

ELDERLY VOTER ATTITUDES TOWARD PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDING
IN A RURAL COUNTY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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A Qualitative Study

By

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ABSTRACT

The demography of the United States is in the midst of an unprecedented transition that will result in persons age 65 and over outnumbering children by the year 2030 (MacManus, 1995). This demographic shift has the potential to give elderly voters significant influence over public education funding (Poterba, 1997). The purpose of this study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding in a rural county. By engaging elderly voters in dialogue that captured the essence of their lived experiences in school and in the community, valuable information related to how those experiences had nurtured community loyalty or fostered rational self-interest was obtained.

A phenomenological approach rooted in the tenets of narrative analysis was used as the framework for the research design in this study. The setting was a rural county in a mid-Atlantic state. Ten volunteers were solicited from among typical elderly voters in the county. Data were collected from personal interviews, field notes, interview notes and reflexive notes. Constant-comparative analysis was conducted in accordance with a three-iteration strategy to develop within and across-case analyses. Code-mapping was used to develop a visible audit trail.

Personal narratives based on information obtained from the four data sources were written for each participant. The themes that resulted from an analysis of each narrative across all cases were applied to the economic theories of community loyalty and rational self-interest. The application of the emergent themes relative to each theory led to the conclusion that the lived experiences of the ten participants in school and in the community had impacted their attitudes toward public education funding. The identification of these experiences has implications for local education policy makers as they engage in strategic planning initiatives.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family. To my parents, John and Jo Nell Talton, whom I admire and respect for everything they are and for everything they taught me to be; to my husband, Mac Campbell, who is the love of my life and my constant source of strength; to my children, Emily, Catherine, and John, who make me proud every day; and to my granddaughter, Kylie Grace, who fills my life with love, joy, hope and laughter. I could not have completed this work without their constant support, words of encouragement and loving sacrifices.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The demography of the United States is in the midst of an unprecedented transition. By the year 2030, there will be a simultaneous shift in the population that will result in persons age 65 and over outnumbering children (MacManus, 1995). This demographic shift has the potential to empower elderly voters, thereby giving them significant influence over the allocation of government transfers to public education (Poterba, 1997). Scholars of public education finance forewarn of policy implications of catastrophic proportions (Plutzer & Berkman, 2005) if the elderly base their votes on self-interest (Poterba) rather than loyalty to their community (Glaser, Aristigueta & Payton, 2000). In the words of Plutzer and Berkman, “If age is associated with diminished support for public schools, then the steady graying of America constitutes one of the major societal negative forces (Sirkin, 1985) that could curtail spending on public education” (p. 70).

Context for the Study

The concept of a graying American population (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004) and its effects on public school funding have captured the attention of scholars of public education finance. Since the publication of Preston’s (1984) groundbreaking predictions of disastrous consequences of an aging population on public education funding, education finance scholars have conducted a sizeable amount of research. The results reported by these scholars in the empirical research provide substantial data on why the elderly vote as they do on school funding issues. In order to fully comprehend the implications of these findings, it is important to describe the context of the problem. This study contextualizes the issue of elderly voter support for public education within an explanation of the theoretical framework, a review of historical perspectives, and a synopsis of current issues.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides a backdrop of common understanding for the conceptualization of the problem. The preponderance of research related to elderly voter influence on public school funding is grounded in one of two economic theories. According to the rational self-interest theory, individuals view economic policies in terms of a cost/benefit ratio (Cataldo & Holm, 1983). Self-interested voters are characterized as those members of the

electorate who favor taxing measures that are the most financially advantageous to themselves as individuals (Ladd & Murray, 2001).

The application of the rational self-interest theory to elderly voter behavior has significant implications on public school funding initiatives. First, persons age 65 and older are not likely to have children enrolled in public schools (MacManus, 1995). Second, the elderly are more likely to be homeowners than younger citizens, and as such are more directly affected by an increase in local property taxes (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004). Finally, living on a fixed income makes the elderly particularly sensitive to an increase in property taxes, the mainstay of local school revenues (MacManus). Based on these circumstances, it is highly improbable that elderly voters will recognize any personal financial benefit from supporting an increase in education funding (Miller, 1995). Consequently, proponents of the rational self-interest theory expect the elderly to vote against tax increases for public schools (Poterba, 1997).

At the other end of the theoretical continuum is community loyalty. Hirschman (1970) espoused that loyalty is a powerful motivator of human behavior that has the potential to direct a person's actions away from behaviors associated with self-interest. Scholars who support this theory believe that elderly who are longstanding residents are more likely to have developed affective ties to their community that thwart their inclinations towards self-interest (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004). Berkman and Plutzer attributed the cultivation of loyal elderly to prolonged opportunities for community engagement associated with educating their children in the local schools. Glaser et al. (2000) contended that there was a strong, positive correlation between the concern for community well-being and support for public education. Proponents of this theory believe that elderly voters who have been engaged in the education of their children are more likely to be directed toward community loyalty, and subsequently should support increased local funding for public education (Berkman & Plutzer; Glaser et al.).

Historical Perspective

The historical context for this study is rooted in the evolution of public education funding in the United States. Prior to the Revolutionary War, education in America was colony specific and grounded in religious beliefs (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). The concept of a free system of public education began to evolve in conjunction with the birth of democracy when the founding fathers recognized that an educated electorate was the key to sustenance and perpetuation of the ideals of a republican form of government (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). As a

result, public schools were established to promote virtue in government. The goal was to teach common ideals that purposefully directed voter behavior toward community interest and away from personal self-interest (Alexander & Salmon).

Each of the first three United States presidents recognized the link between appropriate education of the people and the preservation of the democracy. However, it was not until 1825 that the need for taxation to support a state system of education became clear (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). This realization eventually resulted in state governments requiring local school districts to self-tax to fund education (Alexander & Alexander). Ironically, the contentious nature of the self-tax for public education at local level has evolved into the leading impediment to building a cadre of loyal community voters, particularly among the elderly population.

Current Issues

The context of the current issues related to elderly voter support for public education is based on a study by Preston (1984). In a document presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Preston asserted that the demographic topography of well-being in the United States was transitioning away from children and toward elderly. Within the community of public education policy scholars, Preston's claim spurred an outbreak of quantitative research that focused on elderly voting behavior as it related to government transfers toward education.

At the core of these inquiries was the changing demographic structure in the United States during the last 45 years. The inquiries produced several important results. First, there was evidence of a significant decrease in the number of non-elderly citizens between 1957 and 1982 when the birthrate fell from 3.68% to 1.8% live births per woman (Poterba, 1997; Preston, 1984). The result of this decline was a 28% reduction in the portion of the population under age 15 which Preston attributed to the production of contraceptives and an increase in the number of women entering the workforce.

A second group of researchers produced evidence that showed the elderly population was increasing at a rate of 54% at the same time the birthrate was shrinking (Uhlenberg, 1992). This unprecedented increase in the number of persons age 65 and over resulted in a 28.4% growth in the overall population of elderly that was 61% greater than anticipated (Preston, 1984). This

demographic shift simultaneously occurred as the life expectancy of the elderly population was increasing at an unprecedented rate (Uhlenberg).

Third, scholars tied school funding sources to the increase in the elderly population. Alexander and Salmon (1995) reported that local governments provide a substantial portion of funding for public schools, the bulk from local property taxes. Because elderly homeowners on fixed incomes were shown to be more sensitive to property tax increases, they tended to vote against increases in school funding initiatives (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004).

Finally, researchers connected elderly voter behavior to the tenets of rational self-interest (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004; Cataldo & Holm, 1983). This meant that elderly tended to vote for measures that maximized their personal financial status. Since the majority of elderly no longer received a direct benefit from spending for public schools, they were likely to resist voting for increased property taxes (Cataldo & Holm).

Knowing that the elderly were likely to cast their votes on the basis of self-interest or community loyalty was important information, but it was not complete information. In their 2000 study, Glaser et al. held firmly to the theory that loyal elderly voters were likely to have undergone some sort of meaningful life experience in their community that cultivated an affective tie to that community. Unfortunately, the researchers stopped short of identifying what sort of meaningful experiences this cohort of voters may have had. The next logical step in the research process was to conduct a qualitative study to gather deep, rich information about the essence of the meaningful life experiences of this cohort of voters that had shaped their attitudes toward school funding initiatives.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding. A thorough understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon was captured through personal dialogue that related the essence of the lived experiences of these elderly voters. At the heart of this inquiry was the gathering of detailed descriptions of real life experiences that had nurtured community loyalty or fostered rational self-interest within a select group of elderly voters who had experienced the phenomenon in question. The goal was to illuminate the essence of the experiences of these elderly voters that molded their attitudes toward education funding.

Research Questions

The specific questions that guided the research were:

1. What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education funding?
2. What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education quality?
3. What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of community that have shaped their attitudes towards school funding?
4. What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of school that have shaped their attitudes towards school funding?

Overview of the Methodology

A qualitative inquiry based on the tenets of the phenomenological tradition (Creswell, 1998) was the methodology used in this study. The goal was to use narrative analysis as the means to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the lived experience of elderly voters as those experiences related to the development of the phenomenon of their attitudes toward public education funding.

Volunteer participants were solicited from among the elderly residents in one rural county in a mid-Atlantic state. Each participant took part in an in-depth, one-on-one, audio- taped interview at a mutually agreed upon location. The interview protocol was designed to elicit rich descriptions of the stories and experiences that illuminated the essence of the phenomenon in question and to obtain pertinent demographic information. Interview notes, field notes and reflexive notes were recorded and maintained by the researcher to aid in the analysis and interpretation of the data. Narrative analysis (Reissman, 1993) was used to identify and describe the themes that described how elderly voters formed their attitudes toward public education funding. Data analysis was conducted in accordance with a three-iteration strategy that used code-mapping to develop a visible audit trail.

Significance of the Study

A substantial body of empirical research has been conducted during the past two decades in an effort to determine why the elderly vote as they do on school funding issues. The results reported in this research indicated that the elderly cast their votes on the basis of either rational self-interest or community loyalty. Furthermore, scholars of public education funding policy have shown that elderly who feel a sense of loyalty to their community are more likely to vote in favor of school funding initiatives. Little is known about how this cohort of voters evolves into

either loyal or self-interested elderly. This qualitative study was designed to examine the lived experiences of elderly voters in order to determine how their attitudes toward public school funding were formed. The knowledge gained from this inquiry will be of particular significance to education funding policymakers as they engage in long-term and short-term planning, especially at a time when the elderly voting population is increasing at an unprecedented rate.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations serve as a reminder that all studies are vulnerable in one way or another (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). There were three limitations to this qualitative study. First, the nature of the purposeful sample selection process and the use of the interview as the primary data gathering technique limit the results to self-report data by volunteer participants. Second, the small sample size and rural location of the study limit the transferability of the findings to similar localities. Finally, the fact that the researcher was a longstanding member of the education community in the rural county identified in the study may have impacted the responses of the participants. Therefore, it was incumbent upon the researcher to provide a clear, succinct explanation of the purpose and the design of this study and to emphasize the importance of keeping the findings within the context of the study.

Definition of Terms

The ability to comprehend the scope of this study is contingent upon the reader's knowledge of key terms and their definitions. The demographic age delineations are referred to as *elderly*, *non-elderly*, and *children*. In all but one instance in the literature reviewed for this study, elderly were considered to be a cohort of aged Americans who are age 65 or over (Duncombe, Robbins & Stonecash, 2003; Ladd & Murray, 2001; Miller, 1995; Poterba, 1997). Berkman and Plutzer (2004) expanded the age range of this cohort to include persons between the ages of 60 and 64. For this study, the researcher considers the elderly to be the cohort of retired citizens aged 65 and older who live on fixed incomes. The non-elderly are persons between the ages of 18 and 65 who are likely to be wage earners. The non-elderly represent the cohort of Americans who generally have children in school (Preston, 1984). Children are those persons under age 18 who directly benefit from government transfers to public education, yet have no voice in the electorate (Preston).

Migrant elderly and *loyal elderly* are terms used to sub-categorize the elderly population. For the purposes of this study, migrant elderly are retired voters who have lived in a county five

years or less, whereas loyal elderly are members of this same voter cohort who are classified as longstanding residents of the community by virtue of the fact that they have lived in the same community five years or more (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004).

Rational self-interest and *personal self-interest* are used interchangeably throughout this study. These terms refer to an economic theory that provides one rationale for elderly voter behavior (Ladd & Murray, 2001). This theory posits that elderly cast their votes in favor of funding initiatives that are most advantageous to themselves as individuals, while giving little thought to the good of the community as a whole. Those who ascribe to the concepts of this theory would argue that elderly are not likely to vote in favor of public school funding initiatives (Glaser et al., 2000; Poterba, 1997).

Organization of the Document

This document is organized in a five chapter format. Chapter one frames the context of the study and provides essential background information. This chapter also includes an overview of the purpose, significance, and potential limitations of the study. Chapter two provides a review of relevant literature and establishes the theoretical framework for the study. Chapter three contains a thorough discussion of the qualitative methodology to be used in the study. This discussion includes a description of the phenomenological research design, the role of the researcher, and the data collection and thematic analysis procedures. Chapter four includes an analysis of the cohort of participants and a presentation of the across-case thematic findings in narrative form. Chapter five includes a discussion of the findings, the conclusions, the limitations, the recommendations for future research, and the implications for future practice.

Summary

Education policy scholars have conducted a number of quantitative studies to determine why the elderly vote for or against school funding initiatives. Their results indicated that the elderly base their school funding votes on either rational self-interest or community loyalty. The researchers have shown that that loyal elderly are more likely to endorse funding initiatives for public education than self-interested elderly. Despite the critical implications for the future of public education finance noted in this research, the literature stopped short of providing information on the lived experiences of the elderly that nurtured their feelings of loyalty to community or fostered a sense of personal self-interest.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes regarding public education funding. A thorough understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon was captured through personal dialogue that related the essence of the lived experiences of these elderly voters. At the heart of this inquiry was the gathering of detailed descriptions of real life experiences that had nurtured community loyalty or fostered rational self-interest within a select group of elderly voters who had experienced the phenomenon in question. The goal was to illuminate the essence of the experiences of these elderly voters that molded their attitudes toward education funding and to generate knowledge related to the implications for continued support for public education funding initiatives from this growing bloc of voters.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Changing demographics in the United States is placing new demands and expectations on public education. The ability to ensure that all children receive an adequate education is becoming more complicated by the fact that the population is transitioning away from the young to a populace overshadowed by the growing number of elderly. Driven by declining birth rates and the advancement of the Baby Boomers into retirement, this generational advancement has the potential to shift government funding away from public education and toward programs that benefit the elderly.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of how elderly voters form their attitudes toward public education funding. A thorough understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon was captured through personal dialogue that related the essence of the lived experiences of elderly voters. At the heart of this inquiry was the gathering of detailed descriptions of real life experiences that had nurtured attitudes toward public education funding within a select group of elderly voters who had experienced the phenomenon in question. The goal was to illuminate the essence of the experiences that had shaped the attitudes of these voters toward public education funding.

Chapter two contains a thorough examination of the literature search, analysis and review process. The goal of this literature review was to ground the purpose of the study in the context of prior research in an effort to justify the direction of this investigation. Ultimately, this literature review will inform the readers of how the purpose of the study evolved and why qualitative inquiry was selected as the most appropriate genre of research. This goal was accomplished via a sequential account of the processes used to select and analyze literature relevant to the purpose in an effort to support, explicate, and illuminate the logic of the study (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000).

This chapter is divided into six main sections. The first section provides an introduction and overview of the organization of the chapter. The second section outlines the literature search and review process. Section three includes a thorough discussion of the background literature that provides essential knowledge for this study. The fourth section contains a review of the current literature on elderly voter support for public education funding. Section five includes the

summary and analysis of the research and section six ties the literature to the direction of this study.

Literature Search and Review Process

The literature search and review process was conducted to collect information from a variety of sources that relate to the topic of elderly voter support for public education. The initial process began with an Internet search of the phrase “elderly voters and public education.” This search returned thousands of hits of empirical and non-empirical sources. These sources were in the form of websites maintained by government agencies, professional organizations, colleges and universities, and independent individuals. This search was refined by adding the terms “taxes, senior citizens, demographics, funding, and self-interest.”

Next, electronic data bases were searched for empirical sources. Initial searches were conducted in ERIC and Education Full Text using multiple combinations of the key words. Parameters were set to include both peer-reviewed and alternate forms of literature. This search produced a myriad of articles and books from 1965 to the present. To extend the search, the reference lists from the most relevant and most recent literature were used to identify other pertinent studies and journal titles that could provide information. An Ejournal search led to several additional database searches. These databases included JSTOR, Wyley InterScience, InfoTrac OneFile, Blackwell Synergy, MetaPress and LEA Online. Well over 200 articles were identified during this process.

An initial review of the research resulted in the identification of several authors whose names appeared regularly throughout the literature. Each of these names was searched on the Internet. Several of these authors had web pages with links to their professional vitas. Each of these vitas was reviewed for information relevant to the purpose of the study.

The literature that was ultimately selected for inclusion in this review was based on specific criteria. First, the research had to be relevant to the purpose of the study. Second, the research had to contain a direct tie to the essential background knowledge needed to fully comprehend the ramifications for electing to pursue this line of inquiry. Finally, the research had to link studies of elderly voter behavior to support for public education funding initiatives. Together, these criteria set well defined parameters for the selection of relevant research.

Essential Knowledge

Grounding the purpose of this study in the context of prior research served two purposes. First, it established credibility for the direction of this study. Second, it provided a foundation of essential knowledge. Essential knowledge is synonymous with basic understanding and it is rooted in several key concepts that were derived from the purpose of the study. With regard to ascertaining how elderly voters form their attitudes toward public school funding in a rural county, these key concepts included public school funding, demographic change, population studies, and public school planning. Individually, understanding each key concept represents one piece of the knowledge. Synthesis of the knowledge culminates in a foundation of understanding.

Public School Funding

Historical Perspective

It is important to have a rudimentary knowledge of the historical and philosophical underpinnings of public education in the United States in order to understand how schools are financed (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). The founding fathers were influenced by the writings of Rousseau who espoused that the concept of public education was one of the fundamental rules of a legitimate government (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). During the birth of the nation, the founders stressed that an educated citizenry was the key to the sustenance of a republican form of government and that “knowledge [would] empower citizens to discern the legitimacy of government and to balance the preservation of individual liberties against the necessary subordination of self-interest to the mutual benefit of society” (Alexander & Salmon, p. 1).

Although the framers of the Constitution tied an educated citizenry to sustenance and perpetuation of the ideals of a republican form of government, they did not include language in the document to designate the responsibility for education to the federal government (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). This power was reserved for the states and the people of the states via the Tenth Amendment of the Constitution which states, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the states respectively or to the people” (Alexander & Salmon, 1995, p. 275). As a result, the legislatures of each individual state were vested with the authority to make laws to regulate and finance public education.

Presidents Washington, Adams, and Jefferson recognized the need for government support of public education. However, it was well into the first quarter of the nineteenth century

before the populace recognized the need for taxation to support a state system of education (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). This recognition eventually led state governments to authorize local school districts to impose taxes on property for education (Alexander & Alexander). The controversial nature of the property tax at local level has evolved into the leading impediment to building a cadre of loyal community voters, particularly among the elderly population.

Federal, State, and Local Roles

Public education is the responsibility of the state. The education clause of each state constitution establishes the role of the state in maintaining its public school system (Augenblick, Myers, & Anderson, 1997). The proviso for education in each constitution usually requires that systems of education be “equal,” “adequate,” or “efficient” (Howell & Miller, 1997, p. 39). Meeting these goals is contingent upon the quality of a state’s school funding mechanism.

The school funding mechanism is synonymous with school finance system. Rather than being planned from scratch, most school finance systems have evolved over the decades in conjunction with legislative decisions, school finance litigation, and voter choice (Alexander & Alexander, 2001; Alexander & Salmon, 1995; Howell & Miller, 1997). This often painful evolution has resulted in school finance systems that vary significantly from state to state.

Despite the variations in state systems of public school finance, there are two interstate commonalities that are relevant to this study. First, public school systems are supported by federal, state and local governments. Second, each level of government has a primary tax source that provides revenue for allocations to public schools (Alexander & Salmon, 1995; Howell & Miller, 1997).

Federal Funding.

Since the federal government has no constitutional authority to regulate or fund public schools, its role in education is grounded in the interpretation of implied powers found in the General Welfare Clause of the Constitution (Alexander & Alexander, 2001; Alexander & Salmon, 1995). Over time, the federal role in financing education has grown out of efforts to “...equalize financial resources among states” (Alexander & Salmon, p. 273) generally in response to some specific public concern couched under the auspices of public welfare. In 2002-2003, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) reported that the federal government portion of all national education expenditures totaled 8.5%. The federal income tax is the primary source of revenue used to fund these expenditures (Alexander & Salmon).

State Funding.

States are vested with the authority to maintain and operate public schools in the United States. Their plenary power gives each state the authority to pass school laws as long as they are in compliance with state constitutions and not in conflict with the federal constitution (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). This authority includes the power to tax for public education. In 2002-2003 the states appropriated 48.7% of the funds allocated for public education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). The sales tax and state income tax are the primary sources of revenue used to fund state appropriations for public education (Alexander & Salmon).

Local Funding.

Local fiscal responsibility for public education is rooted in the history of the Common schools. These early schools were organized, financed and maintained by the community. Even though the states have always had the legal authority for public schools, the tradition of local fiscal and managerial responsibility has remained with the localities (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). The 2002-2003 data reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) indicated that local sources of revenue for public education totaled 42.8%. The property tax is the primary source of revenue for public school funding at the local level (Alexander & Salmon).

Voter Theory

Voter theory has to do with determining the conditions that favor political behavior (White, 1976). Within the context of elderly voter support for public education, the economic theory of rational or personal self-interest is predominant. Rational self-interest is based on the concept that, "People will be considered as acting in their personal self-interest when their political evaluation or behavior is influenced by those changes in their economic status that can be attributed at least in part to the actions of government" (Feldman, 1984, p. 230). Furthermore, an individual's vote for one public service or another is generally based on whether or not that individual is a direct user of the service (Duncombe et al., 2003). In other words, votes are cast in terms of a personal cost to benefit ratio (Feldman).

The rational self-interest theory has been applied to much research conducted to determine why the elderly vote. Campbell (2002) held that the role of Social Security in determining the status of economic well-being had much to do with the high rates of political participation by elderly voters. She further contended that the fact that low income elderly received as much as 40% of their income from Social Security explained why this sub-group of

older voters participated at higher rates than would typically be expected. In a subsequent study, Campbell (2003) noted that the elderly were "...a politically important and unusual constituency because both high and low income seniors [had] sources of political mobilization" (p. 30) via AARP, senior centers and nutrition programs.

Scholars of public education policy offered several other explanations for elderly voter behavior based on the theory of rational self-interest. Preston (1984) proposed that adults who were not parents opposed any taxes for investments in other people's children. In a more recent study, Duncombe et al. (2003) concurred with Preston's assertion by stating, "Public education is a local service where the intergenerational conflict may be most likely to emerge because of the clear distinction in the direct use of this service between seniors and families with school age children" (p. 47). Overall, proponents of the application of the rational self-interest theory to elderly voter support for public education contended that this group of voters constituted a gray peril to sustained school funding (Rosenbaum & Button, 1989).

Community loyalty is the antithesis of rational self-interest. Berkman and Plutzer (2004) argued that, "...many elderly [felt] loyalty toward their community's schools, [that would lead] them to support higher taxes needed for higher expenditures" (p. 1179). These researchers based their position on the belief that longstanding elderly voters may have developed a sense of connectedness to their communities that would outweigh predispositions toward self-interested voting behavior.

Other arguments on behalf of loyalty are present in the literature. Moe (2001) maintained that an ideological perspective based on an allegiance to the principle of public education may predispose an individual to support funding for public education. Hirschman (1970) had a different perspective. He felt that loyalty was evidenced by an affective tie to an institution that had been cultivated and nurtured as a result of one's life and community experiences.

The majority of the literature on elderly voter behavior is grounded in the theory of rational self-interest. Berkman and Plutzer (2004) did show that longstanding elderly are more supportive of school funding initiatives than migrant elderly. Beyond this, there is little reference to the notion of loyalty in the education literature. However, education policy scholars would be well advised to pursue Hirschman's (1970) notion of affective loyalty in an effort to determine what type of lived experiences nurtured this feeling among the elderly.

Demographic Change

There is consensus among the scholars that the population of the United States is aging. Hamil-Luker (2001) reported that the percentage of elderly in the population was 11% in 1980, and that by 2050 that percentage should increase to about 20%. Ozawa (1999) stated that the proportion of persons aged 65 and older will increase to 20.7% by 2040. Clark, Knapp, and White (1996) reported that the proportion of elderly would double to about 22% of the total population by 2030. Even though there is slight discrepancy between the researchers as to when the elderly portion of the population will reach 20% of the total population, the fact that it will happen is not in dispute.

According to Uhlenberg (1992), “The age structure of a population is completely determined by past fertility, mortality, and migration patterns” (p. 450). Therefore, much of the purely technical demographic research on population aging has focused on issues associated with why fewer children are being born, why people are living longer, and what influences international migration.

Fertility

In 1957, the total fertility rate in the United States peaked to an all-time high of 3.76 live births per woman (Preston, 1984; U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). By 1978, this same statistic had dropped to 1.76. As a result of this decline in fertility rates, the population of children under age 15 dropped 7% between 1960 and 1982 (Preston, 1984). Uhlenberg (1992) attributed these significant declines in the number of births per woman to be the primary cause of the aging population. As to the future, he stated, “...the expected persistence of low fertility in the future is the basic reason for anticipating a continual aging of the population through the first third of the twenty-first century” (p. 454). Lee (2003) agreed with Uhlenberg’s forecast. In fact, Lee went so far as to project that the population will continue to restructure until 2100 when there will be “...50 times as many elderly, but only 5 times as many children” (p. 167).

Several scholars have offered explanations for the decline in the fertility rate. Preston (1984) attributed the drop in births to the conscious decision of women not to have children when contraceptives gave them control over child bearing and when they decided to enter the workforce. Using the vital statistics data published by the National Center for Health Statistics, O’Connell and Rogers (1982) reported that the increase in the divorce rate had resulted in a decrease in the fertility rate. These researchers also showed that women who were better

educated had lower overall rates of childbearing. Another interesting explanation for the determinant of fertility was the perceived costs and benefits associated with child bearing (Ahn, 1995). Ahn reported that the parental decision to have children may be related to their perceived benefit as providers of support to aging parents. Collectively, these researchers provided several plausible explanations for the decline in the number of live births per woman.

Mortality

The increase in the population aged 65 and older has been attributed to a decline in the mortality rates. Statistics indicate that the number of elderly increased by 54% between 1960 and 1980 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). It has been shown that continued rapid declines in age-specific death rates could result in a population in the year 2050 with 36% of the total population over age 65 (Siegel & Taeuber, 1986). The greatest growth in life expectancy has most recently taken place in the 85 and older population (McGill, 1988).

The decline in mortality rates began during the first half of the twentieth century. Much of this decline was attributed to the introduction of methods to control infectious diseases (McGill, 1988). Lee (2003) also cited the introduction of public health measures, better personal hygiene, and improved nutrition as contributors toward increased longevity.

Migration

Migration during the twentieth century has affected the population of aging, but not positively. Early in the century over 25% of the population entering old age were migrants (Uhlenberg, 1977). Based on a change in migration patterns, this trend reversed itself to a point that by 1980 only 6% of those turning 65 were of foreign origin. One particularly interesting aspect of the recently reduced flow of young immigrants into the United States is that it has deprived the country of persons who could have moderated the current population trend (McGill, 1988).

The research on international migrant demographic data related to the overall complexion of the United States population has little relevance to the purpose of this study other than to support the position that the populace is becoming older. However, the concept of migration does have some significance to elderly voter behavior as it relates to interstate retirement migration and support for public school funding initiatives. This discussion is presented later in its more relevant context.

Population Studies

Population studies is the interdisciplinary domain of demography that ties mathematical models to the social sciences (Xie, 2000). This tie is critical to the discussion of elderly voters and their support for public education funding from several perspectives. Sociologists and economists have focused on demographic change in terms of the status of well-being of the children and the elderly and its effects on fiscal policy (Xie). Additionally, political scientists have approached the demographics of aging from a political behavior model. Together, the literature in these three domains of the social sciences has been tied to demographic studies to provide the research framework for this study.

Demographic Change and the Status of Well-Being

The interplay of demographic, political, and economic factors over time has resulted in a shift in the status of well-being from children toward the elderly (Axin, & Stern, 1985). Prior to the enactment of the Social Security Act in 1935, state support was available to children and to the elderly in most states. However, the post-Social Security years resulted in different treatments of the two groups. Axin and Stern stated, “The aged reap[ed] the benefits of a vast array of public programs that improved their economic and social circumstances, while children...reaped a bitter harvest of poverty and lost opportunities” (p. 666). These researchers based this change on the fact that the public assumption of responsibility for the elderly had been maintained via the formation of a “political coalition” (p. 666) that had been able to sustain support for their social programs despite cutbacks in other social welfare programs (Axin & Stern).

The most frequently cited theories with respect to the concept of group size and the status of well-being were put forth by Richard Easterlin (1978) and Samuel Preston (1984). Easterlin believed that the economic and social statuses of well-being were rooted in economic status, and that economic status was determined by a comparison of income-earning opportunities to one’s expected standard of living. In other words, “Demographic behavior, economic decision-making, and social well-being result[ed] from an individual’s comparison of resources to aspirations” (Pampel & Peters, 1995, p. 165). His theory was based on the premise that cohort size played a key role in determining both income potential and anticipated standard of living.

Easterlin (1978) held that income potential was relative to the size of the cohort group entering the work force as compared to the size of the parental cohort already in the work force.

He believed that a larger cohort entering the work force would result in increased competition for a limited number of existing jobs which, in turn, would lower the income of the members. As to children, Easterlin believed overcrowding in three institutions was to blame for the variations in economic and social well-being. First, large family units reduced attention toward and delayed achievement of children. Second, crowded educational facilities reduced learning opportunities and delayed achievement of children. Third, overcrowding in the labor markets reduced employment opportunities for emerging workers (Pampel & Peters, 1995). Based on Easterlin's theory, the economic and social well-being of the large baby boom cohort was tentative, at best.

While Easterlin's hypothesis purported that a small cohort of children should fair better economically and socially, Preston's (1984) subsequent theory espoused just the opposite. Using a variety of economic and social indicators of well-being, he showed that the status of well-being for the large cohort of elderly had improved significantly relative to that of children (Ponza, Duncan, Corcoran, & Groskind, 1988). This argument was based on data that showed, "...the size of government transfer programs varie[d] positively with cohort size for those life-cycle stages when the cohorts [were] out of the labor force" (Ponza et al., p. 442).

Underlying Preston's (1984) argument was the notion that people are predisposed to support spending policies that are most advantageous to themselves as individuals and that people in different stages of life vote for the policies that are targeted at their unique self-interests. The theory was based on three specific sources of support for the elderly (Ponza et al., 1988). First, the elderly vote in support of policies that are most advantageous to themselves. Second, the working population votes to support policies for the elderly in order to avoid direct responsibility for parents and grandparents. Finally, the working-age population votes for old-age policies to ensure their own well-being in later years (Preston). Barring the fact that the elderly may have children or grandchildren in school, this scenario of voting behavior left only young adult parents to champion the cause of well-being for children.

Although Easterlin's (1978) hypothesis of group size being inversely proportional to the status of well-being was highly touted during the late 1970's and early 1980's, Preston's (1984) theory brought a new perspective to the issue. It is well documented in the literature that families with children experienced increased instances of poverty during the period in question while poverty among the elderly declined dramatically (Bianchi, 1990; Duncan & Smith, 1989).

Consequently, Preston's theory has become prevalent and, therefore, widely challenged in the annals of literature that focuses on elderly voter support for public education.

Elderly Voter Behavior

The underlying message in Preston's (1984) theory was that the well-being of the elderly had improved in relation to that of children due to the self-interested behavior of several classifications of voters. This assertion dismissed altruistic voting as a viable alternative and established what is now referenced as "the potential for conflict in intergenerational relations" (Logan & Spitze, 1995, p. 353). Preston's contentions resulted in a resurgence of research on the relationship between the elderly and their political behavior.

Much research has been done to examine the characteristics of the elderly voter. MacManus (1996) reported that older Americans voted in greater numbers than any other age group. Binstock (2000) corroborated her findings by showing that the proportion of votes cast by persons aged 65 and older in national elections had grown steadily between 1968 and 1996. His study went so far as to conclude that the elderly "...have consistently constituted a larger share of the electorate than they have the voting age population" (p. 20). The fact that there was evidence to show that the elderly voted in greater numbers than any other age group opened the door for research to determine why.

Scholars have offered several explanations for the high voter turnout from the elderly. Timpone (1998) tied voter turnout to voter registration. His study showed that voting registration increased with age and the length of residence in the same home. These findings provided an explanation as to why registration rates of the elderly have been maintained over time. Education was found to be the most important factor in determining voter registration. Since the more recent cohorts entering retirement have higher levels of education (Timpone), they would be expected to register at higher rates than their predecessors.

