AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FACTORS IN RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS THAT IMPACT CHILDREN’S PERCEIVED SELF-EFFICACY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF

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by

Shannon Healy Kelaita

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Division of Social Work
Abstract

of

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF FACTORS IN RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS THAT IMPACT CHILDREN’S PERCEIVED SELF-EFFICACY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF

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This qualitative exploratory study examined the perspectives of parents and school staff on strategies to promote self-efficacy among rural children who face multiple risk factors due to poverty and isolation. Guided detailed interviews with six individuals from three rural schools provided the data on school factors and resources that are perceived as important in supporting or inhibiting children's self-efficacy. Interviews were analyzed for thematic content and common elements. Study findings indicate that the following factors impact the development of self-efficacy: formal supports provided by the school; school staff and school environment attributes; the family-like role that school plays in the lives of many rural children; the value and concerns over reduction of availability of extracurricular programs; the support of the larger community; issues of health and nutrition; value of innovative programs; the significance of after school programs and preschool that extend the school experience; and the threat of rural school closure. One of the key recommendations of the study is that rural schools should recognize the strengths
of positive social capital offered by the close knit community and enhance elements of
the school community that are conducive to creating a family-like environment.

____________________________, Committee Chair
Jude Antonyappan, Ph.D.

________________________
Date
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Chapter 1
THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Modern rural life presents multiple barriers to healthy childhood development. Economic forces have resulted in widespread poverty in rural regions creating unhealthy and non-supportive environments for families and children. Children growing up in rural poverty are at risk of being deprived of basic needs. Many rural families do not have adequate housing, food, or access to health care. Isolation, parental substance abuse, low parental education, mental illness, and domestic violence are common issues in poor rural families (Gerard & Buehler, 2004; McLaughlin et al., 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Despite the high needs of rural communities, remoteness and geographical isolation make intervention and provision of services difficult. Supports for children in families struggling with economic and social instability are sparse in these areas. Rural elementary schools are often the one connection between poor, isolated rural children and the greater world. School is a stable, constant presence in the lives of rural children and their families. This study intends to explore ways that schools can support children who face multiple risk factors due to poverty and isolation. Identifying resources and factors that schools can provide to promote children's self-efficacy may offer insight into ways to mitigate the risk factors for children in poor rural communities.

For children contending with the challenges of rural life, academic failure in school becomes yet another stressor. Unstable family life in poverty conditions often undermines children's sense of self even before they enter the school setting. Further
difficulties in school can result in children believing they are incapable and worthless. This low-self efficacy impacts children in numerous ways. Once a child develops the belief that he cannot succeed, he often stops applying himself. This is related to school failure, behavioral problems in the classroom, social problems with peers, depression, and lowered expectations for the future (Bandura, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1999). This is unfortunate because school has the potential to offer support for rural children when their families struggle with the challenges of modern rural life.

It is unfortunate when children learn to dislike school so early in their academic career. The desire to learn is a natural human drive. From birth, humans are compelled to explore and understand the world that surrounds them. The sound of a baby babbling while trying out new words and the sight of a toddler learning to walk are evidence of the inherent human drive to gain competency and knowledge. New words lead to the development of sentences. Once the toddler walks, she naturally moves on to running. Learning is a cumulative process where success leads to further learning and growth. This process drives development through early childhood, but it can be interrupted once a child enters the formal school setting.

Children develop and grow along their own timetable according to their innate abilities and in response to their environment. Ability levels vary and environments can support or hinder learning. Each child entering kindergarten comes with a unique set of strengths and challenges. Educational policy makes it difficult for schools to meet the needs of children as individuals. State standards require that all children of a given grade level be provided with the same curriculum and perform at the same level regardless of
their developmental level or ability to master required information. Children who enter
the school setting unprepared for learning at this mandated level are set up for failure.
That which begins as a mismatch between school requirements and the child's readiness
and ability to learn often results in children feeling they are "stupid", bad, and unworthy.
This in turn, leads to feelings of depression and anger, which are manifested in negative
behaviors, which further erode the child's performance and sense of self.

This problem is particularly common in rural communities where numerous risk
factors interfere with children's ability to perform in the school setting. Poverty,
substance abuse, family violence, low parental education levels, and isolation are all part
of the rural landscape. Families that struggle with such issues are not in a position to
prioritize their children's cognitive and social development and academic readiness.
Poor, rural children often have risk factors in their lives that interfere with their ability to
achieve at the social, behavioral, and academic level required in the school setting yet
they are held to the same standards as children who have not contended with such
challenges. Educational policy does not account for this discrepancy among children.
Access to public education is designed to provide children with equal opportunity to learn
and succeed. Unfortunately, under the current system, the lesson poor rural children
seem to be learning is that they are incapable, inadequate, and likely to fail.

Rural schools have their hands tied in addressing this problem. They are caught
between the high needs of the children they serve and the high demands of current
educational policy. There are few ways for them to adjust administration of education to
better serve children's needs while remaining within regulated educational requirements.
Additionally, schools today are contending with financial strain that impacts their ability to provide a quality educational experience for children. Economic constraints are even more severe for rural schools due to higher administration costs and lower overall income compared to urban and suburban areas. The economic downturn has also increased poverty within rural communities, which has intensified the needs of the families and children the schools serve.

Theoretically, education is an important tool in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and poverty. If schools are not able to adequately educate children, and they serve to lower children's sense of self-efficacy and self-worth, they only reinforce the cycle. It is important to understand the ways schools impact the development of children not just academically, but holistically. Is there a way that school can be set up for children to succeed academically based on their potential as opposed to arbitrary state mandated standards? Can children be given opportunities to grow and excel outside the narrow categories of language arts and math? Can children be taught that their worth as a person is not tied to their test scores? This study will explore these questions to examine how schools can promote self-efficacy among rural children who face multiple risk factors due to poverty and isolation. The goal is to identify resources and factors that contribute to the school's ability to assist the development of the whole child and help the community as a whole by providing children with an opportunity to learn and grow to their full potential.
Background of the Problem

Children growing up in rural communities are exposed to numerous risk factors due to economic conditions that have resulted in widespread poverty. Rural poverty creates stress for families, which can lead to instability that impacts a child's ability to function academically and socially in the school setting. Children from such environments often enter school with already fragile self-images. Failure in the school setting can lead to a spiral of reduced confidence, low-self efficacy, and hopelessness that interferes with motivation and further impedes children's functioning. As a result, young children give up before they have even had a chance to succeed. Feelings of low self-worth and depression put them at a high risk for substance abuse and dropping out of school. Such activities further the cycle of disadvantage as these children become parents and lack the skills necessary to provide support for their own children, academically, economically, and socially.

The rural economic landscape offers few opportunities for earning a living wage. Unemployment and underemployment are the norm for most residents. The resulting poverty, combined with isolation and lack of access to services, creates an environment that is not conducive to healthy childhood development. Rural residents experience higher levels of mental illness and substance abuse compared to average urban and suburban areas but lack of treatment services and long distances to care make treatment difficult. Disparities also exist in health care for similar reasons. Rural employment conditions also contribute to the difficulty in accessing medical care, as many rural residents do not have health insurance coverage.
The impact of poverty on families and children is well documented, yet much of the debate on poverty in the United States focuses on urban areas. Small population sizes and remoteness of rural areas lead to these areas being forgotten and ignored in research and larger policy debates (Lichter & Parisi, 2008). The invisibility of rural poverty is compounded by the difficulty in accessing data on the problem. For example, much of the data available for Calaveras County does not adequately describe small rural pockets in the far eastern section of the county. Census reports on poverty rates in the county are skewed by the economic disparities between the more affluent western parts of the county and the isolated, remote regions that are the subject of this study. School data is also problematic as seen in the results of the California State Standards Test (http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2011/). In small classes with fewer than fifteen students, one or two high or low achieving students can skew the data. These tests that are intended to evaluate school performance are not valid indicators due to the small sample size of test takers. These challenges in statistical and quantitative analysis indicate that qualitative exploration is a reasonable alternative in understanding poverty, childhood, and school in rural communities.

Despite the flaws in available data, it is clear that children in rural Calaveras County are struggling economically and academically. A review of the 2011 California State Standards Test results for West Point Elementary, the most remote community in the county, indicates that more than half of the students in both second and fourth grade tested below basic in both language arts and math. Fifty-four percent of third graders tested below basic in language arts, and a full 69% of fifth graders tested below basic in
math. A second rural school, Railroad Flat Elementary, also has low test scores and, as an indicator of the pervasiveness of poverty in the community, it is a designated free breakfast and lunch school. Drop-out rates are difficult to track for students attending these rural schools. Poverty related mobility results in frequent relocations for many rural children. Tracking their linear academic progress is difficult especially once they leave the small rural schools and become grouped with the larger high school that serves greater Calaveras County.

Cumulative stress faced by poor rural families results in situations where children's academic potential is not developed. Risk factors such as isolation, low maternal education, low income, single parenthood, unemployment, and high number of children per household have been shown to negatively impact early childhood cognitive development (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2008). These risks have been shown to interfere with social development and behavior as well. Furthermore, education is often a low priority for families in rural areas where there are few employment opportunities that requiring higher education. Rural residents who do pursue higher education often relocate away from economically depressed rural areas. This leads to few educated role models in rural communities and overall lowered academic aspirations for remaining residents.

Isolation, lack of access to services, few employment opportunities for families, loose social supports, poverty, and associated issues of substance misuse, family violence and child neglect, intergenerational trauma and illiteracy are all part of the rural landscape. Despite this, rural children who enter school at a disadvantage are expected to
perform at the same level as their more academically prepared peers. Current education policy demands a high level of academic performance from all children regardless of challenges in their home life or the extent of their cognitive development before entering kindergarten. Schools provide various resources to bolster children's academic performance in this time of high stakes educational testing. Much research has gone into increasing scores on standardized tests and boosting academic performance. Much less educational research has been done on the development of the whole child although children who struggle emotionally, behaviorally, and socially are seldom able to perform to their full academic potential.

Rural schools contend with unique circumstances that impede their ability to meet the needs of children and provide the level of support children require for optimal learning. Inequitable funding and the high cost of administrating to remote, small communities puts rural schools in a situation where they must perform at a higher level in a challenging social environment with less financial support. Recently, the No Child Left Behind Act has imposed mandates and standards that fail to account for the specific needs and challenges of rural communities. Currently the more rural schools in Calaveras County have a majority of their students testing below basic in both math and language arts. This may lead to a restriction of funding as money is tied to student achievement under current education policy.

This circumstance, where students have high needs and schools have few resources, is disadvantageous to children in a number of ways. Not only does it negatively impact children's academic development, it creates an environment that has
the risk of undermining children's already tested sense of self-efficacy. Low self-efficacy has been connected to depression, feelings of powerlessness, academic underachievement and lowered life expectations. The more opportunities children have to make choices and develop their individual talents the more likely they are to develop feelings of hope and self-worth.

From a strength based perspective, there is value in identifying the resources and factors that contribute to children's perceived self-efficacy in order to expand and build upon what is already working. Many studies have evaluated the effectiveness of school resources on academic achievement. Fewer studies have looked beyond academics to identify the impact of resources on the development of the whole child. Additionally, accurate data on rural schools is scarce. Inquiry into rural schools and their impact on children's sense of self can lead to an understanding of the ways schools can support children in developing to their full potential.

