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Deborah Costlow Cartee

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TWO SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS UNDER SIEGE:

AN ORAL HISTORY 1969-2012

by

DEBORAH COSTLOW CARTEE

(Under the Direction of Robert L. Lake)

ABSTRACT

This study is an oral history of the small rural community of Portal, Georgia, its two local schools, and its residents' successful fight to keep these community schools. Guided by the theoretical framework of critical theory and the works of critical researchers, namely Paulo Freire (1998), Michael Apple (2006), Jean Anyon (2005), and Henry Giroux (2001), one purpose of this study was to discover what we can learn from the experiences of citizens in one small rural community who have been affected by consolidation. Since the account of the relationship between the Portal community and its hometown schools remains untold, another purpose was to produce a written record of some of the events from 1969, the year desegregation was enforced in Bulloch County, Georgia, to 2012, two years after the new Portal Middle High School was completed.

The residents of Portal, Georgia, have struggled for nearly four decades to retain their neighborhood public schools citing these institutions as vital members in a partnership with this community. The recommended elimination of these schools was partly due to the small enrollment, limited funds, and perceived isolation from other schools in the Bulloch County district. It is how and why these schools, over time, came to be the disfavored, under-enrolled, and under-subsidized institutions they are today that was explored. The concepts of small size, closeness, and the experience of knowing

members of their community were repeatedly stressed by the participants as crucial positive characteristics of the schools and community. The analysis of contention between the Portal community and the members in the more influential areas of Bulloch County revealed an ownership attitude and a manner of condescension toward this community with a chief bias being economic discrimination that essentially linked the Portal children's education to their parents' income-tax brackets.

The majority of the data was gathered through interviews with five women and three men, all key members of the community whose ages range from their early 30s through their early 70s: Sarah Greene, Ellen Hodges, Tracy Kirkland, Kate Mitchell, Jamie Young, Richard Emerson, William Etheridge, and Gerald Johnson (all names are pseudonyms). The stories were analyzed through a critical lens that examines power relationships and the influence of classism in society.

INDEX WORDS:                   Classism, Critical Theory, Desegregation, Marginalization, Oral History, Ownership Society, Rural Schools, Sense of Place, School Consolidation, Schwab's Four Commonplaces, Small Schools, and Social Bias

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1969-2012

by

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## DEDICATION

To Jackson, Addison, Greyson, Ellison, and Grandson No. 3 on the way...the five most beautiful reasons I have for continuing to learn and grow. I hope that each of you, in your own creatively indomitable way, will strive to achieve high levels of excellence in your education and professions. Most importantly, don't just learn so you can make a living; learn so you can have a wonderfully abundant life full of service to others.

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*But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.*

Isaiah 40:31

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Fighting Words: Amplifying Their Voices

*I love the schools [Portal Elementary and Portal Middle High School]. I mean, they...it's a small community so, see, and the schools are smaller, and the teacher can do more one-on-one with the students. The children know each other. The teachers know their students and get to know their families. The community [of Portal, Georgia] and the schools cooperate.*

Sarah Greene ([pseudonym], personal communication, September 26, 2006)

The residents of the small rural community of Portal, Georgia, have fought for nearly four decades for their right to retain their neighborhood public schools citing these institutions as vital members in a partnership with this community. Even though this community has in the last 15 years won the challenge to keep its Portal Elementary School, a Title I Distinguished School of approximately 390 students, the Portal Middle High School is still under siege, particularly the high school division. Although the middle high school is now situated in a new building complex that was completed in 2010, the proposal of closing the high school section and either bussing these students to Statesboro High or building an entirely new high school closer to the county seat of Statesboro is still perceived by many Portal citizens as an ongoing threat. Many of these residents have, in our private conversations together, expressed their concerns that the Portal Middle High School will become just a middle school if further rezoning of the school districts takes place.

The two schools examined in this study exist in a setting that is fundamentally different from the suburban context of most of the other schools in Bulloch County, particularly the larger schools located in Statesboro and Brooklet. Statesboro High School, an ultramodern, high-tech \$42 million facility that houses a 1200-seat Performing Arts Auditorium and two Gymnasiums, was featured in *American School & University Magazine's* annual 2011 *Architectural Portfolio* issue. SHS boasts a student enrollment of over 1,400. Southeast Bulloch High School is housed in a complex of five year old edifices that were awarded an "Outstanding Design" designation in *American School & University Magazine's* annual 2009 *Architectural Portfolio* issue and now features a new \$5 million Athletic Complex that opened in 2012. It is located in nearby Brooklet, nine miles southeast of Statesboro, and accommodates approximately 900 students. Portal Middle High School, consisting of two new buildings that hold classrooms, a gym, and a lunchroom with small stage area, accommodates a combined middle school and high school enrollment total of just around 385 students and is located a little over twelve miles northwest of Statesboro (see Appendices A1-A3).

The quiet rural town of Portal located in southeast Georgia (see Appendix B) might appear an unlikely setting for major battles (if only of words). Yet, such was the case when the Portal town schools were threatened with closure and consolidation in the late 1960s with a court-issued plan for legal desegregation of the Bulloch County school system and again when the issue of closing the middle high school resurfaced some 20 years later. It was in the early 1990s that a group of concerned members from the Portal area, the Bulloch County Coalition (see Appendix C1), was formed with the initial purpose of meeting with the Bulloch County School Board concerning the proposed

closings of all Portal schools that accommodated students over grade 5 (see Appendices C2 and C3).

During its early stages, integration in Georgia had brought about the closing and consolidation of many schools, including several located in and near the town of Portal. In 1969, Federal Judge Alex A. Lawrence drew up a plan for the legal desegregation of the Bulloch County School System in Georgia (see Appendix D). By 1971, the implementation of Lawrence's plan led to the restructuring of several Bulloch County area school student-body populations. Continued unconfirmed reports and insinuations throughout the next two decades regarding further closings peaked in the mid-1990s when the local Board of Education made recommendations to close the Portal community's remaining middle school and high school and merge them with schools in Statesboro. Though the plan to close the Portal schools was defeated at this time, it was in 2002, after many county town hall meetings in which I actively participated were held to rehash the issue that a new proposal surfaced. It was recommended that the school board create two new high schools out of the current three (Statesboro High School, Southeast Bulloch High School, and Portal Middle High School) by combining all ninth through twelfth grade student populations into two equally numbered student bodies and housing them in two new high school complexes. It was suggested that the new school on the northwest side of Bulloch County be called North Bulloch High School. The other on the south side would either retain the name Southeast Bulloch or be renamed South Bulloch.

This proposal was not acceptable to the Statesboro area citizens, the Portal community, or the newly awakened Southeast Bulloch High School community. Up to this point in the discussions, the Southeast Bulloch High School district members had

remained inconspicuously on the sidelines since neither closing nor consolidation was in any way a threat to their high school. As one Bulloch County Board member stated recently, “Until we offered a plan for closing and consolidating all three high schools into two new high schools, Southeast Bulloch had no ‘dog in this fight.’” Fortunately, this all worked in Portal’s favor. The plan for the new North Bulloch High School and South Bulloch High School was dropped. Instead the school board voted to build three new high school complexes on the original sites of the old schools. Consequently, the Portal district managed not only to save their middle high school from closing, but was also promised a new middle high school facility, which did in fact open in time for the 2010-2011 school year (see Appendix E).

Though the Portal townspeople’s reactions to the proposed closings and consolidations may seem overly territorial to some, the citizens’ feelings of anxiety and concern were prompted in effect because their schools were and still are “linked to their perception that, with their school’s communal function jeopardized by local and state policies, their entire community’s survival would become vulnerable as well” (Peshkin, 1978, p.4). The recommended elimination of the Portal community schools was and continues to be due, in part, to the small enrollment, limited funds, and perceived isolation from other schools in the Bulloch County district. Now *if* this was all there was to the story of these particular schools and *if* the number of students in the Portal school district had diminished due to a natural spontaneous population migration towards Statesboro, then perhaps the closing and consolidation of these schools could be deemed the most practical and beneficial option for all concerned. However, it is how these community schools, over time, came to be the disfavored, under-enrolled, and under-



subsidized institutions they are today that should be explored, questioned, and shared.

As a consequence of being smaller than their suburban counterparts, as are most rural schools, the bigger-is-better philosophy automatically reduced these schools to second best and marked them, along with many other small rural schools, as “prime objects of state and national concern because political, business and educational leaders have increasingly embraced school reform on behalf of restoring international competitiveness” (DeYoung, 1989, p. 65), reform that often requires the closing of small rural schools. The seemingly “savage inequalities” (Kozol, 1991) practiced upon the citizenry in this particular area of Bulloch County appear to be that of the all-encompassing prejudice of classism practiced by a dominant society or privileged elite (Klonsky & Klonsky, 2008) who are, in this case, the citizens of the more densely populated cities of the Statesboro and Brooklet areas (see Appendix F).

Many other small communities, much like Portal, Georgia, either have faced closing and consolidation in their pasts or are presently tackling similar situations of marginalization of their community and small school relationships (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006; DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald, 1995; Tyack, 1974). Due to the wide diversities in geographical landscapes, economic standings, political circumstances, and cultural and social connections of these areas, there is not one single all-inclusive description that captures the complexity and variability of what comprises the range of rural communities and their schools. There are, however, many similarities in the challenges almost all rural schools and small communities encounter in their struggles to justify their right to survive and maintain their schools as well as who is usually most responsible for the issuing of these challenges. As observed by Marty Strange, Rural

Trust Policy Director, in a 2011 *Phi Kappan* article: “Professional educators are no longer at the forefront of the consolidation movement. Now, governors, legislative leaders, and chief state school officers (more policy makers than professional educators) are leading the way” (para. 4).

It was in response to society’s demands that schools address the changes in society and assist in improving the national economic situation by training citizens to become contributing commodities to the United States’ economy *and* winners in the game of “international competitiveness” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Murphy & Beck, 1994) that the federal and state governments initiated some oppressive reform policies designed to improve or eradicate allegedly underperforming schools through increased testing, educator quality, and control of youth. “The operative words under these prevailing conditions are ‘accountability,’ ‘benchmarks,’ and ‘performance standards.’ These buzzwords have entered the field of education through the world of business, technology, and industry and, for the most part have driven the configuration of schooling at every level since the age of mass production began in the early Twentieth century” (Lake, 2006, p. 13). According to Kozol (2005), these policies act on the assumption that teachers and students are the culprits in the crime of lack of adequate yearly academic progress and are “desperation strategies that have come out of the acceptance of inequality” (p. 51). Often the first school casualties of these mandated, underfunded strategies are the small community schools, chiefly those in rural areas (Purcell & Shackelford, 2005).

Initially it was a growing awareness of underlying unjust hegemonic forces in public education and later contact with injustices legislated on rural areas in our equal

opportunity educational system (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999) that compelled me to begin questioning the idea of power and control in education; specifically, who has it and why? Shortly after I began my career as a public school teacher, I became aware that decisions concerning education were more often than not made by men who were not in the field of education per se; unless you count coaching school sports teams as valid teaching experiences equivalent to those experienced by regular classroom teachers. The judgments relating to curricula, physical facilities, districting, etc. were made mostly by businessmen and politicians whose desired objectives were the realization of a healthy financial bottom line (and perhaps winning football and basketball teams), and the production of better, more efficient products, i.e. workers for a more industrious financially viable society. According to this particular educational archetype, larger and consolidated is almost always considered to be more cost effective and better in providing broader, more diverse curricula.

The enforced application of the bigger-is-better paradigm, however, can be a major impediment to providing an environment in which every child, regardless of his or her socioeconomic level, racial makeup, or place of residence, receives equal access to the best education our profession can offer. According to Jimerson (2006b), “There are always students ‘left behind’ in these smaller communities and they have the same rights to an equal educational opportunity as those who leave (rural communities). Indeed, our society’s obligation to educate is not dependent on demographic good fortune and cannot, and should not, be compromised by geography” (p. 3). Also, in the aftermath of consolidation, teachers are often overcome by such large enrollment numbers that they are essentially prohibited from forming relationships with each of their students because,

as astutely stated by Klonsky, “When we jam children into factory-style schools, it is impossible to see them as individuals” (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000, p. 88).

Equally unfortunate is the fact that consolidation sometimes offers the greatest benefit not to the students of the smaller schools, but to those bureaucrats with the most political influence and financial clout who are often more interested in centralizing control rather than in educating all students equally and justly (Apple, 1995; Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). Even though many rural school advocates warn that the financial and academic advantages of big schools are often slight, if indeed any at all are realized (Adkins, 2002; Bard, et al., 2006; Coulson, 2007), the proposals, or dictates, to close and consolidate these entities with already established, larger schools may be presented to rural and small community residents as the only workable recourse for the difficulties that plague them, particularly if these difficulties are fiscal ones.

While pondering how it was that equal opportunity education regressed to this problematic state of affairs, I began to positively envision ways in which we educators, students, and community members can best use our voices in the decision-making processes regarding the current forms of schooling. To be more specific, how can we work to confront and revise educational policies that tend to marginalize certain students and their families who are economically or culturally disadvantaged as are many of those represented in this study? Moreover, how can we incorporate students’ locales into the curriculum so as to make their geographical place an asset to their learning rather than a limitation (Jimerson, 2006b)? The desire to find the answer to these critical questions led me to look for solutions within the theoretical framework of critical theory, a wide-ranging belief based upon the use of critique, specifically that of critically assessing and

challenging the status quo, as a method of investigation (McCarthy, 1991). The works of critical researchers, namely Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, Jean Anyon, and Henry Giroux, who have been or are now actively engaged in promoting social change within the education system and the culture itself further fed my desire to find ways to encourage those who are “finding a voice” (Freire, 1994) with which they can speak up and demand the right to be a part of the discussions concerning their small school educational infrastructure.

Poor children and their home communities or neighborhoods often receive unfair treatment from the institutions of society because the residents lack either political clout or economic power, or, as does the town in this study, both. However, “[s]mallness and local contexts play vital roles in the educational process” (DeYoung & Howley, 1992, p. 65); and policymakers need to know the stories of the communities they, perhaps inadvertently, seek to nullify. “[S]ometimes it will make sense to close a school. The point is that closures should take place for good reasons and in giving the reasons and developing plans (including alternatives to closure), community members should be active and knowledgeable partners” (Howley & Eckman, 1997, p. 25). It is particularly important that these community members realize wholly the power they have in their collective voices. Also equally important is the recognition of what is exceptional about one’s home milieu and the knowledge of when and how to defend it against outsiders who may mistakenly think they know what is best for others. As Miller (1991) states succinctly in *Distress and Survival: Rural Schools, Education, and the Importance of Community*, “Learning what is uniquely rural about one’s community (history, culture, economics and the social and political structure) is an empowering process” (p. 32). The

attitude of “what works for us should also work for you as well” sometimes expressed by larger, more financially stable communities, is not always acceptable. Citizens in rural and small community areas often have strong feelings of support for their local schools and cling to their convictions that local control is vital not only to their students’ education but to the continuation of their community life as well.

It was my tenure in the Portal Elementary School and my close affiliation with many of the Portal residents that further fostered my desire to document experiences, impressions, and actions taken in this rural community’s encounters with school closings and consolidation. I believe that the best way to present the innermost feelings, sentiments, perceptions, and attitudes of these rural citizens concerning their hometown schools, factors that are unlikely to be detailed in archived documents of school board meeting minutes or newspaper articles, would be through the voices of those who have personally fought and continue to fight to keep these schools open.

#### What Does This Mean to Small Rural Communities?

To begin this section it would seem practical to provide the fundamental meaning of *community* applied in this research. As explained in a straightforward manner by Kemp (2006), “The community is a combination of the environment, the place, and the people that inhabit a particular locale” (p. 127). However, in this study, the significance of community encompasses more than this. A community’s character is also defined by its body of interacting individuals who share common interests such as a common history and common social, economic and/or political interests (Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, n.d.) embedded in an genuine sense of connectedness and belonging (Block, 2008).

Over the years, it appears that policymakers have spent relatively little time in examining the behavior of people in small communities and their schools, particularly rural ones, to discover the philosophy behind their feelings and actions. Rural educational philosophy claims that those in education disregard “the most worthy purposes to which people might otherwise aspire” (Theobald, 1992, p. 3) and ignore “the great untapped energy and potential in rural areas” (Lockette, 2010, p. 4). As early as 1914, Joseph Kennedy, dean of the school of education at North Dakota State University, wrote from his own rural experience that “the rural school of former days was frequently as good as, if not better in some respects than the school of today” (p. 15). He mitigated this overly simplistic and nostalgic analysis somewhat through a later comment which acknowledged that “[o]f course some things will be lacking in the country which are found in the city, but conversely, many things and probably better things will be found in the country than will be found in the city” (p. 27). Almost a century later, these sentiments still run strong among many current and former rural residents. Stern (1994) clearly portrayed the relationship between rural institutions and their supporting communities in his observation that “[t]he family, the church, and the school have been at the heart of rural communities since this country was settled” (p. 21). In many rural communities, the local schools serve not only as educational institutions, but are the social, cultural, and recreational centers as well. “It is the place where generations come together and where community identity is forged” (Lyson, 2002, p. 1) *and sustained*.

The difficulties, particularly the economic ones, facing the small rural community schools seem to frequently go unnoticed, or intentionally ignored, by politicians and policymakers. Since school funding is usually tied to enrollment numbers and property

tax totals garnered from the residents of the school district, both of which are often smaller in rural areas, these schools usually have less construction money made available to them (Deweese, 1999) and are either left out or, at least, short-changed. This is a familiar plight to the Portal schools since Portal typically has lower property value assessments than most other areas in the county. These economic inequalities, along with political disparities between classes in our society, facilitate the passing of control into the hands of the more affluent or socially and politically influential citizens. This observation is supported by many of the Portal community members with whom I have spoken throughout my years as a teacher in this town. As stated by one potential interviewee for my study in a short conversation we had at the beginning of the 2011 school year, “Portal doesn’t generate the amount of tax-base that Statesboro does. And when you look at E-SPLOST – Education SPLOST [special-purpose local-option sales tax] – that 1% extra that the Board of Education gets [from local sales taxes]; that’s pretty much what they build our schools with. I don’t want to say the numbers are doctored, but it’s not an equal analysis if you look at it” (Jamie Young, [pseudonym], personal communication, 2011).

It is also unfortunate that a number of school administrators and teachers in some rural communities and small towns disallow the relevance of community members’ interest in preserving their small, local schools (Peshkin, 1982; Woodrum, 2004). The residents’ feelings of attachment to their town and local institutions are dismissed as irrational or sentimental (Howley & Harmon, 2000). Conversely, the attitude expressed audibly by some administrators or educators biased against small schools is “[t]hese schools could not serve the national interest well whatever pride their (backward)



communities might (irrationally) take in them” (DeYoung & Howley, 1992, p. 14).

However, what may appear to be mere sentiment and local biases to “outsiders” might, in reality, be expressions of a common set of cultural bonds since “[f]or rural areas, community is a core value” (Mathis, 2003, p. 3).

Another element of stereotypical bias that does a great injustice to the real lives of rural families and communities are those prejudgments that are propagated through our language. As asserted by Haas (1991), “[M]odern American society does not value *ruralness*; prejudices against rural people and places are strong” (p. 14). Even in this time of astute political and cultural correctness, rural citizens still are often easy targets for prejudices and slurs. Very seldom is anyone chastised for using the expressions “country bumpkin,” “hayseed,” “redneck,” “hillbilly,” “goober,” “yokel,” “plowboy,” or “cracker” to indicate “the healthy, naïve, slow-witted, unsophisticated, ignorant, ultraconservative, penniless soul from beyond the outer fringes of the interstate” (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 3). This thoughtless, politically incorrect terminology further promulgates the image of small town people as those who, because they are rural, are intellectually and culturally inferior to those at the top, the “top” denoting metropolitan, urban, or, in this case, suburban residents. “These communities and the schools that serve them are a lot more complex than those who succumb to rural stereotypes want to acknowledge, let alone understand” (Strange, 2011, p. 8).

### Our Vanishing Rural Social Capital

Rural communities and their schools face many unique pressures, not the least of which is the continued demand to justify their continuation and hold off their termination. At the beginning of the 1900s, more than 200,000 one-room schoolhouses were in

operation in the United States. By 1932, there were over 127,000 separate school districts (Peshkin, 1982; Rocheleau, 2003). By 2006, however, the number of school districts had dropped by 90% (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007) even as the nation's population of students continued to increase significantly. Furthermore, even though today one in five students in the United States, nearly 23% of all U.S. students, still attend a rural school (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012; Williams, 2010), rural public schools are continuing to vanish from the American landscape, since school consolidation is still often considered by policymakers and educational bureaucrats as the best as well as quickest way to solve "rural issues" (Bard, et al., 2006).

The stirrings of the consolidation movement, an undertaking defined by Nelson as the practice of combining two or more schools, or school districts, for educational or economic benefits (1985), began around 1918 with the closing of nearly all one-room schools in the United States (Covert, 1930). The growing awareness that one teacher in a one-room schoolhouse serving various grade levels could not achieve the level of instruction needed to adequately educate students coupled with the opinion that larger schools could provide a greater number of educational opportunities than could the small schools prompted the initial round of school reorganization, i.e. consolidation, in the United States. Supporters of consolidation today, however, tend to ignore offsetting expenses such as those added through the "required" extra administrative staff salaries or, more particularly, by student transportation costs.

Student transportation in rural areas usually involves a larger monetary outlay since students are located in less concentrated areas where each rural bus route is comprised of more miles than those typically driven by bus drivers whose routes are

located in urban or suburban areas. Yet, this is a fiscal obstacle that would continue even after consolidation since the same miles must be traveled regardless of the school location. But perhaps more important than financial costs is the additional hazards students face in spending more time on a bus traveling those extra miles required to reach a consolidated “city” school. When coming from the Portal area to Statesboro High School via school bus, as much as two extra hours per day could be added to a student’s travel time. The least amount, in all probability, would be an additional full hour of travel per day to cover the extra 24 miles roundtrip. There is potential for an increase in student tension and conflict during these longer bus rides. The loss of free time may also prevent many students from participating in extracurricular after-school activities. The earlier home departure times and arrival back home at later hours may contribute to sleep deprivation and deny students the privilege of uninterrupted study time. In addition, there are physiological hazards brought about by increased inhalation of diesel fumes and CO<sup>2</sup> gases and their effect on still developing bodies (Howley & Howley, 2006). How can we justify these added risks to student wellbeing in the name of a healthier financial bottom line? According to Howley, Johnson and Petrie (2011), in cases such as these “deconsolidation is more likely to yield benefits than consolidation” (p. 3).

Another issue to consider is the rising evidence that not all rural areas are still in steady decline. In recent years, increases in rural enrollment have outpaced growth in all other school locales (Strange, et al., 2012). At first glance these smaller communities, not unlike Portal, do appear to offer potential residents less than their urban counterparts, namely less crowding in their children’s schools, less traffic, less noise, and less air pollution. Since these regions may not be cultivated primarily for farming as they once

were, they have become “bedroom communities” in newly developed subdivisions for residents who work in nearby large cities; in other words, they are residential areas that include a large number of commuters among the home-owning population. Many residents of Portal actually work in other towns in Bulloch County (Statesboro, Brooklet), or in neighboring counties such as Jenkins County (Millen), Evans County (Claxton), Candler County (Metter, Rincon, Savannah), or Richmond County (Augusta). So it would seem that we are now no longer talking about schools that service small, declining populations, but rather institutions responsible for the education of a flourishing sector of our nation’s residents. Yet with all this being said, there continues to be an authoritative push to re-evaluate “the practicality for the existence of many small rural community schools” (Purcell & Shackelford, 2005, p. 1).

#### The Ties That Bind

Personal and professional lives often connect in meaningful ways. I have been associated with the Portal area as a teacher since August 2001 and have developed a tremendous respect for this community. Consequently, my interest in this community and its schools is both personal and professional. I am currently teaching at the Portal Elementary School. The 2012-2013 school year marks my twelfth year of teaching music (and three years of reading as well) at this school. I see and have experienced this town as a vital, close-knit community that maintains a central link to its past while striving to provide and maintain contemporary services and facilities for its residents. I am an active participant in community events such as the annual Turpentine Festival and the Portal Community Christmas Nativity Program also held each year on the festival fairgrounds. My elementary school students present a musical program at both events every year.

Since this community's schools have in the fairly recent past been affected by many broad political and economic policies that tend to damage and even destroy rural communities, I am deeply concerned with this town's continued survival. I believe a loss of the high school section of the middle high school would be extremely detrimental to this community's future.

I usually enter the Portal city limits around 7:20 each weekday morning, praying that I will not find myself behind bus 022 as I make my way to the elementary school. Already the township is coming to life and there are several cars at each business that sells the needed "cup of caffeine" or, if one has the time, the full bacon, eggs, and grits smothered in butter breakfast. I enjoy the sometimes sleepy and sometimes highly energetic waves I receive from my present and former students who are waiting on the bus.



- (a) The town's welcome sign located on the southeastern entrance to Portal, and
- (b) *The Turpentine City* and the Carter turpentine still commemorated through local artwork on a building in downtown Portal

The main street (Highway 80 West) through downtown Portal looks nothing like I visualize a *highway* to be, but reminds me of the fading main street of Cartersville,

Georgia, a formerly small, basically agricultural town where I was born and where my four grandparents and various aunts, uncles and cousins have lived their entire lives. It is also the place I still refer to even today as “home” even though I have lived in Bulloch County for over 35 years. This northwestern town located in Bartow County has now grown to much larger proportions since I-75 connected it more directly to Atlanta several years ago, and businesses have moved from the downtown area to the Wal-Mart and mall district further down the highway. It has, in fact, become one of the aforementioned bedroom communities created by the growing number of employment opportunities, the crowded settings, and the often much higher-priced real estate in the Fulton County and Cobb County areas. When I was a child, Highway 41 (yes, the one made famous by the Allman Brothers’ “Ramblin’ Man”) was the fastest way from our house to my maternal and my paternal grandparents’ houses which were located within a mile of each other.

What stands out most in my memory as I think back on the every Sunday visits to my grandparents’ homes for dinners of fried chicken, country ham, homemade biscuits, chicken gravy, fried okra, and sweet tea, is the long conversations around the dinner table as everyone “kicked back and let their dinner (not lunch!) settle.” Sometimes neighbors or more relatives dropped by after dinner and added to the dialogue while accepting just a small (not really) piece of homemade chocolate cake or pineapple upside-down cake. It was a great place to be for catching up on current family and community news. Yet, what I enjoyed most were the tales from the past that began later on into the conversations. What kid doesn’t like hearing about a time when her father and mother acted like “young’uns” themselves? Stories of antics that got them into trouble, revelations about their childhood behaviors that perhaps revealed the same growing pains I myself was

experiencing at the time, were all thrown into the “remember when” mix. If we, that is my cousins and I, could remember to stay still and keep quiet, the adults would forget that we were there, and we could hear some really “juicy” yarns before some observant grown-up noticed us and spouted the dreaded “little pitchers have big ears” maxim.

Perhaps most importantly, what I recall very clearly is that we all seemed to seek not only a sense of reconnection with our past, but also the experience of present-day bonding together of family and community members who have distinct similarities as well as varied, but accepted, differences. To put it simply, we reveled in what made us...“US.”

Portal, like “old” Cartersville and many other small towns across the United States, has a sense of this “us-ness,” a feeling that we, meaning not only my north Georgia family members but also the residents of Portal and other small towns across the country, want to maintain and protect. It is this action of safeguarding our *selves*, that is to say our individualities and personas, that may often seem like close-mindedness to those outside the realm of a small town or community; however, it is simply the residents exerting their wants and likes and protecting the way things are in their own milieus. Yes, change can be good, but not always. “Things,” and this includes the public schools, may not need to be upgraded, expanded, corrected, or abolished to make way for supposedly bigger and better things. I believe that there are times when the “old” ways of small community schools are not necessarily lacking and these institutions may not need in the least to be consolidated with the alleged “better,” larger schools attended by the some of the more influential members in another section of the school district.

I began my own public school education in the early sixties in a neighborhood school located in a small northwest Georgia suburb of Atlanta. It contained kindergarten

through seventh grades, two classes in each grade, and had an enrollment of about 350 white students from middle-class families. There were no paraprofessionals, though parent volunteers often came to help. For the most part, I remember pleasant feelings of belonging, being protected, and being valued, and I trusted those “in charge” of my educational upbringing. I think these pleasant memories and the excellent education I received were, by and large, due to my personal experiences in a small neighborhood community school. I believe that people, especially families with young children, generally appreciate the familiarity of place, land, and kin associated with sparse populations or small towns.

My school and community shared a symbiotic relationship in that this school was a vital focal point for the community; more specifically, it was the central gathering hub for the residents. In support, parents and community members gave of their time and work efforts to the school. The Parent-Teacher Association (P. T. A.) was very active and the monthly meetings were well attended. The school administrators were also very cooperative when other community organizations, those not necessarily school-related, wanted to schedule other activities on the school grounds. This reciprocal association is very similar to the relationship I have observed and experienced among the approximately 600 resident-member Portal area community, the Portal Elementary School and the Portal Middle High School.

My interest in preserving small rural community schools may seem somewhat nostalgic in nature, but it is much more than that. I believe, in concert with Howley and Eckman (1997), that “[m]aintaining good rural schools and communities means recognizing that being small can be a virtue and needs to be cultivated as such” (p. 1). As



a parent, grandparent, community member, and teacher, I fear the loss of smallness and intimacy in our schools, the loss of our ability to see children as individuals, and my personal loss as a classroom teacher of seeing growth in every single student I teach because I am too overwhelmed with the numbers in my classroom and must instead evaluate groups of students whose names I struggle to remember. I am concerned that what often passes as an apposite education, at least in the minds of some bureaucrats and businessmen, is not an emancipatory process advanced through critical thinking but rather a universal form of training enmeshed with the archaic idea of “schooling” for the masses. As the old Leiber and Stoller song of the 1960s queries, “Is this all there is?” I, too, wonder if this is all there is to be offered by our system of alleged equal-opportunity public education. More specifically, as an educator I am struggling to find an answer to the following challenges found in schools with larger classroom enrollments, particularly those high schools with enrollments of over 800 students as would be the case if Bulloch County High Schools consolidated: Will we as teachers have the time to take a personal interest in each of our students when they are merged into larger schools housing students from other towns and neighborhoods, or will they become merely a name and number in a grade book? Will larger classroom populations even allow the students the opportunity to *know* each other as individuals? Finally, when our students graduate from formal schooling, will they continue to learn because we teachers had the time and opportunities to promote and nurture, through one-on-one interactions, an intrinsic desire in each and every child to know more, to grow more, and to be more?

## Purposes of the Study

The inspiration to conduct this research was dual in its development. Initially it was the concept purported by Glesne (2006) that researchers should “see research as a political act in challenging value systems” (p. 16) that spurred my desire to generate a research project that could possibly give an even greater voice to residents of the Portal, Georgia area. When I paired this idea with Greene’s (1995) view that teaching and learning must be linked to improving the world beginning with the immediate area in and around us, I was wholly motivated to research and document the challenges, obstacles, and possibilities of these small schools and their rural community. Consequently, the purposes of this study, *Two Small Rural Schools Under Siege: An Oral History 1969-2012*, are twofold in nature. Primarily, the overarching research issue in my study is the exploration of what we can learn from the experiences of citizens in one small rural community who have been affected by the consolidation movement. Secondly, I wanted to produce a written record of some of the events from 1969-2012 along with various reactions and viewpoints of the community members to these events that took place due to the push for the closing and consolidation of these schools.