MacManus (1996) held that the elderly are better informed voters. According to MacManus, "Older persons are more likely to pay attention to the news and to rely upon a wider array of news sources to follow public affairs" (p. 35). Other scholars have found that the elderly are more generally knowledgeable about politics (Carpini & Keeter, 1993; Luskin, 1987) and they report strong attachment to political parties (Binstock, 2000). MacManus and Tenpas (1998) reported that the elderly were more likely to follow primary elections, watch debates, and participate in grassroots activism.

Strate, Parrish, Elder, and Ford (1989) espoused that “civic competence” (p. 450) accounted for much of the voter turnout among the elderly. According to the tenets of civic competence, “Political knowledge is...acquired through everyday experience that accumulates with chronological age” (Strate et al., p. 450). This being the case, the life experiences of the lesser educated elderly become the mediating factors in advancing their political knowledge to a level commensurate with the better educated elderly. Thus, attainment of civic competence as a function of aging can equalize the effect of formal education.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this voter behavior research. First, the elderly will vote and they will vote in great numbers. Second, the number of elderly voters will increase proportionately to the growth in their population. Third, the less well-educated elderly voters cannot be ignored as a viable force to be reckoned with at the polls. Finally, it would behoove the education policy makers to make a concerted effort to determine what kinds of life experiences influence the elderly voter.

Planning in Public Schools

The implications for the requisite to study the effects of elderly voter behavior on public school funding are grounded in the need to plan for the implementation and delivery of quality educational programs. Earthman (2000) contends, “Planning is a purposeful activity that helps achieve something” (p. 15). If students are to be offered a program of instruction that affords them the opportunity to achieve to their maximum potential, school districts must have a plan based, in part, on the identification of the community within the context of “location, resources, [and] constraints” and a financial plan that identifies the “sources and amounts of funds” (Earthman, p. 28). Therefore, in order to become fully cognizant of possible constraints placed on a small, rural county with regard to funding support from elderly voters it is essential to engage in effective long-range planning.

Summary

Several key concepts relative to the purpose of this study have been presented in order to provide a background of essential knowledge for this study. Although the need to establish and maintain a system of public education in the United States can be traced back to the birth of the nation, its fiscal sustenance remains a contentious issue even to this day. Much of this turmoil can be linked to the fact that systems of public school finance have evolved from a combination of piece-meal decisions instead of from well-planned models. Regardless of the system of

finance in place, almost all public school systems are funded via a combination of federal, state, and local taxes. It is the contentious nature of taxing and spending politics that forms the basis of controversy for this study.

The issue of taxing and spending for public education is complicated by the fact that the demographic complexion of the United States is changing. By the year 2030, as much as 20% of the total population will be made up of persons aged 65 and older. This demographic realignment has been attributed to declines in the fertility rate, the mortality rate, and the international immigration rate.

Theories of economic well-being have evolved in conjunction with the transitioning population. The Easterlin (1978) hypothesis posits that membership in a large cohort is detrimental to the economic well-being of the group. Although Easterlin's theory is credible when applied to the cohort of Baby Boomers entering a competitive work force, it has had little relevance to the improved status of well-being that the large cohort of elderly has garnered in recent years. A more appropriate theory was espoused by Preston (1984). Preston's theory is based on the premise that similar cohorts cast favorable votes towards initiatives that are most advantageous to their economic self-interest. Therefore, the improved status of well-being for the elderly is directly related to the size of their group and the group's ability to influence voting outcomes.

The growing elderly population has prompted a considerable amount of research on the political behavior of this cohort. Scholars have shown that the elderly turn out in higher percentages than any other cohort of voters. This behavior has been attributed to the fact that the elderly register to vote in great numbers, that the elderly are well informed voters, that the elderly show ideological attachment, and that life experiences equalize the education gap that exists between the socioeconomic strata of the cohort.

Long-range planning is not effective unless local education policy makers are fully aware of the limitations of the community and the availability funding sources. Without this knowledge, there is little likelihood of operating a successful system of public education. Since the elderly pose a viable threat to long-term and sustained support for education funding over the next 30 years, it behooves educators to inform themselves of the demographic complexion of their local school district.

The synthesis of these key concepts leads to the conclusion that elderly voters have the ability to influence spending for public education. What remains to be seen is whether or not the elderly vote in a bloc on the basis of economic self-interest, or whether they cast their votes as heterogeneous individuals. Some answers to these questions can be obtained from the most current research that links elderly voter support to public education funding.

Elderly Voter Support for Public Education Funding

The current literature on elderly voter support for public education funding approaches the topic from several perspectives. Some scholars have focused on the parent vs. non-parent issue. Others have concentrated on studies of retirement migration. Research on rural elderly voter behavior is quite limited; whereas, demographic inquiries comprise a substantial majority of the empirical literature. These perspectives provide the framework for this review of the relevant literature.

Parent vs. Non-Parent

The parent vs. non-parent paradigm originated from Preston's (1984) position that adults who are not parents oppose any form of tax that is levied to support other people's children because there is no personal benefit (Chew, 1992). A significant amount of research has been conducted in an effort to prove or disprove the parenthood issue. As early as 1973, Piele and Hall conducted a review of studies done in the 1960's only to find that no more explanatory weight was attached to parenthood than it was to any of the other explanatory variables. A decade later, Smith (1982) reported in his survey of national public opinion polls that, "...self-interest is a partial explainer of spending attitudes, but having school age children is not a major source of support for spending" (p.187). Not long thereafter, Brown and Saks (1985) determined that number of families with children and the number of children per family had very little effect on support for school funding as compared to the racial, ethnic, and economic composition of the school district. This literature did little to support Preston's theory.

Research from the 1990's was somewhat more supportive of parenthood as a predictor of support for education funding. Kenneth Chew has done some extensive research on this topic. In his first study, Chew (1990) examined national public opinion polls from 1986 in an effort to determine the effects of several independent variables on public school finance. Based on his analysis, he argued that parenthood status as a predictor of support for school financing was positive. However, its effects were indirect and no greater than a voter's level of education. In a

subsequent study, Chew (1992) updated his original research with a study conducted in Orange County, California. Parents were found to be more inclined to support education funding than non-parents. With regard to age, it was noted that “Support for tax increases may decrease marginally with age (Chew, p. 285).

Of greater significance was Chew’s (1992) unique interpretation of decreased support by the elderly. Aside from Preston’s aging theory, Chew contended that the elderly coefficient could be the result of “period” effects that develop from specific historical events that occur throughout the lifetime; or that it could be the result of “...unique generational experiences” (p. 288). Although Chew did not offer a clear connection between his results and any of the explanations, he did provide an original alternative for future research that is tightly aligned with the purpose of this study.

Migrant Elderly

For the better part of the last half century, retirement migration has been adding to the demographic transformation of state and local populations (Button & Rosenbaum, 1989). Between 1975 and 1990, more than 4 million elderly Americans migrated from one state to another to retire. The effects of retirement migration impact both the giving and receiving communities. Consequently, local policy makers have reason to be concerned about the political ramifications of this movement.

The empirical literature on the effects of elderly migrants on school funding issues is polarized. Studies conducted in the late 1970’s concluded that the elderly were as diverse in their attitudes about government spending as the younger voting population (Campos, 1986; Beck & Dye, 1982) and that they were too socially and economically diverse to organize in to a political voting bloc (Williamson, 1982). Button and Rosenbaum (1989) studied the effects of elderly voter behavior on support for school funding referenda in the state of Florida via an analysis of aggregate voting data collected over a 20 year period. These researchers found a positive correlation between the growth of the elderly population and the presence of one or more chapters of the American Association of Retired Persons and concluded that “...the more politically organized...aging not only influence[d] the outcome of school bond referenda but [were] part of a social context supportive of increased financial resources for local education” (p. 168). In a more recent study, Berkman and Plutzer (2004) came to a different conclusion when they examined the voting behavior of 9,129 elderly residents across the United States who had

lived in a different county five years earlier. They found the effects of elderly migrant voters to be strong and negative, while the same measure for longstanding elderly was shown to be strong and positive.

Collectively, these results raise questions about the economic status of the migrant elderly and their support for local schools. Button and Rosenbaum (1989) concentrated their study on elderly migrants in one state. The fact that these retirees were financially stable enough to relocate could be an indication of their wealth and disposable income. This wealth, in turn, could be a reflection of the level of educational attainment. If true, either of these measures could positively skew the results in the direction of support for education. On the other hand, Berkman and Plutzer's (2004) large sample may have been more representative of the total elderly population, not just those who had the fiscal capacity to relocate to a retirement state. Either way, the lack of consistency among the results highlights the need for more in depth analysis.

Rural Voting

A basic operational definition of the term "rural" is a prerequisite for conceptualizing this study. According to the Rural Prosperity Commission (RVPC) (2000), rural is all the area of the state not included in the Census Bureau's Metropolitan Statistical Areas. Therefore, rural means non-metropolitan, or areas that have fewer than 120 people per square mile. Currently, there are 61 rural counties in the state, one being the location selected for this study. The RVPC acknowledges that there is no one right way to define rural, as it is a multidimensional concept, and "...we must not make the serious mistake of thinking that all rural places are homogeneous" (p. 5).

The issue of rural elderly voter influence on public school funding is a topic that is not well represented in the literature. Lentz (1999) conducted an entire study around the creation of a typology of six school district jurisdiction types based on land use in the state of Illinois. Using educational culture, tax revolt, capacity to pay, and voter turnout as the four predictors of school referenda outcomes, he found that "Districts in small rural jurisdictions passed 53% of their referenda, the highest level of any jurisdiction type" (p. 61). Additionally, there was evidence that unfavorable economic conditions in the rural areas may have been overridden in school funding elections. Although Lentz never distinguished between elderly and non-elderly voters, he did reference "newcomers" and "old-timers" in the context of residential growth and suggested that there was likely a precedent for prior support among the "old-timers" (p. 61).

Only two other studies under review made mention of the concept of rural elderly voters (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004; Ladd & Murray, 2001). Ladd and Murray as well as Berkman and Plutzer specifically noted that the interaction between elderly voters and rural jurisdictions had been purposefully left out of their regression equations in an effort to eliminate outliers. By excluding this cohort of voters there was no way to confirm or dispute the assertions made by Lentz.

Demographic Inquiries

The final body of research is purely demographic. In other words, the researchers conducted a series of studies using various methods of data analysis in an attempt to determine how the growing population of elderly voters impacted government transfers to public education. The unique component in this literature is its contribution to the understanding of elderly voter support for school funding initiatives on a national, state, county, and district level.

National Support for Education Funding

Demographic change and support for public education spending at the national level is limited by the fact that there is no national education referendum. Consequently, an analysis of elderly voter attitudes has to be disaggregated from some form of national public opinion survey (Page & Shapiro, 1992; Plutzer & Berkman, 2005). In a 1999 national public opinion survey of 1422 adults conducted by the NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School of Education to determine if respondents would support increased taxes for public education, only 36% of those aged 65 and older were willing to pay an additional \$500.

Several other national opinion studies evidenced more supportive results. Page and Shapiro (1992) examined 703 domestic policy issues across several national surveys and found that support for education was part of the 12% of those issues that had increased as much as 20 percentage points or more. Based on the context of their study, it was concluded that, "...American's changing views toward educational spending, compared to other issues, [were] exceptional" (Plutzer & Berkman, 2005, p. 71). In a second analysis of The National Election Studies it was shown that from 1984 to 2000 support for education spending increases grew 22% (Plutzer & Berkman). Finally, a disaggregation of the General Social Survey (GSS) showed that Americans increased their support for education spending by 23 percentage points over the 30 year period from 1973 to 2003 (Plutzer & Berkman). Collectively, this data provided evidence

that support for education spending had risen steadily in comparison to support for other national issues. What was lacking in this research was an age group analysis.

Plutzer and Berkman (2005) took the GSS data to the next level. In an effort to understand how education had come to be regarded as the top national priority in 2002, they analyzed age group cohort responses to the education questions over a period of four decades to determine if the changes were purely demographic, due to generational replacement, or a result of some combination of the two. The researchers found that all Americans shifted their views on education funding in a positive direction irregardless of age and that this shift was tied to the life events associated with the transition to retirement. Consequently, Plutzer and Berkman held that those who support Preston's (1984) theory of intergenerational conflict would be wise to acknowledge the view that "...conflict arises out of different experiences as young citizens and not out of conflicting motives rooted in self-interest" (p. 81).

State Support for Education Funding

The literature on state support for public education funding is focused on the relationship between demographic structure and the level of state spending for K-12 education. Using survey data from Massachusetts, Ladd and Wilson (1983) concluded that households headed by the elderly were more likely to support a 1980 property tax limitation proposition. Poterba (1997) held that the number of elderly in the population had a negative effect on state per-child spending on public education. Based on his unique regression equation, Poterba showed that a one standard deviation shift in the share of elderly in the population would result in a 5% decline in per-pupil allocations to public education. He qualified these results by noting that a larger elderly population did evidence support for higher levels of non-educational spending, only lower public spending on education.

In a similar study, Miller (1996) studied educational expenditures using panel data from 48 states in 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990. She found the effects of a growing elderly population to be negatively related to increased support for education. However, the results were insignificant. The researcher qualified the tentativeness of her results by noting that the dependent variable was per-adult spending for education rather than per-child spending, and that when an adult brought more than one child into the mix, spending per-child would decrease proportionately with each additional school-aged child. What did make a difference in Miller's analysis was the addition of

a mobility measure to assess the impact of migrant elderly. When this mobility measure was included, migrant elderly clearly showed a lack of support for public transfers to education.

County Support for Education Funding

Several studies have approached the demographic issue from the county funding perspective. Ladd and Murray (2001) substituted county level panel data into Poterba's (1997) original regression equation and found no statistically significant effects from the elderly population. These researchers made it very clear that the study's "...primary contribution [was] the finding that county-level estimates of the effects of the elderly on support for education [were] smaller than those that emerge[d] from the state-level study by James Poterba" (p. 356). Ladd and Murray could offer no more than a notion as to why their results were different. However, they did suggest that the elderly population distribution relative to children among the counties was a reasonable place to begin studying the phenomenon.

Ladd and Murray (2001) were not the first to recognize the need to study county-level effects of the elderly on education funding. In Miller's (1996) study, she not only worked with state level data, but also with county level data for each of the 253 counties in the state of Texas. Whereas her state study had produced insignificant results with regard to the elderly, the county results showed the elderly coefficient to be negative and significant. One explanation for the difference between the state and county level results may have been the fact that county level spending was more readily influenced by the effects of special interest groups which was not easily discernible in state level aggregate data (Miller).

District Support for Education Funding

Several scholars have made strong arguments for approaching the study of demographic effects of the elderly on education funding from the district level perspective (Duncombe et al., 2003; Harris, Evans, & Schwab, 2001) based on the fact that there are significant variations between the level of fiscal support for education between state and local governments (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). Harris et al. attempted to reconcile the differences between Poterba's (1997) state analysis and Ladd and Murray's (2001) county analysis by focusing on district level data. These scholars adapted Poterba's original regression equation to accommodate district level data and found that, "...the elderly [had] very different effects on state revenues [as compared to] local revenues" (Harris et al., p. 463).

Two feasible explanations were given to explain lack of support for education at the state level and the increased support at the local level. On the one hand, an increase in state tax dollars for education had no obvious benefits to the elderly because it increased fiscal transfers to all state schools (Harris et al., 2001). Since all schools in the state theoretically improved, there was no perceived financial benefit to entice the elderly to support a state tax increase. On the other hand, a tax increase to benefit education at the local district level was regarded as more visibly and personally attractive. Visibly, the local community benefited from the improved aesthetic value that quality schools brought to their neighborhoods. Personally, increased spending for education was financially beneficial as it became capitalized into higher property values. Based on this scenario, elderly support for education had to do with literally seeing tax dollars at work.

Duncombe et al., (2003) approached elderly support for education at the district level from a completely different perspective. They took their study directly to the people via the use of an adapted contingent valuation survey method (CVM) grounded in the context of local school budget referenda. According to Duncombe et al., “CVM surveys are designed to ascertain the values that individuals attach to goods or services not generally sold in a market, contingent upon their cost” (p. 54). Using a personal telephone survey followed by an iterative bidding component, these researchers found that the elderly and non-elderly held similar views on funding initiatives in the district. These results highlight the fact that the elderly should not be stereotyped into one homogeneous group to be regarded as an anti-school funding coalition. Certainly this study was limited by the use of self-report data. However, it does open the door to further direct inquiry in the form of in-depth, personal, one-on-one interviews.

Summary

The current literature is comprised of studies that focus on the effects of elderly voter support for public education from several perspectives. Unfortunately, there is little consensus among the results. Although, there are indicators that parents will be more supportive of increased spending for education, there is no strong evidence to indicate that the elderly, non-parents are not. The literature on elderly migrant support is polarized. At one end of the spectrum, there is support for education referenda among the better educated, politically active, migrant elderly in one retirement state. However, on a national scale migrant elderly show a strong, significant lack of support when compared to longstanding elderly residents. Information about rural elderly voter support for public education is almost non-existent in the research. One

study of jurisdiction types did recognize the small, rural jurisdiction as being supportive of education (Lentz, 1999). However, when mentioned in other current demographic studies, rural data were eliminated in an effort to control for outliers.

The national, state, county, and local data is also confounding. The majority of national survey data evidenced a significant level of support for education funding among all age groups. However, this same level of support did not exist at the state level. As a group, elderly voters were shown to be more heterogeneous in nature at the county and district levels. Clearly, the results reported in the relevant literature confirm the need to pursue further study of elderly voter support for public education in order to continue to refine the effects of this growing population on the future of public education funding.

Synthesis and Summary

The debate over elderly voter support for public education funding is one that should not be ignored for several reasons. First, the elderly are going to represent the largest voting portion of the population within the next 25 to 30 years. Second, the elderly are generally out of the work force and, therefore, particularly sensitive to any intrusions on their fixed incomes. Third, the elderly are well-informed voters who turn out in higher numbers than any other portion of the voting age population. Finally, there is no conclusive evidence in the literature to guide local policy makers in their efforts to develop long-term planning initiatives for public schools that takes into account the impact of the elderly voter, particularly in a small, rural community.

Three specific references were made in the literature that support the need for further inquiry into the lived experiences of the elderly voter in order to determine how those experiences impacted preferences toward education funding (Chew, 1992; Duncombe et al., 2003; Strate et al., 1989). From these references it becomes clear that elderly voter attitudes toward public education do not form in isolation. Rather, they emerge from the culmination of a series of successive, unique, life experiences that coincide with the evolution of chronological age.

Research Direction

Knowing that life experiences mold elderly voter behavior has both long-term and short-term implications for the direction of this study. Elderly voter research conducted in a small, rural, aging county can inform local education policy makers of the personal life events within the context of the community that have shaped individual attitudes toward public education

funding. The benefits of understanding these personal experiences are twofold. As to the short-term, local school administration officials have a need to know the dynamics of their elderly voting population if they are to successfully engage in effective planning initiatives. As to the future, local education policy makers and local government officials need to be able to identify community and educational initiatives that have resulted in positive, personal experiences among elderly voters so as to promote efforts to enhance and sustain those initiatives over time.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding. A thorough understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon was captured through personal dialogue that related the essence of the lived experiences of these elderly voters. At the heart of this inquiry was the gathering of detailed descriptions of real life experiences that had nurtured attitudes toward public education funding within a select group of elderly voters who had experienced the phenomenon in question. The goal was to illuminate the essence of the experiences of these elderly voters that had formed their attitudes toward education funding.

The specific questions guiding this study were:

- a) What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education funding?
- b) What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education quality?
- c) What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of community that have shaped their attitudes towards school funding?
- d) What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of school that have shaped their attitudes towards school funding?

In order to obtain empirical evidence on the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding, the researcher established and completed a series of methods and procedures to satisfy the requirements of an organized, disciplined and systematic study as called for by Moustakas (1993). Chapter three contains a comprehensive analysis of the six methodological components used in this study to meet these requirements. These components include the research design, the informed consent and permission procedures, the data collection process, the data quality procedures, the data analysis procedures, and the data representation plan. Subsumed within the context of these components are detailed descriptions of the participant selection process, the role of the researcher, and the criteria for establishment of the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. The structured implementation of each of these components ensured the rigor of this study.

Research Design

Research design is the logic that connects collection and interpretation of data to the purpose of a study (Yin, 1994). Based on the locus of interest noted in the purpose of this study,

a phenomenological approach rooted in the tenets of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) was used as the framework for the research design. Phenomenology served as the rationale for the researcher to reduce the lived experiences, or phenomenon, of a small group of individuals to their central meaning, or essence. The aim of this genre of research as applied to the purpose of this study was to illuminate the essence of the lived experiences of elderly voters that had shaped their attitudes toward public education funding. Data were generated in the form of personal narratives that resulted from responses to a set of carefully crafted questions as recommended by Creswell (1998). These questions prompted elderly voters to tell the story of their everyday lived experiences as they related to the phenomenon in question.

Narrative analysis was used to determine the extent to which the stories provided insights about the lived experience. This strategy focuses on extracting meaning from the stories people tell (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Bochner (2001) reinforced this notion by stating that stories as data can stand on their own as documented narratives of the experience, or phenomenon. Consequently, the first-person accounts of the participants become the object of investigation in narrative research (Riessman, 1993).

Critical to understanding the concept of narratology is the recognition that stories are portals into cultural and social meanings (Patton, 2002). The role of the researcher is to examine how each story is put together in an effort to determine why the story was told that way (Reissman, 1993). From this analysis, the researcher identifies the dominant narrative themes that emerge from the stories, thereby gaining insight into how a select group of individuals make sense of their lives (Thorne, 2000). Within the context of this study, narrative analysis allowed the essence of the stories of the elderly to emerge, thus giving voice to the experiences that shaped the attitudes of this growing bloc of voters toward public education funding.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the instrument in a qualitative study (Patton, 2002). As the instrument, the researcher becomes the conduit for the collection and analysis of each piece of qualitative data (Merriam, 1998). One unavoidable consequence of this process is the development of an intimate relationship between the researcher and the data. This relationship has the potential to compromise the validity of a study unless the researcher self-discloses to acknowledge personal perspectives that may influence the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Moustakas (1994) says the validity of a phenomenological study rests, in part, on the researcher disclosing the personal “self” through self-awareness and self-reflection. The researcher can demonstrate self-awareness through the Epoche and bracketing (Creswell, 1998). Epoche is a Greek term that means to refrain from judgment (Patton, 2002). In the Epoche, the researcher commits to taking no position and to giving every aspect of the data equal value (Moustakas). Bracketing is the process of setting aside personal assumptions about the world (Schwandt, 2001). When effectively used, the Epoche enables the researcher to bracket biases and preconceived notions; thereby allowing the researcher to approach the study from a naïve and completely open manner (Moustakas).

Self-reflection is accomplished through the process of reflexivity. Reflexivity is an introspective examination in which the researcher identifies and acknowledges the ownership of a personal perspective related to the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002). Through participation in this process the researcher willingly confronts biases and predispositions (Schwandt, 2001) that may influence the collection and analysis of the data. Researchers who engage in reflexivity are more likely to produce good data (Kleinsasser, 2000).

It was incumbent upon the researcher in this phenomenological study to self-disclose any personal or professional predispositions that may compromise the validity of this study prior to becoming immersed in the data collection and analysis process. There were several personal issues in the life of the researcher that may have had a bearing on this study. First, the researcher was a longstanding resident of the county in which the research was conducted; the researcher’s spouse was life-long resident of the area and a member of the county’s board of supervisors; and all three of the researcher’s children completed their K-12 education in the public schools in the county. Second, the researcher had a great deal of respect for the elderly due to having been raised in an extended family situation. Finally, the researcher had developed affective ties to the community via personal experiences that resulted in an intimate knowledge of the quality of life the area has to offer.

The researcher’s professional roots were grounded in almost three decades of service to the school district that serves the county in question. The first 24 years of the researcher’s career were spent as a classroom teacher, an elementary principal and an instructional supervisor. While conducting this study the researcher was the assistant superintendent for instruction in the district. One of the major responsibilities of the researcher’s position as assistant superintendent

for instruction was the development and management of the instructional portion of the district operating budget. As a key member of the budget committee, the researcher was involved in all relevant aspects of the budget development process. Consequently, the researcher was well schooled in the amount of district revenues received from local funding sources and in the critical issues affecting the continued funding commitment from the local government.

From a self-reflexive perspective, it was the researcher's responsibility to acknowledge that any one or all of these personal or professional issues had the potential to bias the role of the researcher in this study. However, through self-reflection, the Epoche, and bracketing; the researcher committed to approaching this study with an open mind and to refraining from any preconceived judgments. The researcher's goal in self-disclosing was to underscore a commitment to collect and analyze data in a manner that accurately represented the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding.

Selection Process

In a qualitative study, the selection of a research site and the identification of the participants constitute the sampling process (Burgess, 1982; Merriam, 1998). The researcher is charged with establishing the parameters for this process (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Because the parameters are integrally tied to the purpose of the study, these sampling strategies are referred to a purposeful (Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Merriam (1998) explained, "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). Full disclosure of the rationale for site and participant selection by the researcher gives a study scope and boundaries which can augment the transferability of the results (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the lived experiences of elderly voters that had shaped their attitudes toward public education funding. Purposefully selected elderly voters who resided in a rural county in a mid-Atlantic state were identified as participants. The participants were chosen from among the voters age 65 and over who had a story to tell about their personal experiences as they related to the purpose of this study. All participants freely volunteered to participate in this study.

Setting

The site selection strategy used in this study was based on Patton's (2002) definition of a "typical case sampling" (p. 236). In typical case sampling, the location is purposefully selected because it is more likely to represent the average situation of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 1998). The location identified for this study was selected because its characteristics were generally representative of a rural county.

The county identified for sampling was located in the western part of a mid-Atlantic state, 176 miles from the nearest urban center (Demographic and Economic Resource Inventory, n.d.). The U.S. Census (2000) reported the total population of the county at 17,215. The percent of residents living in poverty was above the state average, while the median household income and the per capita income was significantly below (U.S. Census). Of the top ten employers in the county, only one had more than 1000 employees (Employment Commission, 2004). Additionally, the county consistently recorded unemployment figures higher than those reported for the entire state (U.S. Census). Since these issues are often associated with rural areas throughout the United States (Demographic and Economic Resource Inventory, n.d.), this county met Patton's (2002) criteria for a typical setting.

Participants

Typical case sampling procedures guided the selection of participants for this study. The typical rural elderly voter was identified from among county residents who were members of the over age 65 population. Statistics from county data sets indicated that these elderly citizens make up 17.6% of all residents in the county (U.S. Census, 2000) and they comprised 23.2% of all registered voters (State Board of Elections, 2005). Of the 2380 registered voters age 66 and over, 28% voted in the most recent election (State Board of Elections). As a cohort of registered voters and as a cohort of frequent voters, the elderly portion of the population in this county was greater than any other reported group.

There were several other pertinent social characteristics of this county that were indicative of a rural population (Demographic and Economic Resource Inventory, n.d.). First, 80.1% of all residents in this county did not have a college degree (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). Second, 84.9% of all residents lived in owner-occupied housing. Finally, 71.3% of all residents had lived in the same house since 1995.

Based on this information, the typical participant for this study was purposefully chosen from among county residents who fell within a hierarchy of parameters. First, the participants were at least 65 years old and they were registered voters who had voted within the past five years. Second, the highest degree earned by any participant was a high school diploma. Third, all participants owned their home and had lived in that home since at least 1995. Finally, all participants were volunteers. Figure 3.1 illustrates how the typical participant was identified.

Participant Identification Matrix

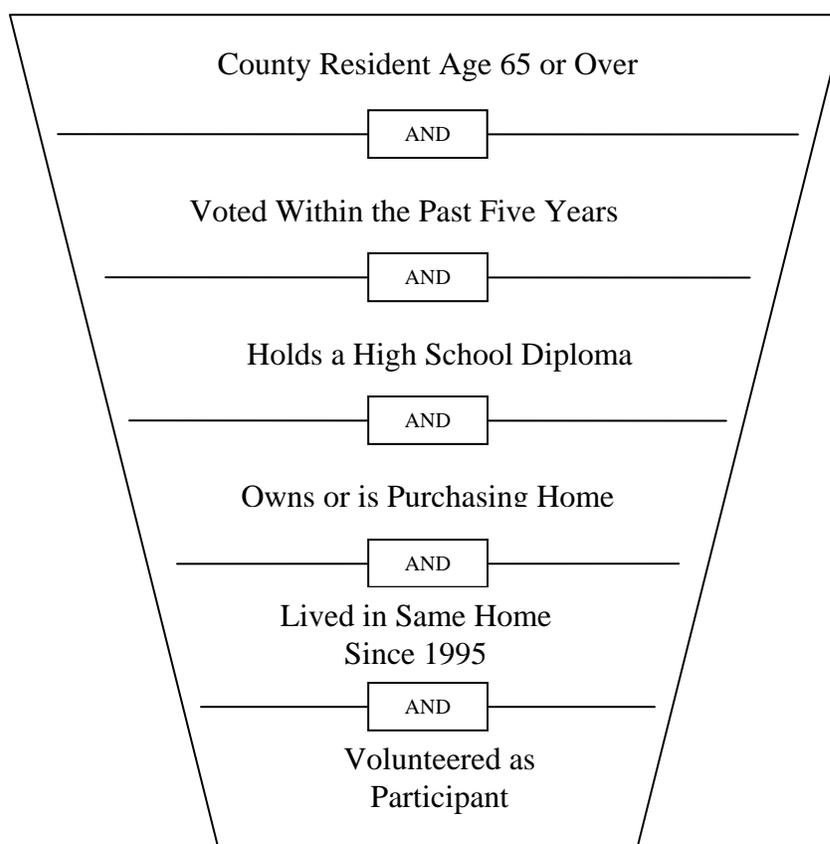


Figure 3.1

Volunteers for this study were solicited from among county residents who fit the characteristics outlined in the participant selection matrix. Solicitation flyers (See Appendix C) were sent to leaders of selected organizations in the community (See Appendix A) whose members were likely to possess the identified characteristics. A cover letter accompanied the flyers to explain the study (See Appendix B). Sending out flyers had a two-fold purpose: to generate interest among potential participants and to establish the credibility of the study among this cohort of citizens. Referrals were also requested from among peer educators. The first ten

volunteer respondents became the cohort of participants. Subsequent to their identification, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Informed Consent and Permission Procedures

In a qualitative study, ethical issues may emerge during data collection and publication of findings due to the intimate nature of this form of inquiry (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). To protect the rights and welfare of each participant, this study was conducted in accordance with the rules and regulations of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). These guidelines provided the ethical framework to ensure each participant was not deceived about the study and that their participation was voluntary.

The purpose of informed consent was to ensure that all participants freely volunteered to participate in the research. Rossman and Rallis (2003) contend that there are four ethical principles that must be included in this process. First, participants must fully understand the purpose and audience of the study. Second, participants must completely understand their participation agreement. Third, each participant must willingly agree to participate. Finally, participants must understand that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Patton (2002) identifies several additional issues that should be fully disclosed to each participant at the beginning of an interview. These topics include the intended use of the information, the content of the questions, how the participant's answers will be used, and what the risks or benefits are for the participant. All forms were developed to comply with each of these conditions.

The application for expedited approval was submitted to the university's IRB in July 2006. Formal approval was received via a letter on July 28, 2006 (See Appendix F). In order to ensure that each participant was fully informed and came to no harm, a copy of the informed consent document (See Appendix D) was read to each participant preceding their interview. Following the thorough examination of the informed consent document, each participant signed and initialed the form to affirm their willingness to participate and to acknowledge their awareness that the interview would be audio-taped. The original informed consent document was retained by the researcher and a copy was left with each participant for their records.

Assurance of Confidentiality

Maintaining confidentiality means that no one other than the researcher will have access to sensitive materials used in a study (Seidman, 2006). In a qualitative study, this degree of

confidentiality poses two challenges to the researcher (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The first challenge is protecting the identities, names and roles of the participants. The other equally important challenge is ensuring that all information will be held in confidence by the researcher.

Procedures to protect the privacy of participants and the security of all sensitive material were fully implemented throughout this study. Participants in this study were fully advised of issues related to the confidentiality of their statements and of their identities prior to each interview. As recommended by Seidman (2006), all participant information was coded from the outset to the extent that no bystander could inadvertently discern the identity of anyone involved in the study. Additionally, each participant was provided with an assurance that all contact information, informed consent forms, audio-tapes, interview transcripts, and research notes would be maintained in a secure location at all times as an additional identity safeguard. As an added assurance of confidentiality, each participant was informed that their audio-taped interview would be personally transcribed by the researcher.

Patton (2002) suggested that the form of in-depth interviewing that is involved in qualitative research has the potential to expose the innermost feelings of participants. Because some participants may be particularly vulnerable to the use of sensitive information, it is incumbent upon the researcher to reveal the extent to which the material from an interview may be used (Seidman, 2006). Participants were advised in advance of how extensively their own words may be used in the study and how broad an audience the study was intended to reach. Extreme caution was exercised to guard against presenting a scenario that may limit the publication of the study. Consequently, full and complete disclosure was implemented.

Gaining Access and Entry

The manner in which a researcher establishes access to potential participants for an interview study lays the foundation for the quality of their relationship (Seidman, 2006). Seidman contends that it is incumbent upon the researcher to lay a foundation of mutual respect built on equity and understanding. Because the participants for this study were selected from among elderly voting citizens, no formal or informal gatekeepers were involved in the access process.