Clearly, many rural children enter school already at an educational disadvantage. This provides a challenge for schools that are assigned the job of providing an education for these children. Children enter school needing basic socialization and early literacy exposure. This runs counter to California state mandate that requires children begin reading by the end of kindergarten (California State Board of Education, 1998). It is interesting to note the high stringency of kindergarten standards considering that kindergarten attendance is not even required in the state (California Department of Education, 2011). California children are at a particular disadvantage due to the unusually late age cut-off date of age five by December 2. Most other states require
kindergarteners to be age five by September. This means that kindergarteners in California are often significantly younger and less mature than kindergarteners in other states yet they are still held to similar grade level standards.

The difficulty rural schools have providing high-needs young children with an education that enables them to meet high standards is compounded by financial barriers. A review of School Accountability Report Cards (SARC) which is provided by the California Department of Education to allow the community to evaluate and compare schools shows that the two most rural schools in Calaveras County, West Point and Railroad Flat, spend $4625 and $5422 per pupil per year respectively. This is significantly less than the state average of $5,681 and compares unfavorably to neighboring non-rural school districts such as Sacramento Unified where per pupil spending is $6,234 (www3.cde.ca.gov/sarcupdate/clink.aspx).

Despite lower funding and expenditures, the cost of administering small, isolated schools is disproportionately high. Transportation often consumes a large portion of the rural school budget. Low enrollment in small schools means fewer dollars and the tax base of rural communities does not provide funding at a level equitable to schools that are located in less economically depressed areas. Rural schools cannot compete with more affluent schools when paying teacher salaries and providing staff with opportunities for professional development. This may result in less qualified teachers teaching children who have a higher level of need. Teacher ability is one of the studied resources that has been shown to have an impact on children's academic achievement. Along with per-pupil expenditure, small school size, and small class size, teacher skill and experience have
been positively correlated with higher test scores in schools (Hedges, & Laine, 1996; Koski & Weis, 2004).

Studies that correlate effectiveness of educational resources on academic performance are difficult to undertake in rural schools. Challenges inherent in rural research render much statistical analysis meaningless. Small data sets do not provide consistent information that can be reliably repeated. In a class with ten students, one or two high, or low, performing students can completely skew standardized test results. Furthermore, data is often not released when the groups measured are small as a protection of the privacy of individuals. Although educational resources have seldom been studied in rural schools, the uniqueness of rural culture and challenges specific to rural education make it unwise to assume findings from studies on larger urban or suburban schools will transfer meaningfully. Truly assessing the impact of resources in a rural school requires an analysis at the personal, local level.

This study on school resources and factors is not just unique due to its focus on rural education. The assessment of the impact schools on children's self-efficacy is a departure from other research that focuses on the relationship between schools and academic achievement, usually defined by test scores. Under current education policy, test scores are a primary concern for teachers, schools, and legislators. Money is awarded and withheld from schools based on student test performance. This myopic focus fails to recognize non-testable areas that impact children's learning and overall ability to live successful, productive lives. A school where a majority of students are poor and have been exposed to numerous risk factors in their community will likely have
many students score low on standardized tests. To focus solely on this deficit and ignore areas of strength and resiliency is a disservice to both students and the school. Identifying the successes and abilities of children in rural schools, and analyzing the resources that support such successes, allows analysis of factors that create an environment for children to grow to their full potential. Children have value beyond their test scores. The development of a strong sense of self-efficacy is an important goal for all children, but is particularly vital for those facing the challenges that are a part of rural communities.

The impact perceived self-efficacy has on academic achievement supports the argument for attending to its development in the school setting. Students with higher perceived self-efficacy are more motivated and persistent when encountering new and challenging curriculum. As a result, such children have more academic success, which further reinforces their belief in their abilities. Alternatively, children who feel they are unable to complete tasks are quickly discouraged and often avoid academic challenges, often through distracting, negative behaviors. This pattern reinforces a child's belief that he/she is incapable and can lead to academic failure. The second pattern is particularly hazardous to poor rural children whose feelings of hope and self-worth are already tested by the stresses of poverty and isolation.

School can serve as a support for children's growth and development, or it can become another barrier for children who are already challenged by their environment. Studies that focus on academic outcomes and ignore the social and emotional world of children are not able to provide the complete picture. Even in studies where evidence is found that can lead to increased test scores over all, there will be children who do not
excel academically. What becomes of these children? Is there a way to help children gain a sense of competency based on their ability and personal strengths? Can children feel capable and valuable even when problems they struggle with at home interfere with their ability to meet stringent academic demands at school? These questions are pertinent outside of rural areas as well. Poor urban children struggle with poverty related risks that impact perceived self-efficacy as well. Identifying resources to assist children in developing belief in their own ability and worth can lead to more effective interventions. School environments tailored to improve motivation, persistence, hopefulness, and self-esteem, would not only positively impact test scores, they would positively impact children's lives.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

This study is an inquiry that seeks to identify factors in rural elementary schools that impact children's perceived self-efficacy. While numerous studies have evaluated factors that increase academic performance, from a social work perspective it is also appropriate to evaluate the influence schools have on children's emotional and social development. Studies have shown the impact poverty related risk has on children but few have addressed school related buffers and interventions that can mitigate the hazards of growing up in a poor isolated community. By exploring such potential resources, perhaps effective factors can be built upon and expanded and situations that are harmful to children's development of perceived self-efficacy can be addressed.
Theoretical Framework

This study will be guided by the empowerment theory, which will be used to conceptualize issues at the macro, meso, and micro level. Empowerment theory is an appropriate fit for an exploration of ways to promote self-efficacy among poor rural children because disempowerment affects these children on a number of levels. A multidimensional approach is useful in addressing both the challenges children face at an individual level in the school setting as well as the greater problem of poverty and disempowerment of the community. It also provides a framework to critique the system of disadvantage and economic oppression that fosters conditions that are detrimental to the development of children (Hur, 2006).

At the most basic level, children are disempowered by their age. Children must rely on more powerful adults to meet their needs. This is significant in communities where poverty is the norm and family life is often unstable. Children growing up in such communities experience profound helplessness when adults are unable to provide the attention and supports necessary for healthy childhood development. Rural children are also disempowered by their lack of access to services and opportunities that are available to their non-rural counterparts. For instance, geographic and economic barriers may mean that a rural child has no access to a library while a child growing up in a more populated area does. Cases where the curriculum demand in the classroom exceeds the ability or readiness of the child to perform is a source of disempowerment as well.

At a larger level, the issue of rural poverty is an issue of class. Poor communities that lack economic opportunities are a result of oppressive policies and practices that
value material gain over human lives. Holding society accountable for addressing conditions that lead to the intergenerational cycle of poverty is at the heart of empowerment theory. Recognition that society can intervene in the cycle by supporting the education and efficacy development of disempowered individuals is also germane to the theory (Hur, 2006). Exploring ways schools can support the development and strengthen the self-efficacy of poor rural children is an ideal area of study if the goal is to empower these children and their community.

This study will also be guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive theory, specifically Bandura's theory of self-efficacy which posits that "children's intellectual development cannot be isolated from the social relations within which it is imbedded and from its interpersonal effects" (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996, p. 1207). As such, this study is not only interested in the formal structures that provide academic support for students, it is also interested in less tangible aspects of the school community that enhance student success. The intent is to identify factors within the school setting that promote the development of children's sense of competency and efficacy. When children feel confident, important, and powerful they are more successful academically and less likely to engage in negative behaviors. Studying the development of self-efficacy in children takes into consideration aspects of the child beyond academic performance or self-esteem. This whole child approach is appropriate for children who have difficulty performing academically as well as children with social and behavioral issues. Within this context, rural schools will be assessed for their ability to enhance a
child's feelings of competence, importance, and power, and for their contribution to providing children with choices and allowing children to have a voice in their education.

In emphasizing solutions and identifying areas of effectiveness in schools, this study takes a strength-based approach. Research on rural communities, rural schools, and rural children is less prevalent than in non-rural regions. Studies that have been conducted on the rural experience have often focused on deficiencies and problems. Economic difficulties have resulted in challenges for rural families. Looking for solutions and exceptions to these challenges is a worthy endeavor that provides a counterpoint to studies that explore the hardships with which rural residents contend.

Definitions of Terms

*Perceived self-efficacy*: Perceived self-efficacy is a person's belief about their capability to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes (Bandura, 1994).

*Resources*: Resources are any structured, intentional support provided to children and families by the school.

*Factors*: Factors are traits or non-intentional aspects of the school or the delivery of educational services.
**Assumptions**

This study makes the assumption that self-efficacy can be impacted by resources for the right kind of opportunities for self-actualization. A secondary assumption is that rural schools possess factors and provide resources that impact children's perceived self-efficacy. A third assumption that underlies this study is the belief that society has an interest in improving lives of poor, rural children and ending the cycle of poverty.

**Justifications**

This study will benefit the field of social work by providing insight into ways to mitigate the impact of poverty on people living in rural areas. Investigation into school factors that encourage feelings of capability and self-worth in children will lead to information that can be utilized to disrupt the cycle of disadvantage. Schools have the potential to be a powerful resource for poor children and families. If schools can find ways to build hope and motivation in children, those children will be more likely to develop their individual strengths and reach their full human potential. Empowering poor children speaks to the heart of social work values.

**Limitations**

This study will be limited to rural elementary schools. It seeks to identify ways that schools can enhance self-efficacy beliefs and is not directly concerned with children's academic performance. This study does not seek to explore disparities between rural and non-rural schools, nor does it intend to focus on their deficits. Transferability of the results of this study will be somewhat limited as different schools have different factors and offer different resources. As a study from the perspective of parents and
school staff, the objectivity of the information gathered is limited. Perspectives are influenced by personal experience, which may result in findings that tell as much about the individuals interviewed as about school resources and factors. This pertains to only three schools in a specific rural area in a small rural county therefore the findings of this study are not generalizable although some findings may provide insight regarding the larger issue of supporting the development of self-efficacy for children growing up in poverty as a whole.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Children in rural communities are increasingly impacted by poverty, substance abuse, child maltreatment, domestic violence, and geographical and social isolation. These multiple risk factors are associated with impaired cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral development in children. Unstable home environments and lack of access to basic needs and services undermines the ability of families to promote and support children's feelings of confidence and self-worth. Family stress and low parental education levels lead to decreased emphasis on cognitive development and academic achievement. Often, children enter the school system with a history that interferes with their ability to learn in a classroom setting. Difficulty mastering school curriculum can result in children developing low self-efficacy, which is associated with academic failure, depression, behavioral problems, lack of motivation, and feelings of hopelessness regarding the future. As a stable and constant factor in the lives of rural children, school has the ability to greatly impact children's development. Identifying ways that schools can promote the wellbeing of children who face multiple risk factors due to poverty and isolation would be of great value in mitigating the effects of rural poverty. This study intends to explore the availability and capacity of rural schools to offer resources and opportunities for improving children's self-efficacy.

