Examined from many perspectives, rural education and the needs of rural students have been neglected in the education literature as economic and social challenges there grow. Throughout the school counseling literature, agreement exists that advocacy is key to success for professional school counselors as they attempt to remove the barriers to success for students. More research is needed to fill the gaps in the knowledge about social justice advocacy in particular settings. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the essence of the experiences of school counselors approaching their work in schools as social justice advocates in a rural setting. Through interviews with rural school counselors who describe themselves as social justice advocates, this study sought to discover the meaning ascribed by social justice school counselors to their role and to their place, the rural setting, as it relates to their social justice advocacy. The following themes emerged, with each holding both positive and negative elements: the stability of place; community promise; mutual reliance; professional and personal integration; and a focus on individuals.

INDEX WORDS: School counseling, School counselor, Rural schools, Social justice, Advocacy
THE EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES IN RURAL SCHOOLS

by

LEE EDMONDSON GRIMES

B. A., Valdosta State University, 1985
B.S.Ed., Valdosta State University, 1985
M.Ed., The University of Georgia, 2003

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by

LEE EDMONDSON GRIMES

Major Professor: Pamela O. Paisley
Committee: Diane L. Cooper
Yvette Q. Getch

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

To the students, educators, families, and community members of the rural southeast.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Besaida’s family recently came to the rural area in which they live for her father to work at the local poultry plant. For a fifteen year old, she has many responsibilities helping her mother with her three younger siblings and trying to keep up in school. This year Besaida did not keep up. She failed several required courses and must repeat them, but her parents do not have the money to pay for summer school. Their limited English ability prevents them from exploring with Besaida the options their daughter has to stay on a college prep diploma. Besaida feels that she should give up her dream of college because it is causing her family so much stress.

Down the road from Besaida’s family live the Trulocks. Unlike Besaida’s family, seven-year old Kyle and his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles have lived in the community for generations. Kyle was born to teenage parents who never married, and his mother does her best to raise him. Her absences, though, mean that most of the time Kyle lives with his grandparents. Kyle’s frequent outbursts in the classroom have the school considering moving the boy to a class for children with emotional and behavior disorders, but no one from his family has responded to the school’s invitation to meet to discuss the placement. The family has struggled with their own lack of success in the community schools; none of Kyle’s close relatives have graduated from high school, and the letters from the school indicate trouble to the family. Meanwhile, Kyle falls farther and farther behind in school.
Mrs. Reece is principal of the high school in the community. Brought in by the state to improve the faltering high school, the new principal feels like an outsider and quickly realizes the lack of financial resources available to her since so many local businesses have closed. Her school counselor Mr. Hendricks knows the community and is well accepted there, but with his combined administrative responsibilities and fear of rocking the boat at school, he feels unable to help students such as Kyle and Besaida or to come to Mrs. Reece with knowledge about the community.

Each of these individuals feels bound by his or her circumstances. In an era of tremendous educational reform, these individuals feel and are being neglected. Unfortunately for these individuals and for many others in rural schools, rural education is indeed characterized by neglect, even in terms of educational research. “While much attention has appropriately been paid to the needs and issues facing urban education, little research, debate, or funding has focused on the differences between urban and rural education or the specific needs and issues impacting rural education” (Hines, 2002, p. 192). For the neglected needs of students in rural areas to be met, educators with unique skills who position themselves to bring about change must come forward to take on the challenge. Besaida’s, Kyle’s, and Mrs. Reece’s stories reveal important pieces of the challenges occurring in rural schools, but the challenges there are greater than their stories entail.

**Issues Facing Rural Communities and Schools**

Many rural communities are suffering economically which contributes to problems in rural schools and in rural student achievement (Budge, 2006). A variety of problems including geographic isolation, weak community infrastructure, outward migration, and increased regulations (Budge, 2006) have led to the economic decline of many rural communities. At the
same time, rural communities are home to some of the most diverse groups of families and students in the United States, including ethnic minorities, families suffering with generational poverty and compromised education and single-parent or no-parent households (Flora, Flora, & Fey, 2003). According to the Rural School and Community Trust, half of all English-language learners live in rural communities, but the lack of funding for programs often leaves these students inadequately served (Johnson & Strange, 2007). College attendance is lower in rural communities than in any other location in the United States (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Even attitudes toward ruralness are often negative, prejudicial, and erroneous. “Our students seem to have internalized those prejudices, and they exhibit an inferiority complex about their origins. Although the term rural conjures up rich images, many of those images are based on negative stereotypes. . . country bumpkins. . .” (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 113). Likewise, the term rural often evokes the image of midwestern white people living on farms, but the truth is that the rural student population is very diverse and often incredibly economically disadvantaged (Davis, 2009, p. 8).

Defining the word rural is even difficult (Budge, 2006; Flora et al., 2003; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Sherwood, 2001). For the purposes of this study, rural will be defined according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) which makes its designations based on the relative proximity a community has to urban centers. The definitions are as follows:

Rural, Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area, as well as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
Rural, Distant: Census-defined territory that is more than five miles but less or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Rural, Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. (Hoffman, 2010)

Whether fringe, distant, or remote, rural communities experience economic challenges and underfunding educationally (Johnson & Strange, 2007), and the issues there have not been represented in the research literature (Hardre, Crowson, DeBacker, & White, 2007). Sherwood (2001) took the lack of research further and said, “like the traditional American farmer, the rural education researcher appears to be something of an endangered species. Rural education has been misunderstood, underfunded, un-encouraged. . . and the resulting collection of work has suffered for it” (p. 1). Examined from many perspectives, rural communities, students, even ways of being have been devalued, and the subsequent loss of power politically, economically, and culturally leaves many literally marginalized (Howley, 2009, p. 540).

School Counselors and the Needs of Rural Students

To meet the neglected needs in rural education, school counselors possess the unique skills that schools and students need to be successful. School counselors are perfectly positioned to address the needs of all students in schools, and as professional educators, possess vital skills to address the needs of individuals who have been marginalized, those who are disadvantaged, through social justice advocacy (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Education Trust, 2003; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Social justice advocacy in school counseling “is centered on reducing the effects of oppression on students and improving equity and access to educational services” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 18).
Much discussion has centered on the call for social justice advocacy in school counseling (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Field & Baker, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Mitcham-Smith, 2007; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Uehara, 2005). Throughout the school counseling literature, agreement exists that advocacy is key to success for professional school counselors as they attempt to remove the barriers to success for students. However, missing from the agreement is an important and overlooked factor. “Although the advocacy role has been touted extensively in the literature, there has been little analysis of the personal qualities needed for effective advocacy” (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 263). Knowing what social justice advocacy is, is a crucial first step for addressing the needs of students, yet knowing how to be a social justice advocate and practicing school counselor are often missing.

Just as a one-size-fits-all approach, fine for maintaining the status quo, is no longer an option for counselors as they work with clients or students, the one-size approach does not fit the requirements of the different settings or environments in which school counselors and their students live and learn. More research is needed to fill this gap in the knowledge about social justice advocacy in particular settings. “It seems that qualitative studies... could add to the profession’s knowledge of how school counselors develop advocacy competencies in particular environments” (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 263). More research must be conducted to discover aspects of the experiences of rural school counselors who have adopted the social justice advocacy model.

**Previous Studies on Rural School Counseling**

What do we know of the issues surrounding rural school counselors in general if they are to address the needs of students who have been traditionally marginalized in their schools and communities? Morrissette (2000) offered answers to this question discovered through a
phenomenological qualitative study with rural school counselors in which he found that isolation, boundary spanning activities, and community pressures most directly affected the work experiences of rural school counselors. These findings raise a further question: how do school counselors respond to the suggestions of Bemak and Chung (2008) to align themselves with like-minded colleagues in their school if they are the only school counselor in a remote region?

Monterio-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, and Skelton (2006) conducted a study of rural mid-western school counselors, counselors in training, and principals about the role of school counselors. The findings were significant in terms of the misunderstandings surrounding exactly what roles school counselors should fill, but ironically the call to be involved in professional organizations at the state level to advocate for their profession led the suggestions. How do school counselors participate in advocacy for their students and for their profession when they are isolated? Finally, in terms of the studies conducted with rural school counselors, Morrissette (2000) discovered a notable lack of systematic investigation regarding the daily experiences of rural school counselors among counselor educators. Even at the very institutions where school counselors are trained, counselor educators often lack knowledge about the unique rural setting for their counselor trainees.

In their studies with rural school counselors, Morrissette (2000) and Sutton and Pearson (2002) both discovered that community pressure is a struggle for those in the rural school counseling profession. According to these studies, challenges with the visibility in the community existed for many rural school counselors, and they felt a need to avoid the community spotlight. Similarly, Lonberg and Bowen (2004) studied the religious or spiritual component of school counseling in a rural community, and their work shed light on many issues, particularly becoming familiar with community norms and values so that school counselors may
“thoughtfully consider the impact of their personal and professional behavior on the school community as well as the lives of their current and future students” (p. 320). Less privacy in the rural or small town community makes the counselor’s participation, or lack thereof, in religious activities more noteworthy to the community (Lonberg & Bowen, 2004). Perhaps such scrutiny by the community – visibility and perhaps even judgment of their spiritual lives – makes the high place of importance and involvement in the community almost intimidating. On the other hand, the prominence within the community also holds potential. The continued relationships with students and even community members combined with their visibility and prominence in the community hold the potential to make school counselors the powerful social change agents rural schools need to meet their needs.

**A Call to Action through Additional Research**

Rural education and thereby the needs of rural students have been neglected in the education literature (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Budge, 2006; Hines, 2002; Sherwood, 2001; Truscott & Truscott, 2005). Achievement gaps continue to grow as do marginalization in rural areas (Johnson & Strange, 2007). At the same time, school counselors are challenged and called to provide interventions to these problems in schools throughout the nation by responding as social justice advocates who break systemic barriers to student success (Trusty & Brown, 2005). Both the ASCA National Model and the ACA Advocacy Competencies offer critical resources for school counselor advocacy efforts, yet limited research has been conducted about how these efforts are being made (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). For rural school counselors to adopt a social justice advocacy framework in their efforts to serve the growing number of historically underserved students, more research must be conducted to discover how school counselors who are social justice advocates make a difference in their
schools and communities. Research must be conducted to discover aspects of the experiences of rural school counselors who have adopted the social justice advocacy model.

**Current Study Research Paradigm and Theoretical Orientation**

To provide greater understanding of social justice school counseling in a rural setting, the use of phenomenology is a natural choice. In phenomenological inquiry, “the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). Since little exists to shape the suppositions of the researcher in terms of rural school counselors and rural education as a whole, phenomenology offers the ideal vantage point from which meanings may be discovered. Essential descriptions to broaden current knowledge about social justice school counseling in rural settings with the potential to discover recommendations for future research further support the use of phenomenology as the research paradigm. Given the needs in rural schools in terms of growing student total populations and especially of the historically underserved, challenges in rural areas socioeconomically, and lack of adequate research to support new measures, phenomenological discoveries with the potential to shape policy and practices for rural school counselors are critically needed.

Inherent in the methods of phenomenology is the in-depth interview. The in-depth interview process with school counselors in their environment also allows information to emerge about the context of the counselors’ behaviors. “To observe a teacher, student, principal, or counselor provides access to their behavior. Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action” (Seidman, 2006, p. 10). Phenomenological
inquiry goes beyond the observation and allows the school counselors in this study to provide the context explanations important to their work as social justice advocates in rural settings.

Also guiding this study were two theories: social constructivism and the critical theory of liberation psychology. These theoretical orientations provided the framework for questions used in the interviews. From social constructivism came the fundamental consideration that the participant’s view of the situation, historically and socially constructed, must be determined to understand the meanings made of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The goal of the research and therefore the interview questions was to use the participants’ worldviews of rural life and education as guides (Creswell, 2007). Liberation psychology’s tenant of adopting the perspective of the oppressed led to designing interview questions that challenge participants to actively consider the perspectives of those within their schools who are typically excluded, the oppressed and powerless (Adams, O’Brien, & Nelson, 2006). Closely related is the liberation psychology concept of conscientization, discussed as “a gradual transformation of consciousness via ongoing deconstruction of the life experiences of oppressed persons [that thereby transforms] the entire community” (Duran, Firehammer, and Gonzalez, 2008, p. 289). This concept from liberation psychology influenced interview questions phrased in an attempt to discover the school counselor’s role in bringing about change to a whole community. These theories combined with the traditions of phenomenology led to the research questions guiding this study: How do rural school counselors describe their experiences of social justice advocacy in a rural setting? What is the essence of social justice advocacy school counseling in a rural setting?

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the essence of the experiences of school counselors approaching their work in schools as social justice advocates in
a rural setting. Through interviews with rural school counselors who describe themselves as social justice advocates, this study sought to discover the meaning ascribed by social justice school counselors to their role and to their place, the rural setting, as it relates to their social justice advocacy.

Discovering meanings in the shared experiences of rural school counselors who are social justice advocates formed the basis of this phenomenological inquiry. Interview questions focused on the following: professional role within the school and community; influences, supports, and challenges in the rural school and community; and vision of social justice in rural school counseling. Given the needs in rural schools - growing student populations of the historically underserved, challenges in rural areas socioeconomically, the lack of adequate research to support new measures such as social justice advocacy - phenomenological discoveries with the potential to shape policy and practices for rural school counselors, students, schools, and entire communities are critically needed.
CHAPTER 2
SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To provide a substantive answer to the question what is the meaning ascribed to the experiences of social justice advocacy by school counselors in a rural setting, a review of the pertinent literature surrounding the topic was necessary. This selected review of the literature includes perspectives from multiple disciplines as they relate to the research question. The purpose of this chapter is to present the issues relevant to rural education, current calls for social justice in school counseling, and the need for further research on social justice advocacy by school counselors in rural areas.

Dire Needs in Rural Education

Students across the nation begin their days with the Pledge of Allegiance. Familiar to many students is the ending phrase, “and justice for all.” While the words may echo similarly from school to school, a closer look reveals the actual vast differences in terms of educational justice that exist particularly when examined by school setting. Justice in education requires that the needs of students and communities be addressed for the unique paths to success that each student needs. Perhaps justice and place are interdependent, and perhaps educators such as school counselors hold important insights into the meaning of “and justice for all” in rural settings.

In terms of region or setting, students across America face tremendous differences in the opportunities and challenges they face educationally. In particular, students in rural areas of the United States face staggering challenges, with the Rural Trust serving as a primary advocate on
issues related to those struggles. In their report *Why Rural Matters: The Realities of Rural Education Growth* (Johnson & Strange, 2007), the authors contended that rural matters indeed. The Rural Trust defines itself as “the leading national non-profit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities. Our mission is to help rural schools and communities get better together” (Johnson & Strange, 2007, p. i). Their work points to the many factors that affect the dire needs in rural education.

**Rural Schools and Student Population Growth**

Popular thought may be that rural student numbers are small, and so if challenges exist, they do not affect many students. This thought is far from true as the following numbers from the Rural Trust reveal. In 2004-05, 29% of the nation’s students attended schools in communities of fewer than 25,000 people and 22% attended schools in communities of fewer than 2,500. Schools grew in enrollment by about 1% from 2002-03 to 2004-05, but enrollment in rural schools increased by 15% in communities with fewer than 2,500 residents and decreased in communities with over 25,000 residents. “Thus the proportional increase in rural enrollment is the result of both an increase in students attending schools in rural areas and a decrease in students attending schools in urban and suburban settings” (Johnson & Strange, 2007, p. iii).

**Rural Schools and Historically Underserved Students**

Besides the growth of total numbers of students attending rural schools, the number of minority students in these schools is significant as well. As a nation, our schools have not addressed well the needs of diverse groups of learners, and No Child Left Behind, with its requirement for schools to track and report information on their ability to help make successful various diverse groups of students by race, socioeconomic status, and ability, has helped to focus educators on better ways to serve students who have been traditionally underserved. Using data
from the National Council of Education Statistics, the Rural Trust reported total numbers of
groups of minority students in rural schools (American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific
Islander, Black, and Hispanic) as well as students served with Individual Educational Plans
(IEP’s) so that their numbers reflect the total number of students who are historically
underserved, including students in special education. Their research using NCES data shows
that more than half of the nation’s 2 million minority students attend school in one of six states
that are predominately rural. Research by the Rural Trust asked the question, “given the
diversity of students in rural schools, how crucial is it in each state that policymakers develop
policies that target educational needs associated with student diversity?” (Johnson & Strange,
p. ii). Their results show that for states across the nation, developing policies for diverse groups
of students in rural areas is particularly crucial.

**Rural Schools and Socioeconomic Struggles**

Nearly half, 45.9%, of rural students are eligible for free or reduced meals, significant
since “socioeconomic challenges present the most persistent threat to high levels of student
achievement. . . the income level of families is closely related to the preparedness level of
children entering school, while the educational attainment level of adults in the community is
closely related to both community economic well-being and community support for education”
(Johnson & Strange, 2007, p. vi). In terms of the rural economy and rural education, one needs
the other to be successful. Rural high schools often suffer from a lack of equitable funding,
shrinking local tax bases, and in their ability to offer high level coursework such as Advanced
Placement and International Baccalaureate courses (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).
Declining communities have led to the development of *rural ghettos*; ninety-eight percent of the
poorest counties are rural (Truscott & Truscott, 2005). These persistently poor counties are
characterized by heavy concentrations of racial and ethnic minority populations (Lichter & Johnson, 2007).