The account of the relationship between the Portal community and its hometown schools remains essentially unexamined and, unfortunately, untold. Since knowledge of our history has the potential to successfully guide future decisions and endeavors, I ardently believe that these oral histories need to be preserved and shared for the benefit of future generations. I also believe that the histories disclosed by former Portal school students and their parents, grandparents, currently active and retired teachers, and other community members as to why they place such value in retaining their neighborhood

schools could encourage others to become outspoken advocates for their own small schools. Perhaps learning of another small community that has successfully retained, maintained, and continues to fight for their own local schools will inspire others to protect their own unique educational heritage by working “together to form strong partnerships, examine all possible variables, and make well informed decisions based on all possible data before embarking on the path toward consolidation” (Bard et al., 2006, p. 45).

Another objective of this study is to redirect attention, especially that of some educational and political policymakers, to small rural schools in a more positive way by illuminating the many admirable characteristics of small rural schools. While I realize that findings generated by qualitative research are not decisively conclusive and usually are not used to make overarching generalizations about the area of interest studied, I strongly believe we can draw valid meanings from these oral histories from this time period (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; van Manen, 1990); meanings that will support a fresh look at rationales for maintaining the basic premise of the small, rural community school and preserving its educational base as an integral part of further decision-making. I believe that with a greater understanding of what has gone on before in this particular rural school district we can find compelling reasons for becoming advocates for smaller, community-based schools.

This research covers the time period from 1969, the year enforced legal desegregation of the Bulloch County School System brought the closing and consolidation of several area schools, until 2012, thirteen years after the new Portal Elementary School had been completed and one year after the final touches were made

on the completely new Portal Middle High School edifice. The stories are conveyed through the voices of those involved and have been analyzed through a critical lens that examines power relationships and the influence of classism in society. I believe the narratives and anecdotes gathered from the individuals selected as interviewees were best told through dialogical and conversational interviews that allowed the participants' voices, passions, and personal histories to permeate the telling. I am convinced that archival sources alone could not provide the familiarity and understanding I believe we can glean from these individual perspectives.

### Research Questions

As with many qualitative studies, I was aware that the foci of the research questions could evolve as I collected, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted the data. However, it was the following four wide-ranging questions that guided my study: What are the challenges, problems, and possibilities of small schools in rural communities in Georgia? What can we learn about the relationship between small schools and communities in rural locations through an oral history of the fight to save the two community schools in Portal, Georgia? What can an oral history recounting this period of struggle in Portal to save the two local schools tell us about the positive characteristics of small rural schools? What was/is involved in sustaining and preserving these two schools?

### Why Portal, Georgia and Why Should We Care?

Vital entities to any community, possibly as critical as the heart to the body, are the neighborhood schools, particularly if the district is a small, rural one like the town of Portal, Georgia. Herein is one compelling belief conveyed in this study; that we all lose a

valuable piece of our American legacy when a community dies, an often foregone conclusion when the community loses its schools. Therefore, it is my hope that a renewed focus on subjects such as student-, family-, and community-interaction will support a fresh look at justifications for regarding our rural schools as integral parts of our nation's educational foundation.

Currently, it would seem that we as a nation are becoming more driven to produce successful human commodities not only nationally, but globally as well. I have come up against the global education philosophy frequently in the last several months as we classroom teachers began attending training sessions and curriculum development meetings that will "train" us to move on from the *Georgia Performance Learning Standards* (GPLS), implemented in 2004 after a Phi Delta Kappa audit conducted in 2002 concluded that the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) lacked depth and did not meet national standards, to the *Common Core Georgia Performance Standards* (CCGPS) touted as "a common sense next step from the Georgia Performance Standards" (Common Core Standards [website], 2012). It is my understanding gleaned from these early training sessions that the CCGPSs are to address more comprehensively the objectives that will enable our graduating students to achieve success globally. In fact, students as early as kindergarten will begin to look at career possibilities for themselves and create a portfolio that supports these choices. "With students, parents and teachers all on the same page and working together for shared goals, we can ensure that students make progress each year and graduate from school prepared to succeed in college and in a modern workforce" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Common Core Standards [website], Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, para.

3). While it is hard to argue with the positivity these goals project, again my concern is that we may accept these overarching objectives as all there really is to education.

I am not trying to downplay the value of financial security. Certainly all students need to possess the skills that will enable them to be gainfully employed contributors to their own lives and our nation's economy on both the national and global scales.

However, children should not be viewed as commodities. Nor should their progression on the road to becoming human capital for the state be measured solely by two end-products: financial coffers and test scores (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). I firmly believe in concert with Littky (2004) that we must "fight for an education system that includes [the citizens and students] and their voices, and that allows schools to be true assets to our kids, our families, and our communities" (p. xvi).

Portal residents claim that, initially, they were given very little say in the deliberations and decisions concerning the continued existence of their schools. Many local citizens have, in our private conversations, expressed to me their frustrations at feeling excluded from official dialogues pertaining to their schools. Freire (1994) has warned us that "to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (p. 66). This specific struggle of the Portal community exemplifies a concept of inequities resulting from a power relationship or domination by an ownership society, in this case, residents with more vested interests in the larger schools of the Statesboro and Brooklet areas. However, the Portal community developed a strong network of community supporters who *found their voices* and not only defended the right of their schools to exist, but vigorously questioned the educational validity and rationale for the proposed closures. By arming themselves with their own uniqueness, the citizens

were able to curtail some of the political imbalance by articulately and, if the situation called for it, loudly expressing why the community and their hometown schools are valuable institutions worthy of their own place in the Bulloch County School System. In instances such as this, what may appear to be the right course of action for all involved, in this case the closing and consolidation of schools, may in fact be, albeit unknowingly, a misguided and detrimental option. Decisions concerning the educational welfare of our nation's students should not be defined solely by high stakes test scores and financial bottom lines. Therefore, a truly comprehensive education should also be evaluated by its continuous service to and for human beings, individuals who are much more than mere numbers embodying their test results and taxable earnings.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Even though rural America and its people continue to be vital assets nationwide in both material goods as well as human resources (Hamrick, 2003; Stern, 1994), rural communities are grappling with a decline in their quality of life due to the 1980s economic slump, the 1990s globalization of the market place (Miller, 1995), and yet another fiscal nose-dive in the new millennium. As schools address the responsibilities of educating those with “diverse student backgrounds, learning styles, and needs” while striving to meet the added “federal and state accountability requirements” (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005, p. 1), the quest to obtain and maintain funding is a continuous challenge for most school systems. As Elizabeth Cohen stated quite decidedly in a speech at an Education Research and Improvement Conference (1996), “[P]overty constitutes the unexamined 600-pound gorilla that most affects American education today” (cited in Biddle, 2001, p. 3). However, while it is true that schools in virtually all regions of the United States are wrestling with fiscal problems, inner-city and urban schools tend to receive much more financial assistance than do their rural counterparts. For example, according to the National Education Association (2007), the nation’s rural school districts serve about 40% of all students and receive 22% of all federal education funds.

Conversely, urban districts serve 32% of the overall student population and are awarded 41% of all federal funds. Budgets of the typically underfunded rural community schools (Long, 2006; Powers, 2009) are stretched even further when the complications of



higher transportation costs and lower per-pupil tax generated revenue are added to this already daunting list of obstacles. With all these difficulties, it seems reasonable to expect that struggling smaller communities would become disheartened and forfeit the responsibility of maintaining their own community schools, but that is not always what happens, especially when closing and consolidation alone are offered as the only solutions to the problems. According to Nadel and Sagawa (2002) it is the prevailing sense of place in rural communities that helps them overcome the hardships of insufficient financial support and scarce resources.

In this literature review the broad expanse of research on consolidation has been limited to the studies summarized here after an analysis of primary resources and meta-analyses of empirical studies. The selection was subjective, but was directed by the findings of many respected researchers who combined and analyzed the results of various studies on the topics of rural schools, rural communities, and school and district consolidations. This chapter also examines the issue of classism and its effects on small rural communities and their hometown schools in juxtaposition with the emancipatory principles of critical theory exhibited in the works of social activists Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, Jean Anyon, and Henry Giroux. The pros and cons of school closings and consolidations and how these actions are linked to power are also analyzed. This review is organized in the following manner: a) a focus on the presumption that schools close to home are the right of every child intertwined with the curriculum scholarship concept *sense of place*, in this instance southern history and culture, that validates the community of geography and kinship that is distinguished and sustained over time; (b) a delineation of the most widely used definitions for the terms *rural* and *rural school* and an

explanation as to how these differing definitions can and have distorted the conclusions in some rural research; (c) a summary of the theoretical foundation, critical theory, and how it applies to this study, particularly in terms of power and classism, and an overview of dominant critical theorists cited in this study; and (d) a review of the history and effects, both positive and negative, of consolidations on small communities and their schools.

### The Right of Every Child

Many small community residents who declare the schools to be the very lifeblood of their communities resolve to fight to save these entities from closure. Indeed, research does show that many communities, rural ones in particular, have lost their sustainability after losing their school (Jolly & Deloney, 1996; Lyson, 2002; Sell, Leistriz, & Thompson, 1996; Weber, 2007) since, more often than not, “economic and political atrophy follow” (Ward & Rink, 1992, p. 11). The schools, however, contribute far more than just fiscal security. As per Stern (1994), a “rural school and its community are inextricably bound” (p. 21) by their sociocultural identities and a *sense of place* (Nadel & Sagawa, 2002), the latter attribute being perhaps most difficult to identify and comprehend but vital to understanding the feelings and opinions of rural and small town citizenry. The term sense of place is characterized by Low (1992) as a symbolic relationship formed when people, in interacting with their environments, create emotional bonds and links to a particular area. “Place, particularly a rural place...is the central cohesion point of a life interconnected with other beings” (Bushnell, 1999, p. 81).

Physical locations however are only one piece in this sense of place puzzle. This attachment is not bounded merely in affective connections but is also comprised of

cultural beliefs and customs that connect a person or group of people to a certain locale. As stated by Reynolds (2013), “Understanding identity and how it is formed is a complex activity that cannot be separated from the social and cultural contents that frame individuals” (p. 43). This sense, this essential part of the human experience, contributes to our collective identities and is grounded on the premise that our behavior, emotions, thoughts, indeed our entire personalities are “shaped not just by our genes and neurochemistry, history, and relationships, but also by our surroundings” (Gallagher, 1993, p.12). McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood and Park (2003) suggested there is a conflict of identity and one’s place in the world, not “exclusive to the industrialized world” (p. 451), and that culture and identity of all peoples are essential to education. In the Portal community, the residents’ sense of place has over time resulted from living in this area and becoming familiar with its geographic characteristics as well as its history. To these citizens, Portal, Georgia is a place especially different from anywhere else and it is crucial to these residents that they protect and maintain its essence.

In Osterman’s (2000) article reviewing research regarding students' sense of acceptance within the school community, a sense of community was defined as a feeling of belongingness within a group. The findings (Wentzel, 1998/1997) indicated that how students experience school as a community and how schools influence this sense of community is significant in educational settings in relation to social perceptions and behaviors. Based on the premise that all individuals have personal psychological needs, the study examined the methods and success to which these needs are met by the schools, in the social context, by conveying the experience of belongingness enhanced by parents, teachers, and peers. The findings suggested that some schools implement, albeit

unknowingly at times, structural practices that undermine or even completely ignore the students' experience of membership in a caring community. In order to meet the compulsory academic objectives assessed by standardized testing, Osterman posited that the affective needs of students must be met first. Other studies that have measured this sense of community (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003) have proposed a causal link with levels of productive achievement and appropriate student behavior.

Few studies have linked developmental outcomes to relationships between community context and the social context of the schools as the principal social milieu. Researchers tend to limit their studies in scope, unquestionably a necessary prerequisite to proceeding with the research, to one or two student behavioral characteristics. For instance, Ballestich and Hom (1997) delineated their study to students' involvement in problem behaviors and how they are linked to students' sense of community and school. The findings indicate that the school milieu, with its significant sense of community, may strengthen students' resistance to unsafe relationships and situations and increase more suitable behaviors. Moreover, in *Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity, and Transformation*, Green (1999) stressed that our ontological rootlessness created by our lack of attachment to and involvement in a place and community exacerbates our inability to engage with one another.

With its ontological basis, a fundamental concern of curriculum theory "is the 'what' or 'why' of any educational enterprise" (Morris & Hamm, 1976, p. 299). "Education," as decisively stated by Giroux (1999), "is never innocent because it always presupposes a particular view of citizenship, culture, and society" (p.31). In considering sense of place, we must appreciate that it "has implications for education" (Pinar, 1991).

The consolidation of a local school with other schools outside the rural community usually signifies that the education of these students is now to be “entrusted to an arbitrary unit of civil society under the aegis of the state” (Reynolds, 1999, p. 57). In instances such as this, before bending to the biddings of those who urge this action, we must ask some frank and penetrating questions of ourselves and these powers that be. What effect will this have on the community, present and future, as well as its student residents? Have any other viable options to consolidation been offered? Why was this move to erase the community’s schools and merge them with another educational unit deemed necessary? These inquiries are particularly vital since it is these authorities who will most likely be deciding whose knowledge is of most worth, how this knowledge is to be organized, and how the achievement of this knowledge is to be evaluated. The loss of a community’s schools encompasses more than just the loss of some sentimental sense of neighborhood or place. The residents’ loss of connection and influence on their students, as well as a significant loss of students’ affiliation with their community, tend to produce an invading atmosphere of suppression, perceived clandestineness, and exclusion within the community. Curriculum theorists recognize these experiences as a form of cultural reproduction by those in power and question the inequities of this form of education.

The educational institutions of small rural communities play key roles in community growth and continuity by their transmission of the aforementioned community mores, especially those of a moral and ethical nature, and further promote community pride and a sense of identity by representing local history and tradition (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Stern, 1994). Many rural schools demonstrate qualities such as leadership and commitment that promote good citizenship,

qualities that are sometimes lost in bigger, less community-minded schools (Bryant, 2012).

Perhaps one of the strongest methods community residents could implement to save their communities would happen in partnership with its local schools. By implementing the multidimensional system of Schwab's "milieus" (1983), schools can incorporate a framework for learning with the school and classroom environment, community and family, class and ethnicity, and values and attitudes that, in the learner's environment, produce a "curriculum of shared interests" (He, Phillion, Chan, & Xu, 2008) that embraces the students' "cultural climate" (Schwab, 1983). Furthermore, these schools, due to their familiarity with the students and families of the community, are more easily capable of incorporating an *ethic of caring*; and this "heart of caring in schools is relationships with others (teachers, parents, and students) characterized by nurturance, altruistic love, and kinshiplike connections" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 145)

In a survey of rural students regarding their opinions of their communities and local schools, the participants reported that the "positive feelings they had about living in rural areas were connected with their families, homes and small communities with peace, safety and caring" (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p.18). Learning should be personal, an objective that is more readily met in the milieus of small schools such as those in the Portal community. In these intimate learning environments teachers tend to know their students well. According to Perry (2003), small schools provide an environment in which students interact more often and more significantly with their teachers, both formally and informally, and in conversations concerning not just school issues but extramural matters as well. Being known, truly known as *a person*, is vital to a student's psychological

wellbeing, especially for those students who are quieter, more introverted, and are likely to go unnoticed in large and impersonal settings. All children, indeed all human beings, deserve “a safe place where we go as we are” (Angelou, 1991, p. 196); for many, that place is a small rural school located in one’s own community. In her review of several large-scale studies on small schools, Raywid (1997/1998) ascertains, “there is enough evidence now of such positive effects—and of the devastating effects of large size on substantial numbers of youngsters—that it seems morally questionable not to act on it.” (p. 35). Yet perhaps the most significant point often overlooked by governing authorities from outside the community is expressed by Jimerson (2006a) in her report for *The Rural School and Community Trust*: “[G]ood schools, close to home are the right of every child” (p. 6).

#### What Characteristics Demarcate an Area as “Rural”?

A definitive classification of what comprises a rural area was perhaps supplied by Coburn, MacKinney, McBride, Mueller, Slifkin, and Wakefield (2007) when they surmised that the term “rural” is most often defined not by describing what it is, but by what it is not. Due to the complex nature of what the category of rural can entail in its entirety, pinpointing exactly what constitutes “rural areas” are can be overwhelmingly confusing (Apling & Kuenzi, 2008, Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Lewis, 2003). According to Stern, “Few issues bedevil analysts and planners concerned with rural education more than the question of what actually constitutes ‘rural’” (1994, p. 17). Even though Cromartie and Swanson (1996) claim that the fundamental “concepts for defining what is rural have not changed greatly over time” (p. 31), there is still an overall inconsistency in the definition and interpretation. Most government agencies first define “urban” and

“suburban.” “Rural” is then simply what remains. While there are no shortages of definitions for the term, these definitions are rarely completely analogous. This is due, in part, to the fact that “population size, density, and accessibility have not been mapped and analyzed at a spatial scale detailed enough to fully capture increasingly complex U.S. settlement patterns” (1996, p. 31).

Generally speaking, rural America’s key features are its low population density and the long distances separating rural communities from one another and from urban centers of economic activity. For some, the term *rural* brings to mind a locale imbued with tranquility and bucolic images of red barns, rows of planted fields, livestock and sweeping, unspoiled expanses of acreage inhabited by small numbers of residents residing on one-family farms. For others, particularly the empirically-minded, rural is restricted to quantitative measures of wide-ranging miles, the number of residents per mile, and the concentration of these residents who are engaged in varied agricultural occupations in the quantified area. While the former interpretations evoke images of acres of wide-open countryside, it must be pointed out that low-populated geographical areas and rural areas are not always synonymous, i.e., mountainous areas, timberlands, swamplands, deserts, and other areas with a low population density such as small towns, are not always defined as rural. Furthermore, the efficient output of many rural farms is due, chiefly, to the merging and commercialization of the farming industry and not to the productivity of the idealized single-family farms remembered from years past. Moreover, the predominately agricultural perception fails to recognize the prevalence of the growing number of urban-employed rural residents (Howarth, 1997) such as the one in this study.



There are four agencies whose definitions are widely used by many policy-making organizations: the U.S. Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The implementations of these classifications result in very different sets of locales being categorized as rural areas. Consequently, evaluating findings from research conducted in rural areas must be approached with some caution, since there may be a large gap separating the different rural areas that are being compared.

According to the U. S. Census Bureau's Urbanized Area categorization (*Defining Urban and Rural*, 2010), an urban area "must encompass at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 of which reside outside institutional group quarters. Urban areas that contain 50,000 or more people are designated as urbanized areas (Uas); urban areas that contain at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people are designated as urban clusters (Ucs). The term 'urban area' refers to both Uas and Ucs. The term 'rural' encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (p. 9), or more simply, rural is "any territory not defined as urban" (p. 12). This information is based on total population and population density. This loosely fashioned "nondefinition" classifies Portal as a rural area.

The definition supplied by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in its analysis of counties in the *Federal Register* was not calculated to provide a clarification of the term rural (Spotila, 2000). "The purpose of the *Standards for Defining Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas* is to provide nationally consistent definitions for collecting, tabulating, and publishing federal statistics for a set of

geographic areas. To this end, the Metropolitan Area concept has been successful as a statistical representation of the social and economic linkages between urban cores and outlying, integrated areas” (p. 2). The OMB published definitions of Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas (Core Based Statistical Areas – CBSA) based on census data and population estimates that classified nonmetropolitan counties as either “micropolitan” or “noncore.” Metropolitan Statistical Areas are based on urbanized areas of 50,000 or more population; Micropolitan Statistical “micropolitan” or “noncore.” Metropolitan Statistical Areas are based on urbanized areas of 50,000 or more population; Micropolitan Statistical Areas are based on urban clusters with a population of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 (p. 10). However, these CBSA classifications cannot be likened to that of an urban-rural categorization as Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas can contain both urban and rural populations. In spite of this conundrum, the exceedingly ambiguous “OMB classification system is the most frequently used system of identifying urban and rural areas for statistical purposes because it is a county-based classification system and most data are collected at the county level” (Crandall & Weber, 2005, para. 7).

The Economic Research Service (ERS) for the U. S. Department of Agriculture has developed several classifications to measure rural qualities and assess the economic and social diversity of rural America: the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, the Urban-Influence Codes, and the Rural-Urban Commuting Areas. The categories classify counties, census tracts, and ZIP codes by degree of *rurality* and are used to determine eligibility for Federal programs that assist rural areas (Parker, 2010, para. 1). Rural-Urban Continuum Codes shape a system of classification that differentiates metropolitan (metro)

counties according to the population size of their metro area, and nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties by degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area or areas.

The 2003 Urban Influence Codes divide the 3,141 counties, county equivalents, and independent cities in the United States into 12 groups. Metro counties are divided into two groups by the size of the metro area—those in “large” areas with at least one-million residents and those in “small” areas with fewer than one-million residents. Nonmetro micropolitan counties are divided into three groups by their adjacency to metro areas—adjacent to a large metro area, adjacent to a small metro area, and not adjacent to a metro area; the latter defines Portal. Nonmetro noncore counties are divided into seven groups by their adjacency to metro or micro areas and whether or not they have their “own town” of at least 2,500 residents. Census-defined places are major categories—city, suburban, town, and rural. “Rural areas are subdivided by their proximity to an urbanized area into the categories fringe, distant, or remote” (Womach, 2005, p. 226).

The U. S. Department of Education implements an extremely restrictive definition to identify the rural school districts that are eligible to participate in the Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program entitled REAP (Rural Education Achievement Program), a program “designed to assist rural school districts in using Federal resources more effectively to improve the quality of instruction and student academic achievement” (U. S. Department of Education, 2003, p.7). Local educational agencies (LEAs) “must have an average attendance of less than 600 or have all of the schools located in counties with a population density of less than 10 persons per square mile and serve only schools that have a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) school locale of 7 or 8 or be located in the area of the State defined as rural by a governmental agency of the state”

(2003, p. 9). As expected, most areas do not qualify for placements into this rural categorization, including the Portal school district examined in this study.

Not surprisingly, just as there is an abundance of rural definitions, it follows that there are scores of ways to identify “rural schools” or “rural education” (Carmichael, 1980) as well. This ongoing application of differing definitions by principal federal agencies responsible for tracking rural populations has hindered research in the field of rural education largely due to the fact that the evaluation of comparable data on a longitudinal basis is made more difficult. Accordingly, not only what constitutes rural schools but also how competently these schools provide their students with educational opportunities are, respectively, confusing and hard to document. A particular school may be defined by its location (e. g., remoteness from urban or metropolitan areas,) or its population’s density, ethnicity, and overall median age. Considerations of these factors are particularly important because they frequently influence the availability of resources, including the amount of financial grants offered, and community economic conditions. They can also influence meta-analyses of schools since it is hard to know if one is comparing “apples to apples.” Hull (2003) however has identified common qualities that apply to most rural school districts, including the one cited in this study: “From a governance standpoint, rural school districts tend to be smaller in population, although larger geographically, and are less ‘layered’ than urban and suburban districts, with fewer administrators and specialists than in other areas” (p. 1).

While rural schools are not always smaller than their counterparts, this is the case for the two schools profiled in this research. Furthermore, even though small schools do not always service smaller classes of students, these particular schools generally do

maintain smaller class sizes than most of the other elementary, middle, and high schools in the county. The Rural Assistance Center (RAC), a product of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Rural Initiative that helps rural communities and other rural stakeholders access the full range of available programs, funding, and research that can enable them to provide quality health and human services to rural residents, identifies Portal as a rural area.

In the rural area cited in this study, residents have claimed that they initially were given very little input into decisions concerning the continued existence of their schools. Sometimes referred to by other citizens of Bulloch County as “those people,” the residents of this small town in northwestern Bulloch County appear to have been side-stepped when significant decisions concerning their schools were made. This exclusion from the decision-making process in effect relegates these citizens to the status of lifeless “objects” (Freire, 1994) incapable of participating in policymaking negotiations. In order to challenge the perceived inequalities practiced upon this marginalized rural school community, we must implement the theoretical framework of critical theory and confront the far-reaching jaundiced eyes of classism.

#### Critical Theory: Battling Power and the Overarching “ism” of Class

Currently our educational system has been restructured to allow corporate America to make major social and political decisions that restrict teachers “through an emphasis on accountability, teaching to the tests, and management by objective approaches that reduce their work to reductionist, instrumental, and demeaning procedures” (Giroux, 2008, p. 2). It is vital, especially in the field of education, that we question whose knowledge and directives we are perpetuating and for what reasons. For

example, how and why have corporations been permitted to exert such a “great influence over education policies and politics without contributing their fair share of the tax burden”? (Klonsky & Klonsky, 2008, p. 13). How have we arrived at a point in teaching that defines education essentially as a business valued primarily for its serviceable cash value (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008). Why is it that public schools in areas with high property values tend to be more successful than those in lower socio-economic neighborhoods, and why do many in society accept that this paradigm is “just how it is,” “how it has always been,” and therefore, must be “suitable” for everyone. How can we “define justice that shapes decisions about practice...without forcing conformity to a dominant norm that privileges some over others?” (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. ix). Exactly who do these dominant standards benefit and why? Lastly, how did scores of educators, students, and community members lose *their voices* in the decision-making processes regarding the current forms of schooling that often marginalize students who are labeled as poor, a racial minority, and are least advantaged socially and economically and, therefore, are seemingly not as worthy as those who are more privileged?

Unfortunately our current school systems tend to further social conditioning and the reproduction of class inequality (Apple, 1995, 2006). Equally disappointing, it also appears that “the only people who can really improve teaching – teachers – are often left powerless” (Klonsky, 1995, p. 17). Unless educators, parents, and students reclaim the right to exercise greater control over what and how we teach and learn, all learners will continue receiving scripted instruction caught up in hegemonic practices that, as the ideal curriculum for all, advance the class, gender, and racial relationships that exemplify the dominant society instead of an “emancipatory education” (Potts, 2005) that empowers

each person. Teachers further risk the danger of becoming merely lackeys who simply “train students with ‘blue collar virtues’” (Giroux, 2001, p. 43) that reduce education to an inert object that is to be measured instead of a life form to be taught. In order to address these issues head-on with an anticipatory hope of change for the benefit of all, we must implement principles of critical theory combined with an ethical understanding of our work in education.

The central most concept of critical theory, “(a legacy from the Frankfurt school, spanning from Marx to Habermas) that assumes it necessary to expose and overcome unjust social hierarchies derived from socioeconomic class, race, gender, sexuality, place, age, appearance, disability and other hegemonic factors in society and school” (Schubert in Connelly, He, & Phillion, 2008, p. 404) is one of power. This concept of hegemony, that is, the idea of control or a dominating influence, was first articulated by Antonio Gramsci (1971) and defined as the organizing of spontaneous consent among subordinate groups, allowing one group to emerge as leader over the others. Those who made significant contributions to this school of critical thought, Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Habermas, Lowenthal, Pollack, and Fromm as well as critical theorists who have continued in this vein such as Freire, Anyon, Apple, and Giroux, emphasize the significance “of critical thinking by arguing that it is a constitutive feature of the struggle for self-emancipation and social change” (Giroux, 2001, p. 8), with “self” being a key word here. Geuss (1999) provides us an overarching definition of critical theory as “a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation” (p. 2). Critical theorists advocate that this enlightenment and emancipation are won through questioning and challenging any forms

of domination, especially the “tacit rule that regulates what can and cannot be said, who can speak with the blessings of authority and who must listen, whose social constructions are valid and whose are erroneous and unimportant” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 310).

The bias of classism is characterized by differential treatment or discrimination of “others” based on social class or *perceived* social class on multiple societal levels. It seems that many poor children and their small communities, similar to those in this study, often receive unfair treatment from the institutions of society largely because they lack political and economic power. Though this can also be due to racism, in the case of the Portal community it appears that racism is a subgroup of the overarching discrimination of classism. As stated by Larson (in Charlton, Myers, & Sharpless, 2006), “To a degree, class more than any other critical theory subset is related to the discussion of representation of the nonelite” (p. 116).

According to Kovel (2002), “class is an essentially man-made category, without root in even mystified biology” (p. 123). One’s class identity is not just a sociocultural consideration. It is usually based on economic status (Levin & Bane, 1975) and can extend to the political sphere as well. As succinctly stated by Langston (1995), “Class is all-encompassing” and we experience it “at every level of our lives” (p. 112). With the lack of financial support as their most obdurate obstacle, the Portal community’s struggle to maintain their schools exemplifies this concept of inequities resulting from a power relationship, one which underlies McLaren and Farahmandpur’s contention that “[e]ducation can never be free or equal as long as social classes exist” (in Dimitriadis & Carlson, 2003, p. 59). If education is to truly become “the great equalizer of the



conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery” as proclaimed by Horace Mann in 1848 (Twelfth Annual Report to Massachusetts State Board of Education) and reiterated by current United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, as recently as April 2012 in a speech made to the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues (Area Urban Debate League [press release]), all schools must be accorded equal access to funding, facilities and instructional supports.

The long established and largely accepted practice of using local property taxes to finance education, a tradition honored by Bulloch County along with the discretionary distribution of funds collected through the Special Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), has affected many injustices in education. As summed up by Van Heemst (2004), “[T]he quality of children’s schooling is in large part related to their parent’s income, since schools are funded largely by property taxes” (p. 4). The disproportionate property values lead to large inequalities in per-pupil spending as well as inequities in the educational opportunities. Furthermore, a sense of entitlement appears to exist among many citizens in the more affluent neighborhoods who feel it is their right, since they pay larger amounts in taxes, to have better schools than those living in less prosperous sections of the school district. If we are to ever level the playing field for “[a]ll, regardless of race or class or economic status” (U. S. Department of Education, *National Commission on Excellence in Education*, 1983), “states must do one or more of the following: redistribute state and local funds, increase state revenues, or cap education expenditures in wealthy districts” (Carr & Fuhrman, 1999, p. 138).

In the last decade, our government has attempted to equalize schools by “[a]dopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students

for success in college and the workplace” (The White House, [press release], 2009) and setting a core curriculum (The Common Core State Standards Initiative [website], 2012) that is to be internalized in some manner by each student; a process somewhat akin to the two similar concepts of a child as a “tabula rasa” (i.e. “blank slate”) or the metaphor of the “banking concept” employed by Freire (1970/1998) to identify students as empty containers into which educators must deposit knowledge. At the time of this writing, the District of Columbia and forty-five states have adopted this universal curriculum (The Common Core State Standards Initiative [website], 2012). In President Obama’s *Race to the Top*, only eleven states and the District of Columbia were declared “winners,” with winners being defined as “those that conformed to its restructuring goals with respect to testing, charters, privatization, and removing teacher tenure” (Foster, 2011, p. 10).

Success or failure of this schooling is presently evaluated by high stakes testing which enables colleges and universities, corporations and other possible employers to filter out students who do not score well and, thus, are not destined for executive positions. These officials and administrators can then select from those who, they believe, will become effective “movers and shakers” in the global economy, usually those students who have either lived in financially stable homes in middle- to upper-class neighborhoods or have attended the higher-quality schools in these areas, or most fortunately have been afforded both opportunities.