This review of the literature will begin with a look into the world of the rural child. Issues affecting families and children living in remote, sparsely populated areas
will be identified and explored. This will be followed by an examination of the current state of rural education with specific emphasis on the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act. At this point, literature on resources in education will be reviewed. Identification and analysis of the usefulness of resources offered in schools will be assessed. This will provide both understanding of potential resources that could be made available, as well as a point of comparison of the equity of resources between rural and non-rural schools.

After the discussion regarding educational resources, a review of the research on self-efficacy will explore the connection between resources offered by the school and children's development of feelings of empowerment, value and self-esteem. The review will conclude with a brief discussion about the challenges and gaps in research in rural areas.

**The World of the Rural Child**

Rural living presents many challenges for children and their families. Dramatic shifts in the rural labor market have resulted in widespread poverty for many families (Cochran et al., 2002). Rural communities have traditionally been built around industries that extrapolated natural resources such as mining, logging and farming. As large industries pushed out small farming, ranching, and mining businesses, rural residents have turned to low-skilled, low-paying manufacturing jobs (Swanson, 2001). Globalization has further eroded the rural job market as companies have taken many of these jobs oversees (Dewees, Lobao, & Swanson, 2003). Unemployment and underemployment is the norm for many residents living in the rural United States today.
The resulting poverty of the rural economic landscape has significant consequences for the families living in rural communities. Economic instability has been linked to increased substance abuse, family violence and child neglect (Aron et al., 2010; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Poverty is also associated with low academic achievement and increased behavioral problems for children (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans & Cox, 2008). Mental illness and poor health is also positively correlated with economic instability (McLaughlin et al., 2011). Ultimately, rural families often find themselves struggling to attain such basic needs as housing, electricity, running water, nutritious food, adequate health care and transportation.

Unfortunately, the increased need of rural families is not offset by higher levels of services and intervention. An exploratory study of rural, low-income women in 16 states found inequity in access to health care due to a number or factors. Lack of health insurance was a barrier to services for many women who are often under or unemployed. Most of the women in the study did not have a regular doctor, a factor related to the scarcity of primary care physicians available in rural communities. Rural women often receive medical care through emergency rooms and urgent care facilities. This is a concern because preventative care is neglected and the overall health of low-income rural women is not addressed (Simmons, Anderson & Braun, 2008).

A study of mental health services availability found significant disparities in the provision of mental health services in rural areas (Hauenstein et al., 2007). This disparity exists despite reports of poorer mental health in rural areas. Issues like transportation, distance to care, the lack of mental health professionals and facilities were noted as major
barriers to treatment. The study also pointed to issues such as challenges of topography, lack of autonomy and stigma as suspected reasons rural residents are less likely to receive mental health care (p. 264). Issues of remoteness and isolation also come into play for residents seeking substance abuse treatment. In a study that found significantly higher rates of the co-morbidity of mental disorders and substance abuse issues in rural areas, Simmons and Havens (2007) speculated that lack of access to appropriate mental health treatment may lead rural residents to self-medicate with alcohol and/or drugs. Substance abuse in rural is surprisingly understudied (Schoeneberger, Leukefeld, Hiller, & Godlaski, 2006). While there are calls for increased data collection, current knowledge regarding the prevalence and patterns of substance misusage is scanty.

The stressors of rural life often lead to family disintegration. Isolation and male partner unemployment have been shown to increase the risk of intimate partner violence in rural areas (Lanier & Maume, 2009). Economic instability results in transient living situations for families. High-frequency poverty-related mobility is particularly disruptive for children. Changes in schools interfere with students' development of social relationships and interrupts academic progress (Schafft, 2006). Studies have also found an increase in the number of children being raised by grandparents in rural communities. Grandparent lead households are tied to divisive family factors such as parental incarceration, substance abuse, mental illness, child maltreatment, and death (Bigbee, Musil, & Kenski 2011; Leder, Grinstead, & Torres, 2007).

In a study on cumulative social risk, parenting, and infant development in rural low-income communities, Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans and Cox (2008) confirmed the
association between risk factors and negative cognitive outcomes for rural children. The authors identified several risk factors frequently experienced by rural families such as geographical isolations, low maternal education, low family income, single parenthood, high number of children in the household, number of life stressors, parental unemployment, and neighborhood safety, and developed a cumulative risk score based on a child's level of exposure. The study found higher rates of cumulative risk associated with rural life were negatively correlated with children's cognitive development. This was evident in children as early as fifteen month of age. Earlier studies in non-rural areas have confirmed the impact of cumulative risks on children's social development and behavior as well (Gerard & Buehler, 2004).

**Rural Schools**

School features prominently in the life of the rural child. While at school, children have the opportunity to learn, socialize, and have contact with the larger world. Ideally, school can offer an environment that supports and enhances a child's development into a functioning, competent adult. For this reason, it is important to assess the current challenges and strengths of rural education and look at the effectiveness of schools in rural areas. The current paradigm for evaluating schools is based on student testing, but a review of the literature indicates that there is more to an effective school than high test scores.

Rural schools contend with many of the issues faced by rural families. Financial distress is a common for schools that rely, at least partially, on local property taxes. In impoverished areas, where home values are low, the local tax base does not generate
sufficient revenue (Jimerson, 2005). Rural schools also spend a disproportionately large part of their budgets on transportation as buses travel to children living in remote areas (Beeson & Strange, 2003). Inadequate funding is also a barrier to schools hiring and retaining qualified school staff. Rural schools are simply not in a position to compete with salaries offered by non-rural school districts. Additionally, teachers who work in rural schools have little access for opportunities for professional development.

Technology is another where rural schools lag behind. Working, up to date, computers in the classroom are not within reach of the rural school budget. Both funding issues and remoteness make it difficult for schools to utilize supplemental service providers (Jimerson, 2005).

Inadequate funding of rural schools is compounded by the high expense of providing educational services to isolated, high-needs populations. A study by Roscigno and Crowley (2001), examined the interplay between disadvantaged families and disadvantaged schools and how that relationship affects children's academic achievement. The authors of this study found that rural children are impacted by the family issues of depressed family income, low parental education levels, and households with a high number of children. These disadvantages are exacerbated by disadvantages in rural education, particularly lower funding per pupil, depressed expectations for student performance, and higher number of poor students. The imbedded nature of families and schools has consequences for both schools and students alike. Efforts families make to improve a child's academic performance can be offset by problems within the school and
conversely, effort made by the school can be undermined by issues in the child's home life.

Education in remote areas is also undermined by greater sociological factors. Higher education is not part of the rural landscape. Colleges are inaccessible for many residents due to high cost, lack of transportation and commutes of long distances. Individuals who attend college are usually only able to do so by relocating away from their community. Due to the depressed job market, few college educated residents return to rural areas to live after graduation. Few educated role models may result in rural children and their families having lower academic aspirations than their urban and suburban peers (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Individuals who intend to remain in their rural communities close to family and friends may be less inspired to pursue higher education simply because there are fewer opportunities in such communities to benefit from higher education. Furthermore, rural children with high academic aspirations often feel conflicted by the incompatibility of pursuing higher education and remaining close to their rural community and identity (Howley, 2006).

Although the primary role of school is providing basic education, schools in rural communities also serve as social and community centers. A study by Lyson (2002) on the economic and social well-being of rural communities made the case that small rural communities with schools have higher property values and more developed infrastructure than those without schools. He also found that the occupational structure in communities with schools included higher rates of employment in more favorable occupational categories. The increased social cohesion and sense of community identity the presence
local school creates in a rural area provides benefits far beyond the education of its students. This role of local schools is particularly important in light of the move toward the closing and consolidation of small rural schools in an attempt to cut educational costs (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002).

As a component of rural identity, there is a strong tradition of local control over rural community schools (Jimerson, 2005). That control has recently been wrested from communities with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. This federal education policy has undermined rural schools' ability to effectively serve children by mandating policies that are particularly burdensome for small, rural schools (Mitchem, Kossar & Ludlow, 2006). Low student enrollment in rural schools often results in multi-grade classrooms, which are difficult to teach. Grade leveled standards require a teacher of a combination grade class to develop and implement two or three complete, distinct curriculums at the same time (Jimerson, 2005). Rural schools also have trouble meeting the NCLB mandates for academic yearly progress (AYP), a requirement that the school improve its overall test score each year. With small class sizes, two or three high performing or low performing students can significantly alter the schools standardized test scores. This is significant because the NCLB has punitive economic repercussions for "underperforming" schools, which result in struggling schools losing the very funding they need (Jimerson, 2005; Mitchem, Kossar & Ludlow, 2006).

While the intended goal of NCLB was to improve education for disadvantaged students, the unfortunate impact has been to financially punish schools that serve a high number of struggling students. Standardizing curriculum was meant to assure all children
receive equitable access to knowledge, but the result has been to tie the hands of teachers who are now unable to tailor curriculum to the abilities of students. Frequent standardized tests were developed as a means to track performance and make schools accountable for student's learning. The high-stakes nature of the testing has resulted in teachers "teaching to the test" in order to assure their school is not punished for failing to make adequate progress. This has resulted in schools reducing the emphasis and shifting resources from areas that are not tested, such as art, music, science, and physical education (Hursch, 2007).

**School Resources and Factors**

With funding scarce, it is crucial that schools invest money ways that provide the most significant impact on children's learning. Numerous studies investigate the academic value of school factors and expenditures, but a review of the literature indicates the there is no agreed upon understanding of the concept "educational resources". At the simplest level, resources are interpreted as money. In a study on the relationship between expenditures on instructional supplies and student academic achievement, Okpala, Okpala & Smith (2001) argue that instructional supplies expenditures per pupil is a proxy variable for both quality and quantity of resources used in the learning process (p. 113).

Bodine et al. (2008) developed a complex system to assess school resources. In a study on disparities in charter school resources, they designed an index that refers to both material and human resources. Indicators the authors use for material resources include principal's salary, the median salary paid to the current teaching staff, an index of fringe benefits, ratio of students to part-time teacher and the ratio of students to full time
teacher. Indicators for human resources include average years of experience among teachers employed at each school, the types of credentials teachers had, an index of teachers reported influence (status within profession) and an index of parent participation.

In an analysis of the effect of school resources on student achievement, Greenwald, Hedges and Laine (1996) examine seven individual factors: Per-pupil expenditure, teacher ability, teacher education, teacher experience, teacher salary, teacher/pupil ratio, and school size. They found that per-pupil expenditure showed strong and consistent relations with student achievement. Smaller schools and class sizes were also positively related to student achievement, as were teacher attributes, particularly teacher ability. The authors argue that these findings emphasize the importance of spending in education and the need to understand where money can be spent most effectively.

In study that regarding California's Educational Content Standards, authors Koski and Weis (2004) argue "the intuitively compelling notion that it is not fair to hold students and teachers accountable when they are hamstrung by resource deficiencies." (p. 1909). They assess the educational requirements California has set in response to federal accountability policies and analyze resources necessary to meet those standards. The "educational resources" they explore are facilities (schools, classrooms, libraries and media centers, laboratories and kitchens) technologies (computers and printers, software, internet access, audiovisual equipment), instructional materials (books, periodicals, films, videos audiotapes, charts/graphing materials, measuring instruments, laboratory equipment and scientific calculators, and maps and globes) and teachers (credential). The
authors concluded that in order to meet high content standards, students require an equally high level of educational resources.