**Rural Schools and Calls to Action**

Lichter and Johnson (2007) noted from their studies “one implication of our results is that rural children – those in persistent poor counties – may be more disadvantaged than ever, if we measure disadvantaged by the lack of opportunities and community resources that can promote positive development” (p. 354). Numbers are growing but opportunities are not. To add further, Herzog and Pittman (1995) analyzed economic trends in the nineties forward and predicted “more rural students will come from economically impoverished backgrounds and fewer will come from homes in which the parents have professional or managerial positions” (p. 117). In this regard, Gerstl-Pepin (2006) added that the vast change that has occurred in the economy recently such as the loss of pensions, health insurance, and other social supports that low-income families have depended on and lost, and these losses directly affect children in schools. Rural students’ needs have increased as the nation’s economic confidence has decreased.

**Added Issues, Outward Migration**

A lack of opportunities in rural areas is an awareness of many students as they decide where to seek their first jobs after college. Their study with college students from rural areas depicted the “brain drain” that can occur in rural areas if the educated do not return (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Brain drain matters and so does the dwindling number of educated households in rural areas. “Socioeconomic status of a student’s household most often operationalizes as family income or parents’ education, and is consistently influential for attainment and achievement. . . [and skills such as] parents’ ability to invest in educational resources, hire tutors, use proper English in the household, and interact with their child’s teacher” (Roscigno &
Crowley, 2001, p. 276) are important, and yet fewer families in rural areas have these skills due to outward migration after college. As Roscigno and Crowley (2001) puts it, as go rural families in terms of their resources, so go their schools.

**Added Issues, Struggling High Schools**

Rural schools are indeed struggling, particularly high schools. Recognizing the interdependence of rural education and the rural community, the Alliance for Excellent Education noted that rural education is the engine for economic growth and the overall future of rural communities (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Unfortunately, one in four high school dropouts in the U. S. is in rural communities; twenty percent of “dropout factories” are in rural communities; rural students are less likely to attend or graduate from college (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

**Added Issues, The Lack of Research**

Despite the many areas of concern listed here, few research studies have been conducted to meet the needs of rural schools (Hardré, Crowson, DeBacker, & White, 2007). Increasing poverty and numbers of students from minority groups, low high-school graduation rates and college-attendance rates, outward migration, and inequitable educational policies all point to vast educational needs in rural schools. Yet according to Arnold et al. (2005), a dearth of higher and medium quality studies exist when they conducted a study of *ERIC* and *PsycINFO* databases for journal articles published between 1991 and summer 2003 on rural education research in the United States.

Likewise, the research is scarce in terms of multicultural education literature focused on the needs of diverse groups in rural areas. “While the ideals of multicultural education emphasize inclusion, the reality is that an important segment of the population is excluded”
(Ayalon, 2003, p. 30). More specifically, Ayalon analyzed major textbooks on multiculturalism in teacher education programs and discovered many areas of omission in terms of rural issues. In fact, the texts treated poverty as an urban issue. Truscott and Truscott (2005) agreed and stated, “We seldom hear about problems in rural schools. Perhaps we hear more about urban education because most major media outlets are located in cities, or because high population densities in cities make the challenges more visible, or because voters are concentrated in cities” (p. 123). Should rural education issues be ignored given their critical nature simply because of population densities, numbers of voters, and visibility in the media?

Hines’s (2002) point goes further: “nearly 27% of American school children attend schools in rural areas or small towns. . . yet only 22% of the total dollars spent on education in the United States goes to rural schools” (p. 192). To compound the problem, in rural areas few services exist to address the problems. “Drug use has placed enormous pressure on rural hospitals, child welfare systems, treatment facilities, and law enforcement” (Hines, 2002, p. 197). Listing the challenges to rural schools – poverty, homelessness, drug use – Hines, too, contended there is an overall lack of research to address the needs.

Given their expertise on rural issues, the Rural Trust (Johnson & Strange, 2007) puts it best: “there are no surprises here. . . poverty, fiscal incapacity, low levels of adult education, and low levels of achievement run in the same mutually reinforcing circles” (p. x). Justice for all does not exist when the educational issues of rural children and adolescents are allowed to continue in mutually reinforcing circles of neglect and decline.

Social Justice in School Counseling

Fundamental changes in the counseling profession began with the introduction of the multicultural competencies in by Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992). Defining the
multiculturally competent counselor, Sue et al. set forth standards they urged counselor education programs to adopt so that clients benefitted not only from the counselor’s helping skills but from a heightened perspective of respect and acceptance for the cultural influences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation. In the years following the initial call to action, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) adopted the multicultural competencies as a part of their standard. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), too, encouraged professional school counselors to intentionally work to ensure students from culturally diverse backgrounds receive the support and services necessary to meet their developmental needs and optimal growth.

Soon after the adoption of the multicultural competencies in the form of a position statement, other changes and growth began to occur in school counseling. Known as the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, TSCI charged counselor education programs “with producing a conceptual framework for changing school counseling preparation programs so future counselors can better serve elementary, middle, and high school students, especially those in low-income communities” (Sears, 2002, p. 147). Throughout the past decade, counseling and particularly school counseling have changed and expanded to include a perspective far beyond the white, middle-class world view that dominated counseling approaches for decades before. Often called the fourth force in counseling, multiculturalism paved the way for the next major force in counseling, social justice.

In terms of school counseling, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) suggested that a social justice perspective “acknowledges the role that dominant cultural values have in shaping the educational success and failure of youngsters, as evidenced by the achievement gap” (p. 18). Challenging
the status quo and attempting to remove systemic barriers to success for all students at the individual, school, and community level characterizes the work of the school counselor with a social justice framework. More recently Dahir and Stone (2009) stated that school counselors “must accept responsibility as social justice advocates, focus strategic and intentional interventions to remove barriers to learning, and raise the level of expectations for students for whom little is expected” (p. 18). Further, the authors suggested that the key to a thriving future for school counseling lies in social justice advocacy (Dahir & Stone, 2009, p. 18). The question, then, might be asked, is not social justice advocacy the key to a thriving future for marginalized students as well?

“Social justice champions the belief that one can change the world and that all persons may contribute to the whole of society while striving for their own potential” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 6). The opportunities for rural students can be expanded; their educational worlds and futures can be improved; all students can strive for their potential – promises such as these form a social justice framework that can be adopted to confront the overwhelming and neglected educational needs in rural schools. With this framework comes the potential of empowerment theory, mattering, and closing the achievement gap. All of these positive factors can be brought to rural students through the interventions of professional school counselors acting as social justice advocates.

Holcomb-McCoy (2007) discussed social justice in school counseling as “the acknowledgement of broad, systemic societal inequities and oppression, and the assumption of the inevitable, if unintentional, location of every individual (and the profession) within the system” (p. 17). The author added further that school counselors must take action that leads to the “elimination of systemic oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism,
and other biases” that exist in the systems within schools that affect students and their families (Holcomb-McCoy, p. 17). Social justice in school counseling is closely related to the American Counseling Association advocacy competencies. Ratts et al. (2007) discussed the history of the advocacy competencies as stemming from the 2000-2001 initiative of then ACA president Dr. Jane Goodman to make social justice advocacy central to the profession. In 2003, the American School Counselor Association endorsed the ACA advocacy competencies as well, with endorsement by both counseling professional organizations indicating their centrality to the field. Leaders in school counseling call for professional school counselors to embrace the ACA advocacy competencies and a social justice framework to confront educational inequity and close the achievement gap; moreover, school counselors cannot ignore oppression (Ratts et al., 2007).

Rural schools need school counselors acting as social justice advocates. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) recognized that the ASCA National Model has been integral in linking school counselors to the academic focus of schools, but many students need more; they need barriers to their success, often in the form of systemic oppression, removed. Much of the challenge to bringing down systemic oppression comes from protecting the status quo. The status quo is “characterized by inequitable distribution of power and resources; external sources and factors influence individual behavior and attitudes; we have internalized the attitudes, understandings, and patterns of thoughts that allow us to function in and collaborate with systems of oppression” (Holcomb-McCoy, p. 18). In rural schools and in every school in every setting, the status quo must be challenged to remove barriers for student success. The legislation of No Child Left Behind attempts to make certain that all students are successful, but the status quo exerts power, to some degree, there as well. Recent policy makers place the blame on educators for achievement gaps and do not recognize the very different circumstances in which teachers teach.
Gerstl-Pepin (2006) argued that current thought is too narrow a view as the public education system alone cannot be solely responsible for achievement gaps. Systems such as whole communities must be examined to close achievement gaps and ultimately to remove systemic barriers to student success. Those who allow barriers within systems to continue must be held accountable as well, and school counselors acting as change agents can draw attention to this fact.

**School Counselors and Advocacy**

The role for school counselors as systemic change agents is a relatively recent one (Galassi, Griffin, & Akos, 2008, p. 178). This recent role needs further research on “how knowledge and skill sets may vary when advocating for a group or social-cultural issue” (Field & Baker, 2004, p. 63). Although the need for more research on advocacy by school counselors is needed, one aspect of the issue is clear. “Despite the changes occurring in the U. S. demographics and the growing awareness of the need to make substantial changes in the public school system to address the injustice and inequities that underlie the academic achievement gap, many school counselors resist implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy. . . that [is] recommended by various experts in the field” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 372). Bemak and Chung explored the reasons school counselors continue to resist the new professional role as social justice advocates and found that a major factor is NCS or Nice Counselor Syndrome. “School counselors exhibiting nice counselor syndrome strive to be agreeable by supporting the status quo and avoiding unpleasant realities related to the injustices and inequities many students of color and poor students are subjected to in many public school systems” (p. 375). Breaking free of nice counselor syndrome is difficult because it alienates those who wish to maintain the
status quo, no matter how professionally and respectfully the school counselor goes about it (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

**Resistance to Advocacy**

Personal obstacles to taking on the role of social justice advocacy may lead to resistance. Bemak and Chung (2008) listed the following personal obstacles school counselors may bring: personal fear, being labeled a trouble-maker, apathy as a coping skill, anxiety that may lead to ineffective responses, a false sense of powerlessness, and personal discomfort (p. 375). The professional obstacles they cited for school counselor reluctance to taking on the advocate role include the following: professional paralysis, resistance based on turf considerations, dealing with administrative edicts, perpetrating a culture of fear, and even professional and character assassination efforts (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 376). “Counselors must be aware of their personal and professional obstacles to redefining their roles [and think] in ways that are aligned with the overall mission and goals of the school” (Bemak & Chung, 2008, p. 380). Another consideration the authors suggested for overcoming these personal and professional obstacles is aligning with like-minded allies. Remaining ever aware of the nation’s critical educational needs and learning about the power of the status quo are also helpful (Bemak & Chung, 2008).

**Advocacy through Empowerment Theory**

School counselors acting within a social justice advocacy framework should align their efforts with the school’s mission and goals (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Furthermore, school counselors also should consider the powerful personal and individual missions and goals of their individual students. By employing empowerment theory in their social justice advocacy in schools, school counselors can help individuals discover their personal strengths and empower them rather than working with those same students from a deficit standpoint. In fact, if a school
counselor is faced with obstacles such as apathy, anxiety, discomfort, and fear for the advocacy role, empowerment theory serves as a powerful theoretical ally. In an extended discussion, Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) discussed the roots of social justice and empowerment theory and then focused on the ways in which empowerment theory can be used to reach the marginalized and oppressed. “If empowerment of oppressed students is to take place, professional school counselors must heed the call of the Education Trust and the American School Counselor Association and look to redefine the current paradigm of school counseling. A major component in redefining this paradigm is the mandate of social justice” (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007, p. 329). Clearly, empowerment theory and social justice make one another more powerful. Gutierrez (1995) defined empowerment theory as “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations” (p. 229). Leaders at the forefront of school counseling espouse empowerment theory for social justice: “Students can be helped to see how living in [their particular area] influences their daily lives, their political representation, and their opportunities for advancement in American society” (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007, p. 330).

The use of an empowerment theory approach as a part of school counseling for social justice holds great potential for the changing of the status quo. Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) suggested approaches such as the following: “To assure that the experiences of marginalized communities are accurately portrayed through curricula, professional school counselors can work with administrators and department heads to develop standards for curricula that embrace non-Western perspectives and values” (p. 330). The authors also suggested that “professional school counselors can foster the development of critical consciousness by creating consciousness-raising groups for students of marginalized groups” (p. 330). Also as part of social action in the
school, schools counselors as social justice advocates can encourage students to participate in community groups, social advocacy groups, and political rallies so that students “begin to take control of their sociopolitical reality and aid them in working toward liberation of their community” (p. 330).

Unfortunately measures such as these might be considered radical to some. In a response to the Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) piece, Mitcham-Smith (2007) applauded empowerment theory yet recognized that it is a nontraditional approach. “The reality is that many professional school counselors are of the majority race and presumably have been socialized in the same American ethnocentric curricula and school system that disserves marginalized students” (p. 341). Although Mitcham-Smith recognized the challenges to adopting empowerment theory in school counseling, the author stressed its potential for reaching students who need to be reached. Adopting this nontraditional approach “espoused by Hipolito-Delgado and Lee is notable and ideal for achieving higher levels of equity in working with students who are traditionally marginalized and oppressed” (Mitcham-Smith, 2007, p. 341). But more work in addition to the call for such must occur: school counselors must align their efforts with school leaders. “Engaging school principals and administrators is a key step in professional school counselors adopting and operating under an empowerment theory framework” (Mitcham-Smith, 2007, p. 341). Across levels personally and professionally, social justice advocacy with an empowerment theory approach calls for working in nontraditional ways and getting others on board; in short, it takes guts.

**Opponents to Nontraditional Advocacy**

One might expect opponents of social justice since it does turn the status quo upside down. In an article titled *Radical Social Justice Being Pushed on Our Schools*, Schlafly (2008)
warned the public about “matters that vitally concern everyone who cares what the next generation is taught with taxpayers’ money” (p. 1). Schlafly calls Friere’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a classic text, “a radical education theory” that is regularly assigned in education schools and that has made its way into public schools “especially where low-income and minority kids can be taught Oppression Studies” (2008, p. 2). From her examples of classroom studies and social-justice based schools, Schlafly (2008) stated: “It is clear that social justice teaching does not mean justice as most Americans understand the term. Those who use the term make clear that is means the United States is an unjust and oppressive society and that the solution is to spread the wealth around” (p. 3). Social justice with a foundation on empowerment theory calls for realization that while it may seem a logical and critical approach to many educators, strong and vocal opponents do exist.

### Advocacy and the Concept of Mattering

Social justice advocacy might be enhanced as well through the foundational concept of *mattering*. The mattering approach is similar to empowerment theory. Dixon and Tucker (2008) gave examples of the mattering through the power of surveying “all students in a school about the barriers the students perceive at school; [with such] a counselor sends the message that everyone’s voice needs to be heard” (p. 124). While such interventions hold powerful potential for marginalized students, mattering sends a powerful message to the community as a whole. “School counselors can have a positive impact on school climate by letting other faculty members, parents, and students know that they are important to the success of the school as a whole” (Dixon & Tucker, 2008, p. 125). The entire community can be included in school improvement when a mattering approach is employed. How can such an approach have
Rural Stereotypes and the Need for Advocacy

Hines (2002), a leader in rural education issues, does understand the entire community approach to fostering school success, and she recognized the power of including the community, of making them matter, when she suggested recognizing and developing the social capital of the community. Here, too, the combination of mattering and empowerment theory and social justice leads back to advocacy. Walker (2006) suggested: “critical to the socially just school environment is the acknowledgement of the influence of diversity and its dynamics on other cultures, the provocation of the status quo, and the confrontation of stereotypes” (p. 120). Each of these steps must be taken to address a major first step issue in rural education, its problem of stereotype. Herzog and Pittman (1995) stated: “Rural is often defined from an outsider, urban perspective in much the same way that dominant culture has traditionally spoken for minority groups” (p. 118). The authors discussed further “even though our times are characterized by a heightened awareness of multicultural differences, it is still considered socially and politically correct to poke fun at rednecks, hillbillies, and hicks” (1995, p. 119). Empowerment and mattering must be employed with entire communities that remain marginalized due to socially-sanctioned stereotyping and marginalization, and this includes the stereotypes applied to rural communities.

No More Business as Usual

Despite opponents and the professional courage needed to do so, the Education Trust contends that school counselors have the opportunity to be change agents for the barriers that keep all students from achieving academic success (Education Trust, 2003). To be these change
agents requires an advocacy framework, yet the framework lacks a clear definition. Field and Baker (2004) noted “a vital component to enhancing an advocacy vision for the school counseling profession is to clearly define advocacy and understand how it is, and most importantly, should be operationalized” (p. 57). They continued with, “despite the need for student advocacy, literature within the school counseling profession is sparse when it comes to identifying and measuring essential advocacy behaviors of school counselors” (Field & Baker, 2004, p. 57). One suggestion in terms of a definition of advocacy, this one broader than school counseling advocacy though, comes from Kiselica and Robinson (2001): “advocacy counseling goes beyond traditional counseling with direct and indirect forms of helping that involve influencing the people and institutions that affect clients’ lives” (p. 387). Clearly, in terms of school counseling, more research is needed to determine how this definition takes action in public schools. One point is clear, though. Advocacy counseling, like social justice and empowerment theory, calls for school counselors to be “radically different from business as usual” (Field & Baker, 2004, p. 61).

