

Knowing and Being Known: Parents' Experiences with Rural Schools

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Members of rural communities tend to be well acquainted with each other. This phenomenological study examines what it is like for parents to know and be known by others in rural schools. The main themes characterizing their experiences are that parents know the teachers and principal, it is common knowledge whenever a child has a problem at school, and what happens at school can change relationships.

In the 1980s and 1990s educators have called for increased involvement of parents, both at home and at school, in their children's schooling. While teachers have generally been clear about expecting parents to supervise homework, parents' roles at school have been a bit ambiguous. Site-based management of schools has extended the possibilities of parents' participation in education and has offered clearer role delineation for a few parents. At the same time the educators invite more involvement of parents, we know relatively little about parents' experiences with their children's schools. This article examines some of the experiences of five rural families with schools.

Members of rural communities¹ are better acquainted with each other (Lefcourt & Martin, 1983) than are their urban counterparts. Teachers and principals know the parents (McCracken & Miller, 1988), and the parents know their children's teachers and principals; this knowledge is revealed casually and absently in parents' conversations. In urban and suburban settings, matter-of-fact talk about teachers and principals may be interpreted as name dropping or obsessive familiarity, given that the school houses mostly strangers and only a few familiar faces.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, my sisters and I attended rural schools and my mother taught in them. Thus, I knew by name not only the six teachers in my grade school, but also the high school teachers, principal, coaches, counselor, and band director. My eighth grade teacher had been my mother's student and later became her principal. I attended church with the school superintendent and belonged to a 4-H club with most of my schoolmates.

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My experience as a parent of a child attending urban and suburban schools showed me a different kind of relationship between families and school professionals. They and we have been strangers. It took me a year to identify which of three principals is *the* principal at my son's high school; I do not expect him to recognize me, one of 3,000 parents of students attending his school.

Before I interviewed rural parents for this study, I had not considered how knowing and being known by others influenced parents' experiences with school personnel, especially when a conflict with the school arose. What is it like for parents to know and be known by others in rural schools? This is the research question addressed here. The methodology selected is phenomenological, the purpose of which is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Researching Parents' Experiences

Phenomenological research is the study of everyday, lived experiences and the meanings that people construct from them (van Manen, 1990). Three important assumptions help to characterize phenomenological research: humans seek meaning in their lives, there are multiple realities, and realities are socially constructed. The researcher, therefore, attempts to understand a participant's experience from the participant's perspective.

Phenomenological studies start with a question about what an experience is like. I had originally been researching rural, urban, and suburban parents and their experiences standing up for children at school. Examples of the kinds of episodes causing parents to stand up for their children at school are (a) when a son who had dyslexia paired with a

¹"Rural" is used in this paper to designate communities that are more than 100 miles from a city (Pladson & Lemon, 1982) and are agriculturally based; the residents express traditional values (Nachtigal, 1982b); and fewer than 1,000 children are in a school district.

high I.Q. was listed for retention in the sixth grade, (b) when a son was kicked off the track team before legal processes following a misdemeanor charge had taken their course; and (c) when a son and other black children in a third-grade classroom were receiving less teaching time and attention than their white classmates.

The interviews with rural, middle-class parents clearly disclosed a theme of knowing others and being known by them. I created this study to explore the theme. As the research question about parents knowing and being known by others in rural schools emerged, I considered my own experiences when I was a child in school. I also reflected on my longing to be a part of my son's urban and suburban schools, and the comparison between his schools and the more intimate rural ones I attended. I bracketed (Husserl, 1962), or set aside, these experiences. I tried to be open to other parents' experiences and to guard against preconceived ideas about experiences of parents in rural schools.

I developed a pool of rural participants by use of the snowball method (DePoy & Gitlin, 1994). Friends, students, and acquaintances identified possible participants who, in turn, helped to identify other parents. I held preliminary phone conversations with this initial group to determine whether, in fact, they had the experience of standing up for a child at school and invited those who met this essential criterion to participate. Eight parents in five middle-class families in three midwestern and southern communities became the participants in the study.

These parents are from families who are well known in their communities. Their occupations include social worker, farmer, small-business owner, vocational school dean, and county librarian. They are active in churches, civic organizations, youth activities, and a civil rights organization, and they serve on park, agricultural, and school boards. In each family, at least one parent has lived in the community or a neighboring community all her or his life, except for college and, in some instances, during their first job after college.