Discussions on resources necessary for student performance involve varied interpretations yet there is a commonality. The basic question in all these studies is how can schools help students learn? The research on creating effective schools has found that the "single best determinant of a school's likely output is a single input - the characteristics of the entering children" (Neuman, 2009, p. 582). Despite legislation targeting schools, economic problems and social pathologies lie at the heart of educational failure. Research has found seven essential principles may lead to breaking of the cycle of disadvantage: "Target interventions to children who need help the most, begin early, engage highly trained professionals, provide intensive interventions, coordinate health, education, and social services, provide compensatory instructional benefits and be accountable” (p. 583). By providing resources that address issues external to the school setting, schools can mitigate disadvantage children face in community and home life.

The Role of Self-Efficacy

As discussed earlier, research has shown that academic achievement is negatively impacted by adversity in students' home lives (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2008). Additionally, the underlying issues of school failure can be related to family poverty and dysfunction (Neuman, 2009). Although schools are in the business of academics, it is clear that to be effective, rural schools need to address issues beyond the classroom. The cumulative risk factors rural children contend with in their communities
means that many enter the school environment unready to learn (Gerard & Buehler, 2004). Struggles at home result in children entering school with cognitive, social, and behavioral disadvantages. The academic, social, and behavioral demands of school are sometimes beyond the ability of disadvantaged children. This can result in children feeling incompetent, powerless, hopeless and worthless. This lowered sense of self-efficacy further interferes with children's learning and has significant repercussions beyond the academic realm.

Perceived self-efficacy is important in the development of children in a number of ways. In a discussion regarding the multifaceted impact of self-efficacy beliefs on academic functioning, Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996) describe self-efficacy as "people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their level of functioning and environmental demands" (p. 1206). Bandura's social cognitive theory posits that perceived self-efficacy regulates the way people function on many levels. Cognitively, individuals with high self-efficacy have higher aspirations are more likely to take on academic risks which leads to better learning. Motivationally, individuals set goals based on their beliefs about their abilities. Those with high self-efficacy set high goals, approach challenges with more hope, and are more resilient in the face of setbacks. Efficacy beliefs also regulate emotional states. Individuals who feel they are capable of managing stresses in their environment feel less threatened and therefore less anxious. Low self-efficacy can lead to hopelessness and depression. Social relationships are challenging for individuals with low self-efficacy. This creates a vicious cycle of low
mood and social isolation, which in turn lowers perceived self-efficacy further (Bandura, 1997).

In a study on the self-efficacy pathways to childhood depression, Bandura, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, and Caprara (1999) explored the influential role perception of one's academic achievement and social behavior plays in depression. Authors correlated children's perceived self-efficacy in academic and social realms with the incidence of depression. They concluded that perceived academic and social inefficacy contributed to depression both immediately, and in the long term. Over time, the low academic performance and problem behaviors, both related to depression and low self-efficacy, further increased the intensity and frequency of depressed mood. The authors suggest that the solution to this self-efficacy pathway to childhood depression involves efforts to enhance perceived self-efficacy and skill in academic and social domains. They state, "The solution partly lies in changing educational practices that undermine the perceived efficacy and aspirations of children" (p. 267).

In addition to analyzing the impact of self-efficacy on mood, Bandura (et al) also studied the interplay of self-efficacy on academic functioning. In this analysis on the multifaceted impact of self-efficacy beliefs, the authors evaluated not only the self-efficacy beliefs of children, but of parents as well. The correlative study found that parents who perceived themselves as effectual in parenting are better able to promote their child's learning and serve as more effective advocates for their child in the school environment. The impact of children's perceived self-efficacy on academic achievement is also analyzed in this study. Diverse factors were found to both affect and be affected
by children's beliefs about their abilities. Children with higher perceived self-efficacy tended to have higher aspirations and lower levels of depression. These children believed they were able to exercise control over their environment and chose academically engaged pro-social peers. This is an important factor because interpersonal relationships reinforce academic aspirations (Bandura, et al. 1996).

This research clearly indicates that academic capability and achievement cannot be separated from the social and emotional aspects of a child. To best educate children, schools would be wise to address children's perceived self-efficacy. An added benefit of such attention would be development of higher aspirations in children. High self-efficacy has been shown to shape not only academic goals but children's career aspirations as well (Bandura, 1996). Essentially, children who feel they are capable and can exert control over themselves and their environment have more hope in their future. Another benefit of schools addressing children's self-efficacy is the mitigating effect high self-efficacy has in the development of depression. Although schools are not in the business of attending to children's mental health, the impact children's emotions have on their academic performance and behavior makes this goal worthwhile.

Bandura identifies four main ways to develop perceived self-efficacy. First, experiencing success through perseverance provides individuals with evidence of their efficacy (1997). Second, self-efficacy beliefs are increased through social modeling or seeing others in similar situation succeed. Third, through social persuasion, which encourages individuals to exert more effort and increases their chance of success, and
finally reducing stress and depression and which individuals interpret as signs of personal deficiency (Bandura, 1997).

In a critical review of the literature, Usher and Pajares (2008) analyzed a number of studies to identify the sources of self-efficacy in school. By synthesizing the results of studies, the authors found that mastery experience is the most influential source of information upon which students build their beliefs about their abilities. In studies of self-efficacy development across academic disciplines, including mathematics, organizing school related activities, computer skills, science, academic and general learning, self-regulation and writing, authors found mastery experience was the primary indicator of a child's perceived self-efficacy in that area.

The correlation between the other three factors thought to impact self-efficacy was less consistent. Vicarious experience specifically was not consistently shown to influence the development of self-efficacy in children. The authors speculate that this may be at least partially due to the difficulty researchers have had creating an accurate measure to assess it. While some studies have found that vicarious experience is indeed influential, it appears that contextual factors mediate its influence on the development of self-efficacy. Social persuasion has a more consistent correlation with self-efficacy development although, unlike mastery experience, it is not predictive of self-efficacy across all contexts.

For instance, social persuasion has predicted the academic and self-regulatory efficacy beliefs, but not the writing self-efficacy beliefs in middle school students. The fourth factor thought to influence self-efficacy is emotional and physical state. Anxiety and its
accompanying physical manifestations were shown to negatively impact self-efficacy in many but not all of the studies the authors reviewed (Usher & Pajares, 2008).

Self-Efficacy Development at School

Because mastery experience is crucial to the development of self-efficacy, it is important that children have the opportunity to succeed in early formative academic endeavors. This is often difficult for rural children entering schools that must conform to standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. As explored earlier, cumulative risk factors in the rural environment can negatively impact cognitive development in children as early as 15 months of age (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2008). Federally mandated standards require high academic achievement as early as kindergarten. Children who enter school unready for such academic pressure face failure. This failure leads to low perceived self-efficacy, which sets the tone for future educational performance. Academic standards that exceed the student's ability combine with the student's low sense of self-efficacy to damage the student's sense of hope and self-worth.

Educators have questioned the developmentally appropriateness of standards implemented by NCLB (Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008). There is a clash between the current education policy and research findings on effective education methods. Early childhood specialists have found that children learn best while actively engaged and working at their own pace. Federal requirements for children's performance are not based on respect for the individual development of children's abilities, but on the idea that all children are capable of meeting arbitrary milestones at ages determined not by educators but by legislators (Neuman, 2002). The expectation that all children should be
capable of meeting the demands of NCLB, regardless of ability and individual developmental patterns is not supported by research on education (Neuman, 2002; Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008). Thus, many young children, particularly those from impoverished home lives, are entering a school environment in which they are set up to fail.

Within this context, what can be done to support children in developing a healthy sense of self-efficacy? Clearly attending to young children's actual efficacy is of utmost importance. Providing learning opportunities for children in order to promote cognitive development during early childhood, as well as reducing cumulative risk that has a negative impact on such development is crucial (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2008). In the school setting, this may mean providing an early childhood education program or providing parents with educational and resource support to enrich children's home environments (Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008).

Providing children with mastery experience is also necessary to assure they develop a belief in their abilities. This can be done in many ways. According to Margolis and McCabe (2004), the most important academic decision teachers make in developing self-efficacy in struggling learners is determining the levels at which to instruct them. Controlling task difficulty and sequencing tasks from easy to difficult avoids circumstances where children become frustrated. Specific learning strategies need to be overtly taught and students benefit from opportunities for guided practice. Students benefit from positive feedback about successes and task-specific information on what needs to be done differently in the case of errors. Instruction on this level requires talent
and expertise from teachers. Teacher ability is an important and significant factor in children's academic experience (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996). Not only do teachers impact the development of a child's actual efficacy, they also impact a child's perceived self-efficacy through their choice of lessons, the structure they provide in the classroom, and the feedback and social persuasion they offer to the child.

The classroom and school environment provide feedback to students regarding their abilities. When children compare themselves to one another they can feel more capable. Vicarious experience, or seeing others succeed, provides evidence that success is possible. On the other hand, in competitive environments, comparisons can lead to children feeling inadequate. This results in the opposite effect and children’s sense of self-efficacy becomes undermined (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Education researchers point to the importance of a non-competitive classroom environment in the development of children's academic confidence (Margolis & McCabe, 2004; Neuman, 2009; Usher & Pajares, 2008). Engendering cooperation and pro-social behaviors also minimizes children's feelings of anxiety, which in turn encourages higher levels of perceived self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1996).

Extracurricular activities provide an additional venue for children to succeed in the school setting. Although research on the impact of such activities on children's self-efficacy is scant, art classes, music programs, and physical education offer children opportunities for mastery experience outside of traditional academic curriculum. This may mitigate depression associated with low academic self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1999) and may promote children's involvement and motivation in school. Self-efficacy
does not only pertain to the academic arena. If children believe they have abilities outside the school setting, even when they have low academic self-efficacy, they may judge themselves less harshly.

Parental attitudes have a high impact on a number of factors that influence children's sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, et al., 1996). Social persuasion, or the level of belief a parent has in their child's ability, influences the child's own self-efficacy beliefs. Parental involvement in school has a positive impact on the functioning of the school and their child's impression of the importance of education. A child may place higher value on their academic ability if their parent sends the message that education is important. Furthermore, self-efficacy beliefs held by parents regarding their own abilities often influences their child's self-evaluation (Bandura, et al., 1996). It follows that involving parents in the school setting and supporting their own feelings of self-worth regarding the educational environment would benefit their children and the school as well. Opportunities to work in the classroom, volunteer at school events and belong to parent organizations can provide parents with a connection to their child's educational experience.

Integration of services is another factor that supports the development of children by supporting their families and their communities as a whole. Much of the low self-efficacy seen in children in rural schools is a result of issues beyond the scope of the school setting. Poverty and family difficulties result in children lacking support and ability to perform academically (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2008; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Studies have found that coordinating health, education, and social
services in poor, rural communities is an important part of breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Neuman, 2009). By coordinating with agencies that address environmental risks that have an impact on children's academic performance, schools can enhance children's ability to function in the school setting. Children's are better able to perform in school when they are healthy, safe, and well nourished.