Business as usual equals status quo, and school counselor advocates cannot be complacent with doing business as usual or with the status quo. Breaking down systemic barriers in the institutions that affect client’s/student’s lives requires doing things differently, and doing things differently for different students perhaps. “Merely doing the same thing for all students doesn’t mean equity. School counselors must work for systemic change in the system to give individuals the most that need the most” (Education Trust, 2003, p. 2). “Beliefs and good intentions will not contribute to systemic change” (Dahir & Stone, 2009, p. 18). Waiting for systemic change is not the answer for students who need action the most. “The gap that separates poor students and students of color from other young Americans is wide and getting
wider. . . while the 1970’s and 1980’s saw progress in narrowing the gap, by 1990 we stopped
dead in our tracks and things are getting worse again” (Education Trust, 2003, p. 1). The
Education Trust believes professional school counselors have the opportunity and are perfectly
positioned to be the caring, committed advocates that students need so that achievement gaps and
systemic barriers do not prevent them from meeting their potential. Advocacy, empowerment,
and mattering, through a framework of social justice provide school counselors with the
theoretical base from which to act.

**Social Justice in the Rural School Setting**

Rural education and thereby the needs of rural students have been neglected in the
education literature. Achievement gaps continue to grow as do marginalization in rural areas.
At the same time, school counselors are challenged and called to provide interventions to these
problems in schools throughout the nation by responding as social justice advocates who break
systemic barriers to student success and build assets by using empowerment theory. But what do
we know of the issues surrounding rural school counselors in particular if they are to address the
needs of marginalized students in their schools and communities? Morrissette (2000) offered
answers to this question discovered through a phenomenological qualitative study with rural
school counselors in which he found that isolation, boundary spanning activities, and community
pressures most directly affected the work experiences of rural school counselors. “Due to the
nature of the school counselor’s position, a combination of physical, psychological, and
professional isolation can be experienced” (Morrissette, 2000, p. 198). This raises a question
based on earlier observation. How do school counselors respond to the suggestions of Bemak
and Chung (2008) to align themselves with like-minded colleagues in their school if they are the
only school counselor in a remote region? Morrissette (2000) recognized this problem even as
he stressed involvement in professional organizations and additional professional study for school counselors. Involvement in professional organizations supports advocacy, yet distance makes such involvement a struggle for rural school counselors. Again and again, the struggles surrounding professional involvement for rural school counselors emerged. Monterio-Leitner et al. (2006) conducted a study of rural mid-western school counselors, counselors in training, and principals about the role of school counselors. The findings were significant in terms of the misunderstandings surrounding exactly what roles school counselors should fill, but ironically the call to be involved in professional organizations at the state level to advocate for their profession led the suggestions. How do school counselors participate in advocacy for their students and for their profession when they are isolated? Finally, in terms of the studies conducted with rural school counselors, Morrissette (2000) noted a notable lack of systematic investigation regarding the daily experiences of rural school counselors among counselor educators.

**The Rural Community, Friend and Foe**

In his study with rural school counselors, Morrissette (2000) also discovered that community pressure is a struggle for those in the school counseling profession. The pressure to follow community norms with no tolerance for deviance in their professional behaviors emerged from his studies. According to his study, challenges with the visibility in the community existed for many rural school counselors, and they felt a need to avoid the community spotlight. Similarly, Lonberg and Bowen (2004) studied the religious or spiritual component of school counseling in a rural community, and their work shed light on many issues, particularly becoming familiar with community norms and values so that school counselors may "thoughtfully consider the impact of their personal and professional behavior on the school
community as well as the lives of their current and future students” (p. 320). Less privacy in the rural or small town community makes the counselor’s participation, or lack thereof, in religious activities more noteworthy to the community (Lonberg & Bowen, 2004). Perhaps such scrutiny by the community – visibility and perhaps even judgment of their spiritual lives – makes the high place of importance and involvement in the community almost intimidating. On the other hand, the prominence within the community also holds potential. Continuing relationships with students emerged from Morrissette’s (2000) study with rural school counselors as a benefit in light of the many challenges in the rural setting. Perhaps the continued relationships with students and even community members combined with their visibility and prominence in the community make school counselors the powerful change agents rural schools need to meet their needs.

Morrissette (2000) made two recommendations for improving the effectiveness of rural school counseling. First, counselor educators’ efforts are needed to create networks of professional support. Secondly, efforts should be focused on making students (school counselors in training) aware of the differences in being a school counselor in a rural versus an urban setting. In addition to finding out more about the work of rural school counselors, Morrissette (2000) noted it is important to study the experiences of the urban school counselor and contrast them to that of the rural school counselor.

Besides isolation and community visibility, another quality of rural schools that repeatedly emerged is the great influence of community. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) recommended developing a student-family-community initiative targeting families-of-color and low-income families that requires broad-based outreach with the help of representatives from all community stakeholder groups. Holcomb-McCoy added further the suggestion to include nontraditional
leaders such as clergy, small business owners, transportation workers, police workers, grandparents, uncles, aunts, godparents and so forth from the community in supporting schools and the students who need the extra support. She also recommended avoiding the blame game (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007) if parents are not involved. In contrast, then, to the earlier drawback, visibility in the community perhaps becomes an advantage if the school counselor’s prominence gives him or her access to so many stakeholders in the community to involve in the improvement process.

To involve stakeholders in community efforts with the school takes trust. “School counselors must be seen as an integral part of the community and demonstrate commitment beyond the boundaries of the school” (Morrissette, 2000, p. 198) to develop the trust that is needed. Community in any setting often equals place. “Rural life was and to some degree is characterized by a strong connection between community and the school, and between the community and the land (Ayalon, 2003, p. 30). Messinger asserted that more research needs to be conducted on the Comprehensive Community Initiative Model, with the “exclusion of studies on comprehensive rural interventions from the general CCI literature [being] unfortunate (2004, p. 536). Involvement for and with the community is key for the rural school counselor. Hines (2002) contended that rural school counselors must facilitate the development of a school/community vision of student success and use the social capital, the community resources such as relationships, values, and social networks, to bring positive change and growth for the schools and community alike.

Like Dahir and Stone (2009), Hines stressed too that data are important pieces, and with that idea in mind, also stated, “it is when goals are school and community-vision based and data-driven that change can become systemic (Hines, 2002, p. 192). Despite its drawbacks in terms of
visibility and even judgment, rural school counselors must involve the community to make a
difference for their students. And to do so they must “have a keen understanding and genuine
pointed out, “the backbone of rural life is personal and communal relationships” (p. 192).
Specifically for rural school counselors, understanding and appreciating their rural community
despite its drawbacks professionally hold potential for creating mutually beneficial, systemic
change for students, families, schools, and communities.

Teachers as Multicultural Allies

Ayalon (2003) asked the question, why is rural education missing from multicultural
education textbooks? This question can be asked as well: are not school counselor efforts to
stress multicultural education, a component of social justice, needed in rural settings? From his
research, Ayalon (2003) determined that teacher candidates held the erroneous belief that
multicultural education is for teachers in urban schools. Yet rural schools contain great numbers
of students who have been historically underserved. Teachers must understand, too, the
necessity for addressing multicultural issues in their schools as such understanding leads to
better, more equitable teaching. Students who live in poverty and students of color are more
likely to reach their academic, career, and personal/social potential when they have access to
highly trained teachers and quality educational materials and when they attend a school in which
the culture expects all students to be college ready (Education Trust, 2003). Rosigno’s (2001)
research into rural schools showed results, too, that high teacher expectation is one factor that
cuts across other negative factors. Moreover, high teacher expectations reduce the likelihood of
a student dropping out. Highly-trained teachers must understand multicultural issues to realize
that systemic barriers are what often stand in the way of students being ready to finish high
school and to attend college. Hines (2002) suggested rural school counselors can play a part in training and mentoring teachers as the faculty needs to understand the unique needs of students in rural settings. As Ayalon’s question (2003) suggested, greater multicultural understanding is needed in rural schools. With their training in multicultural issues, school counselors in a rural setting can provide faculty training when it is missing.

**Students and Multiculturalism**

In addition to helping train and mentor teachers on multicultural issues, rural school counselors can reach students with important messages about multiculturalism. Uehara (2005) outlined a thirteen-week program delivered by school counselors for promoting diversity discussions and giving voice to all students, keys to a foundation for social justice in rural schools. To such efforts, Dellana and Snyder (2004) made a further recommendations from their research in a rural setting: “educators [need to]. . . devote more research to the customer service perceptions of their distinct customer groups and to more fully consider the obstacles to trust that might be considered by these perceptions” (p. 35). The use of market psychology terms to describe their research with rural minority students underscores the importance of building trust with individual students just as it must be developed with communities. School counselor programs that give voice to all students can provide not only needed education to students, but can provide trust that all voices matter as well.

Building trust is a foundational step with all students. In addition to the importance of trust, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) made a further suggestion: the first step to creating a socially just school is creating a place where issues of diversity can be discussed. Dees (2006) drew particular emphasis to the need for such discussions in rural settings, perhaps most especially for first generation college students. For students to be willing to grow, their educators must be
willing to challenge them. “We must continue to challenge our students regarding racist, homophobic, and gender perspectives that limit and deny access to others in a diverse and democratic society. . .” (Dees, 2006, p. 10). Holcomb-McCoy (2007) suggested taking the message to students and faculty in public ways such as teacher training and classroom guidance, but also in those everyday, personal interactions as well. In terms of the little jokes, comments, and cruelties that are expressed about the historically underserved, she suggests, “Counselors who work from a social justice framework do not accept or tolerate bias. Ignoring bias will not make it go away, and silence can send the message that you are in agreement with such attitudes and behaviors” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 95). Whether in the form or direct or indirect modeling, full school or community programs, or in individual interactions, rural school counselors who operate from a social justice perspective can bring multicultural knowledge to their students and faculty in a setting that it is often ignored in the literature and textbooks.

**Rural School Counselors and Student College Attendance**

Rural school counselors have the potential to bring multiculturalism, a first step in social justice, to their students, and they are perfectly positioned to address the low numbers of students who attend college in rural areas. But even after attending college, too few students return. “Brain drain” or the tendency for outward migration to occur in rural settings has been established in the literature on rural concerns. Brain drain is not the only issue surrounding college attendance in rural areas; sometime being the first in a family to attend college is the problem. Hines (2002) stressed that rural school counselors must carefully guide the development of students who make the leap into the first generation of college education. Dees (2006) stressed that educators must understand and develop trust with rural students who attempt to change their educational status by attending college. Being a first-generation college student
causes great acculturation stress, and students need the examples of peers who have made it. Getting rural students to college is vital, and guiding their development through the process is vital as well due to the stress of the change. Getting the educated to return is the other side of the coin. Perhaps that occurs with the sweeping changes that must occur in their communities.

Rural Social Counselor Alliance with the School Principal

Beyond working with students and faculties to bring change to rural schools, rural school counselors must include in their efforts close collaboration with their principals. Walker (2006) studied the relationship between principals and counselors working as a complimentary leadership team for social justice and made several significant observations. “Many educators have difficulty understanding social justice issues and do not want to engage in confrontations when it comes to race, poverty, and culture. Even well-intentioned educators may not comprehend the complexities and political ramifications of social justice” (p. 117). Walker noted such lack of understanding comes from their own “lack of lived experiences” and a “deficiency in appropriate preparation in social justice” (2006, p. 117). But if for no other reason, the pressure principals face for improving student performance should help to bring together the ideas of school counselors and administrators.

Budge (2010) describes a model of leadership from which school counselors might learn to foster collaboration with their principals for addressing improving student performance. Critical place-conscience leadership is built on three constructs: place shapes identity; places are pedagogical; and a sense of place shared by the leaders in a community can serve as a starting point for advocacy and activism (Budge, 2010). Critical place-conscience leadership uses the importance of place to community members to manage or change the political environment rather maintaining the status quo. “These leaders would not only engender
relationships with the powerful key communicators in a community but also co-create the conditions for understanding the workings of power and privilege and actively reach out to people in the community who have been marginalized and silenced” (Budge, 2010, p. 18). The goal of critical place-conscience leadership is the same as that of social justice, to include and foster success for all individuals, particularly those who are marginalized and silenced. Budge (2010) contended that such a style of leadership uses the importance of place to strengthen advocacy and activism. In their relationship with their principal, school counselors have the potential for collaborating with school leaders in the spirit of critical place-consciousness to make their advocacy for students who are marginalized to be successful.

Describing the relationship between school counselors and principals as sometimes a challenge and tentative though, Walker (2006) suggested these educators must “abandon their power turfs and territories. They must acknowledge and utilize their unique skills and expertise for the good of students and families” (p. 119). These school professionals need to develop “an inclusive team to advocate and activate a diversity plan of action encompassing the school and larger community”. . . [with] the four components of students, school staff, parents, and community, and the universities that prepare the teachers, school counselors, and administrators” (Walker, 2006, p. 119). Such a plan is a massive undertaking, and the tendency to continue status quo then becomes tempting. McKenzie et. al. (2008) discussed educational leadership and social justice and offered the reminder that perfect social justice leadership does not exist. The authors suggested social justice leaders realize their unevenness in social justice leadership and attempt to close the gap between perfection and real life application. Rural school counselors, principals, and communities need information about how to apply social justice interventions in
their setting in real life applications, and perfection for making it happen cannot allow the interventions to never take place.

**Rural School Counselors and the Local School Council**

One place to start connecting schools and communities for bringing about change is through the school’s own Local School Council or LSC. In 2000, acceptance of the A Plus Reform Act of 2000 by the Georgia General Assembly led to the requirement for all schools in the state to form school councils. Consisting of the principal, two teachers, two parents of students in the school, and two local business partners, the school council’s role is to make recommendations on school matters (Georgia School Council Institute, 2000). Pharis, Bass, and Pate (2005) stated that “the school councils in Georgia were created to bring communities and schools closer together in a spirit of cooperation to solve difficult educational problems, improve academic achievement, provide support for teachers and administrators, and bring parents into the school-based decision-making process” (p. 33). In their study of a forty-one county area in south Georgia, Pharis, Bass, and Pate (2005) determined factors school council members believed to be significant for effectiveness of the council. The leading factors that emerged were twofold: focus of efforts and a facilitative principal. The authors even suggested that local school councils “might consider participation in site-based professional development designed to enable councils and school communities to nurture [the] enabling factors that lead to the LSC’s success” (p. 37). In addition, “probably one of the most important findings is that school councils have opened lines of communication and made accurate information available to the communities they represent” (Pharis, Bass, & Pate, 2005, p. 37) Perhaps LSC’s offer the venue for rural school counselors to bring a social justice advocacy approach to key players such as teacher leaders, the principal, parents, and community leaders all in one place of mutual concern.
for school improvement. Pharis, Bass, and Pate (2005) saw the potential for LSC’s and suggested more research be conducted in this area: “school reform is considered crucial for all rural students. Implications for future practice might be considered by policy makers and local school councils in order to implement more effective school councils” (p. 37). The needs of rural schools are great, and if local school councils offer a venue for bringing change, further steps must be taken to determine factors that would lead to the success of such.

**Factors to Bring Rural Social Justice Advocacy into Action**

Individuals, faculties, schools, principals, local school councils, and entire communities need the efforts of the rural school counselors working within a social justice advocacy framework to facilitate efforts in removing the barriers to educational success in rural schools. However, *nice counselor syndrome*, numerous personal and professional issues of resistance, role and turf confusion with school leaders, and possible community opposition or mistrust of social justice advocacy make the proposition one about which little to nothing is known. Collison et al. (1998) offered six personal activism dimensions for counselors to consider, but offered no evidence of success for such self-reflection in a rural setting. The problem goes on. Hines (2002) noted “rural school counselors must be advocates for their students, schools, and communities at the local, state, and national level. . . school counselors need to be activists who bring together rural educators and citizens to help legislatures understand rural funding dilemmas. . .” (p. 195). But how does the rural school counselor make activism work in the rural setting? What are the experiences of school counselors who are working from a social justice advocacy position in a rural setting?