The themes of achieving the overarching goal of global market competency and the leveling of the academic area through common standards resound throughout these quotes from corporate CEOs and leading educational bureaucrats cited on the Common Core State Standards website (2012): “Common education standards are essential for

producing the educated work force America needs to remain globally competitive (Craig Barrett, Former CEO and Chairman of the Board, Intel Corporation, 2011, para. 1);

“This is an historic day for American public education and for our nation as we begin the journey to level the academic playing field for every student” (William Bradley Bryant, Georgia State Board of Education; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, para. 3);

“We clearly understand the need for common standards, voluntarily adopted by each state, if the United States is to remain competitive in the global education environment. We also support the underlying concept of higher, clearer, fairer standards and agree that they will contribute to improve the quality of instruction in our schools and the raising of student achievement levels” (Dan Domenech, Executive Director, American Association of School Administrators, 2010, para. 6); “Common standards ensure that every child across the country is getting the best possible education, no matter where a child lives or what their background is” (Gov. Roy Romer, Senior Advisor, The College Board, 2010, para. 13); “ State by State adoption of these standards is an important step towards maintaining our country’s competitive edge. With a skilled and prepared workforce, the business community will be better prepared to face the challenges of the international marketplace” (Edward B. Rust Jr., Chairman and CEO, State Farm Insurance Companies, 2010, para. 15); “Now, perhaps more than ever before, high quality education serves as a vital pathway out of poverty, both in the U.S. and abroad. If our country is not just to compete, but also win in that global environment, we must continue to shake off the educational status quo and reinvigorate our schools and students with innovative ways of thinking, learning and doing” (William S. White, CEO and President, C.S. Mott Foundation, 2010, para. 18). As illustrated by the preceding comments, the top-down

dictated schooling format of standardization and implementation of both content and evaluation is acceptable to many politicians and educational bureaucrats. Yet, these quick-fix remedies that are to be implemented entirely in the classroom are almost assuredly destined to failure chiefly because the “authorities in charge” have yet to grasp the realization that merely equalizing educational standards alone will not lead to equal outcomes (Betts & Roemer , 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Sunderman & Kim, 2005).

Overall, the educational model we are implementing now only maintains the current status quo, allowing or forcing (depending on your viewpoint) schools to reproduce an unequal society (Apple, 1995). “Educators who are committed to democracy realize that sources of inequity in the school are likely to be found in the community as well” (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 12); and, until we alert and challenge the aforementioned “authorities” as to the ways in which schools reproduce social, cultural and economic inequalities and facilitate the classist controlling domination that exists in America, there will never be a level playing field on which the subjugated and overlooked can strive to achieve and be equitably rewarded. According, to Singleton and Linton (2006) authentic “equity means that the students with greatest need receive the greatest level of support to guarantee academic success” (p. 46). This democratic ideal will never come to pass unless we address the inequalities of resources and opportunities across all schools, regardless of their socioeconomic levels and race or class makeup (Kozol, 2005). A democratically unbiased reform of education integrated with philosophies of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2001/2006/2008) and critical theories of gender, race, and class must be cultivated if we are ever to be successful in challenging and changing these elitist, undemocratic aspects of traditional educational paradigms.

Critical theory challenges us to question and agitate (Douglass, 1857) as we struggle to implement a paradigm of democratization and reform to meet these inequities in both our education system and in the greater society as well. Curriculum study in the United States has progressed from the critical theory of the early Frankfurt school to researchers who now become very actively engaged in promoting social change within the culture and education system itself. “Critical theorists believe that humans are not merely spectators in the drama of human events” (Larsen & Ovando, 2001, p. 25), but are either passive contributors to their own suppressive situation or active participants in their personal liberation.

To a large extent, critical theory was introduced into education by the work of Paulo Freire, in his native Brazil, in relation to what he termed “the culture of silence” (Freire, 1994). His insights led him to take an active role in grassroots social reform by helping dispossessed peoples “find a voice” with which to challenge dominant systems of control and assert influence in decisions concerning their own interests and wellbeing. Freire himself was well acquainted with the effects of poverty and classism and it was these personal experiences that fostered within him a passionate commitment to social justice (Freire, 1970/1998). When he was twelve years old, Paulo’s father died and the family’s middle-class life, already marked by the Great Depression, slipped further into poverty. He fell behind in school due the fact that his new position in society offered plenty of days marred by hunger. Freire stated “I didn't understand anything because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. My social condition didn't allow me to have an education. Experience showed me once again the relationship between social class and knowledge” (Gadotti, 1994, p. 5). Freire believed that the key needed to open

the door of social justice into inequitable society is “education in the service of liberation” (Freire, P., Freire, A., & Macedo, 1998, p. 40). He cautioned activists to be aware that many of those who are wealthy and privileged also use education to maintain an undemocratic and unequal status quo.

Michael Apple, a prominent critical educational theorist whose work centers on issues of power and domination affirms Freire’s assertion that schools function to reproduce an unequal society (Apple, 1995). “Schools are an important part of a complex structure through which social groups are given legitimacy and through which social and cultural ideologies are re-created, maintained, and continuously built” (Apple, 1986, p. 6). Apple further stated that not only did schooling fail to eliminate divisions and biases within society; it reinforced them through curriculum content, teaching strategies, classroom behavioral management, and the *hidden curriculum*, an unwritten and often unintended “program of study” such as the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs communicated in the classroom and the social environment (Apple & King, 1977). In *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979), Apple challenged educators and education policy-makers to redirect understandings of knowledge and learning by listening to those who have the least power. Moreover, he (1993) stressed that finding the answer to several crucial ontologically-based questions was vital to steering us away from selective practices, often designed to maintain social and cultural control, of deciding what constitutes a legitimate curriculum. Among the questions Apple poses are: What knowledge is of most worth? Whose knowledge is it? What should count as knowledge? Who shall control the selection and distribution of knowledge? Even though many educators and stakeholders tried to implement these ideas of redirection, some thirty-

three years later the same inequalities exist. Furthermore, these inequities will continue to exist until all involved, including those who are frequently marginalized in the educational arena, are motivated or allowed to generate a critical dialogue, based on mutual respect, which will make possible the process of “concientizacao” (critical conscious approach to dialogue) in which the social construction of reality might be critically examined (Freire 1994).

Jean Anyon, another critical thinker in education, focuses chiefly on the convergence of race, social class, and policy and their effects on urban neighborhoods and their schools. Anyon brings to the critical dialogue the position that any efforts seeking to bring about a reformation in urban education must be grounded on the premise that the failure of this particular sector of education is embedded in a social and historical milieu of poverty and social and racial isolation. Not only does she encourage educators to become social activists, she also urges them to inspire their students to social activism, especially those who are oppressed by social and educational poverty (Anyon, 2005).

Recent research has asserted that “in advanced industrial societies such as Canada and the U.S., where the class structure is relatively fluid, students of different social class backgrounds are still likely to be exposed to qualitatively different types of educational knowledge” (Anyon, 2005, p. 3), in other words, a “hidden curriculum” is in place. In her papers *Social Class and School Knowledge* (1981) and *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work* (1996), Anyon expanded the research of Bowles and Ginitis’ (1976) when she exposed a hidden policy of cultural reproduction that was implemented in five New Jersey elementary schools of different economic and social classes. The schools in the study were grouped according to the parents’ earning capacity and their occupations.

The five schools (two working class, one middle class, one professional class, and one highly affluent executive elites class) were shown, over the course of one entire school year, to educate their children differently by exposing them to different types of knowledge in accordance with their station or class in life. Working class knowledge would be more in the vein of *practical* knowledge; upper classes would be exposed to more *intellectual* ideas. While the curriculum topics and materials were comparable, there were differences in presentation and delineation of the material and in the outcomes expected that illustrated the social stratification of knowledge.

Anyon summarized her findings by avowing that differing school experiences “may not only contribute to the development in the children in each social class of certain types of economically significant relationships and not others but would thereby help to reproduce this system of relations in society.” (1996, p. 10). In 2001, Bowles and Gintis also reiterated and supported their original findings in *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (1976) that “parental economic status is passed on to children in part by means of unequal educational opportunity, but that the economic advantages of the offspring of higher social status families go considerably beyond the superior education they receive” (2001, p. 2). “Correct” classroom behaviors correspond to the “correct” occupational strata; i.e., passivity and obedience for the working classes, initiative and decisiveness for the managerial classes (Bowles & Gintis, 1976/2001).

Activist Henry Giroux writes, as do Apple and Anyon, with a Marxist approach to equality in education. Giroux became well known in the 1980s as a leading figure in radical education theory, a perspective that opposes the anti-democratic neoliberal and



neoconservative tendencies that often repress opposing opinion, minority races, classes, genders and worldviews. He emphasizes the significance of critical thinking by arguing that “it is a constitutive feature of the struggle for self-emancipation and social change” (Giroux, 2001, p. 8). He ardently advocates questioning and challenging any forms of domination, and he endeavors to provide a framework for understanding teaching as a form of cultural politics. His “radical pedagogy” urges educators to analyze how domination in our schools originated, how it is sustained, and how students relate to it. Giroux also offers us both the critical language with which to express our views and ideas and the facility to combine this language of critique with the language of possibility.

All students, particularly those who are being marginalized in some capacity, need an area in which to question, process, and interpret identity, social class, and racial order. Giroux advocates questioning the relationships between the marginalized and the powerful in schools. He also stresses that we must develop and enact an approach of reading history as a move toward reclaiming power identity in regards to race, gender, class and ethnicity. “[C]urricula need to be organized around knowledge of communities, cultures, and traditions that give students a sense of history, identity and place” (Giroux, 2006, p. 107). It is then through critical dialogue, not top-down instruction, that genuine learning occurs (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). What better place to initiate this conversation than in the secure environments of classrooms with teachers who are not afraid to open themselves and their classes to dynamic conversations, disagreements, and debates that could lead to a restructuring of our ideas of power and classism?

## Come Join Us: Consolidation and School Size

The early research on rural schools and rural school districts and the long-term effects of closing and consolidation on the students, families, and communities involved is exceedingly extensive yet indecisively abstruse. Many of the early studies were beset with methodological flaws (Slate & Jones, 2005), namely that of poor study designs and the indications that researchers often failed to account for important mitigating variables such as not controlling for school locations, limiting the study to one grade, or not randomly selecting schools. These problems made certain research questionable (Ballantine & Spade, 2008) and have negatively impacted the capacity to generalize results, especially those studies that involved only small samples from a single educational milieu.

Many of these studies that supported school and district consolidation tended to focus primarily on the effects of school expenditures on student performance rather than that of school and district size and its influences on achievement (Howley, et al., 2011; Huang & Howley, 1993; Sabulao, 1971; Stevens & Peltier, 1994; Turner & Thrasher, 1970), a practice that unfortunately still dominates most decisions made today as to which educational institutions will remain open and which will close and consolidate. Since advocates of consolidation tend to “believe that the financial and curricular advantages surpass the negatives of school closings” (Adkins, 2002, p. 2), these are often the only elements evaluated. By focusing solely on the relationship of size to economic and curricular efficiency, other important underlying forces in education that figure into the overall relationship between school size and student achievement are discounted or overlooked altogether (Hanushek & Luque, 2001; Jimerson, 2006a).

Another drawback in early small school/rural school research is that some studies do not deal effectively with the possibility of bias in student and teacher selection or the limited generalizability of research findings. There have been accusations from both sides of faulty research procedures that appear to ‘cherry-pick’ certain data and fail to completely assess the complex workings of the teaching-learning experience. In addition to these obstacles, the labels for the milieus are often lacking in clarity and specificity. As outlined previously in this chapter, there are uncertainties regarding what constitutes “metropolitan,” “micropolitan,” “urban,” “suburban” and “rural” areas. Consequently, the terms “rural schools” and “rural community schools” are equally difficult to pinpoint. Along with the problems of nomenclature, the aforementioned localities and educational institutions have been compared in many studies without regard to the fact that the particular geographical area or the size of an institution can greatly affect the qualities and characteristics being assessed. As surmised by Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010), localities can be greatly affected by their individual historical, political and socioeconomic make-up. In reporting findings and making generalizations, these factors cannot be ignored.

Today researchers continue to argue among themselves as to what constitutes reliable research findings on the subject of these educational entities and their unique correlation to school atmosphere and student achievement. However, research into the questions surrounding consolidation has in the last few years generated several longitudinal studies that provide somewhat more clearly the long-term results of closing and consolidation on teachers, students, school districts and communities. Therefore, conclusions that instruct decision-making concerning our schools and the effects of

school size must be guided by the mass of the evidence currently accumulated rather than on a few seemingly definitive studies conducted earlier. This approach to decision-making is based on the assumption that the strengths of some studies will ultimately compensate for the weaknesses in other studies and vice versa” (Slate & Jones, 2005, p. 2).

School consolidation, the process of restructuring two or more schools or school districts into one new unit, began in the United States over a century ago with the closing of thousands of one-room schoolhouses, one-teacher schools, and one-school districts. Through the years, this merging of schools and school districts “has been a way to solve rural issues in the eyes of policy makers and many education officials” (Bard et al., 2006, p. 2). Today, consolidation is still an issue of great concern for many small rural schools and rural school districts. Since, as per Stern (1994), “The cultural and social health of the rural sector depends on how it participates in the national and global economy” (p. 5), rural and small town communities perhaps feel the pressure for consolidation the most, particularly those with vulnerable economies and limited political leverage much like the community in this study.

The push for larger schools, particularly high schools, increased in the 1950s and 1960s with the publication of James B. Conant’s *The American High School* (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992; Walberg, 1992). Conant, then president of Harvard University, claimed that larger schools, defined as those with over 750 students, could offer a wider range of better quality academic programs at less cost than could smaller schools. He firmly believed that small high schools, those with graduating classes of less than 100 students, constituted “one of the serious obstacles to good

secondary education throughout most of the United States” (Conant, 1959, p. 80). He further asserted that a larger consolidated school could operate with a smaller staff than would two or more separate schools. Rural high school students would be provided with a better educational environment since increased funding and resources would be gained when consolidation was enacted. Likewise, sports and extracurricular activities would also thrive since these consolidated schools would make more efficient use of the collective resources.

It was also during this time period that both Sputnik and the Cold War generated increased concerns that small schools, especially rural high schools, were not developing the kind of human capital required to promote national security (Ravitch, 1983). The publishing of *A Nation at Risk Report: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (United States Department of Education, National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) further bolstered the driving force of school reform, chiefly in the form of district and school reorganization, i.e. consolidation. Commitments to the concepts of economies of scale and to the production of globally efficient workers (Fanning, 1995) prompted many district policymakers to establish large comprehensive high schools or "mega-schools" with enrollments of 2,000 upwards to as many as 4,000 students (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997).

In the 1990s and throughout the beginning of the new millennium, there were a host of large-scale studies involving hundreds of individual schools and their districts indicating compelling reasons to consider major benefits of both small and large school settings, depending on which factors of consolidation were considered significant to the study. “The early waves of consolidation did produce arguable improvements: graded

schools, special teachers, professional administration, and more solid buildings” (Howley, et al., 2011, p. 8), however many researchers believe “that a century of consolidation has already produced most of the efficiencies obtainable” (p. 3) and are now reducing efficiency (Coulson, 2007). A key concern in many of these “is-bigger-better” studies was whether policymakers take the best interests of all students into account. “Seldom have policy makers or researchers asked ‘Better for whom?’ or ‘Better under what conditions?’” (Bickel & Howley, 2000, p. 4).

This review identifies several studies on the effects of school expenditures on student performance and some research on the relationship between school/district size and student achievement since Portal residents have claimed that their smaller schools usually receive a much lesser proportion-per-student of the “funding pie.” There are no studies, particularly among recent research, that supported consolidation, even as a means to save money. As stated previously, the benefits of consolidation appear to have been achieved and any further expectations of gains due to consolidation appear to be unsupported by at least twenty years of research.

Although there are no longitudinal studies that solely and explicitly explored one small, rural community’s schools and their proposed or realized consolidations, there is one text written by a University of Iowa geographer, David Reynolds, which is especially comparable to Portal’s encounters with the “powers that be” over closing and consolidation. This particular history of rural consolidation in the early twentieth century, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* describes the milieu within which school consolidations took place in the early twentieth century. Reynolds concentrates particularly on the power of a

particular school reform crusade of that period called the *Country Life Movement*, “arguably the Progressive Era’s most important rural reform movement” (Reynolds, 1999, p. 4). In the second half of his book Reynolds focuses primarily on the Buck Creek neighborhood in the Delaware County of Iowa, highlighting the struggle of this group of rural communities whose members fought to preserve their traditions, values and, indeed, their communities, against the likelihood of elimination by consolidation. “Material progress was the desired end; institutional and organizational consolidation was the means to that end” (p. 3).

During the time period outlined in Reynolds’ work, local elections could be held as frequently as every two weeks. Hence when a proposal for consolidation was defeated, “proponents would simply note where the opposition was concentrated and redraw the boundaries to exclude enough opponents for it to pass at the next election” (1999, p. 85), a situation that paralleled, to some extent, the experiences of Portal residents as their school district attendance areas and voting precinct lines were redrawn approximately every five years. The way these periodic *readjustments* were often manipulated categorically ensured that the Portal school enrollments would remain much smaller than the other schools in the area. Furthermore, in the last decade these gerrymandered districts were plotted in such a way that, as one Bulloch County school board member stated, “It virtually guarantees the probability that a current Portal resident will never be elected to the school board again” (Richard Emerson, [pseudonym], personal communication, 2013). Reynolds concludes his study with the admonition that there are numerous reasons as to why community members greatly value their schools, and the discussions concerning consolidation should encompass more than simply the economic

quality of these institutions.

The following case study by Brown (2011) of the rural mountain communities of Leicester and Sandy Mush, North Carolina, analyzes the historical significance of the community residents' attachment to and involvement in their schools. Brown, a native of the Leicester community who now lives in Sandy Mush, is descended from many of the families who have been involved in these community schools for many years. Today, she works as an elementary school teacher in Leicester. Both her local residency and job circumstances encouraged a close relationship with the local citizenry and gave her further access to school records and information, a situation parallel to the one in this study. Together these conditions aided Brown in her search for many of the sources used in her research. Regrettably, the Sandy Mush schools were closed and consolidated with the larger and more centrally located Leicester and Erwin schools. "During those years, Sandy Mush lost its school, its post office, and its separate community identity" (Brown, 2011, p.154). Yet Brown asserts that although "[s]chool consolidation, changes in community structure, and changes in the size and cultural makeup of the community have created differences in the schools, ...the support seen over time has continued" (p. 6) particularly through sports events and combined community uses of the school buildings that include non-school related gatherings as well.

A particularly creative study on the subject of rural communities and their schools was one that utilized participant-produced photographs to elicit responses from the photographer participants themselves concerning their own relationships with their small rural school, Woody Gap School, the smallest school in the state of Georgia (Sampson-Cordle, 2001). Woody Gap serves approximately 100 students in grades kindergarten



through twelve. This school is the last K-12 school in existence in Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2001) and the only school in the state classified as a *rural isolated school*. In her study, Sampson-Cordle had the participants, three teachers, two community members, and three students, each take photographs that, to them, represented the school-community relationship. They then wrote about their pictures and, in the final phase of research, held them in their hands as they discussed their insights, their feelings, and the meanings drawn from the subjects they chose to photograph. While many of the pictures were of places in Union County, many participants chose to capture images of things and people: the school bus driver standing in front of his bus as he waits for his afternoon load of students; a pair of brogans (heavy ankle-high work boots) placed in a student's cubbyhole (a small, storage compartment or shelf space; a locker for younger students); a community member's handmade afghan; and community members bringing baked goods to the school yard sale.

In her analysis, Sampson-Cordle (2001) identified eight themes that can be broadly grouped into four categories of kinship and outsider relationships: exclusivity, community and school involvement and support, and traditions. She concluded that a rural school and community relationship can be identified "by common and frequent interactions and associations among kin, neighbors, and members of the community that permeate the school setting and the community" (p. 339). Community customs, values, and rules of conduct are conveyed and reinforced by community members who themselves model the mores by participating in activities that involve interactions between school and community.

In the following sections of this review the literature is broadly divided between

two categories of research: economic studies focusing chiefly on financial data and fiscal efficiency, and school quality studies that assess the more subjective educational attributes such as school climate (overall attitudes and demeanor of students and school personnel reflected in the school environment). These analyses of student populations, both elementary and secondary, and school staff will identify relationships between school size and the following aspects of schooling: diversity of curriculum and student achievement; teacher attitudes; and dropout rates. Along with Conant's dictate to enlarge came studies on the ideal school size. Even now, opinions on optimal school size vary. Mohr (2000) and Howley (1997) recommend that no high school should house more than 1,000. Lawton (1999) concurs with this recommendation and further asserts that no elementary school should exceed 500. In contrast, Meier (1995) and Sergiovanni (1993) believe that no school should enroll more than 300 students. Lee and Smith (1996) claim that high school students learn best when enrollment is 600 – 900. Other researchers dismiss the idea of a model size and assert that the most suitable size for a school is likely to vary from place to place (Howley, 1996) since other research has indicated that there “is the increasing possibility that size effect may be subject to the type of student served by a school” (Stevenson, 2006).

An early study on school district consolidation by Kennedy, Gentry, and Coyle (1989) analyzed 330 school districts in Arkansas and found very slight correlations between district size and cost per student, higher test scores, or lower dropout rates in secondary schools. The correlations between district size and expense per average daily attendance indicated that expenditures were slightly less per student as district size increased. Basic and composite scores obtained from the Metropolitan Achievement Test,

a standardized achievement test administered annually to Arkansas students in fourth, seventh and tenth grades, indicate that the test scores at some grade levels were higher in smaller districts and some were higher in larger districts. The dropout rates in Arkansas' secondary schools (7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades) were calculated by dividing the number of dropouts per district by the number of students per district in these grades. There was a slight tendency for larger districts to have higher dropout rates. After analyzing data collected from the state's 330 school districts, the researchers came to the conclusion that "there is no evidence to suggest that consolidation of small school districts into larger ones will necessarily reduce expenditures per student, increase standardized test scores, or reduce dropout rates" (1989, p. 24). However, the method of analysis in this study measures only the linear relationships among the variables and the findings could not be used to determine causality.

Two years later, Streifel, Foldesy, and Holman (1991) conducted a study to determine the financial impact of 19 school district consolidations. Chosen from a survey of the 50 state departments, the districts that met the criteria for their research were five Arkansas districts, two each from California, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, and Texas, and one each from Iowa, Kentucky, New York, and Washington. This project was unique since no other studies up to this point had compared pre-consolidation data with corresponding post-consolidation data. Furthermore, the study was limited to only financial issues in six categories: administration, instruction, transportation, operation and maintenance, total cost, and capital costs. The researchers analyzed the revenue and expenditure changes for three years before and after the consolidations and compared the rate of change to each of the 10 states' average rates of change. Of the six categories,

“administrative costs” was the only category that increased more slowly than the other categories at a savings related to consolidation at a statistically significant level with consolidated districts increasing these costs by 10% while the average cost increase was 31%. This finding was not consistent through all 19 cases of consolidation as three districts actually showed an increase in administrative costs. Moreover, the documented savings in administrative costs were often offset by larger increases in the other categories, thus prompting the conclusion “that major financial advantages are not a necessary outcome of small district consolidation ... and may not impact the overall expenditure rate to a large degree, especially in smaller rural districts" (1991, p. 15).

A longitudinal study covering eight years of district consolidation in the Ohio school districts of Mercer County was completed by Tucker Self, superintendent of that district, in 2001. Covering the results of the last district consolidation enacted in Ohio in 1992, Self surveyed teachers, parents and students on their concerns of five dominant issues that prompted the consolidation of the Mendon-Union Local School District with the Parkway Local School District: low enrollment, finances, adequate curricular and extra-curricular offerings, people’s moods, and the fact that student were being hurt academically. Of the 17 teachers from Mendon-Union who continued their teaching in the Parkway District, 14 remain 8 years after consolidations. Of the 200 parents and students contacted, 58 responded to the survey and expressed their views on the issues.

When originally surveyed in 1992, 11 of 13 teachers and 78% of the parents and students responded positively to the consolidation. Parents cited more extra-curricular activities as a primary reason they favored consolidation. Eight years later, these statistics remained virtually unchanged. Ten teachers expressed that they felt they grew through

more professional development and had more tools for teaching. These teachers also received a substantial raise in salary. Teachers were more skeptical about students' success: 6 rated students' achievement higher since consolidation, 3 rated it lower, and 4 checked that they did not know. Parents and students remained positive concerning the extra-curricular activities with the addition of a chance for Mendon-Union students *to play football* specifically being mentioned in the comments section of the survey. Parents and students were somewhat ambivalent concerning the academic syllabi though most said greater curriculum opportunities were beneficial. Consolidation also resulted in large tax-savings for Mendon-Union citizens immediately, and eight years later the residents are still paying less than they paid in the final year of Mendon-Union's existence. Though the mood of the residents of both communities was more difficult to assess, the task force saw the overall attitude as positive for consolidation. Mendon's business area has, in fact, continued to prosper with a small growth of new businesses being reported. Most of the respondents contribute the overall success of this consolidation to "[t]he fact that Mendon-Union had a plan" (Self, 2001, p. 10) that was carried out in a professional orderly manner and encouraged the input from all community members.

A 1991 study conducted in New Jersey by Fowler and Wahlberg examined data from over 250 public secondary schools and determined that large school size was negatively related to student achievement. In a case study, Gregory (1992) profiled a highly successful high school in Colorado and argued from his findings that very small high schools (with 250 students or less) can afford excellent learning programs if a paradigm shift in school structure could be made to encompass an "open school" where students organize their plans of study. Gregory further asserts that finances would

become available as fewer administrators would be needed to “enforce” these programs of study.

An initial study by Howley (1994) that focused solely on finding a possible correlation between students’ socioeconomic levels and academic achievement concluded that smaller schools correlate with higher student achievement overall, but small schools particularly benefit disadvantaged students. This was corroborated, again by Howley (1996), in West Virginia schools by his replication and expansion of a 1988 California study by Friedkin and Necochea of elementary and secondary schools that indicated that large schools benefit the affluent and small schools benefit the economically disadvantaged even more so. Another follow-up to this series of studies that became known as “The Matthew Project” (Howley & Bickel, 2000), was a methodical examination of the relationship between school size and academic excellence at all school levels across four states (Georgia, Montana, Ohio, and Texas). By using test scores from the eighth grade Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the eleventh grade Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHS GT), Howley and Bickel observed that “all else equal, larger school size benefits achievement in affluent communities, but it is detrimental in impoverished communities” (p. 4).

In 2002, the *Charleston Gazette* in West Virginia published a series of articles on ten years of school closings in that state (Eyre & Finn, 2002). Since 1990, West Virginia had closed over 300 schools in an attempt to streamline the budgets and minimize financial expenditures. However, after the state spent more than \$1 billion to achieve the closures, it was shown that administrative, transportation, and utility and maintenance costs had increased substantially even though the number of students in the system

declined by 41,000 over the decade. The consolidated schools also failed to realize goals of maintaining Advanced Placement classes and foreign language courses. Also due to the extended bus rides, transported students from the closed schools had fewer opportunities to participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Parents and other family members also experienced fewer opportunities to participate in their children's education due to the increased travel time. Parent-teacher conferences and school volunteerism decreased among these "traveling" parents.

The studies cited up to this point have all been either case studies or individual studies. The next two studies employ hierarchical linear modeling, and hierarchical generalized linear modeling techniques. Lee and Loeb's (2000) study conducted in 264 Chicago inner-city schools explores whether teachers and students are affected by the size of the school to which they belong. Researchers gathered information from surveys completed by over 5,000 teachers and from 23,000 student test scores on annual standardized tests in order to study the effects of school size on teachers' attitudes and students' achievement in math. In both attitudes and test scores, small schools, defined as those enrolling fewer than 400 students, were favored when compared to schools with enrollments of over 400. Nine years later Werblow and Duesbery (2009) investigated how school size and the operation of smaller learning communities influenced growth in mathematics achievement and the dropout rate. The curvilinear results showed that students of small schools and large schools performed at similar levels in math; medium-sized schools were at a disadvantage. Results did show students in smaller schools were less likely to drop out than their high school counterparts.

As stated at the beginning of this review, research on consolidation of schools and

school districts is voluminous. Drawing conclusions and generalizing findings, however, still prove difficult. Many educators do not view school consolidation as a cure-all for educational ills. Furthermore, there is a concern that “despite massive consolidation of school districts in the United States, there is little convincing evidence on how consolidation actually affects school districts in the long-run” (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002, p. 22). The focus on teacher-student relationships, parental involvement, and the surrounding environment as crucial factors in student development must not be ignored. Instead they should be persistently presented and considered in all discussions and debates pertaining to educational decisions.

It can be especially difficult for policy makers to see two sides of a debate if they access only quantitative facts and figures to guide their decisions. For many years, rulings concerning school closings and consolidations have tended to focus on school expenditures, or economy of scale, and ignored details such as the effects of school size and location on student achievement and overall school climate (Ballantine & Spade, 2008; Overbay, 2003; Sabulao, 1971; Turner & Thrasher, 1970). According to DeYoung and Howley (1992) school reform and school improvement efforts (e.g. consolidation) generally are not about how to best serve the needs of U. S. students. “Rather they are stories about changing the political economy of the United States” (p. 4). More recently, Dale Douglass, executive director of the Maine School Management Association who has been monitoring the results of school consolidation in many of the Maine school districts for the last three years (2009-2012), states: “I’m not able with any certainty to tell you that consolidation has been a success or not. You have to examine it with verifiable data about what schools [used to] cost and what they cost now and if people are paying more



or less than they are now” (Steeves, 2012, para. 45). Those considering consolidation, or fighting it, should remain open to whatever results develop from future well-designed studies.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

*Two Small Rural Schools Under Siege: An Oral History 1969 – 2012* marks the first study of its kind about the history of the Portal, Georgia community's struggle against possible enforced school closure and consolidation. It provides insight into the mutually beneficial relationship between the residents of the small rural town of Portal, located in Bulloch County in the southeastern portion of the state, and its two community schools, one an elementary school and the second a middle high school. The information disclosing the adversities, the victories, and the continued apprehensions that the Portal citizens have encountered and continue to face have been gathered by listening to the stories that eight research participants, all Portal residents during this specified time period, were encouraged to tell in the tradition of oral history. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant in addition to having many informal and sometimes unplanned conversations conducted either by phone or in person. Notes of these latter conversations were made either during the conversations or as soon as possible after these exchanges.

The rationale for conducting this form of historical research is to inform present and future generations by learning from the past experiences of those in this small rural setting when confronted with the closing and consolidation of their hometown schools. By conscientiously listening to the eight participants as they relayed their stories drawn from their recollections of this specific time period, I was able to gather understandings that sharpened perceptions of the events and deepened understandings of the participants'

emotions and reactions to these events. The undertaking of this study was underpinned by two principles: firstly, the philosophy that skilled educators must strive to connect their teaching and learning experiences, their own as well as that of their students, to improving the world (Greene, 1995); and secondly, the advocacy of action research that challenges current prejudicial value systems (Glesne, 2006) that often drive education. A study enthused with these two tenets could possibly encourage those who see themselves as marginalized to use their “voices,” as did those in this study, to protest, to offer other possibilities, to demand and implement changes, and by their activism, to conceivably improve their own immediate world.