The fact that the researcher was well known in the county facilitated access and entry to the pool of potential participants. Solicitation flyers were sent to leaders of organizations whose members were primarily members of the group identified for participant selection. Additional

access was generated via personal contact and peer recommendation. Once potential interviewees were identified, telephone contact was made to set up a time to meet in person to conduct the interviews.

Data Collection

There are several methods that can be used to collect data in a qualitative study. The selection of the most appropriate data collection procedure is driven by the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002). In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviewing was used as the primary data collection technique. Additional data were generated through field notes, interview process notes and reflexive journaling. Combining these four methods aided in the triangulation of data.

Interviewing

Interviewing is one of the primary ways to learn in the field (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The interview allows access into another person's mind and to the stories they have to tell (Patton, 2002). The purpose of interviewing is to develop an understanding of the lived experience of other people and to make meaning from that experience (Seidman, 2006). The process allows the researcher to obtain a purposeful kind of information that cannot be obtained by direct observation (Merriam, 1998).

There are several approaches to interviewing (Patton, 2002; Seidman 2006). This study combined the tenets of the standardized open-ended interview and the interview guide approach. In the standardized open-ended interview research questions are carefully crafted prior to the interview to ensure that each participant is exposed to the same set of probes (Patton). In its purest form, this methodology does not allow the researcher to deviate from the predetermined script. Consequently, the researcher does not have the artistic freedom to pursue topics that arise during the course of the interview.

The interview guide is less structured. This method is driven by the development of a pre-interview outline of critical issues that must be explored during the course of the interview (Patton, 2002). This outline becomes the checklist for topic coverage, but in no way does it limit the researcher's freedom from exploring, probing, or asking questions that may uncover the essence of the experience of the participant.

To get at the heart of the lived experiences that shaped elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding, this study combined strategies from the standardized format with the interview guide approach. Standardized open-ended questions were developed prior to the

interview. Each participant was asked the same key questions in exactly the same manner. However, the interviewer had the flexibility to probe for richer information and to pose follow-up questions based on participant information. Combining these two questioning strategies empowered the researcher to make decisions on the basis of strengthening the quality of participant information. Each participant interview was audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher.

Interview Protocol

The following protocol was used in the interview:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a resident of this county?
2. Describe the schools you attended in grades 1-12.
3. What experiences do you remember most about your years in public school?
4. What stories can you share about how these experiences influenced your attitude toward public education?
5. How have these experiences impacted the way you feel about public education today?
6. How do you feel about public education today?
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of public schools today?
8. Do you feel public schools are doing a good job?
9. What specific experiences impacted the way you feel about public education today?
10. Do you have, or have you ever had, children in our county schools?
11. What role do you feel the community plays in funding public education?
12. Describe your feelings about the community and its level of support for public education.
13. How has the issue of funding public schools affected your voting behavior?
14. How does being a senior citizen affect your ability to provide financial support for public schools in the county?
15. Are there particular events in your life have influenced how and why you feel as you do about public education?
16. What else should I have asked you about your experiences related to the formation of your attitudes toward public education funding?

Demographic Questions

1. How long you have you been retired?

2. How often do you vote?
3. How long have you lived in your current home?
4. Do you own, or are you purchasing, your home?
5. What is highest grade you have completed?

Field Notes

Field notes turn what the researcher sees, hears, tastes and smells into data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The act of taking field notes allows the researcher to document personal impressions and insights in a systematic manner. Quality field notes are constructed to capture the here and now. Field notes constructed after the fact are likely to lack elements of the essence of the researcher's rich experience (Patton, 2002).

Field notes are meant to be descriptive (Patton, 2002). Patton stated that all field notes should be dated and should contain detailed information about every aspect of the interview. Patton further clarified his position by stating, "Field notes [should] contain the descriptive information that will permit...the reader of the study's findings to experience the activity through your report" (p. 303).

Field notes were an integral part of data collection process for this study. Thick descriptions of each interview were initiated on site. Detailed accounts of the researcher's insights into observations, feelings, reactions, and reflections toward the field experience were recorded concurrent with and immediately following each interview. These notes became part of the data and were used in the triangulation process.

Interview Notes

Patton (2002) contends that note taking during the interview process serves several purposes. First, note taking is a non-verbal cue to the participant about what is and is not important. This type of cue aids in pacing the interview. Second, note taking signals the participant that they have something of value to say and, therefore, aids in building rapport. Third, interview process notes lay the groundwork for follow-up questions. Finally, taking notes during the interview keeps the researcher focused on the content which will facilitate analysis at a later time.

Detailed notes were taken during each interview. The goal was to capture the body language, emotions, and individual nuances of each participant. The goal in taking interview notes was to convey to these elderly citizens that their stories were valuable and that they had

much to contribute to the study. The notes proved to be a springboard to the development of probing questions and to the researcher's internalization of participant information.

Reflexive Notes

The reflexive researcher recognizes that their presence has an influence on the context of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This means that the researcher must take their own bias into account when attempting to make meaning of the data. To do this, the researcher engages in a process of systematic reflection. This process entails several steps. First, the researcher engages in self-reflexivity (Patton, 2002). During this process the researcher acknowledges personal understanding, personal perspectives, personal experiences related to the purpose of the study. Second, the researcher engages in participant reflexivity. In this phase of the process the researcher accepts the fact that being present in the participant's world will have an impact on their reactions (Rossman & Rallis). Finally, the researcher acknowledges reflexivity about potential audiences. To do this, the researcher examines how the findings will be received, how the researcher will be received, and how the perceptions of the audience will influence the manner in which the data is reported.

Reflexive notes were made directly following each interview. These notes captured the reactions of the researcher to the field work experience. Journal entries focused on the researcher's attempts to make sense of the researcher's personal biases before and after entering the field, the researcher's dynamics on participant behavior, and the researcher's perceptions of how the information would be received by the audience. A concerted attempt was made to identify all biases the researcher may have brought to the study using reflexive note taking.

Data Quality Procedures

Trustworthiness

The implementation of data quality procedures ensures the rigor of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Guba (1981) contends rigorous naturalistic inquiry is based on credibility, transferability, and dependability. Guba further espouses that credibility is established by triangulation and peer debriefing; transferability is established by thick description; and dependability is established by auditing. Together, these procedures increase the likelihood that the findings are trustworthy, or noteworthy to audiences (Schwandt, 2001).

Credibility

To establish the credibility of findings, the researcher must provide assurances of a correlation between the participant's view of personal experiences and the representation of these experiences in the study (Schwandt, 2001). Guba (1981) suggested that triangulation and peer debriefing were two techniques that could be used to establish this correlation.

Triangulation is based on the concept that multiple methods of data collection and data analysis are less vulnerable to errors (Patton, 2002; Schwandt). Data triangulation enhances the credibility by ensuring the depth and complexity of the study are adequate (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Triangulation in this study was achieved by collecting and analyzing data from interviews, field notes, interview notes, and reflexive notes. Interview data were generated from one-on-one, audio taped interviews with the 10 volunteer participants. Field notes were written by the researcher at the time of each interview in order to document personal impressions and insights in a systematic manner. Interview notes were recorded by the researcher during participant responses and were used as the basis for the development of follow-up prompts. Finally, reflexive notes were made directly following each interview to capture the reactions of the researcher to the field work experience.

Peer debriefing involves sharing ideas about procedures in the field with a trusted and knowledgeable colleague (Schwandt, 2001). This confidant becomes the researcher's sounding board throughout the entire study. Rossman and Rallis (2003) characterize the peer debriefer as an "intellectual watchdog [who helps the researcher] modify design decisions, develop possible analytic categories, and build an explanation for the phenomenon of interest" (p. 69). The researcher's dissertation committee chairperson served as the peer debriefer throughout the course of this study.

Transferability

Patton (2002) defines transferability as the fittingness of findings for use in other settings. Transferability has to do with whether or not the results of a study will hold in an alternate context, or in the same context in an alternate time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative researcher cannot specify whether or not the results of a study are transferable. However, what the researcher can do is present a thick, rich description of the data that will enable someone who is interested in the study to make their own inferences about the transferability of the findings. One way to ensure thick descriptions is to purposefully sample information-rich cases (Patton).

To enhance the transferability of this study, 10 purposefully identified participants whose stories lent themselves to deep, rich, thick descriptions were interviewed. Subsequent to each interview, the researcher made a concerted effort to represent each participant's story in the form of a detailed narrative that conveyed the essence of their voice.

Dependability

For a qualitative study to exhibit dependability, it must maintain data and process consistency over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is measured by an audit trail (Morse & Richards, 2002). An audit trail refers to documentation that tracks research events and decisions in a manner that can be verified by an independent, expert auditor (Patton, 2002). An impartial, expert auditor has the expertise to render judgment about the quality of data collection and analysis. The auditors for this study were the members of the researcher's dissertation committee. The researcher logged and described each step of the design and implementation process so that the committee members could understand them, reconstruct them, and subject them to scrutiny.

Data quality procedures ensure that a study is plausible and defensible (Johnson, 1997). A study that is deemed to be credible, whose results are transferable, and whose methods and processes are dependable is judged to have been rigorously conducted. To ensure that this study had rigor, the researcher relied on multiple methods of data collection and diligently documented all processes related to gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data as suggested by Rossman & Rallis (2003). These procedures tied the data collection, the data analysis and the report of the findings into a credible audit trail.

Data Management, Analysis and Representation

Making meaning out of qualitative data is both an art and a process (Schwandt, 2001). It is the critical point in a study in which the researcher transforms raw data into deep, rich findings (Patton, 2002). The challenge faced by the researcher is that of managing massive amounts of data during the reduction process. Wolcott (1994) held that there was good reason to distinguish between the three distinct activities of management, analysis, and interpretation even though the literature often combined these processes under the umbrella of data analysis. This section details the methods to be used to organize the volumes of raw data, to reduce the raw data into meaningful units, and to turn the meaningful units of data into results.

Data Management

Within the context of this study, data management refers to the systematic manner in which raw data will be organized and maintained for ease of retrieval. Data sources for this study included face-to-face, audio-taped interviews, field notes, interview process notes, and reflexive journal entries. Rossman and Rallis (2003) emphasized the importance of developing a process for storing, labeling and dating each piece of material generated from the data sources to ensure that the researcher knows where and when each item was obtained and how to locate it quickly.

Structured methods of data management were used throughout this study. Data were organized according to each participant. From the outset, each of the 10 participants was assigned a color. Duplicate sets of audio tapes were labeled with the participant color. Each personally transcribed interview transcript was printed on “participant color” paper and maintained in color coordinated file folders. Field notes, interview process notes and reflexive journal entries were maintained in a similar fashion. Color-coding drove the dating, labeling, and storing process for further refinement of the management process. By the time the information collection process was completed for each participant, all raw data were readily identifiable.

Data Analysis

“The purpose of data analysis is to bring meaning, structure, and order to data” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 31). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that the analytic process operates concurrently with the data collection process. They further contended that the documentation of the insights that emerge is an essential part of fieldwork that constitutes the beginning of qualitative analysis. Ongoing analysis in the field is an underpinning of the emergent nature of qualitative research.

During the course of the data collection process, the researcher cyclically examined the text using the tenets of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is the process of making meaning from the manner in which participants make sense out of events in their lives (Reissman, 1993). It is based on analyzing how a story is put together and how the story persuades the researcher of its legitimacy. The role of the narrative analyst is to dissect the text to determine why the participant told the story with those words in that way.

The narrative analysis was conducted in accordance with a three-iteration strategy purported by Anfara et al. (2002). The first iteration involved chunking the data and assigning codes to the text (Miles & Huberman, 1994). “Chunks” (p. 32) are units of text identified by the

researcher for the relevance of their meanings to the research questions (Anfara et al.); while codes are the “labels” (p. 56) used to organize the chunks (Miles & Huberman). Marshall and Rossman (2006) stated that coding data is a means of formally representing analytic thinking.

Anfara et al. (2002) referred to the second iteration as the thematic development process. In constant comparative analysis, data are compared within and between codes until themes begin to emerge (Anfara et al.; Merriam, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) believe these patterns are important because they enable the analyst to reduce the number of chunks into more manageable units and because the themes have the potential to explain and predict.

The third and final iteration is hypothesis or theory development (Anfara et al., 2002). Strauss and Corbin (1998) contend that the evolution of theory is a fascinating process that develops over time. They further contend that this process requires that the researcher be immersed in the data until the nuances of the relationships among data begin to emerge. By the conclusion of this third iteration, the researcher in this study had applied the narrative data to the purpose of the research and was in a position to relate the essence of the lived experiences of elderly voters to their attitudes toward public school funding.

The rigor of qualitative research as judged by its reliability and dependability is often questioned due to its lack of public accountability (Anfara et al., 2002; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Lincoln and Guba (1985) espoused that the use of code mapping in qualitative research develops a visible audit trail that holds up to public scrutiny. When code mapping, multiple iterations, and meticulous analysis of the narratives were combined, the trustworthiness of this research was enhanced.

Data Representation

Representing and reporting qualitative findings are the final steps in data analysis. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), “Writing about qualitative data cannot be separated from the analytic process....for in choosing words to summarize and reflect the complexity of the data, the researcher is engaging in the interpretive act” (p. 162). The goal is to find and write a story so that others can know what you have learned and how you have learned it (Patton, 2002).

The purpose of the study guided the report writing and the dissemination of the findings. Thick descriptions and telling quotations by the participants were included in the final report to allow the reader to access the thoughts and the situations represented in the analysis. The goal of

the final representation of the findings was to impose order on the data in a manner that resulted in an interesting and readable report. To accomplish this goal, the final report included detailed narratives about the unique life experiences of each participant and the identification of themes across the content of the interviews that were clearly supported by the data.

Summary

A phenomenological approach based on the tenets of narrative analysis was used to examine the lived experiences of elderly voters that had shaped their attitudes toward public education funding. Guided by four research questions, data were collected from 10 participants using personal interviews, field notes, interview process notes, and reflexive journaling.

The setting for this study was a rural county in mid-Atlantic state. This setting was purposefully selected based on demographic characteristics that identified it as a typical, rural county. Potential participants were identified from among the demographic majority of elderly registered voters. Volunteers were solicited from the pool of residents who met the specified criteria.

Data were collected from audio-taped interviews, field notes, interview process notes, and reflexive journal entries. Narrative analysis was used to identify emergent themes from within and across the data. Data were coded and mapped for organization and clarification of emergent themes using a three-iteration process. Once the data were analyzed, it was used to report the meaning of the lived experiences of a purposefully selected group of rural elderly voters. The final representation of the data was in the form of a narrative for each participant. These narratives were subsequently analyzed for thematic content across all participant interviews. From these analyses, rich descriptions of the lived experiences of elderly voters that shaped their attitudes toward public education funding emerged.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding. A thorough understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon was captured through personal dialogue that related the essence of the lived experiences of these elderly voters. At the heart of this inquiry was the gathering of detailed descriptions of real life experiences that nurtured attitudes toward public education funding within a select group of elderly voters who had experienced the phenomenon in question. The goal was to illuminate the essence of the experiences of these elderly voters that formed their opinions toward education funding.

The methods and procedures used in this study were established to satisfy the requirements of an organized, disciplined and systematic study via a three-step process. First, data were generated from personal interviews with ten participants, from field notes, from interview notes and from reflexive journaling. Next, the data were subjected to a rigorous process of within and across case reduction via three iterations of analysis using the constant-comparative method. Finally, emergent themes were identified that culminated in an explanation of the unique experiences that shaped the attitudes of retired voters toward public education funding.

Chapter four provides the venue for the presentation of the findings. It is divided into four sections. Section one establishes a foundation of understanding of the overall characteristics of the cohort of participants. Section two takes the analysis to the level of a personal profile of each individual participant. Section three includes a detailed representation of the themes that emerged as a result of three iterations within and across the cases. The final section summarizes the contents of the chapter.

The deep, rich, thick language of the participants combined with observations of the researcher are included to support the results. Transcript identification codes were included at the end of each direct quote to identify the participants' words in the representation of the within and across case analyses. The goal was to support the findings with a credible audit trail by presenting the data reduction process in a clear, concise, organized fashion.

The Cohort of Participants

The cohort of participants for this study was purposefully selected from among retired voters living in one rural county of a mid-Atlantic state. Volunteers were obtained by distributing solicitation flyers to local organizations whose members were predominately retired and by recommendations from peer educators. The first ten respondents became the cohort of participants. Participants elected to meet in one of three locations: a conference room at the local hospital, the participant's home, or in a business office. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym by the researcher.

The cohort of participants was an eclectic group despite the fact that each individual met all of the specific inclusion criteria. Three of the ten participants were men and seven were women. One was African-American. The others were Caucasian. The number of years having lived on a fixed income ranged from 1 to 17 years, while the number of years of residence in their current home ranged from 10 to 46 years. Two of the ten participants had lived in the county their entire lives. Six had lived in the county from 46 to 70 years. The two remaining participants indicated they had lived in the county 20 and 24 years, respectively. There were three commonalities among all ten participants. First, they all owned their homes. Second, each one had graduated from high school. Finally, all participants voted on a regular basis. Table 1 was included to summarize the participant demographic information.

Each of the elderly voters had a unique story to tell about their experiences in public school and in the post-public school years. The goal was to capture the deep, rich language used by each participant to describe their experiences in an effort to reveal the essence of the individual's lived experience that shaped their attitudes toward public education. Each participant's individual profile is represented in four parts: a demographic profile, an overview of the public school years, a summary of the post-public school years, and a synopsis of the participant's current attitude toward public education funding.

Earl

Earl was a widower who had been retired for 12 years. He confidently reported that he voted in, "Every election, except primaries" (Earl, Page 1, Line 4). Earl had lived in his current home for 45 of the 47 years he had resided in the county. In addition to completing high school, Earl reported that he had taken some courses in the armed forces institute. Although Earl did not receive his public education in the county, his four children and five grand children had attended

the local schools. Earl had a unique public school experience. When asked to describe the schools he had attended in grades one through twelve, Earl heaved a loud sigh and said, “Oh boy. I attended 28 schools before I got to high school” (Earl, Page 2, Line 14). Earl’s unusual experience was based on the fact that he was forced to travel with his father from work site to work site after the untimely death of his mother when he was four years old.

Earl’s transitory experiences shaped the stories he had to share about public education. First, Earl reflected on the personal impact of changing schools. He made a point of saying that

Table 1

Participant Demographic Matrix

Name	Gender	Race	Years on Fixed Income	Years in Current Home	Years as County Resident
Earl	Male	Caucasian	12	45	47
Polly	Female	Caucasian	17	13	66
June	Female	African American	15	42	70
Sally	Female	Caucasian	1	46	46
Ruby	Female	Caucasian	0	10	56
Sonny	Male	Caucasian	7	39	Lifelong Resident
Richard	Male	Caucasian	4	28	61
Grace	Female	Caucasian	10	24	24
Louise	Female	Caucasian	15	15	20
Lilly	Female	Caucasian	6	34	Lifelong Resident

changing schools only one time could be perceived as a shocking experience for a young student. Consequently, he felt "...somewhat traumatized early on by going to so many different schools" (Earl, Page 3, Lines 52-53). Changing schools prevented Earl from forming any meaningful relationships. He said, "I would meet one or two people that I would be friendly with at first and about the time you would form a relationship with them...zoom, you were gone again" (Earl, Page 4, Lines 74-76). Additionally, Earl expressed a need to feel connected and to form an identity with his schools stating, "...the only thing I really wanted to do was stay in one school long enough to make it your school" (Earl, Page 6, Lines 134-135). Next, Earl commented on his recollections of the significant adults he encountered in school. It was evident from his remarks that Earl was not fond of his male teachers. He said, "...the men, we didn't feel could get a job anywhere else...we thought they liked to teach so they could bully students" (Earl, Page 2, Lines 23-26). Conversely, Earl described two or three of his female teachers as having helped him on an individual basis noting, "They were kind of like being on Little House on the Prairie" (Earl, Page 6, Lines 120-121). Earl did make a point of emphasizing that whether or not he liked a specific teacher had no bearing on the fact that he respected them all simply because they were his teachers. Another issue that impacted Earl's recollections of public school was student involvement. He began by telling the story of a time he was made a patrol boy in one of his 28 schools. Earl stated, "I had been there maybe three months or so. They gave me a belt. I think they were just trying to make me feel good" (Earl, Page 4, Lines 78-82). He also recalled a time when he was asked to draw a chalk mural of the Three Wise Men on the classroom blackboard. Earl proudly reflected, "Some individual from the school system came in and was very much impressed about [the mural] and they said I had great potential to be a great artist..." (Earl, Page 5, Lines 95-97). Earl also lamented that his transient status had prevented him from being able to participate in sports. Finally, Earl commented on his experiences related to academic achievement. He recalled his determination to achieve in spite of his circumstances stating, "I would just set my mind to it and work on it and take books home at night" (Earl, Page 5, Lines 106-108). Clearly, it was Earl's personal drive and determination that enabled him to graduate from high school with his age appropriate peers.

Earl's post-public school experiences with education were tied to his role as a parent, as a grandparent, and as a concerned citizen. Earl indicated that he was involved in the education of his children. He was proud of the fact that he, "...went to all the parent-teacher conferences"

(Earl, Page 9, Lines 187-188). Earl felt his presence at those conferences gave him the opportunity to personally assess the quality of each of his children's teachers. From these experiences Earl concluded, "It made me realize we had some teachers that were inadequate...In fact, there were a few that we did not think should be teaching, especially our children" (Earl, Pages 8-9, Lines 186-193). As a result of his experiences, Earl expressed concern over the fact that his children's low performing teachers were allowed to remain in the classroom. Other personal concerns related to the process for evaluating teacher performance and Earl's perception that the administration was focused on "...not stirring the pot [and] not having to go out and look for new teachers..." (Earl, Page 10, Lines 210-212). Despite these concerns, Earl confidently reported that his children had received a good education in the county schools. Additionally, he made it clear that he felt the education of his children was a shared responsibility between the schools, the parents, and the students. Earl's role as a grandparent had provided the opportunity for him to maintain a connection with the local schools. He reported that he frequently attends band concerts at the high school and sporting events that involve his grandchildren. Earl was clear in his position that he is more supportive of the arts than sports stating,

...band teaches kids something they can take with them the rest of their life. You can't be a fullback the rest of your life. But, music you can take with you. It offers the opportunity for an appreciation of some of the nicer things in life that some people never...get exposed to" (Earl, Page 17, Lines 283-288).

As to community involvement, Earl prided himself in keeping up with current issues via the newspaper, the radio, and regular contact with local government leaders. Although Earl had never served on the local school board, he did indicate that he had been close to those who had served stating, "We talked...they valued my opinion...because I would tell them what I thought" (Earl, Page 18, Lines 397-399). Overall, Earl indicated that his public school experiences with his children, his grandchildren, and his community had been positive.

Earl expressed several noteworthy opinions related to his current attitude toward funding for public education. First, he attributed the formation of his position on funding for public education to the experiences he had while his children were in school noting, "Today with public education, I guess I have to go back to when I really first got involved and thought about it and that was when my children got in school" (Earl, Page 8, Lines 173-175). Inquiry into the qualifications of his children's teachers led Earl to the realization that his small, rural county had

a difficult time maintaining competitive teacher salaries. Second, Earl tied his attitudes toward funding for extra-curricular activities to his own experiences as well as to those of his children and grandchildren. As to the issue of funding for new athletic facilities he said, “We don’t need two gymnasiums and ball fields and track fields. If you look at the investment we put into the sports and athletic departments and you look at how many students that you serve, I think it’s disproportionate” (Earl, Page 13, Lines 274-283). Consequently, Earl indicated that he felt expenditures on athletic facilities were one area of the current school budget in which the localities could do a better job. Finally, Earl expressed his position on tax increases for public education stating,

Anytime there is anything on the ballot that is related to the financing of public schools, I look at it very closely. If it makes sense to me, even though it may place a little more burden on people...I am going to vote for it. If it has been brought up and it...would just be nice to have, I have to say no.

Although Earl did not convey an unwillingness to support additional taxes for public education, he did point out that he is on a limited income, that he scrutinizes his tax tickets closely and that he places a significant amount of emphasis on the long-term benefits of tax increases for public education.

Earl indicated that he is a supporter of local funding for public education despite being a retired voter on a fixed income. He reflected on his position by stating,

When my children were in school, the people who were...retired were paying for my kids and I appreciated them. Since my kids are gone now, I am retired and I feel like it’s my responsibility to continue on with that (Earl, Page 21, Lines 475-480).

Earl went on to state that the strength of the schools today lies in the fact that teacher salaries are better than they were when he was in school and that teachers have a genuine desire to be in the classrooms. Conversely, Earl added that the weaknesses in public education were rooted in the fact that schools today are required to take on more responsibility for the rearing of children than they should. Earl concluded by addressing the adequacy of local funding for public schools. To support his opinion that the locality is doing what it is financially able to do under the current circumstances, Earl stated,

There are probably some things that we should be doing that we aren’t because we don’t have the funding for it. It is certainly a blessing that we realize our limitations. As long as

we keep in mind that the well is not bottomless and the drinking water needs to stay sweet. Let's not get carried away with some things that would be great to have...but we just can't afford to do them (Earl, Page 22, Lines 493-502).

Polly

Polly was a widow who had been retired for 17 years. When asked how often she voted, Polly was quick to respond, "Every time" (Polly, Page 1, Line 4). Polly had moved into her current home 13 years ago. In addition to graduating from high school, Polly had completed two post-secondary years of study. Polly spent the first six years of public school in a neighboring county and the remainder in the local system. Polly was the first of several participants to point out that there was no eighth grade when she went through school. Consequently, a complete public education consisted of elementary grades 1-7 and high school classifications of freshman, sophomore, junior and senior. Aside from her own experiences, Polly had two children and two grandchildren who had attended the local public schools.

Polly enjoyed her years in public school. Consequently, she characterized them as "...a very happy time" (Polly, Page 2, Line 36). Polly felt that emphasis was placed on different aspects of the curriculum when she was in school. The focus on proper grammar and Bible study were of particular importance to her as was the fact that music was lacking. Additionally, Polly reflected on the fact that everyone in high school was required to take two years of Latin. Her curricular experiences led Polly to express a personal concern related to the lack of guidance counseling available to students at that time. She stated, "You were really pretty much on your own as to what you took. You knew what you needed to graduate, but other than that you were on your own" (Polly, Page 3, Lines 60-63). Respect for elders was another important concept that Polly associated with her experiences in public school. She reflected, "It was a time when you respected your parents and you respected your teachers...It was just society...You wouldn't have thought of back talking" (Polly, Page 4, Lines 75-80). The quality of social relationships was a significant factor in Polly's public school experiences. She commented on the number of gatherings sponsored by the school that "...gave young people a social outlet" (Polly, Page 4, Lines 89-90). Polly commented about the concerning distinctions that were made between the social classes. Yet, she concluded that despite these differences, Polly felt that extra-curricular activities and after school clubs were important in shaping her positive attitudes toward her

public school experiences. Collectively, Polly characterized her years in public schools as a particularly positive time in her life.

Polly's experiences during the post-public school years were shaped by her role as a parent and a grandparent, and by her involvement in the community. In characterizing her role in the education of her children, Polly described herself as the one who provided support stating,

I think children always have to be encouraged to take advantage of everything that is there for them. Maybe I [was] too much of a pusher...but when [education] is available to you, you should take advantage of it and learn all that you can. I have that feeling for [my children] that I didn't have for myself (Polly, Page 5, Lines 107-113).

As a result of her perceived role, Polly indicated that she was an involved parent who was inclined to speak out. She recalled one concerning interaction at a parent-teacher conference with her child's English teacher. Polly explained that she was confused about what her child was supposed to be studying. Since English had been emphasized in Polly's home, she made a point of meeting with the child's teacher to discuss her concerns. Polly explained that she was taken aback when the teacher snapped at her and said that the child should know what was going on and that Polly should find out [what was going on] from the child. In Polly's words, "...that was one unhappy experience that [stood] out" (Polly, Page 11, Lines 240-241). As to experiences with her grandchildren, Polly said, "I have had the privilege of keeping close tabs on what they do" (Polly, Page 9, Lines 201-202). Consequently, she indicated that her grandchildren would have benefited from more guidance services noting that one grandchild had not received adequate career counseling prior to graduating from high school and that the other would have benefited from more academic advice to encourage the development of the child's creative writing talents. Additionally, Polly lamented about the fact that her grandchildren did not appear to have as many opportunities for social interaction as she did during school stating, "It seems to me that kids now don't have as many [extra-curricular and social activities] as we did in connection with the school...They have to create their own" (Polly, Page 4, Lines 82-89). On the issue of community involvement, Polly noted that she maintains an active role in a local organization for women, that she is an avid reader of the newspapers, that she is a lifelong member of a local church and that she has a close circle of friends. Based on these conduits of information, Polly acknowledged that she attempts to stay informed about the current issues in local public education and that those issues are discussed in the community. Despite several

noted concerns, Polly felt that her post-public school experiences with her children and grandchildren had been positive stating, “I think it was a happy time for them as well. I don’t remember [my children or grandchildren] being particularly stressed about anything” (Polly, Page 10, Lines 218-220).

Polly made several significant points about her position on support for public education funding. First, Polly connected her knowledge of and interest in the quality of the local schools to her experiences with children and grandchildren. When asked if her own experiences had influenced her attitudes toward public education funding, Polly stated, “I am not sure that [my experiences] have had so much [influence] as my association with my children and my grandchildren” (Polly, Page 5, Lines 98-100). Second, Polly tied her status as a retired voter on a fixed income to her current position on tax increases for public education noting, “I support funding for public education now as much as I ever did” (Polly, Page 14, Lines 315-316). However, she did qualify her response by noting that she would not object to having her property taxes raised somewhat as long as she could be sure the money would go toward public education. Third, Polly addressed the issue of voting behavior. Although she was not aware of anyone who had run on the platform of improving schools, Polly stated that being retired and on a fixed income would not affect her ability to vote in favor of financial support for the local schools. Finally, Polly commented on issues related to community support for public education funding by stating, “I think [the people in the community] want the schools to do well...[but] with so many people on fixed incomes, I am not sure they can afford to do it” (Polly, Page 12, Lines 264-268). She went on to explain that she feels the community as a whole lacks awareness of the issues associated with public school funding and that many of her friends do not think about it. Ultimately, Polly qualified her comments by stating, “...you have to realize, this is how I feel. Others may not feel as I do” (Polly, Page 12, Lines 254-255).

Polly made a point of stressing her position on the importance of support for public education. To support her opinion Polly said,

I just can’t emphasize how important I think public schools are to educate everybody...just look at the people who come from very poor backgrounds...had it not been for our public schools to educate them...and you can site one dramatic story after another...that because of public education, they have gone on to lead worthwhile lives (Polly, Page 16, Lines 355-363).

Polly felt the strengths of the local public schools were found in the wide curriculum offerings and in the infusion of instructional technology. As to the weaknesses, Polly cited the restrictions that the state curriculum and assessment program is placing on children and the pressure they are putting on teachers. Polly commented, “[The state curriculum and assessments] are taking up time that prevents children from pursuing some hobby or talent that they might have” (Polly, Page 6, Lines 134-136). In conclusion, Polly made a point of stating that the local schools have provided her children and grandchildren with a good education. In addition, she went on to emphasize, “If we don’t educate the young people as they come along now, what is the world of tomorrow going to be like?” (Polly, Page 14, Lines 313-315).

June

June was a married, 74 year old African American woman who had been retired for 15 years. She had lived in her current home for 42 of the 70 years she had resided in the county. June proudly indicated that she votes, “Every chance [she] gets” (June, Page 1, Line 4). June received her entire public education in the county schools as did her 10 children and thirteen grandchildren. One unique component of June’s public education experience was that it was spent in a segregated setting.

June’s stories about public school focused on issues with teachers, curriculum content, extra-curricular activities and socioeconomic status. June had several memorable experiences to share about teachers. One teacher told her, “You are somebody...If you want to [run] for president, you say [you are] going to be it” (June, Page 3, Lines 48-54). Another teacher not only selected June as one of two students who could attend a week-long conference on the opposite side of the state, but the teacher also provided June with the financial support she needed in order to attend. To this day, June holds this teacher in highest regard and considers the teacher to have been her mentor. June did have one negative story to share. She recalled the time that one teacher who thought June was not doing well in class called her a “cabbage head” (June, Page 4, Line 88). June lamented, “...you know, that hurt me. That really, really hurt me...I have never forgotten it because it hurt. (June, Pages 4, Lines 88-89). June said this memory is as clear as it ever was. In her words, “I could never forget that one teacher. Every time I cook cabbage I remember her... [for her] to do that before the class, it just tore me up” (June, Page 20, Lines 452-457). Despite this one negative story, June characterized her experiences with her teachers as positive stating, “We had great teachers. There was no way kids could say [they were] not

getting it” (June, Page 2, Lines 24-25). June spoke enthusiastically about the curriculum offered in her school. In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, June had access to French, Spanish and Home Economics. She happily spoke of participating in drama and “...plays to let you know the culture” (June, Page 5, Line 113). June did not have access to biology and typing was only offered in the evenings. Extra-curricular activities were an important part of June’s public school experience. She proudly stated that she wrapped the May Pole every year. In addition, she said, “We had a football team...one of the best. We won every championship with [the] girls in softball and volleyball tournaments” (June, Page 5, Lines 102-105). June’s experiences were shrouded in the issues of segregation. Her textbooks were old, marked and handed down from the white schools as were the sports uniforms. In addition, she said, “The desks were carved up and [we] had no cafeteria” (June, Page 6, Lines 130-131). Despite these issues, June confidently stated, “...we still learned. We just still learned. We didn’t let that get us down” (June, Page 6, Lines 134-136). June’s stories about school were tightly tied to socioeconomic status. June grew up in a family of nine and she indicated that her family was poor. Consequently, June’s parents instilled a strong work ethic in her. She explained, “I went to work when I was 12 after school. I paid for my own cap and gown, my own invitations, and my own ring” (June, Page 8, Lines 181-183). After work, June would have to find the time to get her school work done. This experience taught June to be determined and deliberate with regard to making the most of her educational experiences. Overall, June characterized her experiences in school as positive.