A decade ago, Theobald and Howley (1998) made a statement about rural education that rural school counselors can and must heed today: teacher education for rural areas must be based
on the three themes of sustainability, social justice, and democracy. But how are sustainability of rural education, social justice in rural education, and democracy in rural education operationalized? What is the role of the rural school counselor in this view of rural education? Little research has been produced that sheds light on the rural school counseling experience as a whole. Perhaps discoveries about the experiences of rural school counselors who have adopted a social justice advocacy framework would bring understanding about the unique ways in which school counselors in rural settings can use the power of their position, influence, education, and school and community alliances to bring about systemic change. “Achievement gaps seem to be most prevalent in those schools that are not attending to issues of social justice; that is, to issues of equity, equality, and possibility for all students” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 6). An understanding of the experiences of key players such as rural school counselors who bring social justice advocacy into their work with students and communities is a step in discovering the possibilities for positive change for regions in dire need.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

An analysis of the literature on rural education and social justice in school counseling reveals that little research exists for describing the experiences of rural school counselors (Hines, 2002; Morririssette, 2000). The research that does exist indicates that unique factors affect the work of rural school counselors with students and in their communities. Data also indicates that groups of historically underserved students are growing at a faster rate in rural areas than they are in urban and suburban areas (Johnson & Strange, 2007). School counselors who are social justice advocates seek to remove the barriers that impede student success, particularly for groups of students who are underserved. To begin to develop a clearer understanding of the experiences of rural school counselors who are social justice advocates in a rural setting, this study employed qualitative research methods, specifically following a phenomenological paradigm. This chapter provides the methods and procedures used to study rural school counselors who are social justice advocates.

Rationale for the Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research methods provided the ideal approach for discovering the meanings ascribed by rural school counselors to their work as social justice advocates. Creswell (2007) borrowed from Denzin and Lincoln (2005) a definition of qualitative research that captures the evolving nature of qualitative inquiry from social constructivism to interpretivism:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These
practices transform the world. . . . This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)

The purpose of this study was to discover the meaning ascribed by rural school counselors to the phenomenon of social justice advocacy in their setting. The tenets of qualitative research suited this goal since its inherent methods are to make sense of or to interpret the meaning people bring to a phenomenon.

Merriam (1998) asserted that the key philosophical assumption upon which all qualitative research is based on the idea that reality is constructed by individuals in their social worlds. This study sought to discover from individual school counselors their reality of social justice advocacy in their natural world, in this case, the rural setting. “Qualitative researcher are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Creswell (2007) suggested that it is appropriate to use qualitative research to make sense of a complicated problem that needs to be explored; when we want to capture a complex, detailed understanding of the problem; when we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants experience the problem; and because quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not fit the problem. “Interactions among people, for example, are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). In terms of this study and the multitude of issues affecting rural education and the growing diversity therein, qualitative research was a must.
Creswell (2007) described the key characteristics of qualitative research as occurring in the natural setting; researcher as key instrument; multiple sources of data; inductive data analysis; participants’ meanings; emergent design; theoretical lens; interpretive inquiry; and a holistic account. Each of these characteristics and others will be addressed in this chapter.

**The Phenomenological Paradigm**

Of each of the qualitative research approaches, phenomenology is the best choice when it is important to understand the shared or common experiences of a phenomenon. Understanding these common experiences is important so that policies or practices can be developed or so that a deeper understanding of the phenomena could be discovered (Creswell, 2007). Understanding the ways in which rural school counselors have experienced social justice advocacy and the context and situations that affect their advocacy efforts there holds the potential for shaping policy and procedures to benefit students in other rural schools as well.

The task of the phenomenologist is to capture the essence or basic structure of an experience and to temporarily set aside or bracket his or her own prior beliefs that may interfere with the interpretation (Merriam, 1998). In phenomenology, the researcher collects data through in-depth and multiple interviews from individuals who have experienced a shared experience, analyzes the data for meanings, and then writes a composite description that presents the essence or essential, invariant structure of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). This chapter describes each of these steps specific to the phenomenological study of individual school counselors who share the experience of working as social justice advocates in a rural setting.
**Theoretical Framework**

Before outlining the research methods of this study, it is important to reflect on the theoretical framework that guides it. Two theoretical orientations served to shape the framework of this study, social constructivism and critical theory, specifically that from liberation psychology. Creswell (2007) pointed out that constructivism is often combined with interpretivism and refers to the orientation in which individuals seek to understand the world they live in by developing subjective meaning of their experiences that are complex rather than narrow and limited to a few categories or ideas. The goal of research is as much as possible to use the participant’s views of the situation to discover subjective meanings that were formed through interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms operating in the individuals’ lives (Creswell, 2007). Ponterotto (2005) called the orientation constructivism-interpretivism and contended that the paradigm stresses that meaning can be brought to the surface through reflection stimulated by the interactive researcher-participant dialogue. Thus, research shaped by a constructivist paradigm includes that the researcher and participants co-construct findings in their dialogue and combined interpretations (Ponterotto, 2005). Interview questions and interpretations of meanings throughout this study, then, flowed between the researcher and the participants with an understanding that the interactions and dialogue taking place were influenced by the personal, cultural, and historical experiences of each.

Critical theory, specifically Liberation Psychology, and its emphasis on challenging the status quo and transforming systems of power and control also influenced the framework of this study. Creswell (2007) referred to critical theory as a family of theories that have in common the idea that “knowledge claims must be set within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender, and other group affiliations” (p. 25). Liberation
psychology’s tenet of adopting the perspective of the oppressed shaped this study in that it challenged participants to actively consider the perspectives of those within their schools who are typically excluded, the oppressed and powerless (Adams et al., 2006). Ponterotto (2005) pointed out that like constructivists, critical approaches hold that reality is constructed in a social-historical context as well. “However, more so than constructivists, criticalists conceptualize reality and events within power relations, and they use their research inquiry to help emancipate oppressed groups (Ponterotto, 2005). Morrow (2007) agreed and added further that critical paradigms value subjectivity and are committed to social justice. This study was undertaken with the goal that the findings would lead to the discovery of meaning in the experiences of rural school counselors and their social justice advocacy. Inherent as well was the critical commitment to discovering meaning that would lead to changing status quo practices that potentially marginalize rural students and their communities.

In summary, Morrow (2007) stressed the importance of considering the theoretical underpinnings of one’s research. In terms of this study, such consideration reveals that the voice of the researcher in dialogue with the participants was used to discover meanings in the common experience of social justice advocacy in rural school counseling. Ultimately, this discovery would lead to practices to better serve students possibly left out of school success.

**Central Research Question**

Built on the foundations of constructivism-interpretivism and critical theory within the traditions of the qualitative approach to research called phenomenology, this study was guided by the following central research question: what is the meaning ascribed to the experience of social justice advocacy by school counselors in a rural setting? Creswell’s (2007) recommendation to follow central research questions with procedural sub-questions questions in
a phenomenological study led to a series of sub-questions. What statements describe these experiences? What themes emerge from these experiences? What are the contexts and thoughts about these experiences? What is the overall essence of the experience? This central research question and series of sub-questions provided the overarching basis for how this study was conducted and analyzed.

**Participants and Sampling**

To find participants for this study, I chose purposeful sampling, specifically snowball or chain sampling. The strategy I used to locate individuals for the study began with my contacting a variety of individuals I discovered as I conducted my literature review. Throughout my reading, I emailed or telephoned different individuals who either work or conduct research on rural education issues. I attempted to build a professional connection with these leaders in the field of rural education research as I realized that finding a sample, hopefully nationally, would mean that I would need to begin the connections early. I have connected with individuals from the Rural School and Community Trust, the Education Trust, Counselors for Social Justice, and four university professors.

When names and contact information for rural school counselors were shared with me after IRB approval, I contacted potential participants personally by telephone. During this screening phone call, I explained to participants that their names and contact information were shared with me as potential participants for research. I used a five-statement questionnaire to determine if participants meet the criteria for participation; that is, that they identify as social justice advocates (see Appendix A). If participants did not identify as social justice advocates, I planned to thank them for participating but to explain that they did not meet criteria for the study. If participants did identify as social justice advocates as indicated by their responses to the
questionnaire, I provided them with information about the study and discussed making arrangements to meet for the interview.

Participant criteria included the following: is a school counselor in a rural setting (as defined by the NCES); identified as a social justice advocate according to their responses on the telephone screening questionnaire; provided consent to participate.

Since the purpose of qualitative research is to provide rich and descriptive information about a phenomenon rather than to generalize, the number of participants was small. Creswell (2007) recommends studying a variety of sites and to collect extensive detail about the sites and from the individuals interviewed. In total, seven participants qualified for inclusion in this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

After IRB approval, I received the contact information for potential participants and contacted the individuals by telephone. I stated that their name had been shared with me as a possible participant in my study. I fully informed possible participants about the intent of the study, how and when it would be conducted, and about the limits of anonymity and confidentiality. I explained that I would be providing them with an informed consent document with greater detail if they decided to participate. At the end of each interview, I thanked participants with a gift card as a way to show my appreciation for their participation.

Morrow (2007) offered thoughts of special consideration in terms of ethical concerns involved in qualitative research. “Because participants in qualitative investigations often disclose information of an emotional and sensitive nature, and because the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is often very intimate, the researcher’s responsibility to treat participants with high regard and respect is paramount” (Morrow, 2007, p. 217). Inherent in this study was the reliance on co-constructed meaning-making. The dialogue involved in the in-
depth interviews sometimes led to confidential disclosures about students, schools, and communities. Through the statements in my informed consent document and in my language with participants during interviews, I remained always aware and respectful of the ethical obligations I brought to the research and to my participants in this study.

**Development of Interview Questions**

One of the hallmarks of qualitative research is that it is emergent and flexible in nature (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). During the in-depth interviews, I entered into the dialogue with participants using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B), but because we worked together to make meaning of the issues being discussed, I allowed the interview questions to adapt to develop meanings that perhaps I could not predict as they were revealed in interviews. The semi-structured interview questions I used to begin interview sessions were developed from my selected review of the literature and my theoretical framework.

In terms of the theoretical framework, interview questions were developed with two theories as guides. Social constructivism uses the participant’s views of a situation to discover subjective meanings of experiences or events, and meaning is co-constructed between the participant and the interviewer. Most of the interview questions - one, two, four, five, seven, eight, nine, and ten – were informed by social constructivism as they rest on the belief that the participant makes the events he or she describes real through his or her subjective perspective. On the other hand, critical theory, in this case, liberation psychology, emphasize the socio-historical context of meaning. Liberation psychology calls for adopting the perspective of the oppressed, and interview questions sought to discover instances when the participant would adopt such a perspective. Questions three and six of the interview protocol were influenced by critical theory as they ask participants to assume the role of students and community members...
and to describe life in the community and in the school from the perspective of every member, particularly those whom are marginalized.

Following Creswell’s (2007) suggestion, the interview questions focused attention on gathering data that would provide textural descriptions and structural descriptions of the experience under study, in this case, social justice advocacy in a rural setting. Finally, other open-ended questions based on the literature review sometimes were asked as they surfaced during interviews. The categories of questions fell into the following topics: personal information and background, community information, life experiences for the counselor and for community/school members, meaning of social justice advocacy, examples of their social justice advocacy in the rural school and community.

**Interview Procedure**

After selecting participants as described in the section participants and sampling, interviews were conducted in person and were audio recorded. I traveled to each participant’s community for every interview. Every effort was made to conduct interviews in the participant’s community as the context and natural settings were important factors to consider in a phenomenological study.

After introducing myself and providing the participant with an informed consent document, I discussed a general background to the study and asked if there were any questions. I then began with the semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. At the end of the interview I inquired again about further questions and offered additional details about how I became interested in doing the study. I discussed this issue only at the interview’s ending so that my comments did not interfere with the participant’s thoughts and beliefs about the phenomenon. At this point I also explained the use of member checks of the
transcripts and of the themes that I identified after analysis. After transcription of interviews, I sent participants the transcripts for them to check and respond to me if they were aware of discrepancies and did the same with the list of themes after analysis of the interviews. At the end of the interviews, I thanked the participants with a gift card for their participation.

Field Notes and Additional Sources of Data

Throughout this study, I kept detailed field notes and created an audit trail of my experiences. These notes included specifics on topics ranging from how I contacted potential participants to recording information regarding the actual interviews and the place at which the interviews were held. I also kept a reflexive journal (to be discussed in greater detail in the section on trustworthiness).

Community observations. In addition to the interviews, site observations of the rural communities were conducted as a part of this study. I entered as a complete observer and used an observational protocol for recording notes on experiences, hunches, and impressions of the community at large; these observational notes are included as both descriptive and reflective observations (Creswell, 2007).

Data Management

Each interview was audio recorded using the iPhone application iTalk. As a precautionary measure, a mini-cassette recorder also was used to record interviews as; however, the quality of the I Talk application was superior and made transcription of interviews clearer. Audio recordings were given to a hired transcriptionist who transcribe interviews saved under pseudonyms. Until the research was finalized, audio files of the interviews were saved on my personal computer.
Data Analysis

Generally, the analysis was comprised of preparing and organizing the data (transcripts and observational protocols) for analysis, then reducing the data through coding, and finally presenting the data in a discussion (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, the data analysis follows these steps, each of which was set forth by Creswell (2007). First, I have described my experiences with the phenomena under study, in this case, rural education. This is an attempt to bracket or set aside my personal focus so that the focus can be directed to the participants. The bracketing of my experiences with and biases about rural counseling can be found at the end of this chapter.

Second, after transcribing interviews and conducting observations, I found statements about how participants experienced the phenomena, and I listed these significant statements, treating each statement with equal worth. This process, called horizontalization, allowed me to develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. Next I used these statements to create groups called meaning units or clustered themes. In the next two steps I wrote descriptions of what the participants experienced, the textural descriptions, and how they experienced it, the structural descriptions. These steps are presented with thick, rich verbatim statements from the interviews. Finally, I have written a synthesized description of the textural and structural descriptions in a passage that represents the meaning and essence of the experiences of rural school counselor social justice advocates.

Again, since phenomenology is an emergent and fluid approach and since my theoretical orientation, constructivism-interpretivism, relies on co-creating meaning with my participants, my data analysis sometimes follows a non-linear pattern. I have kept detailed field notes to create an audit trail that records ideas and reflections about emerging themes as data analysis
occurred alongside transcription and observations. Data analysis also occurred within a research
team to be discussed in the following section.

**Trustworthiness**

Since in qualitative research the interviewer is the research instrument (Creswell, 2007), it is important to build into the study measures to establish the trustworthiness of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that the criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility.** To build credibility into this study, member checks and a peer research team were employed. I sent transcripts of the interviews to the participants and ask that they read and give feedback to me regarding differences or questions they have with the contents and to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. To further strengthen the study, themes identified during the analysis steps were shared with participants so that they could judge the accuracy and credibility of the findings. In addition, my dissertation committee is an integral part of my research, and I sought the guidance and input of my committee members in the data collection and entire methodology in terms of the analysis and presentation of findings.

My peer research team consisted of me and two other members. As the primary researcher, I am a practicing school counselor (a white woman) in my third year of a PhD program in Counseling and Student Personnel Services at a major southeastern university. The two additional peer research team members are also practicing school counselors (both white females) and members of my cohort also working towards their PhD’s in Counseling and Student Personnel Services. The peer research team assisted in the analysis of themes in a process called intercoder agreement after the transcription of interviews. Additionally, I shared my assumptions and biases about the rural setting, school counselors, and about social justice
advocacy in the rural setting with my peer research team before conducting interviews as one step in bracketing my biases (Creswell, 2007).

Transferability. For others to discover meaning in the findings of this study, thick, rich descriptions have been included. Unlike quantitative research, findings from qualitative research cannot be generalized to other populations. However, with detailed descriptions and thick, rich verbatim examples from the interviews, readers can draw conclusions that may be transferable to other settings.

Dependability. The primary researcher kept a detailed and complete audit trail of each step of the research process to further confirm the findings and to strengthen the dependability of the study.

Confirmability. One of the measures Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested for confirmability of qualitative studies is the use of the reflexive journal. Throughout the study, I kept a reflexive journal in which I made regular entries about methodological decisions and reflected upon my own values, biases, and assumptions.

Researcher as Analyst

Morrow (2007) stated that it is common for qualitative researchers to make their worldviews, assumptions, and biases known so that the reader understands the lenses through which the research is viewed. To bracket or set aside my biases and to make both my worldview and lenses known, the following is a narrative that tells my story.

I define myself as rural. Although I have lived in urban and suburban settings since graduating from college, I still see myself as a small town person and often feel like an outsider in the world of subdivisions, tennis teams, and new cars. My family of origin would be
categorized as working class. While my mother did graduate from high school, my father was a high school drop out who managed to work his way into manufacturing at a small factory.

From the first grade on, school was for me the best place in the world. I loved learning and the predictability that came with the school day. My area of southwest Georgia in the seventies and eighties was diverse racially only in terms of black and white, and socioeconomically, fifty percent of the population lived below the poverty line. We still had neighborhoods where only black people lived that were referred to as “the quarter.” At school, however, the racial divide was lessening, and my favorite teacher, was a black man. I have been forever changed by his role model and by the friendships with other children living even further outside the margins than my own family, friendships that happened because the schools were racially and socioeconomically diverse.

After college I left and became one of the examples of outward migration or brain drain that often occur in rural areas, but I still feel connected to the wiregrass and peanut fields of southwest Georgia. Returning today I see more vividly the poverty that lurked around me as a child but seemed normal then. I feel a connection to my rural area that transcends its physical location and makes me acutely sensitive to both the strong ties and desire to escape that individuals can experience in any rural setting.