Each participant was interviewed two or three times in private, except when the spouse was also a participant. The only missed interview was conducted later by phone. The interviews took place around the kitchen or dining room table and were lengthy and conversational in tone. The conversations were about the participants' lived experiences with the school. As each conversation progressed, I summarized to the parent what I thought was being said and asked if that was what she or he meant. The conversations were audio recorded and transcribed to create written texts.

I used a holistic approach to uncover themes (van Manen, 1990) while I listened to the tapes and read the transcripts over and over. To identify themes, I engaged in a dialectic with the text, searching for the essence of the experience. I asked, "What does this comment disclose about parents knowing others and being known at school?"

What is he saying here? What does she mean?" I then searched for phrases that best captured the fundamental meaning of the themes and finally used them as headings to highlight the themes. I also investigated the literature on rural schools and on knowing people to further inform the development of the themes.

Phoning and corresponding with the participants occasionally while I was writing and rewriting drafts of the themes helped to sharpen my understanding. When I thought I had captured the essence of the experiences, I sent a draft of the themes to each of the eight participants asking (a) if my draft accurately reflected his or her experiences and (b) if each felt sufficiently camouflaged to be anonymous. Minor suggestions to further protect anonymity were made. Another phenomenological researcher also read and critiqued the manuscript at different stages. Then, using the feedback from parents and researcher, the paper was redrafted, once again.

Parents' experiences of knowing and being known in rural schools is disclosed in the remainder of this article in three themes: (a) we know the teachers and principal and they know us; (b) when a child has a problem at school, everybody knows about it; and (c) what happens at school can change our relationships with others. It's important to keep in mind that these parents had experienced some degree of conflict with the school.

The Teachers and Principal Know Us and We Know Them

The parents referred to being known by principals and teachers casually. The Beckwith² children's principal, with whom Mr. and Mrs. Beckwith had been in conflict, had been Mr. Beckwith's teacher in third grade. The respective families had never been intimate, but Mr. Beckwith had been known to the principal for a very long time and they shared interests in investments and farming. Mrs. Robinson, living in a different community said that, the principal "has known me from the past, that I'm very straightforward. So he felt like if I had to come to him, it was for a legitimate reason." She and the principal had common experiences. He knew her and her children.

These parents knew the teachers as well as the principals. One father said, "I think in every case I've known that teacher . . . from some kind of contact. In some way I know that person."

What does it mean to know teachers or principals? For the parents I interviewed, knowing teachers and principals meant chatting as they jogged with them; calling them at home to ask if their children had been assigned to the wrong class; or joking with them in a store about what their children had done in school that day. It meant going way back

²All participants have been given pseudonyms.

with teachers and principals; in some cases it meant having roots in the community that were intertwined over generations; and it meant that the teachers and principals were familiar with their other children and had a history with them.

It also meant that parents had been able to observe teachers and principals over the years and were familiar with their attitudes and behaviors. For example, Mr. Sanders knew from his sons and their friends, that the high school principal severely punished some students. Mr. Sanders said,

A lot of good kids . . . got, I thought, hammered on really hard. . . . A lot of these kids had maybe gone out for football and played their tails off from July to October, and all of a sudden they'd do something, and he yanks them off the team and suspends them enough days that they lose their [athletic] letter. . . . I'm not saying that sports is more important than school, but he uses it as a real punishing tool for the good kids involved in extra-curricular activities. . . . He has a distinct personality.

Mr. Sanders had had experience with the principal at both school and church, had stories to tell about him, and had a sense of the kind of person he was.

A layering of relationships can be discerned among these parents and school professionals. In addition to the parent-teacher/principal relationship, some parents talked about principals and teachers as friends. "There's probably not been a teacher that the boys have had—not that they're [our] close friends, but I would consider them friends in a general sort of way." Some had professional relationships, such as the social worker who had contact with teachers and principals regarding child welfare. Some were neighbors, customers, and members of the same civic organizations and church. One parent was on the school board (an employer relationship, albeit indirect). The connections among parents and teachers and principals were multiple, varied, and overlapping.

Because rural society is composed of small groups where roles and functions of individuals are integrated (Nachtigal, 1982b), the relationships among parents and teachers and principals are complex. When a mother goes to school to see the teacher about a problem her son is experiencing, does the teacher "orient" to her (Schutz, 1964) as mother, social worker, or member of the school board?