*Two Small Rural Schools* also speaks to some of the challenges that school closings and consolidations may present to the physical, social, political, and economic welfare of teachers and students and their small rural communities. Though an unpopular topic with some in the Bulloch County area, this story needed to be told by those who made these schools the community the forces they were and continue to be today. While this study addresses some of the points necessary to evaluate more fully the impact of rural school consolidation on students and their communities, it is not intended to provide definitive solutions to the subject. Nor is the goal to present a critical analysis of this and other small school studies. Rather it is to provide information and insight into this one particular symbiotic relationship between the small community populace of Portal, Georgia and their hometown schools and, as stated by Howarth (1998), “to offer a voice to the unheard and unseen” (p. v).

## Oral History – The “Just” Methodology

The design of this study is qualitative in that I as a researcher have drawn on in-depth interviews and informal conversations that combine both interviewing and observation along with archived documents to record a small communities' encounter with the anticipated loss of its hometown schools. Oral history is the methodology I have utilized in collecting and organizing the stories of residents in the Portal, Georgia school system relating how they fought to save their community schools from closing and consolidation. According to Janesick (2007), “The basic techniques of oral history are the basic techniques of qualitative research. Both use interviews, observations, and documents as evidence” (p. 113), beginning with either a written record or an audio recording of a first person account. Both the “interviewer and the interviewee have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past” (Oral History Association [website], 2009, para. 1). Oral historians, using all accessible data, offer the most thorough explanation and interpretation possible, at that point, of someone's memories of actions and events in his or her life. The histories I have collected are a compilation of memories that are especially significant of a particular time (1969-2012) in the life of the Portal citizenry.

Oral history is one of the oldest forms of collecting history harking back to the days when spoken word responses predated writing. Its description, simply stated, is the methodical collection of living people's declarations about their own experiences. It is a compilation of memories and personal commentaries of historical significance (Ritchie, 2003), even from those who have been deemed as insignificant or less than noteworthy by many past writers of history, leading business executives, and educational bureaucrats.

As oral historians have come to realize and appreciate the need to interview “from the bottom up” (i.e., record social history), they have exerted the effort to become not just recorders but activists by expanding “the possibilities for oral history in serving nonelite people” (Charlton et al., 2006, p. 7). As they search for a deeper understanding and appreciation of another’s life story, a Socratic dialectic often forms between the participant’s actual recounting of the story and the inquiring mind of the researcher. According to Grele (1985) in his earlier work, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, it is this frequently conflictive discussion that often arises when interview research is more in-depth that “gives oral history its real dimension...particularly when placed within the social and cultural milieu” (p. vii).

Because this study addresses the perceived class-biased system of education present in the United States, I wanted to implement an especially democratic form of research. Since oral history can be used to study ordinary people as well as the elite, thereby giving more sway to marginalized groups, it can sometimes be asserted that this distinctive methodology is particularly egalitarian in practice. Oral history does not necessarily “set out to seek answers but rather to chronicle experience” (Howarth, 1998, p. 77) and does so through “enriched and enlivened narration” (Davis in Short, 1991, p. 79). It can oftentimes supply information that otherwise might never have been deemed important enough to save. It is not composed of gossip, innuendo, hearsay, rumor, or legends and folktales handed down through many generations. Rather oral history is a story told by the very people who participated in or observed certain past events, and is garnered for the purpose of recording, reconstructing and explaining something of interest that happened in the past (Sitton, Mehaffy, & Davis, 1983). In terms of one’s

community, oral histories allow the storytellers to give back to their communities by empowering them, through knowledge of themselves as a people, for community activism (Charlton, et al., 2006).

Oral history interviewing is one method of collecting information about the past that allows a researcher to directly question and, in effect, collaborate with those who participated in or observed that past. This co-created narrative can serve to “reveal trends, generate theory, advocate sensible policy changes, and effectively implement them” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 152). The content of oral histories is based on reflections of the past “as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events” (Oral History Association, 2009, *General Principles for Oral History*, para.1). By providing personal data, particularly that of “lived experience” often not accessible in formal written records, interviewees can offer us a means in which we can explore the past in order to understand the present. Telling one’s story links our current “us” to our past “us” within particular cultural and social milieus and can present viable reasons as to why this “us-ness” (see p. 30 of this study) is so important not to just individuals but social groups as well. Perhaps most importantly oral history not only serves to place events in their cultural and social constructions, it also allows for the raw emotions experienced by the narrators to touch us today via their own words. When I blended this understanding with Hesse-Biber and Leavy’s (2006) observation that oral histories usually seem to be the stories that allow us “to get at the valuable knowledge and rich life experience of marginalized persons and groups that would otherwise remain untapped” (p. 151), the genre of oral history, to me, became the obvious choice of methodology for this study.

Oral history can be very effective in that it can unite and strengthen people.

According to McLaren (2006), “Interviews can be liberatory social tools” (p. vii). These revelations from interviewees, i.e. the chroniclers, also gain power when archived as a creditable artifact, since it may be utilized both now and later on for social change (Charlton, et al., 2006; Hoopes, 1979). Thus, for my research, oral history seemed to be the most “just” methodology since I wanted to explore the human side of a story that ostensibly appeared to be hidden in bureaucratic red tape and enveloped in insinuations of missing transcript items from closed door meetings attended only by those with decision-making power. I also wanted to document the Portal residents’ viewpoints on their close encounter with the proposed demise of their schools through enforced consolidation, a goal best accomplished when their voices provide the conduit through which these events and personal emotions can be viewed and understood.

#### The “Twin Cities” and the Portal of Today

The town of Portal is situated in the northwestern section of Bulloch County in southeastern Georgia. This wiregrass county spans from the Emmanuel County line to Friendship Church Road from Upper Lotts Creek to the Ogeechee River. Highway 25 carries most traffic past Portal. The closest major Georgia cities are Savannah and Macon, located approximately 59 miles to the southeast and 112 miles to the northwest respectively. Georgia Southern University is located approximately 12 miles away in the county seat of Statesboro. It is a town that has fought many battles to maintain its place on the map. Moreover, it almost completely ceased to exist before it attained a concrete stronghold as a stable community. Once a part of Effingham and Screven counties, Portal actually could be called “twin cities.” The births of the two offspring, however, just happened to be a little over a decade apart.

The original Portal community was a company town owned by the E. E. Foy Manufacturing Company of Egypt, Georgia. As of 1895 “it boasted a turpentine still, farm, commissary” (Brannen, 1992, p. 109), and the first railroad in Bulloch County which the town utilized to transport timber (Portal Heritage Society, [DVD], 2008). “Old Portal” never had its own church or school. Families worshipped at Pleasant Hill to the west end and “the children continued to walk to the old Bradwell School a few miles away” (Brannen, p. 470). The continued emergence of a vital community regrettably came to a halt when the Foy Company abandoned its logging operations in 1902, leaving only one general store and the dismantled turpentine still that were bought by J. D. McCroan.

The district languished and almost faded from existence until 1907, when Ellerbee Daughtry (father of Leila Daughtry Denmark, the world’s oldest practicing pediatrician until her retirement in 2001 at the age of 103), W. J. (Dol) Williams, and two Statesboro developers, J. A. Brannen and Hinton Booth, founders of the Georgia Realty Company, laid out the new town on what was to be the Savannah, Augusta, and Northern Railroad. Unfortunately, when the railroad was completed in 1908, it fell far short of the original site (Portal Heritage Society, [DVD], 2008). Not to be beaten, residents created “New Portal” along the tracks of the new railroad that same year. By 1909 it was a booming town with its own post office and bank, ten stores, a cotton gin, two doctors, and several family homes with a town school housed over the bank on its second floor. “The earliest recorded history of Portal school is an article from the *Bulloch Times* dated October 16, 1913” (Motes, 1990, p. 1) that gave an account of a new \$4,000 brick school that opened for the fall term under the direction of Professor James H. St. Clair (see Appendix G). By



1915, Mr. St. Clair was joined by a second teacher, Miss Lucile Harmon (Brannen, 1992, p. 498). The earliest complete description of Portal's High School can be found in an educational survey conducted in 1915 by Rural School Agent, M. L. Duggan, under the direction of the Department of Education. This *Educational Survey of Bulloch County* reported that Portal High School was an eight-month school serving nine grades with an enrollment of 93 students. The building held "four classrooms, an auditorium, and a cloakroom" (p. 53). Portal was incorporated in 1914, with Ellerbee A. Daughtry as its first mayor. By 1915, there were 55 white schools in Bulloch County and 24 Negro schools. There were two high schools among them, one being the aforementioned Portal High School (Portal High School Journalism Class, 2000-2001). Community support was strong even in the early stages of this town school. According to Mrs. Daisy Trapnell of Portal, "boxed-supper" fundraisers were "a popular community event organized to raise money for many rural schools" (Brannen, p. 500). In this particular activity the men were asked to bid on boxes decorated with brightly colored paper and ribbons that were filled with delicious meals prepared by the ladies of the group. Male contenders would each bid for the privilege of sitting down together with the cook, who was, hopefully, also their favorite girl, to share the dinner packed inside.

By 1923, Portal was a thriving town with a population of 600 and new grammar school building that was connected to the high school by a walkway. The new two-story edifice housed 8 to 10 classrooms, the principal's office, and a school store on the first floor (see Appendix H). The second floor accommodated a library, chapel, and a community auditorium. As enrollment grew, boarding teachers, those schoolteachers who lived rent-free with community residents during the school year as part of their pay, were

hired (Smith, 1999). A course in vocational agriculture was added to the high school curriculum. A little over twenty years later the high school sealed its place in school sports history when the boys' basketball team placed second in the 1946-47 state championships (Motes, 1990). The town continued to flourish and the citizens built their first City Hall building in 1948.

Prosperity flagged again somewhat in 1949 when the high school and most of the grammar school were destroyed by fire (see Appendices I, J and K), and later in 1950, when the railroad stopped running altogether through the Portal community (Portal High School Journalism Class, 2000-2001). It was not until 1951 that the Bulloch County School System was formed, and in that same year the voters passed a bond issue to build new schools in the county. By 1953, enrollment in Portal schools was listed in the superintendent's report at 510 (Motes, 1990).

Today, the Portal community is still a place where everyone tends to know each other or at least knows someone who knows, or is related to, the person you want to find. The countryside is filled with acres of tall Georgia pines and pastures of grazing cattle and horses. In the summer, fields of cotton, corn, soybeans, tobacco, and peanuts sprinkle the landscape. At midday, most of the townspeople who spend their days in Portal and are not at work in one of the neighboring towns or counties are enjoying lunch in one of the school cafeterias, or at Pepper Jack's Restaurant or the C-Shop Diner with their down-home cooking, or maybe the new Cotton Patch Bakery with its 14-layer caramel cake. Families and friends frequently are seen catching up on the latest news in the aisles of the local Dollar General Store, Lanier's IGA Grocery, Clyde's Market, the Mill Creek

Time Saver, or, weather permitting (and it is almost all year round), on the sidewalks of downtown Portal.



Common sights upon entering the Portal, Georgia area: (c) livestock and (d) “Georgia Snow”- cotton fields



(e) Old Portal Bank building and (f) the Portal Town Hall – both located on the main street in downtown Portal - Highway 80 West

Portal has two public schools, one elementary and one middle high school, with a total enrollment of approximately 750 students. The schools sit right off Highway 80 West within a half a mile of each other. The rooms of both institutions are spacious and colorful and the sense of pride and accomplishment are almost palpable. The

administrative staff of each school consists of a secretary, bookkeeper, principal and assistant principal. As of 2013, the Portal Elementary School has been opened for 14 school terms and the brand new Portal Middle High School opened in July, 2010, just in time for the 2010-2011 school year.



(g) Portal Elementary School on Grady Street opened in 1999



(h) Portal Middle High School opened in 2010 on Highway 80 West

Depending on with whom you speak, Portal is typically described by local residents either as a town with a good number of longstanding community families or a small community with many new younger families who have moved in looking for a quiet, less expensive neighborhood in which to raise their children. According to the U. S. Census of 2010, there were 638 individual residents (a growth of 6.9% since the 2000

census) in this township. The average family size was 3.00. Although there are some “well-to-do” citizens and a middle class population as well, most of the town is considerably less affluent. The median income for a family was \$34,000. About 8.2% of families and 14.4% of the population were below the poverty line, including 28.5% of those under age 18 and 71.5% of those over 18 years of age. The racial makeup of the town was 82.2% White/Non-Hispanic, 17.4% Black, 2.2% Hispanic, 2% Asian and Mixed (two or more races) (U. S. Census Bureau, Table DP-1, 2010).

Historically, Bulloch County’s economy was based on agriculture and forest products, with timber and turpentine as its mainstays. This particular community is no longer primarily agricultural. Over time, the economy has diversified as economic forces such as Georgia Southern University, Ogeechee Technical College, and East Georgia Regional Medical Center have become more predominant as major employers. The Portal populace also works in construction (18%), machinery (11%), repair and maintenance (11%), food and beverage stores (10%), truck transportation (8%), apparel (5%), and radio, TV, and computer stores (4%) (U. S. Census Bureau, Table DP-1, 2010).

The elementary school employs 29 to 31 teachers. The middle high school employs 35 to 38 teachers. There are numerous committees staffed by classroom teachers that assist with various school functions – School Climate, Safety, Accelerated Reader, Leadership Team, Student Achievement, Discipline, and Parent Involvement, to name just a few. Most post-graduate students attend either Georgia Southern University, Ogeechee Technical College, both located in Statesboro, or East Georgia College located in Swainsboro, Georgia.

In October, the Portal Heritage Society hosts the annual “Catface” Turpentine

Festival at and around the grounds of the E. C. Carter turpentine still which is fired up each year to actually produce turpentine in commemoration of the turpentine industry in southeast Georgia that once thrived from the 1880s until the 1950s. “Catface” refers to the slash marks resembling a cat’s whiskers cut into each pine tree by turpentine workers in order to drain sap which would then be distilled into turpentine. This technique, developed by Dr. Charles Herty, produced greater quantities and better-quality resin, extended the productive life of the trees and allowed them to eventually be milled as lumber (Reed, 2005). The weekend festival boasts a parade, handmade arts and crafts, plenty of good food, performances by local musical talent, and demonstrations of how the old still works in the cooking of turpentine and a street dance in the evening.

Townpeople and visitors alike come to purchase the bottles of turpentine, rosin pieces, and rosin-cooked potatoes (Portal Heritage Society [webpage], 2008). In 1993, the properties of Dr. James A. Stewart, consisting of his Folk Victorian home (circa 1910) and his drug store and office, were awarded National Register designation. In addition to these buildings and the turpentine still, a grist mill, cotton gin, seed houses and warehouses lie quietly right along downtown Portal, lending it an amiable, old Southern town ambience (Portal Heritage Society [webpage], 2008).



- (i) Sign marking the main entrance into the Turpentine Festival Grounds and (j) the log cabin playhouse where story times are held during the festival





(k) and (l) The Carter turpentine still, which operated from 1930 until the late 1960s, is functional even now (two days a year) during the town's annual "Catface" Turpentine Festival held each year the first full weekend in October



(m) The Dr. James A. Stewart home and (n) Dr. Stewart's medical office that also served as a general store (thus the gas pump located in front)



(o) Storage shed owned by E. C. Carter family and (p) the Lummus Cotton Gin

### Exemplary Oral Texts

When searching the dissertation database for oral histories, I found that in the last ten to fifteen years this type of qualitative research has become more copious. I

referenced studies that were conducted in the United States only. My reason for this limitation was that since the term “rural” already has such an unclear delineation, I feared I would further obfuscate the meaning by using studies from other countries that have their own unique cultural specifications as to what comprises the term *rural*. I chose six studies that were done geographically nearest the Portal locale. Five were studies conducted under the auspices of Georgia Southern University. The sixth was conducted under the auspices of Georgia State University. While they differ from my study individually due to the particular “Goliath” each subject was battling and by their archival resource support, there are several similarities among these studies themselves as well as some parallels that can be likened to my study. Though each study was an oral history that allowed the reader to experience vicariously the participants’ lives, the telling of the participants’ stories varied in the presentation.

The first study to spur my interest in the retrieving of oral history was the qualitative research carried out by Gail D. Dismuke. *The Solid Rock: An Oral History of the Events Preceding the Disappearance of One Southern Rural African American School in Evans County, Georgia 1954-1971* (2004) uses oral histories from twelve participants, former students, teachers, a Jeanes supervisor, and an administrative assistant, as well as primary and secondary resources. The recollections of the participants of this study furnish a look at the schools' facilities and curriculum as well as its educational impact on the rural Georgia community of Evans County. This study specifically answered questions concerning the reliability and validity of individuals’ memories. Though oral history is considered a primary resource (Starr in Dunaway & Baum, 1984), the histories are often considered by some as less reliable than other



primary sources. This is largely due to the fact that memory is a subjective instrument as well as a selective process and is always influenced by not just the past but the present as well. Therefore, information obtained from an interview should not be viewed as equivalent to original events since an individual's memory has been subject to a process of self-selection and is not neutral in nature (Moss, 1996).

Dismuke acknowledged these alleged contradictions in her study. The twelve African Americans interviewed for this oral history were, at the time, active and respected members of the community. Many were lifelong residents of Evans County. Dismuke pointed out that since this history was told from the viewpoint of those involved in the Evans County School, it was possible that the participants' perceptions of these particular events and the reason for those events might be biased. However, she cited Sangster (1994) who urged looking at this process from a different angle, one that would accept this creative process of the research and "explore the construction of ... historical memory" (p. 6). Dismuke claims that exploring how people rationalize and make sense of their past offers a more comprehensible perceptiveness of the social and historical framework within which they operated. An individual's story is narrated through memory; "[t]his means that their recollection of their experiences, and how they give meaning to those experiences, is about more than 'accuracy;' it is also a process of *remembering* – as they remember, they filter and interpret" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 137).

A particularly creative re-telling of history was the study of generational poverty conducted by Derrick Tennial (2008) also under the auspices of Georgia Southern University. Using the social justice lens of critical race theory, this researcher explored

the cross-generational effects of educational, political and public policies on his paternal family from 1899 to the present day; and questioned why his family and many other African-American families have been unable to break the burden of generational poverty, even in families with strong patriarchal figures. Interestingly, when Tennial was about thirteen years old, his mother “prophesied” that he would write a book about his paternal family. The seeds for *Unto the Third & Fourth Generation of African Americans: Kaleb Norris’s Stories of Generational Poverty and Inequality in the South* were planted in Tennial’s senior year of high school when he was given an assignment of creating a presentation of his family tree. He decided to use a video camera to record interviews with his maternal and paternal great-grandmothers, his maternal grandfather, and his maternal and paternal grandmothers.

These opening seeds came to full fruition several years later as Tennial collected the stories of six generations of his family for his doctoral dissertation. He held two storytelling sessions at his grandmother’s house, one during his summer visit home and the second during the Christmas break. The “storytellers” ranged in age from 4 to 73 and represented five of six generations. Tennial’s original intent was to speak with each family member one-on-one, but as more relatives came by and stayed to listen and take part, the conversation grew into participatory conversation. Even though there were no living members from the first generation, he was able to collect stories from the memories of living family members that knew them. A particularly imaginative aspect of this study was in Tennial’s decision to allow the family patriarch, Tennial’s great-grandfather, Kaleb Norris Lindsey (aka “Big Daddy”) who was born January 21, 1899, to “relate” the story. As stressed by the author, this further enabled the reader “to capture

the processual development of the person” (p. 34). Comparable to the purpose of amplifying the voices of marginalized citizens in this *Two Rural Schools Under Siege* study, Tennial similarly hoped that his research would lead to self-realization, in this case that of African Americans who will no longer be silenced by marginalization but will speak out and offer solutions that will benefit themselves and future generations. Tennial also accessed the works of Kozol and referenced the “savage inequalities” of classism and racism in American society.

*Self, Other, and Jump Rope Community: The Triumphs of African American Women* (2007) was another interesting oral history conducted under the auspices of Georgia Southern University. The researcher, Wynnetta Scott-Simmons, focused on the motivational factors that prompted four participants, all African-American women, to attend all-white, all-girl private schools despite feelings of success within their culturally segregated “Jump Rope Communities.” Scott-Simmons explored the lives of these women who left their culturally familiar surroundings during the late 1960s and early 1970s to attend these elite schools. Employing critical race theory and Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework, the researcher utilized jump rope rhymes and the women’s experiences to explore their world of divergent language codes, deviating linguistic expectations, behaviors, dispositions, and opposing social, cultural, and economic stratifications. The selected jump rope rhymes speak of experiences, dreams, faith, and hopes that a marginalized people will achieve self-power and find their voice in the wake of such historical events as segregation, integration, resegregation, and the effects of the Civil Rights Movement. “The oral, storytelling traditions of the African American community...” were used “...to capture the experiences of myself (Scott-

Simmons) and my classmates as I search for social justice potentialities in educational integration and desegregation” (p. 180). As do the preceding oral histories, Scott-Simmons’ research deals with racial, gender, family, class, education, literacy, and access concerns. It is through the collection of these stories of resistance and triumph, termed “OUR stories” by the researcher, that this study connects history and present day. This emphasized reference to “OUR” highlights another perhaps more encompassing facet of the sense of “us-ness” explored in this study of Portal.

The next study explored how three women of color raised outside the United States, all mothers of multiracial children, experienced gender and racial identity issues in the milieu of the United States. This doctoral study, framed by qualitative inquiry and oral history, was informed by Critical Race Feminist thought and examined the women’s choices of racial indicators for their children and the influence that raising multiracial children would have on their own racial identity. Throughout *Critical Narrative of Multiracial Women’s Personal Journey: Negotiating the Intersectionality of Race and Gender Issues in a Monoracial Paradigm* (2009), Geralda Nelson attempts to expose gender and race as principal issues in these women’s lived experiences by collecting their stories through semi-structured open-ended interviews. Sexism, racism, heritage pride, and racial invisibility were mitigating factors in their lives and influenced the choices of racial indicators for their multiracial children. Again, marginalization was a primary idea in the research. Furthermore, this study was similar to *Two Small Rural Schools* in its social aspects in that “there was a measure of comfort and familiarity between the participants and me (Nelson), because we already knew each other through community and school interactions” (p. 87).

The fifth dissertational work in this review is an inquiry into the oral histories of four female African American educators and students who experienced the Albany Movement in the early 1960s. *If You Can't Find Me in the School Room: Oral Histories of African American Educators and Students During the Albany Movement* (2010), explores, through the lens of critical race theory, segregation, integration, and the educational changes set in motion during this turbulent time period. Oral history provided a voice for those whose stories were deemed unimportant by the majority population. Throughout her inquiry, Maqueta Griswold implemented the lyrics of freedom songs from the Civil Rights Movement in order to draw the reader's attention to the tenacious spirit of these African Americans who kept "their eyes on the prize." The effect of racism on African Americans was detailed through the voices of the four participants as Griswold implemented Baum's four steps to conducting oral history: creating, processing, curating, and using. The interviews were scheduled to last from an hour to an hour and a half and Griswold chose to use both open-ended and specific questions to find answers to the problems that arose from desegregation by documenting the experiences of these educators and students who themselves experienced the Civil Rights Movement.

Though Griswold's paper and this one both call for an equal education of caring and fairness for all, the studies differ somewhat as to what is proposed to be the commencement of the inequitable education many students are receiving today. Griswold purports that the curriculum of justice for all was lost during the process of integration. This study of Portal, however, questions if there has ever been a curriculum that truly practiced and administered justice for all, even in the times long before integration. It would appear that in the United States there has always been a dominant culture or class,

essentially an “ownership society” (Klonsky & Klonsky, 2008), that would have made true fairness and equity in education most likely improbable at any time in our history. Perhaps both studies are correct since each identifies a different form of bias that prompted and promulgated the inequitable education system of today. These two prejudices have plagued the United States since its birth: for Griswold it is the bigotry of racism, as for Portal it is the narrow-mindedness of classism.

It was through Terri Ann Ognibene’s qualitative study (2008), conducted while a doctoral student at Georgia State University, that the plight of another marginalized group was highlighted: the Turkish people in Sumter County, South Carolina. In *Discovering the Voices of the Segregated: Oral History of the Educational Experiences of the Turkish People of Sumter County, South Carolina*, Ognibene sought to analyze and understand holistically the educational experiences of this segregated group during the integration movement. Through qualitative means of conducting the study, she considered the human element when collecting the data by asking not only her planned open-ended questions but by allowing “the participants to take the interviews in any direction that they desired” (Ognibene, 2008, p. 79). Four participants, in three separate interviews each, shared their stories of how attending an elementary school for Turkish students affected their integration into white high schools. In addition to the formal and informal interviews, Ognibene “took field notes, audio-recorded and videotaped some of the interviews, transcribed all of the interviews herself, and researched archival photographs of schools, students, census reports, artifacts and documents” (p. 80). Based on the theoretical framework of critical-narrative theory, she also referenced the works of Freire (1970/1998) in identifying the two stages of pedagogy of the oppressed. Ognibene

asserted that a “dominant culture...had the strongest voice in...decisions” (p. 5) concerning this marginalized group of Turkish peoples. She also cited Merriam (2001) in a statement that surmised a key belief promulgated in both Ognibene’s paper and this study of Portal citizens: “the social institution of school is structured such that the interests of some members and classes of society are preserved and perpetuated at the expense of others” (p. 5).

Though somewhat different in presentations and theoretical frameworks, each oral history reviewed above was conducted in order to obtain information from differing points of view by recording individual stories that could not be garnered from already archived written sources. Each researcher asked open-ended questions and tried to avoid leading questions that would, to some extent, compel the participants to say what they thought the researcher wanted to hear. Tennial’s work was more of a life review, told by one leading “interviewee” who was, in fact, not interviewed himself, but whose story was revealed through the “remember when” accounts of other family members. More similar to this study of Portal, the other five oral histories focused on a specific period of time in the participants’ lives. As stated by Brown (1988), an educator-historian cited by two of the reviewed studies, “In effect, they provided a ‘snapshot’ of the way things were at a given point in time” (p. 121).

### Preparing to Collect the Tales of Battle

#### Participants

My first task in preparing to initiate the interview process was to generate a list of possible interviewees. According to Ritchie, “The best projects were those that cast their nets wide, recording as many different participants in events or members of a community

as possible” (2003, p. 24). After reading the suggestions of many authorities on the subject of oral history interviews, I decided to limit myself to no less than six but no more than ten interviewees. Though this still may seem excessive to some, I believed that, since this is not a life-long autobiographical history of each participant but a more limited history of a specific 43-year time period, this number was doable. Initially, I created a list of potential participants based on suggestions from city council members, parents of local school children, teachers and school administrators, and members of the Portal Heritage Society. I included those who have acquired longitudinal experiences as students, parents, grandparents and/or educators in the schools of this area that would allow them to articulate new perspectives for their schools, particularly in regard to the issues of consolidation and rural community marginalization. I tried to involve people with varying vantage points, with experiences from different time periods, and with different levels of power. As recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), I applied the following question to all suggested possible interviewees as I considered their inclusion in the study: “How valid and reliable is this person likely to be as an information-gathering instrument?” (p. 38).

I chose only adult residents, past and present, of the Portal community for interviews. The eight interviewees selected for the study are former students, former and current educators, and past and present community members who are still actively associated with the Portal community and its schools. Age parameters limited participants to those 18 years or older. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Every precaution was taken to assure anonymity of the interviewees as some have expressed concerns about causing problems for their grown children who are currently working for



the Bulloch County Board of Education. I did not set gender requirements, but the interviewees consist of different generational, socio-economic, and racial groups that are representative of the Portal community. I did not advertise to recruit participants. Selections of interviewees were made at my discretion. I believe that a crucial part of the interview process, the route to fostering collegiality and establishing a personal connection based on trust, was facilitated by my having been a part of the Portal community and, in particular, its elementary school for twelve years. The eight participants are identified with the following pseudonyms: Sarah Greene, Kate Mitchell, Tracy Kirkland, Reverend William Etheridge, Ellen Hodges, Jamie Young, Richard Emerson and Reverend Gerald Johnson.

Sarah Greene is a lifelong resident of Portal and is a Portal High School alumnus. As of 2012 I have known her for almost ten years. Sarah was in her mid-thirties at the time of her interview in 2006. She has three children, one who has graduated from Portal High School in the last three years, one who is now attending Portal Middle High School, and a third, a special needs child, who was served by Statesboro High before graduating five years ago. Sarah was and continues to be very active in the community and the schools. She has worked as a substitute teacher at Statesboro High School and in the Portal schools. Many of the elementary students shared with me that they enjoyed Ms. Greene's cheerful personality and her sense of humor. It was during her tenure as a long-term substitute in a classroom close to mine that I came to know her not just as an acquaintance but as a friend.

Kate Mitchell, another lifetime Portal resident, is in her early seventies and still lives in the home her parents built in Portal in the 1940s when she first began attending

elementary school. She is a Portal High School graduate and is a very active supporter of the Portal community, a representative on the Portal town council, and a member of the Portal Heritage Society. Her children attended the Portal schools and graduated from Portal High School. She currently has two grandchildren attending the elementary and middle high school. I have worked with Kate for the last eight years on the annual Portal Community Christmas Nativity Program presented the first Thursday in December at the Turpentine festival grounds. She is a hard and innovative worker who is a principal organizer of not only the Christmas program but also the annual Catface Turpentine Festival each year. Her seemingly boundless energy makes her an impressive motivator and leader and she has received several leadership awards attesting to this fact.

Tracy Kirkland has been a paraprofessional at the Portal Elementary School for several years and has twice been named Paraprofessional of the Year. She also served as a paraprofessional in a Statesboro school before she was able to transfer to Portal Elementary. I first met her over twenty years ago when she served as my daughter's fourth grade paraprofessional in Statesboro. She is in her early forties, has a high school education, and is also a Portal native. Tracy graduated from Portal High School and presently has two children attending Portal Middle High School. Her husband operates his own business in Portal. Tracy and her mother, who still serves as a substitute teacher in the Portal schools, and I have become good friends and have shared many joys, concerns, and prayer requests throughout my years at Portal Elementary.

Reverend William Etheridge, who is in his early seventies, has resided in Portal for over 60 years. He has served as a pastor and as a member of the school council. He also worked for many years as a farmer. He has five children and several grandchildren

who have attended the Portal schools. He has always been actively involved in his grandchildren's education. William has volunteered his time to come in during the school day and help tutor elementary and middle school students. I taught two of his grandchildren who now attend other schools. He has always found the time to come by and see me after a musical program and tell me he appreciated my work with the students.

Ellen Hodges graduated from Portal High School. She attended college and is a retired federal employee. After living many years in Atlanta and the Washington, D. C. area she has returned to her hometown after retiring. She is a leading member of the Portal Heritage Society and is very active in the Portal Middle High School where her nieces' attend. She has one son who was educated in Virginia and has had a great deal of experience working with school boards in that area. She is in her mid-sixties and now helps out part-time in the family owned business located in Portal. She is very knowledgeable about many areas of school law and is not afraid to question, challenge, or voice her opinion. I have only known Ellen for about three years, but I greatly respect her wisdom and trust her to be always open and honest with me.

Jamie Young currently is a teacher at Portal Middle High School and teaches both high school and middle school classes. She is in her early thirties, has obtained her Master's degree, and has one child who attends the elementary school and another in preschool. She is a very supportive parent and she and I have laughed about having to curb our tendencies to be "hover mothers" [overly-protective]. Her husband is a coach for some of the area sports teams. She and her parents are all Portal natives. Jamie taught in two other school systems before she was able to return to Bulloch County. She has served

as a representative on the Portal town council for several years. Her father is also very active in local politics.