Finally, my personal beliefs in social justice advocacy influence my goals for this study. Because I see the systemic changes that school counselors can initiate through social justice advocacy as a positive and powerful response to the educational challenges facing rural areas, I must be cognizant that I do not inappropriately influence participants in this study. I must be cognizant that I do not sentimentalize the rural setting and that I present its community cons along with its pros. My personal narrative has deep roots in rural education, and its branches
have spread into a strong commitment to bringing educational equity to all students no matter where they go to school. I feel fortunate to have grown up in the way that I did.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In phenomenological inquiry, “the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). The question or problem guiding this phenomenological study is the discovery of the meaning ascribed to the experience of social justice advocacy by school counselors in a rural setting. Through interviews with rural school counselors who describe themselves as social justice advocates, this study sought to discover the meaning ascribed by social justice school counselors to their role, to their place, and to the rural setting as it relates to their social justice advocacy. This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected through the interviews and proceeds through the following steps as described in the methodology of chapter three: synthesis of data and horizontalization; determination of meaning units and clusters of themes; discussion of themes with verbatim examples from the interviews; final synthesis of meanings and essences of the experience under study. As set forth by Moustakas, after the analysis of findings, chapter five of this study will conclude with implications for further research and reflection.

Background Information, Researcher and Participants

Before analyzing the data, a review of relevant background information regarding the researcher and the participants builds the foundation for the study. Phenomenological research is
often built upon the foundation of the co-creation of meaning, making the transparency of relevant background information on researcher and participants a critical piece of this study.

**Researcher Bracketing**

To abstain from making suppositions regarding the topic of social justice advocacy by school counselors in a rural setting, I bracketed my biases and assumptions on the topic. Presented in detail which included my worldview in chapter three, my biases surrounding rural education can be summarized as follows: rural education has been overlooked and underfunded; rural educators bring their love for the community to their work; rural education has been held back through the maintenance of the status quo. Likewise, my assumptions regarding rural school counseling and social justice advocacy centered around one major obstacle that advocates may face: educational peers, community members, and school leaders may hinder the efforts of advocates. By reflecting on my worldview and bracketing my personal views and preconceptions on the topic, I attempted to enter both the interview process and analysis of data as Moustakas (1994) suggested, without allowing my own meanings, interpretations, and theoretical concepts to affect the participants’ views. Finally, as noted in chapter three, I shared my worldview, biases, and assumptions with my research team to further strengthen the bracketing process.

**Participant Descriptions**

After conducting the snowball or chain sampling described in chapter three, I identified seven participants who met the criteria for this study. In each case, I traveled to the participant’s community and conducted a live interview that was audio recorded. The seven participants were located in four southeastern states and in five different regional areas of those states. In terms of their location based on the NCES definition of rural (Hoffman, 2010), of the seven, three worked
in areas considered fringe, two in distant locations, and two in remote locations. Their years of experience ranged from three years to fourteen years in school counseling. Of the seven, all but one were career educators having started either as a school counselor or as a classroom teacher. Finally, all but one of the participants considered him or herself to be a native of the rural area in which he or she worked as a school counselor.

**Researcher Observations of Sites**

Since phenomenology attempts to create a vicarious experience of the topic under study, I made detailed field notes of my observations of the rural areas as I traveled to them to conduct interviews. Recorded as descriptive and reflective observations (Creswell, 2007), I made immediate notes as I entered each site to record the actual sights encountered and the reactions I found myself having to each location. A sample of significant observations is presented here with both descriptive and reflective examples of notes recorded at each site. Descriptive notes for each location included the following: (a) location 1, many families out together, large number of closed factories; (b) location 2, farms, logging industry, confederate flags; (c) location 3, miles and miles of remote swampland, oil industry sites; (d) location 4, acres of gardening/nurseries, some encroachment of suburbs; (e) location 5, crumbling mansions and trailer parks, many Native American symbols. Reflective notes on each location included the following sample: (a) location 1, *why is nothing open on Sunday?*; (b) location 2: people apologized that library closed early and seemed eager to help me find another meeting place; (c) location 3: open disdain and disregard for this town from inn owner in the city, seemed to think putting the people there down was funny; (d) location 4: *is the shiny new welcome sign at the town’s entrance a sign of the new people moving in?*; and (e) location 5: *how can people live in such an isolated area; what if your car broke down way out here?*
Research observation notes contained diverse entries in terms of sights and reactions as I entered each of these rural locations. Descriptive notes revealed rural stereotypes such as farms and confederate flags (since the four states in which the interviews occurred were all southeastern) to unexpected sights such as a booming nursery gardening industry and Native American presence. Likewise, reflective notes revealed negative attitudes encountered toward ruralness as indicated in the literature review and in my own discomfort with the degree of isolation in another area. A final reflective observation of note in this study is that interviews were conducted in some of any locations’ most inclusive places, public parks and libraries. As the researcher, I found the inclusiveness of these locations to enhance in my mind the social justice framework of the entire study.

**Analysis of Interviews**

To begin the analysis of the interview data, I listened repeatedly to the interviews and reread transcripts of the interviews multiple times in an attempt to consider a broad range of each participant’s words. When I felt that I had developed a sense of the contents of the interviews, I began to follow the steps outlined by Creswell (2007) for the reduction of data into meaning units or clusters of themes leading ultimately to the synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomena under study, rural school counselor, social justice advocacy.

**Synthesis of Data and Horizontalization**

As I read the transcripts, I synthesized the data by making margin notes regarding statements participants made about the phenomenon. I then recorded my notes, thus creating an exhaustive list of possible significant statements. My research team also read and made notes in a similar manner. Next, I followed the process of horizontalization by combining the notes from
each reading, both mine and the team’s, treating each with equal worth, while at the same time not creating over-lapping or repetitive statements.

**Meaning Units or Clustered Themes**

In the next step in the analysis of the interview data I reduced the statements to those that seemed to illuminate the phenomenon best. I did this by eliminating redundant statements and by considering the number of times a similar statement was made by all participants. Next, I took the significant statements and grouped them into larger units of information called meaning units or themes. These themes contained both textural, or what the participants experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and structural, or how the participants experienced the phenomenon, themes. At the end of the data analysis, five themes proved to be significant.

**Discussion of Themes**

As described in the methodology of chapter three, as clustered meaning units or themes were identified, I shared the themes with each participant and with the research team to increase trustworthiness. Because phenomenology relies on the co-creation of meaning between the researcher and participants, participant input on the identification of themes was critical. The research team, primary researcher, and participants agreed that the following themes were significant: stability of place, community promise, mutual reliance, professional and personal integration, and a focus on individuals. These themes are illustrated in the following series of verbatim examples or thick, rich quotations taken from the seven interviews.

**Stability of Place**

In describing the rural setting, lifestyle, work environment, and outlook for students, participants shared many positive aspects regarding the stability of their place in terms of connections, family ties, and security. At the same time, participants were candid about the
negative aspects stability of place can bring to each as well. In a discussion of her rural area and its separation from the closest city, Brenda stated, “It’s not that far geographically, if you think about it, but [the city] is like another world to them.” Perhaps their feelings of separation from the city comes in part from the longevity of connections that many generations of families have held to their rural location. Eagle described her rural area in this way: “Hardworking... the younger people are more professionals and the older people are just outstanding people, just good hardworking people that have lived in this community for a long, long time.” When asked about her experience as a rural school counselor, Brenda described her work and life in her rural community with both sentiments.

I think that, and I’ve never worked in an inner-city school so I don’t know how to compare to that, but my experience has been the benefit of having generations. That was one of the interesting things when I started here was how the generations, you get the reputation of that constant, oh so you know her, remember her at the elementary school? And remember she is so-and-so’s mama? You have that connection before you even start working with students and parents, and that means a lot.

Kris described her rural school counseling experience in a similar manner.

It’s a very small community although it is growing everyday. You will see a lot of involvement with the local churches. Everyone knows each other. It’s one of those things that you don’t mind calling home because you probably know their parents or know of their parents. But more people are populating that area so it’s growing every day. But we’ve got really strong community roots.

Likewise, Hope described her rural work and community as mutually benefiting from the family connections.
It’s a small town, lots of churches. You would think there’d be no bad people here, but we do have them, but it’s a small town that is very family oriented. And I have worked here all of my years in this small town, so now I have children of students. So it’s neat because I feel like a grandmother to them all.

Hope went on to describe one of the ways that family-type connections enhances her work in her rural community.

I think the benefit is knowing the families. And also being able to go into the poorest of the poor and not; I don’t know if it’s because I have been there for thirty years, I think that’s a benefit for me, knowing the people, knowing the families, having taught some of the older people, having gone to church there … I can go into the ‘hood, and they’re like, *Mrs. Hope, What’s with you doing on this side,* and I’m like, *What’s with you doing on this side,* you know, back and forth.

As she continued, Hope explained that her home visits and the ease with which she entered many of her rural community’s most struggling neighborhoods made her rural school counseling efforts more effective.

Close family connections and the knowledge families have about one another’s circumstances were expressed as a benefit by Jill. Extremely low SES in her remotely located rural community meant that families sometimes struggled with conditions such as head lice that recurred frequently. Family understanding within the remote location brought a lack of judgment for the condition.

Especially those children with lice, and some might say, *Oh they keep it all the time, we see it all the time,* and then say, *Oh, it’s that family.* But for the most part that is not said
because they know they can’t help it. . . they don’t do it. . . it’s like an unspoken thing almost, you just know.

Knowledge, connections, acceptance, and some lack of judgment were expressed as positives in terms of the stability of place these school counselors experience. Brenda describes community members drawn back to these conditions.

Even though we are on the outskirts of the area, I feel like this area has been very close knit, I think it’s just like we said, they want to come back here. If they started out here, they come back here or some place like it, because there are other little communities out and around here. . .

On the other hand, stability of place has its drawbacks. Brenda described the attitude of some in rural communities as being such that, “I’ve always lived like this; it’s not that big of a deal.” Brenda explained that sometimes rural community members feel they have to settle, and this stability of place is not one she wished to foster. Jessica concurred.

Well, it’s because, once in a small town, always in a small town, so it’s like they never leave. Everybody’s like, this is their family, I am going to live, and I am going to die here. It’s like their parents went to this school, their grandparents went to that school, and now they are going to this school. And it carries on that way. The parents talk about other people’s children, and so then the children talk about it. The parents have a way of keeping things stirred up. It’s a generational thing because it just carries on through the generations. They think this small town is the only place in the world.

Generational reputations seemed to be a negative of the stability of place in rural areas. Jessica explained why.
Well the benefits of it would be if you’re in you’re in, but if you’re out, you’re out. I guess you would say you can be a star out here. If you’re an excellent student, you are popular and everybody knows you and that’s great, and the teachers love you, and you are well known and you are chosen for everything, you know, you’re great. But if you’re not, then everyone also knows you as well, but it’s for the opposite reason and then you’re the one that they talk about at the ballpark. You’re the one always criticized at the ballpark. . . and it doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. That’s just the way things go.

Stability of place often means that moving out of one’s educational reputation is difficult as local people do not forget the reputation of families. Jessica described this experience.

You can decide that you don’t want to be considered a *blank* like the rest of my family, and you can be a perfect student, but you will be considered part of that family. . . your whole school career. . . Especially in a small town because usually, educators in a small town, they stay, they don’t go anywhere, there is not much turnover in a small community.

Kris found the same negative qualities in the stable, unchanging nature of rural communities.

Other drawbacks are narrow mindedness. We have students who’ve come in from other areas that may be homosexual, or dress differently, a lot of the kids in our school are not really open to that, because they haven’t seen that before. If you are exposed to people who are kind of different, you are kind of scared of that. Because you really aren’t sure, or you can’t really feel our what’s going on there. I would say most of our kids are very small town, hunting and fishing and things like that. So we have to teach a lot of tolerance.
Kris went on to say that she wanted to think of her rural area as being more progressive, yet she had to recognize that narrow mindedness was a problem in the community. Educators, too, can become stuck when the stability of place become too comfortable. Kris explained, “Most of the people who work in the school and around the school have been there for years and years, and they like the old way of doing things. They stick with tradition. You know when you have somebody who comes in with new ideas, it’s not easily accomplished.”

Stability of place, according to Don, can bear a negative affect on families as well in terms generational cycles, both for families and for the schools themselves. He discussed the generational cycles of early pregnancy and poverty in his rural community, but added “there’s still a tight family support that helps buffer it a little bit.” Another community factor he discussed in terms of the negative aspects that can occur in cycles with the stability of a place was racism. He observed that historically, community members had sent their children to private schools instead of to the public schools in his rural area due to racism.

And then what happens so then twenty years ago the support wasn’t there in schools even though it was no longer necessarily strictly racial it was the history that caused it. So the schools were sub-par from lack of support, and so then you didn’t send your kids because it was, you know, whether it was racial or not. Now we’re getting more and more kids coming in from private schools and are behind us. And word’s getting around, but the reputation takes a long time to mend.

According to these rural school counselors, stability of place in terms of generational support and reputations, was a common experience, both positive and negative, for individuals and the community as a whole.
Community Promise

In their discussions of rural experiences, participants recounted details of life there that can be collectively referred to as community promise. Like stability of place in their rural areas, community promise was discussed in both positive and negative terms. For the purpose of this discussion, the term promise refers to the indicators of success the community holds. Participants commented on a wide range of indicators of success from their rural experiences that speak to their pride and to their worry about success there.

One of the major indicators participants discussed that falls under the theme of community promise was the lessened degrees of boundary or separation between groups of people in their rural areas. Simply playing sports with every other group of person in town helps to break down barriers and to create bonds for future relationships within the community. Jill explained as follows:

The benefits for the students, I think, as far as our community, is that they grow up and do things together, everybody. For instance our little football teams; we have softball, baseball, and football teams and they grow up together so when you are grown up, you know a lot of people in the community just because you grew up with them at school. . .

I don’t know how to say this, but our community school is different from an urban or an inner-city school so you got to understand how a community works, and they have that benefit here.

Additionally, this participant saw promise in her community in part because of what it is not, a city. Jill added, “We have a joke here that people here can talk about the other people, but if anybody else talks about them, we take up for them. It’s because we’re such a rural area; it makes us close knit here. We have to because we have to go so out of our way to get any help or
to have contact anywhere so that’s why we are like we are.” Jill explained the point further when she said, “We have people here who have lots of money, and people here who are dirt poor. The families go way back, generations back, so that you grow up knowing all these people so it’s not so much that you are isolated by your income or social status. They still work together.” Jill added that growing up in a rural area such as hers the people all live near one another, go to school together, work and play together one because of the small size of the town and the sheer isolation of it from other areas. Three times in her discussion of her rural area she pointed out that her community differed greatly from the city, a point she appeared to take pride in and see promise in.

Participants also discussed with pride the investment they believe community members take in their rural community. Kris expressed belief that “in a small community you are just more personally invested in those kids and the community and making sure they get what they need.” Like Jill, she pointed out the ways in which students interact with one another across boundaries.

It’s great being a school counselor here. You see all kids of different things here. We have, I don’t want to say, the same problems as an urban school, you know, all the kids get along. Of course there are the high school cliques and things like that. It’s really that everyone gets along with everyone. And they all know each other; they’ve grown up together. They’ve played rec-park football, baseball, cheerleading, all of those things together.

Like Jill as well, Kris took pride in distinguishing her school and community from the city ones. Don, too, observed the way in which community members view their rural community with pride. He states, “Let’s say, with suburbia, everybody lives there, small town, everybody’s from
there. And suburban parents are very much *What are you doing for my kid*, but with the small town it’s more embracing as our kids and just a sense of community and a little ownership by the community.” Investment on the part of the community was portrayed by Don as a community indicator of success while at the same time he pointed out that this marker distinguishes his community from another, this time suburbia. As a final mark of a rural community’s investment and promise, Brenda recounted how the town’s library was built. After years and through the combined efforts of young and old, the community has its own library so that townspeople did not have to travel into the city for library services.

Community promise was evident in the stories participants shared regarding the efforts on the part of community members to improve the next generation. Kris discussed how students marked by generational poverty will continue to be there, and that if they leave they will most likely return, and so efforts must be made to break the generational struggles of poverty and low-levels of education. Hope told the story of a principal she worked with who believed that community promise is built on helping those most needy. “Now she’s the principal of this school. It’s like her community. She told me once, that the kids that give us the most trouble are not leaving our community, so I am going to do everything I can to help them.” Hope concurred with her principal and added, “Those that don’t get the academics are still going to stay in our community. So either they are going to have a respect for the school and want better for their town or not.” Hope believed that this difference was up to her and that her efforts could increase promise or the indicators of success, this time respect, for the community.

Community promise seemed most likely to Hope through her efforts to motivate students to come back and make a difference in their community. To combat outward migration, she focused her efforts on certain students.
Well, I will speak to our Black community, because the kids I have taught, when they come back, I’m like, *Oh you need to come back,* and they tell me it just bothers them to see how things haven’t changed. And I tell them it’s because everybody leaves us, and you don’t come back to make it better. But we do have some that come back…She was one of my Tigerettes, but it was the first thing she had ever done at school. So I got to know her parents because they had a crawfish farm, and they had a tree farm, but that’s how they make their money…but when she decided to go to college he [her dad] was like, *No! That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. She’s gonna get married.* *She’s gonna stay home.* [I told him that] that’s crazy. She might do that one day; there’s nothing wrong with that.