Not all rural parents, of course, have the multiple, thickly layered relationships with teachers and principals of the foregoing parents. Jim and Patty Brown who were less educated, had jobs with lower social status, and appeared less affluent than the parents included in this study, moved in a social circle that did not overlap with the higher

status school professionals. Although they did not speak of relationships with teachers and principals outside the school, they were friends with the teacher's aide in the learning disabilities classroom.

Knowing the teachers and principals and being known by them is taken for granted by the participants in this study. It is a part of everyday life in rural schools.

When a Child Has a Problem at School Everybody Knows about It

If parents are known in the community, it follows that their children's school problems also will be generally known to the community. Here's how Mrs. Johnson explained it:

If you are not successful and well accepted in school, then you have that same problem in all the other activities, because it's so well known what your school stature and status is. And it carries out into other things within the community. . . . The school is such a major part of all the social functions.

In Mrs. Johnson's town, as in so many other rural communities, the school is the center of the community (DeYoung, 1995). If a child has a problem in the school, the knowledge of it seeps out into the community and affects the child and the family in their relations with the community. Three episodes are illustrative: (a) the Johnson's son, Pat, was diagnosed as dyslexic during first grade; (b) Mr. Miller's son passed a calculator to a friend in algebra class; (c) two girls were expelled from school for fighting in Mrs. Robinson's community.

Pat's Learning Disability is Like a Shadow that Follows Him Everywhere

Mrs. Johnson said about Pat's dyslexia: "We never hid it. There's not a soul in town that doesn't know that we struggled and we struggled hard." Mrs. Johnson explained how Pat's difficulties at school affected him in the community:

It's just like, "Well you know, maybe there's something wrong with him," or whatever. "We don't really want to be associated, and we don't really maybe want him to be in our group. So we'll just sort of make it a little harder and maybe he'll drop out or go away."

Other boys actually didn't want Pat in their scout troop or on their ball team, and he was treated as a bit of an outcast. His school problem caused not only teachers but, also,

other adults in the community to assume he was less able than other children. Mr. Johnson related how scout leaders underestimated Pat:

They didn't think he could do the mile swim. The mile swim is a big thing with scouts. Swim a mile when you're twelve, thirteen. It took Pat two years. There was no question in Pat's or my mind. He's going to swim a mile. Not only did he do that, he's also a lifeguard. . . . But there were parents who thought, "Don't let Pat try. He can't do that." He did all that!

Pat's disability followed him like a shadow everywhere he went in the community. Since the same families go to school and attend extracurricular activities, church, baseball games, and scouts, everyone knew that Pat had a problem, and the problem influenced their understanding of who he was. Being dyslexic at school led to his being marginalized as a boy scout.

The Community Knows Kevin is a Bad Person

Mr. Miller's son, Kevin, was handed a boy's calculator to pass down the row in ninth-grade algebra class to a classmate who hid it. When it was not found, the students involved were called into the principal's office, questioned by the police, and some were suspended for theft. Kevin was one of the students who was suspended and referred to the juvenile court. His father said,

And for passing a calculator he got 40 hours of community service. Along with all the trappings that goes with it in a small community. . . . In a small school, everybody knows who the bad people were. And so consequently, as far as the rest of the community was concerned, those are bad people.

From this episode, Mr. Miller said that Kevin was followed by a "devil halo" throughout high school. [Devil can mean an extremely wicked person. A halo is a differentiated zone around a central object (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993).] Kevin was the bad central object surrounded by a differentiated, negative zone. The "devil halo" wasn't seen just by the principal, it was seen by parents in the community as well.

Mr. Miller described how the "devil halo" haunted Kevin:

It wasn't only a case or two, a teacher thing, but it even extended to the parents who would chaperone a basketball trip. You know, there was an incident when all the team had gone to the city. . . .

And of course they're staying in some hotel, and there's a report that someone was seen walking outside their motel window on the window ledge, two or three floors up in the air. And immediately someone accused Kevin of this. "It must have been Kevin." He wasn't guilty at all, but they immediately thought he was, so he got a grilling for absolutely no reason what-so-ever. So it extends beyond teachers and can include everybody else who somehow got rolled into it.

Who created the halo? Kevin? The principal? The chaperones? Town people? All of them living out their daily lives in a small, social system where people know each other?