June’s primary post-public school experiences were linked to parent and community involvement. June felt like her 10 children had received a good education. She maintained regular contact with her children’s teachers by regularly attending all parent-teacher conferences. According to June, “...if you don’t go, you don’t know...[and] you can’t fault anybody but yourself for not taking the time and getting up off your duff to go see what’s going on” (June, Page 16, Lines 360-363). Consequently, June expressed pride in the fact that she never went to the schools for problems. June shared one negative story about one of her 13 grandchildren. It involved the young child being left alone in the classroom as punishment while the rest of the students and the teacher celebrated a birthday outside. June stated, “That bothered me...still sometimes when [the grandchild] comes home [the grandchild] will talk about that experience...I don’t know why the teacher couldn’t have let [the grandchild] just stay after school” (June, Page 16, Lines 345-352). Aside from having been involved in her family’s education, June noted that

she is integrally involved in supporting the education of the youth in her church. She indicated that she had given financial support to several high school graduates from the church and that she had spoken before the members of the churches to encourage them to give more to support the education of their graduates. In one particular incident, June noted that, "... [the churches] paid 100% of a student's college education" (June, Page 20, Line 439). In addition to being involved in the education of the youth in her church, June noted that she is involved in the Senior Citizens organization and she is involved in the senior organization at the local hospital.

June reported that she is an avid supporter of funding for public education. She noted that she reads the newspaper and attends local debates in order to stay informed about the issues. June showed her commitment to the issues by stating, "I read a lot. I don't want to go out and talk to anybody if I don't know what I am talking about. So I read it and I read it again to make sure I don't leave anything out" (June, Page 17, Lines 385-389). She concluded by commenting on her tendency to vote for local candidates who are inclined to support education initiatives noting, "I look to see what [a candidate's] platform is...If its educational, I have more of a tendency to really get into it" (June, Page 18, Lines 402-404). June had no issue with tax increases to support local public education initiatives. On that topic, she stated, "...my husband is still living and we are pretty well fixed. That's why I can give more...but if I couldn't, I would do what I could" (June, Page 19, Lines 415-421).

June indicated that she is an ardent supporter of public education. She expressed her pride in the local school system noting, "[We] have computers... [and] new schools...We are a small town, but I am still proud. I would put it up against anybody else" (June, Page 14, Lines 311-313). Based on her experiences June said, "[Education] made me a better person...a more compassionate person" (June, Page 12, Lines 252-254). In conclusion, June emphasized her position on the issue of sustained support for public education funding, stating, "I don't say a word when my taxes go up for education...Somebody has got to pave the road for those kids. Even if it's not my grandchildren, I am for education 100%" (June, Page 17, Lines 373-378).

Sally

Sally was a married retiree who had lived in her current home each of the 46 years she had resided in the county. She was proud of the fact that she voted in every election. Although her two children completed their K-12 education in the county, Sally graduated from a neighboring school division. She was the second participant to stress that there was no grade

eight during her tenure in public school. The fact that Sally had been retired for only one year made her the participant with the least amount of time having lived on a fixed income.

Sally told a variety of stories about her experiences in public school. Stories involving interactions with her teachers formed the basis of many of these experiences. Sally began by talking about the second grade teacher who had helped her through a bout of the whooping cough. She reminisced, “My teacher was a real old lady. I can’t remember her name, but she was real sweet and she helped me make up that time” (Sally, Page 2, Lines 26-29). Next, she spoke of the time that her sixth grade teacher had spanked her stating, “...that was the only spanking I ever got, and we got it for talking in the girl’s restroom” (Sally, Page 2, Lines 30-31). In high school, Sally was reminded of an algebra teacher who had thrown an eraser at her for talking and of an English teacher who she characterized as, “...mild-mannered...a real teacher” (Sally, Page 4, Lines 80-82). The death of her father during her senior year in high school was a defining experience for Sally. After having taken only one day off for her father’s funeral, one of the girls in the class ridiculed Sally for having come back to school too soon. Sally gratefully recalled, “[The principal] called me to his office that day...I was scared to death...He just told me he was sorry about my father and if anybody [gave] me any trouble to let him know” (Sally, Pages 3-4, Lines 65-69). Sally was most appreciative of the support she had received from the administration. Entering high school overwhelmed Sally. After arriving home from her first day, Sally cried and told her parents she would never go back. She said, “I had gone from being the oldest to the youngest...it was so different...I felt very intimidated” (Sally, Page 2, Lines 42-25). This was one area in which Sally would have benefited from support from a counselor. Sally attributed her eventual positive transition to high school to social interactions as evidenced by her broad smile as she reflected on “...waiting breathlessly for a prom date that [she] didn’t get” (Sally, Page 4, Lines 74-75). Sally had little to say about the curriculum other than she dropped Latin because that was the only subject she ever failed. However, she did emphasize the fact that her attitude toward public education was positive noting, “My mother and father did not graduate from high school. So, I appreciated being able to graduate” (Sally, Page 4, Lines 89-91).

Sally’s post-high school experiences focused on stories about her two children. She was an involved parent who participated in the Parent Teacher Association and who helped with classroom parties. In Sally’s words, “...we were always there” (Sally, Page 11, Line 234). Although Sally did feel that her overall experiences with her children were positive, she did

recount a concerning story of a time when one of her children's teachers denied a request for her child to use the restroom. As a result, Sally said she had to take the child a change of clothes. She said, "I waited for three days to go over there. I was so angry... [The teacher] apologized...but the principal never did" (Sally, Pages 9-10, Lines 201-212). Another more positive incident that was etched in Sally's mind was an encounter with her child's high school biology teacher. Sally explained, "[Our child] was getting failing grades. My husband and I went to the [parent-teacher conferences] and found that the child was not bringing the text book home" (Sally, Page 10, Lines 217-221). After assuring the teacher that their child would bring the book home from that point forward, Sally noted that her child did get passing grades from then on. Aside from experiences with her children, Sally had no contact with the local public schools. However, she did note that she regularly read the newspaper, listened to the radio and obtained current information from one of her children who is a teacher in the county schools.

Sally indicated that she supports funding for public education. However, she qualified her response by adding, "If I can make sure that's where [the money] is going" (Sally, Page 7, Line 149). Sally's skepticism was rooted in concern over appropriations of adequate funding for teacher salaries. She noted,

I worked many years with government people. My bosses had four-year educations. That was all. They [had] been working for 20 years and making 50 and 60 thousand dollars. And, you have got school teachers who are molding the minds of our young people and they are only making 40 thousand with 20 years of experience. I think it's terrible. I think it's terrible.

Based on the researcher's reflexive notes, it was clear that Sally's position on teacher salaries was tied to her own child's experiences. Sally expressed concern over community apathy toward public education funding based on the fact that she feels the government does not get information to people who no longer have children in school. Consequently, she felt more publicity related to local student achievement would be helpful. When asked if the issue of funding public education had affected her voting behavior in local elections, Sally convincingly responded, "...not in local government, but state government, yes" (Sally, Page 6, Line 135). Sally had no concerns about tax increases to support local public education stating, "I can see why some people who are retired probably can't afford to pay more taxes. But, I guess we are a

little bit lucky. If I know that's where [the money] is going, that's OK" (Sally, Pages 7-8, Lines 159-162).

Sally spoke positively of her support for local public education. She felt the strength of the county schools was found in their ability to do as well as they were doing with what they were provided. As to weaknesses Sally stated, "[The two local school divisions] need to realize they need to combine. They don't need a new high school" (Sally, Page 8, Lines 171-173). To reiterate her point, Sally said, "Now, I would vote for supervisors that agree with that" (Sally, Page 8, Lines 173-174). Sally soundly expressed her position that local citizens should support local education as much as possible by stating, "I have heard some people say that once their children are out of school they don't think they should have to pay that part of the taxes. But I think, well somebody paid for yours" (Sally, Page 5, Lines, 97-100).

Ruby

Ruby was a divorced resident who had lived in the county for 56 years. She indicated that voting was important to her noting, "I vote in every election, all the time" (Ruby, Page 1, Line 10). Ruby moved into her current home 10 years ago when she decided to downsize. In addition to graduating from a city high school about 40 miles south of the county, Ruby had completed one year of college. When asked how long she had been living on a fixed income, Ruby responded, "I don't really live on a fixed income. I have rental properties" (Ruby, Page 1, Lines 5-6). Ruby reported that all of her children did attend the local schools.

Ruby's public school experiences were filtered through the lenses of being an only child. Ruby felt like being an only child "...sort of put a different light on things" (Ruby, Page 2, Lines 25-26). Ruby was happy in school despite the fact that "...it was a concern to [her] about what would happen...if her [parents] weren't there" (Ruby, Page 2, Lines 37-39). Because Ruby had learned to entertain herself at an early age, she particularly enjoyed courses like business education, crafts, and home economics that focused on independent, hands-on activities. Ruby explained that social activities were often restricted by her parents noting,

There were a lot of things I wasn't allowed to do and places I wasn't allowed to go. My dad owned a grocery store and I just wasn't allowed to go many places. He knew what went on everywhere. So, I wasn't allowed to go anywhere.

Despite her guarded experiences in public school, Ruby expressed pride in the fact that her parents had been able to send her to kindergarten. When asked if she had any particularly

memorable experiences in public school, Ruby responded, “No. Not really” (Ruby, Page 3, Line 59).

Ruby had maintained a connection to public education in her post-public school years. Ruby was involved in the education of her three children. One of her earliest recollections involved experiences with her children’s teachers. Ruby explained that all three of her children attended the same local elementary school and all three were taught by the same first grade teacher. She confidently stated, “I always thought a lot of [their first grade teacher]. If they had [that teacher] they were going to get a good basic start” (Ruby, Page 8, Lines 163-165). On a less positive note, Ruby stated, “I did have some trouble with [one teacher]. He was giving [the class] questions on things they had not covered. When I talked to him, he thought it was funny. But, I found it very upsetting” (Ruby, Page 8, Lines 165-169). Additionally, Ruby indicated that two of her great grandchildren attend school in a nearby district. Aside from experiences with her children, Ruby explained that she is actively involved in an organization comprised of retired graduates from her high school. When questioned about the organization, she noted, “You have to be graduated 50 years in order to become a member” (Ruby, Page 4, Lines 74-75). Ruby proudly provided details about the quarterly meetings of the organization and about her contributions to its scholarship fund. Other than frequenting one school when she votes, Rudy indicated that she no longer has occasion to be in any of the local schools.

Ruby was clear in her position on support for school funding issues. On the issue of financial support for public education, she stated, “We don’t have any choice but to fund education” (Ruby, Page 8, Line 177). As to whether or not the issue of funding for public education had affected her voting behavior, Ruby adamantly stated, “I always vote. What the local candidate feels about public education does not affect how I vote. Whether or not property taxes are raised for public education does not affect how I vote” (Ruby, Page 9, Lines 193-196). Having said that, Ruby went on to express her position on several local funding issues. First, she indicated that building a new high school was a controversial issue. In her opinion, Ruby felt that the current high should be renovated. To support her position, Ruby noted, “I vote at [one of the local schools]. That school is in good shape after the renovations. That just shows what can be done” (Ruby, Pages 6-7, Lines 137-139). Second, Ruby addressed the issue of funding for teacher salaries stating, “They have always said teachers are underpaid, but teachers have the summer off. So, if you ratio, I feel teachers are not underpaid” (Ruby, Page 6, Lines 125-130).

Finally, Ruby indicated that too much money is spent on sports. As to whether or not being on a fixed income affects her ability to provide financial support for public education, Ruby stated, “It doesn’t, [but] it would if it were outrageous or something” (Ruby, Page 9, Line 201). Despite her concerns, Ruby concluded that the local government does not spend too much on public education.

Ruby evidenced a conservative attitude toward support for public education funding. Although she did indicate that she does not think much about public education today, Ruby did express her belief that the local public schools are doing a good job when she stated, “I think the schools are good. When you graduate you can go pretty much anywhere and take your pick of where you want to go” (Ruby, Page 9, Lines 204-206). Ruby based her opinion on the fact that her own children had been accepted to good colleges after graduation. As to weaknesses, Ruby said, “I don’t think there are any weaknesses. I think around here they can get about everything” (Ruby, Page 7, Lines 154-155). To reaffirm her position on funding for new educational facilities, Ruby reiterated, “It comes down to where the money is coming from. I have never had a car payment. I save my money. You save to get what you want. You don’t go into debt” (Ruby, Page 7, Lines 143-146).

Sonny

Sonny was a married retiree who had lived in his current home for the past 39 years. He stated that he had been living on a fixed income for seven years. As to his voting behavior, Sonny stated that he votes, “Every time there is something to vote for” (Sonny, Page 1, Line 4). Sonny graduated from high school at a time when a complete public education consisted of grades one through seven and four years of high school. Consequently, he did not have a grade eight experience. Although Sonny completed school in a neighboring district, his two children attended the local county schools. Sonny had no grandchildren.

Sonny had several memorable stories to share about his public school experiences. When asked what he remembered most about his years in public schools, Sonny paused before stating, “I reckon the discipline” (Sonny, Page 1, Line 21). He then proceeded to tie the issue of discipline to his interactions with the teachers and the administrators. Sonny began by smiling and stating, “I remember the teachers. They were good people...I remember them being real stern” (Sonny, Pages 2-3, Lines 44-46). He reminisced about his high school math teacher would throw erasers at students who misbehaved and an elementary social studies teacher who Sonny

said, "...got after [him] pretty heavy one time" (Sonny, Page 2, Lines 26-27). As to his principals, Sonny said, "... [One] was pretty stringent. I remember getting in trouble with her one time and I was terrified" (Sonny, Page 2, Lines 23-25). The other one, he said, "...never laughed" (Sonny, Page 2, Line 29). On the lighter side, Sonny did confess that he and his friends had a good time making fun of their behavior. Other memorable experiences included reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and attending Bible class. Sonny made a point of mentioning the fact that he did not remember ever having seen students with disabilities when he was in school. To clarify his statement, he said, "...maybe that was because they were institutionalized. [But] we didn't see kids in wheel chairs who couldn't feed themselves and couldn't go to the bathroom by themselves. You didn't see that" (Sonny, Page 4, Lines 79-82). Sonny stressed that his father had placed an emphasis on school when he said,

I think [attending school] was something that you had to do. I can remember waking up in the morning faking a stomach ache because I didn't want to go to school. Dad would [tell me to] get my butt out of [there] that [I was] going to school.

Consequently, Sonny proudly reflected on the fact that he never missed school. Sonny tied his strong work ethic to the discipline instilled in him by his father and to his experiences in public school. Sonny concluded by stating that his public school experiences were good ones.

Sonny's post-public school stories were framed by his experiences with his children and by his involvement in the community. As to his children, Sonny stated, "I can't remember anything bad" (Sonny, Page 9, Line 190). He elaborated by explaining that his children had done well in the local schools, that their experiences were positive, and that they had been accepted to good colleges after graduation. In one specific incident with a teacher, Sonny recalled that the teacher had phoned to express concern about a potentially troublesome situation involving Sonny's child that the teacher had observed at a sporting event. The teacher explained that he simply wanted Sonny to know what he had observed. Sonny took the opportunity to speak with his child in an appropriate manner. Sonny felt like the fact that this particular teacher cared enough to make that call had made a difference stating, "...it ended. If that [teacher] hadn't called me...He wasn't even [my child's teacher]. He was just somebody that cared...But, I really appreciated it" (Sonny, Page 10, Lines 208-211). Sonny indicated that his experiences with his children had been positive. Sonny made a point of stressing, "[My experiences] were positive. I never had any bad discussions with teachers...They never called me and said you better do

something with your kids. They got a good education” (Sonny, Page 10, Lines 226-229). As to his experiences within the community, Sonny indicated that he keeps up with what is going on in the schools by talking to people who work in the school system and from his interactions at church and other events. In addition, Sonny reported, “I read the paper all the time. I read the supervisor’s report and how they go about their business” (Sonny, Pages 11-12, Lines 251-253). He also made it clear that the topic of local public education is an openly discussed issue among his contacts in the community. Sonny concluded by noting that his post-public school experiences had been positive.

Overall, Sonny evidenced a supportive attitude toward funding for the local schools. As to his perceptions on the role of the community in supporting public education Sonny stated, “I think the voters have a big responsibility to put the right people in office to do their bidding” (Sonny, Page 11, Lines 234-236). He went on to explain that the community is doing what it can for the local public schools. Sonny clarified his statement by saying, “I figure the community is pretty well stretched. I suspect 75% of the budget goes to education...I would like to see the budget less in education, but I don’t know how you would do that” (Sonny, Pages 13-14, Lines 296-301). Sonny expressed concern that the number of federal and state mandated programs being forced on school districts was driving up the local budget. Expanding on this concern, Sonny lamented over the fact that schools are required to offer services to severely handicapped students noting, “That’s expensive and I don’t think the schools ought to be doing that” (Sonny, Page 4, Lines 75-76). Sonny indicated that he took his responsibility as a voter very seriously noting that prior to voting he studied each candidate’s position on education. He concluded by adding that any candidate who did not put education as a high priority did not get his vote.

Sonny reported that his fixed-income status had not changed his position on support for funding for the local schools. Sonny felt like the strength of public education today was rooted in the number of programs offered to students that better prepared them for the outside world. Additionally, he commented on the fact that schools provide students with computer literacy skills. Sonny’s list of weaknesses was lengthy. First, he felt that the curriculum was lacking as far as teaching several fundamental life skills i.e. multiplication tables and how to make change. Second, he felt like patriotism and the love of country was being left out of schools today and that God should be put back in. Next, he commented about the impact of the mandated state assessments stating, “...they are teaching to the tests. Schools are teaching kids so they can pass

the...tests. I think that's wrong" (Sonny, Page 6, Lines 128-131). Finally, Sonny addressed the issue of discipline in schools today by noting,

Discipline is big on my mind. I don't think kids have the respect for the teachers they ought to have (Sonny, Page 7, Lines 145-147). There is no discipline in schools...it all boils down to discipline and respect for one another (Sonny, Page 9, Lines 184-187).

Despite his concerns, Sonny acknowledged his commitment to supporting local funding for public education when he stated, "I think [education] is the answer to our world problems. Although I think it could be done in little bit different way, I think education is the key" (Sonny, Page 14, Lines 314-316).

Richard

Richard was a married retiree who had been living on a fixed income for the past four years. He convincingly stated that he voted in every election. In addition to having lived in the county since he was five years old, Richard reported that he had lived in his current home for 28 years. Richard had graduated from high school and completed 40 hours of post-secondary studies at the local community college. Both Richard and his children had completed their public education studies in the local schools. Richard was one of several participants who reported that there was no grade eight when he attended school.

Richard enjoyed his years in the local public schools. He reminisced about enjoying his walks to elementary school and having recess on a playground that was simply a rock pile. Richard provided more detailed information about his experiences in high school. He began by noting that high school was different because he had to catch the bus. Next, Richard shared personal stories about the sporting events that were held in, "...a little tiny basketball gym" (Richard, Page 2, Lines 39-40). Despite the small facility, he stated that basketball teams were good and that extra-curricular activities were positive. Richard's final stories were about the academic component of his experiences. As far as his teachers were concerned, Richard credited them with much of his school and professional success stating,

I had real good grades. I was the top boy graduate... [Some] people just trying to look out after me knew I was pretty good at math and pretty good at doing drawings. Through some of the advice from some of my teachers...I got a job...right out of high school (Richard, Pages 3-4, Lines 64-73). Without them, I wouldn't have gone in that direction (Richard, Page 5, Lines 96-97).

The only regret that Richard shared was not having had adequate counseling services. He lamented over not having an advisor who could help him secure the financing for college. In his words, “It would have been great if someone would have stepped in and told me [that I could probably go to college]. That would have been really good. I would have liked to have done that” (Richard, Page 5, Lines 99-102). Despite this one significant regret, Richard made a point of stating that he did not have any bad experiences in public school.

Richard had maintained close personal ties to the local schools during his post-public school years through his children, his spouse, and his involvement in the community. Both of Richard’s children had attended the local schools. However, his experiences were unique in that one of his children had completed their high school education prior to local school consolidation while the other was caught up in the consolidation process. Despite the fact that he did have concerns about his child moving from a very small high school to a significantly larger one, Richard indicated that his child did not experience any ill effects of the merger. In fact, he said the child did well academically and was involved in extra-curricular activities. All in all, Richard stated that he never had any problems with his children in school and that his experiences with the public schools were positive during that time. Richard’s experiences with public education had extended into the community. He recalled one school-related experience that led him to make a presentation before the local city council noting,

[The schools] wanted some additional funding from the city for reading or math...

[because] they wanted to institute some type of program to help the [students]. I

remember going before the city council and speaking. I told them we really need to help fund this...and I cited [my child] as an example (Richard, Page 13, Lines 281-289).

Richard was proud of the fact that he had taken the initiative as a parent to secure the funding for the program. Aside from his role as a parent, Richard had maintained a connection to the local schools due to the fact that his wife was employed by the system. In addition to this connection, Richard had kept up with current school issues via reading the newspapers, conversing with local leaders, and having discussions with friends. Richard concluded by noting that his experiences with the local public schools had been positive since graduating from high school.

Richard indicated that he supports local funding for public education. As to the role of the community in funding education, he stated, “Well, we definitely have to do it. There is no

question about that” (Richard, Page 15, Lines 326-327). Richard evidenced a significant concern about adequate funding and teacher quality noting,

[To] keep well qualified people in [teaching] positions, we’ve got to be competitive salary-wise. There’s too many [neighboring counties] that are just doing a better job of funding. And, money speaks an awful lot...[We] all have to make a living and you can’t blame people for moving a little bit to make a whole lot more money at the same job. (Richard, Page 16, Lines 355-363).

Richard went on to affirm that the issue of maintaining adequate funding for schools in the county definitely had affected his voting behavior, particularly in state elections. He was adamant about the fact that prior to casting his ballot he routinely studied each candidate in the context of how they feel about schools and how they are going to vote in support of schools. Richard qualified his position on support for local education funding by commenting on the need to secure state grants that are available to the local school district. In his words, “I feel the county needs a lot [of these grants] because the workforce in this county is...kind of small. With the railroad being gone...it’s kind of tough on this county” (Richard, Page 15, Lines 335-339). Richard concluded by saying that he is of the opinion that the older retirees are more skeptical of infusing additional taxes into the schools based on the fact that their retirement income is not as substantial as that of younger retired voters like himself.

Being a retired voter on a fixed income had no bearing on Richard’s attitude toward support for local education funding. He indicated that he had been fortunate to have had a good career that had afforded him a good retirement income. Consequently, he stated, “[Being on a fixed income] doesn’t create a negative aspect on funding for schools...because I planned my retirement well” (Richard, Page 17, Lines 375-377). Richard openly acknowledged that he could sympathize with people in the county whose retirement income was limited and that he could understand their position if they were not financially able to support tax increases for public education. Richard commented on several areas of strength in the local schools. First, he acknowledged that the teachers and supervisors were strong and well educated. Second, he noted the substantial infusion of instructional technology that had taken place in recent years stating, “I think computers are here and they are going to be here for a long time. They’re great!” (Richard, Page 9, Lines 199-201). Finally, he tied his personal experiences with counseling to his perceptions of the situation today stating, “There’s all kinds of help out there. There’s all kinds

of money. There's all kinds of counselors and advisors" (Richard, Page 18, Lines 399-400). Richard pointed out two weaknesses. First, he felt the math and science curriculum needed to be strengthened so that student achievement would not continue to lag behind similar achievements in foreign countries. Second, he referenced the demeanor of students today stating, "I look at [student] attitudes and the way they act and the way they present themselves...I am a little disheartened in what I see in some of that" (Richard, Page 10, Lines 217-220). When asked about the role of the local public schools in dealing with the poor attitudes of the students, Richard acknowledged that the biggest responsibility should be borne by the parents. However, he did add, "Maybe through some meetings and programs...the school system could get some information out to these parents" (Richard, Page 11, Lines 234-236). Richard closed by stating that schools are doing an outstanding job today. In reference to his own missed opportunities, Richard said, "[Kids] don't have any idea how well off they are. They need to back up and look at someone like me who...had the grades...[but not] the money or the advice to go [to college]" (Richard, Page 6, Lines 129-132).

Grace

Grace was a married retiree who had been living on a fixed income for 10 years. When asked how often she votes, Grace confidently responded, "Every time there is an election. I never miss" (Grace, Page 1, Line 8). Grace and her husband had lived in their current home since relocating to the county 24 years ago. After graduating from high school, Grace continued her education in business school. Grace explained that much of her life had been spent in a very small town in a bordering state. Consequently, she, her husband, and two of her three children had completed their public school education in that state. The only one of her children to attend school in the local district was her youngest, although Grace did share that she had two grandchildren currently enrolled in public schools in a nearby county.

Grace's public school experiences were framed within the context of a small, rural Kentucky community. Grace's elementary years began in a two-room school house that doubled as a church on Sundays. She associated two particularly memorable experiences with this little school. Grace explained that her father appreciated education and that at one time he was a teacher. Consequently, Grace's father taught her to read long before she was old enough to enter school. Her father decided to visit the superintendent's office in an effort to purchase a book for Grace to read. According to Grace, the superintendent of schools told her that if she could read a

certain book that he would give it to her. Not only did the superintendent end up giving Grace the book, but he also made special arrangements for her to start school at the age of four. This was the first of several experiences that set the tone for Grace's positive attitude toward public education. Grace's second experience focused on the kindness of her first grade teacher. Grace explained that because she was only four years old when she started school, she was a very small first grader. Grace noted that there were some children in her school that were not very nice. In an effort to protect her from these other children when school was dismissed, Grace explained, "... [My teacher] was afraid for me to travel [home] by myself. So, he would watch until I got almost home before he let the other children out" (Grace, Page 3, Lines 48-50). High school memories were equally as positive for Grace. She was reminded of having to leave her small community to attend a larger county high school. Despite this move being a big change for Grace, she noted, "...that first year really worked out well for me. I made good grades, I got in a really nice homeroom...I was voted queen of the fall carnival [and] that was really something exciting" (Grace, Page 3, Lines 54-59). In addition to her memories of a positive transition to high school, Grace pointed to one particular teacher who had impacted her experiences explaining, "I was in her homeroom...She really took care of us. She stuck with me...She was alert to everything that was going on and she just looked out for us" (Grace, Page 4, Lines 69-74). Aside from having one of the school's cheerleaders murdered during her high school years, Grace could not identify any negative experiences. Consequently, she characterized her public school experiences as very positive.

Grace's post-public school experiences were tied to her role as an involved parent and grandparent and to her connections within the community. Grace noted that two of her children had attended public school in another state and one had attended local public schools. Overall, she indicated that all of her children had good experiences in school. As to her children's teachers, Grace stated, "[My children] seemed satisfied" (Grace, Page 7, Line 160). The one concerning issue Grace discussed was the fact that her youngest child seemed to lack the ability to take tests successfully. Even though Grace wondered if there were programs in the school that could have helped her child, she did not hold the school responsible noting, "Maybe we, as parents, were not as alert as to how to help [our child]. Maybe we should have helped [our child] more" (Grace, Page 7, Lines 153-158). Grace was an involved parent while her child was enrolled in the local schools. She explained that she was a school volunteer during the child's

elementary and middle school years. Being a band parent was the focus of Grace's high school involvement. In her words, "I was involved in the high school. I worked with the band. I traveled with them and I helped in every way. In fact, I was an officer one time with the band...I was there all the time" (Grace, Page 8, Lines 171-175). Grace continues to stay connected to current issues via her grandchildren and her community involvement activities. As to her grand children, Grace indicated that she is fortunate to be with them each week-end. Because of this she stays current with issues associated with the state testing program as it relates to the success of her grandchildren. Consequently, Grace stated, "...both of [my grandchildren] made close to [a perfect score] on two different tests. One of them made a [perfect score] on one test. They are really doing well in school" (Grace, Page 9, Lines 194-196). Although she no longer frequents the local schools, Grace obtains information about public education from the media and from her neighbors. In reference to information from her neighbors, Grace noted, "I have neighbors whose children are in the schools. Most everything I hear from them seems to be positive" (Grace, Page 11, Lines 230-232). Grace also indicated that she has volunteered at the local hospital for over twenty years.

Grace indicated that her attitude toward funding for public education is positive even though there have been times when she has disagreed with some issues. Paramount among the dissenting issues was Grace's attitude toward school consolidation. Grace retorted,

There is one issue I have had ever since I have lived here...I think [the localities] should [consolidate the schools]. We worked for that when my youngest son was in school...Even the government offices should be combined. I think it's a waste of money (Grace, Page 9, Lines 196-204).

When asked to describe her position on funding for public education, Grace stated, "We fund [schools] with taxes. We need that because we need money for schools. I am all for that. I don't have an issue with paying taxes for education" (Grace, Page 11, Lines 241-244). Additionally, Grace indicated that the issue of public school funding does impact her voting behavior. She made a point of stressing that her votes are cast for the candidates who indicate they will do everything they can to fund the schools. Grace concluded by acknowledging that her personal experiences in school had impacted her attitudes toward funding for public education. In her words, "...going through the schools when I was small in that small community and not having

very much of anything...makes me want better things for the schools now. So, I want anything that will make the students do better” (Grace, Page 12, Lines 262-267).

Grace noted that being a retired voter on a fixed income for the past ten years has not affected her ability to support funding for public education. She supported this position by stating, “[Being on a fixed income] doesn’t affect my vote. My husband worked for the railroad and he got a pretty good pension. It takes care of us. I really don’t see that as a problem” (Grace, Page 12, Lines 256-258). Grace indicated that she felt that the strengths of public schools today could be found in the advancements that have been made in computer technology noting, “I know they are so much more advanced than we were...If they don’t have computers they are missing out on so much” (Grace, Page 10, Lines 213-218). On the flip side, Grace could not think of any weaknesses. Grace concluded by reiterating that she supports local school consolidation.

Louise

Louise was a retired widow who had been living on a fixed income for the past 15 years. When asked how frequently she voted, Louise responded, “Every year” (Louise, Page 1, Line 4). Louise had lived in her current home for 15 years. As to her level of education, Louise reported that she had graduated from high school and had completed some post-secondary English courses at the local community college. Neither Louise nor her children had attended the local county schools. In fact, Louise noted that she was originally from a metropolitan area in a northern state. The migration of her family to this area resulted from one of her husband’s career moves.

Louise enjoyed her public school experiences. Grades one through eight were spent in the same elementary school before Louise transferred to a large high school closer to the city. One of her earliest recollections was based on an incident that took place during her first grade year. She laughingly explained, “...one little boy was kind of mischievous and the [principal] came in and gave him a spanking... [The little boy] had to put his hands on our table. And, that just shook me up” (Louise, Page 2, Lines 35-37). Louise went on to reminisce about some of her high school experiences. She focused on her involvement in the drama program stating, “I just loved dramatics. I participated in quite a few things. I did several plays and just whatever they asked me to do” (Louise, Page 2, Lines 39-40). Her connection to drama reminded Louise of another experience with one of her English teachers. Louise explained that she stumbled over some

words while reading Shakespeare in class. In response, the English teacher asked Louise to explain why she was having trouble with the words since she was involved in dramatics. As to her reaction, Louise said, “So I learned to be a little careful about how I read Shakespeare” (Louise, Page 3, Lines 50-51). Although Louise had nothing more to share related to her public school experiences, she did indicate that she enjoyed high school and that her memories of school in general were good ones.

Louise admitted that she had had very little contact with public schools since completing her education. As to experiences with her children, Louise stated, “I was not in the schools as much as my husband was. He was in there. He worked in the schools, somewhat” (Louise, Page 6, Lines 118-120). Even though Louise was not involved in the schools, she did indicate that her children had good experiences. Louise indicated that she maintains contact with some of her high school classmates and that she was just recently invited to a reunion. With regard to obtaining information about the local schools, Louise indicated, “I read about [the local schools] in the newspaper” (Louise, Page 4, Line 75). Louise noted that she is an active volunteer at the local hospital and that she has helped with fundraising activities for health-related organizations. However, she had never had occasion to be in any of the local schools. When asked if the people she comes into contact with in the community discuss public education issues, Louise responded, “No. Not really. My source is the newspaper” (Louise, Page 4, Line 78). Consequently, Louise’s experiences with education issues during the post-public school years were limited.