Hope’s efforts to build community promise were successful: the young lady did become the first in her family to go to college after which she returned to the community.

Efforts to build upon both the pride in and promise for her rural community resonated in Brenda’s experiences as well. Like Hope, her goal to improve the community by expanding the college-going student numbers became locally bound. She told how she does this when she takes her students on bus tours of colleges or universities, an intervention to be discussed at greater length in a following passage. Brenda utilized the promise of local connections to motivate potential college students for college.

Well, I think one thing that we have done in the past is when we schedule a day to tour a school or a university, we usually have a student who is an alumni [of our school] do the tour. And so when they would walk up, it was so funny because they walk up and go, *Oh I remember you from my high school!*** And so they have that connection. The kids see them getting so emotional, and then the kids say, *Didn’t you have Mr. So-and-So?* And
so that connection is right there, and so, “You’re here and you had him for math, too?” or 
You had her for science? I feel like that is a big part of the connection.

Community connections provided a glimpse into community promise for Brenda’s rural students.

As with stability of place, community promise also had an opposite side in the reflections of these rural school counselors, with the opposite of indicators of success being the lack of resources in the community. Jill described the lack of resources coming down to one factor: “The only drawback I see is that there are not always jobs available for people so they work in an outlying area … the job offerings here would be the drawback of being in a small community.”

Brenda remarked about the promise of the community’s new library, but recognized the lack of indicators of success in the lack of technology.

I think some of the challenges include the lack of resources, just like I said, the library itself just being here, the parents that still, we have email newsletters that go out, and yet we have only 300 emails, and we have over 1,800 students, and we have only 300 email addresses. That’s not the best way to get information out. And still coming over the challenge of scholarships and applications for colleges that are done online, and we have computers in our guidance office, but some of the kids don’t get on Facebook every night, and they don’t know how to navigate, and the time it takes to do that, and just things like that, I guess, resources.

The lack of resources as indicators of success affected more than the lack of technology. Jill discussed the problem in her rural school.

Another drawback might be that we are not able to offer arts and music. We had had art and music teachers, but with the cuts through the school board because of the economy, and the schools are suffering because they don’t have money so one of the drawbacks
would be there is not as much arts and things that can be offered. We have schools in the other areas, magnet schools, that offer the arts, where as we are not able to here because of the money.

Don discussed how finances are an issue in his rural community and how the lack of money affects transportation for his rural students.

But finances are an issue. Buses, we are a lot more spread out. So we are going to have to spend a lot more money on buses. And it takes longer, you do two loads, and you’ve got to go way out and way back again. Some of our children spend way too much time on the buses. Just for my taste. And it’s just getting from here to there and a lot of stops on the way.

Eagle, too stated that her rural students are affected by the lack of resources in the community.

The lack of access, I would have to say. A lot of my kids eat in fast food restaurants, but they don’t know what it is like to go to a museum. We take them on field trips, but it’s not something they would do. We live within an hour of the beach, and I have children that have never been to the beach, or they have never been to the zoo unless it’s with someone from school.

Regardless of the lack of resources, Eagle expressed a form of community promise or an indicator of success her community holds despite its lack of access.

It’s almost sheltered. It really is. We don’t see the gang activity, you know, we don’t see the crime rate. People do pitch in like when there is a house fire or something tragic, everybody pitches in. Everybody is aware of it. Everyone tried to help.
The rural community’s promise permeated Eagle’s comments about her life and work experience there. A second time she discussed the lack of resources but followed it with what she describes as an indication of success in the community.

Yes because the kids don’t have the opportunities that they would have for the classics and for the museums. They just don’t have the exposure to as many things. I guess the biggest thing they are exposed to in the community is the huge community ball program that pulls everybody together and where everybody knows everybody. That can be a negative, but you can make it a positive. I went up to the park one year and said, Look guys, we’ve got state testing and passed out little flyers to make sure your kids are in bed this week [because] it’s state testing.

So while rural students in Eagle’s community lack exposure, she expressed that other behaviors, norms, and connections akin to the shelter she described previously balance and provide a measure of success for her rural students.

The lack of financial resources and job opportunities in their rural communities flowed through each of the participants’ remarks about their experiences in the communities. More often than not though, participants followed the lack of a resource with comments that revealed that rural communities find a way to create the promise they need. Don discussed that his rural community has suffered from the inability to find professionals to fill specialized school positions. In terms of finding a school counselor after losing several to urban and suburban areas, Don explained the solution.

And they went through several [school counselors] in a row, and they decided that they needed to promote from within. It wasn’t a promotion really. And I don’t know if they
helped her go to school or just looked for someone who wanted to do it who was with the school. And that was kind of their solution to the problem.

Perhaps Brenda put it best when she described the collective attitude of just not accepting some events that might occur in her rural school. She related an attitude of pride in the school and among the students that would not tolerate negative influences, an attitude developed in their character education program.

That fact that it is rural as you were describing in your questions, and I was thinking back to the character education, and it struck me in that, and I still use this when I think of a rural setting, and that is not at my school. If you see something that is going on, and you don’t approve of it, and it’s against the rules, I say, Not at my school; don’t do that. And I’ve heard other students say, Not at my school. I have to just quietly let them see that we have a standard here because we are all in this together. If we have that identity with our school then hopefully their ownership will take over, and they will want better. We will set higher standards, and it comes back again, and I feel like you can do that more in a rural setting because of the connection with the community, the churches, the families, you know. It’s not at our school; it’s not at my school.

While the idea may have been created through the education program, the connection between community members that Brenda described came as she saw it from the connection that a rural setting provides.

Mutual Reliance

According to the participants in this study, the promise for rural communities lies in the connections that exist between the people there. Despite a sometimes staggering lack of finances for individuals and for the rural economies as a whole, the rural communities represented here
have school counselors who expressed tremendous belief in the potential for success there. As they discussed the benefits of their experiences as rural community members, a recurrent factor that emerged was the mutual reliance between the schools and community organizations or between the school counselor and other educators. Don introduced the concept in his description of how he finds resources for students in the rural community. “Probably back to relationships; somebody who knew somebody.” The connections that occur through cultivating relationships with others in the rural community helped Don to find resources.

Kris described how she is able to get the word out about the sometimes complicated topic of advanced placement to students and parents in a community where higher educational aspirations have been challenging to motivate.

We advertise in our local newspaper. We put it up on our school website. We put it on our marquee outside of our school. We put up flyers all over the school for kids to see. We have teachers announce it in every class, and just all of those things. We put it on [name of town].com which is a website people go to look for local news.

Besides the relationships with individuals throughout the community and with the local news outlets to meet student needs, every participant noted the reliance they feel on the local faith-bases organizations. Eagle referred to the lack of resources and credited the organizations with helping meet needs. “The challenge that I would say would be the greatest is the lack of income. You have a lot of people that have economic needs, but our faith-based organizations are a tremendous asset. As a counselor, I depend heavily on them.”

Eagle went on to explain the connection her community schools have with their local faith-based organizations, a connection carefully built so as not to include religion in the schools.
All the principals, assistant principals, and one Partner in Education liaison from each school, one teacher or faculty member, and we had a round table discussion and decided how can you help me and how can I help you. This is what we can do with religion in school. We can allow the churches to minister to the kids and meet their needs. We kind of laid it out on the table, and when we left the luncheon, we had a list of things the church could do and a list of things we could call on for each church… We invited school board members, and we had someone represented from every area so that legally we were walking the walk and doing the talk. We had our representative there; our senator was there; everybody was there.

Kris explained depending on the rural faith-based organizations again to get the word out about specialized school content such as parent nights. “Talking to the pastors, telling them we are having this parent night, can you announce it to the parents of our kids that go to our school. And I think if the pastors say it they will check it out.”

Hope explained partnering with her rural faith-based organizations as well to meet student needs. She described one intervention.

When I was at that school, and they did that, study nights, and I started it for my kids in high school so we, at an area church that opened up the fellowship hall for math and English. So I got the teachers to give us all their study guides, and a group of us got together that were comfortable with that, and we had a study night for the kids at the fellowship hall. And the science and social studies was at another church’s fellowship hall. And the people at the church were like, can we help?, and of course, they could come help.
In her isolated rural community, Jill talked about relying heavily on the local faith-based organizations because financially strapped families have difficulty traveling into other cities or towns for services. The churches provide food for the weekend for children to take home with them as a primary need since seventy-five percent of her school qualifies for free lunches. Local church volunteers mentor needy children in the schools. Beside the food and mentoring they provide, local ministers volunteer their time to tutor adult students in a tremendously successful GED program offered at the school.

Faith-based organizations are not the only rural organizations these participants rely upon for meeting student needs. Recurrent in many of the participants’ discussions were references to the importance of parks and recreation sports programs. The ball field came up as a powerful influence for providing connections in these rural communities. Kris discussed again how she gets the word out about specialized content at her school through coaches for parks and recreation teams.

And really hitting the coaches and giving them a little positive self-esteem that they can do it. I think they have been told that they can’t do it for so long that they kind of believe that. . . I mean these kids look up to their coaches. They have a huge influence. The football coach, the baseball coach, the wrestling coach, and I think that it would be good. If these kids have this athletic ability, and we have so many kids with great athletic ability, but they don’t go anywhere because they don’t have the grades. And we want that for them, and this is the way to get that.

Kris recognized that in order to motivate students to take AP classes and make the grades for college, her local parks and recreation coaches are influences outside the school that her rural students in particular look up to.
Kris described a reliance inside the building for meeting the needs of her students through school counseling interventions as well. Traveling together the distance required for rural educators to attend professional development opportunities allows Kris and her assistant principal to discuss and make plans for their students. Kris explained how she relies on these events.

[We have to travel for] four hours. And we rode together so we had lots of conversations on the way there, on the way back. When you go to one of those conferences and trainings, you come back so energized and so ready to make changes. And then you get to your school, and it’s like a brick wall. But we have made big changes. . . I think this is important because she can make the decisions. I cannot make really school wide decisions.

Besides relying on educational partners within her school, Kris partners with educational change makers outside the school building to meet the needs of her rural students despite the lack of resources often experienced there.

Absolutely. It is [very expensive]. Right now we are feeling the economic crisis just as everyone else is. We’ve had a bank go under, businesses go under, and we haven’t had a pay increase in four years. It’s tough out there. When all of that happening it’s kind of hard to say, *Will you pay $1,000 for me to go to this professional development*, but luckily we formed a partnership with the College Board. It is a grant, and I want to say that they gave it to several rural communities, and they’ve given us money for professional development to send our teachers to workshops, for our AVID program. They gave us all free PSAT tests that the kids don’t have to pay for so that they can get that exposure to what these college tests are like. It’s been wonderful.
Further, the reliance this rural school counselor has on her assistant principal comes in some degree to the lack of separation between their roles or levels of leadership within the school. Kris explained this positive lack of a distinct hierarchy that allows her reliance to occur.

I think that in a smaller community we are all equals. We are all in it together. We are all in it for the kids, all of those kinds of things. My principal and assistant principal have never made me feel as though I am less valued or anything like that. They are always there to listen to my ideas. And they are always there to see what I have to think about things.

Kris described their efforts as a common vision. “So I think we had a common vision when it came to making sure that all kids for the opportunity to advance their studies and to be the best they could be.” Rural communities suffering from diminished resources in terms of educational dollars, local job opportunities, and young people to stay need the efforts of school counselors who organize efforts for meeting student needs. These needs range from the basics, such as food on the weekends all the way to the need to pursue a rigorous education for college preparedness. These rural school counselors described the reliance as mutual in that while the community relies on their effort to meet community needs, these rural counselors rely on individuals and organizations well outside their departments to provide for students in rural schools.

**Personal and Professional Integration**

Stability of place that provides security but can be limiting, community promise despite a present lack of resources, and the critical balance of mutual reliance with the community emerged as factors that require a unique blend of personal and professional integration for these rural school counselors. When asked about their experience of their role and the traits needed to be successful in the rural setting, each school counselor discussed the broad, encompassing
nature of their experience, one that requires integrating their personal and professional selves. Hope introduced the concept when she described the following, “So I think it’s just make sure you’re ready to do it all, and some things that may be considered not your job.” At the same time, the responsibilities considered to encompass Hope’s high school counseling job are massive.

And I don’t know how it is with you, but there is no clerical work [to support the department]. I am the registrar; I do the records; I do the testing. . . I do the 504. I do the special education, and so it’s constant scheduling, report cards, grades, and I think I did more actual one on one. I have to make myself get out there, like at lunch. I meet with all classes at least twice a year. I have freshman parent meetings three times a year, and senior parent meetings twice a year. The juniors and seniors I get in the classrooms twice a year. Sophomores twice a year because I do the testing that’s ACT sponsored.

As the only counselor in her small rural high school, Hope described her professional role as one that requires a personal ability to *wear many hats*.

Don, too, as the only counselor in his elementary school, used the reference of *wearing many hats* repeatedly in his description of his work. Beyond the juggling of many responsibilities for Don, though, was the central nature of building relationships in his rural school counseling role. Just as students and community members must consider their reputations perhaps to a greater degree in rural areas, Don discussed the importance of relationships and thereby reputations. “So it’s relationships and reputations, and even being part of the area, and how I’m out in the community, and when I see people, and you know the kids names or at least they smile when they see you when they know who you are. So it’s the relationships are
everything.” While in some settings using data may create the change that social justice advocates seek to foster, for Don in his rural setting, he described the opposite.

It is personal. It is. The historic long memories I have talked about and the long relationships. While the data matters, I think I’ll kind of do a counter narrative. There are schools where you would want to go in with your data for your school and talk about how this is going to help these students and this school’s needs. And you need the data, and you will be using it, but in this setting while yes using data, what makes the impact in terms of long-term program support, I’ve noticed I think I just start small, do it well, and then branch out, which probably works anyway. But the reputation, building relationships, and reputations are everything.

Being able to gauge one’s relationship, reputation, and approach with his peers was described by Don as allowing him to build new programs needed for educational change. “If I came in kind of gung-ho with whatever the next new thing was that we need to implement to fix this problem, while it sounds great, it would fall on its face because I hadn’t done the ground work.” And for Don, ground work for professional success in his rural community was described as leading with relationships.

In Don’s rural community, his personal approach to potential racial tension was described as leading to success professionally.

It is a very unique role. And another part if taking those things into account, and those relationships, and for instance being a white males in an area that still has ripple effects of desegregation that includes some social effects of figuring our who you can trust, and who you can’t across those boundaries. I get it on both ends, where I have to be very intentional about how I treat black students, black families, kind of proactively.
Reaching out the hand for a handshake, and not forcing myself on somebody, but being very aware that I do to build maybe more trust. That trust there is important.

As explained by Don, developing a persona that crosses racial boundaries is a trait needed in his professional role. Unlike Don, Kris described using data as a skill she does find necessary in her role to create change necessary for programs in her school, but one that she combines with a personal connection. Using the data works to sell teachers on increasing their number of students taking advanced placement classes. But Kris combines this professional use of the data with her personal connection to the teachers as a former AP classroom teacher herself.

Absolutely. Because I really know what goes on in the AP classroom. I can sympathize with them. I know what it’s like to grade all of those essays, and I know what it’s like to make up all of those lesson plans. I’m right there with them, but you instill in those kids the knowledge that they need to know.

Crossing boundaries to create the personal connections that lead to professional success was described as integral in each of these rural settings.

A personal understanding of the people in their rural setting permeated the reflections on their professional role for the participants in this study. Hope described her role this way: “I think I do it in a way that they all know that I go to bat for the kids, but I do it in a way that I don’t intimidate them. I don’t intimidate them, and I never have the last word.” Don described politics in his area as requiring understanding. “I would say it’s more sensitive in rural areas, especially right now and maybe more in the south.” Encountering politics in his community requires Don to behave with caution professionally.

And countering, and it’s not like, I’d say that there are areas that they’re not more progressive. And I can sense the Tea Party movement and some other things in this area
so I have to be careful how I do it when I counter. So sometimes it’s very gentle, and it’s very developmental. What’s that next step or half step from where that person’s coming from.

The clash of politics was not the only factor requiring a unique personal understanding of the community. In her rural community, Jessica described her need to be a mediator of sorts for the clash of personalities in her rural school. “A lot of people in rural areas like this are scrappy. They are fighters. And if you have the same bluntness with them, they are kind of like, they will back off. But if you are real meek and mild and real, like, timid with them, they are going to walk all over you.”

To a question about the possible need for extraordinary people skills in a rural setting, Hope described that in her community it could be possible since you deal with so many different types of people. In her response to the question, Hope described working in a way that develops trust with even the most marginalized families in their community so that they understand she is there to help them without ulterior motives.

I was at a track meet, and I got a call that one of my sixth graders got run over and killed. And it was a pitiful little family, rough. So I went back, and I asked where do they live? And they were like, You’re not going out there. And I was like, Yes I am. The mama came and wanted to whoop the bus driver’s ass because she wouldn’t stop long enough to pick her up. But then she broke down and cried and said nobody will come out here because of who we are. So I went out there. So that’s when everybody commented that I went to their house.

