your arms around it and feel it,” and all participants worried extensively about what would happen to the building. One participant’s belief that the school closing would be perceived as a death and the grieving process through which participants progressed further support this idea. Existing literature on small rural school closings does not examine the extent to which small rural communities anthropomorphize their schools, the circumstances under which this occurs, or whether this develops prior to the school closing or as the closing is occurring. In addition, while the literature provides substantial evidence that the closing of a small rural school causes constituents to grieve, there is a lack of research that examines the process of grieving for a school through a framework such as that provided by Kübler-Ross. Research that explores and examines the anthropomorphization of small rural schools is needed, as are studies of small rural school closings and the processes through which constituents grieve and mourn.

Finally, there is a need for longitudinal studies of the effects of small rural school closings on their small rural communities. More specifically, there is a strong need for additional research specifically focused on the remaining mill villages that have managed to retain their historic mill schools. Beckner (1983) writes that such schools have
traditionally “served as a community nucleus,” (p. 14), but we know very little about what happens to these communities beyond the immediacy of the school closing. With regard to this case: Will the mill village of Chase find another symbolic core around which to reinvent itself? Will the community members of Chase continue to associate their identity with that of “the mill hill”? What will be the long-term effects on their collective sense of place, their collective identity, and the cohesiveness of the community? Will Chase cease to exist except in the historical research on mill communities? The only way we can know and understand is to identify and to continue to examine these places and people and to document, through research, what we discover.

Caught off-guard by Donovan’s statement and question, I glance over at another afterschool worker. Joy has worked in the cafeteria of Chase Elementary for many years. She knows every child, calls each one by name, and is openly affectionate. She has overheard Donovan, and I can tell that she has also realized what he was saying—and what he was not remembering. Neither of us can look the other in the eye for long. I cannot bring myself to remind Donovan that there will not be a “next year” for Chase Elementary School. Instead, I bend down and hug him, saying, “Thank you for playing. I’m sure he will be around next year.” And with that, underneath a red and white sign that reads, “Chase Elementary School,” we all walk into the building, for there is nothing else we can do but to go on.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Adult consent form for participation in a research study

Appendix B: Child assent form to participate in a research study

Appendix C: Parental permission form for participation of a child in a research study
Appendix A: Adult Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study - Clemson University

When a Small, Rural School Closes:
Perceptions of History, Identity, School and Schooling, and Symbolism

Description of the research and your participation

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Suzanne Rosenblith and Mrs. Amy Hallenbeck. The purpose of this research is to gather information about students’, parents’, and community members' responses to the closing of [Chase] Elementary School. We want to know more about how the school closing affects different individuals and the community as a whole.

Your participation will involve voluntary interviews and group sessions during which you share your thoughts and ideas about [Chase] Elementary School, its importance to the community, and its closing.

The amount of time required for your participation will be approximately two hours.

Risks and discomforts

The only known risks associated with participation in this research are potential breaches of confidentiality. To minimize these risks, interviews will be scheduled at a mutually agreed upon location with at least 15 minutes between the end of one interview and the beginning of another. For those who choose to participate in a focus group session, you are asked to maintain the confidentiality of other participants by not sharing or discussing any information from the session. Doing so will protect all participants’ rights to privacy and confidentiality, including your own.

In the event that you become aware of a breach of confidentiality related to your own participation or the participation of other individuals, you are asked to contact us immediately.

Potential benefits

This research will potentially benefit small schools and communities--their students, parents, teachers, community members, and school board members--who are faced with the closing of a community school. Although there are no known, specific benefits to you that would result from your participation in this research, this research may help us to understand the difficulties students, parents, teachers, and communities have and must overcome when a school closes.
Protection of confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. Audio-recordings of and notes from interviews and group sessions will be kept in a secure, locked location, and all identifying information will be coded to maintain anonymity. Audio-recordings will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study. No one other than the researchers will have access to any specific or personal information you provide to us. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

As discussed above, we will make every reasonable effort to maintain your privacy and rights of confidentiality. We are asking that neither you nor other participants share or discuss the information disclosed and shared during the course of interviews or focus groups. However, we cannot guarantee that all individuals will abide by this request. If, at any time, you would like to withdraw from the interview or focus group process you may do so simply by notifying the researchers.

In rare cases, a research study will be evaluated by an oversight agency, such as the Clemson University Institutional Review Board or the federal Office for Human Research Protections, that would require that we share the information we collect from you. If this happens, the information would only be used to determine if we conducted this study properly and adequately protected your rights as a participant.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

Contact information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Suzanne Rosenblith at Clemson University at XXX.XXX.XXXX. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Institutional Review Board at 864.656.6460.

Consent

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this study.