The Newspaper and Churches Carry News About Students

Mrs. Robinson said, "Sometimes, if you're not careful, things [happening at school] will get written up in the newspaper." She has been careful to maintain the privacy of her own children since she knows what can happen in the community. There is only one newspaper in her county and, she said, "it's very powerful because everybody subscribes to it. . . . that's how I know exactly what's going on in the school system. Because they print the school news."

Mrs. Robinson was the chair of the education committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in her county and had the special responsibility of observing and advocating for black children in the schools. She described the community response when two black girls had gotten into a fight and were expelled from school:

The black community became divided. . . . One side of the river was mad with the other side of the river. And they really were not even concerned with what took place, how it took place, and what we need to do to get these kids back in school. . . . Everybody was mad with everybody. I think there was articles in the paper. . . . And the [education] committee [of the NAACP] had to get involved to get these girls back in school because time is passing by, and what are we going to do?

The black community knew about the fight and chose up sides; not black community against white administration of the school, but against each other. It was common for school issues of all kinds to be discussed at the black churches in this community, and that included the fight between the girls. The fight at school became a community issue—everybody knew about it.

There's no keeping a secret about troubles in a close knit community. When children are having troubles at school everyone knows about it. A school not only educates children, but often is the hub of the community as well (Nachtigal, 1982a), and messages about children radiate from it like pulsing sonar signals. Where home, school, and the community are closely tied, a child's self-concept can be strongly influenced by the school (Dunne, 1977). The school is powerful in shaping the community's image of a child, and the image can become very persistent.

What Happens at School Can Change Our Relationships with Others

Standing up for their children at school changed some relationships for the parents. Sometimes it was with teachers and principals, and sometimes with others in the community.

Relationships with Teachers and Principals Can Change

There is an irony in parents knowing the teachers and principal. It is only if parents already have a relationship with them that the connection can take an unhappy turn. While some rural parents expressed the occurrence of little change in day-to-day associations with teachers and principals, the experiences of Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Miller, and Mr. and Mrs. Beckwith illustrate how easily the relationships can change. In each case, the nature of the conflict with the school must be understood to appreciate the changes.

Our relationship with the principal is very strained now. When Pat, Mrs. Johnson's son, was in first grade in the early 1980s, he was diagnosed by a specialist at the state university as dyslexic with an above average I. Q. The grade-school principal and teachers did not recognize the testing done by the university nor did they, at that time, recognize dyslexia as a learning disability; hence, the teachers did not employ any of the teaching strategies recommended by the specialist. Pat's progress was slow and in sixth grade the inevitable happened: the sixth-grade teacher, who had been especially trying for Pat and his parents, recommended that Pat be retained in the grade another year. When Mrs. Johnson told of her meeting with the principal, she said she told him,

"I do not care what you say and what you do, but that child will not be in that woman's room again!" . . . by the time I got done, I was almost standing on his desk. . . . I think that was the most radical and the most vocal that I had ever got.

The battle with the school was prolonged, absorbed enormous amounts of time, emotional energy, and even money as the family maneuvered to keep their son learning without his sense of self being eroded. They would not allow the school to hold him back a year.

Over time, the Johnson's relationship with the principal changed. Mrs. Johnson had known the principal much of her life and had had positive experiences with him while her older children were attending his school. She said,

Then as the situation went downhill, of course, the principal was in the position of trying to deal with us and support his staff and support the school—protect the school, I'm sure, from what he thought might be lawsuits. . . . And we see them frequently in the community, the principal and his wife . . . it's a very strained relationship. You can tell some of the animosity is gone. We see them, and we can be cordial to each other, but not ever friends. We can't ever socialize. It's still too close to the surface. And you just wouldn't ever get over that.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson told about good teachers and how some of them had worked so hard with Pat. Their associations with those teachers did not seem to change. But not so with the sixth grade teacher who had been so "damaging" to Pat and difficult for them to deal with. Mrs. Johnson said, "That one's just open warfare. It's very silent, but obviously she knows how we feel, and we know how she feels."