Developing personal courage to meet educational needs seemed to resonate with Hope in terms of her professional outreach, and Don described a degree of personal courage needed to create
advocacy initiatives in his rural school. “And I don’t know if it’s that Tea Party, Fox News or what, but if I came in calling it social justice, calling it even diversity awareness, which we actually did in our school, and the teachers took it reasonably well, but we still had some resistance, so I have to be sneaky.” Indeed, for Don and for Hope, meeting the needs of the marginalized seemed to require personal courage in the face of societal and political forces.

Integrating personal and professional understanding surfaced in the reflections of both Brenda and Jessica as well, and the centrality of the rural community ballpark emerged again. Brenda stated the following about how professional reputations can be built at the venue.

Word of mouth does a lot, too. Plus you know it is, for good or bad, there is a lot of talk at the ballgames going on, and when they are sitting out at the ballpark, they start saying things and talking and there is a lot of discussion. It makes a difference that’s where you can get a lot of the working relationships. They feel like, okay, we can trust her to help my child or to do what’s best for my child.

When asked about being able to remain anonymous in her rural community, Jessica simply stated, “I don’t go to the ball field!” While her comment was made humorously, Jessica’s reaction captured the personal understanding needed for professional success in her rural setting.

Finally, several participants made observations on the aforementioned personal anonymity in their professional worlds. Jill described the benefit of trading personal anonymity for professional understanding of her community.

You know a lot of your kids parents so that helps to know where your kids come from. It helps you to know their socio-economic level. It helps you to know what kind of help they might need. Sometimes it’s not a good thing because you run into a lot of parents at the grocery store, but I like that, and that’s interesting that you ask that because my
husband loves so much when we go in the store, and the kids say, *Hey Ms. Jill*. And to him, he loves that. He sees that as an extension from the school, and I think the parents trust you because they know you from this area, and they know where you come from, so they know you are there for their children.

Don, too, described the ability to accept the loss of personal anonymity as an important part of his professional success in the rural setting. When asked about life outside of school in his small town, Don said the following: “Oh I can guarantee running into several families. When I go to the grocery store after work, I am going to have several conversations with families in the grocery store.” Hope described the personal understanding of other family members for her life in the community.

My husband won’t go with me to eat. He worked nights so for a couple of years my daughter cheered at the local college, and so he had a night job so he could be off on Saturday nights when they played. We’d go and so there were several places he wouldn’t go to because he said he wouldn’t be able to sit down with me for forty-five minutes without the work. But that’s just – people come and visit. And they like him, too. But I don’t know. I don’t mind, and they will apologize, *Oh I hate to ask you this at church or at the store.* But it’s fine.

For Don, Jill, Brenda, and Hope, the personal ability to integrate their professional and personal roles seemed to be an accepted and even valued part of their rural counseling experience. When asked about remaining anonymous, Hope stated how far the public scrutiny goes.

No it won’t happen. And that’s another thing I try to tell my kids. That people are always looking at you and what you’re doing. So you have to be honest, you have to be fair. You don’t want to have to go back and say, *Why did I do that?* Or that I’m so sorry.
For these participants, crossing boundaries, understanding the community’s unique blend of people, and trading anonymity for connections emerged as professional skills made stronger with the integration of special personal traits.

**A Focus on Individuals**

Discussions with the seven participants in this study revealed that comments regarding the stability of place, community promise, mutual reliance, and the integration of unique personal and professional skills share commonalities across each rural school counselor’s experiences. Participant reflections on their social justice advocacy as a rural school counselor share many commonalities as well. In his comments regarding social justice advocacy, Don stressed the importance of individual relationships within the context of current politics. “So it is the relationships and doing the work and branching out with those mindsets, but people might not like the words social justice because it’s being actively labeled socialism and communism stuff right now.” Don stressed taking one step at a time with social justice advocacy in his rural community and that he strives not to make waves with it. The theme of mutual reliance resonated in his comments about changing the status quo. “I don’t make a lot of waves with it. I think it’s finding more community partners.” Don’s comments suggested that he works with individual community partners and with individuals in his education setting as they require personalized services to bring social justice to life without making waves in his community.

Jessica, too, specified that her social justice advocacy lies in her work with individual students as well. “Where the need is - is what I do. That is where my social justice advocacy lies, in here the need is for the individual child. The individual need for the individual child. I try to do an individual plan for each child. I try not to group students by grade level. I guess you would say I try to help the individual.” Jessica explained at length her well-received student
advisement program that is an intervention at the school level, but her social justice advocacy lies in work with the individual student within the program.

Kris explained her work as a social justice advocate as centering on the individual as well. She offered her definition in the following way:

It means that I am there for all students. That no matter what your race, how much money your parents make, what your sexual orientation, it doesn’t matter, that you have a right to an education and to make all your expectations come true. I am there to make sure they get a good education, that everybody gets a good education. And that they are ready once they graduate high school to pursue anything that they choose to.

Kris offered the story of an individual effort to illustrate her social justice advocacy.

I have a young lady that I taught about four years ago when she was a freshman. Her parents are no longer living, and she lives with her sister. Her sister is always telling her, *I don’t know why you are always in those hard classes. You’re not smart enough to do anything*, all of those types of things. I take those kinds of kids under my wing. Two weeks ago I helped her fill out the registration to take the ACT. I sit with kids like that because I know that they don’t have a frame of reference of how to do a college application, how to fill out forms for financial aid. I kind of make that my mission. Get those kids what they need.

An important note regarding Kris’s advocacy work is that while she stressed individual efforts as defining her social justice advocacy, she led the way in her school to make access to advanced placement classes for all students an accepted policy. Kris was the single participant in this study to describe a systemic intervention as defining of her social justice advocacy.
When asked if she advocated differently for some students because of her social justice advocacy beliefs, Hope explained that some of her students need greater advocacy because of their generational lack of confidence. Hope offered two examples of the individual focus of her advocacy.

Yes, it’s generational. The little girl that I sponsor is going to be eighteen, and we have an options program for kids that are at risk to get their GED. And they go through this options program, and she won’t be able to get her GED because of her reading level. Sweet, trustworthy, comes from a very dysfunctional family though. But she is just, I don’t know, she is just something. So like with her, I have taken her to driving school. This is the second weekend. The family doesn’t even own a car. I have a couple of friends that I am going to take her to and train her to clean houses because it’s just one of my obsessive things. . . . And so it’s just I don’t know what’s going to help her.

Unsure of how to help the student overcome staggering odds, Hope’s answer was to focus her effort on the individual and to advocate for her within her own family to learn to drive and to perform a basic community job skill. Hope’s advocacy in another marginalized student’s life focused on the individual student and helping her to develop social capital for the next generation of her family.

Just an example. I have a girl, and she calls me Maw. She had her first child at thirteen. She was pregnant at twelve. By the time she got to high school, big black girl, and I taught PE, and they were like, You better watch out she hit her teacher, . . . and so she gets to high school, but she didn’t finish ninth grade. I found out her birthday was on my dad’s birthday, and so for her birthday in the 9th grade I made her a heart cake and brought it to school. . . and I told her to take the rest home, and she said this is the first
birthday cake I have ever had. . . she got a job for the first time in the cafeteria in the middle school. Never would come to school. When her youngest one got into high school, I told her that she needed to go up there to speak to those teachers. She has every right to be up at that school as I do. It’s foreign to me how they think like that, but I have never been treated differently I guess.

Like Kris, Hope described her social justice advocacy with an individual focus. “I think it for all of them to have that chance. That opportunity to know about it, and to be able to take that step into better for them, whatever it may be, whatever level they are, to better themselves personally and emotionally…them knowing they deserve the opportunity.”

At the elementary level, participants often discussed that social justice advocacy efforts happen with the parents of their students. When asked about her primary advocacy efforts, Eagle discussed how anger sometimes fuels her social justice advocacy efforts.

I’ll tell you where I experience it the most and get angry the most is when there is a really bright child and they work and work and work, but they do it all by themselves. There is not that parent that will sign advance placement [forms]; there is not that parent to support the child in advanced placement. They are literally their own advocate. There is nobody to push them and because of their dress and because of their lack of parent support they don’t always make the PACE program, they don’t get recommended for those advanced classes or those extra areas for academic excellence or those scholarships. They just don’t have the parental support.

Eagle went on to offer an example of an individual student for whom she advocated to see that the child receive the PACE or academically challenging program she deserved.
Jill defined her social justice advocacy as centering on individual students who need her support because of the lack of it they receive from parents as well. She explained that she recognizes that she “helps more of the lower social-economic students than I do the higher ones because their parents are able to do more for them than the lower socio-economics.” But in Jill’s community the efforts to reach individual students went beyond advocating for students into actually educating their parents. Jill explained.

Okay, what we did was a lot of our parents don’t have an education, and so they are not able to help their children, so to better help the parents, help the children, last summer we offered a GED program here through Good Will Easter Seals, and we did not have a lot of people participate, but it worked, and we had some who graduated, and the GED Easter Seals Program does have a graduation program so the people feel like they have an accomplishment. At the beginning of the year, we started it again, and sent a letter out that asked if parents were interested, and we sent it home with students, every student takes home a letter. If the parents respond to the survey then we call the parent, and we tell them when the classes start, this is when we offer the classes, and they have what we call an intake. The parents who are interested will come to the intake. . . we have people at our schools that are actually the teachers for the GED program.

In a short time the program has doubled its graduates, and Jill sees its success as lying in its location – at the local school of a very remote community – and its being taught by community members. While the effort proved to be far reaching in terms of the number of individuals served, the intervention described by Jill for her students’ parents nevertheless focused on serving the educational needs of individuals.
Advocating for or focusing on the needs of individuals emerged from Brenda’s discussion of social justice advocacy in her rural community as well. Brenda explained that she organizes a bus trip to colleges and universities for her students around her state, but her primary advocacy efforts center on individual needs. She related the success story of her school sponsoring a needy student.

We had a particular success story last year, she is at [blank] this year, I knew her in elementary. And the faculty at our school actually just took responsibility for this child. She is at [blank] and doing well, the lady is in place, and she will be the first generation out of many, many in her family to go to college, and she came by a few weeks ago and just had to tell me how awesome it was, and it's the kind of thing that just keeps you going. Of course she sent me someone else now and said, *Okay, I need you to work on him now.*

Asked about her beliefs regarding issues of equality versus equity, Brenda explained, “I feel like everybody, you know, being fair doesn’t mean everybody gets the same thing. Being fair means everybody gets what they need. That student was our success story last year… you’ve got to step in just meeting those needs.” Across the board, in these seven rural participants’ reflections, social justice advocacy meant meeting the needs of individual students.

**Synthesis of Experiences**

Having presented the units of meaning or clusters of themes that emerged in the discussions of the participants’ experiences, the final step of analysis in a phenomenological study is to provide a synthesis of the experiences that captures the essence of the phenomenon examined. Research focused on the discovery of the meaning ascribed to the phenomenon of social justice advocacy by school counselors in a rural setting. Further, inquiry focused on the
participants’ experience of their role, place, and community as they relate to their rural social justice advocacy. Creswell (2007) stated that the goal of the phenomenologist is to reach the essence or essential invariant structure of the phenomenon by reducing the textural (what) and structural (how) meanings of the experiences to a brief description that captures the experience of all the participants in the study. The following section presents this synthesis of all of their experiences.

**Textural Meanings or Themes**

The themes mutual reliance and a focus on individuals reveal textural meaning in terms of the phenomenon rural school counseling, social justice advocacy. Throughout their observations under the theme of mutual reliance, participants talked about low socio-economic status, a lack of resources, and the need to face generational struggles within the community. Each of these needs and others were met, though, through their efforts to combine forces with primarily faith-based and sports and recreation-based organizations. Likewise, textural or what these rural school counselors discussed facing in terms of student needs led them to take steps to make a major difference in the individual lives of students and sometimes parents held back by the very needs that demand a mutual reliance with the community. Overall, what these rural school counselor, social justice advocates ascribed as meaningful in their experience was their partnering with the community organizations available to them so that individual needs can be focused upon and met.

**Structural Meanings or Themes**

The themes stability of place, community promise, and the integration of personal and professional traits offer meaning in terms of the structural qualities of the phenomenon rural school counseling, social justice advocacy. In terms of how these participants experienced these
themes, several essential qualities prevailed. According to these seven individuals, their rural communities offer connection (stability of place), personal investment (community promise), and a community setting where the school counselor’s role is highly valued (the integration of personal and professional traits). At the same time, the stability can be limiting, the promise sometimes empty financially, and the integrated role one that demands tremendous personal compromise of privacy. Overall, what these participants described experiencing is a role and place caught between connection and limitations, investment and loss, and value and compromise.

**The Essence or Essential Invariant Structure of the Phenomenon**

Following the process of the qualitative research called phenomenology, this study was guided by the following central research question: what is the meaning ascribed to the experience of social justice advocacy by school counselors in a rural setting? Textural and structural meanings of their experiences lead to the following synthesis, essence, or essential invariant structure of the phenomenon under study. The experience of rural school counselor, social justice advocates is made meaningful by deep community connection with generational limitations, community investment and socio-economic loss, and both value and compromise personally and professionally. Rural school counselor, social justice advocates ascribe meaning to their partnering with the community organizations available to them so that individual needs within the community schools can be focused upon and met.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I summarize the previous four chapters and discuss this study’s findings in light of current literature on rural education, rural school counseling, and school counselor social justice advocacy. I also address the limitations of the study and identify implications for future research and counselor training. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion of the inspiration I have in terms of future directions and goals related to rural school counseling, social justice advocacy.

Summary of the Study

In Chapter 1, I introduced and detailed the problem central to this study. Many rural communities suffer economically which contributes to problems in rural schools and in rural student achievement (Budge, 2006). Geographic isolation, weak community infrastructure, outward migration, and increased regulations (Budge, 2006) have led to the economic decline of many rural communities. Rural communities are home to some of the most diverse groups of families and students in the United States, including ethnic minorities, families suffering with generational poverty and compromised education, and single-parent or no-parent households (Flora et al., 2003). College attendance is lowest in rural communities than in any other location in the United States (Alliance for Educational Excellence, 2010). Attitudes toward ruralness are often negative and stereotypical (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). The truth, though, is that the rural student population is very diverse and often incredibly economically disadvantaged (Davis,
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2009, p. 8). Unfortunately, issues in rural education have not been represented adequately in the research literature (Hardre, Crowson, DeBacker, & White, 2007).

As educational change agents, school counselors, particularly those who approach their work with a social justice advocacy foundation, are perfectly positioned to address educational inequities. The call for social justice advocacy in school counseling has permeated the literature (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Field & Baker, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Mitcham-Smith, 2007; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Uehara, 2005). Throughout the school counseling literature, agreement exists that advocacy is key to success for professional school counselors as they attempt to remove the barriers to success for students. However, missing from the agreement is relevant knowledge regarding advocacy in particular educational settings. More research is needed to fill this gap in the knowledge about social justice advocacy in particular settings. “It seems that qualitative studies... could add to the profession’s knowledge of how school counselors develop advocacy competencies in particular environments” (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 263). Therefore, discovering meanings in the shared experiences of rural school counselors who are social justice advocates formed the basis of this study.

In Chapter 2, I carefully reviewed the relevant literature on rural education, rural school counseling, and social justice advocacy. An analysis of the literature on rural education revealed that little research exists for describing the experiences of rural school counselors (Longberg & Bowen, 2004; Morrissette, 2000; Monterio-Leitner, 2006). The research that does exist indicated that unique factors affect the work of rural school counselors with students and in their communities. These factors include community pressures, a lack of educational and community resources, and isolation (Morrissette, 2000). Research indicated that groups of historically
underserved students are growing at a faster rate in rural areas than they are in urban and suburban areas at the same time that socio-economic and educational funding inequities grow there as well (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Given the needs in rural schools, chapter two concludes that phenomenological discoveries are critically needed as they hold the potential to shape policy and practices for rural school counselors and entire communities.

In Chapter 3, I examined the qualitative research approach of phenomenology and the theoretical frameworks of social-constructivism and critical theory that shaped this study. Primarily based on social constructivism, interview questions and interpretations of meanings throughout this study occurred between the researcher and the participants with an understanding that these interactions were influenced by the personal, cultural, and historical experiences of each. Following the phenomenological process, the researcher collected data through in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced a shared experience, analyzed the data for meanings, and then provided a composite description that presents the essence or essential, invariant structure of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). In the methodology chapter I explained each of these steps from sampling, to data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and the researcher as analyst. I found it critical to the study that I consider my personal worldview, assumptions, and biases. Like the participants in this study, I describe myself as a homegrown rural individual, one with a passion for bringing social justice advocacy to areas much in need of such interventions.