Participant’s signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________

A copy of this consent form should be given to you.
Appendix B: Student Assent to Participate in a Research Study

When a Small, Rural School Closes:
Perceptions of History, Identity, School and Schooling, and Symbolism

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Below you will find answers to some of the questions that you may have.

What is it for?
- We want to find out what you think about [Chase] Elementary School being closed and how you feel about going to a different school.

Why me?
- We are asking you to talk with us because you were a student at [Chase] Elementary School.
- There are no right or wrong answers, and talking with us will not change your grades or hurt you in any way.

What Will I Have to Do?
- We have some questions that we will ask you about your thoughts and feelings. You will either be with your parents or with another small group of parents and students. We do not think the questions or your answers will take more than two hours.
- Participating in the question and answer time will not hurt you.

Did My Parents Say It Was Okay?
- Your parent or guardian has signed a consent form giving us permission to talk with you, and we have told them everything we are doing.
- Your parent or guardian will be with you while we ask the questions.

Who Will Be Helped By This Research?
- We want to learn more about how students, parents, and community members are affected when a school closes.
What If I Want to Stop? Will I Get In Trouble?
- If you want to stop answering our questions or talking about how you feel and what you think about the school closing, you may stop at any time.
- Participating in the discussion or stopping participation will not change your grades, anything about going to a new school, or your participation in school-related programs like GoalPOST.

Are There Any Other Choices?
- Right now this is the only way we have of asking you what you think and how you feel about [Chase] Elementary School closing. You and your parents get to decide whether or not you want to participate.

By signing below, I am saying that I have read this form and have asked any questions that I may have. All of my questions have been answered so that I understand what I am being asked to do. By signing, I am saying that I am willing and would like to participate in this study. I also have received a copy of this form to keep.

________________________________________   _______________________
Signature of Child/Student                        Date
Appendix C: Parental Permission Form for Participation of a Child in a Research Study - Clemson University

When a Small, Rural School Closes:
Perceptions of History, Identity, School and Schooling, and Symbolism

Description of the research and your child’s participation

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Suzanne Rosenblith and Amy Hallenbeck. The purpose of this research is to gather information about students’, parents’, and community members' responses to the closing of [Chase] Elementary School. We want to know more about how the school closing affects different individuals and the community as a whole.

Your child’s participation will involve voluntary interviews and group sessions during which he or she may share thoughts and ideas about [Chase] Elementary School, its importance to the community, and its closing.

The amount of time required for your child’s participation will be no more than two hours.

Risks and discomforts

The only known risks associated with participation in this research are potential breaches of confidentiality. To minimize this risk, interviews will be scheduled at a mutually agreed upon location and with at least 15 minutes between the end of one interview and the beginning of another. Children who participate in a focus group session are asked to maintain the confidentiality of other participants by not sharing or discussing any information from the session. Doing so will protect all participants’ rights to privacy and confidentiality.

In the event that you become aware of a breach of confidentiality related to your child’s participation or the participation of other children, you are asked to contact us immediately.

Potential benefits

This research will potentially benefit small schools and communities--their students, parents, teachers, community members, and school board members--who are faced with the closing of a community school. Although there are no known, specific benefits to your child that would result from his or her participation in this research, this research may help us to understand the difficulties students, parents, teachers, and communities have and must overcome when a school closes.

Protection of confidentiality
We will do everything we can to protect your child’s privacy. Audio-recordings of and notes from interviews and group sessions will be kept in a secure, locked location, and all identifying information will be coded to maintain anonymity. Audio-recordings will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. No one other than the researchers will have access to any specific or personal information your child provides to us. His or her identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

As discussed above, we will make every reasonable effort to maintain your child’s privacy and rights of confidentiality. We are asking that neither you, your child, nor other participants share or discuss the information shared during the course of interviews or focus groups. However, we cannot guarantee that all individuals will abide by this request. If, at any time, your child would like to withdraw from the interview or focus group process, he or she may do so simply by notifying the researchers or by having you notify us.

In rare cases, a research study will be evaluated by an oversight agency, such as the Clemson University Institutional Review Board or the federal Office for Human Research Protections, that would require that we share the information we collect from your child. If this happens, the information would only be used to determine if we conducted this study properly and adequately protected your child’s rights as a participant.

**Voluntary participation**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You may refuse to allow your child to participate or withdraw your child from the study at any time. Your child will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to allow your child to participate or withdraw your child from this study.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Suzanne Rosenblith at Clemson University at XXX.XXX.XXXX. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Institutional Review Board at 864.656.6460.

**Consent**

I have read this parental permission form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my permission for my child to participate in this study.

Parent’s signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________

Child’s Name: ________________________________

A copy of this parental permission form should be given to you.
REFERENCES