Richard Emerson is in his late fifties. He is a Portal High School graduate and a college graduate. He is employed as a University of Georgia Cooperative Extension agent. His wife, who is employed by the Bulloch County Board of Education, and both sons are all Portal High School alumni. He and several family members have served either on the Bulloch County school board, the Portal Town Council, and/or the Bulloch County Board of Commissioners. I have known Richard and his wife for over 15 years through our work in education and as fellow church members. Richard is very well-spoken, direct, and sincere. I have always sensed that, like his father, he will tell the truth about an issue and where he stands even if he knows you will disagree. He has, however, the skill to do this in a non-threatening and non-combative way. I have always respected him especially for this particular attribute.

Reverend Gerald Johnson is a minister who, though born in Metter, Georgia (Candler County), has lived and ministered most of his life in the Portal area. His church is located in Portal and he has close ties not only to his church members but to many other Bulloch County residents as well. Gerald worked for many years in a business in Statesboro to supplement his part-time minister's salary, retiring from that job only a few years ago. His sister and brother-in-law are owners of a recently opened business in "downtown" Portal and Gerald can be found there many mornings sharing a cup of coffee and visiting with the customers, all whom he knows not just by *their* names, but by the names and ages of their children and grandchildren as well. Gerald plays an active part in community government and recreational activities. Many Portal school students attend

his church and are active members of the church youth group. I met Gerald some ten years ago when he delivered the eulogy at a funeral for which I was providing the music. This type of “meeting” has repeated itself several times through the years along with our visits together in Portal. One aspect of his personality that I esteem is his servant’s attitude. Whenever you call him with a need, his first question is always, “What can I do to help?”

### Interview Processes

As per Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “Experience happens narratively... [t]herefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (p. 19). Accordingly, in this study, the majority of the data concerning the Portal school district and community has been gathered through interviews augmented by my handwritten explicatory notes describing the interview setting, physical appearances of the interviewee such as facial expressions or other “body language,” silences in the conversation, and human traffic into the interview space. The interviews, as per Patton (2002), have allowed me, as a researcher, to listen to the experiences of the participants in their own settings without manipulating the variables being studied. I am aware that in addition to the oral discourse itself, “the way in which a participant tells his or her story is itself recognized as an important knowledge source by oral historians” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 144). I also realized that I needed to “listen with a completion and attentiveness that is far more rigorous and in tune with nuance than most of us use in daily life” (p. 140) if I was to accomplish the principal task of understanding the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale, 1996).

After being told initially by a representative from the Institutional Review Board

Office (IRB) of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at Georgia Southern University that I would need approval from this board if any interpretation of data (i.e. interviews) were to take place, I completed the National Institutes of Health of Extramural Research web-based training course, “Protecting Human Research Participants,” on May 4, 2010, (see Appendix L) and applied for IRB approval. I received a letter of exemption for assigned project number H10371 from Eleanor Hayes, Compliance Officer at the Institution Review Board at Georgia Southern University on April 9, 2012 (see Appendix M). After receiving this authorization from the IRB, I approached members of the community to participate in the study. I made face-to-face contact with potential participants when I explained the project.

My invitations to take part in this research were received enthusiastically by almost every person I contacted. Only three declined to participate. Two were concerned that their words may somehow affect their grown children who now work for the Bulloch County Board of Education. The third was another Portal resident and Board of Education employee who was actively involved in the political machinations initiated by the Portal senator to the Georgia legislature in the early 1990s that legally stopped the Portal consolidation process at that time. I had been told by several Portal residents that this particular person would be a valuable source of information. After over six months of trying to contact this individual through phone calls, emails, and “snail” mail, this individual never responded to any of my requests, even to express that she was not interested. Two of my potential participants, who both recommended this person to me, took it upon themselves to contact this prospective interviewee. To date, she has also failed to respond to either of them. This, to some degree, illustrates the level of silence

and secrecy that has hidden this story for so long. Furthermore, since beginning my work on this thesis, two of my potential interviewees have died, thus increasing the urgency I felt to see this project completed.

After the participants verbally agreed to grant me an interview, I scheduled an ‘informative conversation,’ either by telephone or in person, in order to explain the project more thoroughly and obtain additional background information from my narrators. I then created a list of pseudonyms for each participant with non-identifying information (see Appendix N). I mailed each one a packet of information that included a letter explaining the study and outlining the participant’s rights, including the right to pull out of the study at any time and rescind his or her permission to use any information provided in the interviews (see Appendix O), a request for information/release form to be signed granting me the right to use their interview in my thesis (see Appendix P), and a list of sample questions that may be asked during the interviews (see Appendix Q).

The interviews were scheduled and semi-formal in nature and were conducted at sites chosen by each participant. No surveys or questionnaires were used. When needed, which was not very often, I used the list of sample questions to initiate or to spur on the conversation thus assuring a continued flow of dialogue. My goal was to get the participant involved in a conversation as quickly as possible. After we were comfortable together and the conversation was moving effortlessly, I would basically step back and allow the interview to become “a monologue, not a dialogue,” in which “the narrator does most of the talking, with the interviewer on the sidelines, encouraging and cheering on” (Brown, 1988, p.40). As opposed to formal question and answer sessions, these more informal conversational opportunities gave me as a researcher, as well as my

interviewees, chances to further explore deeper meanings of a co-constructed text (Anderson & Jack, 1991). A few of the interviews were completed in one session, but several required a follow-up to either clarify some data or provide further information on a previously asked question. This was done by way of a phone call or a short meeting after work. I made notes either during these conversations or as soon as possible afterwards in order to preserve the main ideas of the added communications. Data were analyzed both during and after the data collection process.

Even though I stated to each participant that I would try to limit the interviews to one hour every scheduled interview, except for the first one with Sarah Greene, lasted from one and one-half hours to two hours. This was not at my insistence, but a result of the narrators' enthusiasm, willingness, and desire to share their stories. The above-mentioned Greene interview was one I conducted in 2006 as a required assignment for a Georgia Southern University class on qualitative research. It was this particular interview that further encouraged my interest in this study topic.

Each formal session was recorded on a small cassette tape recorder. Even though my recorder has batteries I was able to use an electrical outlet at each interview. I believe I was able to enjoy the interviews more since I did not have to worry about the loss of battery power, a glitch that could have caused a loss of interview data. I personally transcribed each interview. Although Ochs (1979) warned that too much detail is difficult to read and assess, I transcribed the complete dialogue of every interview whether I considered all of it relevant or not. It was important to the narrator to share, so I included the data. I believed that each person had a valid reason, sometimes personal and sometimes hidden from me and maybe even the narrator herself, for including the



information she chose to share in the interview. I had no wish to negate the importance of any of these disclosures by editing them from the transcript.

After I transcribed the interviews, as a part of ethical practice, I gave copies of the transcriptions to the participants to critique. In this way, the participants were also involved in the interpretive process since they were given a chance to review, edit and add more information to the raw transcripts from their interview. Participants did not view each other's transcripts. An overview of each interview was recorded on interview summary pages (see Appendix R). This information will be kept with the cassette tapes along with the participants' consent forms.

After participants had viewed their copies of the transcripts and given their feedback, I began dissecting these life stories in order to develop an open and frank analysis and interpretation. I employed the following strategies in my analyses: the keyword approach and narrative analysis. The keyword approach, as outlined by Coffey & Atkinson (1996), helped me organize the data into a more manageable form by summarizing each small section of text and identifying it with a descriptive code word or phrase. Next I looked for both consistencies and contradictions in the narrators' statements. I was then able to collapse these codes into conceptual categories of narratives with similar perspectives and common experiences. This enabled me to identify four dominant themes.

The purpose of narrative is to describe or explain. In this study the narrators explicated particular events and personal experiences relating to their community and schools. In implementing in-depth narrative analysis methodology, I focused on the ways the interviewees related and used stories to interpret the world (Riessman, 1993). This

was particularly helpful as I tried to seek meaning in the sometimes lengthy accounts some of the participants felt needed to be recounted, especially those that on the surface seemed to bear no relation to my purpose of study. By applying an evaluation model (Labov and Waletzky, 1967/1997) I looked at the content by following the path of beginning, middle, and end. I also applied another method of narrative analysis called dramatism (Riessman, 1993). This approach highlights a motive for action or inaction on the part of the narrator. For this type of analysis, Riessman posed five questions the researcher can ask to determine (1) *What* - the action/inaction itself, (2) *Where* - the scene of the act, (3) *Who* - the actor, (4) *How* - how the act was done, and (5) *Why* - why the act was done.

In addition to the methods described above, I also relied on the help of two of my colleagues, one who has already completed the dissertation process and one who has earned her six-year specialist degree. These women volunteered to read and critique my manuscript. I have listened to their suggestions and seriously considered their opinions during the final editing process.

#### Documents and Archived Data

Documents and archived written data used in these studies primarily supplemented the interviews when possible. I requested minutes from the Bulloch County Board of Education (BCBOE) but found very little definitive information in these documents that could enlighten my study. Topics in the minutes were short, to the point, and lacking in details. I also searched archival data such as newspaper articles, school board documents, and video footage. Since this community has such a rich history, I assumed that their struggle to maintain their schools had been documented; however, it

appears that written documentation is not nearly as extensive as I had supposed. Newspaper articles about anything Portal-related, other than social news of visiting relatives, weddings, obituaries, etc., are very limited when compared to many of the other Bulloch County areas. Even the article about the fire that destroyed the high school and damaged the grammar school (1949) merited only 13 lines in *The Bulloch Herald and Bulloch Times*.

Fortunately for me a member of the Bulloch County Coalition, a special group chosen to meet with the Bulloch County Board of Education during the 1990s, found her notebook of information concerning the works of this coalition. The notebook contained the following useful information:

- List of officers and positions held
- Facility Plan Priorities for 1993-98 proposed by the Bulloch County Board of Education
- Alternative Plan Priorities proposed by the Bulloch County Coalition Members
- Current and Proposed Zoning Maps outlining rezoning of school districts
- Renovations suggested by school board district architect
- Assessment of renovations by Bulloch County Coalition Members and suggestions for alternative funding Copies of letters exchanged between the Bulloch County School Board and the Bulloch County Coalition

#### Meeting the Challenges in the Study

As is true in all qualitative research, this study contains challenges to both the methods utilized and the findings reported. This inquiry pertains only to the town of Portal, Georgia, in Bulloch County, and is limited solely to existing data. Information

provided from the personal narratives acquired through interviews generally has come from memory and may be distorted either due to time or personal and emotional biases. However, most of the narratives have not only complemented but substantiated each other, thereby lending further credence to these histories. Also, the limitation of interviewee selections (i.e. participants being restricted to those actively involved with the Portal community) may create bias toward a more negative view of consolidation. While I realize that, as with all narrative forms, the way the interviewees tell their stories may be largely influenced by factors such as race, class, gender, level of education, work, and geographic location (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 167), I still adhere to my assertion that the narratives concerning these schools can provide honest, real-life information about this particular chapter in the Portal community's life and, as such, need to be written down and shared. Unless the data are recorded the memories will inevitably through time become more distorted or irretrievably lost forever.

Subjectivity is always a challenge to be negotiated in qualitative studies. In effect, "all research is biased in its subjectivity, simply because the research begins, progresses, and ends with the researcher, who, no matter how many controls she may put on it, will nonetheless be creating a document reflecting her own assumptions" (Yow, 2005, p. 7). Glesne (2006) noted that researchers must continually ask themselves questions about their research and use techniques such as member checks and peer review. In order to address the issue of subjectivity, I have employed member checking by the participants, of their *own interviews only*, to ascertain that their stories were conveyed straightforwardly in the same manner in which they were related to me. Descriptions of past events are based not only upon memory, but are also be substantiated with written

documentation from the past when possible. Two of my good friends who are also in education and have received advanced degrees from Georgia Southern University periodically read and re-read the chapters of my study. One, who also did an oral history study for her dissertation, was a great help in guiding me in ways to make my participants and the town of Portal seem more “real” to those who will read this study upon its completion. The other, a published writer herself, was instrumental in showing me how to communicate the personal relationship I had with each interviewee; an attribute of this study that supports my role as an involved co-creator of this oral history. I was well aware that I, in addition to my position as interviewer and archivist, would also play an interpretive role; a role that may be distrusted or, at the least, questioned by other researchers and educators. To counteract these critics who may pinpoint my subjectivity as flawed and thus leading to an unreliable study, I used exact quotes whenever possible from the recorded oral narratives and made a concentrated effort to present both the positive as well as the negative perceptions of the individuals involved in these events. When dissimilar accounts were related by two or more participants when recalling the same event, all accounts were included in the study.

This study will be preserved in the Georgia Southern University Henderson Library in the form of an electronic thesis. Transcripts will also be given to the library’s archives. I will keep the cassette tapes along with the information sheets and release forms in a safe deposit box at my home. While the tapes will not be made available to others in order to protect the identities of the interviewees, the transcripts will be available to any readers who request them from Georgia Southern University. The twelve years I have spent in the Portal Elementary School as well as my close association with

many of the Portal residents have encouraged my ambition to document the accounts of this rural community's encounters with school closings and consolidation. I have enjoyed recording the feelings, thoughts and discernments of these rural citizens concerning their hometown schools.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCOVERIES

#### Sharing the Tales of Battle: Cohesive Community Voices

*As each interview began I was that kid again listening to stories told by my grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and various other relatives and friends as they visited late into the afternoon after Sunday dinner.*

Deborah Cartee, March 20, 2013

*Two Rural Schools Under Siege: An Oral History 1969-2012* evolved from my interest in the symbiotic relationships between many small communities and their community schools. I chose to focus my research on this small rural community of Portal, Georgia, and its schools primarily because of my own initial educational experiences in a small neighborhood school, my upbringing in a small community, and a legacy of celebrating “us-ness” transferred to me through my family’s tradition of sharing daily life stories and anecdotes, both current and past, while enfolded in the familial atmosphere at the dinner table. In this assessment of the collected interviews I have emphasized beliefs, meanings, and perspectives expressed by the narrators. Though some data were gathered from a small number of archived documents to reinforce the positions stated in this paper, the bulk of the information was garnered primarily through interviews with eight concerned citizens of the Portal, Georgia area, all who exhibit a resilient connection to their geographical and affective *place*.

As a former student educated in small neighborhood schools, and now a teacher in this small rural community similar to the ones of my childhood, this study provided me

opportunities to reflect on and intertwine my experiences growing up; that is to say a time of relating the experiences of my childhood place with my adult experiences that evoke in my consciousness the same awareness of this sense of place. I am concerned that these small “places” are being threatened by larger, more powerful entities that tout closing and consolidation as the “right” path to financial savings and better opportunities in one-size-fits-all educational settings. In order to confront educational policies that tend to marginalize certain economically or culturally disadvantaged communities and their schools, we must question who has the power and control in these educational situations.

It is through the lens of critical theory based on the works of Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, Jean Anyon, and Henry Giroux that I viewed my participants’ struggles as they experienced the bias of classism and the negation of their interest in preserving their small, local schools (Peshkin, 1982; Woodrum, 2004). When coupled with their feelings of anxiety and unhappiness over the possibility of losing not only their educational identity, but perhaps their entire community as well (Peshkin, 1978), these Portal residents used their collective “voice” (Freire, 1994) to send a message to the closing and consolidation forces, e.g. as stated by one interviewee, “[D]on’t mess with Portal.”

The eight interviewees: Sarah Greene, Kate Mitchell, Tracy Kirkland, Reverend William Etheridge, Ellen Hodges, Jamie Young, Richard Emerson and Reverend Gerald Johnson (all names are pseudonyms) are parents, grandparents, teachers, retirees, and citizens who are concerned about their schools and their community’s future. They range in age from their early 30s to their early 70s. Most are Portal natives. A few moved to Bulloch County at an early age and have lived a majority of the lives in Portal (see



Chapter III and Appendix N for richer descriptions of participants). I believe it was vital in my interviews with these men and women that I, as an active participant in the dialogue (Anderson & Jack 1991), reinforce the sense of connection and friendship that already existed between these participants and me. In so doing, I was able to act more effectively as a co-creator of the material that would be presented.

Although these interviews were conducted at different times and in various locations, including scheduled interviews, impromptu meetings, and phone conversations, I chose to present the substance of these exchanges in the style of a focus group round table discourse in which group comments could be correlated. I believe this better represents the discussions these residents have had among themselves through the years concerning their community school issues. The particular interview questions were not always asked at each interview, but serve here to organize and visibly identify the topic or theme of the particular sections of this “discussion.” Each narrator talked with candidness and a willingness to be helpful. It was chiefly for this reason that I seldom had to consult my list of questions during the interviews as the dialogues flowed readily and I was able to immerse myself in the pleasure of listening throughout most of the interview times.

The interviewees’ statements in the following “discussion” are exact quotes, serious in nature yet sprinkled with humor and Southern colloquialisms. Their comments reflect pride in their community and indeed in themselves for the victories realized. Although each interview covered topics that took place during the time span of 1969-2012 (chiefly the matters of local school closings and consolidation, ideas concerning school size, and perceptions of unfairness and control), every interview was unique. Each

participant played a different part in serving the schools and community and presented distinct accountings of his or her role in this history. Not every participant answered every question; some of the participants answered my questions before I had the chance to ask. The interviewees tended to talk most about what was important to them; a few accomplished this either by simply ignoring certain questions or by briefly stating perfunctory replies then returning straightway to the particulars that held the most significance for them. I discovered, however, that each telling was linked to the others by strong communal cords of community and school.

Upon asking each narrator to share his or her experiences, the participants warmed quickly to the topic and related life stories animatedly but genuinely. In the responses that served to delineate their place in Portal, I identified several keywords and phrases that emanated from the text. The concepts of small size, closeness, and the experience of *knowing* each other permeated the verbal images painted by these residents. Though these responses may seem mawkish to outsiders, they do express a common set of cultural bonds and core values that are not insignificant to small communities (Mathis, 2003). These revelations in effect describe for us some of the positive characteristics of small rural schools and their communities. The narrators exhibit a sense of dignity and pleasure in expounding their “us-ness.” These emotions are not merely nostalgia, nor do they exhibit a blind acquiescence to one’s sense of place. Instead, I view these sincere responses as a verification of qualities, specifically smallness and familiarity, that need to be supported and sustained (Howley & Eckman, 1997) if for no other reason than, as participant Tracy Kirkland succinctly expressed, “The Portal area is my home and my heritage.”

## Roundtable Conversations: Portal Experiences, Memories and Impressions

**Deborah:** Let's begin with your experiences here in Portal. Please tell me about things you remember, impressions or any lasting memories that stand out in your mind.

**Jamie:** I've always been here – my whole life. I graduated from Portal. I went off and taught at another small school and then came back to Portal. I think it's just the small size...it's that I know the parents of the kids I'm teaching. When I was in school here, everybody who was in my class – I knew them...the parents and the grandparents. I think it's just that closeness; knowing each other. There're not as many big school issues that you would have in a larger school. And I think that's the biggest thing...that sense of community. You know everybody and we all have that in common. I can tell you that, of my hundred students, I probably know the parents of seventy-five or eighty of them. And I mean *really* know them. Not just, "Hi. Your child's in my class," but I really *know* the parents or grandparents or aunt, uncle, somebody.

**Richard:** You've got to understand that Portal *is* that – a *small community*, and there are a lot of factors involved that you need to know to fully understand the whole picture. There's just a lot of things that parents in a smaller town like about the smaller schools.

**Tracy:** The Portal area is my home and my heritage. Down through the generations from great-grandparents to my children, we have all lived and attended school in the Portal schools. Small schools have had an impact on my life...knowing those I went to school with as members of my community and church. In my position today [works in a Portal school] I know the parents and their children and interact with them like my parents before me were involved with our community as I grew up. Living in communities where you work together, go to church together, join in the activities of the school and

community has a great effect on who you are.

**Richard:** I played on the first football team that Portal High School ever had. And if you wanted to play football at Portal – you almost needed a doctor’s excuse *not* to play [laughter] - if you wanted to play, you could play. You didn’t have to be great. Well, a lot of the kids at Statesboro are competitive. Now I’m not saying that standards are not good. You need standards, but, if you want to play football at Statesboro High School you have to be really good; or basketball or baseball or tennis at Statesboro High...really good to be able to play. However, you can go to one of the smaller schools and make the team and get playing time. You know, that’s just one example. Leadership opportunities are more available. You can have some involvement, there’s something that everybody can do.

*[In each individual interview, I took a few seconds after this initial topic had been introduced and discussed and made a few notes in order to give the interviewees a further chance to add their thoughts before asking the next “prompt” question.]*

**Deborah:** Let me ask you about the relationship between the schools and the community now; specifically the community’s involvement in the two schools.

**Sarah:** They really do work together. The Fall Festival is one community project. We have a great turnout for that. There’s P. T. O. at the elementary school and P. T. A. at the middle high school. We have the parents working, the community is working with the schools so the children can get what they need.

**Deborah:** Does this include just those who have children in the schools?

**Sarah:** If they don’t have a child of their own in school, they have nieces, nephews...

**Jamie:** When we stand together, it seems like we sent the message “don’t mess with

Portal.” I will probably upset a lot of people by saying this, but we’re not going to really stand up for ourselves until we *have* to. A couple of years ago when they built this school [the new middle high school] and the whole deal with the gym came up [there were no plans to include a new gym with the school], that lunchroom [where the meeting was held] was packed. People were standing up. It’s like we’re a community and we work together, but we only really work together when they’re fixing to close the school or tear down the gym. And I think that’s why through the years it’s kind of like we’ve been pushed and pushed around.

*In this opening section of dialogue it was easy to identify several common threads that connect these four participants emotionally and cognitively (Low, 1992) to their home community. While the other four participants also expressed their feelings, all positive, about their lives in Portal, I believe these quotes presented above best communicated the themes of this particular section of discourse. A prominent theme throughout this section is that of the small community as a contributor of many positive factors, primarily the smaller schools where there is a chance for everyone to become involved. Sarah stressed that the community residents did work with the schools since almost everyone has a student attending them, if not a son or daughter then other kin. In relation to my question concerning what was/is involved in sustaining and preserving these two schools, Jamie pointed out that due diligence is a requirement of keeping these small districts intact. Community members often wait until their district is under attack and they are pushed to action before they rally their forces into one collective voice.*

**Deborah:** I would like to ask specifically about the forced integration of Bulloch County schools. Does anyone remember how that was handled here? This would be back in late

1969 and early 1970.

**Gerald:** I can tell you a little bit about it. Integration was a pretty smooth transition for us here, and I'll tell you the reason why. Jerry Brown was the principal of Portal High School at that time. He treated everyone fairly; he didn't cull [reject, treat unfairly] anyone. And after Jerry, Dale Wilkinson came. His attitude was much the same as Jerry's. There were some skirmishes here and there, but by and large integration was a peaceful thing because the people in charge used their authority wisely. They were strong enough and cared enough to make it happen.

**Sarah:** Like someone mentioned before, we're a small community and *all* the children, really stick together. They know each other's families. You don't hear about all the violence that you have in bigger towns. I mean, everyone knows everyone.

**Jamie:** There are little disagreements here and there, but as far as fights and big incidences, no. And that's the plain truth. I taught in Millen for three and a half years and we had a fight every week or two. I mean, there was one fight I went to break up and they were yelling, "They got a knife!" I'm talking *serious* fights. I don't know of three fights since I've been here – in four years. A few girls will get into it over something. He said, she said, and whatever. But overall, in my classes, every kid gets along with every other kid. It's just not...the drama, I guess you would say.

**Deborah:** So, nothing that would make the *Statesboro Herald* [the local newspaper]?

**Jamie:** Oh, about that...We were 100% *clear* Friday [speaking of the recent drug sweep/search of the middle high school], and that won't be in there. But let a kid get caught with drugs and *that* will be front page news. Hearing just the bad, that all plays together in the perception others have of Portal.

**Deborah:** What about gangs or gang-related activities?

**Sarah:** There's no violence...Just small things every once in a while. [laughing] I know there was one time; like they were doing confetti...I mean graffiti on the side of the IGA [local grocery store]. I don't think they said anything...just wanted to express their artistic side. We don't have that gang problem here. And we don't have the trouble that Statesboro High School has. I mean the drugs."

**Deborah:** Jamie, you spoke about a perception others hold of Portal. Specifically, what perception is that? What do you think causes others to hold this view of the Portal community?

**Jamie:** There is just a negative stigma... (sighs). Statesboro has always been the county seat, and Portal was just that other community. It's gone on as long as I can remember...that little tension there. I can't pinpoint and say when it started, but I will say that as long as I've lived here it's gone on. You know, even when my Dad was in school here. I don't know why it exists. I wish I could understand it.

**Ellen:** Drawing my own conclusions, I think it's economic discrimination. It's always been that way.

**Deborah:** Why do you think that?

**Ellen:** We're located in an economically deprived portion of the county. Portal schools are on the far side of the county. I guess there's not a lot of interest from the leaders in the county who are centrally located in Statesboro; on their part it isn't seen that this side of the county grows.

**Deborah:** Is it just the schools?

**Ellen:** It's that way with all things Portal. And Portal may not be the only one. There may

be some other smaller communities outside Statesboro that receive the same “redheaded step-child” [a colloquialism used to denote a person or thing that is neglected or mistreated] treatment.

**Gerald:** This little town gets overlooked so much in every area.

**Richard:** You know, I think there was the thought at the time that if you sent the worst teachers, the worst coaches, and the worst administrators up there [to Portal] that the people would just get fed up and quit. Say “Ah, to heck with it. Let’s just go to Statesboro.” But that never happened. Now, I’m *not* saying that the administrators and teachers at Portal were bad. Don’t quote me as saying that. But that idea was out there. But the board members, I think, resisted that. They saw through it and felt like the kids needed to have the best.

**Jamie:** They think we’re just a small, two-bit, one-horse town.

**Ellen:** I’ll tell you it’s amazing that people in Statesboro don’t know anything about this side of the county. The Turpentine Festival this past October, the first weekend in October is the Turpentine Festival; and when [name withheld] from Statesboro High brought her J. R. O. T. C. [Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps] students to march in the parade, the kids knew nothing about Portal. She took them to the Festival afterward, and so many of the ones from Statesboro had never, ever been to Portal. Knew nothing about the Turpentine Festival. Said, “I’ve never been here.” They had lived in Statesboro all their lives and had never even been to Portal.

**Jamie:** When it was decided that the county would build us a new middle high school with *no* gym, of course Portal people were mad. A comment was made to the effect of, “You can’t get everything. We’re giving you a new school. We’re spending \$14 million



or maybe \$17 million on this school. No, it's not going to be Statesboro High; it's going to be basic. But we are *letting* you keep your school. We're *allowing* you to keep your school." Like it was in their power alone to either bestow or not this gift on us. I guess I take it more personally because I'm from here, but it was the way it was worded.

**Kate:** And our sports complex... when they allocated that money, they just did it for football. No renovations on the other things. The bathrooms [at the sports fields] are not accessible for the handicapped. If somebody was of a mind to come in there, they couldn't.

**Deborah:** And there's no track.

**Kate:** No, no track at all. We've got a track team; and that's one thing - that they run this road and it's dangerous. What they do is what we call the "graveyard run." They run down and around where the graveyard is and they come back up this side street here [points out directions as she speaks]. And that's where they run. And somebody's going to get hit one day...or snake-bit. It's so grown up on the sides.

**Ellen:** Well, I'll tell you the maddest I ever got. It was when we were going to the board about trying to get them to give us a new gym. They were just obnoxious. And they said something about, "Well, you could just keep that old gym. There's nothing wrong with that old gym." We could just do some touch up. And then they said, "We've spent so much money on Portal any way." That's what their attitude was. Talking about how much money – and they hadn't built the new school yet. – talking about how much they had allocated for the new school. I was like – excuse me. This gym – you've spent nothing on that gym. That gym was built by Portal in the forties. The land was given to the school board by a Portal person who owned the land so they could build the gym. It

was paid for – every nail, every board was provided by and paid for by the citizens of Portal. The school board – Bulloch County – did zero. Nothing. Nothing as far as that gym – nothing.

**Kate:** I can tell you some things that was said because I was at that meeting. The place was packed. We were talking about the gym. We went to the expense of doing a booklet on it, and, uh, that’s when R. O. T. C. was going to be dropped. And you had a lot of R. O. T. C. parents and the R. O. T. C. students...

**Deborah:** The cadets?

**Kate:** Yes. They were dressed in their uniforms and they sat on the front row looking him [the school superintendent at the time] dead in the face. Never said anything; just made their presence known. I was in the back because there was no room. No seats. The place was packed. Then when the subject came up about the [old] gym, [the school superintendent] said, “We have been to the city council of Portal and talked to them to them about taking it over” [referring to the financial care and upkeep of the old gym]. That’s when [Portal’s mayor at the time] stood up and said, “I beg your pardon. No, you did not come to that meeting.” And [the superintendent] said, “Well [the Assistant Superintendent, Budget and Finance] has been there.” And *I* spoke up and I said, “No, he has *not*. No one from the Board of Education has approached the city council [of Portal] and I’m a council lady.” And he had egg on his face and you talk about trying to change things around.

*[Several of the narrators who had also been at this particular meeting voiced agreement with these observations during their individual interviews.]*

*In the short replies to my question about the enforced integration of all Bulloch*

*County schools, the observations seemed to be unrealistically optimistic. This particular question happened to be one that some of the participants chose to evade by either giving me a standard short reply - "I really don't remember any major problems"- or ignoring it altogether. Sarah's comment that "all the children" stick together seemed too simplistic. Even though Jamie seemed to support this idea of harmony among students with her comments, she was specifically addressing the school environment, an atmosphere usually more controlled and thus, much less volatile than open, less-restricted environments such as neighborhoods where adults may not be close enough to monitor interactions. In retrospect, I do not believe Sarah's comments to be deliberate falsehoods but an instance of one woman constructing meaning of her personal experiences with integration and racism. In the spirit of constructivism, we can respect these multiple realities individuals form in their minds. As termed by Sangster (1994) this "historical memory" offered a more comprehensible perceptiveness of the social and historical framework within which Sarah operated. She is, in effect, making sense of her environment in relation to what she chooses and hopes to see by filtering and interpreting (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Sarah is an intelligent woman and, as such, does not live her life in a fantasy; however, interpretation of her somewhat overly enthusiastic response does require some balance perhaps best offered by one not so emotionally invested in this community.*

*In answer to my question about gangs or gang-related activities, Sarah laughingly recalled that there was a small group of high school students who got together one time and wrote "graffiti...on the side of the IGA" [local grocery store]. She emphasized that nothing vulgar was said or drawn. Sarah further stressed that Portal has*

*always been a quiet town. “No violence...Just small things every once in a while.” I also decided to ask each of my fifth grade classes at Portal Elementary if they were aware of any gangs in Portal. While I had no reason to believe any of these fifth graders participated in gang-related activities, but I thought they may speak up about older relatives or friends who professed to be gang members. At first several of the students answered that there were definitely gangs in the town. I questioned them about the activities of these gangs and was able to discern that they in fact were describing social “cliques” among students at both schools. I asked if these gangs “ran the streets” and was informed that it was “not like that at all.” These particular “gangs” were “snooty” and excluded others, with the girls being the most responsible for this “gang-related snobbery.”*

*Another important theme, one of contention between this community and the “outside” powers identified by the participants as “they,” is that of an ownership attitude and a manner of condescension by the dominant society toward the Portal residents (Klonsky & Klonsky, 2008). Jamie questioned the artificial benevolence of these outside powers when they bestowed on the Portal community the gift of keeping their “basic” middle high school. Ellen asserts the chief bias against Portal is one of economic discrimination and that it is this way “with all things Portal.” Economic bias is a powerful foe given that the education of children is often strongly linked to their parents’ income-tax brackets (Deweese, 1999). Furthermore, the residents claim that the “negative stigma” attached to Portal is, in part, borne out of the outsiders’ apathy and ignorance of the town.*

**Deborah:** I want to ask you to think about the first time you can recall a push to

consolidate your schools. What did you feel; what did you *do*?