Louise indicated that she supported adequate funding for public schools. As to the role of the community in funding education, Louise stated, “[The community] is the taxpayers. And, that’s important. It’s important that [the schools] have good support from the taxpayers” (Louise, Page 6, Lines 123-125). Louise admitted that she does not pay attention to the issue of funding for public schools, but that in her opinion the local community does a good job in providing financial support for public education. Louise concluded by stating that funding for education does not affect her voting behavior. In fact, Louise retorted, “I don’t pay attention to that” (Louise, Page 6, Line 132).

Louise indicated that she does support local funding for public education despite her status as a retired voter on a fixed income. Louise went on to say that the strength of public schools today lies in their dedication to teaching students to read. On the issue of weaknesses, Louise was much more outspoken stating,

I think a lot of attention is being paid to sports these days than what I feel like most of us experienced...There are certainly a lot of things that could be a good influence on kids, guiding them into what they want to do. Not many will be going into sports; I would imagine (Louise, Page 5, Lines 94-100).

In commenting on the quality of the local schools in response to being asked whether or not she thought the schools were doing a good job, Louise stated, “Oh yes! Yes, I do...I just know they do a good job” (Louise, Page 4, Lines 81-85). In conclusion, Louise stated her position on public school funding by saying, “I think it is important that we maintain an adequate base for [funding] public schools” (Louise, Page 7, Lines 138-139).

Lilly

Lilly was a married retiree who had been living on a fixed income for six years. Because she had only worked part-time throughout the years, Lilly clarified that her report of years on a fixed income was based on her husband’s retirement. When asked how often she voted, Lilly remarked, “Nearly every time, unless I am not able to get out” (Lilly, Page 1, Line 5). Lilly was a lifelong resident of the county and she had lived in her current residence for the past 34 years. Lilly was unique in that she was the only participant who had lived in the county her whole life, who had completed her entire public education in the local system, and whose children were also products of the local schools.

Lilly’s experiences in the local public schools focused on the circumstances that defined her life, on the people that made an impression on her, and on her family. Lilly had vivid recollections of her teachers in elementary school. She began by explaining that the death of her mother in October of her first grade year was the event that shaped much of the rest of her life. Lilly stated, “The last thing [my mother] did was put me in school” (Lilly, Page 1, Line 17). Her mother’s death and a poor teacher almost caused Lilly to fail the first grade. Lilly credited a strong second grade teacher with helping her overcome significant reading difficulties noting, “...my second grade teacher took me from the being the lowest reader in the class to the highest reader...She was the sweetest thing in the world” (Lilly, Pages 1-2, Lines 22-25). From that point on, Lilly’s grades were good. Lilly reminisced about her sixth grade teacher who also doubled as the shop teacher. One of her fondest memories of the year was having the teacher show the students how to construct puppets and then helping the students use the puppets to put on a play. Lilly explained, “...I was the witch. We did Hansel and Gretel. We went around to

different schools doing [the play]" (Lilly, Page 3, Lines 66-68). On a lighter note, Lilly recalled a humorous story about her seventh grade teacher. She said the seventh grade classroom had cracks in the ceiling and when the students would misbehave the teacher would grab her hair and say, "Do you see those cracks in the ceiling? That's where I blew my top" (Lilly, Page 3, Lines 61-63). Lilly's stories about her high school experiences were tied to the impact of the death of her mother on her family. She explained,

We had a rough time [after the death of my mother] with four kids. Dad had to go in the army. I was the youngest. Dad married two years after my mother died. We lived with my grandfather. It was hell. We nearly raised ourselves. Dad was in such grief. Dad was just anxious to get us out. (Lilly, Page 2, Lines 28-33).

Out of the context of that horrible situation, Lilly developed a social network of friends that she came to regard as her family. In her words, Lilly described her friends by saying, "My school mates were my family. We are still close... We have a reunion every year... a certain group of us" (Lilly, Page 2, Lines 41-44). Consequently, Lilly came to recognize the social network associated with high school as a key component in her life both in and out of school. Lilly's one reference to the high school curriculum being the same for all students led into personal revelations about her socioeconomic status during her public school years. Lilly recalled,

You didn't have the studies like they do now where students can go to the college to study. Everybody studied the same thing. Even if they had had it at that time, I wouldn't have been able to go because Dad just didn't have the money. (Lilly, Page 4, Lines 86-90).

Despite the bumps along the road, Lilly's attitude toward her public school years was positive. In her words, "I don't remember any really bad experiences in school. We all grew up together... We had the best time. I had good grades [and] I had good teachers" (Lilly, Page 4, Lines 70-73).

Lilly's stories about the post-public school years focused on the experiences she had with her three children while they were in school. None of her recollections were positive. Lilly began by recounting an experience she had with her middle child's third grade teacher. She explained that her child's teacher had a reputation among the parents of having been moved from school to school due to poor performance issues. Despite the fact that Lilly had received reports from several parents that the teacher was treating her child unfairly, she refrained from going to the

school until one day late in the school year when the teacher hit the child in the head with a ruler. Not only did the teacher react irrationally to Lilly's visit, but when Lilly mentioned in the course of the conversation that her child always made straight A's the teacher retorted, "Well, I'll have to see that [the child] doesn't get anymore" (Lilly, Page 11, Lines 245-246). Lilly concluded that this was a most disheartening incident. Another of Lilly's children was identified as having a learning disability. Lilly explained that the child's learning issues began in the second grade when the child had five different substitutes. Prior to that time, Lilly reported, "In kindergarten [the child] was in the highest level. [In] first grade she stayed in [the highest level] and then [the child] just started going down, down, down" (Lilly, Page 14, Lines 317-320). By the third grade Lilly's child was taken to the front of the class and made fun of by the teacher. Lilly's frustrations were complicated by the fact that teacher after teacher said the child was not trying and that the child's special education teachers would not implement instructional techniques that had been suggested by an independent psychologist. The ultimate defeat came from the child's high school guidance counselor. According to Lilly, "[The counselor] told [my child] not to even try to take the SAT's...It broke my heart" (Lilly, Page 17, Lines 371-373). Lilly's final story about her children was based on an incident with her oldest child. Lilly explained that this child was reading the newspaper before starting first grade. Lilly believed that the child's teacher had focused on one gifted student at the expense of the other students in the class. Lilly explained, "[The first grade teacher] told me [my child] wasn't doing well...Then the second grade teacher nearly had a fit and said the child could read anything that was put in front of [the child]" (Lilly, Page 14, Lines 306-310). Despite the fact that Lilly's experiences with her children were not positive, she did explain that she was always a room mother and that her children's hands were the first ones to fly into the air when the teachers needed a parent volunteer. Lilly concluded by explaining that she was bitter, but that time had since eased the pain of some of the memories. Lilly indicated that she had not had any involvement with the public schools since her children had graduated. However, she did state that she would gladly go into the schools if there were opportunities for community involvement.

Despite Lilly's concerning experiences with her children, she reported that she supports funding for public education. Lilly explained that she gathers information about local education issues by reading the newspaper, talking with her friends, and interacting with parents of school-aged children. In addition, Lilly noted that she is an officer in the local alumni association. As to

how the issue of funding public schools affected her voting behavior, Lilly stated that she does consider it. Additionally, she commented, “I would love to see consolidation [with the neighboring school division]. I think it’s ridiculous that [the other school division] is not willing” (Lilly, Page 19, Lines 434-436). Lilly ended her comments on funding by stating,

As an older person, I feel it’s the community’s role to fund education. Even if I didn’t have a grandchild getting ready to go to school, I would support it. I hear a lot of people say they don’t want to pay for [schools] because they don’t have any kids in school. And I think, well what do you think the future’s going to be. Yea, I am glad to fund schools (Lilly, Page 19, Lines 422-428).

Lilly made a point of stressing that she supports funding for public education initiatives even though she was involved in some disheartening experiences with her children. To support her position she stated, “The schools we have now are wonderful” (Lilly, Page 19, Lines 432-433). Lilly clarified her response by noting that the strengths of the schools today could be found in the quality of the programs available to students with disabilities and in the programs for gifted students. On the issue of weaknesses, Lilly cited the [state curriculum and assessment program]. She explained, “I do think [state standards of learning] are making it harder for everyone (Lilly, Page 7, Line 137). I don’t think the [state assessment program] is fair” (Lilly, Page 7, Line 139). As to how being a retired voter on a fixed income affected her voting behavior, Lilly explained, “Raising taxes to help with schools wouldn’t bother me. In fact, if it weren’t for the schools we would be nothing. I am very much for it...better schools” (Lilly, Page 21, Lines 462-464).

Themes

The identification of the themes that emerged from the across-case analysis was the manifestation of what the data revealed about how the lived experiences of a select group of elderly voters from a rural county shaped their attitudes toward public education funding. The goal was to illuminate the essence of their life experiences in school and in the community that had fostered rational self-interest or nurtured community loyalty within this purposefully selected group of voters. Guided by the research questions and based on the tenets of constant-comparative analysis, the thematic representation of the lived experiences that molded the attitudes of these elderly voters toward public education funding has been tied to the rich descriptions of events that took place in the lives of the participants. The themes that emerged

from the stories provide insight into the attitudes toward public education funding currently held by these elderly voters.

Themes Based on the Context of School Experiences

Five themes emerged from the rich stories of school experiences shared by the participants. These themes included (1) the impact of atypical experiences, (2) the organization and structure of the learning environment, (3) the level of student involvement, (4) the significance of peer relationships, and (5) the quality of support systems.

The Impact of Atypical Experiences

Six of the ten participants acknowledged that their experiences in public school had been influenced by the impact an atypical event. Several participants were affected by the untimely death of a parent. Earl explained that his mother passed away when he was four years old. Because Earl's father had promised to keep Earl with him after his mother's death and because Earl's father traveled extensively in search of work during that time, Earl ended up attending 28 different schools before entering high school. Earl explained,

Sometimes I would be in school for a month and sometimes three months...Starting a new school is almost a traumatic experience if you are a youngster. So, I was somewhat traumatized early on by going to so many different schools (Earl, Pages 2-3, Lines 37-53).

Lilly characterized the loss of her mother as the defining event in her public school life. In her words, "My mother died right after I went in [first grade] in October. The last thing she did was put me in school...So, that shaped a lot of my life" (Lilly, Page 1, Lines 16-18). Lilly went on to explain that because of her mother's death she nearly failed the first grade, that her father was anxious to get the four kids out of the house, and that "...[her life] was hell" (Lilly, Page 2, Line 31). Sally lost her father during her senior year in high school. Although this loss happened near the end of her public school career, Sally was reminded of how it had affected her when a schoolmate criticized her for returning to school too soon after his funeral.

Ruby considered her circumstance of being an only child with older parents to be the factor that permeated her public school experiences. She explained,

I was an only child. So, that sort of puts a different light on things. My mom was 36 when I was born and my dad was 48...Being an only child, it was a concern to me about what would happen to me if they weren't there (Ruby, Page 2, Lines 25-39).

Aside from her own worry about her parents not being there, Ruby's experiences in school were limited by the fact that her parents were overprotective. Consequently, her parents did not allow Ruby to go many places or do many things with her age-appropriate peers.

June had a different story to tell. Hers was one of attending segregated schools. Having classes in a crowded facility, reading from tattered old books and wearing hand-me-down athletic uniforms were standard procedures during June's years in public school. However, what was not the norm by anyone's standards was the manner in which June found a way to shape a positive self-image out of so much negativity. June characterized her teachers as "Swell" (June, Page 1, Line 22), and her memories as great stating, "I wouldn't have [had] it any other way" (June, Page 2, Lines 32-33). Despite her positive attitude, the lived experiences of segregation were woven tightly throughout June's stories.

Grace's atypical experience was the only one based on a positive premise. Grace explained that the fact that she entered school at the age of four had shaped many of her experiences. The story began when Grace's father taught her to read at a very early age. When her father took Grace to the office of the superintendent of the local schools to ask to buy a book for Grace to read, the superintendent was so impressed with Grace's ability that he gave her a book to keep and he granted her special permission to enroll in school as a four-year old. The superintendent's kindness combined with the care shown by some special teachers cultivated Grace's strong, positive attitude toward public education. In her words, "Well, I know the way that they took care of us at that time made me feel good toward education..." (Grace, Page 4, Lines 90-91).

The Organization and Structure of the Learning Environment

When asked to describe the public schools they had attended, all of the participants focused on at least one of three issues related to the organization and structure of the learning environment: the quality of the physical plant, the organization of the curriculum, and the standards for discipline and respect. These issues would subsequently provide a point of reference for several of their current attitudes toward public education funding.

The quality of the physical plant was cited as an element of the public school experience that had influenced attitudes toward education funding. June's recollections of school facilities were based on her experiences as an African-American student attending segregated schools. In her words, "...our desks were all carved up. We didn't have a cafeteria. I had to walk home [for

lunch]. Four times a day I walked across [a] bridge. We were crowded with bathrooms...we had two” (June, Page 6, Lines 134-136). Grace had a distinctly different school situation, but similar experiences with regard to school facilities. She had grown up in a poor community in the mountains of a coal mining state. Consequently, Grace explained that her early elementary years took place in a two-room school house that doubled as the church on Sunday. She noted that, “...when she was small in that small community [they did not have] very much of anything at those schools” (Richard, Page 12, Lines 262-264). Richard’s experiences as a student in the local schools added a different perspective to the issue of school plant. He focused on the recreational aspects of the facilities stating, “...the [elementary] playground was horrible...All we really had was a rock pile to play on” (Richard, Page 2, Lines 29-31). As to his high school years, Richard said,

We had a little tiny basketball gym. It was so small that when you went in for a lay-up, you actually hit into the wall after that was over with. The stage was on one end of the gym and the other end of the gym was a solid wall. When you went on a fast break to make a basket, you actually went into the stage or into a solid wall. Very few bleachers...probably four rows of seats was the maximum number (Richard, Page 2, Lines 39-49).

The organization of the curriculum was mentioned frequently by the participants. Polly lauded the strong English program and the fact that all students were required to complete a minimum of two years of Latin prior to graduation. Both Polly and Sonny commented on the Bible classes that were a regular part of the curriculum. As an aside, Sonny expressed pride in the fact that all students were required to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day. June enthusiastically explained that in her segregated school, “[They] had drama...wrapping the May Pole...folk dancing...home economics...and great summer programs” (June, Page 2, Lines 28-31). She went on to note that several foreign languages were offered as well as plays that taught them about their culture. However, June did make it clear that biology was not available because they had no labs, that typing was only available at night, and that all of their books had been used by the students in the white school across town before she and her classmates ever got them. Lilly’s recollections summed up much of the discussion on curriculum when she noted, “You didn’t have the studies like they do now where students can go to the college to study. Everybody studied the same thing” (Lilly, Page 86-88).

High standards for discipline and respect were also referenced as important aspects of the structure of the learning environment. Earl was the first to mention the concept of respect for his teachers. Based on his experiences, Earl was adamant about the fact that his male teachers were not well liked. Despite this feeling, Earl stated, "...all of the teachers, male or female, even though we didn't like a lot of the male teachers, they weren't feared. But, the fact that they were teachers earned them our respect" (Earl, Page 2, Lines 27-31). Polly added, "It was a time when you respected your parents and teachers" (Polly, page 4, Line 75). Sally added her own point of view to the status of discipline in the schools. Sally was proud of the fact that she had only gotten one spanking at school and she laughed out loud when she reminisced about the algebra teacher who threw an eraser at her for talking to a boy during class. Sonny spoke of his "stringent principal" (Sonny, Page 2, Line 33) who terrified him one time when he got in trouble. Then, he added that he remembered his teachers being "real stern" (Sonny, Page 3, Line 46). When Sonny commented about one specific teacher who threw erasers at him for talking, he reinforced Sally's experience. Despite these seemingly negative recollections, Sonny qualified his comments by repeating, "They were good people. They were good people" (Sonny, Page 2, Lines 44-45).

The Level of Student Involvement

The level of each participant's involvement in school activities varied from person to person based on each individual's unique circumstances. Earl's transient status prevented him from participating in any extra-curricular activities. He explained, "There were not particular things in school that I was particularly fond of. I did not participate in any sports because I wasn't around long enough to do much" (Earl, Page 6, Lines 123-126). Ruby felt like her status as an only child limited her ability to become involved in student activities due to the nature of her overprotective parents. She noted, "There were a lot of things I wasn't allowed to do and places I wasn't allowed to go. My dad owned a grocery store...He knew what went on everywhere. So, I wasn't allowed to go anywhere" (Ruby, Pages 3, Lines 46-50). Consequently, Ruby lamented about the fact that she had no recollection of any particularly memorable experiences in school.

Several participants lauded the benefits of being involved in student activities. Polly explained, "We had a lot of extra-curricular activities...We had clubs that added to our social life. We had a lot of social gatherings sponsored by the school...So it gave young people a social outlet...Certainly, there was a lot of enthusiasm for athletics" (Polly, Pages 4-5, Lines 82-92).

June added, “We had a football team...one of the best. And a basketball team...and softball. We won every championship with girls in softball and volleyball tournaments” (June, Page 5, Lines 102-105). Richard supported a similar position when he stated, “We had good basketball teams when I was there. You know, the sports was good” (Richard, Page 2, Lines 42-43). Louise focused on a different genre of student involvement. In her words, “I had some good experiences in high school. I loved dramatics...I participated in quite a few things. I did several plays and just whatever they asked me to do” (Louise, Page 2, Lines 38-41).

The Significance of Peer Relationships

The majority of the participants had a story to share about how the quality of peer relationships impacted their experiences in school. Earl quietly explained that his transient status prevented him from forming any sort of meaningful relationships in school noting,

I would meet one or two people that I would be friendly with at first and about the time you would form a relationship with them...zoom, you were gone again. That was kind of tough because you were never really there long enough to establish a relationship (Earl, Page 4, Lines 74-78).

Ruby reiterated the fact that her only child status kept her from forming any meaningful relationships whereas, Sally laughingly explained that her social adjustment to high school was complete when she realized that “...B stood for boys instead of books” (Sally, Page 3, Line 48). Sonny smiled broadly when he reminisced about his friends stating, “I remember running around with a bunch of guys and getting in a little meanness once in a while” (Sonny, Page 2, Lines 31-32). Then, there was Grace who explained how her peers softened her transition to high school. In her words,

[Going to] high school...was a really big change. But, that first year it really worked out well for me...I ended up being voted the queen. We had this fall carnival and [the students] elected queens and kings. I was voted the queen that year. That was really something exciting (Grace, Page 3, Lines 53-59).

According to Lilly, the significance of the relationships she established with her peers was what gave her the strength to get through school. Lilly’s mother had passed away right after she entered first grade. Her father remarried two years later and Lilly and her three older siblings were forced to go and live with her grandfather. Lilly explained, “We nearly raised ourselves. Dad was in such grief. Dad was just anxious to get us out...I took care of myself and I ended up

being the one to keep everybody together” (Lilly, Page 2, Lines 31-37). Because of her unique circumstances, Lilly had no support from home. Consequently, Lilly’s relationships with her peers were an integral part of her school experience. She said, “My school mates were my family...We all grew up together. It was just like family. We had the best time...School was a social event” (Lilly, Pages 3-4, Lines 70-72).

The Quality of Support Systems

The participants reflected on the significant experiences that were based on the quality of support from four sources. These sources included parents, counselors, administrators and teachers.

Most participants referenced the role their parent(s) had played in shaping their experiences in school. Earl and Lilly indicated that the deaths of their mothers and the absence of support from their fathers had shaped the majority of their experiences in public schools. Ruby felt that her parents were responsible for limiting the opportunities for student involvement that she might otherwise have had even though she acknowledged that their intentions were good. Polly credited her mother with having stressed the importance of language arts stating, “My mother was a real stickler for using proper grammar and reading” (Polly, Page 2, Line 41). June cited her father as the role model for her work ethic in school. In her words

I wanted a pair of black and white Spalding shoes. My dad said if I wanted [the shoes], I had to go work for them...[and] I got ‘em, too. I was determined. OK, dad...mom, if you say you gotta work for what you get, I will do it” (June, Page 9, Lines 185-195).

As a result of the work ethic instilled in June by her father, June experienced much academic success in school. Sonny attributed his father with instilling in him an ethic of commitment towards education. Sonny laughingly recalled,

I can remember waking up in the morning faking a stomach ache because I didn’t want to go to school. Dad would tell me to get my butt out of there. [Consequently], I never skipped school, never skipped school...I went to school a lot of times when I didn’t even feel like going to school (Sonny, Page 2, Lines 34-41).

Grace’s father was instrumental in shaping the path of her education. After teaching her to read before she entered first grade, Grace explained,

[My father] decided he would go to the superintendent's office to get a book that I could read... The superintendent said if [I] could read the book, [he] would give it to me...I found that [book] the other day. My dad had kept it (Grace, Page 5, Lines 95-102).

Two participants cited the lack of quality counseling as a concern. Polly was the first to broach the topic while discussing her high school curriculum. She explained, "You were pretty much on your own as to what you took. You knew what you needed to graduate. But, any other things you took were pretty much on your own" (Polly, Page 3, Lines 60-63). Richard's also commented on the lack of support from guidance counselors and how he felt that changed the course of his life. In his words,

I kind of have to say, I didn't get real good guidance going through high school. Actually, I had real good grades. I was the top boy graduate in that class of '57. I had no counselor or advisor and financially I didn't have any help to guide me in the right direction to send me off to college (Richard, Page 3, Lines 63-68).

The impact of not having adequate counseling was of life-changing significance to Richard. He explained, "It would have been great if someone would have stepped in and told me that [I could] probably go to college. I guess that's my one regret...I would still like to be able to say that I went to college" (Richard, Page 5, Lines 99-111).

Three participants mentioned their administrators as agents of support. Earl cited specific experiences in which administrators in two of his 28 schools positively impacted his life. In his effort to explain how difficult it was to establish a significant relationship while moving from school to school, Earl paused and said, "I was made a patrol boy in school one time. I had been there maybe three months or so. [The principal] gave me a belt. I think they were just trying to make me feel good" (Earl, Page 4, Lines 78-82). The second experience involved Earl being asked to draw a chalk mural of the Three Wise Men on a huge blackboard. Earl recalled,

One school I was in, fourth grade I think it was, I was asked...to do a mural on the blackboard of the Three Wise Men...Some [administrator] from the school system came in and was very much impressed about it and they said I had great potential to be a great artist...(Earl, Pages 4-5, Lines 89-97).

Sally's experience was based on the support she had received from her high school principal after the death of her father. Her voice cracked as she said,

Let me tell you this. My father died my senior year in high school. I took one day off from school. One of the girls said something to me about coming back too soon. I know you have heard horror tales about [that principal]. He called me to the office that day. They did it on the loud speaker. When I got there I was scared to death. And, he just told me that he wanted me to know that he was sorry about my father and if anybody gave me any trouble I was to let him know (Sally, Pages 3-4, Lines 61-69).

Finally, Grace cited the fact that the superintendent of schools had given her a reading book and had allowed her to begin school at the age of four.

The participants' stories about support from their teachers had more to do with how the teachers made them feel rather than how adept the teachers were as instructors. Earl's experiences with his male teachers were not positive. In his words,

The mix of teachers may have been 20% male and the rest, of course, female. All of the students knew it didn't pay anything. And, pretty much our impression was...mostly, the men, we didn't feel could get a job anywhere else so they took up teaching. One of the things we thought [the men] liked about being able to teach was they could bully the students (Earl, Pages 1-2, Lines 18-26).

Earl's impression of his female teachers was quite the opposite. He explained that there were two or three teachers who really helped him. He went on to say, "They were kind of like being on Little House on the Prairie. They took the students and really worked with them. They helped them on an individual basis" (Earl, Page 6, Lines 120-123). The essence of June's stories was similar to Earl's in that she had both positive and negative experiences to share. Overall, June benefited from a strong support system of teachers. One of June's teachers told her that she could be anything she wanted to be and that she should never let anyone or anything stand in the way of her success. Another teacher fostered June's sense of pride and positive self-image. According to June that teacher said "You are somebody and you always stand up and say you are somebody. Make your choices. If you make a mistake, don't go back and make that same mistake again. Try to profit from that mistake and go on" (June, page 3, Lines 48-53). Although June had several similar stories to share about her teachers, the most powerful one had to do with the teacher who had selected June, one of the poorest students in the home economics class, to accompany her on a week-long seminar to the other side of the state. Not only did the teacher help June with the funding for the trip, but she also set high expectations for June's success. June

proudly stated, “And we went and stayed a whole week. The most joy of my life. She did it for me. And I tell her to this day that she is my mentor” (June, Page 10, Lines 215-217). Despite her overwhelming pride in the nurturing she had received from the majority of her teachers, June had a negative story to tell. June sadly recalled a music teacher who had called her a cabbage head because June was having difficulty in the class. June explained, “You know, that hurt me. That really, really did hurt me...and I have never forgotten it because it hurt” (June, Page 4, Lines 88-91).

Richard credited his teachers with providing what little guidance he received during high school noting, “Without the teachers I wouldn’t have gone to work for the highway department” (Richard, Page 5, Line 96). Sally recalled an experience with a second grade teacher who helped her make up the time she had missed from school when she had the whooping cough. Similarly, Lilly spoke of the second grade teacher who took her from being the lowest reader in the class to the highest reader stressing, “She was the sweetest thing” (Lilly, Page 1, Line 22). Grace’s positive experiences with teachers were instrumental in shaping much of her attitude toward public education. She began by talking about the first teacher she ever had explaining,

[W]hen I started school, I was really small...My teacher would watch when I left school. I had to go across this little field. There were some children that weren’t that nice. [My teacher] was afraid for me to travel by myself. So, he would watch until I got almost home before he let the other children out.

When asked if there were other significant experiences with her teachers, Grace confidently responded,

Yes. This one teacher...when I started high school. I was in her homeroom. I remember her, how nice she was to all of us. She really took care of us. She stuck with me. She made sure...she was very alert to everything that was going on and she just looked out for us. I don’t remember exactly what she did, but I remember her. And, that was really good for me because I came from [a] small community (Grace, Page 4, Lines 69-76).

Themes Based on the Context of Community Experiences

Seven themes emerged from the data relative to the stories the participants shared about their experiences during the community, or post-school, years. These themes were based on two distinct life phases. The first life phase focused on the roles of the participants as parents and the second life phase focused on the roles of the participants as retired voters. The first three themes

evolved from the reflections of the participants as parents. They include (1) the quality of the parental experiences, (2) the role of parental responsibility, and (3) the level of parental involvement. The last four themes emerged from experiences as retired voters. They include (4) the present level of contact with public schools, (5) the degree of community involvement, (6) alumni experiences, and (7) political consciousness.

The Quality of Parental Experiences

The reflections of the participants on experiences related to having children in school generated more discussion than any other single topic. As a point of reference, nine of the ten participants were parents of children who had completed their public education in the local schools. Louise was the only participant whose children attended school in a neighboring county. When sharing stories about experiences relative to having children in school, the participants drew a distinction between the quality of the academic experiences and the attributes of the emotional experiences.

All of the participants, except one, indicated that their children had received a good academic education. For instance, Ruby explained that all three of her children had the same first grade teacher. In her words, "I always thought a lot of [that teacher]. If [my children] had [that teacher] they were going to get a good basic start" (Ruby, Page 8, Lines 163-165). Earl said, "Generally, overall, I did feel like [my children] got a good education" (Earl, Page 10, Lines 219-220). Sonny simply stated, "[My children] got a good education" (Sonny, Page 10, Line 229). Richard echoed Sonny's position when he said, "[My children had] mostly just good experiences. They both done real well" (Page 14, Lines 305-306). Additionally, in response to a probe about whether or not her grandchildren had received a good education in the local schools, Polly said, "Yes. I think it's there and if they don't get it, it's their own fault" (Polly, Page 7, Lines 157-158).

Several participants did cite specific examples of issues that had caused them some level of concern. Earl expressed concern about the qualifications of some of his children's teachers explaining, "...there were a few teachers that we did not think should even be teaching, especially our children" (Earl, Page 9, Lines 191-192). Polly noted frustration with the level of academic counseling based on her experiences stating, "I am not sure [my children] were ever counseled enough or tested enough...So many kids graduate from high school and have no idea what they really want to do" (Polly, Pages 9-10, Lines 164-166). Ruby shared two concerning

memories. First, she commented about a teacher who was giving her children questions on information that had not been covered in class. Ruby said, “When I talked to [that teacher], [the teacher] thought it was funny. But, I found it very upsetting” (Ruby, Page 8, Lines 167-169). Second, she cited one specific high school teacher whose class “...was such a waste of time” (Ruby, Page 8, Lines 170-171). Lilly was the lone participant who felt that one of her children had not received a good education. Lilly’s story was based on the experiences she had with the youngest of her three children. Lilly explained that her child was reading on the highest level in the first grade. Due to the fact that the child had five different substitutes in the second grade, the child began to regress academically. The child’s third grade teacher made matters worse by making fun of the child’s work in front of the class. At some point during the fourth grade, Lilly took the child to a specialist who identified the problem as a learning disability. Lilly lamented, “The first disability teacher [my child] had called the kids dummies and was mad because I had taken [the child] to [an outside source] for testing” (Lilly, Page 15, Lines 341-343). Lilly’s frustrations continued throughout the child’s public school career and culminated when the child’s high school guidance counselor told the child, “...not to even bother to take SAT’s” (Lilly, Page 17, Line 372).

The emotional attributes of the educational program were tied to experiences the participants disclosed about their personal interactions as parents with teachers and principals. These attributes were grounded in the subtleties of each participant’s rich descriptions that evoked emotional reactions. Earl expressed frustration about one specific interaction with a school principal. Earl explained that he had made a point of meeting with a principal to discuss his concerns about the qualifications of some teachers. In his words,

We asked questions of the administrator. How come these teachers are here? We don’t think they are qualified and they don’t seem to be doing the job we would like to see. And the response was...this is a small town. We don’t pay much and it’s hard to get teachers here unless there is someone local who is going to be a teacher...My impression was that the administrator seemed to be more interested in not stirring the pot...and not having to go out and look for new teachers...” (Earl, Pages 9-10, Lines 193-212).

Polly’s experience had to do with an encounter she had with her child’s high school English teacher. As Polly began to tell her story, she reiterated the fact that English had always been important to her because it had been emphasized in her home by her mother. Polly explained,

[I] couldn't figure out what in the world [my child] was taking in English...I said [to the teacher] I really wonder what it is [my child] is supposed to be doing. And [the teacher] said [my child] should know [and] that I should find out from [my child] (Polly, Pages 10-11, Lines 226-232).

Polly went on to explain that the teacher made light of the fact that Polly expressed concern about the lack of grammar being taught to sophomore English students. Disheartened, Polly concluded, "So, that was one unhappy experience" (Polly, Page 11, Line 240).

Lilly shared a bizarre experience about an encounter she had with her middle child's third grade teacher. The story began when two other mothers told Lilly that their children had come home from school and said that the teacher had hit Lilly's child in the head with a ruler. Lilly explained that this was not the first issue Lilly's child had faced with the teacher. Prior to that day, Lilly had spoken with the teacher about humiliating the child in front of the class after falsely accusing the child of cheating. After finding out that the teacher had hit the child on the head with a ruler, Lilly made a second trip to the school even though the child begged her not to go. Upon arriving at the school, Lilly met with the rattled principal who pleaded, "Now, now, please don't jump on [the teacher] in front of the kids" (Lilly, Page 9, Lines 204-205). After convincing the principal that she had no intention of jumping on the teacher, the principal arranged for Lilly to meet with the teacher in the lounge. According to Lilly,

[The teacher's] whole demeanor changed [once the door was closed]. Her hair sort of stuck out like these movies you see and she was just wild...Finally, I told her to calm down [and then I asked] what my child was doing wrong. The teacher said [my child] was just sitting there not doing anything after turning in an assignment...When I commented that [my child] got straight A's, the teacher said she would have to see to it that [my child] didn't get anymore A's (Lilly, Pages 10-11, Lines 223-246).

Lilly lamented, "It was absolutely horrible...I would say we're not getting anywhere so I am going to leave [and the teacher] would jump up and run to the door and beg me not to leave and say we had to talk" (Lilly, Page 12, Lines 252-259). As the situation escalated, Lilly became more distressed. Finally, she heard the principal outside the lounge door and screamed for help. Lilly concluded,

[The teacher] jumped back [when the principal opened the door]. You'll think I'm crazy, but [the teacher's] hair came down just as nice and she stood there just smiling. I mean it was scary. It was scary (Lilly, Page 12, Lines 264-267).

Lilly agreed that her lack of support from the principal was just as distressing as the harrowing episode she had experienced with the teacher.

Some participants did provide more positive perspectives related to the emotional attributes of their experiences as parents. Sally was reminded of the time her child's biology teacher explained that her child was not doing well in class. The teacher took the time to let Sally know that the child was not taking books home on a regular basis. Sally concluded, "[The teacher and I] had a clearer understanding of each other after that" (Sally, Page 10, Lines 228-229). Sonny shared a classic story of a coach who cared. He reminisced,

I don't remember the guy's name, but a coach called me. [The coach] told me he was concerned about [my child]. [The coach said my child] was at a basketball game...and [my child] was acting kind of strange. [The coach said] he didn't know what was going on, but [he] thought I ought to know about it. When [my child] came home from school...we went for a ride and we talked it over. [My child] didn't deny anything and I didn't accuse [my child] of anything. But, it ended. If that coach hadn't called me...and, he wasn't even [my child's] coach. He was just somebody that cared (Sonny, Pages 9-10, Lines 199-210).