**Rural Research**

Research in rural communities provides challenges not associated with research done in larger suburban and urban settings. Because the term "rural" is ill defined in many data collection methods, it is common for data to be inaccurate or non-applicable (Helge, 2010). Issues such as density of population, remoteness from urban areas, and size of towns all enters the discussion of rurality, yet there is no consensus among researchers as to the exact meaning of the term (Hart, Larson, & Lishner, 2005). For this reason, data sets intended to represent one rural population may not be pertinent or transferable to another. In education, the small numbers of students in rural schools often result in situations where the data set is too small to be reportable (http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2011/). Where the student population is small, one or two individual students can skew data. This undermines the strength of quantitative studies on small, rural schools.

Lack of data has often resulted in urban solutions being applied to rural problems with little success (Helge, 2010). With poverty acting as an overarching theme, rural communities share many of the same concerns as urban areas. The subcultures of urban and rural communities though are significantly different and occasionally at odds
with one another (Lanier & Maume, 2009). It is important for interventions in education to reflect the unique culture of the community the school serves in order for the interventions to be meaningful and effective (Johnson, Baker, & Bruer, 2007). An accurate understanding of a given rural community requires an in-depth, personalized, qualitative assessment in order to tailor interventions to specific community needs.

An assessment of the resources supporting the development of children's self-efficacy in rural schools must incorporate the challenges and strengths unique to both the school and the greater rural community the school serves. Exploring the experiences of children and families in rural areas, and the particular environment in which they live, provides insight into ways schools can effectively meet children's needs. Assessing the local rural schools leads to an understanding of the barriers the schools face in supporting children's development as well as the areas where they are effective. A strength-based appraisal of the relationship between the child, school, family, and community may provide clarity regarding the role of the school in supporting rural children in developing to their full human potential. This study intends to add to the professional knowledge base by providing information about the rural school experience. Research on rural schools is scant, and the little that exists focuses on academic achievement. This study will also contribute to the knowledge base by investigating school resources from a new perspective by exploring the potential impact of resources on the development of children's perceived self-efficacy.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study explores parent and staff perceptions regarding the ways that rural schools impact the development of self-efficacy in children. This chapter will identify the methods used in this exploration. The methodology of the study will be presented in sections on study design, study sample, and study question. An explanation of the protection of human subjects will follow, along with an explanation of data collection and the analysis process.

Study Design

This study is an exploratory and descriptive phenomenological study utilizing qualitative research design. This approach is appropriate because the issues being studied are complex and occur in the natural setting of school and community. An assumption has been made that the school environment affects children's development of self-efficacy, but the ways and the extent of this impact of the school is the goal of this inquiry. This study does not predict or hypothesize. It seeks to explore and explain the experience of rural education with particular attention to the school factors that may increase the development of self-efficacy. Detailed responses from individuals most familiar with the school, specifically parents and school staff, are the most relevant way to explore such a topic.

According to Leedy & Ormrod (2010), qualitative research is most useful for looking at characteristics that are not easily reduced to numerical values. Such an approach is appropriate in cases where the researcher's aim is a better understanding of
complex human situations. Furthermore, the qualitative design allows for exploration and illumination of unknown conditions that do not lend themselves to quantifiable approaches. This approach is also ideal for conducting research in rural areas. The uniqueness of rural areas, combined with their sparseness of population, results in a situation where quantitative study is difficult. Small sample sizes and variation of experience between rural communities makes qualitative information difficult to obtain. Furthermore, small sample sizes interfere with the accuracy of qualitative research because results can easily be skewed by exceptional, outlying information. Rural areas receive less attention in research than other areas and therefore less is known about them. This relative lack of research results in a dearth of accurate knowledge about rural communities (Hart, Larson, & Lishner, 2005; Helge, 2010; Swanson, 2001). For this reason, studies that are exploratory in nature are helpful first steps in indicating possible areas for further quantitative study.

**Study Population and Sample**

This research was conducted in 2011 and 2012 in a small rural county in the Sierra Nevada foothills in California. The non-random purposive sample for this study was selected from parents who have also worked as school staff at three rural elementary schools. The schools are located in remote, isolated communities of 700 people or less. The schools studied are small, each with fewer than 120 children. The teaching and administrative staff in these schools is small as well. The small sample size used for this study is reflection of the demographics of the region where the population of both the communities the school are quite low.
Six participants were interviewed for this study, two from each of the three school sites. Participants were selected for their knowledge of the rural school environment. All six work in their community's rural school. In addition, all six are mothers of children who either currently attend, or have attended, the school where they work. One interviewee also attended the school herself when she was a child in the community. Participants were able to offer perspectives from both professional and personal experience because they interact with their school as both employee and mother of students. Participants had resided locally and worked in the rural school community for a minimum of three years. All six of the participants were Caucasian, which reflects the general demographics of the region.

**Study Question**

This study explores how schools can promote self-efficacy among rural children who face multiple risk factors due to poverty and isolation. The goal is to identify resources and factors that contribute to or impede the school's ability to assist the development of the whole child and create an environment where children can grow and learn to their full potential.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The subjects who participated in this study were protected under the procedures required by the California State University, Sacramento, Social Work Department. This study was reviewed by the Human Subjects review committee in September 2011 and was approved as a no-risk study. The approval number 11-12-029 was assigned to the study and a copy of the approval letter is attached here as appendix A.
Participants for this study were informed of the risks and benefits of involvement before being interviewed and their consent to participate was documented through their signature on the Consent to Participate form, which is attached as appendix B. Subjects were informed of the possible consequences of their participation. School staff interviewed may have expressed opinions that put them at odds with the school district that serves as their employer. For this reason, the researcher conducted interviews in a one to one setting in a private location convenient to the school staff. As mothers, participants also had the opportunity to express opinions, which may have put them at odds with the school, thereby creating a difficult relationship between themselves, and possibly their children, and other school personnel. All information shared by participants was kept completely confidential, as indicated in the consent form, and the anonymity of participants was maintained at all times. The researcher took all precautionary measures to ensure that the data collection was accurate and did not leave participant wondering that the information they shared would be available to anyone else in an individually identifiable manner.

**Data Collection Techniques**

Data for this study was collected through interviews with parents and school staff. The researcher utilized the attached interview guide (appendix C) to facilitate investigation into parent and school staff perception regarding the ways that rural school impact children's sense of self-efficacy. Interviews were conducted in private areas on a one on one basis. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher for analysis.
Preliminary Analysis Plan

The transcriptions of interviews were analyzed for thematic content and common elements. Ideas and perspectives that are repeated across interviews were noted and discussed. The researcher identified instances of repeated use of words, phrases, and ideas to extract common themes. Relevant information was broken down into small segments that reflect a single, specific thought. These segments were then grouped according to various aspects of the school experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Commonalities across the three schools were identified and aspects unique to each of the school settings were noted. After completion of analysis, conclusions were drawn regarding the resources and factors that teachers and parents perceive to have an impact on the development of children's sense of self-efficacy. These themes, composite perspectives, and divergent perspectives are reported in order to provide a detailed accurate picture of the services currently provided by rural schools and their perceived effectiveness.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the common themes that emerged from the detailed interviews conducted with parents and school staff from rural elementary schools with regards to their perceptions of the ways the school impacts children’s development of self-efficacy. The themes are organized into the following sections: formal supports provided by the school; school staff and the school community attributes; strengths of increased interaction in the form of positive social capital; extracurricular programs; the role of the larger community; school nutrition issues; adjunct programs that augment the regular school experience; and concerns over school closures.

These themes are discussed in the context of self-efficacy theory, which identifies factors linked to the development of self-efficacy. These factors include mastery experience, social modeling, social persuasion, and supportive, secure environment (Bandura, 1997).

Formal Supports Provided by the School

A majority of the formal resources provided by the schools target children's academic performance. Indeed, academic performance is the most studied aspect of school settings and research on the development of academic self-efficacy is plentiful. In exploring the supports rural schools offer to enhance children's academic mastery, respondents were able to identify a number of influential factors. All respondents discussed the intervention program that is present at each of the school sites. The
Afterschool (day care) component of the school experience was emphasized as a support. Volunteerism was also mentioned by a majority of the respondents although their perspective on the availability and role of volunteers varied, not only from school to school but even within the individual schools themselves. According to Usher and Pajares (2008), the most important factor in the development of academic self-efficacy is mastery experience. Intervention programs are designed to enhance the children’s academic success. When children experience academic success, it enhances their belief in their academic ability.

All the rural schools in this study provide an intervention program for students who are having difficulty performing at grade level. The school district provides an intervention teacher who comes into the school on a part-time basis to work with children in small groups during the school day in a separate classroom. Intervention utilizes specific programs that target the development of reading skills. One of the three schools also provides math intervention. This program is the only on-site, school funded support for students outside of the regular curriculum. Two of the parents noted that the school supports for academic performance targeted the lower performing children and there was a lack of resources for gifted children. One of these respondents stated "gifted children are also considered to be ‘special needs’ by the academic community, but we don't have anything for them" (Respondent). While another parent mentioned the district's inability to provide a Gifted and Talented Education due to the expense of the program's administration:
Although formal, funded academic supports primarily target academically struggling students, respondents pointed out that the district hosts the countywide Science Fair and the Spelling Bee, both of which provide students of various levels the opportunity to receive recognition and positive feedback for extra effort and higher levels of performance. The County Office of Education also hosts the Math Minibowl, a competition for fifth and sixth graders who perform well in math. This competition provides students with an incentive to develop their math skills and allows them to receive positive feedback for hard work and high performance.

While the school district primarily attends to children's educational needs, it also offers very limited services to children who need assistance with emotional and behavioral issues. At this time, there is one counselor who provides services to all six elementary schools in the district including those three schools that are the target of this study. The respondents who have worked with this counselor spoke highly of her services but her availability is limited which reduced the impact this component of school services has on benefiting students.

**School Staff and School Community Attributes**

Several respondents spoke at length about the supportive and positive atmosphere the schools provide for the children, with particular emphasis on the role school staff plays in creating such an environment. Two important criteria for the development of self-efficacy in children are social persuasion and an environment low in stress that allows children to take risks and make occasional mistakes (Bandura, 1997). Research has also found that teacher ability is an important and significant factor in children's
school experience (Greenwald, Hedges & Laine, 1996). These findings were reflected in the emphasis respondents placed on the teachers, the school staff, and the overall environment of the rural school setting.

**Small size of rural schools and increased social interaction.**

The low enrollment and small size of the rural school results in the reduction of school staff and few teachers. Two of the three schools that are the subject of this study have four teachers on staff and the third school has only three teachers. Each school has a secretary, a food service provider, yard duty, and one or two para-educators who perform various roles such as librarian, classroom aide, and intervention services instructor. For the second time in two years, all three schools are sharing the same principal who must travel the far distances between the remote schools and is only able to commit a third of her time to each site. Respondents discussed the value of the individuals who make up the schools' staff and emphasized the importance of individual attention and feeling of family that is present in the small rural school setting. As one respondent stated:

All the kids here feel like it is one big family. That's how I feel. I moved here from (a larger area). It is a bigger school down there and I didn't know all the kids down there. I didn't know all the teachers. Here it feels like family. We moved here and they made my kids feel like, "Hey Welcome! Come on in. You can be my buddy." It was the whole school, the kids too (Respondent).