**Richard:** Unfortunately, a lot of people you need to have talked to have passed away. It's about a multitude of issues. You really can't pick out one single issue and say this is what it's about. You need to go back to when Statesboro High was being constructed back in the 60s. Not Statesboro High School as it sits now, but when it was moved from the other side of town to where it is now. Statesboro wasn't nearly as built up then as it is now. That location where Statesboro High School sits was on the edge of town back then. It was 50 acres and that was a good size at the time when they built the school there. And the theory then was just like it is forty years later - we'll build it big enough so that all the kids from Portal can come, too. Well, the kids from Portal and the parents from Portal didn't want to come. You know, from where I lived to Statesboro High School was about 20 miles. It was 15 to 18 miles in a lot of places, if you lived on the edge of the community. They didn't want the kids to have get up that early and travel that far to school. They wanted them to have a quote "community school." They wanted to have their own identity and not just be thrown in with all the kids at Statesboro.

**Kate:** I got involved when they were still having school board meetings at Statesboro High. That's where they had the meetings for the public. A lot of people like \_\_\_\_\_ (Richard Emerson's father) were already working on a plan to save our schools. They were talking about closing the schools up here. But that's when Billy Bice was superintendent. Now he got a really negative view of Portal. I was like a group protestor, and that's the involvement I had. Of course, I listened to people talking and all, and there was a good many others who were on that committee who started working on a plan to stop the closing. I don't know how much I can help you except as a person who was

fighting to keep our school. I was like everybody else saying, “No, we don’t need to lose our school. We need to keep our high school.”

**Ellen:** But they wanted to bus them all [Portal Middle High students] to Statesboro.

**Gerald:** And, unless they start at 6:00 in the morning, there’s no way bus drivers can run their routes in Portal and then get the students to Statesboro by 8:00. I attended several of the board meetings where they presented plans for closings and new schools. There were several who were pretty well bent on closing Portal schools. These meetings were all at Statesboro High and the place would be packed. I know everybody from Portal was there and I think a few from Candler County as well [laughter]! Well, at one of those meetings I asked the board chairman why it was so important for this school to close. He started talking about the monetary part of it. I told him I understood that, but I said when you start thinking about the safety of the children driving from here to Statesboro...you can’t put a price on that. And if you start talking about closing the Portal schools, you’re going to have a fight on your hands. You can count on it. And that’s what happened. It got pretty ugly sometimes.

**Jamie:** We are lucky our school was saved this last time. We are lucky to be in the new building [referring to the middle high school]. I guess both sides of it - people joke about our school versus Statesboro High. I went to Statesboro High one day and I was just...my jaw dropped.

**Ellen:** Everyone around here calls Statesboro High the “Taj Mahal” [laughter]. As far as closing and consolidation, there may have been a push earlier that didn’t really come to fruition. But, as far as when they were *absolutely* going to do it, that was in the nineties. They, the board members, were adamant. They were going to close this school and ship

everybody down to Statesboro. My nephew [who has children in the Portal schools] called me up in Washington. I worked in Washington then. I know that he and some other folks interested in keeping the school were trying to do whatever the community could do to keep the middle high school. And I had fought some issues with a school board up in West Virginia where I lived with my son; so he knew that I had some experience with school boards [laughs]. So he called and said, "What can we do?" I said, "Number one: you're going to have to get a lawyer. You're going to have to get a lawyer and fight it." The second thing you do is you get the school laws for the state and you learn them forwards and backwards, and you catch them doing illegal stuff and nail them on it. So, they got a law book... [holds up her personal copy of Georgia School Law and laughs]...it's about seventy bucks. A group of parents and some other folks got together, consolidated their efforts and challenged the authorities.

**Tracy:** I see consolidation as a political move by people who have never lived or experienced life in a small community and school and where people matter to one another as *individuals*.

**William:** I'll tell you Mrs. Cartee. The excuse given for consolidation and school reform is poor people; but it is *not* about them. It is more about government control.

**Ellen:** It's not about saving money. It's what the affluent people want. Whatever the affluent people want is what happens. It doesn't really matter what it costs. They may say it's about saving money, but it's not.

**Sarah:** When this deal came up the last time - when they were talking about putting up one consolidated high school [on the north side of Bulloch County that would combine a portion of the student bodies of Statesboro High and all of Portal High], community

people didn't like it at all. I mean, could you imagine? There's what, well over a thousand at Statesboro High now? They were drawing up petitions here and had them at the IGA [local grocery store in Portal] for people to sign to save the school. And that's how the school got saved. The citizens of Portal saved our middle high school.

**Jamie:** And you're talking about almost 2,000 kids at one school. I don't see that being a good environment. You put that number of kids in a school... I taught at Swainsboro High, and my first day there I was just "Oh, my gosh!" And I guess it was... a thousand maybe. That was several years ago now. You're talking about six or seven social studies teachers, and seven or eight English teachers, and here we have one or two. Wow! It was a good experience, but I wouldn't want to teach in a school like that – no. And I wouldn't want my children in that school.

**Deborah:** Why do you feel that way?

**Jamie:** It seemed like the students got lost. I mean, the sheer size of the school was one thing. But there was the class size. You're talking maxed out classes, 30 to 32, and you lose that one-on-one that you have in a smaller school. It was a good experience. I won't say it was terrible, but I wouldn't want to teach in in a school that size, or go to a school or send my kids to a school that size. It's because of numbers. It's not as personal. Now with really small schools, no, you're not going to be able to give those kids all the opportunities that they need. There's got to be a balance. The ideal situation is one where you can offer those opportunities, courses and extracurriculars, but you still have smaller classes. You can still have that one-on-one relationship with the students where you know each student and they're not just another kid sitting in your class.

**Deborah:** Well, what do you think would be a perfect size for a high school or middle



high?

**Jamie:** I think we're at like 460, the middle and high school. That is extremely small. I mean, that is really small. I think if we were a little larger we could offer more opportunities. But then I think if you were to get above that number just in one, middle or high, I think that would be too large. If you had more than 500, say in the high school, or more than 500 in the middle school, then I think that's getting on up there. And I know, in particular here at the school now, we have so many teachers who are crossing over and are teaching high school courses and middle school courses just so we can offer...like...drama this year for the first time. We had it when *I* was in school here. But this is the first time we've had it in years. And Quest [gifted program] in our high school, the foreign language teacher is going to teach Quest. We have high school teachers who are teaching middle school keyboard. So, we have to split and teach so many different subjects to offer those things to our kids. And I think if we had bigger numbers ...and you know it's a scheduling issue, too. The middle and high school schedules are not the same time periods.

**Tracy:** The size of a school certainly matters. In my opinion, when you get over 400 students in an elementary school there are too many students in each class for the teacher to instruct and work with. In middle school, 450 students would be my estimate of the number of students that could make the transition from elementary school with good supervision and instruction. In high school, 500 students would be my guess of the number of student who would receive the education and supervision they need to accomplish all the work necessary for graduation. My thought is that in small classes students have one-one-one with teachers and have small group discussions where

students can better understand what is being taught. My thoughts are that larger schools probably miss out in a lot of ways because parents like to be involved with the child and large schools are not too open to parent involvement.

**Sarah:** We lived in Statesboro one year. My children attended Mattie Lively Elementary School. The classes were bigger. The teachers here are able to work more one-on-one. You know if the children needed help they had it. There in Statesboro, they just didn't. There were too many students for the teacher to be able to do that.

*In this segment of the conversation the residents grew more animated as they denounced the efforts to consolidate their middle high school with Statesboro schools. Richard was able to present the most detailed information concerning the internal machinations that propelled the bigger-is-better paradigm due to not only his father's service but his own as well on the Bulloch County Board of Education. He stated that the mindset through the years was to build a big enough high school to contain both the Statesboro and Portal students. The crucial drawback to this plan was the overlooked likelihood that "the kids from Portal and the parents from Portal didn't want to come" (Richard Emerson). Citing long bus rides as a particularly unwanted result, Richard and Reverend Johnson both voiced the opinions that the students would have to bear a much earlier departure time from home each morning coupled with a later return time as well. Perhaps more important was the compromising of the students safety as they would be required to travel almost double the miles each day to attend a Statesboro school. Richard then returned to a previously mentioned theme by stating that they (Portal residents) wanted to have a "community school." The Portal inhabitants however would not accept a lesser school in trade for the right to keep their community schools. They*

*also demanded a school equipped with equal educational opportunities on par with the other schools of Bulloch County, as is their right (Jimerson, 2006b).*

*These statements led into a discussion on school size. It was obvious to me that the participants had given this matter some thought and maybe debate among themselves over the years. The participants agreed that the less than 400-student population of a combined middle and high school was not the best use of resources or the best situation for the students. With that being agreed upon, they also voiced the opinion that combining into schools of over 900, which would be the case if Portal was combined with Statesboro, was too big.*

*Perhaps the most overarching assessment of this section was given by Reverend Etheridge when he stated that school reform “is more about government control.” The bias of classism and the hidden agenda to erase these schools was not lost on these residents. The consolidation of power was equally visible. Their reactions to the proposed closings and consolidations were not overly territorial nor were they based merely in sentiment. The townspeople realized that losing their schools would also place the community’s survival in jeopardy as well (Peshkin, 1978), an opinion that will be expressed even more vehemently in the next portion of the interview.*

**Deborah:** Well, going back to the topic of consolidation, what reasons did they give you all for the proposed closing?

**Jamie:** It was to consolidate because we didn’t have enough students. Well, we all just went in and said we *need* to keep our high school. You take our high school and we will die in this area. We’ll be like a ghost town. And we need it because we’ve got all these kids here. And see, back in that time, they did more college prep courses up here than we

have in the last few years. We have to fight for what we get here. We really have to fight for it.

**Richard:** When I was on the board the other members kept looking at the cost-per-student at Portal; saying that it's more than at Statesboro High. They said, "You need to shut it down." I said, "No. Let's get Portal operating at a lower cost." Well, I went in and I studied the budget really hard and I made the statement at a board meeting one night, and I really upset some people but that's okay because it was *true*, that if you took the board budget at any time and you want to go back and study the Board of Education budget on a per-school basis, the Board of Education in Bulloch County was not spending an excessive amount of money in Portal. What was sent to Portal was really inconsequential to the total budget. But Bulloch County was spending a ton of money, and nobody had even looked at it, operating *five* elementary schools in just the Statesboro area alone. All those elementary school in the city were eating money, and everybody looked the other way on that. But what they *would* pick on is the cost-per-student at Portal.

**Deborah:** And there was Northside School that housed *only one grade* during the 70s, 80s and 90s. I always wondered why. It didn't seem very cost-effective, though both my girls enjoyed the smallness of it and the fact that it was just one grade.

**Richard:** Yeah, my Dad was on the school board then and building Northside School was a compromise. It was a deal made in order to get a school outside the city and on the north end of Bulloch County [closer to Portal]. So that was kind of a compromise that happened back in the 60s or the early 70s when my Dad was on the board - to get something moving in the direction of the north end of Bulloch County. That way, if at

any point in time Portal did close and kids had to move, they wouldn't have to go all the way to the city. The board would have a hundred acres of property and a school and a place to start without having to go all the way into the city.

**Deborah:** Wow, that was pretty forward thinking!

**Richard:** Dad got a lot of angry phone calls when he served. He went through the same stuff during his terms concerning certain ones wanting to close Portal and move all the kids to Statesboro. *Same* argument. It comes up every 10 or 12 years – same kind of thing. I can give you a lot of info on the typical things like the argument about the cost-per-student, whether it happened in the 60s and 70s or in 2002 or 3. Cost was *always* a big focus. Well, you need to look at some things that happened. Go back - historically - and it's a *fact*; the attendance boundaries for Portal have eroded significantly over time. The coalition [Bulloch County Coalition] that you mentioned [in a previous phone call], one of their big rebuttals to the argument of low enrollment was that the reason attendance at Portal is low is because the attendance district lines have been altered over time. Therefore the population of Portal continues to decline not because the population isn't growing, it's because the kids are constantly being redistricted to schools outside the Portal district. You know people will argue that's not the case but it is.

**Deborah:** I saw Jack Hill [a Georgia senator who at one time represented the Portal area] in a restaurant in Reidsville and I told him about my dissertation topic. When I mentioned consolidation, he told me he and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ [a Georgia representative who retired in 1996] had done some legal maneuverings to keep the schools from closing.

**Jamie:** I was talking to Jack at the Turpentine Festival Parade and he mentioned something about it. He said they had to change state law or something like that so that

they could keep it open.

**Richard:** Jack was actively involved in the whole thing; he supports small schools. There was a bill that was presented in the Georgia legislature; the Bulloch Coalition folks had a lot of input. Anyway, the bill basically said that if you have a school that has exhausted its useful life for funding purposes [a determination made by the state] and the Board of Education no longer funds that school for maintenance and operation due to the age or low enrollment of the school, but the district wants to continue operating that school, they can do so if they expend local funds on it. County dollars, not state dollars. We called it the “Portal Bill,” but other systems in the state take advantage of it, too. Jack really worked hard for us. Another thing he was able to accomplish was the development of the plan that helped Portal get a sewer system here.

**William:** We couldn’t have built our new school where it is without that. You know, I remember in one of the meetings at Statesboro High Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ [an older gentleman from Portal] stood up and said, “I want to share a few things; and he began to name off local politicians, government officials, law enforcement, and the like who had graduated from Portal High School (see Appendix S). And when he finished he said, “It seems to me that if you close up Portal schools, then you’re likely going to have to close up the city of Statesboro, too” [laughter].

**Deborah:** Were other options to consolidation offered at the time...by either side?

**Richard:** When I came on the board, the Portal Elementary School had already been built. So the next issue was the high school. There were several plans that I offered up for potential population growth. I also attempted to get the new school nearer Portal. The first plan, the “three equal schools” plan, offended a lot of people. Statesboro is

artificially big, Portal's artificially small [both due to attendance lines being altered over the years], and Southeast Bulloch is sitting out here doing their own thing. Now, if you take Portal and Statesboro and put them together then divide it by two, guess what you got. You've got almost the same enrollment that Southeast Bulloch has. I suggested that we go out here to Hopeulikit [a small unincorporated community located at highway 80 and highway 25 just below Portal]. There's a property we looked at that would be a beautiful site. It was for sale and the owners were enthusiastic about selling it to the county. I suggested that we build three equal high schools. Southeast Bulloch could pretty well stay like it is. We'd cut Statesboro High way down in size and boost Portal way up in size. I said we don't have to call the new school Portal. We'll call it North Bulloch or Northeast Bulloch, whatever you want to call it. We'll leave Statesboro High where it is in the same facility because you're going to take a bunch of students out of it when we build a new school. You could if the different groups were for or against this plan by what they called this new school. If you called it North Bulloch, you were in favor of it. If you called it Hopeulikit High, you were against it [laughter]. So the Hopeulikit High people were against this three-school plan because the kids who live on the north end of Statesboro and the kids from Portal would get a new school; the kids in the city would go to the same 40-year old run-down place. No, we want our kids to go to a *new* school and we want to be 5A [a classification in high school sports based on population]. Well, the Statesboro High Athletic Boosters wouldn't hear of going smaller. When they got involved, that plan was rejected. One of the big things was that if the kids from Portal went to Statesboro, it would make Statesboro a 5-A school. That was a huge deal at that time. Coach \_\_\_\_\_ (athletic director and head football coach at Statesboro

High at the time) wanted to be a 5-A school. And the Boosters, the *football* boosters, were tremendously vocal in all this, and they wanted to get 250 more kids so they could be 5-A. People from Portal couldn't care less. The superintendent at the time let it slip in a meeting when this plan was first presented; the first thing out of his mouth was, "That makes us 5-A. We can play Valdosta!" None of the kids from Portal would be on the team, but the enrollment would get you to the point where you could be in 5-A. You cannot overlook the power that the Booster Club had...you *cannot*. Okay, on to the next option. I said look, "I just want everybody to be represented equally. What do you think of having two equal high schools? Have one on the north and one on the south end of the county. You divide Bulloch County down the middle – a north and a south. And you take the enrollment and you send it – send some from the north and some from the south; and you go out to William James (Middle School) and right beside it there, where we've got plenty of room, we're going to build a high school there and we're going to build a new high school at Southeast Bulloch. Make Southeast Bulloch a little bigger and Statesboro a little smaller; and you're going to have two high schools with the same enrollment and the same program. Here's what happened. The people from Southeast Bulloch, who've been sitting over here for a year and a half, haven't opened their mouths. They're not in the fight. They're just sitting there waiting on Portal and Statesboro to duke it out. They needed to have a dog in the fight. They need to be involved in this. Well...this one never got any press because it got nixed before it ever went public. Mainly because I...well, that would necessitate ... see, there are a lot of African Americans that would be moved. At Southeast Bulloch...well, just look at the enrollment down there. The demographics are skewed. There are a lot of whites. Majority, it's very white. It's affluent. And you've



got a lot of people out of Savannah who come to lower Bulloch County and buy a home, they work somewhere else; and they have some farmers who are doing well. It would greatly change the demographics of Southeast Bulloch. So, we got no, no, no after all the town hall meetings and all that. But guess what came back after all this; the suggestion to just give those people [Portal residents] what they want. So, what came about was maybe not the best option, but those were the goals to begin with; keeping the school in Portal, having a new middle high school, having some new opportunities and for those kids to be treated on par with what the kids in the other Bulloch County schools have. Now Statesboro High got most of what they wanted. The city of Statesboro wanted their high school to be *in the city limits*. They also wanted a majority white population.

**Deborah:** Really? Wouldn't that be illegal? I wouldn't think you could blatantly ask for a majority of whites.

**Richard:** They didn't *say* it...but the district... They had done their own districting. They had the demographics of the district. So the city sent \_\_\_\_\_ [Statesboro city manager] to a board meeting with a counter proposal. We all felt sorry for him because he was doing what he was sent to do. But the City Council of Statesboro came up with their own plan that they recommended to the school board. And they had this gerrymandered district that went crazy – all over the place. They wanted us to district this way and put the school back in the city. So the Statesboro High would be inside the city limits and a majority white school. Now [this city manager] is gone and I don't know if you'll find anybody who will own up to that, but that's factual. Now, by insisting on staying at the same location to build their new, much larger school, Statesboro High lost their baseball field because we didn't have enough real estate to build one. In the end, they ended up

partnering with Bulloch County at Mill Creek [Parks and Recreation Department] to move the high school baseball team. And it's...that's okay; that's fine; but the only thing about that is 10 years from now, 15 years from now, they are going to out-grow that site. So what are you going to do? I guess you just worry about it when it happens.

**Deborah:** Certain people outside the Portal community have told me they think Portal is overdramatizing this thing...

**Richard:** No, no, no.

**Deborah:** Well let me verify this point: at one time Portal *did* have enough students to justify its existence?

*[Every participant answered positively in some way, either verbally or with a nod of the head, when I asked this question in the personal interviews.]*

**Deborah:** So, what exactly happened with the district lines? How and when did they change?

**Kate:** Back when I was in school – I graduated in fifty-nine – we had a lot of kids, a lot of families with kids who went to school here. And over the years it's kind of dwindled down. But see, all those kids around Hopeulikit at one time went to Portal, but now they're districted for Statesboro. That includes Hunters Pointe [subdivision], too. Well, where you go to Friendship [Friendship Church Road is a few miles from Hopeulikit] there's a road that turns to the left. Our bus used to run there. I'm not sure how far back in there it ran, but we used to go down to there. And then over the years it shifted. Now we don't pick up any kids down in that area that I know of.

**Ellen:** When I was in school people from Hopeulikit all the way out to Middleground and all the way out to – that was a rural area out there – where Hunters Pointed is now, there

were no houses when I went to school. That was rural farms and stuff. Those people came to Portal. That was part of the Portal attendance zone. And if they had really let that stay, all those kids from Hunters Pointe would have come here and Portal would have had a higher student population and been justified to be a school. But see, when it diminished the numbers, that's when they said that you're not big enough to stay.

**Kate:** When was it...was it last year they changed the district zoning? And they had this map which I think I kept a copy of, just to see...

**Deborah:** To see...You mean take more?

**Kate:** Yes, that's one reason I wanted to pay attention to it, because they may ease into us...

**Richard:** When you continue to have your attendance zones eroded, naturally your numbers go down.

**Jamie:** Yeah, that's the thing. You have to look at what are they intending to do when they rezone. Are they trying to take us in more? I mean, it's numbers.

**Richard:** I [while on the BOE] presented the idea that we should make the county voting districts and the attendance districts the same. That way everybody would buy into who their representative is. Everybody would have one board member and that seemed like a logical way to boost the enrollment at a school on the north end of the county.

**Deborah:** Let me ask you specifically about the voting lines and the redistricting before the Hunters Pointe subdivision [located on Highway 80 West and was originally in the Portal district] was built. Why was the Portal voting district changed to add some of the northwest side of Statesboro in with the Portal district? Was the moving of the attendance zone [done before the subdivision was built] done in such a way so as to appease the

builders or is this just a rumor?

**Ellen:** It's true. They manipulated the whole situation. When they redistricted that attendance stuff... people who used to attend Portal were all the way out to Middleground and all the way up to Hunters Pointe. But see, the developer who was developing Hunters Pointe didn't want those ritzy people in Hunters Point to have to come to Portal. They redistricted it so they wouldn't have to come here.

**Deborah:** What about the voting lines for school board?

**Richard:** About midterm of my term, all the school board members went to Atlanta and we took a map and said this is the way the lines are going to be. The Statesboro district had grown. Statesboro was dominating everything in the population; and you take eight seats on the board and take the population and divide it eight ways. Divided by eight each district has to have the same number of residents in it. And, like I said to you on the phone, historically about 60% of the votes were associated with Portal because those kids went to school at Portal and you would get to know those people. And a Portal person could win the election by carrying 60% of the votes – just to get the votes to go for you in Portal could get you elected. If you get votes in Statesboro, that's wonderful. And there would always be a candidate from Statesboro who ran. That was the way it was in my first election. And I met a lot of people in Statesboro and they voted for me and I appreciate it, but there were three people in the race; and I won my majority on the first ballot. So I got about 60% on the first ballot and the other two candidates split what was left. And I went in. Well, when I ran a second time the lines had changed and about 60% of the votes now attended Statesboro schools. And I had offended a lot of Statesboro people, and I understood that. And I knew that it was very hard for me to win my seat

back because 60% of the votes went to Statesboro. So I could get every single vote in Portal and still not win. Mathematically you've got to get every vote there is in Portal and you have to get 50% of the votes in Statesboro. Hard for anybody to do. I don't think we'll ever have another *Portal* resident represent our district again.

**Deborah:** I don't think our BOE representative has visited P. E. S. [Portal Elementary] over three or four times this year. \_\_\_\_\_ [a faculty member at Sallie Zetterower Elementary] told me he is in his school almost every week, yet he [the representative] didn't even attend the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at the new Portal Middle High School. But then, neither did the superintendent.

**Gerald:** I don't think that's right. If you represent a district, you should be an active part of the district.

*In this segment of the discussion, the participants tended more toward a reflective mood as they listed not just reasons for the proposed consolidation; they also meticulously recounted proposals offered that would have benefited all Bulloch County school students and lead to a more level playing field for all schools in the Bulloch County district. One of the primary reasons given for closing Portal Middle High School was the argument of low enrollment. The Bulloch County Coalition, a grassroots committee that was formed to act officially in matters concerning the Portal schools, argued that the reason attendance at Portal is low is because of the steady, ongoing marginalization of this area by the altering of the attendance district lines. A suggestion was made to redraw the attendance lines to allocate more evenly balanced zones. This was rejected. Richard, who was serving on the Board of Education at this time made two other proposals, one a three equal high schools plan and the other a two equal high*

*schools plan. Both were rejected. Any one of these proposals would also make the Portal schools more cost efficient. Richard was also able to verify the allegations I had heard concerning the gerrymandered attendance zones and voting districts. I have not been able to find old zoning maps of school attendance zones; only the current is on file through the Board of Education (see Appendix T).*

*I was not surprised to find out that the argument for consolidation was driven, at least in part, by high school athletics. The 5-A classification would definitely put Statesboro High School in the "big leagues" with the larger schools. The former Portal students, if the closing and consolidation had gone through, would have had the privilege of at least watching the Blue Devils (name of Statesboro High School athletic teams) compete. Also, these residents all seemed very aware of the fact that their "schools serve as important markers of social and economic viability and vitality" (Lyson, 2002, p. 136) and feared the possibility of having their community "die" and become "a ghost town" (Jamie Young, personal communication, 2013).*

**Deborah:** Well, as far as spending per student – are we pretty well matched? Has it balanced out or averaged out at this time?

**Jamie:** Being involved with city council, when we come up for SPLOST funds every five to ten years. It's always like we have to go beg the county to give us our portion. I will say it has gotten better. I don't think it's just the school. I mean, it's overall. Portal has a smaller tax base. But you've got to look at Statesboro; the number of businesses. You've got to look at the college and the amount of money that college students spend *in* Statesboro. And *they* pay that 1% sales tax like we do.

**Ellen:** Have you looked at the SPLOST- the language of the SPLOST at all before? Well,

I kind of got in to it when I came back down here. They asked me to help [some Portal citizens] and they said, “We’re going to fight this thing about the gym.” They weren’t going to give us a gym at all – not at all. Some were telling me that I needed to look all the way back to the first SPLOST years ago. Portal was supposed to get a gym. Well, we were told we didn’t have the money to do that. So...then the second SPLOST. Oh, we’re supposed to get a new school here. Oh, maybe... but we don’t have enough money for that. We can barely make the budget. The third SPLOST – [laughs]. I mean, they kept on lying and lying and lying. By the time they get – I mean, they use Portal as the number one need, but they don’t get around to doing it. By the time they get around to spending on all these elementary schools and Statesboro High and Southeast Bulloch...It’s oh, we’ve just kind of run out of money. Well, we’re just going to have to have another SPLOST now. We don’t have enough to do this out at Portal; and that’s what they tell Portal. We’ll have to have another SPLOST and on the next SPLOST we’ll put you at number one. And right now, this school – even though we have this brand new school – they did not finish all around the eaves and stuff like that. They had insulation hanging out! You know what the board told them to do. “Oh, just paint over it.” I’m serious. I’m serious! Just do it. We’re done. We’re not spending another nickel on Portal.

**Jamie:** My classes have 14 students...compare that to some of the classes at Statesboro that have 30 or more. But if they condense our faculty any more than we already are...They’re talking about getting rid of more teachers, but we’re already down to two social studies teacher, two English, four math and two science. You can’t lose any more, but then our class sizes compared to what they are at Statesboro or Southeast Bulloch are smaller. And it’s just a cost thing. It’s like losing the R.O.T.C. program, moving it to

Statesboro High. You can justify it. It's sheer numbers.

**Deborah:** And it was dropped because of that...I mean the numbers?

**Jamie:** [Nods yes] But with us going to seven periods [a new method of class scheduling for Portal schools and was only implemented in Portal], the formula for counting your total number of students changed. With block scheduling you count your total number of students per semester and add the two together to get your yearly grand total.

**Deborah:** One of the former R. O. T. C. commanders told me you have to have either 100 students or 10% of your student population, whichever is greater, enrolled in the program. He said he had 55 students signed up for this year, before they cancelled the program at Portal. So on block scheduling that would have been a total of 110 cadets. But when going to seven periods like the middle high school is doing now, it counts as just 55. But most of the Portal residents were in favor of adopting the seven-period scheduling, weren't they?

**William:** Yes. But you can't keep up with all of this. They present this and you think, "That sounds good." But you don't realize all it's going to affect; because we don't have time to keep up with all of that.

**Richard:** The kids from Portal make up about 10% of the total enrollment; so I wanted to make sure we got 10% of it (sale tax). I had some language put in there [the wording in the plan for the SPLOST funds] that stated that if we are 10% of the population, that portion of sales tax money was promised to us.

**Deborah:** What about Southeast Bulloch Schools? Do you think it's that way for them, too?

**Ellen:** Well, having Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ [a former BOE member from Brooklet] on the Board a



number of years did help Brooklet. Now, he's not there anymore but he did make sure that Brooklet got its fair share. He did *not* like Portal.

**Deborah:** Oh, really?

**Ellen:** He referred to us as “those people up there.” [Ellen laughs at Deborah's surprised look.] Uh, huh...he did. I was there. I witnessed it.

**Deborah:** I want to ask you now to think ahead. Do you see the population of Portal growing; possibly becoming a “bedroom community” for some of the surrounding areas?

**Ellen:** Well, I'm going to tell you this. The Chamber of Commerce discourages people from moving into these outlying communities when they come from other states and all. Some friends of mine who moved here asked me about living in Portal. They came from up north for a job down here – a transfer thing. They were looking because it was much cheaper to buy a house here in Portal. They were asking about the schools and stuff and they were very interested in our little community. The Chamber of Commerce told them oh, you don't want to live out there – it's too “hicky.” So they send them to a subdivision. The Chamber member told them they would be better off in a little subdivision in Statesboro. Statesboro has so much more to offer. So they bought in a subdivision and... they're not very happy.

**Jamie:** We've had a few move here recently. I wouldn't say there's been a big increase. But there is available land. I think the economy right now is a big thing. We had somebody buy a tract of land out here to build homes on; build up a little community - a subdivision. But the economy... He has the land up for sale now. Nobody at this point is buying land. I think we are in a good situation for when the economy does turn around. We've just got to hope for that turn-around [laughs].

**Richard:** I think Portal is *right now* where Southeast Bulloch was 25 years ago. Because you have to have a quality facility that's safe, it's clean, it's well-lit, and it's pleasing. Parents don't feel bad about their kids being there. They have quality programs. You need to offer parents and students a quality alternative to Statesboro High. If they want to go to a big school, it needs to be a quality school. If they want to go to a small school, it needs to be a quality small school. As it is... another thing is a caveat in there that I got them to add concerning the attendance areas. And that is that anybody who wants to leave a Statesboro school and attend a Portal school – or going from any large school to a small school, like from Statesboro to Portal – you can waive the attendance requirement without having to go through all the processes. You're in Statesboro and you want to go to Portal, you can just sign the paper and go. Now GHSA (Georgia High School Association for sports) and football playing and that kind of stuff, all those rules still apply. So if a kid moves in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they can play football in the 9<sup>th</sup> without any restrictions. They can't if they wait until 9<sup>th</sup> grade to move - GHSA restrictions.

*The discussion of spending-per-student reminds us again that in many instances students' levels of educational achievement may be determined by their parents' income (Van Heemst, 2004). The references to "those people" and "hicks" leaves little uncertainty as to the social class Portal students seem deemed to bear.*

**Deborah:** What do you think the future holds for the Portal Middle High School?

**Ellen:** I think eventually the high school will be gone. I think it is that or increase – grow in numbers. There're not enough high school students to justify keeping this school open long-term.

**Jamie:** Even last year I had a couple of teachers – one particular teacher - she was like,

you know, they built this school and it's small. It's going to become a middle school eventually. That's what it will be – a middle school.