Sonny concluded by stating that he really appreciated what that coach had done.

The Role of Parental Responsibility

Several participants reflected on experiences with their children relative to the impact of their parenting philosophies. In response to being asked if he felt his children received a good education in the local public schools, Earl stated, "A lot of it was up to them. Some studied harder than others. Some didn't need to study. Some had to be made to study. Generally, it was there for them and there was encouragement from the parents" (Earl, Page 10, Lines 220-224). Polly characterized her role in her children's education as follows,

I think children always have to be encouraged to take advantage of everything that is there for them. Maybe I am too much of a pusher...but when it's available for you, you should take advantage of it and learn all you can (Polly, Page 5, Lines 107-112).

June tied her parenting philosophies to the work ethic she had learned from her father stating,

I taught all my kids [the way my dad taught me] and they have come up through the ranks the same way. They all say they aren't gonna ask anybody to do anything for me. If mom can do it, I can do it (June, Page 9, Lines 196-199).

June went on to make two additional points relative to her parenting beliefs. First, she explained that all ten of her children had been trained to set and maintain high standards of personal performance. Then, she proudly noted that she had never made a trip to the schools relative to any disciplinary problems with her children because, “[You] don’t send your kids to a teacher to do what you should have done at home. [I]f you start good training at home, [children] wouldn’t be running over the teachers...like they are doing now (June, Page 14, Lines 306-310).

The Level of Parental Involvement

The theme of parental involvement had to do with experiences relative to making an effort to be there for the good of a child’s education outside of situations that necessitated a parent’s attention. The degree to which each participant was involved as a parent in the educational lives of their children stretched from one end of the involvement continuum to the other. Based on her experiences, Grace was the most actively involved parent in the school lives of her children. Grace was a homemaker. Consequently, she elected to spend a significant amount of time volunteering in her youngest child’s school. She noted,

I volunteered when [my youngest child] was in elementary school. And, then [my child] moved to [middle school]. I volunteered there for a while. But, then they didn’t need volunteers as much...I was involved in the schools in high school because I worked with the band. I traveled with them and I helped in every way. In fact, I was an officer one time (Grace, Page 8, Lines 163-174).

Lilly was a room mother for all three of her children. She proudly stated, “I was always the one. My kids’ hands went up first. My mommy will do it” (Lilly, Page 20, Lines 447-448). Sally’s role was similar to Lilly’s. She smiled broadly when she explained, “PTA, parties. This house always had football players or cheerleaders in it. By being so close to the school, we were always there (Sally, Page 11, Lines 232-234). Earl was proud of the fact that he regularly attended parent-teacher conferences. In his words, “I went to all the parent-teacher conferences. In fact, a couple of times when I didn’t show up, they almost called me to find out where I was” (Earl, Page 9, Lines 187-190). In addition, Earl commented about being respected by members of the school board stating, “I did not get involved on the school board, but I was close to people who

were on the school board and we talked. They valued my opinion” (Earl, Page 18, Lines 394-398). Richard shared an interesting story about an experience he had going before the city council to ask for funding for a reading program. According to Richard,

[The schools] wanted some additional funding from the city for reading...[The schools] wanted to institute some type of program to help students and I remember going to City Council and speaking. I told them we really need to help fund this or help to do whatever we can and I cited [my child] as an example (Richard, Page 13, Lines 281-289).

Richard exuded a great deal of pride in his accomplishment in that the city funded the program and it helped his child significantly. On the basis of a continuum, Louise’s parental involvement experiences would place her at an extreme. When asked about her involvement with public schools since graduating from high school, Louise responded, “I have not had much contact with public schools since I finished my education...I was not in the schools as much as my husband was. He was there” (Louise, Pages 4 and 6, Lines 70-72 and 118-119). It is interesting to note that Louise was the only participant whose children did not attend school in the county.

Limited Current Contact with Public Schools

All of the participants agreed that their current level of contact with the local public schools was limited. Earl explained that he frequents band concerts and attends a few ball games, but that he had not ever attended an open house. Polly did express pride in the fact that she kept close tabs on the performance of her grandchildren, but that her experiences were otherwise limited. June had no direct contact with the schools. However, she did indicate that she was instrumental in having her church strengthen financial support for local graduates. In her words, “I talked to our church board. I told them they should give more [to the graduates]. We raised [our scholarship] much higher” (June, Pages 19-20, Lines 436-438). Sally reiterated that she does not visit the schools for any reason. However, she did note that she is connected via the fact that one of her children is a teacher in the local school system. Ruby explained that her contact with the schools was limited to trips she makes to one local elementary school for the purpose of voting. Sonny indicated that he had not frequented the schools since his children had graduated. Richard explained that his limited contact with the local schools was restricted to attending special events involving his grandchildren. Because Grace currently had no children or grandchildren enrolled in the local schools, she indicated that she is no longer in the schools for any reason. Ruby echoed Grace’s position, but added that she did make yearly trips to one of the

local elementary schools for the purpose of voting. Lilly's comments were much the same. However, she did add, "I would [get involved] if they needed help with something" (Lilly, Page 20, Line 442). Louise was the lone participant who indicated that she had never been in any one of the local schools for any reason. In her words, "The only time I was ever at one of the school was when Relay for Life was going on over at [the high school]. I helped out with refreshments, but we weren't in the school at all" (Participant 5, Lines 103-106).

Community Involvement

Aside from specific incidences of involvement with the local schools, several participants offered information about the degree to which they are currently involved in the community. Earl indicated that he is out and about in the community on a regular basis and that he maintains regular contact with certain members of the county board of supervisors. Polly proudly explained that she is a longstanding member of the local Woman's Club and that she had recently published an historical review of the role of the club in the community. June noted participation in the senior citizens program, in the hospital's senior program, and in her church. Sonny mentioned that he is a member of the governing board in his church. Richard indicated that he meets regularly with a group of local retirees for breakfast and that he is always coming and going in the community. Grace and Louise were proud of the fact that they were both long-time volunteers at the local hospital; while, Lilly remarked that she is currently an officer in her local high school alumni association.

Alumni Involvement

Three participants commented on the fact that they maintain ties to high school alumni organizations. Ruby proudly explained that she is a longstanding member of her high school's retired graduate organization. When asked to expand upon her statement, Ruby said,

[The organization is made up of] a group of retired...graduates that meets about every quarter...They used to meet at the high school, but they outgrew that. Now, they meet at the civic center. You have to be graduated 50 years in order to become a member. One of our principals was a professor [at a local college]. So, we have a scholarship in his name [at that college]. It's pretty interesting because I am all the time getting something from [the college] where I have given to that scholarship...It's a way to stay connected (Ruby, Pages 3-4, Lines 61-85).

Louise indicated that she still maintains contact with peers from her high school graduating class noting, “I just got a card recently. They are having a meeting of the people I graduated with...” (Louise, Page 3, Lines 56-58). Although Louise was not sure she could make the long trip to the meeting, she did indicate that she had attended in recent years. Lilly’s integral involvement with the alumni organization of her high school originated from the quality of the friendships she formed at a very early age. When commenting on the fact that her schoolmates had become her family after the death of her mother, Lilly explained, “We are still close. We have a reunion every year...a certain group of us” (Lilly, Page 2, Lines 42-43). Lilly later explained that her ties to her classmates ran so deep that she had agreed to take on the responsibility of being an officer in the alumni organization.

Political Consciousness

All of the participants acknowledged some level of political consciousness. However, their experiences within the construct of political behavior varied widely. The level of voter participation was consistent across all cases in that each participant proudly stated that they voted in every election. What was not consistent was the degree to which each of the participants cast their ballots on the basis of informed decisions. Several participants indicated that they scrutinized issues associated with education funding thoroughly. Earl stated, “Anytime there is anything on the ballot that is related to the financing of public schools, I look at it very closely” (Earl, Page 22, Lines 505-506). He explained that he always read the newspapers and that he often talked to local government officials and local school board employees to ensure that he fully understood the issues. Polly obtained information on ballot issues from reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, and talking with close friends in the community. June confidently reported,

I try to keep up with [school issues] when I see it in the paper...I read [the paper] a lot. I don’t want to go out and talk to anybody if I don’t know what I am talking about. I won’t talk about [school issues] if I haven’t read about it. So, I read it and I read it again to make sure I don’t leave anything out. Then I can really get into the conversation...I go to some debates. I try to get in on a couple of them. Then, I read what’s going on. Sometimes by voting, I get the information in the mail and that tells me things. Cause I don’t wanna just go vote and punch something (June, Pages 17-18, Lines 382-412).

In addition to reading the newspapers, Richard, Sonny, and Sally all noted that they obtained information about school funding issues from close family members who were employed by the local school system. Grace added that she gathered some information from neighbors whose children were enrolled in the local schools.

The information reported by Louise and Ruby placed them at the opposite end of the informed voter continuum. When asked how she learned about issues related to funding for public schools, Louise said, “I don’t pay attention to that. I just more or less go with the flow” (Louise, Page 6, Lines 132-135). Ruby’s response was similar in that she said, “What the local candidate feels about public education does not affect how I vote. Whether or not property taxes are raised for public education does not affect how I vote” (Ruby, Page 9, Lines 193-196).

Themes Based on Attitudes toward Public Education Quality

The participants were asked a series of questions for the purpose of identifying their overall attitudes toward public education outside of issues related to funding. These questions focused on the participant’s perceived strengths and weakness of public education today and whether or not the participants felt public schools were doing a good job. The themes that emerged from the responses to these questions not only provided insight into the intended purpose of the questions, but they also generated deeper and richer revelations about experiences that had shaped the attitudes of the participants toward education funding issues. Emergent themes included (1) pride in the quality of local public education, (2) support for progressive initiatives in public education, (3) frustration with perceived weaknesses in public education, and (4) ramifications of government involvement in local public education.

Pride in the Quality of Local Public Education

All of the participants expressed a great deal of pride in the quality of the local schools. Earl stated, “Schools are doing a better job now than when my children and grandchildren were in school” (Earl, Page 13, Line 287). Based on her own experiences with her children, Ruby confidently reported, “I think the schools do pretty good for these kids. [The kids] can go to most any college they want to get into” (Ruby, Pages 5-6, Lines 114-115). Sally echoed the sentiments of the other participants and added a qualification to her response when she said, “[Schools] are doing as well as they can with what they are provided” (Sally, Page 8, Lines 168-169). Because she no longer has any contact with the local schools, Grace based her response on experiences with her grandchildren who attend school in a neighboring county. In her words, “I

feel like public education is doing a very good job. I know [the schools] are doing a good job with my grandchildren. The [state benchmark] tests...both of them made close to 600...They are really doing well in school” (Grace, Page 9, Lines 192-196). Despite the fact that Louise had indicated that her knowledge of local education issues was limited to what she read in the newspaper, when asked whether or not the schools were doing a good job she resoundingly responded, “Oh, yes! Yes. I do” (Louise, Page 4, Line 81). Although Sonny was not a negative respondent, he did couch his response with a slight tone of skepticism when he said, “I don’t know that they are doing a bad job” (Sonny, Page 6, Line 122). Conversely, the pride that June exuded in the quality of the local schools radiated in her response,

I do. I do. I really do [believe the local schools are doing a good job]...I am proud of the school system. We are a small town, but I am still proud. I am proud of it. I would put [this school system] up against anybody else (June, Page 14, Lines 300-313).

Support for Progressive Initiatives

When asked to identify the strengths of education today, most of the participants geared their responses in the direction of more progressive initiatives being taken in the local schools. Earl’s response was tied to past experiences he had related about teacher quality concerns. He explained, “The strengths are in teachers who care about the students and insist that they excel...The teachers care. The administration...in our school system looks closely at teachers to make sure they are performing at the level they should” (Earl, Page 14, Lines 303-309). Polly correlated her response to personal experiences with a limited curriculum stating, “The strengths are in offering as wide a curriculum as they are financially able to and physically able to. I think that’s good” (Polly, Page 8, Lines 161-163). June’s thoughts were linked to the substandard materials and facilities she encountered in segregated schools when she noted, “[My children] never say the school doesn’t have this or it doesn’t have that. They’ve got computers. They’ve got new schools. They’ve got state-of-the-art. I never heard any of my grandkids complain” (June, Page 13, Lines 293-297). Sonny supported the positions of several other participants when he stated, “[T]he strengths are exposing the kids to more. [The schools] are getting [them] ready for the outside world...They have computers for just about every kid today. They have computer labs. They are doing a good job in that respect” (Sonny, Pages 6-7, Lines 135-143). Richard based his response, in part, on the lack of guidance he had experienced in high school explaining, “I think the strengths are in the fact that you got such well educated...people to guide [students]”

(Richard, Page 9, Lines 197-199). Richard went on to explain that other strengths could be found in new equipment and technology initiatives available to students today. Grace corroborated other participants' positions about advances in technology initiatives when she stated, "...all the things [the students] have to work with now. If they don't have computers they are missing out on so much" (Grace, Page 10, Lines 216-218). Lilly tied her response to the heartbreaking story of the experiences she had with her learning disabled child. In her words, "The strengths...it seems to me like [the schools] have a lot more programs for [special education] children" (Lilly, Page 6, Lines 125-126). Louise was the lone participant who could not think of any strengths in public schools today. Quite possibly this could be related to an earlier comment in which she stated that she did not keep up with issues in education today.

Frustration Associated with Weaknesses in Public Education

The identification of the weaknesses in public education sparked a sense of frustration from within the participants. Earl tied his comments to teacher quality as he had done when referencing the strengths stating,

One of the weaknesses is in the system itself. Administrators know the teachers. They know when [teachers] are performing and when they aren't. One thing I never really agreed with is that when a teacher had worked a certain amount of time, they are automatically guaranteed a job. I think that is wrong. I think every year, every day, [teachers] should have to prove themselves. One of the things that happens when you get some teachers who may be borderline is that as soon as they get tenure, they do whatever they need to do just to get by. All school systems have them; I believe (Earl, Page 13, Lines 332-343).

Earl's frustration with the issue of tenure was based on his administrative experiences in the work place. He explained, "I have been in administrative jobs most of my working career, responsible for lots of people...[I]t didn't take me five years to find out that somebody wasn't going to make it" (Earl, Page 16, Lines 346-354).

Polly's concerns centered on issues related to state curriculum and assessments requirements and their effects on her grandchildren stating,

I think there are so many more restrictions now on children and on teachers...[F]or instance the [state curriculum and assessments] are taking up time that prevents children from pursuing some hobby or talent they might have...[I]f they had people to work with

children who might have hidden talents...For instance, I think [my grandchild] is gifted in creative writing, but how much exposure [my grandchild] gets with what [the child is required to take], I don't know (Polly, Pages 6-7, Lines 132-137 and 203-205).

Lilly supported a similar position about the state curriculum and assessment standards noting, "I do think the [state curriculum and assessments] are making it harder for everyone. I don't think they are fair..." (Lilly, Page 7, Lines 137-140).

Sally, whose child teaches in the local school system, cited inadequate teacher salaries as a weakness in the system. In her words,

My bosses had a four-year education. That was all. They have been working for 20 years and making 50 and 60 thousand dollars. And, you have got school teachers who are molding the minds of our young people and they are only making 40 [thousand] with 20 years of experience. I think it's terrible. I think it's terrible (Sally, Page 7, Lines 150-156).

Having appreciated the strong standards for discipline and respect he had been taught at home, at school, and in the military, Sonny adamantly stated that he felt like the weaknesses in school today were based on a lack of these attributes. He explained,

I was in the army for 33 years. Discipline is big on my mind. I don't think kids have the respect for the teachers they ought to have. I mean, when I was growing up, some of the shenanigans they do now...they would kick you out of school forever...you would never go back to school (Sonny, Page 7, Lines 145-150).

Richard was of the opinion that schools were not cultivating as strong sense of responsibility in many of its students as they had done when he was in school stating,

I look at some young kids nowadays and their attitudes and the way they act and present themselves and things like that. I am a little disheartened in what I see in some of that...I don't think they have the desire to jump in there and work like some people have coming up through the ranks like myself (Richard, Page 10, Lines 217-225).

Ruby took the negative perspective when she stated, "I don't think there are any weaknesses. I think around here [the students] can get about anything they want (Ruby, Page 7, Lines 154-155).

Ramifications of Government Involvement in Local Education

Several participants were skeptical of the ramifications of federal and state government involvement in public education. Aside from Polly and Sally referencing the state mandated curriculum and assessment programs, both Earl and Sonny had much to say about several other government initiatives. In addition to commenting about the level of emphasis placed on No Child Left Behind legislation initiatives, Earl said,

Schools take on a lot...One of the things they take on is babysitting jobs...Children are put in an education system at too early an age...You got to give kids breakfast and lunch. I don't begrudge the kids getting breakfast and lunch, but there are just too many of the freebee programs that are mandated by the government. The school systems really have no choice in the matter because it is an edict by the government or [the government] won't give [the local schools] any money. Well, the government doesn't have the money anyway. They get it from us and just send it right back (Earl, Page 13, Lines 289-297).

Earl's frustration with government mandated programs prompted him to offer his own solution to the problem. In his words,

I would like to see the local government take more responsibility for the finances of the school system. This will raise my taxes, but with the state and federal government putting this much money into the schools, they dictate to the schools what they can teach, what they have to do, and what programs they have to have. They run the school system...I would like to see the federal and state put the money into the local government and let the local government run the schools along with the money they put in it (Earl, Page 19, Lines 422-434).

Not only did Sonny echo Earl's position on government mandates, but he made a few additional points as well stating,

The schools are doing a lot of babysitting...a lot of babysitting. And, I understand from the friends that I have in the school system that there are children going to school now that will never be able to learn. They have some kind of brain disorder and they will never be able to learn. Yet, the schools are required to provide one-on-one. That's expensive and I don't think the schools ought to be doing that...[W]e didn't see kids in wheel chairs who couldn't feed themselves and couldn't go to the bathroom by

themselves. You didn't see that [when I was in school]. I don't think that's the schools' job (Sonny, Page 4, Lines 69-83).

The level of frustration with government mandated programs emanated from Sonny when he retorted, "The government has got so many hand-cuffs on public education...you've got to do this and you've got to do that...or we're not going to give you the funding (Sonny, Page 5, Lines 111-114). Sonny reiterated his position about government involvement in public education when he said,

I think we ought to leave God in schools. You and I can talk about that, but [the government is] not going to change it. Just recently the American Civil Liberties Union got on somebody about a [religious] picture hanging in a school...I remember in grade school we recited the Pledge of Allegiance and we had Bible class...The government has got their fingers in everything. I understand how [the government] will keep the money from [local school districts] if you don't tow the line (Sonny, Page 8, Lines 161-169).

Themes that Reflect Current Attitudes toward Public Education Funding

The participants were asked a series of questions for the purpose of identifying their current attitudes toward public education funding within the context of being retired voters on fixed incomes. Five themes emerged from the across-case analysis of each participant's narrative. These themes included (1) pride in personal financial stability (2) confidence in voting decisions, (3) concern about specific local education funding issues, (4) community apathy, and (5) concern for the welfare of future generations.

Pride in Personal Financial Stability

Each participant was asked if their current status as a retired voter on a fixed income had a bearing on their ability to support tax increases for public education funding. The across-case analysis revealed a pattern of participants reporting pride in the fact that they had achieved a level of financial stability. As an aside to their sense of pride, several participants expressed sympathy for and recognition of the financial circumstances of others who were less fortunate. Earl did not indicate that living on a fixed-income was an issue in his ability to support tax increases for public education funding. In fact, he exuded a great deal of pride in his accomplishments when he confidently stated, "Everything I got, I had to work hard for and I made sacrifices. But, overall, it's been worth it (Earl, Page 11, Lines 234-235). However, Earl did make it clear that he would prefer more local control over taxing and spending for education.

In addition, it was important to Earl to emphasize his opinion about the financial status of the community as a whole. In his words,

[T]his community is moving more and more toward a retirement community. We have people who are retired on fixed incomes who really have no way to do anything else. They just get by. They could not handle, without difficulty, an increase in their tax structure for schools, or anything else. It puts more and more burden on these people and some of them have sold their homes and moved to retirement homes because they can no longer afford it. I think the general attitude of the older people here in town is...not like I feel (Earl, Page 21, Lines 465-475).

Polly held an almost identical opinion. When asked if her status as a retired voter on a fixed income impacted her ability to provide financial support for public schools, Polly responded without hesitation and said, “[Being on a fixed income] doesn’t. Because [education] is so necessary...I support [education] just as much now as I ever did (Polly, Page 14, Lines 313-316). Polly qualified her response by stating, “[Y]ou have to realize, this is how I feel. Others may not feel as I do...With so many people on fixed incomes, I am not sure they could afford to do it” (Polly, Page 12, Lines 254-268).

June’s response was conveyed with a sense of humility as she explained, “Not that I am tooting my own horn, but my husband is still living and we are pretty well fixed. That’s why I can give more...I can afford to. But, if I couldn’t, I would do what I could” (June, Page 19, Lines 415-421). June also acknowledged that others may not be in a position to provide the same level of financial support for public education when she stated, “I understand that some people don’t get but one check or whatever. I understand that” (June, Page 19, Lines 417-419). Sally responded in a similar fashion when she said, “I can see why some people who are retired probably can’t afford to pay more taxes. But, I guess we are a little bit lucky. If I know that’s where the money is going, [paying more taxes for education] is OK” (Sally, Pages 7-8, Lines 159-162).

Ruby may have been somewhat offended when asked about living on a fixed income in that she retorted, “I don’t really live on a fixed income. I have rental properties. In fact my dad’s home place was where the truck stop is [in a nearby county]” (Ruby, Page 1, Lines 5-8). However, she did go on to explain that being a senior citizen had no bearing on her ability to provide financial support for public education, “...unless it were outrageous or something”

(Ruby, Page 9, Line 201). After taking a moment to reflect on the question, Sonny smiled and said, “I don’t see that anything has changed. I know funding education is inevitable. Um. No. [Being a retired voter on a fixed income] doesn’t affect [my ability to provide financial support for local public education] (Sonny, Page 15, Lines 323-324). Richard concurred with the other participants. He explained,

As I retired, I planned for my retirement for a number of years. And, financially wise, I was able to retire with a good enough income that I can live like I want to live. So, consequently, [living on a fixed income] doesn’t create a negative aspect on funding for schools and things because I planned my retirement very well (Richard, Page 17, Lines 372-377).

Like so many other participants, Richard felt compelled to express his concern for other retirees who may be less financially stable stressing,

I can sympathize with some people on fixed incomes...People that retired ten or 15 years ahead of me...retired with a very low fixed income...I can understand where even my mother might have to say that the schools have got enough...But she is on such a small fixed income that even if they want another five dollars from her...it’s too much (Richard, Page 18, Lines 379-390).

Grace quickly and confidently responded, “[Living on a fixed income] doesn’t affect [my ability to support public education]. My husband worked for the railroad and he got a pretty good pension. It takes care of us. I don’t even see that as a problem” (Grace, Page 12, Lines 256-258).

Louise reiterated that being a senior citizen on a fixed income had no bearing on support for education because she tended to simply, “...go with the flow” (Louise, Page 6, Line 135). Lilly echoed with every other participant’s comments when she stated,

Well, of course, [my husband] worked real hard and did real well with the railroad. So, we are not like a lot of people who are on fixed incomes. Basically, I don’t think [living on a fixed income] would affect [my ability to support funding for public education].

Raising taxes to help with schools wouldn’t bother me (Lilly, Page 21, Lines 459-464).

The Impact of Education Issues on Voting Behavior

The across-case analysis revealed a pattern of participants reporting that local education funding issues do impact voter behavior in elections. Some participants stressed the fact that they closely scrutinize the issues associated with school funding before voting, while others indicated

that education issues were not a factor in voting decisions. As a result, the impact of education issues on voting behavior emerged as a prominent theme.

Earl let it be known that he took his responsibility as a voter very seriously and that issues related to funding public education were of paramount importance to him. He explained, "Anytime there is anything on the ballot related to the financing of schools, I look at it very closely. If it makes sense to me, even though it may place a little more burden on people, I consider the value of whatever the issue might be and how many people it will benefit. As far as kids, I am going to vote for it. If it has been brought up and it seems controversial and it would just be nice to have, I have to say no" (Earl, Page 23-24, Lines 505-521).

Earl expounded on his position by explaining that he is more inclined to vote for an initiative that has long-term benefits and a proven track record. Earl described the process he uses to weigh the pros and cons of an issue noting that he asks himself a series of questions. In his words,

You can say what is the cause and effect? What is it going to do down the road? Is it going to be a good thing or is it going to be another one of these things that you are going to be stuck with once you get it...and you can't get rid of it? What good is it? Is it something that has been fairly well proven and not ill conceived? Something that has depth to it? I like to look at the long-term because it is going to be there" (Earl, Pages 24-25, Lines 549-557).

When asked if the issue of funding public education affected his voting behavior, Richard adamantly stated, "Definitely. I definitely look at the people and how they feel about schools and how they are going to vote and fund things" (Richard, Page 16, Lines 365-367). In addition to stating his position on local election issues, Richard made it clear that his interest in education was not limited to local elections explaining, "I know for a fact that we need to vote and put people in the state level that do better funding for teachers..."(Richard, Page 16, lines 353-354) Sonny focused on the concept of voter responsibility when he stated, "I think the voters have a big responsibility to put the right people in office to do their bidding" (Sonny, Page 14, Lines 236-236). Sonny followed by explaining how he takes the time to study each candidate's position on education funding issues before casting his ballot and by stressing the fact that his vote is cast for candidates who support education. He concluded by stating, "Someone...that don't put education as a high priority, don't get my vote" (Richard, Page 14, Lines 312-314).

Several other participants were not as demonstrative in their responses, but they were equally as sincere. Grace quietly explained, “Well, when I start to vote for someone, I like to vote for someone who will do everything they can to fund the schools. Everything they can do” (Grace, Pages 11-12, Lines 251-253). Lilly took a moment to reflect before stating, “Humm. I do consider it, [but] I really haven’t thought about [that issue]” (Lilly, Page 20, Lines 451-452). Polly admittedly reported that she follows the political issues associated with local school funding and that she fully supports public education funding initiatives. However, when asked how local school issues had affected her voting behavior, Polly responded,

Now, I can’t say that I know of anyone who has been running for public office lately who has been running on the promise of improving schools. If they have, I am not aware of it. It’s not an issue that comes up very much. I don’t know if they are reluctant to bring it up or if they think [the schools] are OK the way they are (Polly, Page 13, Lines 281-286).

Three participants openly acknowledged that issues related to funding public education had no affect whatsoever on their voting behavior. When asked about a tie between voting behavior and school funding issues, Sally reflected, “I can’t say that [issues related to funding public education] has affected my voting behavior” (Sally, Page 6, Line 135); Ruby retorted, “I always vote. What the local candidate feels about public education does not affect how I vote. Whether or not property taxes are raised for public education does not affect how I vote” (Ruby, Page 9, Lines 193-196); and Louise simply said, “[School issues] do not affect my voting behavior. I don’t pay attention to that” (Louise, Page 6, Line 132).

Concern about Specific Local Education Funding Issues

Several identifiable issues emerged from the across-case analysis relative to participant comments on topics of local interest. These issues included school consolidation, construction of new facilities, and teacher salaries. Although these issues were not specifically addressed in the interview protocol, the fact that they did emerge across multiple cases made them worthy of inclusion based on the fact that they did impact attitudes toward public education funding. Consequently, the theme of concern about specific local education funding issues was included.

Three participants referenced the issue of local school consolidation. When commenting on the adequacy of funding for local public education in the county, Sally took a long pause of reflection before saying,

[T]his doesn't have anything to do with the county, but I think the city is crazy. [City government leaders] need to realize that [the city and county schools] need to combine. [This area] doesn't need a new high school. [The city schools] need to combine with the county. Now, I would vote for supervisors that agree with that...It's foolish for people to worry about [school] identity. That's foolish. You are taking education away from those kids. That's foolish. I just get really upset about it (Sally, Page 8, Lines 170-178).

Grace, who was generally soft-spoken, became quite animated about the topic of school consolidation when discussing her attitudes toward public education funding. In her words,

There is just one issue I have had ever since I have lived here and I just think they ought to resolve, and that is combining the schools. I think [the local governments] should do it. [My husband and I] worked for consolidation when my youngest son was in school. We tried to get that passed, but couldn't. Even the government offices should be combined. I think it's a waste of money. So, someday, maybe that will pass (Grace, Page 9, Lines 196-205).

Lilly was the last participant to address local school consolidation. Her attitude emerged out of the context of describing her feelings about the community and its support for public education. Even though her grandchildren had attended public schools in the neighboring city, Lilly confidently said, "I would love to see consolidation with [the city]. I think it's ridiculous that [the city] is not willing. Maybe [the city] has a good system...But I always did think [the city and county schools] should have consolidated" (Lilly, Pages 19-20, Lines 434-438).

Capital projects as related to the construction of a new high school generated much discussion. When commenting on his feelings about the adequacy of public education funding, Earl made it clear that he did not support increased funding for a new high school. Specifically addressing athletic facilities, Earl stated,

I didn't participate in sports. I had a couple of kids that did. I don't believe we need palatial looking buildings. It's nice to have. Palace grounds and things like that are Olympic type sports facilities. We don't need two gymnasiums and ball fields and track fields (Earl, Page 12, Lines 267-275).

To qualify his position, Earl explained that he believed the athletic facilities in a high school were used by only about one-third of the students. Consequently, he maintained the position that the proportion of funds allocated to athletics was disproportionate to the number of students

served. This issue prompted him to state with certainty, “That’s one area of the schools that I think we could do better on spending our money” (Earl, Page 13, Lines 283-284). Ruby radiated an air of confidence in her opinion that renovation was preferable to new school construction when she stated, “I think [the school district] should renovate what they already have. This is not a new area and these people around here have not always been accustomed to the best” (Ruby, Page 6, Lines 132-134). To support her position on renovation, Ruby explained that the recently renovated elementary school where she voted was in good shape. She concluded her comments by noting, “I do think [building a] new high school is controversial. I think the [current] high school can be renovated and it will be just fine” (Ruby, Page 9, Lines 188-190). Sonny broached the subject of new high school construction when addressing the role of the community in funding public education. After thoughtful reflection, he stated,

Right now, [local school officials] are talking about building new schools. I haven’t decided...whether we need a new high school or not. I reckon we do. I take the word of the people, but I know there’s people that will exaggerate the need for that sort of thing. I know we have people like that because they want a new building. I’ve heard a lot of people say they don’t want to put public money in another school that will flood. Yea. I think the voters have a big responsibility to put the right people on the school board and on the board of supervisors (Sonny, Page 11, Lines 232-247).

The adequacy of teacher salaries emerged as a topic of interest. There was dissention among the participants as to whether or not local teacher salaries were adequate. One participant commented about the need to maintain competitive salaries in order to ensure a quality education program. Conversely, two participants indicated that local teachers were adequately compensated. When asked if local education funding issues affect how she voted, Sally referenced her experience as a former government employee stating,

I worked many years with government people. My bosses had four-year educations. That was all. They have been working for 20 years and making 50 and 60 thousand dollars. And, you have got school teachers who are molding the minds of our young people and they are only making 40 [thousand dollars] with 20 years of experience. I think it’s terrible. I think it’s terrible (Sally, Page 7, Lines 150-156).

Earl and Ruby were more supportive of the position that teacher salaries were adequate. Previously, Earl had indicated that he believed his male teachers were in the profession for the

money because they could not get a job doing anything else. Later in the interview when addressing the topic of strengths in public schools today, Earl said,

You hear a lot about teachers. There was an article in the paper yesterday and I heard it on the radio today...about [teachers] being paid...not as much as they need to be. [The article stated] that teachers have a couple of months off and that a lot of them have to go to work to survive during that time. I think teachers now days have it much better as far as being able to make a living than they did back when I was going to school.

Consequently, a lot of teachers come into the system believing I can [teach] and make a living and not just say I can always get a job teaching (Earl, Page 16, Lines 355-365).

When probed for clarification, Earl explained that he did feel teacher salaries today are more competitive than they were when he was in school. Therefore, he was of the opinion that teachers were in the profession because they wanted to be there, not because they had no choice. Whereas Earl's attitude toward the adequacy of teacher salaries evolved from his comments about teacher quality and genuine desire to be in the profession, Ruby's statements were specifically geared to address the issue. Thus, she made it blatantly clear that she was of the opinion that teachers were well compensated. In her words, "They have always said that teachers are underpaid. But, teachers have the summers off. So, if you ratio...I feel teachers are not underpaid" (Ruby, Page 6, Lines 125-130). In addition, Ruby stressed the fact that she believes teachers could work harder and put in more overtime like her own children had done in the private sector in order to accomplish their professional goals.

Community Apathy

Community apathy toward public education funding issues emerged as a theme out of the voices of several participants. When asked if there was anything else she would like to add to her comments at the conclusion of the interview, Polly responded,

I can honestly say there are some [of my friends] who don't think about [school funding]. I think, perhaps, people are not made as much aware of [school funding issues] as they could be...of the direct relationship to funding and education. They know vaguely what the schools are doing (Polly, Page 14, Lines 318-330).