The theme of the rural school's family atmosphere and attention was echoed in other interviews as well. Most of the respondents attributed the family atmosphere to the small size of the school, which supports the development of interpersonal relationships
and allows children to receive individual attention from the adults at the school. Respondents also pointed to the importance of the qualities of individual staff members. One respondent discussed the quality of personal interaction between school staff and children noting that individual attention and mindful listening provides a level of emotional support and protection for children who may be struggling at home or at school with their peers. She stated:

Yard duty is critical because they are out there listening (to the children) so yard duty is a very important position. (The secretary) who kids are going to deal with who is putting band-aids on their cuts has to be a caring person (Respondent).

**Supportive school atmosphere.**

A number of respondents attributed the positive supportive school atmosphere at least in part to the dedication of staff. They reported that staff, and especially the teachers, believe in the children, have high expectations, and provide a great deal of encouragement. This social persuasion is an important factor in children's development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). One respondent describes an environment where, "School staff are really good at about when (students) do good. We compliment them. We reward them. You know what I mean? Encouragement!" (Respondent) A respondent from another school talked about the social persuasion offered by teachers: "(The children) are so encouraged to do anything they want to do in the future. Their dreams aren't squashed" (Respondent) Another respondent from the same school reported, "There's a lot of positive feedback…Just a lot of positive reinforcement…teachers push (students) to work harder, but at the same time, not to where it makes them feel like they can't do it"
(Respondent). This atmosphere of encouragement and support is an integral to the school interactions and is one of the components that led respondents to describe as a family like environment.

Much of the school atmosphere is dependent on the characteristics and qualities of the teachers. One respondent stated, "The teachers here believe in the school. The teachers we had down in (an urban area) were decent too but it wasn't the same family atmosphere as it is here" (Respondent). In discussing the teachers, another respondent explained,

I think the school is their family too. They have been here so long. They just love kids. They are in the right profession to do what they love to do. I've met a few teachers who aren't like that at other schools and it was pretty disappointing. It was kind of like - you're just letting those kids slide by - not really looking at them and it was really sad. I got up here and it was like, Whoa! This is so different. This is what a school should be like (Respondent).

Of course, school staff and teachers vary. It is important to note that the two of the schools reported a stronger sense of family and the respondents had a more positive view of the school staff than third school in this study. In fact, a respondent from the third school indicated that the school did not sufficiently encourage children's sense of belonging. She stated:

I think that kids are on their own socially and if there is a big problem that someone notices, there may be attention from the teacher or the principal but for the most part kids are just left to (their own). They are either going to make
friends or they are not. They are going to be made fun of or not and they just deal with it on their own (Respondent).

When discussing school support for successful peer interactions and a sense of belonging, a second respondent from the same school lamented the loss of a school program that addressed these needs:

They are not doing Special Friends anymore but that was one of the most important things. That made a huge difference. Even for kids who come from families where everything is going fine, there are still social situations they need practice with…to be more successful and positive. If there is not funding (for Special Friends)...finding funding would be important (Respondent).

The Special Friends program was cut on a district wide basis, however, the other two schools have continued to attend to children's social skills efficacy. In fact, respondents at both these other schools discuss conscious efforts by school to facilitate peer interactions. A majority of this is done by the school staff who integrate their efforts into daily school life. One respondent explained:

There is a lot of one-on-one and small groups done here. One person has a problem fitting in and they (teachers) build a group around who that person could have as friends. Like last year my daughter was in a fourth grade girls group…with girls that would not necessarily have picked each other on the playground. You notice the change in who's hanging out with who and them hanging out with other people because they've broken the ice (Respondent).
A respondent from the second school explains that children develop a sense of belonging to the school community because: "The kids are part of everything we do here. Kids are hands on…All the staff are so involved with all the kids. Even though not all the staff live in this town we are all connected" (Respondent)

**School's role as family in the lives of rural children.**

A number of respondents commented on the importance of the family like nature of rural schools. Poverty, disadvantage, and isolation have significantly impacted families from rural communities (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans and Cox, 2008; Roscigno and Crowley, 2001). Respondents acknowledged this and expressed the idea that for some children, the school provides a sense of family that may be missing in their homes. The usual function of families, such as emotional support, nurturance, concern for safety, teaching of social mores, and providing a sense of belonging are difficult to provide when families are struggling to survive. The school serves as a stable, constant support for children who would otherwise have no secure place to turn. Respondents at all three school sites shared this sentiment. As one respondent put it:

I think the basis of most of these kids' lives is this (school) community. If you look outside of the school the kids don't really have that togetherness with their families. The families up here don’t spend as much time with their kids as the school does…It is sad but I feel that this school is some of these kids' main family (Respondent).

Another respondent summarized her view of the role of the school as follows:
The school is making a huge difference in the community. Some students really have no safe place to go at all and now they come to school and it's warm and there are nurturing adults. They get two meals, somebody tries to help them to learn the skills they are going to need to survive in the world or avoid the cycle they are on. Some of the items the schools have are intangibles. It’s not just teaching kids to read but it's having somebody there that maybe a kid can ask for help or if they fall down somebody picks them up and they can be given a hug or somebody can just talk to them because nobody has…In the past I would have said it's not the schools job to do all this stuff, it's the job of the parents and in the '50s and '60s it was the job of the parents and they should be supporting the teacher. Today it's changed. The economy has changed and the role of the school has changed and it has moved greatly toward more of a parenting, and a babysitting role, right or wrong… Even if it is babysitting at least it is a safe place and they are not being abandoned, or not cared for or neglected at least for six hours out of the day (Respondent).

**Strengths of Increased Interaction in the Form of Positive Social Capital**

Many respondents pointed to the importance of parents, volunteers and community support when the school seeks to fill gaps left by inadequate educational funding. This was particularly true in the area of academic supports for students. One of the respondents reported:

At this school we have parents and older people of the community come in and help out...we have handwriting help, spelling help, math help and several different
programs. Most of the time it is volunteer, sometimes we (the parent teacher group) pay a little but it wouldn’t be nothing compared to a regular job. It's just an incentive to get them to come in (Respondent).

A second school has a recently retired teacher who comes in and works with children in grades three through six. She engages them in reading record-keeping and holds a writing class. In a school with four teachers, a dedicated, skilled volunteer like this makes a significant impact on student teacher ratio. Also, because this volunteer is not working for the district, she is not bound by state mandated curriculum constraints and academic standards. She is able to individuate her work with students to meet their particular needs and interests. The third school also utilizes volunteers for academic support. A retired teacher provides math tutoring once a week and one of the current teachers volunteers one afternoon a week to coach a team of advanced fifth and sixth graders for participation in the Math Minibowl.

**Parental involvement and opportunities to increase involvement.**

One of the respondents had a differing perspective on volunteerism. In a discussion regarding ways the school could further enhance children's academic self-efficacy, she introduced the issue of combination classes. In small schools, teachers are often required to teach two or more grade levels at the same time. This respondent explained the challenge and benefits of the need to present two separate curriculums to the class:

For some, (combination grade classes) are at an advantage. For instance, if they are in second grade but their math or reading level is higher. But for the teachers,
they are split thinking, "I am going to go with this grade now." In one class I work in, we have a small group of one grade and a bigger group of the other grade. We try to pull volunteers in so the teacher can work with one group directly and the volunteer can work with the other group. Volunteerism is important and I don’t think we have enough of volunteering in the class. Off the top of my head, we only have two people who come in and help in the classroom (Respondent).

This same respondent reported, "I think if there was money to have separate grades, I think test scores would be a lot higher" (Respondent).

**Reinforcement of the importance of education**

Parental involvement was one of the concerns of a respondent who reported that she would like to see the school intervene more assertively with parents to increase children's school attendance. She noted that the rural school where she worked was in the federal school improvement program as a result of low student test scores. She reported:

> We've got so many parents that just blow (school attendance) off like it is no big deal. They take kids out early or they say, "We just didn't feel good so we didn't come in." Looking at my end and seeing their test scores and their attendance I would like to see more intervention with parents. How can we show these parents, "Look where your kid is scoring (on state achievement tests)? How can we help them when they are not here (at school)?" (Respondent)

In addition to individual volunteer and family involvement, the school receives a great deal of support from outside organizations and the greater community. In some
cases the school partners with other agencies, such as the case where an MSW student interns is placed in the school to provide counseling. Organizations like Parent Teacher Groups exist for the sole purpose of supporting the school. The greater community is also important to the school not only in its support but because it provides students with the opportunity to belong and contribute on a greater level.

**Extracurricular programs and self-efficacy development.**

One of the most common themes across interviews was the value of sports in children's self-efficacy development. Indeed, sports provide the opportunity for mastery experience. They provide social modeling, or the opportunity to see one's peers succeed. In the proper context, sports allow for children to receive encouragement and take risk to improve and grow. Respondents saw sports contributing to children's development of self-efficacy in many realms including physical health and agility, social skills building and peer interactions, sense of self-worth, and emotional regulation and sportsmanship. In fact, sports were mentioned in every interview conducted for this study. Despite the overwhelming value respondents placed on the school sports program, the school district in this study no longer provides sports programs at the elementary school level. Last year, the district cut all sports programs as a cost cutting measure to meet budget shortfalls. It is only through the support of the community that the schools are able to continue to provide sports for the children. As one respondent explains:

There are sports. Sports that are private. Basketball, baseball, volleyball, and soccer. But even the ones played at the school aren't really part of the school
anymore. The school may like them but they are not giving them to the kids (Respondent). In general respondents acknowledge that the school is no longer providing the sports but they continue to associate the sports program with the school setting. This is also the case with a number of other resources and activities connected with the school. Some of the most important private organizations supporting the schools are parent teacher groups (PTG). Each of the three schools has an active group of parents who come together to provide children with opportunities and resources that are not offered by the school itself. These groups often finance projects, pay for supplies, and provide opportunities for community building. Compiling information from respondents, PTGs contribute in a number of ways. Two of the PTGs sponsor jogathons as fundraiser which respondents thought was a beneficial way to send a healthy message about fitness and exercise. PTG's purchase playground equipment and classroom supplies. In some of the schools, the PTGs provide financial support for the sports teams. Two of the more important contributions the PTGs make to the school community are field trips and art programs.

Isolation and remote location leave rural schools cut off from many cultural opportunities. Some children in rural communities have never had the opportunity to see the ocean, walk on a city street, visit an art museum, or see a play. By funding field trips, PTGs are able to provide rural children with exposure to the greater world. Recently one of the schools was able to participate in a school wide field trip to the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. Respondents reported that this was a valuable experience for
students beyond the exposure to art. In traveling to the museum, children had the
opportunity to observe non-rural communities and gain experience interacting with the
larger world. A respondent at a second school spoke of additional benefits of field trips
noting the benefits of social modeling and opportunities for peer interaction:

    School field trips - anytime you can get (students) out of the classroom and just
    interacting with each other and the adults is a good thing. I think field trips are a
good thing especially when parents come to chaperone because kids get to see
how other grown-up and how they act in settings (Respondent).