**Gerald:** I have heard that there is also a plan to sell the new middle high school to East Georgia College and make this a satellite school sometime around 2014. Whether it's true or not, I don't know. But I think that's the only way they could close it. They'd have to sell it to cover expenses or the loss.

**Deborah:** I hadn't heard that one.

**Gerald:** It's out there. Of course, they've built a satellite in Statesboro, so maybe that's off the table now.

**Kate:** We can look at a couple of years and we're going to have to fight for our high school again. I just got a feeling! I just have an eerie feeling in a couple of years that we're going to fight for this high school because they're going to make it just a middle school.

**Richard:** I don't think this suspicion is ever going away. If past history serves... somebody sooner or later will have to fight this again. I don't see it happening any time in the near future. I just think people in Portal are just so accustomed to having to fight this fight that they're planning ahead for the next ten years.

**Ellen:** The voting districts will be gerrymandered again. Right now they've got too many building projects going on to do anything further. When they finish all that, they'll have another SPLOST. That's when they'll close Portal as a high school and this will become a middle school. I think it's going to happen no matter what. It's been a fight to hold on to this school this long. And when that happens...I don't know. I think in the long run a lot of little towns that have had this happen will still be on the map, but they won't have

their own government – no city council. It is difficult to maintain a government entity.

**Deborah:** Is there anything you would like to add in closing...any final thoughts on what we've talked about, advice to others in small or rural communities...?

**Ellen:** You have to be proactive for your own children and you have to be proactive for your own community.

**Sarah:** This small town needs to know that this is Portal and these are Portal schools. You know, it's not Northside School or Statesboro School. It's *Portal schools*.

*In the final portion of this roundtable the participants shared what they see as the future of their community schools. Six also share guidance and recommendations to others who are also facing the prospects of losing their own local schools.*

*When evaluating the interview material, I first employed a keyword approach (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993). The keyword approach enabled me to organize the data into more manageable forms by reviewing each small section of text and identifying it with a descriptive code word or phrase from the interview text. When employing the practice of narrative analysis I examined how the interviewees communicated their answers. Most replies were wrapped in accounts of personal actions and feelings that were related more like stories. Even though Ochs (1979) in *Transcription as Theory* cautioned researchers that too much detail would be challenging to read and assess, I transcribed the complete dialogue of every interview whether or not I, at the time, considered all of it applicable to my study. These stories, or meanderings as they sometimes seemed, were important enough to the participants to share with me, so how could I not think them significant as well? I trust that each person had a valid and perhaps personal reason I could not readily discern for sharing this*

*information during the interview. I also realized these narratives could inform about historical and social contexts of the time period of the study. Thinking that perhaps another researcher might detect some meaning from these “non-relevant” accounts one day and having no wish to invalidate the importance of any of these disclosures by deleting them from the record, I recorded all narratives in the transcripts.*

*Next I looked for both consistencies and contradictions in the narrators’ statements. I was then able to collapse these codes into conceptual categories of narratives with similar perspectives and common experiences. This enabled me to categorize topics for the “focus group” discussion and supply “questions and prompts” to serve as headings for each section of discussion. I was also able to identify four dominant themes or common topics on which the participants seemed to place the most importance. In the following chapter each of these themes will be discussed and related to the four research questions: (1) The benefits of living in a small community with its own small schools; (2) The solidarity that came from knowing each other and experiencing a sense of community; (3) The recognition of an ownership attitude and the bias of classism practiced by some of more influential citizens in the county and a perception of economic discrimination; and (4) the affirmation that consolidation is more about government control than helping those in need.*

## CHAPTER 5

### REFLECTIONS ON THE INQUIRY

*Two Small Rural Schools Under Siege: An Oral History 1969 – 2012* grew from my interest in the mutually beneficial relationships I have witnessed between small communities and their community schools paired with my concern that these towns and their schools are often victims of closing and consolidation. My upbringing in a small community and my own initial educational experiences in a small neighborhood school made this inquiry a very personal one for me. My selection of locale, the Portal, Georgia community, was also an especially personal decision chiefly because of my relationship, both professional and personal, with this particular township.

This study recounts, primarily through the oral histories presented by eight Portal residents, the experiences, occurrences, and personal reactions in this decades old struggle beginning with the enforced integration of Bulloch County schools in 1969 up to the year 2012, two years after the completion of the new Portal Middle High School. It offers insight into the interdependent relationship between the two community schools and the Portal community at large. This inquiry also allowed the residents to recount the experiences of exercising their collective “voice” in this significant period in the life of their community and its schools, an opportunity which no other study has provided.

Upon repeated analyses of the transcripts from their interviews and notes made of spontaneous comments voiced in the course of our private conversations together, four main themes emerged from the material. The first major theme, a topic five of the interviewees chose to discuss straightaway in their interviews and on which all

participants placed a great deal of importance, was the benefits of living in a small community with its own small schools. The second theme, that of the solidarity that came from *knowing* each other and experiencing a sense of community (place), is one that clearly maintains the first theme and is so intertwined with the thoughts expressed concerning the small community and its community schools that I decided to discuss both themes in the same section. The third theme identified three prevalent biases the Portal citizens contested with their collective voice: an *ownership attitude* exhibited by some of the more influential citizens who resided outside the Portal area, classism, and economic discrimination. The discussion of the final theme speaks to the assertion that consolidation is more about government control than helping those in need.

The methodology for this study was that of oral history; the data gathered was viewed through the lens of critical theory as explicated by Paulo Freire (1998), Michael Apple (2006), Jean Anyon (2005), and Henry Giroux (2001). The research was guided by four principal questions: What are the challenges, problems, and possibilities of small schools in rural communities in Georgia? What can we learn about the relationship between small schools and communities in rural locations through an oral history of the fight to save the two community schools in Portal, Georgia? What can an oral history recounting this period of struggle in Portal to save the two local schools tell us about the positive characteristics of small rural schools? What was/is involved in sustaining and preserving these two schools?

#### Small Town Living in Our Sense of Place

The residents of Portal, a small rural town located in southeast Georgia, have struggled boldly and unfalteringly against the seemingly unavoidable closure and

consolidation of their community's public schools. The proposals offered throughout the last four decades to close these schools were supported by the assertions that it was impractical to keep these schools open due to their small enrollment, limited funds, and the alleged lack of curricular and extracurricular advantages available in the other larger schools in the Bulloch County district. However, as described by participant Richard Emerson, the Portal schools were not always "artificially small" as they are today but became that way as a result of the steady, inequitable shifting of the school attendance lines. As the Portal district gradually grew smaller, the push for closing and consolidation steadily escalated.

At this time, Portal's neighborhood public schools appear to be safe from the threat of closing. However, even though the community now has a new middle high school edifice that was completed in 2010, closing the high school section of Portal Middle High School and bussing these students to the Statesboro High School is still considered a strong possibility by the Portal citizens, especially if further inequitable rezoning of the school districts takes place. Though the Portal residents' reactions to the suggested closings and consolidations might appear unreasonably protective to some, their feelings of possessiveness were essentially prompted because these citizens realize there is a strong possibility that if their schools are eliminated from their community, their community's existence would be at risk as well (Peshkin, 1978).

Advocates of consolidation claim the problems of small enrollment, limited funds, and inadequate curricula opportunities could be averted by combining smaller schools into larger institutions that run efficiently by implementing the economies of scale principle. In opposition, proponents of small community-based schools argue that the



cost to local schools and their communities far outweigh the supposed benefits that do not always come to fruition (Fanning, 1995; Kannapel, & DeYoung, 1999). In fact, small community schools have exhibited a greater capacity for producing positive learning results across a wider range of socioeconomic levels than their larger consolidated counterparts (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Friedkin, & Necochea, 1988; Lee, & Smith, 1996). If these challenges to rural schools are to be met and overcome, these schools “will have to capitalize on their community and family ties” (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 118).

Though the “restructuring of education brought about by consolidation achieved much of the geographic and curricular centralization desired by critics...it also brought about, especially in rural areas...a grievous loss of connection between communities and their local schools” (Woodrum, 2004, p. 2). In reality, the advocates of consolidation, under the heading of school improvement through financial and supposed curricular improvements, have *reformed* many smaller rural schools “out of existence” (DeYoung & Howley, 1992), and “the day to day power and control of education [has] passed largely from the lay community members to professional administrators and to the state” (Woodrum, p. 2). It was this uneasy feeling that their schools also could be reformed “out of existence,” particularly the high school section of the Portal Middle High School, that permeated the dialogues of the interviewees.

As illustrated by comments from the eight Portal participants and documented by research (Block, 2008; DeYoung & Howley, 1992; Jimerson 2006b; Stern, 1994, Strange, 2011), close relationships are customarily a distinguishing quality of smaller rural towns. As the participants readily cited positive characteristics of their small rural community

and their community schools, the qualities of less traffic, less noise, lower crime rates, and less crowding and fewer behavior problems in the schools were mentioned repeatedly. As participant Richard Emerson stated decidedly, “You’ve got to understand that Portal *is* that – a *small community*, and... [t]here’s just a lot of things that parents in a smaller town like about the smaller schools.” Participant Tracy Kirkland went so far as to link her personal identity to her small hometown when she stated, “Living in communities where you work together, go to church together, join in the activities of the school and community has a great effect on who you are.”

The importance of community schools to the rural community itself cannot be overrated. Even the school buildings themselves are a source of community pride (if these entities are well-maintained, as is now the case for the Portal schools). Traditionally, rural schools have provided not just a basic education for its students but have also served “as symbols of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community traditions, and personal community identity” (Peshkin, 1982, p. 163).

In answer to a question I posed concerning crime in Portal, Sarah Greene stated that “[Portal schools] don’t have the trouble that Statesboro High School has. I mean the drugs.” Jamie Young’s observations of another clean “drug sweep” conducted at Portal Middle High School supported Sarah’s comments. Jamie remarked further on the small degree of physical violence at PMHS. “I don’t know of three [physical] fights since I’ve been here [over five years]” (Jamie Young, personal communication, 2013).

When I asked about gang-related activities Sarah again responded that this was not a problem in Portal. She further stressed that Portal has always been a quiet town.

“No violence...Just small things every once in a while.” As a music teacher that teaches every student at Portal Elementary School twice weekly, I think I can speak to student behavior in all seven grade levels (prekindergarten through fifth) at PES. While occasionally there will be a verbal altercation between students, they are few in number and usually do not occur with any degree of regularity even in the last few weeks of the school year when stress and irritability, due partially to end-of-year testing and the need for summer break, seem to escalate. Our main behavior infractions tend to be those of chewing gum and disrupting class by talking without permission. These comments and observations support the claims by Gregory (1992) and Stockard and Mayberry (1992) that small schools have lower incidences of negative social behavior than do large schools. They also lend support to the findings in Ballestich and Hom’s (1997) study that the existence of a strong sense of community in the school milieu may encourage students’ resistance to unsafe relationships and situations and increase more appropriate behaviors.

Symbiotic relationships are characteristic of smaller rural towns and their small schools. The school and community interconnection is a positive force that maintains a mutually beneficial association for both. While the school is vital to the community’s continuation, the community’s support boosts success and provides encouragement for high academic standards as teachers, parents and the students work together. The participants’ comments revealed feelings of pride in their community and a sense of self-respect and achievement in their successful actions taken to save their schools and, in all probability, their community (Peshkin, 1982; Woodrum, 2004). As stated by Jamie Young, “You take our high school and we will die in this area” (Jamie Young, personal

communication, 2013). Richard Emerson also added that the Portal residents wanted a “community school” for their children. “They [Portal school students] wanted to have their own identity and not just be thrown in with all the kids at Statesboro.” Participant Ellen Hodges further supported the idea that the survival of a small community often depends on the continued success of its schools when she stated, “I think in the long run a lot of little towns that have had this happen [closing of a school] will still be on the map, but they won’t have their own government – no city council. It is difficult to maintain a government entity.” Fortunately, this outcome was prevented by the Portal citizens who used their collective “voice” (Freire, 1994), already a resilient and compelling one sustained through the shared sense of place and solidarity among the residents and further strengthened by the forty plus years of a collective resistance to closing and consolidation, to send a powerful message that challenged local authorities in these battles to save the Portal schools and their community.

At some time in each interview the participants expressed their positive feelings of being surrounded by strong sense of belonging and experiencing close community relationships. As they elaborated on family heritage, cultural ties, and core values, I could see the pride and joy in their faces as they shared something very valuable to them. This something, this sense of place or feelings of “us-ness,” is an experience these participants want for their children and grandchildren and one they want to continue living themselves.

#### Battling an Ownership Attitude, Classism, and Economic Discrimination

A common challenge for any school regardless of its geographical classification is the task of providing a quality education to its students. For most rural schools the

difficulties of this challenge are often further exacerbated by inadequate funding (Deweese, 1999) since the amounts of school subsidies are usually tied to enrollment numbers and property tax monies obtained from the residents of the school district, both of which are smaller in the Portal area. However this is not necessarily an insurmountable obstacle for rural schools but is, as demonstrated by the citizens of Portal, a “savage inequality” (Kozol, 1991) that should be contested and rectified. However, the challenges against these inequalities cannot be a sporadic and spur-of-the-moment in nature. As the interviewees expressed their thoughts as to what was involved in sustaining and preserving these two schools, Jamie admitted “We have to fight for what we get here.” She went on further to disclose that she knew she would upset a lot of people by stating that “[w]e’re not going to really stand up for ourselves until we *have* to... It’s like we’re a community and we work together, but we only really work together when they’re fixing to close the school or tear down the gym. And I think that’s why through the years it’s kind of like we’ve been pushed and pushed around.”

When discussing matters concerning Portal and those outside the community, six of the residents expressed an awareness of economic discrimination, language bias (e.g. “those people,” “hick”), and feelings of ostracism, especially in the decision-making processes concerning their schools. There was a perception of classism (even though that was not the term used by the interviewees). Initially, there was also a sense of vulnerability to the power from those considered the elite. The elite, as in this case, are not always individuals with expansive financial means. Indeed, there may not be financial elitism at all but another type of selectiveness found in many small southern towns. It is a feeling of supremacy that can be identified and allegedly justified by answering one

archetypical question: Who are your people? Answering honestly with a well-recognized and well-respected local surname can push open many doors of opportunity and privilege.

This inequity of American society is often further promulgated through a hidden curriculum in schools that tailor coursework to promote cultural reproduction. Based on the assumed competency of the students as well as their socioeconomic class, Anyon and Apple suggest a correlation between social class and educational success in those schools that seek to prepare children for life in the social class from which they come. To combat this socioeconomic injustice, Giroux (2001, 2006) urges us to ask how and why knowledge is created. Why are some constructions of reality given credence and applauded by the dominant culture while others are disregarded and scorned? Who gets marginalized as a result of these constructions?

#### Government Control: It Is Not About Us

Perhaps the most profound statement in an interview, and the fourth theme gleaned from participant conversations, was voiced by a quiet, soft-spoken man who declared that consolidation and reform was not about helping poor folks. “It is more about government control” (William Etheridge, personal communication, 2013). He also spoke of Civil Rights and integration and stated that they have *not* brought about equality in education but were also linked to “government-controlled education” that continued to enforce “the same prejudice in the schools.” Reverend Etheridge’s astute comments are analogous to the assertions made by Abu El-Haj (2006) that “[one] enduring outcome of the Civil Rights movement is that the ideal of integration is bound up with our notions of educational justice. This is the case, even though the racial integration of schools (and the

educational equality it was intended to effect)...has never been realized on a national scale” (p. 6).

At this time there are still hegemonic forces in public education that would dissolve small schools and essentially nullify communities many students call home. It is vital that we persevere in questioning power and control in education until policymakers become, if not compliant, at least more knowledgeable of the reasons rural community residents regard their schools as essential elements of their community and vital components of our nation’s educational infrastructure. In order to be successful in our challenge against government control, I believe we must capitalize on the strengths that small rural schools possess and integrate these assets into a curriculum of place (Jimerson, 2006b); that is, one that incorporates the community as a key resource for curriculum objectives and places policy-making concerning the methods and implementation of these objectives into the hands of the local citizens (Peshkin, 1982). This idea of local control realized through a *curriculum of place* will be further delineated in the following section.

#### Homegrown Curriculum – Local Control

While considering all the promising qualities presented by a strong community with a sound sense of place, I began to imagine ways we educators could implement a less conventional curriculum that would engage students in learning that promotes place-based education (Jimerson, 2006b); one that embraces the students' local community as a primary source for learning and encourages personalization of learning experiences; one that places control of the community schools in the hands of the local citizens. For a rural community like Portal their history, unique mores, ecology, culture,

art, music, literature, and economy provide an immense arena for hands-on, project-based learning opportunities that relate to their “real world” based on the basic values of their community. Though this knowledge may not be categorized by some as “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993), it could nevertheless could promote legitimate, more meaningful learning where learners assimilate new knowledge garnered from their own relevant real-world place with related existing knowledge. I am not suggesting that the entire curriculum be a locale-limited pedagogy, but the more wide-ranging national and global issues would be linked to and supported by the home-based learning in which students have had the opportunity to first use various components of *place* as their primary educational tools in an *experience-driven* curriculum. For guidance, I explored Joseph Schwab’s concept of the four commonplaces that he asserted should be integral parts of any curriculum: teacher, learner, milieu, and subject matter.

Good teachers strive to create constructive and productive safe environments for students in which each learner feels safe to share, think, ask questions, and contribute to the ongoing discussions of self-actualizations. “Education is dialogue, and conversation and the participants all have something added to their understanding” (Lake, 2006, p.157); in fact, a classroom that is constructive to personal learning is permeated with the voices of the learners. In Freire’s concept of critical pedagogy the teacher is also a learner in partnership with her students who, in the milieu of dialogue, discover learning together. If authentic individualized learning is to take place, students cannot be viewed simply as obedient and compliant recipients who are to be coerced into internalizing preauthorized subject matter. Good teachers are adept in guiding their students in self-directed learning and convey an enthusiasm for their own learning that consequently



motivates their students to seek self-growth. “As an improvisational artist, the teacher helps create personalized meaning and self-expression in the learner through personal concern and care along with intuitive sense of timing and understanding of the learner potential” (Lake, 2006, p. 158). In other words, curriculum develops when teaching and learning coalesce. That is not to say that teachers would no longer need strong pedagogical skills and content knowledge, quite the contrary. A teacher who is the curriculum maker must also possess a comprehensive knowledge of subject matters. This knowledge encompasses more than just the information collected from the subject fields. It also means the development of cognitive processes while on the journey to self-growth in thinking, learning, and reasoning and in finding ways to serve others.

This is an awesome set of responsibilities, yet these are challenges I, and I believe many other teachers, want to face in the classroom. Providing a meaningful curriculum, one that promotes creative and critical thinking, is constructed in self-knowledge. Accordingly, this allows me as a teacher-learner to connect with my own personal knowledge and learning. How exciting to reclaim the time and the *right* to continue to grow through our own discoveries in learning! This unfortunately is a self-actualization often denied educators as we struggle to maintain control in overcrowded classrooms in which subjects are taught in a vacuum, separated from the context of real life. I view the teacher-learner paradigm as an unbeatable combination, not just for myself but also the students I teach, since “the more we understand ourselves and can articulate reasons why we are what we are, do what we do, and are headed where we have chosen, the more meaningful our curriculum will be” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 11).

Education is also a time for seeking meanings in the role of the school in a community *and* in the role of the community in the school. This can be done by collaborating with other good, motivated teachers, namely citizens of the local community. Currently local residents in Portal who at one time participated in the local business of turpentine production visit the schools during the month of September (the month leading up to the annual Catface Turpentine Festival) and explain as well as demonstrate gathering and processing techniques. Students create artwork illustrating the uses of turpentine and write essays on the production and trade of this one time staple in Portal's economic history. During Veterans Day week, students talk with family and community members about their military service and bring in pictures and artifacts from these citizens to display during the annual Portal Elementary School Veterans Day musical program in November. Each year many of my students are amazed to discover heroes among their families and neighbors as they themselves gather oral history and listen to narratives shared by these residents. Not only does this promote knowledge of American history (as outlined in state based curriculum standards), it also leads to understanding more about the history of their own community and its people.

While these two programs are great for unifying and informing our students, it is not enough. Why not promote learning programs like this all year, programs in which individuals have equal opportunities to "take and receive from others" and have "free interchange of varying modes of life experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 84), opportunities where students learn and implement real world strategies based on the identities they are creating by cultivating a special bond with their milieu? This teaching/learning design could focus more on students discovering their own knowledge and inventing their own

applications for their learning; strategies that would categorically prepare them for “real world” life.

Portal also has many local residents with traditional folk talents: quilt-making, woodworking, pottery; all gifts that could be shared and taught *to* students eager for a way to express themselves *by* family members searching for a way to connect. My particular favorite as a music teacher are those community members who have shared their gift of music whether it be by playing an instrument or sharing self-composed songs or area folk songs. Many of these musicians have expressed a desire to share more. I would love to have additional *sanctioned* time to welcome these individuals into my classroom on a long-term basis that would offer these artists more time to connect with and teach our students. As Greene (1995) stated, “Encounters with the arts and activities in the domains of art can nurture the growth of persons who will reach out to one another as they seek clearings in their experience and try to be more ardently in the world. If the significance of the arts for growth and inventiveness and problem solving is recognized at last, a desperate stasis may be overcome and hopes may be raised, the hopes of felt possibility” (p. 132). This would also offer students “the chance to build relationships with seniors... [while giving the seniors an opportunity] to help the young people build self-esteem by encouraging them to learn more about their history and culture” (Long, 2006, p. 86).

Many parents and grandparents who work as plumbers, electricians, and mechanics are all contributors to the local culture, workers who should be valued for their input who could share skills and knowledge that would enrich student’s lives. There are farmers in the area who would welcome a chance to share their life-work and their

motivations for remaining in the field of agriculture. The high school has worked to implement agriculture classes that would be taught across the curriculum in both Portal schools. I am sorry to say that one of our teachers, who at that time had a child in kindergarten, stood at a community meeting at which this plan was presented and exclaimed, “My child is *not* going to become a farmer!” So it becomes obvious there must be a reorientation of mindsets concerning what education is among policy makers, politicians, *and* many educators. As for me I can just imagine the excitement of the students (and not just the males) who would be thrilled to plant, cultivate and reap a small crop procured by their own doing.

Also in this place-based classroom there would be time to honor, observe, and learn about the cultures of ethnically and linguistically diverse families of students in the community. We certainly need to offer something more than the annual Cinco de Mayo announcement over the intercom and a taco lunch served in the school cafeteria. In “[s]chools that share their interests in educating immigrant students with families and communities... teachers cultivate cultural competence to recognize contributions of ethnically and linguistically diverse students...and develop pedagogical competence to enrich the curriculum for immigrant and minority students. Students are encouraged to value their cultural and linguistic heritages, respect and accept difference, critically examine their position in society, and perceive themselves as agents of positive curriculum change” (He, Phillion, Chan, & Xu, 2008, pp. 32-33).

With the mandated cuts in recess times (our students instead spend time in the computer lab learning to take tests and have only one shortened recess period a day), many of us teachers would be excited by the chance to get children outside, and not just

for state mandated ecological courses alone, but for the students' own health and wellbeing and for the sake of truly *seeing* their surroundings. As Gallagher (1993) suggests we are nature and putting a little nature back in our lives is good for body and soul. This "unwinding" time free from technology (NO cell phones – NO texting – NO video games – NO laptops) and the stress of test preparation could be a period for connecting with nature, discovering local wildlife, learning to care about one's environment, visiting local historical registry sites *and* the residents who could share narratives about these places. It would be essentially an opportunity for students to experience a sense of place and a sense of wonder about their hometown.

The "curriculum of shared interests" embracing the "cultural climate" of one's place (He, Phillion, Chan, & Xu, 2008) provides a chance for all involved: students, educators, community members, to co-create a curriculum that furthers more diverse and self-motivated knowledge. It allows genuine autonomy in the performance of teaching and learning together. It permits time to take new information, reflect upon it, and create powerful *knowledges* leading to new possibilities, goals and outcomes maybe once considered unreachable. It supports the sense of belongingness, closeness and caring, a knowing of each other, an attitude that everyone "can have some involvement," and an atmosphere that allows every student to recognize his or her self-worth and value in the community and the world. It was and will continue to be this strong sense of place and solidarity among the Portal residents that advances the boldness and confidence necessary to challenge authorities concerning their schools and their "home and heritage;" which is exactly what they and any other marginalized citizens have the right to do.

## Limitations and Possibilities for Further Study

As is true in all qualitative research, this study is bound by certain limitations or challenges. That the findings pertain only to the town of Portal, Georgia, in Bulloch County can limit generalizability and requires the negotiation of subjectivity. In spite of this, I believe the stories of this town's victories over those that sought to close and consolidate can inspire others who see themselves as marginalized and are facing like circumstances. Another possible limit to this study is that the preponderance of information provided comes from the personal narratives acquired through one-on-one interviews and personal, unplanned conversations. Since the information in these dialogues has come mostly from memory, they may be distorted either due to time or personal and emotional biases. However, most of the narratives complemented and corroborated each other and, thereby, contributed a strong credibility to these histories. Additionally, the limiting of interviewees to those actively involved with the Portal community tended to present a one-side-only view of consolidation. Furthermore I, as not just an interviewer and but co-creator in the dialogues, played an interpretive role that may be questioned by other researchers and educators. In response to those who may determine my subjectivity to be flawed and thus leading to an unreliable study, I used exact quotes whenever possible from the recorded oral narratives and made a concentrated effort to present both the positive as well as the negative perceptions of the individuals involved in these events. I also asked participants to review the transcripts of their interviews (interviewees did not review the transcripts of others) and, if needed, suggest revisions and clarifications of my interpretations.

In turn, these challenges or perceived biases of *Two Small Rural Schools Under Siege* can suggest further research. The focus areas of this study could be presented through the eyes of “outsiders” who may feel disempowered, frustrated, or even threatened by the agency of this close-knit community and could suggest strategies for removing the barriers to collaboration between the community and these outside powers identified by the participants as “they.” Research revealing the positions of the “others” referenced in this study could encourage a wider base of discussion among the Portal residents and the other citizens of Bulloch County. A study on the other schools in this district could offer another “side” to the issues of consolidation and school size, especially when linked to research that further compels us to question and challenge the idea of who has power and control in education and why; especially when this power often leads to the continuation of class inequality (Anyon, 1996; Apple, 2006; Apple & King, 1977). There is still a significant need for oral historians in educational research who recognize the value of interviewing “from the bottom up,” and who will strive as activists intent on expanding the potential for oral history to serve, empower, and inspire those nonelite who are searching for their “voice.”

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APPENDIX A1-A3

COMPARISONS OF BULLOCH COUNTY HIGH SCHOOLS

A1 PORTAL MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL

Portal, Georgia

(page 1 of 4)



Entrance to Portal Middle High School as seen from Highway 80. (Also see page 65).

A1 PORTAL MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL

(page 2 of 4)



Rear entrance to Portal Middle High School Gymnasium.



Portal Panthers Football Stadium

A1 PORTAL MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL

(page 3 of 4)



PMHS Panther baseball field and Lady Panthers' softball field



Stands at softball field



Panther Ticket Booth



Concession Stand



Public restrooms at athletic fields



## A1 PORTAL MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL

(page 4 of 4)

The PMHS “Track” laughingly known as the *Graveyard Run*



The track path runs down Grady Street past the front of the elementary school to the left and up Woods Street past the Portal Cemetery, then continues past the elementary school. The runners turn left on Church Street and return back to the PMHS ball fields.



## A2 SOUTHEAST BULLOCH HIGH SCHOOL

Brooklet, Georgia

(page 1 of 2)

Southeast Bulloch High School received an “Outstanding Design” designation in *American School & University Magazine’s* annual 2009 *Architectural Portfolio* issue.



Front entrance to the new Southeast Bulloch High School completed in 2007

## A2 SOUTHEAST BULLOCH HIGH SCHOOL

(page 2 of 2)



Southeast Bulloch High School dedicated its new George Roebuck Fieldhouse on August 10, 2012. The new \$5 million SEBHS Athletic Complex opened September 7, 2012 with the first home football game of the season. The new field house was part of the overall project and was achieved by renovating the old gym and locker rooms. Offices were added on.



As of 2012, Fred Shaver Field has a new track and football stadium. The 3,000-seat stadium sits on top of the former practice fields and track. New practice fields are in use on the site of the old stadium.



## A3 STATESBORO HIGH SCHOOL

Statesboro, Georgia

(page 1 of 3)

The newly completed Statesboro High School, an ultramodern, high-tech \$42 million facility, was selected as an example of “*Outstanding Design*” and was featured in *American School & University Magazine’s* annual 2011 *Architectural Portfolio* issue.



Front view of Statesboro High School as seen from Lester Road

Construction of the new Statesboro High School took place over 3.5 years. The new facility was actually built around the old SHS building. It houses a 1200-seat Performing Arts Auditorium, and two Gymnasiums.