I don't have bad feelings about it now. Mr. Miller, the father of Kevin, had had an affable, but not close relationship with the high-school principal. Occasionally they had jogged together and chit-chatted when they met at community gatherings. But after Kevin was turned over to the juvenile court system for passing on the calculator, Mr. Miller's posture toward the principal cooled. He said, "I would speak to him, and as a matter of fact I made a point to just say, 'Hello, Will', and nothing else." Mr. Miller had a foreboding about how this youngest son would get through high school with a principal who had either threatened or simply stated as a fact that if anything like the calculator episode happened again, he would deal much more harshly with Kevin the next time.

That occurred during the last month of Kevin's senior year when he was charged with a civil misdemeanor that had nothing to do with the school. The principal removed Kevin from the track team immediately upon his return to school. In a sharp phone conversation, Mr. Miller objected to the action because although a charge had been made, the legal processes had not yet taken their course. A year after Kevin had graduated and went off to college, Mr. Miller had the following to say about the principal:

To this point, if I see him out somewhere I would probably talk to him, because the anger is gone from me. I still think he's a world class ass hole, and I still think he has a lot to learn about dealing with people. But I don't let that cause me to run around with bad feelings every time I see him. I've buried the hatchet on that.

Mr. Miller went from chit-chat affability with the principal to a cool posture to animosity to burying the hatchet and having no bad feelings toward him. Because the initial relationship was more distant, the changes in it seem not to have been particularly significant for Mr. Miller.

We're on the principal's bad side and the teacher's on our bad side. The Beckwiths didn't know the first-and-second-grade teacher well before their first daughter, Lori, started school, but Mrs. Beckwith had reservations about her from the beginning: "She never smiled. She was somewhat frumpy...and I thought that she was totally unsuited [to teach] small children. But I gave her the benefit of the doubt."

Lori entered first grade with high scores on the school-readiness test; she fell to the 21st percentile of the state achievement test by the end of first grade, however. During the summer, they approached the principal whom Mr. Beckwith had known all his life and asked what could be done about the teacher since Lori would be in the same room for second grade. Finally, months later, when nothing was being done to improve the situation and they knew that their next child would be entering first grade in another year, they decided to express their concern at a school board meeting. They brought to the board's attention the poor performance of most children in that classroom which was manifested by the fact that out of eight first graders, six were found to need remedial reading the following year.

Mr. Beckwith explained that they tried to get changes made in the school with the least fuss possible.

We thought we were going the easiest way we could for everybody involved. We didn't want to get people all upset, and have [the teacher's] feelings hurt. We thought we were going about it in the best way—if we had done another way we probably would have just gone around and talked to each board member separately. But, that seems to me a little behind [people's backs]—we want to be up front, but still not cause a big row.

Mr. Beckwith alerted the principal and the school board president that he and his wife would attend the next board meeting. Just a couple of hours before the meeting, the Beckwiths learned that the principal had told the teachers to attend, and seven out of nine—including the first-and-second-grade teacher—did. It was a distasteful, public con-

frontation quite out of the ordinary for this small community. After the Beckwiths left, the teachers, principal, and school board concluded that the Beckwith girl was immature. The board failed to ask the principal to present test data regarding the performance of the first graders, as the Beckwiths had hoped it would.

Mr. Beckwith recognized a long-standing pattern: parents were afraid to complain to the principal. He said, "If you question him, you're on the bad side already, and people don't want to be on his bad side." His wife added, "Of course, we've been on his bad side for four years now."

The Beckwith's second child entered first grade, and at the first parent-teacher conference concerning him, they told the teacher they could see some positive changes in her classroom. They asked if the changes would have been made if they hadn't "gone out on a limb" and gone to the school board. The teacher said she had not made any changes. Mrs. Beckwith said,

We got really angry. We started firing at her. . . .

We weren't intimidated at all that time. She was the one who was intimidated. Clarence was firing at her, then I would. We really raked her over the coals. . . . We finally said a lot of things we really wanted to say.

The Beckwiths had conveyed to the teacher that she was on their bad side.

Some of Our Friendships Changed

Some parents sensed changes in friendships as a result of being in conflict with the school. Mrs. Johnson was the most specific about how standing up for her child at school influenced friendships. She said that as the community learned about the Johnson's conflict with the school, she and her husband were treated like "lepers." Some of their friends just "melted away."

That's when we really noticed that friends sort of chose up sides. They knew when we were really having trouble and things weren't going well. It's a small enough community that they probably would hear the school's side, and then they would see us, and they would hear our side. And so they would sort of choose up sides or it just became kind of an off-limits subject. It's a matter of, "If we're going to be friends we just can't discuss this. This is just not something that we can talk about." So they either became, it seemed like, our friends and supported us and felt like the school wasn't doing correctly, or we're no longer their friends and they supported the school. And then the others—you just couldn't discuss it.