In response to being asked to describe her feelings about the county and its support for public education, Sally retorted, "I really don't think a lot of the citizens care one way or the other. I think the people who are involved in it really care (Sally, Pages 5-6, Lines 114-116). When

probed for clarification, Sally indicated that she felt more publicity about student achievement would stimulate interest among the retired voters. Ruby's comments about not paying attention to local candidates' positions on education funding issues and not caring whether or not her property taxes were raised for public education, supported the theme of community apathy. Louise made several comments that reflected a personal pattern of community apathy. When asked if the community did a good job in providing financial support to public education, Louise said, "You know, I haven't paid much attention. But, I think they do" (Louise, Page 6, Lines 128-129). With regard to the effects of school funding issues on voter behavior, she stated, "It doesn't [affect my voting behavior]. I don't pay attention to that" (Louise, Page 6, Line 132). Finally, in response to her ability to support funding for public education as a retired voter on a fixed income, Louise noted, "I just more or less go with the flow" (Louise, Page 6, Line 135). Aside from these funding issues, Louise also reported that she had never been in any one of the local schools for any reason.

Concern for the Welfare of Future Generations

The across-case analysis revealed a pattern of participants reporting a need to commit resources to education initiatives in order to ensure the perpetuation of sound educational programs for future generations. These patterns made concern for the welfare of future generations a major theme that impacted elderly voter support for public education funding.

Concern for the welfare of future generations was referenced by many of the participants. Earl indicated that he was indebted to the retired voters that had supported funding initiatives so that his children could receive a good education and that he felt like it was his responsibility to continue on with that support even though he no longer had children or grandchildren in the local schools. He explained,

When my children went to school the people who were here for a long time and even the ones who were retired were paying for my kids and I appreciated them. Since my kids are gone now, I am retired and I feel like it's my responsibility to continue on with that.

Otherwise, we could not sustain school systems and all. I think most of the older people feel like it is their responsibility to do that and they really don't mind doing it (Earl, Page 21, Lines 475-483).

Being asked how being a retired voter on a fixed income prompted Polly to express her opinion about the need to sustain sound funding initiatives for public education. Without hesitation, Polly confidently stated,

I just can't emphasize how important I think public schools are to educate everybody...people who can't help the circumstances they are in...just look at the people who came from poor backgrounds. Had it not been for our public schools to educate them...You can site one dramatic story after another that because of public education [people from poor backgrounds] have gone on to lead worthwhile lives (Polly, Page 16, Lines 355-363). [Education] is so necessary. If we don't educate the young people as they come along now, what is the world of tomorrow going to be like" (Polly, Page 14, Lines 313-315).

June approached the topic from the perspective of respect for the wisdom that comes from the experiences of the elderly stating,

Strength comes from the older people...Education made me a better person, a stronger person; and, I tell you, a more compassionate person (June, Pages 11-12, Lines 252-254). I don't say a word when my taxes go up for education. Somebody has got to pave the road for those kids. See to it that they get an education. Even if it's not my grandchild, even if it's someone else's child (June, Page 17, Lines 373-376).

Sonny's attitude toward the welfare of future generations emerged from his response to the question about how the issue of funding public schools had affected his voting behavior. After stating that any candidate who did not place education funding initiatives as a high priority did not get his vote, Sonny reiterated the point by stating, "I think [education] is the answer to our world problems...I think education is the key" (Sonny, Page 14, Lines 314-316). Lilly was the last participant to focus comments on future generations. While discussing her attitude toward the community's role in funding education, Lilly firmly retorted,

As an older person, I feel it's the community's role to fund education. I hear a lot of people say that they don't want to pay for education because they don't have any children in school. And I think, well what do you think the future's going to be [if we do not fund education] (Lilly, page 19, Lines 422-428).

Table 2
Across-Case Thematic Representations

Research Questions	Themes
What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of school that have shaped their attitudes towards school funding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The impact of atypical experiences The organization and structure of the learning environment The level of student involvement The significance of peer relationships The quality of support systems
What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of community that have shaped their attitudes towards school funding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The quality of the parental experiences The role of parental responsibility The level of parental involvement Limited current contact with public schools The level of community involvement Alumni experiences The level of political consciousness
What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education quality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pride in the quality of local public schools Support for progressive initiatives Frustration with perceived weaknesses in public education Ramifications of government involvement in local public education
What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education funding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pride in personal financial stability Confidence in voting decisions Concern about specific local education funding issues Community apathy Concern for the welfare of future generations

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding. The goal was to illuminate the essence of the experiences of a purposefully selected group of ten retired voters in a rural county. To ensure that the methods and procedures used in this study satisfied the requirements of an organized, disciplined and systematic study the data were generated from one-on-one audio taped interviews, field-notes and reflexive journaling; were subjected to a rigorous process of within and across case reduction using constant-comparative analysis; and were synthesized according to the emergence of themes. Table 2 summarizes the across-case thematic representations. Three iterations of data analysis formed a credible audit trail to support the findings.

The cohort of participants was made up of the first ten respondents to a solicitation flyer and from recommendations from peer educators. Even though each participant met specific inclusion criteria, the cohort was an eclectic group in that there was diversity in the demographic profiles across all cases. Each participant's profile was subjected to within case analysis procedures and then represented in the study in four parts that consisted of a demographic profile, an overview of experiences during the public school years, a summary of the experiences during the post-public school years, and a synopsis of the participant's current attitude toward public education funding.

An across-case analysis of all participant data was conducted to identify the emergent themes. The thematic representation of the data were tied to the rich descriptions of events that took place in the lives of the participants; the goal of which was to provide insight into their current attitudes toward public education funding. The themes were presented according the context of school experiences, the context of community experiences, attitudes toward public education quality, and current attitudes toward public education funding. As a result of the across-case analysis of the deep, rich, thick language of each participant 21 themes were identified.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding. A thorough understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon was captured through personal dialogue that related the essence of the lived experiences of a select group of elderly voters who resided in a rural county in a mid-Atlantic state. At the heart of this inquiry was the gathering of detailed descriptions of life experiences that nurtured community loyalty or fostered rational self-interest within a select group of elderly voters who had experienced the phenomenon in question. The goal was to illuminate the essence of the experiences of these elderly voters that had molded their attitudes toward public education funding.

Four research questions guided the study. These questions included: (1) What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education funding? (2) What are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education quality? (3) What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of school that have shaped their attitudes toward school funding? (4) What do elderly voters describe as significant experiences within the context of community that have shaped their attitudes toward school funding? Interview protocol was designed to elicit deep, rich, thick data to answer these questions and to inform the purpose of the study.

A qualitative inquiry based on the tenets of phenomenology was the methodology used in this study. Narrative analysis of participant data was used to extract meaning from the stories the voters had to tell as those stories related to the development of the phenomenon of their attitudes toward public education funding. Ten participants were purposefully selected from among elderly residents in one rural county in a mid-Atlantic state. These ten participants were the first ten respondents to a solicitation flyer that was distributed throughout the county via organizations whose members were predominately senior citizens. Each participant took part in a one-on-one, audio-taped interview in which standardized protocol questions and follow-up prompts were used to elicit rich descriptions of stories that illuminated the essence of the experiences of the phenomenon in question. Subsequent to each interview, three iterations of analysis using constant-comparative techniques were used to construct within and across case evaluations of participant data in order to identify the emergent themes. Once identified, each theme was categorized and reported according to its relevance to the research questions.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. After this brief overview of the study, the rationale for the study is reviewed. The rationale is followed by a section that contains a detailed discussion of the findings. Conclusions, limitations, implications for future research and a section on the researcher's reflections complete the chapter.

Rationale for the Study

In a document presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Samuel Preston (1984) asserted that the demographic topography of well-being in the United States was transitioning away from children and toward elderly. Preston's claim spurred an outbreak of quantitative research that focused on elderly voting behavior as it related to government transfers toward public education. Of particular concern to public education policy scholars was the fact that elderly homeowners on fixed incomes were known to be more sensitive to property tax increases, the mainstay of local education funding (Alexander & Salmon, 1995; Berkman & Plutzer, 2004).

A more in-depth analysis of the research revealed that elderly voter behavior was tied to one of two opposing theories: rational self-interest or community loyalty. Proponents of the theory of rational self-interest espoused that the elderly would vote for measures that maximized their personal financial status and that because the elderly no longer received a direct benefit from spending on public schools they would likely resist voting for increased property taxes for public education (Cataldo & Holm, 1983). Conversely, researchers who supported the tenets of community loyalty believed that longstanding elderly voters were likely to have undergone some sort of meaningful life experiences that cultivated affective ties to their community and that those affective ties would result in sustained support for public education funding initiatives (Glaser et al., 2000).

Because the prior research was quantitative in nature, it did not describe the lived experiences of elderly voters that led to self-interested or loyal voting. This study evolved in an effort to fill this gap in empirical knowledge. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to illuminate the essence of the lived experiences of a group of elderly voters by conducting a qualitative study that gathered deep, rich information about the essence of the meaningful life experiences that shaped their attitudes toward public education funding. The goal was to generate a body of empirical knowledge that would benefit education funding policymakers as they engaged in long-term and short-term planning initiatives.

Discussion of the Findings

The discussion of the findings is based on the purpose of the study and couched in the context of the relevant literature as it related to the participants' experiences that shaped their attitudes toward public education funding. The discussion emerged from the synthesis of the voices of the ten participants as interpreted through the lens of the researcher. Aligned with the research questions and presented in four sections, the discussion of the findings includes: school experiences, community experiences, public education quality, and public education funding.

School Experiences

The discussion of the findings on the topic of how the lived experience within the context of school impacted elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding is organized according to the categories that emerged from the across-case analysis of the participant data. These categories include atypical experiences, organization and structure of the learning environment, student involvement, peer relationships, and support systems. The discussion is based on the results of research conducted by Chew (1992), Duncombe et al. (2003), and Strate et al. (1989) who concluded that there was a need for further inquiry into the lived experiences of elderly voters in order to determine how those experiences impacted the formation of attitudes toward education funding.

Atypical Experiences

Six participants described an atypical experience that took place during their public school years that had impacted the formation of their attitudes toward public education funding. Three participants had experienced the death of a parent. Earl's mother passed away when he was four. Because his father traveled extensively in search of work, Earl attended 28 different schools before entering high school. References to the impact of attending so many different schools were found in many of Earl's subsequent stories. Lilly felt as though losing her mother right after entering the first grade had shaped much of the rest of her life. Sally lost her father during her senior year of high school. This, too, impacted her attitudes. Ruby felt as though being an only child with older, overprotective parents was significant in shaping her public school experiences. June had stories to share about how the experience of attending segregated schools had shaped her attitudes toward public school funding. Grace was the only participant who shared an unusual story with a positive outcome when she explained that she was allowed to begin school two years ahead of her peers because she learned to read at the age of four. The

impact of these atypical experiences is woven throughout the stories these elderly voters shared about the formation of their attitudes toward public education funding.

Organization and Structure of the Learning Environment

The majority of the participants referenced at least one of three issues relative to the topic of organization and structure of the learning environment when asked to describe the public schools they had attended. The first issue was the quality of the school plant. The segregated school June attended was crowded and small, with no cafeteria and only two restrooms. Her school was furnished with old, used desks and she read from tattered, marked books. Grace referenced beginning school in a two-room schoolhouse that doubled as a church on Sunday. She explained that the coal mining community where she grew up was poor and the school had very limited materials. Richard never attended a school that had adequate recess facilities. When he was in elementary school, he played on a rock pile. Later, in high school, he played basketball in a small, unsafe gymnasium.

The second issue was the scope of the curriculum. Polly lauded the strong English program and the two years of Latin that all students were required to complete. Both Polly and Sonny referenced Bible classes that were a regular part of the curriculum. Even though June attended segregated schools, she enthusiastically explained that aside from not having biology and typing, she was exposed to a full curriculum that was enhanced by folk dancing, drama, and quality summer programs. Several participants indicated that the curriculum had been limited by the fact that all students were required to complete the same coursework. Lilly summarized the content of that discussion by explaining that during her years in school, students did not have access to a differentiated curriculum like they do now because everybody was required to study the same thing.

The final topic that emerged from the analysis of the data relative to organization and structure of the learning environment was high standards for discipline and respect. Earl explained that when he was in school all teachers earned your respect whether you liked them or not simply because they were teachers. Polly characterized the period in which she was in school as one when you respected your parents and teachers and as one in which you would never have thought of talking back to an elder. Finally, Sonny was adamant that having a principal and teachers who were strong disciplinarians was positive even though he may have been scared of them from time to time.

As the stories of the participants continued to evolve, it became evident that experiences relative to the quality of the physical plant, the structure of the curriculum, and the standards for discipline and respect had impacted their attitudes toward education funding. Some of these experiences resulted in supportive attitudes for certain initiatives. Other experiences did not.

Student Involvement

The level of each participant's involvement in school activities emerged as a theme across several cases. Two participants noted that their atypical circumstances had limited their involvement in school activities. Earl explained that the transient nature of his life after his mother died prevented him from being able to participate in sports or any other form of extra-curricular activities. Ruby felt as though her overprotective parents had limited her opportunity to become involved in student activities. Several other participants lauded the benefits of being involved in student activities. Polly felt as though social activities sponsored by the schools and the level of enthusiasm for sports had given her a social outlet. June enthusiastically explained that she wrapped the May Pole every year, that she was involved in drama which helped her learn about the culture, and that the sports teams in her segregated schools won almost every championship. Richard made a similar comment about the sports being good when he was in high school. Louise explained that she had acted in several plays during high school and that as far as dramatics was concerned, she did whatever they asked her to do. The effects of the level of student involvement tied to subsequent discussions on current attitudes toward public education funding.

Peer Relationships

Several participants referenced the quality of peer relationships as a significant aspect of their school experiences. These relationships varied in degree as though they had been placed along a continuum. Earl lamented that he was never in one school long enough to establish any form of meaningful relationship. Ruby felt that her overprotective parents had limited her opportunities to build significant peer relationships. Sonny smiled reminiscently when he talked about getting into a little trouble with a group of guys every once in a while. Grace was further down the continuum. She explained how being voted the fall queen by her peers had eased her transition from a small community school to a larger high school. At the far end of the continuum was Lilly. Lilly had no support from home after her mother died. In fact, she said that all her father wanted to do was get all of the children out of the house. Consequently, Lilly

explained that her school mates became her family and that their support was integral in helping her to realize success in school. The quality of peer relationships had an impact on the level of affective attachment these elderly voters felt toward public education.

Support Systems

The quality of support the participants received from parents, counselors, administrators and teachers impacted their attitudes toward public education. Several comments were made about the level of support received from parents. Earl and Lilly indicated that the deaths of their mothers and the limited involvement of their fathers had shaped the majority of their experiences in public school. Ruby felt that her parents had limited her opportunities for student involvement even though their intentions were good. Polly lauded her mother for having stressed the importance of the use of proper grammar; while June credited her father as having served as a role model for the development of her strong work ethic. Finally, Grace explained that her father was instrumental in shaping the path of her education because he taught her to read when she was four and because he took the initiative to ask the superintendent for a book for her to read.

Two participants mentioned the lack of quality counseling services as an area of concern. Polly felt as though she was expected to navigate the high school curriculum entirely on her own. She explained that students knew which courses they needed to take in order to graduate, but aside from that there was no support. Richard felt like the lack of support from guidance counselors had changed the course of his life. After noting that he was the top boy graduate in his class, Richard explained that he did not have a counselor to guide him towards college financing. To this day, Richard feels that not having had the opportunity to attend college is his one regret.

Three participants commented on the support they had received from administrators. Earl was reminded of two specific incidents. First, an administrator in one of Earl's 28 schools had made him a patrol boy. Second, an administrator from the central office told Earl that he had great potential to be a great artist after viewing a chalk drawing of the three wise men that Earl had drawn on the blackboard. Sally had been comforted by her high school principal when she was criticized for returning to school too soon after the death of her father. Finally, the superintendent of Grace's schools had not only given her a book to take home after she read to him, but he allowed her to begin school as a four-year old.

The participants' stories about support from their teachers focused on how the teachers made them feel rather than how adept the teachers were as instructors. Earl felt that his male teachers were bullies and that the only reason they were teachers was because they could not get a job doing anything else. Conversely, Earl acknowledged the support from a few of his female teachers who had helped him on an individual basis. June recalled a special teacher who had not only selected her to attend a week-long seminar on the opposite side of the state, but had also helped her with expenses. To this day June describes this teacher as her mentor. In contrast, June related how deeply hurt she was when one of her teachers called her a cabbage head and how she still thinks of that teacher every time she cooks cabbage. Richard credited his teachers with providing him with what little guidance he received during high school. Sally recalled an experience with a second grade teacher who helped her complete make-up work after missing school with the whooping cough, while Lilly reminisced about the second grade teacher who helped her become the highest reader in the class. Grace had multiple stories to share. Grace's first teacher allowed her leave school before the rest of the students and watched her walk home because Grace was so small and so young. In high school Grace had a homeroom teacher who looked out for her and was alert to everything.

The formation of the participants' attitudes toward public education funding was influenced by the quality of the support each participant had received from significant adults who impacted their lives throughout the course of their years in public schools. The impact of these experiences tied to the participants' current attitudes toward public education funding and school quality.

Summary

Five themes emerged from the across-case analysis of the participant narratives relative to experiences in school that had impacted the formation of elderly attitudes toward public education funding. These themes included the impact of atypical experiences, the organization and structure of the learning environment, the level of student involvement, the quality of peer relationships, and the quality of support systems. The ramifications of these experiences were integrally woven throughout the subsequent stories that participants shared relative to the formation of current attitudes toward education funding. Identifying specific experiences of elderly voters that had impacted attitudes toward education funding extended the body of

empirical research as discussed by Chew (1992), Duncombe et al., (2003), and Strate et al., (1989).

Community Experiences

In their 2000 study, Glaser et al. held that loyal elderly voters were likely to have undergone some sort of meaningful life experience in the community that cultivated an affective tie to their community. Unfortunately, the researchers stopped short of identifying what sort of meaningful experiences this cohort of voters may have had. One of the questions in this study was designed to identify experiences within the context of community that had shaped elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding. The analysis of the results of the participant data showed that experiences fell into one of two categories: reflections of the participants as parents and reflections of the participants as retired voters. Three topics emerged from the analysis of the participants' stories within the category of participants as parents: parental experiences, parental responsibility, and parental involvement. Four topics emerged from the analysis of the participants' stories within the category of participants as retired voters: contact with public schools, community involvement, alumni experiences, and political consciousness. The discussion of the findings is framed within the context of these topics.

Parental Experiences

The parent vs. non-parent paradigm originated from Preston's (1984) assertion that adults who did not have children in school would oppose any form of tax that was levied to support other people's children because they would realize no personal benefit (Chew, 1992). All of the participants in this study were parents and nine of the ten participants were parents of children who had completed their public education in the local schools. Four participants were grandparents of students currently enrolled in the local schools. The reflections of the participants on experiences relative to having children or grandchildren in school generated more discussion than any other single topic.

The participants drew a distinction between the quality of the academic experience and the attributes of the emotional experiences as they related to having children and grandchildren in school. All of the participants except Lilly felt like their children had received a good academic education. The positive attitudes were based on experiences that the participants shared about the quality of their children's teachers and on the fact that their children had experienced academic success in school. Several participants did cite isolated examples of academic issues

that had caused them some level of concern. Earl indicated that his children had encountered some teachers that he felt should not be in the profession. Ruby felt as though one high school teacher's class was a waste of time for her children. Lilly's explained that one of her children had been the victim of poor special education programs throughout the child's entire public school career which culminated in the child's high school guidance counselor telling the child not to bother taking the Scholastic Aptitude Tests. These issues were couched within the context of very specific incidents related to concerns about low performing teachers and inadequate counseling services. Despite the fact that some participants did have some concerning academic experiences associated with having children and grandchildren in school, these experiences did not impact the overall consensus that their children had received a good academic education.

The emotional attributes of the educational program were tied to experiences the participants disclosed about their personal interactions as parents with teachers and principals. The negative experiences were related to incidents in which the participants had met with a teacher or administrator to discuss a concerning issue. The participants' concerns were grounded in the lack of respect afforded them by the school personnel. Polly cited an emotional interaction she had with her child's high school English teacher. Sally commented on an incident in which a teacher had refused to allow her child to use the restroom that resulted in Sally having to take the child a change of clothes. Sally's concern was rooted in the lack of respect afforded her by the principal in that she never received an apology. Lilly told the story of a teacher who had humiliated her child in front of the class and of the concerning encounter she had when she went to discuss the situation with the teacher. The memories of these experience were vivid and their impact on attitudes substantial. Some participants did share stories of positive encounters with teachers. Sally recalled a teacher taking the time to explain why her child was not doing well in class. Sonny focused on a teacher who took the time to call and express a concern about his child even though that teacher did not have the child in class. The quality of these experiences was grounded in the ability of a caring teacher to communicate effectively.

The effects of the experiences of the participants as parents were based on each participant's unique interpretation of the quality of an encounter or a program. More than one participant explained that the quality of their experiences as parents had more of an impact on their current attitudes toward public education funding than any of their own experiences in school.

Parental Responsibility

All of the participants took their role as parents very seriously. Several commented on experiences with their children relative to the impact of their parenting responsibilities. Earl, who had made his way through school almost entirely on his own, explained that even though he encouraged his children, much of the responsibility for academic achievement was up to them. Polly described herself as an encourager and a pusher. Her philosophy was rooted in the notion that children should be encouraged to take advantage of every opportunity available to them. June explained that she taught her children by example in that she expected them to set high standards for success and to develop a strong work ethics just as she had done. The participants acknowledged that these experiences added to the formation of current attitudes toward public education funding.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement evolved from experiences the participants described in which they had made an effort to be there for their child outside of situations that necessitated their parental attention. The level of parental involvement varied across all the cases. Grace volunteered, chaperoned overnight trips, and served as an officer in a parent support organization. Sally and Lilly were room mothers for their children. Most indicated that they attended all of the parent conferences in order to ensure effective communication. Some participants shared stories about being involved outside of school. Richard told of going before the city council to ask for funding for a reading program that would not only benefit his child, but others in the school as well. Earl explained how he had been respected by members of the school board who had asked for his opinion on several important matters. Louise was the least involved parent. She explained that her husband was the one who stayed connected with the schools and that her level of contact was minimal. As an aside, Louise was the only participant to report that her children had not attended schools in the county. Aside from Louise, the participants acknowledged that their experiences as involved parents had impacted attitudes toward public education funding.

Current Contact with Public Schools

All of the participants noted that their current level of contact with the local public schools is limited. Earl and Richard indicated that they attend some sporting events and some performing arts programs when their grandchildren are involved. Polly explained that she was fortunate to have been able to be integrally involved in keeping up with the academic progress of

her grandchildren. June took pride in the fact that she had been instrumental in having her church increase their financial support for a well-deserving graduate. Some participants explained that they have virtually no contact with the local schools anymore. Ruby said the only time she frequents the schools is to vote. Four participants stated that they are no longer in the school for any reason. All of the participants noted that their level of knowledge about local education funding issues was limited by the fact that they no longer have regular contact with the local schools.

Community Involvement

Berkman and Plutzer (2004) espoused that longstanding elderly voters were more likely to have developed a sense of connectedness to their communities that would outweigh predispositions toward self-interested voting behavior. All of the participants were longstanding residents. Most of the participants attested to the fact that they were involved in the community in some fashion. Earl and Richard explained that they are out in the community on a regular basis talking with community leaders, family, and peers. Polly and June noted that they were involved in clubs, organizations and senior programs. Another commonality was the significant level of church involvement reported by many participants. Ruby, Louise and Lilly also referenced affiliations with high school alumni organizations, while Grace and Louise proudly reported that they had been members of the local hospital volunteer organization for a number of years. In general, all of the participants demonstrated that their involvement had generated affective ties to the community. Based on the conclusions reached by Berkman and Plutzer relative to the level of connectedness to the community reported by the participants, these elderly voters should be more likely to cast their votes on the basis of community loyalty rather than rational self-interest.

Alumni Involvement

Several participants took pride in the fact that they were involved in their high school alumni associations. Ruby graduated from high school in an urban area about 50 miles south of the county. Ruby explained that she was a longstanding member of her high school alumni organization whose membership was limited to those who had been graduated for a minimum of 50 years. In addition, she proudly noted that she contributed regularly to a scholarship supported by her alumni organization. Louise commented on just having received information about an upcoming class reunion from her high school that was located in an urban area of a neighboring

state. Lilly tied her current role as an officer in the local high school alumni organization to the bonds she developed with her peers after the death of her mother. The pride that emanated from Lilly's voice when she referenced her ties to the alumni organization supported the concept of community loyalty and affective voting behavior.

Political Consciousness

The elderly are generally more knowledgeable about politics (Carpini & Keeter, 1993; Luskin, 1987) because they are more likely to pay attention to the news and to take advantage of information from a variety of different media (MacManus, 1996). Additionally, the elderly vote in greater numbers than any other age group (MacManus). All of the participants acknowledged some level of political consciousness. However, their experiences within the construct of political behavior varied widely. Voter participation was consistent across all cases in that each participant indicated that they voted in every election. What was not consistent was the degree to which each participant cast their ballots on the basis of informed decisions. Some participants reported that they thoroughly scrutinize issues associated with education funding before each election. June explained that she read and re-read the newspaper before even discussing an education issue in public. Several participants commented about obtaining education funding information from close family members who were employed by the local school division. Grace added that she also obtained current information from neighbors who had children enrolled in the local schools. Two participants indicated that they did not keep current on local education funding issues. Louise explained that she simply did not pay attention to education issues, while Ruby noted that the local candidates' positions on education funding issues did not affect her vote.

The majority of the information reported by the participants corroborated the findings in the research that the elderly are regular and well informed voters. However, the evidence to the contrary is concerning. Knowing that uninformed, apathetic voters are casting votes on education funding issues has both short-term and long-term ramifications for the future of sustained funding for public education.

Summary

Seven themes emerged from the across-case analysis of the participant narratives relative to experiences in the community that had impacted the formation of elderly attitudes toward public education funding. These themes included the quality of the parental experience, the role

of parental responsibility, the level of parental involvement, limited current contact with local public schools, the level of community involvement, alumni involvement, and political consciousness. Ties between current attitudes toward public education funding and the lived experiences of the participants were evidenced with regularity throughout the participant data. The identification of the specific life experiences within the context of community that had impacted elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding informed the purpose of the study and extended the research of Glaser et al. (2000).

Public Education Quality

The school division in the rural county noted in this study published a public schools community survey in January 2006. The results reported in the survey indicated that 80.7% of respondents with no children currently enrolled in the schools rated the quality of the schools as either excellent or good. Of the 543 respondents in this category 176, or 32.4%, were aged 65 and older. One of the research questions in this study was designed to identify participant beliefs about public education quality. The discussion of the findings on the topic of how the lived experience impacted beliefs concerning public education quality is framed within the context of the categories that emerged from the across-case analysis of the participant data. These categories include the quality of local public education, progressive initiatives, weaknesses in public education, and government involvement in public education.

Pride in the Quality of Local Public Schools

The participants based their attitudes toward the current status of local education quality on their experiences as parents and grandparents. Earl indicated that the local schools were doing a better job than they had done when his children and grandchildren were in school. Because her children had been accepted to the colleges of their choice after graduating from the local schools, Ruby was confident that the schools were providing a quality education to students. Grace felt like the public schools were doing a good job because both of her grandchildren had received extremely high scores on the state benchmark assessments. Sonny was of the opinion that the local schools were not doing a bad job even though he never said that he felt like they were doing a good job. Even Lilly, who had related a concerning academic experience with one of her children, agreed that the quality of the local schools was good. June summarized the overall tone of the participants' attitudes toward the quality of the local schools when she stated, "We are a small town, but I am still proud. I would put [our school system] up against anybody else" (June,

Page 19, Lines 419-421). These results corroborated the results of the 2006 public schools community survey.

Progressive Initiatives

The participants felt that the overall strength of the local public schools was rooted in the quality of the progressive initiatives afforded students today. Earl explained that the strength of public schools today was found in caring teachers who insist that students excel and in the quality of the administrators who carefully monitor teacher performance. He tied the development of his attitude to the experiences he and his children had with low performing teachers. Polly correlated her response to personal experiences with a limited curriculum when she explained that the strength of schools could be found in the wide curriculum offerings that are available to students today. June compared the accessibility of computers, the quality of the new schools, and the availability of state-of-the-art materials currently available to students to the substandard facilities and old materials she had experienced in segregated schools. Richard tied the quality of the guidance programs afforded students today to the lack of similar services that he felt like had kept him from being able to attend college. Lilly's disheartening experiences with her special education child prompted her to report that the availability of more programs for special education students was indicative of the quality of schools today. Most of the participants lauded the implementation of technological advances in the public schools as was evidenced by Grace's comment, "If [students] don't have computers, they are missing out on so much" (Grace, Page 10, Lines 216-218). Grace qualified her comment by explaining that when she was in school in that poor, coal mining community, the schools had nothing. Consequently, she stressed that fact that she was in favor of any type of funding initiative that would improve the quality of education. In all cases, the ability of the participants to discern what they consider to be quality initiatives in public schools today was based on their lived experiences.

Weaknesses in Public Education

As was the case with the identification of the strengths of public education today, the participants' opinions about the weaknesses of public education were tied to their lived experiences. The participants exuded a great deal of frustration with the system of public education when addressing the topic of weaknesses. Earl directed his comments toward teacher quality explaining that as a former administrator in the private sector it did not take him long to recognize sub-par performance by one of his employees. Consequently, Earl felt that awarding

tenure to low performing teachers was a weakness in public schools today. Polly cited the mandated state curriculum and assessment program as a source of weakness in public schools today in that the requirements had not allowed her grandchild to pursue courses that might have enhanced innate talents. Sally referenced her experience as a government employee when she retorted that one of the weaknesses in public education today was that teachers were not adequately compensated. Citing her bosses as examples, Sally explained that she was bothered by the fact that her bosses, who had the same level of education as teachers, were paid as much as 20 thousand dollars a year more than teachers who were charged with the responsibility of molding the minds of the youth. Sonny ardently supported the need for a return to a stricter code of discipline similar to the one he had experienced in school. In addition to tying his attitude to school experiences, Sonny also made it clear that he had spent a number of years in the military. Consequently, discipline and respect for self and country were of the utmost importance to him. As was the case with the identification of strengths in public education, each participant tied their attitude toward weaknesses to specific lived experiences.

Government Involvement in Local Public Education

Several participants referenced national and state government involvement in the public schools. Plutzer and Berkman (2005) analyzed age group cohort responses to the education questions on a national survey over a period of four decades and found that all Americans shifted their views on education funding in a positive direction regardless of age and that this shift was tied to life events associated with the transition to retirement. The findings of this study partially corroborated Plutzer and Berkman's conclusion. The study did provide some support for the assertion that life events are tied to attitudes toward education funding on national issues. However, what was added to the body of knowledge was the notion that the attitudes that evolved from the experiences of the participants in this study were not all positive.

Some participants were skeptical about federal involvement in local education. Earl believed the federal government was forcing schools to take on responsibilities that should be assumed by the parents. His concerns were based on the fact that he has worked hard to support his family and he felt other parents should be required to do the same. Sonny felt as though federal mandates that required the education of children with severe brain disorders were not warranted. He based his opinion on the fact that children with severe disabilities were not seen in school when he was a student. Consequently, Sonny did not feel that the federal government

should be forcing those programs on the local taxpayers. Both Earl and Sonny were well aware of the fact that the federal government would withhold funding from local school division if they failed to implement the mandated programs. In fact, Sonny described the federal government as having “hand-cuffs on public education” (Sonny, Page 5, Line 111).

The research on state support for public education funding showed that elderly voters had a negative effect on state per-child spending (Ladd & Wilson, 1983; Miller, 1996; Poterba, 1997). When asked if funding for public education had affected her voting behavior in local elections, Sally convincingly responded that it had not in local elections, but that it had at the state level. Polly and Lilly were concerned about education mandates that emanated from the state government. Polly felt as though the state curriculum and assessment program had been an impediment to her grandchild being able to take courses that could have enhanced the child’s talents and interests. Lilly cited the unfairness of the state curriculum and assessment program as an inherent weakness in public education.

The ramification of federal and state government involvement in local education resulted in a considerable amount of frustration begin generated among the participants. Earl explained that he favored having the local government assume more control over the financing of the schools. Knowing full well that his position would increase his property taxes, Earl still remained steadfast in his position that he would prefer to have the local government make the decisions on local education issues. Harris et al. (2001) believed that a tax increase to benefit schools at the local level was regarded as more visibly and personally attractive to elderly voters. Although Earl’s comments were more focused on local control of spending for public education, his position may have been related to the concept of visibility reported by Harris et al.

Summary

Four themes emerged from the across-case analysis of the participant narratives relative to elderly voter attitudes toward public education quality. The themes included pride in the quality of local public education, support for progressive initiatives, frustration associated with weaknesses in public education, and ramifications of government involvement in local education. In all cases, participants tied their current attitudes toward public education quality to some aspect of their lived experiences in school or in the community. Additionally, the overall sense of pride that the participants expressed in the quality of the local schools supported the results of a public schools community survey conducted by the school district in 2006.