In addition to providing cultural and educational experiences, field trips allow children to
learn social and behavioral skills outside the narrow classroom setting.

In the past few years, depressed economic conditions in the state have had a major
impact on school budgets. The rural schools in this study have been especially affected
by shortfalls in education funding. Class sizes have grown, staffing has been reduced,
programs have been cut, and basic supplies are no longer being provided due to lack of
financial resources. In this environment, schools are relying more on PTGs to fill in
funding that is being cut by the state. In one school, the PTG was asked to buy classroom
chairs because increased enrollment left children standing. In at least one case, the PTG
is paying for a para-educator to work with children in the classroom so that teachers can
effectively deliver two curriculums to combination grade classes. As programs formerly
provided by the school district are cut, PTGs find themselves financing more basic
services to schools and children. At one point, art, music, band, and sports were the
responsibility of the school. Now PTGs are hiring and paying the fees for art instruction,
music instruction, and more. Due to limited ability for PTGs to fundraise in these rural communities, it is often the case that programs must be significantly reduced in scope and size.

**The Role of Larger Community in Supporting Rural Children in the Schools**

In some instances, the schools are the beneficiary of programs and activities provided by larger community or county organizations. One volunteer discussed California History Day, an event provided by the Community Historical Trust and the History Society. The organizations recreate a Gold Rush era town and invite all fourth graders in the district to participate, wearing period costumes, in learning activities such as gold panning, leather tanning, and blacksmithing. The County Arts Council also offers funding and programs to support art in education. Two of the schools in this study combine Arts Counsel funding and PTG money to provide students with an arts festival day featuring opportunities for children to participate in music, art, and theater activities at the school site.

The school provides a setting where human service agencies are able to reliably access children in order to provide services. The county mental health department provides counselors at the remote rural schools for clients whose families have difficulty with transportation to the main clinic. Schools are also served by a dental van that provides free and low cost cleaning and treatment. Rural children who do not attend the school, such as those who are home schooled do not have access to these services.

The relationship between the school and the community is reciprocal. In addition to receiving support, schools make it a point to involve children in community
participation. All schools host food drives and until this last year, all schools had provided holiday music performances that are open to the community. One school involves children and teaches citizenship by holding clean-up days where families come to the school and participate in school and community improvement. This may involve picking up trash, mowing, painting, rebuilding things or weeding. A respondent reports this helps develop community pride and feelings of belonging and capability in children.

**School Nutrition Challenges and Integration of a School Garden**

Nutrition and physical health are an important component of healthy childhood development. According to Maslow (Martin & Joomis, 2007), basic physiological and safety needs must be met before more esoteric, esteem and self-actualization needs can be realized. In many cases, children attending rural schools exist at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy. Children living in rural poverty often survive in conditions of scarcity and neglect. Many respondents touched on this aspect of rural childhood and the theme of school as the provider of basic needs was voiced across the board.

A number of respondents reported that one of the most important components of rural schools was the nutrition program. All three of the schools are designated Title 1 schools and a majority of students attending are eligible for free and reduced lunch due to low socio-economic status (SES). While all respondents discussed the value of providing meals for children, most were concerned about the nutritional value of the food provided. As one respondent explained:

I am very glad the school is providing two meals a day. It's critical and detrimental. I do not agree with the nutritional value of those meals they are
providing, but they are providing calories and there are a lot of kids out there who really need to have food. During our three-week (school) break, they were probably hungry for most of it and that's a problem. But ketchup is not a vegetable (Respondent)!

Other respondents echoed this sentiment. The food service at these rural schools involves prepackaged, processed foods delivered to schools. Pizza, French toast, high sugar cereals, preformed fried frozen chicken nuggets, and chocolate milk are examples of the foods provided for the children. One respondent compared the rural schools food services to a school she was working at in a more populated neighboring county:

(The neighboring school) has lunch ladies who cook food. They actually cook, where our school has frozen food that is heated up. They had a taco bar with cut-up fresh vegetables, chopped bell peppers and salsa, and fresh grated cheese. The kids made their own tacos. There were beans. It all looked fresh and healthy. The ladies were back there cooking it (Respondent).

This same respondent suggested that part of improving the nutrition program would be the addition of a school garden where children could grow their own food and eat it at the school for lunch. In two of the schools, this garden concept has actually been implemented and is an important piece of the school community, and not only from a nutrition standpoint.

One of the rural schools actually has incorporated a large school garden into many aspects of the school experience. As a respondent from that school explained:
With the garden our kids are served scrambled eggs from the chickens. We have been serving whatever is in the garden at lunchtime. Then each Friday, after the academics are over, we do cooking, art, gardening, and science. Each teacher takes something. One is responsible for the cooking a lot of it comes from our garden. The kids get to cook it, measure it, doing the math and reading of the recipes, and then in the end they get the rewards of eating what they cooked (Respondent).

Another respondent from the same school also emphasized the importance of the garden:

The garden is a big part of (our nutrition program). Our Fridays are enrichment Fridays, so one of the classes is a cooking class. The teacher that teaches incorporates going to the garden and getting the herbs and the vegetables that are going to go into what we cook. The other is garden science. If we have an abundance of something that has grown we put it on our salad bar. We also try to encourage, "If you are going to have French toast and syrup for breakfast in the morning, why don't you have a white milk instead of chocolate" (Respondent).

The school garden is a project designed, implemented, and sustained by the teachers. Funding for the project is provided by the school's PTG. The garden provides healthy nutrition, the opportunity for children to participate and belong. Teachers incorporate the garden into all aspects of their curriculum including science, math, and writing. The garden is not only a beneficial component of the school's nutrition program; it is another example of the importance of staff and teacher motivation and dedication in creating and influencing the school environment.
Supportive Adjunct Programs that Extend the School Experience

Two of the rural schools in this study provide an afterschool/daycare program that respondents unanimously sited as a significant support for children with many components that support the development of self-efficacy. While not all of the children participate in the program, at one school, 40 of the school's 95 children are enrolled in the program with 20 more children on the waiting list. The afterschool program offers homework help and provides children with the opportunity to receive individual, one-on-one help from the afterschool program staff. At one school, the afterschool program features volunteers who provide tutoring and homework club. At another site, the extended school day allows the school to continue providing intervention after the regular school day has ended.

As discussed previously, many of the respondents emphasized the school's role of serving as family for children who do not have adequate support at home. The existence of the afterschool program lengthens the day and allows children to receive nurturing, support, and structure for longer, and therefore more beneficial period of time each day. The afterschool program also is able to provide enrichment programs that are difficult to fit in to the regular school day. As one respondent explained, these enrichment programs are developed and implemented by afterschool staff and community volunteers and are not part of the school curriculum. She discussed gardening, yoga, art, a power-walking club, aerobics, dance, and group activities designed to facilitate positive peer interaction. The ability to provide such enrichment was perceived as a highly valuable component of the school setting to a majority of the individuals interviewed.
Another program deemed valuable by respondents is the preschool program offered at the most remote rural school, which provides services to the greater community. This program focuses on early literature development and emphasizes the development of positive peer interactions and appropriate school behavior. By offering children these early learning experiences, this program increases the likelihood for academic and social success for children once they enter into the formal school system. By providing early mastery experiences in the school setting without regards to mandated state standards, this program is an important component in the development of children's self-efficacy.

**Threat of School Closure**

The ability of a school to provide opportunities for self-efficacy development in children evaporates if the school closes. In the recent economic downturn, the local school district has seriously considered closing the two more remote rural schools as a measure to cut costs. Each year, community members and parents rally to save the rural schools and thus far, the schools remain in operation. In this study, respondents were not specifically asked to comment on the risk of school closure. Despite this, many brought up the topic with concerns regarding the impact school closure would have on the self-efficacy development of the children living in rural communities.

The district’s plan for the closure of the rural schools involved bussing young children from their communities to larger schools in more centralized, yet still rural, towns. This would involve lengthy bus rides, sometimes up to an hour each way. This would also result in larger schools and respondents indicated that the family atmosphere
that is such a valuable part of the rural school experience would be lost. Furthermore, the extensive network of local community volunteers and organizations that currently support the local rural schools would not fit into this centralized school structure. A great deal of the free, innovative, highly personalized support that the rural schools currently utilize would fall by the wayside. As one respondent explained:

"If they close the upcountry school they are going to lose kids, whether they go to home school or whether they just drop out. If you go back and look at the last few years, the graduation rate of the children who come from this is high and many are at the top of their class. They started with a good education. The ones I am thinking of started here and they all went on through middle school and HS and they all graduated strong. That is not going to happen if they bus them down the hill. The majority of them are catching the bus at 6:45 in the morning. It's hard enough riding that bus route for six years (grades 7 through 12) but you don’t want your kindergartner on that bus (Respondent).

Respondents agreed that school closure would be devastating for both children and the local community. A second respondent also expressed concerns about the distraction and stress the continued threat of school creates for school staff.

"I just wish they would stop trying to close us down. That would take pressure off the teachers so they could do their job the way they do. Other than that…the school does a lot more for the kids than most of the big schools do because the parents are volunteering more and they pitch in more of their time than at other schools I’ve been to (Respondent)."
Another respondent spoke of the unifying effect the threat of school closure has had on the local communities and schools. She indicated that the risk of school closure has called attention to the importance and value the schools have for the children and the local rural communities. During the interview process it was apparent that respondents were well informed about the positive impact of rural schools, and there was a level of protective reluctance on the part of respondents to engage in any negative assessment of the rural school experience.

**Conclusion**

The themes emerging from the interviews conducted for this study indicate that points of convergence found in the analysis of the interviews emphasized the importance of the qualities of the school staff and the value of a positive, encouraging school environment. The family-like atmosphere of small rural schools was perceived as particularly important in assisting children gain a sense of belonging, safety, and self-worth. The school's ability to provide for children's most basic needs was seen as crucial in enhancing the well-being of rural children who often come from families struggling with poverty and isolation. Many respondents discussed issues of underfunding and program cuts, and the importance of support from volunteers and the greater community was valued as essential in the schools ability to continue to offer a high quality experience for students. Of particular concern was the risk of school closure which respondents feared would place children in educational situations that would negatively impact self-efficacy development.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study explored the impact rural schools have on children's self-efficacy development from the perspective of parents who work in the school setting. Guided case studies with six individuals from three rural schools provided the data on school factors and resources that are perceived as important in supporting or inhibiting children's self-efficacy beliefs. Upon analysis, the following themes were identified as impactful: formal supports provided by the school; school staff and school environment attributes; value of small school size and increased social interaction; supportive school atmosphere; the family-like role that school plays in the lives of many rural children; importance of positive social capital in the form of participation of community volunteers, organizations, and the involvement of parents; reinforcement of the importance of education; the value and reduction of availability of extracurricular programs; support of the larger community; issues of health and nutrition; value of innovative programs; the significance of after school programs and preschool that extend the school experience; and the threat of rural school closure.

Based on these themes that emerged from the analysis, this chapter lists recommendations with regards to theory, practice, research, policy, and behavior. Recommendations in each of these areas are made with respect to all appropriate levels of practice: micro, meso, and macro. Recommendations will be followed by a discussion of the implications of this study in regards to the field of social work with particular
attention to social work values and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics.