I ask, "Was that sort of a silent understanding?" and she continued:

Yes. The ones that we didn't discuss it with. . . . And it wasn't that they got up and left or that they argued with you. It's just that they very politely and quietly listened. And then, as soon as possible, changed the subject. And so you just—over time, you knew that wasn't going to be discussed and so you went on to other things.

So the Johnsons and some friends drifted apart; with other friends they silently agreed not to discuss the conflict with the school. These changes in friendships seem like the end of a chain reaction: (a) Pat's dyslexia caused him to be a non-normative learner; (b) being a non-normative learner caused the parents and teachers and principal to be in conflict over how he should be taught; and (c) this conflict caused friends to choose sides.

Professional Associations Can Be Tricky

Mr. Miller explained how his interaction with the principal was intertwined with his own professional role:

OK, he's the principal of a high school. I'm an associate dean of [the vocational school], and we're in the same town. There's got to be some interaction between these institutions. They certainly have official and unofficial relationships. And so I'm not going to do something that I think would damage the relationship between the school system and [the vocational school]. As a matter of fact, at the time I [contested my son being removed from the track team] . . . I was a little concerned about that.

In small communities, it is inevitable that some professional relationships will cross the parent-principal relationship. Conflict over a child's situation at school can have a ripple effect on the organizations the parents work in. Mr. Miller not only had his son's well-being to consider, but also his own standing within the vocational school and the relationship between the vocational school and the school district.

Others May View Us Differently Now

Some parents sensed that they were viewed differently by people in the community. For example, Mrs. Beckwith said, "You know, we walk in the door and some people give us the cold shoulder and others don't. . . . I think some of them actually respect us for what we did."

Mrs. Robinson had observed that her son, Alvie, and other black children in his third grade classroom were not receiving as much teaching time from the white teacher as the white children were. Furthermore, the teacher would tell Alvie that he should already know how to do the assignment when he asked her for help. Mrs. Robinson took her request for equal treatment of black and white children to both the teacher and the principal. When I asked how she thought others viewed her standing up for her son at school, she said:

They had admiration for me for—having guts. I guess that's the term I really need—for being a female and having guts—because normally females in the South don't have guts. Females are supposed to be really just a submissive-type person, and not do things like I would do: be outspoken, talk to principals, talk to [the] superintendent about my problem, address the teacher, talk to other people and let them know what's going on.

But Mrs. Robinson also said that some members of the black community may have thought that she considered herself too good for the rest of them because she played an active, visible role in her children's school. In general, Mrs. Beckwith, Mrs. Robinson, and other parents didn't seem to care much about the opinions of others in the community. They did what they thought had to be done because it was on behalf of their children.

Being "framed" as a bad parent, however, seemed to be more disturbing to parents. It's one thing to be labeled by school officials who don't know you very well, but it's quite another to be labeled by people who know you. The Johnsons, for example, were seen as model parents with their older children. They helped with projects at school, and Mrs. Johnson was a room mother every year. When the youngest son, Pat, began to show signs of not doing well in school and the Johnsons began to stand up for him, attitudes changed. Mrs. Johnson said,

All of the sudden, . . . [we're] not successful anymore and not acceptable. That was a shock! . . . Now we're not the intelligent, cooperative, nice parents that they want to be there all the time. We're the troublemakers. We're not successful parents.

In seventh grade, Pat started wearing special glasses. They allowed him to see the letters on the page normally, and his school progress improved dramatically. During high school, Pat's grades were good, and he was active in many extra-curricular activities. By the time he graduated from high school, he had become a star. Mr. Johnson said, "The last week of school we got plaques and awards for this child.

His picture was in the paper his whole last year of school. Everybody telling me how great he was, and it angered me." The grade-school principal with whom there had been protracted conflict, said to Mr. Johnson, "What a great job!" But Mr. Johnson said, "When I needed him, when I *needed* him, he wasn't there!" Mrs. Johnson said,

All of the sudden . . . we have become good parents again. We have become the model again. We're the ones that they say, "Look what they did. And their kid had problems. But look what he accomplished." Now we're back to successful!