# A3 STATESBORO HIGH SCHOOL

(page 2 of 3)

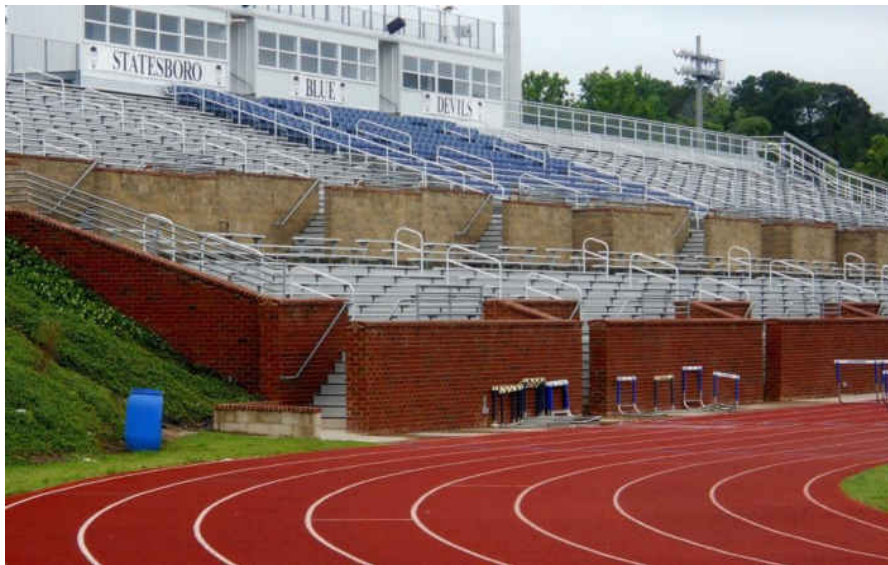


Entrances to the gym and fine arts auditorium as seen from school parking lot



## A3 STATESBORO HIGH SCHOOL

(page 3 of 3)

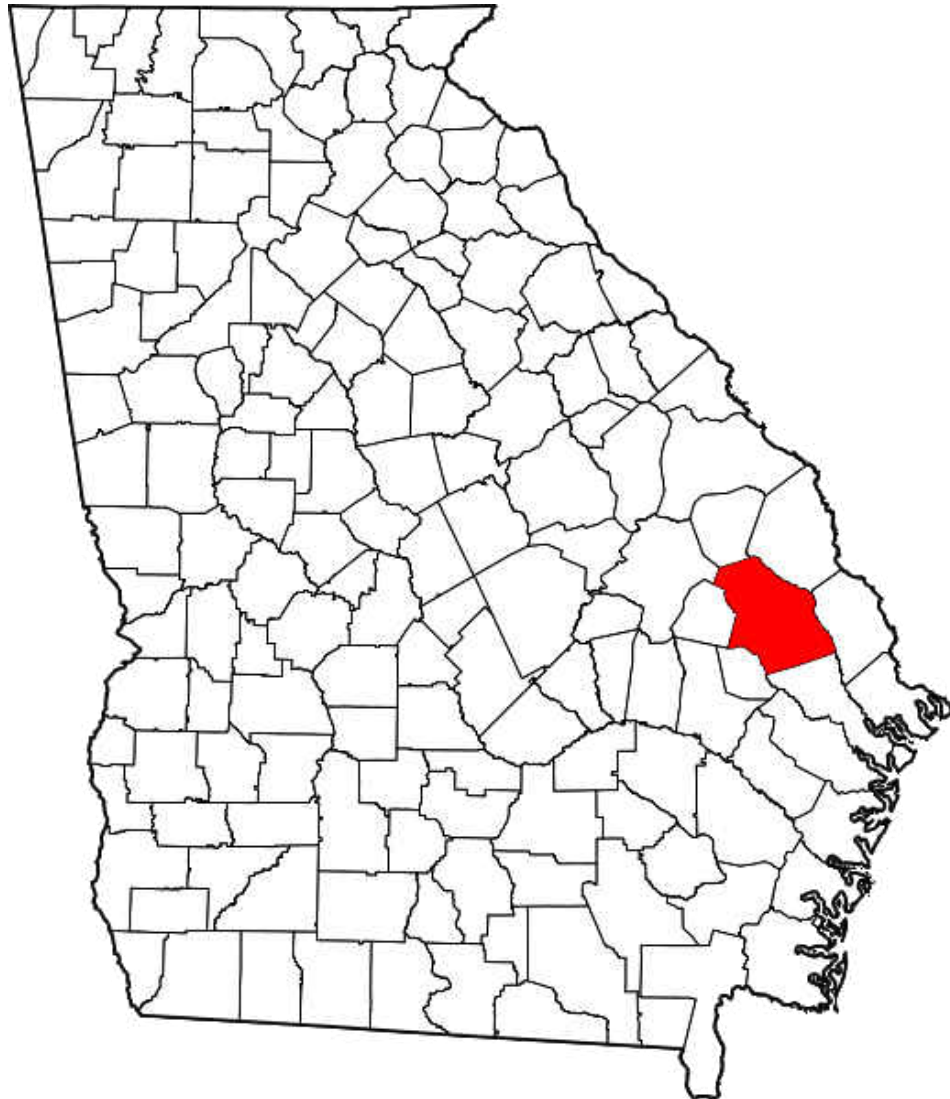


Home team seating and track at SHS's Womack Field

The Blue Devil stadium (Womack Field), located right next to the school, has two large, full-service concession stands, each with their own kitchens and six large serving windows. Large restrooms, four on each side, are attached to the concession buildings. All seating is at least 10 feet off of field level and both sides of the stadium have two levels on concrete with brick bleachers. The field itself is natural Bermuda grass and is surrounded by a five-lane rubberized track.

APPENDIX B

GEORGIA MAP (BULLOCH COUNTY HIGHLIGHTED)



Retrieved May 10, 2010 from

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_Georgia\\_highlighting\\_Bulloch\\_County.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Georgia_highlighting_Bulloch_County.svg)

APPENDIX C

C MATERIALS FROM BULLOCH COUNTY COALITION NOTEBOOK

(page 1 of 3)

C1 LIST OF COALITION MEMBERS AND OPENING STATEMENT

Bulloch County Coalition Members  
Chosen to Meet with the  
Schoolboard

Toby Carter, chair

- ✓ Wayne Brannen
- ✓ Curtis Byrd
- ✓ Al Clark
- ✓ Donna Harville
- ✓ Connie Lewis
- ✓ Deweese Martin
- ✓ Nan Rushing
- ✓ Barry Turner
- ✓ Willie Mae Williams

Opening Statement

We feel it an honor to be here today to attempt resolution between the citizens of Bulloch County and the Bulloch County School Board on their current school facility plan. It is our utmost wish to reach a speedy resolution. However, we want to establish from the beginning that since any resolution will be contingent upon the state's final approval, resolution between our committee and the school board cannot be finalized until such approval is received.

Scanned October 16, 2012, from Bulloch County Coalition Members Handbook created by Chairman Toby Carter.



APPENDIX C

(page 2 of 3)

C2 FACILITY PLAN PRIORITIES (1993-98) ISSUED BY BOARD

Priority No. 6 describes the closing of Willow Hill (Portal's middle school at the time), and Portal Elementary and High School. A new Portal Elementary would be completed by 1998. Portal High School students will be bussed to Statesboro High School. Portal Middle School students will be transported to the enlarged Northside Middle School.

<u>Priority No. 5</u> - Brooklet Elementary Renovation and Additions (K-5) 600 students.	
July 1995 - Application forwarded to State January - March 1996 - Possible Funding July 1996 - Possible Forwarding Fall 1997 - Occupy School (Close Nevils)	
Local Funds: \$761,873.00	State Funds: \$1,767,800.00
<u>Priority No. 6</u> - New Statesboro Elementary (K-5) 600 students - New Portal Elementary K-5 (450 students) .	
July 1996 - Application forwarded to State January - March 1997 - Possible Funding Fall 1998 - Occupy Schools (Close Willow Hill and Portal Elementary and High) 9-12 - Portal students go to Statesboro High	
Local Funds: \$1,902,096.00	State Funds: \$5,434,560.00
<u>Priority No. 7</u> - Renovation of Statesboro High School (9-12) 1506 students - Additions and Renovations at Mattie Lively (K-5) 575 students, and Sallie Zetterower (K-5) 450 students.	
July 1997 - Applications for above three schools forwarded to State January - March 1998 - Possible Funding These schools will be occupied all along, but work should be completed by Fall of 1999.	
Local Funds: \$1,611,754.00	State Funds: \$1,228,866.00
Total Local Funds: \$10,880,186.50	
Total State Funds: \$22,425,765.00	
Grand Total: \$33,305,951.50	

APPENDIX C

(page 3 of 3)

C3 LETTER REGARDING MEETING WITH SCHOOL BOARD

**Bulloch  
County  
Schools**

*"Academics, Arts and Athletics"*

**Dr. Billy Bice, Superintendent**

500 Northside Drive East • Statesboro, GA 30458  
(912) 764-6201 (FAX) 912-764-8436

July 27, 1994

Ms. Donna Harville  
Route 6, Box 331-A  
Statesboro, Georgia 30458

**Re: Meeting with Bulloch County Board of Education consistent with  
O.C.G.A. §20-2-260(k.1)(5)**

Dear Ms. Harville:

Consistent with your discussion with Ms. Colley in Van Pool's office, I have enclosed ten (10) copies of this letter which you have agreed to deliver to each member of the delegation from the petitioners who have been selected to meet with the Bulloch County Board of Education consistent with the provisions of O.C.G.A. §20-2-260(k.1)(5) to discuss the school system facilities plan "as it pertains to the consolidation of schools within the system." Consistent with our previous discussions and my conference with the Superintendent and Mr. Carter, the meeting is scheduled to begin at 6:00 o'clock p.m. and to end at approximately 10:00 o'clock p.m. on Tuesday, August 2, 1994, in the media center of Statesboro High School on Lester Road, Statesboro, Georgia. As you know, if additional meetings are necessary, these have been scheduled at the same location for Sunday, August 7, 1994, at 2:00 o'clock p.m. and/or Thursday, August 11, 1994, at 6:00 o'clock p.m.

If there are questions about the meeting, you or any member of the delegation may speak with Mr. Carter, the Superintendent, or me. I appreciate your cooperation and assistance in delivering the notices.

Sincerely,



Harry S. Carter, Chairman  
Bulloch County Board of Education

HSC:mc

cc: Dr. Billy Bice

APPENDIX D

JUDGE PRESENTS COURT ORDER FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

(page 1 of 3)

**THE BULLOCH HERALD**

and the BULLOCH TIMES

Thursday, July 31, 1969

VOLUME XXVI

***Judge presents court order  
for school desegregation***

Local school officials have now received a Federal Court order from U.S. District Court Judge Alexander A. Lawrence requiring desegregation of Bulloch County schools when they open on September 2, 1969.

Bulloch school officials have made intensive studies to put the plan into effect with the least hardship to any concerned, and have announced the main provisions, as follows:

For academic high school purposes, Bulloch County will be divided into three general areas: the north served by Portal High School, grades 8-12; the middle served by Statesboro High School and Marvin Pittman High School, grades 9-12; and the south by South East Bulloch High School, grades 8-12.

In addition to the four academic, or pre-college high schools, there will be a conversion of William James into Bulloch County Vocational High School, serving grades 8 through 12 on a county-wide basis to teach young people useful skills as well as vocational and academic subject matter, so that upon graduation they can enter into industry or trade with higher income and better chances of promotion. A special article is carried in this newspaper today to give more information on Bulloch County Vocational High School.

The elementary schools for Bulloch County will be located in six areas: Portal, grades 1-7; West Side, grades 1-6; Mattie Lively, Sallie Zetterower, and Julia Bryant, grades 1 through 6, plus a kindergarten at Julia Bryant; Nevils, grades 1 through 7; Brooklet, grades 1 through 7; and Stilson, grades 1 through 7; and Marvin Pittman, grades 1 through 8.

Statesboro Junior High School will serve grades 7 and 8.

Registration for enrollment in all classes is being planned for August, but dates and places for registration are to be announced later.

State school officials have been in Bulloch County this week, planning school bus routes for all of the schools, and these routes will be announced when plans are completed.

Teacher and staff personnel plans are incomplete, but will be announced later.



## APPENDIX D

(Page 2 of 3)

### JUDGE PRESENTS COURT ORDER FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

“Local school officials have now received a Federal Court order from U. S. District Court Judge Alexander A. Lawrence requiring desegregation of Bulloch County schools when they open on September 2, 1969.

Bulloch school officials have made intensive studies to put the plan into effect with the least hardship to any concerned, and have announced the main provision as follow: For academic high school purposes, Bulloch County will be divided into three general areas: the north served by Portal High School, grades 8-12; the middle served by Statesboro High School and Marvin Pittman High School, grades 9-12; and the south by South East Bulloch High School, grades 8-12.

In addition to the four academic, or pre-college high schools, there will be a conversion of William James into Bulloch County Vocational High School, serving grades 8 through 12 on a county-wide basis to teach young people useful skills as well as vocational and academic subject matter so that upon graduation they can enter into industry or trades with higher income and better chances of promotion. A special article is carried in this newspaper today to give more information on Bulloch County Vocational High School.

The elementary schools for Bulloch County will be located in six areas: Portal, grades 1-7; West Side, grades 1-7; Mattie Lively, Sallie Zetterower, and Julia Bryant, grades 1 through 6, plus a kindergarten at Julia Bryant; Nevils, grades 1 through 7; Brooklet, grades 1 – through 7; Brooklet, grades 1 through 7, and Stilson, grades 1

## APPENDIX D

(Page 3 of 3)

through 7; and Marvin Pittman, grades 1 through 8. Statesboro Junior High School will serve grades 7 and 8.

Registration for enrollment in all classes is being planned for August, but dates and places for registration are to be announced later.

State school officials have been in Bulloch County this week, planning school bus routes for all of these schools, and these routes will be announced when plans are completed.

Teacher and staff personnel plans are incomplete, but will be announced later.

APPENDIX E

FLYER ANNOUNCING RIBBON CUTTING AT NEW HIGH SCHOOL



*You are cordially invited to a*

*Ribbon Cutting Ceremony*

*for*

*Portal Middle High School*

*Saturday, December 4, 2010*

*5:00p.m.*

APPENDIX F

F DATA COMPARISONS OF STATESBORO, BROOKLET, AND PORTAL

(page 1 of 2)

2010 Census Data

Land area in square miles (Statesboro, 2010):	13.5
Land area in square miles (Brooklet, 2010):	3.1
Land area in square miles (Portal, 2010):	1.8
Persons per square mile (Statesboro, 2010):	2,105.5
Persons per square mile (Brooklet, 2010):	359
Persons per square mile (Portal, 2010):	351.2
Population in 2010 (Statesboro):	28,422
Population in 2010 (Brooklet):	1,395
Population in 2010 (Portal):	638
Growth since 2000 (Statesboro):	+25.2%
Males: 14,000	
Females: 14,422	
Growth since 2000 (Brooklet):	+25.3
Males: 666	
Females: 729	
Growth since 2000 (Portal):	+6.9%
Males: 289	
Females: 349	

APPENDIX F

(Page 2 of 2)

Estimated median household income (Statesboro, 2009):	\$17,709
Estimated median household income (Brooklet, 2009):	\$51,060
Estimated median household income (Portal, 2009):	\$29,716
Estimated per capita income (Statesboro, 2009):	\$12,177
Estimated per capita income (Brooklet, 2009):	\$20,424
Estimated per capita income (Portal, 2009):	\$14,025
Estimated median house or condo value (Statesboro, 2009):	\$130,659
Estimated median house or condo value (Brooklet, 2009):	\$162,247
Estimated median house or condo value (Portal, 2009):	\$ 99,789

Information retrieved April 10, 2012, from

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/1373256.html>

<http://www.city-data.com/city/Statesboro-Georgia.html#ixzz1umaidnYn>

<http://www.city-data.com/city/Brooklet-Georgia.html#ixzz1umaidnYn>

<http://www.city-data.com/city/Portal-Georgia.html#ixzz1umaidnYn>

APPENDIX G

THE PORTAL HIGH SCHOOL HAS OPENED

Bulloch Times

October 16, 1913

“Superintendent’s Corner”

The Portal High School has opened for the fall term under the management of Prof. Jas. H. St. Clair. A successful term is anticipated. They have just finished a \$4,000 brick building, which is a credit to the town of Portal and the community. Bully for Portal. May she continue to prosper.

“The Portal high School has opened for the fall term under the management of Prof. Jas. H. St. Clair. A successful term is anticipated. They have just finished a \$4,000 brick building, which is a credit to the town of Portal and the community. Bully for Portal. May she continue to prosper.

APPENDIX H  
OLD PORTAL HIGH SCHOOL

1940

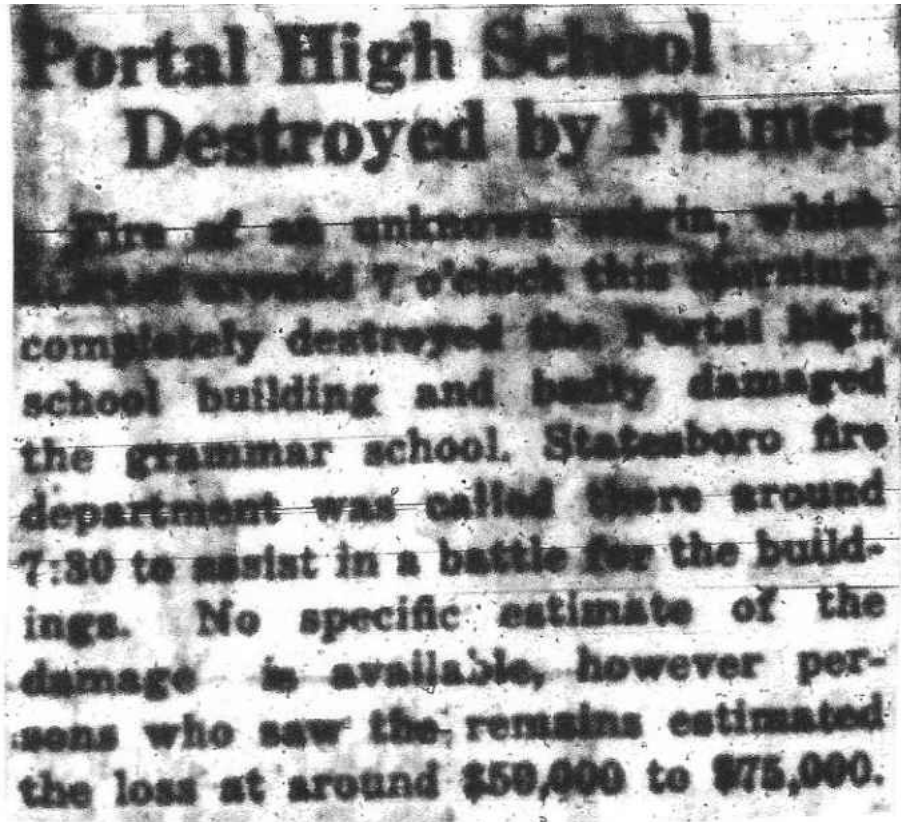


APPENDIX I

PORTAL HIGH SCHOOL DESTROYED BY FLAMES

Bulloch Herald and Bulloch Times

May 5, 1949



“Fire of unknown origin, which started around 7 o’clock this morning, completely destroyed the Portal high school building and badly damaged the grammar school. Statesboro fire department was called there around 7:30 to assist in a battle for the buildings. No specific estimate of the damage is available, however persons who saw the remains estimated the loss at around \$50,000 to \$75,000.



APPENDIX J

THIS WAS THE PORTAL SCHOOL

May 7, 1949

Bulloch Herald and Bulloch Times

SATURDAY, MAY 7, 1949



**THIS WAS THE PORTAL SCHOOL**—The smoking embers and debris above are all that is left of the fine school plant at Portal in Bulloch county. This is the high school building which with its contents was a total loss. The grammar school building was badly damaged at a total loss estimated at \$75,000. The blaze started early Thursday morning. (Photo by L. B. Jones Studio, Statesboro.)

APPENDIX K

SCHOOL REBUILDING PLAN

May 17, 1949

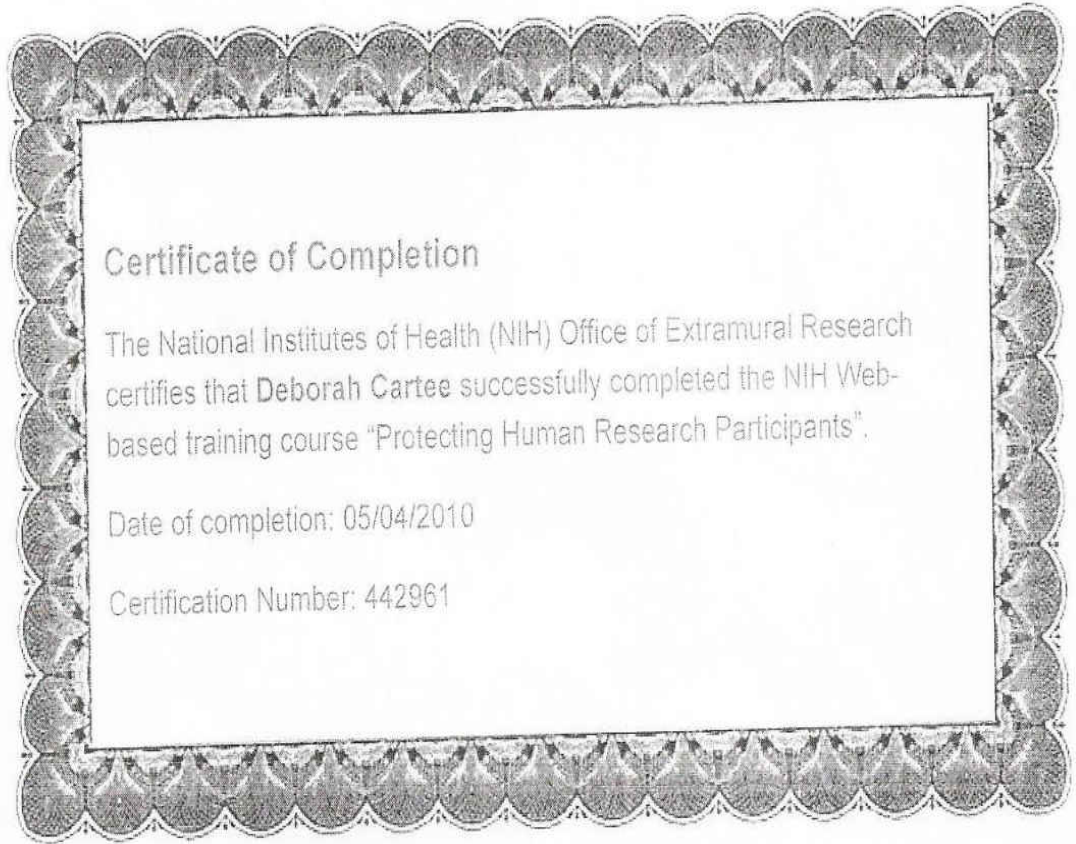
Bulloch Herald and Bulloch Times



**SCHOOL REBUILDING PLANNED**—Statesboro, Ga., May 17.—Bulloch county and Portal school officials are making plans to rebuild the Portal school, recently destroyed by fire. Also to repair damages to the gymnasium and elementary school, the latter probably by the opening of the September term. It is estimated that the damage to the elementary school was about \$15,000. In the meantime, teachers and pupils are continuing classes at Statesboro High, beginning at 12:30 o'clock each day.

APPENDIX L

PROTECTING HUMAN RECIPIENTS CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION



APPENDIX M

FINAL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION LETTER

Georgia Southern University  
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs  
**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**  
Phone: 912-478-5465 Veazy Hall 2021  
Fax: 912-478-0719 IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu P. O. Box 8005  
Statesboro, GA 30460-8005

**To:** Deborah Cartee  
Dr. Robert Lake

**Cc:** Charles E. Patterson  
Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** 04/09/12

**Initial Approval Date:** 06/17/10

**Expiration Date:** 03/31/13

**Subject:** Status of Research Study Modification Request – Exempt

After a review of your Research Study Modification Request on research project numbered **H10371** and titled "**Bigger is Not Always Better: An Oral History of How the Rural Community of Portal, Georgia Saved Its Hometown Schools from Closing and Consolidation 1971-2005.**" it appears that your research modification does not change the conditions of your previous exemption. The research involves activities that do not require approval by the Institutional Review Board according to federal guidelines.

Modification Description: Number of interviewees was limited to 8-12 from 60 and the expiration date of the project was extended to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that your research is exempt from IRB approval. You may proceed with the proposed research.*

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes  
Compliance Officer

## APPENDIX N

### LIST OF PARTICIPANTS (PSEUDONYMS)

(Page 1 of 3)

1. \*Sarah Greene is in her mid-thirties has lived in Portal her whole life except for the one year she and her family (husband, one special needs son who is served at Statesboro High, and two daughters, both Portal Middle High students) lived in Statesboro. She is very active in the community and the schools and serves as a substitute teacher in the Portal schools and Statesboro High.
2. \*Kate Mitchell is in her early seventies and lives in the home her parents built in the 1940s. She is a lifelong member of the Portal community and is an active supporter of the community. She is a longtime member of the Portal town council and a member of the Portal Heritage Society. Her children graduated from Portal High School and she currently has two grandchildren attending the Portal elementary and middle high school.
3. \*Tracy Kirkland has been a paraprofessional at Portal elementary school for several years and has twice been named Paraprofessional of the Year. She is in her mid-thirties and is a lifelong member of the Portal community. She graduated from Portal High School and presently has two children attending Portal Middle High School.
4. \*Rev. William Etheridge has resided in Portal for over 60 years. During his 70+ years he has served as a pastor, worked as a farmer, and currently serves on the school council. He has five children and several grandchildren who have attended and are still attending the Portal schools. William has volunteered his time to come in during the school day and help tutor elementary and middle school students.

## APPENDIX N

(Page 2 of 3)

5. \*Ellen Hodges graduated from Portal High School. After living many years in the Atlanta and the Washington, D. C. areas and retiring from her job as a federal employee, she has returned to her hometown. She is a leading member of the Portal Heritage Society and is very active in the Portal Middle High School where her nieces' attend. She also has one niece who is employed by the Bulloch County Board of Education. She has one son who was educated in Virginia and she has had a great deal of experience working with school boards in that area. She is in her early-seventies and now helps out in the family owned business located in Portal.
6. \*Jamie Young currently is a teacher at Portal Middle High School and teaches both high school and middle school classes. She is in her early thirties and has two children who attend the elementary school. She was born and raised in Portal and is a member of the town council. Her husband helps coach some of the local sports teams and her father is very active in local politics.
7. \*Richard Emerson is a Portal High School graduate and is in his late fifties. His wife and both sons are also Portal High School alumni. He and several family members have served either on the Bulloch County school board, the Portal Town Council, and/or the Bulloch County Board of Commissioners.
8. \*Rev. Gerald Johnson is a minister who, though born in Metter, Georgia (Candler County), has lived and ministered most of his life in Portal. His church is also located in Portal. He has close ties to his church members as well as to many other community members. Many Portal school students attend his church and are members

APPENDIX N

(Page 3 of 3)

of the church youth group. He plays an active part in community recreational activities.

\* Indicates pseudonym



APPENDIX O  
INTRODUCTORY LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS

(page 1 of 3)



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND READING

Dear: \_\_\_\_\_ Date mailed: \_\_\_\_\_

I am Deborah Costlow Cartee, a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia. I am pursuing a study into the historic significance of the Portal, Georgia, community's fight, covering the time period from 1969 until 2010, to save its two community schools from closing and consolidation with larger schools in the Bulloch County school district. I would like for the story to be conveyed through the narratives of some of the individuals who were involved in this momentous struggle. I understand that you at some time in your life were associated with this town and its schools in some capacity. I am asking you to become a part of my effort to preserve for present and future generations the account of this historic struggle. This study will be used to write my dissertation for the completion of the Doctor of Education Degree in Curriculum Studies, through the Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading, College of Education, Georgia Southern University. The working title of my dissertation is "Two Schools Under Siege: An Oral History 1969 – 2010."

This letter is to request your assistance in gathering information. I would enjoy hearing personally from former or current students and their parents, active and retired Portal area teachers, and other community members as to why they place such value in retaining their neighborhood schools. I would like to set up a time that I could ask you questions about your experiences concerning this topic of study. I expect the interview to be about one hour in length.



## APPENDIX O

Page (2 of 3)

After asking a few specific questions, I would then allow time for you to share your personal experiences that you believe to be important to this narrative. If you agree to participate, and give your permission for me to use the information you provide in the interview, please sign one copy of this letter, fill in the information requested, and return the signed copy to me in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope. Please keep one copy for your own reference. You will retain the right to exclude any of your information at any point.

In keeping with the required Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Georgia Southern University for the use of personal interviews, I want to emphasize these points. The following statements will be a part of your Informed Consent to participate by the signing and returning of this letter to me: **(a)** There will, of course, be no penalty should you choose not to participate and you can withdraw your participation at any time; **(b)** All information will be shared at the discretion of the participant and each has the privilege of asking that any part of the conversation not be included in the final dissertation document; **(c)** If you have any questions about this research project, please call me, DEBORAH C. CARTEE at 912-764-3196 [collect if out-of-town], or e-mail me at <[dcartee@bulloch.k12.ga.us](mailto:dcartee@bulloch.k12.ga.us)>; **(d)** If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant in this study, please contact the IRB Coordinator at the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs, P. O. Box 8005, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460 at 912-681-5465 or [IRB@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:IRB@georgiasouthern.edu).

## APPENDIX O

Page (3 of 3)

I have been associated with the Portal schools as the elementary music teacher since 2001. It is my hope that this friendly rural town, its community members, and its schools will become real to the readers' of this study. I also hope that my research will spur further study into other small community schools that are facing nullification and consolidation. Even more, my most heartfelt wish is that others will be inspired to learn and to ask questions of their parents, grandparents, and others who may be persuaded to recall their educational experiences. Because history can define and inform our present, I firmly believe these stories need to be shared and preserved for the benefit of future generations.

Respectfully,

Deborah Costlow Cartee

Doctoral Candidate, Georgia Southern University

APPENDIX P

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION/RELEASE FORM

(page 1 of 2)

PLEASE FILL IN THE BLANKS

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (your full name) agree for Deborah C. Cartee to contact me by telephone to arrange a time for a visit and personal interview. I agree to relate some of my experiences about my personal affiliation with the Portal, Georgia, community and its community schools. By signing and returning this whole letter I give permission for Deborah C. Cartee to use my information in her doctoral dissertation through Georgia Southern University, College of Education, Department of Foundations, Curriculum, and Reading.

\*Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ \*Date signed: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Years of my association with the community:

\_\_\_\_\_

\*My position, title, or responsibility during this time:

\_\_\_\_\_

My full name during this time period:

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX P

(page 2 of 2)

\*Current Name: \*Address: \*Telephone number: and \*e-mail address:

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## APPENDIX Q

### SAMPLE OF POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Used for opening and promoting interview)

1. What have been your experiences growing up or living in the Portal community?
2. How has your experience with a small community school affected your life? Does it still affect your life today? In what ways?
3. How do you think it has molded your current identity?
4. What do you think is the right size student body for an elementary school? middle school? high school?
5. What do you see as the particular influences (historical/social/political) that have led and are still leading to the practice of consolidation in this area?
6. What changes have you seen in the Portal schools and community through your years of connection with this area?
7. What can you tell me about the first time you remember hearing that there was a chance of closing and consolidation?
8. How would you describe the relationship between the schools and the community now?
9. Is the spending per student well matched with the rest of the county?

APPENDIX R

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET SAMPLE

Date of Interview: September 25, 2006

Interviewee's Name: This information is listed on the copy kept by the researcher

Interviewee's Pseudonym: Sarah Greene

Interviewer's Name: Deborah C. Cartee

Tape #: 1 Side: A

Summary of Interview (i. e. events, times, people and places discussed): The goal of this interview was to describe both historical and present connections between the Portal community and the two local schools. Described her residence in Portal (all but one year of her life) and her and her children's experiences in the local schools. Contrasted Portal to the Statesboro schools her children attended the one year they did not live in Portal. Explained her reasons for preferring the smaller schools and community atmosphere of Portal. Described the community's reaction in the mid-1990s to the news that the middle school (Willow Hill) and the Portal High School were being closed and consolidated with Statesboro schools.

## APPENDIX S

### LIST OF SOME PORTAL HIGH SCHOOL ALUMNI

Arnold Ray Akins	Former Sheriff of Bulloch County (served six terms)
John Robert Turner	Superior Court Judge, Ogeechee Circuit
Dr. Frank Saunders	History Professor, Georgia Southern University
Denver Lanier	Chairman, Bulloch County Commission – four years; Bulloch County Board of Education – 18 years
Lee H. Deloach	Judge, Probate Court of Bulloch County
Joseph R. Brannen	Mayor of the City of Statesboro
Terrell Troy Reddick	Brigadier General Deputy Commander, Georgia Army National Guard

## APPENDIX T

### COPY OF D. CARTEE PERSONAL E-MAIL FROM DISTRICT OFFICE

RE: Request for Attendance Maps

Wednesday, March 13, 2012

4:57 PM

Debbie,

For the current zones you can go to our web page, click on Departments, Transportation, School Attendance Zones by Road, type in a road name, map it, then click zoom out a few times, then on the left side of the page under Controls click the plus sign by the folder labeled Schools, then click High, Middle or Elementary. The map will then have a color overlay so you can see the different zones. You can click on the zoom out tab until you can see the whole county, and zoom in to see the street names, you can also click on the map and hold the button to drag it to see different areas and then zoom in to see the street names.

They do all of the changes on the Edulog system and I was told that the past zones were deleted in the Edulog system after the last changes had been Board approved.

Sender's Name Withheld