**Recommendations**

**Micro.**

In order to develop the unique talents of individual children in the face of funding cuts, rural schools would be wise to maximize the use of outside resources in order to provide opportunities that benefit the unique talents and enrich cultural exposure for individual children.

Self-efficacy theory in the schools should be applied outside narrow academic curriculum to assist children in developing skills and confidence in other important areas such as music, art, sports, social skills, and emotional and behavioral regulation.

Teachers and school staff attributes are perceived as one of the most crucial resources in supporting the self-efficacy development of students. Rural school districts should recognize the value and importance of skilled teachers, and schools should be staffed with the highest quality teachers who understand and appreciate the challenges of rural children. Recruiting and retaining teachers who are skilled in their profession and who are invested in the school at an authentic and personal level is of key importance in the successful delivery of rural education.

Teacher encouragement and belief in student ability is an important factor in children's development of self-confidence and their willingness to take risks. Although many rural children enter school inadequately prepared to meet state academic standards, teachers should continue to have high expectations for children. Intervention should be
provided to children who need extra help to reach standards and children should be acknowledged by school staff for hard work and perseverance.

Parental involvement at the school increases a family's perception of the importance of education. It also increases and improves the services the school is able to offer. For this reason, schools should actively recruit parents to work in the schools as volunteers or, if possible, as paid staff. This can be done through improved communication with parents and by assuring the school is a welcoming environment that intends to support parents in the education of their children.

Many rural children come from families that struggle with poverty and isolation. For these children, school provides stability and a family like environment where caring adults meet basic physical and emotional needs. During school breaks, children do not have access to the supports offered through the school. Children would benefit from a program that operated during school breaks, perhaps something similar to the afterschool program that is perceived as an important support for many rural children. This would assure continuity of care for children, and would reduce stress and depression, both of which are associated with lowered perceived self-efficacy.

With the schools providing such a high level of support for children, it is of utmost importance that they remain open. Rural school closures would have a devastating impact on the lives of rural children. School closures result in children being bussed, with lengthy commute times, to large schools outside their community. Many rural families forego this option to choose homeschooling, which is not always a healthy alternative for isolated rural children and which undermines public education.
A stable, encouraging school environment is perceived as the most significant source of potential support for healthy self-efficacy development in rural children. The ability of rural schools to provide a family-like experience for children has value that reaches far beyond the narrow realm of academic curriculum. At the meso level, the school's ability to develop positive social capital within the community allows it to utilize the resources and talents of community members. The school also provides a venue for community and social service organizations to reach children and families thereby increasing resource utilization.

The role of the school as a gathering place for children and families significantly contributes to the social cohesion of small rural towns. Schools would do well to develop this role to the maximum potential in order to support the building of community and the connections between children, families, school staff, and the greater community. This can be done in a number of ways. Schools can invite the community to school functions. They can actively recruit community members to participate in the school. Schools can reinforce their relationship with the larger community by providing children with opportunities to participate in and give back to their community. Programs such as canned food drives, trash clean-up days, musical performances by the school band, and community dinners build positive feelings between the school and the community while allowing children to participate and develop feelings of self-worth and value as active community members. It is particularly important for schools in rural areas to build connections with older community members and retirees. If schools are able to outreach
to this segment of the population they not only gain the involvement of experienced individuals who have the time to help, they foster good will and develop political and community support from a group that is not usually connected to the school.

As a gathering place, the school is an ideal setting to efficiently provide children and families with resources and services. By collaborating with agencies that commonly work with families and children, the school can facilitate the process of families accessing the services they need. While this is currently done on a limited basis, it could be greatly expanded. The County Mental Health Department is planning to stop services to the rural schools in the coming school year. This is unwise and unfortunate. The savings in transportation and reduction of no-shows and cancelled appointments make the program cost effective and the ability to assure consistent services to child clients increases the effectiveness of intervention. The school should contest this decision and argue for continued services. Child Welfare could provide preventative services at the school sites by providing education and early intervention where families appear to need support. This would also improve the working relationship between the child welfare and the school and families. Cal Works is another agency that could provide family assistance through school. By providing services to rural families through the school setting, organizations increase efficiency and assure access to communities where geographical isolation and transportation issues are common barriers.

Rural schools are also able to benefit from relationships with private, non-profit organizations. Currently, the Council for the Arts and the Historical Society provide extracurricular activities for enrichment opportunities. The school could build
connections and increase involvement with other community organizations as well. Perhaps the Master Gardeners could assist schools with setting up innovative garden programs similar to the one that is enjoying such success at one of the rural schools. The Humane Society could educate and involve children in animal care. Community organizations such as local Rotary, Lions, and Soroptomist Clubs might be recruited for school involvement that would benefit the children, the school, the organizations, and the community as a whole.

**Macro.**

In order to truly produce schools that foster healthy self-efficacy development in children, change must take place at the macro level. Lack of funding undermines the school's ability to provide appropriate services and threatens the basic existence of small rural elementary schools. Additionally, macro level educational policy is often incompatible with common sense administration of small, rural schools. The current political climate makes change in these areas difficult. Societal values regarding public education, and the importance of creating supportive environments for children who are born into poverty, should be addressed in order to facilitate the implementation of the following recommendations:

Rural schools should be provided with adequate funding so that they may provide services that are equitable to schools in non-rural communities. Small size and remote locations result in schools that require more dollars per student in order to create equity. It is important to note that rural schools are less able to independently fundraise dollars to fill gaps in education fundraising. Therefore, reliable, constant, adequate funding from
the state is a necessity in the school's ability to provide a supportive educational environment for rural children.

Secondly, educational policies that are geared toward larger schools should make exceptions for small rural schools. State-mandated, grade level curriculum requirements are incompatible with the multi-grade level classrooms that exist in these schools. Funding decisions based on the testing performance of children also works against rural schools. Educational policy makers should recognize the unique circumstances of rural schools and allow them to opt out of requirements that are detrimental to their ability to effectively educate students. Perhaps specific policies could be developed that reflect the needs of rural schools while still holding those schools to standards that ensure rural children receive equal educational opportunities.

**Implications for the Field of Social Work**

Modern rural families frequently struggle with poverty, disparities in resources and services, and disempowerment. Children living in rural communities are particularly vulnerable because geographical isolation and lack of social supports can result in children falling through the cracks. Social work is particularly concerned with pursuing social change on the behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people (NASW, 2006). By providing evidence of the important role that rural school's play in the lives of children, this study indicates the field of social work needs to advocate for such schools. When rural schools are closed to save education dollars, the effect is detrimental to rural children and rural communities.
Supporting rural schools in order to enhance their ability to attend to children's basic needs and development of self-efficacy speaks to social work's core value of social justice. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2006), "Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of injustice." Social workers would be wise to recognize the important role schools serve in alleviating the risks associated with poverty in rural areas. The core value of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of a person is also connected to the health of rural schools. Enhancing children's self-efficacy is closely linked to the social work goal to "enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs" (NASW, 2006). Indeed, the rural school may be the most powerful and appropriate venue for empowering poor rural children.

It is sometimes the case that social workers reactively focus their attention on the loudest, most visible social concerns. Urban problems often overshadow the issues faced by people living in rural areas. Furthermore, social workers tend to think in a client-centered manner. Discussion and research on children in systems, such as child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health is common in the field. School children are not clients in the technical sense, and therefore, they tend to be overlooked by the profession. This is a mistake. The risk of rural school closures and the financial strain that results in diminished resources and services in education should be a priority for social workers. Policies that support equitable educational funding and fair access to public education should be at the top of the profession's agenda. Proactive action to children's needs today is the best way to avert potential problems of tomorrow.
TO: Shannon Kelaita
FROM: Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects

RE: YOUR RECENT HUMAN SUBJECTS APPLICATION

We are writing on behalf of the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects from the Division of Social Work. Your proposed study, “An Exploratory Study of Factors in Rural Elementary Schools that Impact Children’s Perceived Self-Efficacy from the Perspective of Parents and School Staff”

_X_ approved as ______EXEMPT  _X_ NO RISK  ___ MINIMAL RISK.

Your human subjects approval number is: 11-12-029. Please use this number in all official correspondence and written materials relative to your study. Your approval expires one year from this date. Approval carries with it that you will inform the Committee promptly should an adverse reaction occur, and that you will make no modification in the protocol without prior approval of the Committee.

The committee wishes you the best in your research.

Professors: Jude Antonyappan, Teiahsha Bankhead, Maria Dinis, Serge Lee, Kisun Nam, Francis Yuen.

Cc: Dr. Jude Antonyappan
APPENDIX B

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in research which will be conducted by Shannon Kelaita, a student in the Social Work program at California State University, Sacramento. The study will investigate resources and factors of rural schools and their impact on children's perceived self-efficacy.

You will be asked to participate in an interview in which you will discuss the resources offered through the elementary school with which you are affiliated. Your perspective regarding the impact of these resources on children's sense of ability and self-worth will be sought. You will also be asked to identify other factors of the school that affect children's perceived self-efficacy and discuss the importance and impact of those factors. The interview could last up to one hour.

This interview will not seek information about your personal life. While you may choose to discuss your experiences within the school system and your community, you will only be asked about your knowledge and perception of the resources and factors of the school. You may choose to stop the interview at any time and you don't have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

This study may not benefit you personally. It is intended to identify the strengths and weaknesses of local schools with the intention of improving the educational experience for children and helping schools to assist children to develop their perceived self-efficacy. As such, this study may be beneficial to the local community and greater educational system.

You will be asked to provide opinions which may be controversial or at odds with the school system or your local community. For this reason, your privacy and confidentiality will be protected though the entire interview and publication process. With your permission, the interview will be taped and notes will be taken both during the interview and during review of the tape. Your name will not be attached to your interview tapes or notes. Tapes and notes will be destroyed no later than one year after they are made. Until that time, both will be stored in a secure location.

You will receive a $20 as compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Shannon Kelaita at 209-XXX-XXXX or xxxxxxxxxx@yahoo.com

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you have read this page and agree to participate in the research.

_________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant                      Date
APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Introduction

Researcher will:

1.) Provide interviewee with an explanation of the purpose of the study.

2.) Explain informed consent including risks and benefits of participating in this study. Obtain written consent indicated by subject's signature on consent form after the subjects have volunteered to participate and after they have read the details of the study as provided in the consent form as clarified by the researcher.

3.) Researcher will briefly discuss "perceived self-efficacy" with interviewee and explain study terms and why "perceived self-efficacy" is important.

Interview

Subject will be asked the following:

4.) Please describe the resources you are aware of that are offered at the school.

For increasing educational performance
For facilitating peer interaction
That allow children to contribute to their community
For supporting children's physical health
That enhance children's sense of belonging
That enhance children's sense of self-worth

5.) How do you think the school can help your child in self-confidence in the following areas?

Academic achievement
Success in peer interactions
Mastery of behavior and self-control
Physical health
Emotional health
Development of unique talents (art, music, other)

6.) Can you identify other factors within the school setting that impact children's perceived self-efficacy.

7.) Can you think of any changes or improvements that would support children's development of self-efficacy in this school.
REFERENCES


http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kinderinfo.asp