Some resentment lingered as the Johnsons reflected on having once been considered good parents, then being regarded as bad parents, losing friends and support, and finally being rehabilitated at their son's graduation because he accomplished so much. These weren't strangers who framed, reframed, and again reframed Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. These were people who knew them . . . people they knew.

When Mr. Beckwith first approached the principal with his concerns about the first-and-second grade teacher, the conversation ended with the principal asking some questions. Mrs. Beckwith said:

My husband's parenting skills were questioned. The question was, "Clarence, how much time do you spend with you daughter?" And this coming from a man who has known my husband since he was a small child! What kind of father he was! So I was very offended by that, but we kind of let that pass at the time. . . . And then [the principal asked], "How often do you take the family to church?" which I think was none of his business.

Although it offended his wife, Mr. Beckwith was not surprised. He knew the principal and saw this as his subtle way of trying to intimidate him. According to Stern (1994),

The family, the church and the school have been at the heart of rural communities since this country was settled. These three institutions have provided the standards of behavior, circles of personal interaction, and a variety of social activities that collectively shape community ethos and identity. (p. 21)

Given the powerful position of the school, a principal can sting a parent by intimating that his daughter's poor academic progress was not a teacher problem, but was a consequence of the parent's deficiency.

None of the parents expressed bitterness over the changed relationships resulting from conflict with the

school. Rather, they seemed resigned and to have accommodated to the consequences. They seemed wise about negotiating life, learning some lessons, and doing their best when they felt caught between their children's welfare and the school. That's not to say some hurt feelings and disappointments with others didn't linger, but there was a sense of moving on. To live in a rural community was to know people and associate with them, even when things did not go well.

Reflections on Knowing and Being Known at School

One of the desired consequences of phenomenological research is to enhance our appreciation of people's experiences and to be more sensitive to them (Polkinghorne, 1989). Awareness of other's experiences and what the experiences mean to them enables us to search for new possibilities (Hultgren, 1989) in our relationships. For example, teachers and principals in rural schools may be more attentive to parents' experiences when they make decisions affecting them and their children, and parents may take more thoughtful action regarding their children's well-being at school. While I will indicate some of the new insights I have gained from the parents in this study, I invite you, the reader, to do the same. Perhaps you will glean other lessons from their experiences.

Being known and being in conflict with the school varies in meaning for families. Some families probably experience little conflict with the school, so knowing and being known may be regarded positively. For others who are in conflict with the school, knowing and being known may have significant and long-lasting, negative consequences.

Hearing about parents' lived experiences with knowing and being known at school makes me think a bit differently about rural schools. If I were a parent sending my child to a rural school, I would be wary of what could happen if he were out of sync with the school. I'd keep in mind two things that seem contradictory. Schools and families are engaged in complementary activities supporting children's development, but at the same time they are engaged in an adversarial relationship with each other (Lightfoot, 1978). Parents and teachers contest for control over various aspects of the child's life. I might want, but would not be likely to get, control over how my child is treated in the classroom. The teacher might want to direct certain homework activities at home, but could not do so without my cooperation.

This relationship between the school and me would be further complicated by competing interests. The school's main interest would be teaching all the children, and my main interest would be how and what the school teaches my son. Acknowledging that I have less power than the school would make me feel vulnerable, but I would be less

likely to be caught off-guard by the school's actions if I understood the terrain on which I might stand up for my child.

One of the advantages of a small community is also its Achilles' heel. Being known and knowing others might give me a sense of belonging in and to the community, but it would also expose me to others' scrutiny. This scrutiny would be personalized and my troubles would be widely known because I am not anonymous, as urban and suburban parents usually are.

In some situations I might not be able to both protect the well-being of my child, and remain friends with the teachers and principals. There might be costs that I could not foresee, and I might have to endure the disapproval of people whose approval I deeply want. I would try in those situations to summon up the courage to stand by and stand up for my son. I would take inspiration from the Johnsons who "battled the school for twelve years." For the most part, they were successful in protecting their dyslexic child's well-being, even though they were spent at the end of the battle.

More painful than losing friends or being exposed to the community is the possibility of not being able to successfully protect a child at school. One is not always able to protect the child from life's ravages, some of which are found in school. The fear of not adequately protecting a child provokes anguish in the hearts of parents. Sending a son to a rural school where I knew others and was known would disclose some of what it means to be a human being.

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