Chapter 4 elucidates the themes discovered after analyzing the data collected in interviews with the seven participants. Clustered meaning units led to the emergence of five themes: the stability of place, community promise, mutual reliance, personal and professional integration, and a focus on individuals. Thick, rich verbatim examples taken from the interviews
illuminated each of the themes. The findings chapter ended with a synthesis of the structural and
textural elements related to the five themes. Textural and structural meanings of their
experiences led to the following synthesis of the phenomenon under study. The experience of
rural school counselor social justice advocacy is characterized by deep community connections
with generational limitations, community investment and socio-economic loss, and both value
and compromise personally and professionally. As a major part of their experience, rural school
counselor, social justice advocates partner with the community organizations available to them
so that individual needs within the community schools can be focused upon and met.

**Relation to the Literature Review**

The findings of this study share many similarities and some degree of difference with
those in the literature review. First, recurrent in the literature was the struggle that rural areas
face socio-economically (Budge, 2006; Flora et al., 2003; Johnson & Strange, 2007). Each of
the seven participants discussed that their greatest struggle in their schools was for ways to help
students and families overcome financial obstacles. On the other hand, while the literature
review of both rural educational issues and social justice advocacy discussed closing gaps for
students marginalized by race and ability, the participants in this study only discussed closing
gaps created socio-economically. The literature review also pointed out that numbers of
marginalized individuals are growing at a higher rate in rural areas (Johnson & Strange, 2007);
however, the participants did not discuss this as a factor in their work. Several of the participants
did point out that the demographics of their communities are changing and that they are pleased
as a community member to find their rural communities becoming more diverse. One participant
discussed the way in which a strong Native American presence affects life in her isolated rural
community, but she did not discuss closing gaps educationally for Native American students.
The literature discussed that outward migration can be a problem in rural areas (Budge, 2006; Johnson & Strange, 2007). Similarly, participants discussed the ways they battle outward migration but added that it remains for them a problem in their settings as well. Participants explained that young people often want to stay in or return to their rural areas, but the lack of jobs there keeps them from doing so. Helping first generation college students to make the leap to college in rural areas was discussed in the literature and surfaced in participants’ observations as well (Hines 2002). According to the selected review of the literature, supporting students to at least graduate from high school is a problem in rural areas (Hines, 2002; Dees, 2006), and these school counselors concurred that they struggle with the situation in their communities as well. The lack of funding in rural schools surfaced throughout the literature review (Budge, 2006; Johnson & Strange, 2007), and several participants pointed out that programs had been cut or that services were no longer offered because their rural school budgets could not pay for them.

In terms of the rural school counseling role, similarities and differences with the literature existed as well. Prior research indicated that community visibility can be a problem for rural school counselors (Morrissette, 2000), and while it did appear to be a constant for these seven counselors, only one described it with any reservation, and even it was discussed humorously. In fact, these participants described their visibility as being valuable to their personal and professional roles as the visibility gave them the connections they need in the community to meet student needs. Isolation, too, surfaced in prior research as a drawback for rural school counselors (Hines, 2002; Morrissette, 2000), but these participants did not see it as a professional con. It should be noted here that one participant did note that isolation from services is a problem for students and community members in her rural setting.
Nice counselor syndrome was discussed in the literature as a potential barrier for school counselors attempting to advocate for change (Bemak & Chung, 2008), yet these school counselors described their work as being supported by their colleagues and their community members. These participants did not describe feeling unable to advocate for change in their rural communities due to pressure to be nice, but the majority did explain that their advocacy efforts were put into place carefully, one step at a time, and without making unnecessary waves.

Recurrent in the literature review were suggestions from experts in the field that school counselors combine their efforts with other community organizations to meet student needs (Flora et al., 2003; Hines, 2002; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). In every interview, participants discussed examples in which they did just that. By working with community faith-based organizations and with sports and recreation organizations, the main two partners available to them, these rural school counselors described being able to create successful partnerships to meet student and parent needs. In addition, two of the participants described as did the literature review the importance of working with other leaders in their school such as principals and assistant principals (Budge, 2010; Walker, 2006) to meet student needs. One participant worked with her school board and state representative to create a community-combined intervention.

In terms of social justice advocacy, each of the participants discussed their advocacy work as that which meets the unique needs of individuals to close achievement gaps. Again, the gap discussed across the board in this study was socio-economic. Participants discussed programs organized with community support or through their own grant writing so that efforts such as tutoring programs, state college and university bus tours, and GED programs could be offered. Distinctly different from the recommendations of the literature though (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007) is that except for one,
these participants did not discuss moving beyond the focus on meeting individual needs and into working to break down systemic barriers to success for those individuals. One participant discussed her efforts to break down systemic barriers that keep all students from taking advanced placement classes. Moreover, the literature on school counselor social justice advocacy urges moving beyond working at the individual and systemic level and into the public arena to advocate for change (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007), but these counselors described efforts focused almost exclusively on individuals without moving into the public realm. If any of the efforts described in these interviews reached the social/political advocacy level, that which Eagle conducted in her community might. Her school’s effort to unite faith-based organizations in the area included state level politicians in the planning process, but Eagle did not discuss if the effort included advocating for change socially and politically.

Finally, an ism often overlooked according to the literature review is ruralism (Hertzog & Pittman, 1995), but for these participants, a negative or prejudicial attitude toward their rural communities was not an issue. The participants in this study took pride in describing how their settings are not similar to suburban and urban ones and instead described in every interview the great promise they believe exists in their communities. The deep roots and connectedness they expressed feeling in their community far outweigh any negative stereotype of rural life. Despite the similar struggles their rural communities shared with the ones described in the selected review of the literature, six of the seven rural school counselors explained that they were homegrown and that they sense pride and promise throughout their rural schools and communities.
Limitations of the Study

Several limitations must be considered in terms of this study. First, by nature the findings of qualitative inquiry cannot be generalized. Further, several facts regarding the participant sample limit these findings as well. While meeting the criteria suggested for phenomenological research, the number of participants, seven, is small. Geographic location of the sample limited these findings as well. Located across four states, all seven of the participants were located in one region of the United States possibly making their views somewhat tied to the culture of their region. A major limitation is that the racial make-up of the sample was not diverse: each of the participants was white. Gender was somewhat limiting as well: only one of the participants was male. Not every participant disclosed his or her age, but age did differ from the late twenties to the late fifties, making the cohort effect possibly less significant.

Also significant in terms of the limitations is that six of the seven participants were lifelong inhabitants of their rural community. While three of the participants described living and working in other areas for a specified amount of time, six of the seven participants considered themselves natives or *homegrown* to the rural community about which they spoke. The scope and possible ability to see their communities objectively could be limited by their own lack of exposure to other locations. Similar to this issue is possible researcher bias. As disclosed in the bracketing section of this study, as the primary researcher, my childhood and adolescence spent in the rural south combined with my desire to bring social justice advocacy to the region could present bias born from my worldview and assumptions about rural issues.

Implications and Future Research

Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are evident following the completion of this study. Two considerations first revealed in the selected review of the
literature were underscored in the findings of this study and offer implications for practice. First, Hines (2002) contended that rural school counselors must facilitate the development of a school/community vision of student success and use the social capital, the community resources such as relationships, values, and social networks, to bring positive change and growth for the schools and community alike. Throughout their discussions of community promise, these participants pointed out that relationships, core values, and a close knit structure make their rural communities strong. More rural school counselors need to organize summits similar to the one described in this study by Eagle to bring together local faith-based leaders to discuss meeting student needs rather than relying on reaching out to the organizations as a need arises. Similarly, rural school counselors can facilitate joining forces in a formal manner with their local parks and recreation departments. If parks and recreation departments can offer sports camps in the summer for students, could they not also offer math or reading camps, FAFSA or College Board camps, and parent gatherings that could occur while sons and daughters are practicing their sport? In each of these examples, the social capital of the community provides the likelihood for success.

Another implication was also first set forth in the selected review of the literature and resonated in the discussions with these seven rural school counselors. Hines (2002) noted “rural school counselors must be advocates for their students, schools, and communities at the local, state, and national level…school counselors need to be activists who bring together rural educators and citizens to help legislatures understand rural funding dilemmas…” (p. 195). Socio-economic barriers marked the discussions of each of these participants. Just as a possible implication of this research is that rural school counselors need to organize forces with faith-based and coaching organizations in a formal manner, efforts to bring attention to social-
economic barriers must be formalized as well. As a first step, the very stories these counselors offered about individuals for whom they have advocated need to be shared. Rural stories do often contain unique struggles specific to place. A first step in their activism at the state and national level might be the gathering and sharing of rural advocacy stories. Perhaps then the focus on individuals could itself become a public arena intervention.

With socio-economic barriers affecting the work of each rural counselor in this study, greater efforts need to be made for assisting these professionals who already wear many hats with grant writing. Jill discussed working with Good Will Easter Seals to provide her GED program for an isolated community, and Kris explained that her school received assistance as a result of a grant from the College Board that she initiated. With rural school counselors often both spread out and spread thin, the complicated skills needed for successful grant writing could be a challenge. Rural organizations such as the Rural Schools and Community Trust might consider seeking out skilled rural educators who could become specialists with the mission to travel to rural schools and assist with the writing process. The familiarity of a helping individual with whom rural educators share the ways of being often unique to rural dwellers might make the process less intimidating as well.

Final implications to emerge from this study come from the unique ways of being mentioned before. The rural school counselors in this study described their place and role as being highly valued and specialized to their rural locations. Counselor educator programs need to consider place as an effect on the counseling skills necessary for success. Building relationships throughout the community, considering reputation, giving care so as to take small steps and not make waves might not be intuitive to even the most skilled counseling student. For success in the rural setting, rural life means these and many other factors must be considered.
In terms of social justice advocacy in rural settings, perhaps greater training is needed in these outlying areas for the ways that advocates can move beyond efforts that focus on individuals. Perhaps rural school counselor trainings or round table discussions on the ACA Social Justice Advocacy Domains could be held at state school counselor conventions in regions where rural settings are predominant. These seven rural school counselor advocates expressed a wish to meet the needs of all students. Perhaps with better training and with the confidence of sharing success stories of such with other educators like themselves they could see this wish answered in their efforts systemically and then in the public arena.

Another topic that could be discussed in round table form with rural school counselors at school counselor conferences could be a focus on several factors to emerge as both positives and negatives in rural communities. Stability of place and generational reputations seem to go hand in hand in the rural communities described here. School counselors might consider their communities individually and generate a list of the stable factors present therein, then brainstorm approaches to tap into those factors. At the same time, rural school counselors could discuss how stability of place might be discouraging or unwelcoming to the growth in populations expected in their communities. Conversations about how to welcome and support individuals new to the community, particularly in terms of issues surrounding gender and sexuality as they might be viewed by the faith-based alliances already formed, need to be conducted. Approached with the creativity of professional brainstorming in the manner that Eagle used when she conducted the round table with community faith-based leaders, rural school counselors may be able to identify approaches in their community to benefit students that they had not considered.

Important to discuss as well would be the inequity that can occur when generational reputations marginalize students and families in rural communities. To begin to understand how
to overcome this negative rural factor, school counselors must address it with others through professional conversation. Perhaps in doing so, rural school counselors could discover ways to add the generational reputation piece to their school programs on tolerance and character education, both with students and with other educators. Any force that marginalizes individuals within a community must be addressed, and the first step for doing so could be safely taken in the presence of other educators experiencing the same negative community force.

Future research recommendations following this study are apparent and closely linked to the implications just discussed. As discussed here, Morrissette (2000) noted that efforts should be focused on making school counselors in training aware of the differences in being a school counselor in a rural versus an urban setting. In addition to finding out more about the work of rural school counselors, Morrissette (2000) noted it is important to study the experiences of the urban school counselor and contrast them to that of the rural school counselors. For many of the implications of the study to come to fruition, research is needed on how the initiatives such as these can be made real.

Further qualitative and quantitative research might be conducted that would lead to the creation of real school counseling practices for organizing the summits and formal organizations with faith-based and community parks and recreation groups. Future research could gather the stories needed to motivate change at the state and national level in terms of funding for rural schools. Smaller scale studies might provide training manuals for the state school counseling presentations on working through the levels of the ACA Social Justice Advocacy Domains.

Future research also indicated as a result of this study would be with groups of individuals other than school counselors. Qualitative research could be conducted with students in rural schools about the barriers they encounter. Interviews could be held with rural faith-
based leaders about their work with educators to meet rural student needs while remaining intentional about keeping religion out of the intervention. A larger scale study to determine if rural social justice advocacy is affected by region is warranted, as is a study similar to this one but comprised of a more racially diverse group of participants.

A follow-up interview with each of the participants in this study would allow for clarification of points and further details regarding participant beliefs and suggestions on each of the implications discussed here. A second or follow-up interview would also allow for the exploration of major points not discussed by the participants. Clearly, more research needs to be conducted with rural school counselor social justice advocates on these major points. Already touched upon is the need to explore with rural advocates their knowledge about moving beyond the individual advocacy level and into acting with and on behalf of students at the community, systems, and public arena level. Research that includes a second interview to discuss moving into the macrolevel of advocacy in the rural setting is needed. Furthermore, additional research needs to be conducted that points more directly to questions regarding the marginalized groups of individuals whose numbers are growing in rural areas. Besides the discussion of social-economic struggles related here, further qualitative research needs to be conducted focused on what is happening to marginalized groups of students in rural areas. Research is needed to determine if the faith-based community collaboration used by school counselor advocates also includes supporting students who are different based on sexual orientation or gender identification. This study sheds light on only one portion of the full picture that is rural social justice advocacy by school counselors.
Future Direction and Goals

For eighteen months my thoughts have focused on rural issues. Ironically, I have spent two decades separate from rural life, but the first two decades I lived in rural south Georgia heavily influenced my return there these past eighteen months. As a social justice advocate, school counselor, and researcher, I am proud to have given voice to the stories of individuals from places much like the one that created who I am today. Voice is just step one though.

The facts about rural education are clear: justice for all does not exist when the educational needs of rural children and adolescents and local economies are allowed to continue in circles of neglect and decline. My childhood in the rural south makes me keenly aware of the inequity I know still exists for many children and adolescents there, and particularly so for the groups of marginalized students who numbers in rural areas are growing. I am proud, though, to be part of what I believe is the answer, and that is social justice advocacy. I believe we must challenge the status quo and attempt to remove systemic barriers to success for all students at the individual, school, and community level. I believe we must increase our efforts and expectations for all children and adolescents to achieve, and I believe that being born into a rural area should not mean that one’s needs might not be met because we as educators are not sure what factors increase the likelihood of success for advocacy there. As Eagle, Hope, Kris, Brenda, Jill, Jessica, and Don explained, rural areas are unique systems that must be understood if school counselors are to be successful there.

Empowering students and community members to use the promises of their place to be successful must be considered. The goal of empowerment theory to increase personal and political power so that students and communities can take action to improve their situations must be a part of our work as social justice advocates in all areas, particularly rural ones where entire
communities remain marginalized due to socially-sanctioned stereotyping and marginalization. Development of a school and community vision of success and the use of the social capital available such as relationships and social networks with local organizations could go far to empower individuals and support entire communities. From the participants in this study, I learned that faith-based organizations and parks and recreation departments offer such opportunities.

Likewise, from the participants in this study, I learned that the means for meeting student needs in rural areas does not always mean changing the rural system, but does seem to mean using the rural system differently, perhaps in unexpected ways. Stability of place might make rural inhabitants reluctant to try new methods, but if that stability and other rural factors can be first recognized and honored, school counselors themselves might be empowered, a critical first step. Indeed, it seems that empowerment must originate with the advocate, and I hope that this study and others like it will provide the recognition and honor that rural school counselor social justice advocates need to move forward. In addition to the voice that I hope this study has given rural school counselors, I hope my work brings recognition and honor for rural areas and individuals as well.

Because I believe so strongly in the potential for school counselor advocates to bring real change to people and places who need it, I also hope to be able to offer my own efforts in response to some of the implications of this study. Rural education is unique as are the needs there. I hope to continue to hone my skills for conducting research so that I can draw attention in the public arena to the educational inequities that exist in rural schools. I, too, see promise in rural communities, and I feel gratitude to the seven individuals who shared their stories so that rural education is represented in research. As a homegrown rural community member myself,
my professional goals and future direction will focus on continuing to bring recognition to rural educational issues, students, families, and communities. I am honored to do so.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

BRIEF SCREENING QUESTIONS: SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY BELIEFS
Brief Screening Questions: Social Justice Advocacy Beliefs

Lee Edmondson Grimes

Please respond to these questions with agree, disagree, or neutral.

1. I believe I must challenge the status quo in my school to help support all students to be successful.

2. I believe I must challenge the status quo in my community to help support all students to be successful.

3. I believe I must advocate to help break systemic barriers in my school that impede student success.

4. I believe that achievement gaps can be closed through my advocacy efforts.

5. I am an advocate for change.
APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Would you tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be a school counselor here?

2. How would you describe the community in which you live and work?

3. What would you say are the benefits and challenges of being a part of rural community?

4. What is it like to be a school counselor in a rural area?

5. How would you describe the role of the school counselor in your school and your community?

6. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks for your students in this rural community?

7. What does social justice advocacy mean to you?

8. How do other educators react to your social justice advocacy?

9. What is your experience as a social justice advocate in your community like?

10. Would you reconstruct for me a time when you approached your school-counseling role as a social justice advocate?