Public Education Funding

The final research question guiding this study was what are elderly voter beliefs concerning public education funding. The findings that emerged from the across-case analysis of the language of the participants both tied to and extended the content of the relevant literature. These findings are framed within the context of the five categories that emerged from the voices of the participants. These categories included personal financial stability, the impact of education issues on voting behavior, specific local education funding issues, community apathy, and the welfare of future generations.

Personal Financial Stability

MacManus (1995) argued that living on a fixed income made the elderly particularly sensitive to an increase in property taxes, the mainstay of local school revenues. A synthesis of the participant data contradicted MacManus' argument. All of the participants stated with certainty that they had attained a level of financial stability that excluded living on a fixed-income as a factor in their ability to support local education funding initiatives. In fact, the participants expressed a great deal of pride in their accomplishments. Earl spoke of working hard and making sacrifices to attain financial stability in retirement. June humbly confessed that she and her husband were well fixed because they received two pensions. Richard related how he had spent a considerable amount of time in planning for his retirement. Sonny explained that living on a fixed income had not changed anything as far as he was concerned. Grace and Lilly indicated that their husbands' received good pensions from the railroad that took care of them financially. Finally, Ruby retorted that she did not live on a fixed-income because she had rental property. Collectively, these participants made it clear that living on a fixed-income had not impacted their ability to sustain a property tax increase for public education.

Even though the participants were in agreement that they were personally able to support public education funding initiatives, some did express concern about the financial status of other retired voters in the county. Earl made a point of stating that the locality was moving towards being a retirement community and that there were a number of retired elderly voters who did not have the financial means to absorb an increase in local taxes for public schools. He went so far as to state that he was aware of situations in which some retired voters had been forced to sell their homes and move into retirement housing because they could no longer afford to pay property taxes. Polly stressed the fact that she was only speaking for herself when she said that being on a

fixed income was not a factor in her ability to support tax increases for school funding initiatives, but that she was concerned about the number of people on fixed-incomes in the county who could not afford to pay more taxes. June and Sally made almost identical comments when they expressed concern for other retirees in the community who were not as fortunate as themselves. In expressing his concern for other elderly retirees in the county, Richard stated with certainty that his aged mother could not handle as much as a five-dollar increase in her local taxes. These comments lend themselves to the need for more extensive research among the retired county voters.

Education Issues and Voting Behavior

The research showed that the elderly were well informed voters because they were more likely to read the newspaper, to follow election issues, and to rely upon a wide array of news sources to follow public affairs (MacManus, 1996; MacManus & Tenpas, 1998). The majority of the participants in this study were well informed about the issues associated with local education funding initiatives and they took their responsibility as voters very seriously. Earl confidently acknowledged that he looked very closely at all issues related to the financing of schools. He also reported that he was willing to support initiatives that made sense to him even if it placed more financial burden on the taxpayers. Earl qualified his response by explaining that the number of people who would benefit as well as the depth and the longevity of an initiative were factors he weighed when making political decisions. Richard anxiously explained that he always followed the issues related to funding for public education. Likewise, Sonny explained that he took the time to study each candidate's position before casting his ballot and that a candidate who did not support public education initiatives would not get his vote. In addition to reading about education issues in the newspaper multiple times before discussing those issues in public, June also noted that she attended debates and paid close attention to voting information she received in the mail. Several other participants echoed similar positions relative to knowledge of local education funding issues. Collectively, these participants indicated that they stayed current on local education funding issues and that those issues did impact how they voted in national, state, and local elections.

Conversely, two participants reported that education funding had no bearing on their voting behavior. Ruby said she always voted and that what a candidate felt about public

education had no effect on her voting decisions and Louise stated that she did not pay any attention to school funding issues.

The findings in this study offered mixed support for MacManus' (1996) conclusions. It was concerning that there were two participants who admittedly were not well informed about local education funding issues. Even more concerning was the fact that both of these participants had reported that they vote in every election. Knowing that uninformed elderly voters are casting ballots on education funding issues is troubling. This information should inform local education policy makers of the need to ensure that all elderly voters are cognizant of the issues prior to elections.

Specific Local Issues

Based on a 1996 study of all counties in the state of Texas, Miller suggested that elderly voters may negatively impact certain education funding initiatives as a result of the influence of special interest group activity. Several participants in the study expressed concern about specific local issues that impacted their attitudes toward public education funding. These issues included school consolidation, construction of new facilities and teacher salaries. Three participants commented on school consolidation. Sally openly chastised the neighboring city for not being willing to consolidate the two local school divisions. In her opinion, the city government leaders were taking away education from the students by their unwillingness to consolidate the schools. Grace echoed Sally's sentiments when she explained that school consolidation was an issue that she had worked for ever since she moved to the community. Her rationale was based on the fact that consolidation would alleviate a substantial part of the financial burden on the local taxpayers. Lilly's position on support for school consolidation was similar to Grace's in that she felt like the community would be in a better position to provide sustained support for the local schools if the two local divisions were combined.

The construction of a new high school was a topic of discussion among several participants. Earl was concerned about the ability of the local taxpayers to support the appropriation of funds for a new high school. He openly acknowledged that he had not participated in sports during high school and that he did not believe that the construction and maintenance of Olympic type sports facilities was in the best interests of the local taxpayers. Earl offered an explanation for his position on this issue by explaining that he believed that the athletic facilities were only used by about one-third of the students, therefore the allocation of

funds to athletic programs was disproportionate to the number of students who actually benefited from that type of expenditure. Conversely, Earl lauded the sustenance of appropriations for the arts because of the long-term benefits that could be realized by students well into adulthood. Ruby was of the opinion that renovation of the existing high school was preferable to new school construction. Her attitude was based on two facts. First, Ruby felt as though the renovated school that she frequented for voting was adequate. Second, she displayed an air of disconnect with the community when she noted, "This is not a new area and these people around here have not always been accustomed to the best" (Ruby, Page 6, Lines 132-134). Sonny was skeptical about the need for a new high school. Although he openly admitted that he had not made up his mind about whether or not the county needed a new high school, Sonny did express concern that there were people in the community who would exaggerate the need for a new facility.

The adequacy of teacher salaries also emerged as a topic of common interest among some of the participants. Sally felt as though teachers were underpaid. She based her opinion on her experiences as a government employee noting that her bosses, who had the same level of education as the local teachers, were paid as much as 20 thousand more per year. Sally concluded by explaining that teachers were not well compensated even though they were charged with the responsibility of shaping the minds of the young people. Two other participants held different views on teacher salaries. Earl was of the opinion that teacher salaries were adequate and that teachers could make a living in today's society. His opinion was based on the fact that he felt that his male teachers had become teachers because they could not get a job doing anything else, whereas teachers today were in the profession because they were well compensated and genuinely had a desire to be there. Ruby's opinions were in line with Earl's. Ruby believed that teacher salaries were comparable to salaries in other professions because teachers have the summers off. She also drew a comparison to teacher hours and the hours worked by her own children in the private sector by stressing that teachers should be expected to put in more overtime like her own children had done in order to accomplish their professional goals.

There was no mention of special interest group activity in the data. However, the concerns expressed about the specific local issues that impacted attitudes toward public education funding were expressed with enough conviction and emotion that one would have to

question the existence of some form of community activity along these lines. This opens another path for more in depth research.

Community Apathy

Community apathy toward public education funding issues emerged as a theme from the collective voices of the participants. Louise confessed that she did not pay attention to school funding issues. Her comments included, “I haven’t paid much attention [to education funding issues]” (Louise, Page 6, Lines 128-129); “[School funding] doesn’t affect my voting behavior” (Louise, Page 6, Line 132); and, “I just more or less go with the flow” (Louise, Page 6, Line 135). Although Ruby did acknowledge that she was aware of the local issues related to public education funding, she demonstrated a level of apathy when she explained that she did not pay attention to local candidates’ positions on education funding issues and that she did not care if her property taxes were raised to support education initiatives.

Other participants expressed concern about voter apathy among their friends. Polly felt as though some of her friends never gave school funding issues a thought. She qualified her comment by explaining that she felt like her friends lacked an awareness of the direct relationship between the level of funding and education quality. Sally’s comments were almost identical to Polly’s in that she felt that many citizens did not care one way or the other about education funding issues. Like Polly, Sally expressed concern about the lack of publicity and information that was available to retired voters.

Nowhere in the literature related to elderly voter support for public education funding did the researchers address the topic of community apathy. What was reported by MacManus (1996) and Binstock (2000) was that the elderly vote in greater numbers than any other age group and that the elderly are well informed voters. The ramifications of even a portion of the elderly voting population apathetically casting ballots toward education funding initiatives has the potential to impact the outcomes. Therefore, local education policy makers would be well advised to incorporate measures into the strategic planning process to stimulate elderly voter interest.

Future Generations

Alexander and Alexander (2001) reported that the framers of the Constitution tied an educated citizenry to the sustenance and perpetuation of the ideals of a republican form of government. Alexander and Salmon (1995) maintained, “Knowledge [would] empower citizens

to discern the legitimacy of government and to balance the preservation of individual liberties against the necessary subordination of self-interest to the mutual benefit of society” (p. 1). There was evidence in the across-case analysis of the data to support the fact that the participants in this study had been empowered by the knowledge they had gained to recognize the need for sustained support of public education funding.

The participants expressed a genuine desire to support funding for public education initiatives because of their concern for the welfare of future generations. Earl explained that he was appreciative of the efforts of the retired voters in the county who had funded public education when his own children were in school. Consequently, he felt that it was his responsibility to continue on with that support. Polly focused on the fact that maintaining a system of public education was important because it gave all people, regardless of circumstance, the opportunity to achieve success. Additionally, Polly soundly stated, “[Education] is so necessary. If we don’t educate the young people as they come along now, what is the world of tomorrow going to be like?” (Polly, Page 14, Lines 313-315). June felt that the wisdom of the elders was important if education funding was to be sustained. She explained that strength came from the older people and that as far as she was concerned, “Somebody had to pave the road for kids [and] see to it that they got an education” (June, Page 17, Lines 373-376). Sonny was of the opinion that education should be supported by everyone because it was the answer to the world’s problems. Finally, Lilly conceptualized her position when she stated, “As an older person, I feel it’s the community’s role to fund education...I think, what do you think the future’s going to be [if we do not fund education]” (Lilly, Page 19, Lines 422-428).

The participants who commented on the theme of concern for future generations were all in agreement with the fact that the future of our children, our country, and our world depends on the quality of and the opportunity for everyone to receive a good education. Therefore, it was evident that these elderly voters had benefited from their experiences in public schools in that each of them was well aware of the need to support education for the mutual and sustained benefit of society.

Summary

Five themes emerged from the across-case analysis of the participant narratives relative to beliefs concerning public education funding. These themes included pride in personal financial stability, the impact of education issues on voting behavior, specific local education

issues, community apathy, and concern for the welfare of future generations. In all cases, participants tied their current beliefs about public education funding to a personal experience in school or in the community. In some cases the collective voices of the participants contradicted the results reported in the research; while in other cases, they did not. What was consistent across all cases was the finding that lived experiences of elderly voters in school and in the community had impacted the formation of attitudes toward public education funding. Of particular relevance to the purpose of this study was the identification of the specific types of experiences.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to describe the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding by capturing personal dialogue that related the essence of the lived experiences of a select group of elderly voters. At the heart of this inquiry was the gathering of detailed descriptions of life experiences that had nurtured community or fostered rational self-interest within a group of purposefully selected elderly voters who had experienced the phenomenon in question. Numerous studies had provided quantitative data on the correlation between age and support for education funding initiatives on the national, state, local, and district levels (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004; Chew, 1992; Duncombe et al., 2003; Harris et al., 2001; Ladd and Murray, 2001; Ladd and Wilson, 1983; Miller, 1996; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Plutzer & Berkman, 2005; Poterba, 1997). The results reported in these studies consistently showed that the elderly cast their votes on the basis of rational self-interest or community loyalty. What had not been represented in the research was how this cohort of voters evolved into loyal or self-interested voters. This study used qualitative methods to ascertain, analyze, and illuminate the essence of the experiences of ten elderly voters who resided in a rural county to determine how their attitudes toward public education funding were formed.

The conclusions are reported in two parts. The first set of conclusions is presented in a seriated list that illuminates the purpose of describing the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education and it is organized according to the research questions. The second part draws upon the theoretical framework and applies the conclusions to the research on rational self-interest and community loyalty.

Elderly Voter Attitudes Toward Public Education Funding

Several conclusions pertaining to the phenomenon of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding can be drawn from the findings in chapter four and the preceding discussion. These conclusions include:

1. Attitudes toward education funding of the elderly voters in this study were shaped by their lived experiences within the context of school.
 - a) The participants who had experienced an atypical event during their school years tied the ramifications of those events to the formation of their current attitudes toward education funding. In some cases the event resulted in supportive attitudes toward certain education funding initiatives, while in other cases it did not.
 - b) Most participants referenced the organization and structure of the learning environment they had experienced in school as having impacted their attitudes toward education funding. Participants who had attended schools that were in poor condition and that had inadequate materials were supportive of efforts to provide improved facilities and materials. Participants who had attended schools that had limited curricular offerings were supportive of initiatives to offer more diverse course offerings. Participants who had attended schools where high standards of discipline and respect were maintained indicated that the lack of those standards was a weakness in schools today.
 - c) The level of student involvement in extra-curricular activities and social organizations impacted attitudes towards public education funding. Students who were more involved in school activities were more supportive of funding for extra-curricular programs such as sports and the arts. Uninvolved participants evidenced more resistance to funding and a lack of connectedness to their schools.
 - d) The majority of participants had a story to share about how the quality of peer relationships had impacted their experiences in school. The participants who developed significant relationships with their peers had cultivated more affective ties to their schools. Those who had not had the chance to develop strong peer relationships were cognizant of what they had missed.

- e) The quality of support received from parents, counselors, administrators and teachers impacted participant attitudes toward public education funding. Participants who had benefited from the encouragement of nurturing individuals were more inclined to be supportive of education funding initiatives than those who had not.
2. The attitudes of the elderly voters in this study toward public education funding were shaped by the context of their experiences in the community.
- a) The reflections of the participants on experiences as parents relative to the quality of their children's experiences in school generated more discussion than any other single topic. All participants felt that their children had received a good academic education. Likewise, almost all had a story to share about the emotional attributes of an incident they experienced as a parent. The ramifications of the emotional experiences were often tied to subsequent beliefs about education funding.
 - b) Several participants tied their parenting philosophies to their attitudes toward education funding. Participants characterized themselves as encouragers, pushers, role models, and disciplinarians. These roles were linked to attitudes relative to the kind of services that schools should and should not be expected to provide to students today.
 - c) Several participants indicated that they had taken the initiative to be involved in the educational experience of their children outside of situations that necessitated their attention. These participants tended to be more involved in the community today and, consequently, more aware of the issues associated with education funding.
 - d) All of the participants agreed that their current level of contact with the local public schools was limited by not having children in school. Some acknowledged that not being in the schools affected their level of understanding about current issues in education funding.
 - e) All participants were involved in the community to some degree. Some felt like their involvement in the community provided them with an opportunity to learn more about education funding initiatives. Others did not.

- f) Several participants referenced ties to their high school alumni organizations. Those that had not graduated from the local high school were not as connected to local education issues as the participant who was an officer in the local high school alumni organization.
 - g) All participants acknowledged some level of political consciousness, but their experiences within the construct of political behavior varied widely. Even though all participants reported that they voted in every election, some indicated that they were uninformed about political issues associated with education funding or that they never paid attention to education funding issues. Knowing that uninformed or apathetic voters are casting ballots on issues related to funding education is important information for local education policy makers.
3. The school and community experiences of the elderly voters in this study impacted their attitudes toward education quality.
- a) The participants based their pride in the quality of the educational programs in the local schools on personal experiences in school and on personal experiences as parents or grandparents.
 - b) The participants used their personal experiences in school to address the strength of public schools today. Most agreed that the progressive initiatives that had been implemented in teacher evaluation, curriculum differentiation, guidance programs, and technology implementation had resulted in education being better today than when they were in school.
 - c) All of the participants who cited weaknesses in public schools based their attitudes on prior experiences. Perceived weaknesses in the teacher evaluation procedures, mandated state curriculum and assessments, inadequate teacher salaries, and strong standards for discipline and respect were all linked to experiences the participants had shared about personal experiences in school and community.
 - d) Several participants felt as though government involvement in local schools had negatively impacted the quality of educational programs in recent years. Two participants referenced the state mandated curriculum and assessment

program that had been forced on their grandchildren and labeled it unfair. Two other participants felt like the government was forcing public schools to assume parenting responsibilities. Another participant cited the mandated special education programs as having been forced on schools and the local tax payers in recent years.

4. The school and community experiences of the elderly voters in this study impacted their beliefs about education funding.
 - a) All of the participants demonstrated personal pride in having attained a level of financial security in retirement that excluded living on a fixed income as an impediment to being able to support a property tax increase for local education. The participants based their financial situations on hard work, planning, and the quality of the spouses' pensions.
 - b) Several participants added qualifications to their statements regarding their ability and the ability of other county residents to sustain tax increases for public education funding. Some comments were intended to place limits on the amount of a tax increase they would be willing to support. Other, comments reflected a level of concern for fellow elderly residents who could not sustain even a small increase in local property taxes without difficulty.
 - c) Local education funding issues did impact the voting behavior of the majority of the elderly participants. Most acknowledged that they stayed informed via the media. Debates and mailings were cited as other conduits of information.
 - d) Several identifiable issues of local interest emerged as topics of concern among the participants. School consolidation received favorable support. Construction of a new high school was controversial. Finally, the adequacy of teacher salaries received mixed reviews. Attitudes were based on lived experiences as parents and students.
 - e) Apathy within the community emerged as a topic of concern among the participants. Some of the participants admittedly were not interested in local education funding. Other participants were concerned about friends in the community who never gave public education funding a thought. There was

consensus that more information needs to be provided to retired voters in the community in order to stimulate interest in education funding.

- f) All of the participants recognized the need to support public education out of concern for the welfare of future generations. One participant felt as though supporting public education was his responsibility. Another was concerned about the *world of tomorrow*. A third believed education is the answer to the *world's problems*. Finally, one said that the strength to support education came from the older people. Collectively, this group of elderly voters recognized the need to support public education funding.

The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study provided a backdrop of common understanding for the conceptualization of the problem of how the lived experience of the elderly voter had impacted their attitudes toward public education funding. This section includes a discussion of how the theories of community loyalty and rational self-interest tied to the findings in this study. The information is presented within the context of the two theories and supported by the themes that emerged from the across-case analysis.

Community Loyalty

The community loyalty theory is grounded in Hirschman's (1970) contention that loyalty is a powerful motivator of human behavior that has the potential to direct a person's actions away from behaviors associated with self-interest. Loyal elderly voters are likely to be longstanding residents who have developed affective ties to their community by way of prolonged opportunities for community engagement associated with educating their children in the local schools (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004). Loyal elderly voting also evolves from an ideological perspective based on an allegiance to the principle of public education (Moe, 2001). Finally, loyal elderly voting may result from an affective tie to an institution that has been cultivated and nurtured as a result of one's life and community experiences (Hirschman).

The findings from analysis of the participant data generated support for the community loyalty theory. First, all of the participants in this study were longstanding residents of the county and all except one had children who had attended the local public schools. This demographic information and the fact that most of the participants reported a substantial level of involvement in their children's education and in their community, support the assertion that the participants

are likely to be loyal voters. Second, the collective voices of the participants evidenced an allegiance to the principle of public education as reflected by their concern for the future of our children, our country, and our world. Finally, the themes that emerged from the context of school and community experiences relative to the formation of participant beliefs toward public education quality and public education funding showed that almost all of the participants did support local education funding initiatives. Although there was support for the community loyalty theory, the evidence was conditional and somewhat fragile. The conditions placed on the level of support for public education funding were aligned with the research on the theory of rational self-interest.

Rational Self-Interest

According to the theory of rational self-interest, individuals view economic policies in terms of a cost/benefit ratio (Cataldo & Holm, 1983). Self-interested voters are characterized as those members of the electorate who favor taxing measures that are most financially advantageous to themselves as individuals (Ladd & Murray, 2001). Because elderly voters are not likely to have children enrolled in public schools (MacManus, 1995); because elderly voters are more likely to be homeowners who are affected by an increase in the local property tax (Berkman & Plutzer, 2004); and because elderly voters are likely to be particularly sensitive to an increase in local property taxes as a result of living on a fixed income (MacManus); this cohort of voters is expected to vote against tax increases for public schools (Poterba, 1997).

Several participants qualified their commitment to support tax increases for public education funding. Some compared the cost of an initiative to the benefits received. Earl referenced the cost of construction of athletic facilities to the low number of students who actually benefit from the expenditures. Earl also explained how he calculates his per diem property tax rate each year in order to justify the cost in terms of the local services he receives. Ruby used the concept of ratios to express her opinion that local teacher salaries were adequate because monthly salaries of teachers were comparable to salaries in other professions in which employees were required to work in the summer. Grace, Sally and Lilly openly chastised the two local school divisions for not consolidating services by citing consolidation as a means to increase education quality while reducing the financial burden on local taxpayers.

Other qualifications were tied to comments relative to support for local public education initiatives in general. Earl expressed skepticism about the ability of the local taxpayers to

financially support the construction of new high school. Sonny and Ruby indicated that they were not convinced that there was a need for the new school. Polly said she would not object to having her property taxes raised *somewhat* for public education. Louise said that she supported *adequate* funding for public schools. Richard stressed his concern about the ability of older retirees who had been living on fixed incomes for many years to absorb even a small increase in their property taxes for public schools. Collectively, the participants referenced concerns relative to the depressed economic status of the locality and the ability of the local retirees to sustain tax increases for public education.

Conclusion

As longstanding residents of the county, this cohort of retired voters had cultivated affective ties to the county that had nurtured loyalty. What was of particular significance was the complex, conditional, and fragile nature of their support that blended loyal behavior with rational self-interested behavior. The manifestation of the blending of the two behaviors resulted in the participants expressing their support for public education funding within certain parameters. Perhaps Earl said it best when explaining that he felt like the locality was doing what it was financially able to do to support education funding initiatives under the current circumstances stating,

There are probably some things that we should be doing that we aren't because we don't have the funding for it. It is certainly a blessing that we realize our limitations. As long as we keep in mind that the well is not bottomless and the drinking water needs to stay sweet. Let's not get carried away with some things that would be great to have...but we just can't afford to do them (Earl, Page 22, Lines 493-502).

Limitations of the Study

Limitations serve as a reminder that all studies are vulnerable in one way or another (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). There are several limitations to this study. First, the nature of the purposeful sample selection process and the use of the interview as the primary data gathering technique limit the results to self-report data by the volunteer participants. Second, the self-selection of the participants and the rural location of the study limit the transferability of the findings. Finally, the fact that the researcher is a longstanding leader in the school community may have impacted the responses of the participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

Answering questions generated in conjunction with the purpose of one study, often results in questions being generated for future research. This study generated several such topics. First, the participants in this study were purposefully selected based on demographic characteristics that identified them as members of the cohort of typical elderly voters in the rural county in question. Future studies in this county should focus on elderly residents who are atypical insofar as demographic characteristics are concerned in order to broaden the scope of the results. Atypical characteristics may include, but are not limited to, different levels of educational attainment, migrant residents, and ethnically diverse participants. Additionally, future studies may focus on elderly voters who have been known to oppose public school funding initiatives. Second, the transferability of this study is limited to localities with similar demographic characteristics. Future studies should focus on urban and metropolitan populations to determine if the elderly residents in those localities have similar beliefs about public education funding.

Implications for Future Practice

The results reported in this study have implications for future practice for education policy makers in small, rural counties with regard to planning for the implementation and delivery of quality educational programs. Effective long-range financial planning involves identifying the resources and constraints within a community that impact the sources and the amounts of funds available to a school district (Earthman, 2000). This study showed that the attitudes toward education funding of a select group of elderly voters were impacted by their experiences in school and in the community. Consequently, the implications for effective planning are twofold. First, building level planning should include goals and objectives that focus on specific school issues:

1. The identification of and support for individual students in atypical situations,
2. The commitment to and the maintenance of learning environments that are well organized and well structured,
3. The implementation of sustained efforts to encourage participation in extra-curricular activities,
4. The implementation of sustained programs to encourage positive peer interaction, and

5. The implementation of sustained programs to train parents, counselors, administrators and teachers on the importance of providing a nurturing environment.

Second, district level planning should include goals and objectives that focus on specific community issues:

1. The implementation of sustained efforts to train administrators and teachers on how to effectively communicate with parents,
2. The implementation of sustained programs on effective parenting skills,
3. The implementation of quality parent involvement and parent volunteer programs,
4. The implementation of programs to increase community involvement among non-parent residents, and
5. The implementation of effective community outreach programs via local clubs and organizations.

If implemented appropriately, meeting these goals and objectives has the potential to reduce the constraints that elderly voters place on education funding initiatives in small, rural counties.

Epilogue

The act of systematic reflection was the final step in the research process. Systematic reflection involved the researcher engaging in introspective examination of the design and implementation of the research process in an effort to determine how the research design might have been improved if the researcher were to repeat the study. The goal in this process was to offer suggestions for future research that would strengthen the findings.

Two topics emerged from the systematic reflection process. First, the researcher determined that modifications of the participant selection process may strengthen the depth and breadth of the data in subsequent studies. The ten participants could be purposefully divided to include five elderly residents who were known to be more supportive of education funding initiatives and five elderly residents who were known to be less supportive of education funding initiatives. This modification of the selection process would likely provide more information on the dichotomous relationship between lived experiences that fostered rational self-interest or nurtured community loyalty. Second, the researcher determined that modifications of the data collection process to include member checks and artifacts would strengthen the credibility of the findings. Including these two additional objective data sources would ensure that future studies have more adequate depth and complexity.

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Appendix A
Organizations

1. Senior Citizens Organization
2. Women's Club
3. Hospital Volunteer Organization
4. League of Older Americans
5. The Red Hat Society

Appendix B
Cover Letter Template

Date

Sarah T. Campbell
Street Address
City, State, Zip code

Dear Organization President/Chairperson:

I am in the process of completing my doctoral dissertation from Virginia Tech in Educational Leadership and Polity Studies. The object of the dissertation requirement in my program is to demonstrate my ability to design and conduct a research project on a topic of interest to me and to others in the field of education.

The purpose of my study is to describe the attitudes of voters age 65 and over toward public education funding. My goal is to gather information from residents of _____ County on this topic. To gather this information, I plan to interview 10 voters who voted in the November 8, 2005 election, who have a high school diploma, who own or are purchasing their home, and who have lived in their current home since at least 1995.

My hope is that some members of your organization will be interested in sharing their stories with me. Anyone who participates in this study will be asked to meet with me for an interview that will last about 90 minutes. All of the information collected in the interview will be used for research purposes only, and the identity of each participant will be known only to me. My hope is that the stories of each participant will provide valuable information to educators as they plan for the future.

I have enclosed several flyers that explain the study. These flyers also contain my contact information. I would appreciate it if you would pass these flyers out to the members of your organization. Anyone who is interested in participating should feel free to contact me.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you or members of your organization have questions.

Sincerely,

Sarah T. Campbell

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

Senior Citizens

Your experiences and your stories are valuable!

If you are...

- **Age 65 or older;**
- **A county resident;**
- **A registered voter;**
- **A high school graduate; and**
- **A homeowner who has lived in the same home since 1995**

You have the opportunity to participate in a study designed to give your voice to issues related to funding for public education.

I am a doctoral student at Virginia Tech actively seeking volunteers to participate in this research study. Volunteers will be asked to participate in a one-on-one, face-to-face, audio-taped interview. This interview will last about 90 minutes.

If you are interested, please call Sarah Campbell at (540) 691-7479 or email me at scmpbl@vt.edu.

Appendix D

Informed Consent for Participants

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent for Participants In Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: Elderly Voter Attitudes Toward Public Education Funding in a Rural County: A Qualitative Study

Investigator(s) Sarah T. Campbell Doctoral Student at Virginia Tech

Advisor Dr. Penny Burge Professor and Advisor at Virginia Tech

I. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this study is to describe the essence of elderly voter attitudes toward public education funding. The goal is to gather detailed descriptions of real life experiences that have nurtured attitudes toward public education funding within a select group of elderly voters who have rich experiences to share. The researcher will conduct one-on-one interviews with 10 active voters aged 65 and over who meet specific inclusion criteria for the study.

II. Procedures

As the participant you will meet with the researcher one or two times. The first meeting should last no more than 30 minutes. At this initial meeting you will have the opportunity to meet the researcher, to have your role in the study explained to you in detail, to ask questions related to your role in the research process, and to sign the informed consent document. The final step in this first meeting will be to determine a time and place for the a second interview.

The purpose of the second meeting will be to conduct the one-on-one, audio-taped interview. This meeting/interview will last about 90 minutes. At this meeting you will be asked a set of questions related to the purpose of the study. After each question, you will be given the opportunity to respond in as much detail as you like. All of your responses will become part of the data be used for research purposes. The information collected will allow the researcher to investigate the experiences of elderly voters that have shaped their attitudes toward public education funding. The interview will be audio-taped _____ (initial) and transcribed by the researcher.

Interviews will take place in a location that is conducive to focused conversation and mutually agreed upon by you, the participant, and the researcher.

The researcher will provide you with a copy of the informed consent form and the researcher will retain a copy.

III. Risks

Your participation in this study should pose minimal risks to you. The researcher will ask you to describe experiences that have shaped your attitudes toward public education funding. Your reactions will be monitored by the researcher for any signs of discomfort. You will have the right to stop the interview or line of questioning at any point without penalty.

IV. Benefits

The possible benefits of participating in this study may include the opportunity to reflect upon your own experiences and/or to clarify and define specific stories. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate. Scholars of education funding policy decisions may benefit from the information gathered as a result of the study to assist them in future budget planning initiatives.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Every effort will be made to protect your identity and confidentiality. Only the researcher will know the identity of each participant. Pseudonyms will be used at all times and every effort will be made not to reveal any personally identifying characteristics in this study.

Tapes of interviews, transcriptions of interviews, interview notes and reflexive journal entries will be stored in a secure location. The researcher will personally transcribe the interview. Only the researcher and the researcher's advisor will have access to the tapes and transcriptions of the interviews. The audio tapes will be destroyed once the research has been completed and the results disseminated. It should be noted that despite every effort to mask all identifiers, it may be compromised. All possible care will be taken to protect your identity.

VI. Compensation

As a participant, you will receive no compensation for participating in this study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

As a participant, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You are free to refuse to answer any question. There may be circumstances under which the researcher may determine that you, as the participant, should not continue to be involved in the study.

VIII. Subject's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: (1) participate in the interview; (2) answer as honestly, candidly, and completely as possible; (3) notify the researcher immediately if you decide not to participate in the interview.

IX. Subject's Permission

I have read the Informed Consent Form and conditions of this project

I have had all my questions answered.

I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

Subject's Signature

Date

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

Sarah T. Campbell
Investigator

(540) 691-7479/scmpbl@vt.edu
Telephone/e-mail

Dr. Penny Burge
Faculty Advisor

(540) 231-9730/burge@vt.edu
Telephone/e-mail

If I should have any questions about the protection of human research participants regarding this study, I may contact Dr. David Moore, Chair Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects using the following information.

Dr. David Moore
Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Research Compliance Office
1880 Pratt Drive, Suite 2006 (0497)
Blacksburg, VA 24061

(540) 231-4991/moored@vt.edu
Telephone/e-mail

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a resident of this county?
2. Describe the schools you attended in grades 1-12.
3. What experiences do you remember most about your years in public school?
4. What stories can you share about how these experiences influenced your attitude toward public education?
5. How have these experiences impacted the way you feel about public education today?
6. How do you feel about public education today?
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of public schools today?
8. Do you feel public schools are doing a good job?
9. What specific experiences impacted the way you feel about public education today?
10. Do you have, or have you ever had, children in our county schools?
11. What role do you feel the community plays in funding public education?
12. Describe your feelings about the community and its level of support for public education.
13. How has the issue of funding public schools affected your voting behavior?
14. How does being a senior citizen affect your ability to provide financial support for public schools in the county?
15. Are there particular events in your life have influenced how and why you feel as you do about public education?
16. What else should I have asked you about your experiences related to the formation of your attitudes toward public education funding?

Demographic Questions

17. How long you have you been retired?
18. How often do you vote?
19. How long have you lived in your current home?
20. Do you own, or are you purchasing, your home?
21. What is highest grade you have completed?

IRB Approval Letter



Appendix F

Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board
 1880 Pratt Drive (0497)
 Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
 540/231-4991 Fax: 540/231-0959
 E-mail: moored@vt.edu
 www.irb.vt.edu

FWA000005721 expires 7/20/07
 IRB # is IRB00000667

DATE: July 28, 2006

MEMORANDUM

TO: Penny L. Burge
Sarah Campbell

Approval date: 7/27/2006
 Continuing Review Due Date: 7/12/2007
 Expiration Date: 7/26/2007

FROM: David M. Moore SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:** "Elderly Voter Attitudes Toward Public Education Funds in a Rural Virginia County: A Qualitative Study", IRB # 06-404

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective July 27, 2006.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

Important:

If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, this approval letter must state that the IRB has compared the OSP grant application and IRB application and found the documents to be consistent. Otherwise, this approval letter is invalid for OSP to release funds. Visit our website at

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/newstudy.htm#OSP> for further information.