Increased Diversity in Rural Areas: One School's Response to Change

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Megan E. Rhodes

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This dissertation titled

Increased Diversity in Rural Areas: One School's Response to Change

by

MEGAN E. RHODES

has been approved for

the Department of Educational Studies

and The Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education and Human Services by

Aimee A. Howley

Professor of Education

Renée A. Middleton

Dean, The Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education and Human Services
Abstract

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Increased Diversity in Rural Area's: One School's Response to Change

Director of Dissertation: Aimee A. Howley

This qualitative case study examined the ways in which one rural Midwestern high school and its surrounding community responded to increased diversity. The purpose of the study was to explore how teachers, administrators, school staff, and community members in the district understood the character of the community’s demographic changes and the influences of these changes on the academic and social life of the school. The school’s responses to increasing community diversity were of particular importance to the study. Data collection included hour-long interviews with 34 participants, document analysis, and observations. Data were analyzed using a three-step process: initial coding, linking codes in conceptually coherent categories, and theme building. Data analysis revealed three themes. First, educators and community members exhibited class biases toward poor students and their families. Second, educators and community members conflated race and ethnicity with social class, expressing many of the same negative beliefs about minority students as they did about poor students. These respondents displayed deficit thinking toward poor and minority students and blamed these students’ cultural backgrounds for their low levels of academic engagement and performance. Third, a small group of change agents in the school and community advocated for poor and minority students, but they encountered the apathy and resistance of most educators and many community members. The findings of this study fit with
earlier literature about demographic change in rural areas. This literature revealed that social tensions and biases often resulted from shifting demographics in rural communities and schools. In addition, previous work on educators’ tendency to view low-socioeconomic status and minority students from a deficit perspective were similar to the perspectives voiced by the educators who participated in this study. Furthermore, some critical literature on poverty training supported the study’s finding that educators’ biases were compounded by their participation in professional development workshops that purported to offer “poverty training”. The report of the study concluded with several recommendations for educators who work in increasingly diverse rural schools.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Aimee A. Howley

Professor of Education
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Chapter One: Introduction

Public schools in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse. In fall 1972, the student population of public schools in the United States was 77.8% White, 14.8% African American, and 6.0% Hispanic. By fall 2003, it had changed dramatically to 58.3% White, 16.1% African American, and 18.6% Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). These population statistics reflect the fact that substantial demographic changes have been taking place in rural, urban, and suburban schools.

Approximately 40% of schools in the United States are located in rural areas (National Education Association, 2008a). Many of these areas are experiencing rapid demographic changes, the result of which is markedly increased diversity. From 1995 to 2004, rural schools in the United States reported a 55% increase in minority students. Twenty-three percent of rural students—over 2,000,000—are now classified as minorities. Several states, including Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico, report that students from various minority groups make up over 50% of the enrollment in their rural schools. While these states have traditionally had large numbers of minority students, the states with the largest percentages of growth in their rural minority populations are those with the smaller overall percentages of minority students. Illinois, for example, has experienced the greatest change, with a 135% increase in minority students in rural areas from 1996 through 2006 (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007).
Not only has the nation—including rural parts of the nation—experienced demographic changes in recent years, it has also experienced changes in educational policy. Notably, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 increased the extent to which states must hold school leaders and teachers accountable for all students’ academic achievement, regardless of those students’ race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or ability status. Among other provisions, the law focused on the achievement gap between White students and their African American, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, and multiracial counterparts; and it required schools to report each subgroup’s academic performance on state tests (United States Department of Education, 2005). Changing demographics paired with pressure from the federal government to close the achievement gap between middle class White students and their low-income and minority peers have compelled educators to address issues of diversity in their schools.

Not only has the law expanded administrators’ attentiveness to achievement gaps, it has also influenced the way teachers’ unions view the issue of diversity. For example, the National Education Association (2008b) acknowledged the seriousness of the achievement gap between White and minority students in its call for principals to implement policies, procedures, and professional development activities that would provide teachers with the skills they need to work successfully with diverse groups of students.

Increased diversity in America’s schools paired with increased accountability requirements from the federal government has changed how educators and policy makers view the relationship between race and/or ethnicity and academic achievement. Despite
greater visibility in recent years, however, the achievement gap between middle class and White students and their low-income and minority counterparts is not a new issue. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was a revision to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which was signed into law by President Johnson as part of his “War on Poverty”. This law provided federal funds to schools with large percentages of low-income students. Its overarching goal was to decrease the achievement gap between middle class and low-income students by supporting professional development for teachers, establishing Head Start programs, and increasing parental involvement in their children’s schools. Although the federal government funded the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, it gave individual states the responsibility of holding schools accountable for the academic achievement of students (Nwazota, 2005).

Even with the increased funding provided by the early versions of ESEA, poor and minority student in the United States continued to perform far below their White and middle class counterparts. As a result, the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 again sought to remedy the achievement gap. This law increased funding to schools with large numbers of low-income students and required schools to test all students (Nwazota, 2005).

Throughout this time period (i.e., from the mid-1960s to the early 2000’s), policy makers tended to view urban centers as the sites of greatest need for remedying achievement gaps, but such gaps also were evident in rural schools. Moreover, rapid change in the make-up of the student population in some rural districts has in recent years
presented additional challenges to rural schools. Some of these schools struggle to provide equitable and appropriate educational services to diverse students because of these students’ limited English proficiency, poverty, and cultural differences (Dorfman, 2000). School leaders may feel overwhelmed by the racial, ethnic, and economic changes in their communities (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004; Williams & Portin, 1997). Although some principals feel unprepared for these challenges, school leaders play an integral role in providing faculty with the skills they need to address diversity in their schools (Miserado, 1998).

Whereas a robust body of literature looks at ways in which schools in urban areas have addressed changing demographics (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Gutierrez, 2005; Lotherington & Chow, 2006; Nevarez & Wood, 2007; Saunders & Maloney, 2004; Sung & Clark, 2005), little research has explored the ways in which rural public schools have responded to increased diversity. Brunn (2002) concluded that, as rural areas become increasingly diverse, more research will be needed to show how schools are responding to changes in the makeup of the communities they serve.

This chapter presents the background information to justify and contextualize a study of a rural school’s response to diversity. It also presents the research questions that guided the study, discusses the significance of the study, and discloses the study’s assumptions and theoretical limitations.
Background of the Study

Lincoln High School\(^1\) is located in a small rural town in a Midwestern state. Lincoln was home to a large military base until the base closed in the early 1990s. At that time, the community was made up of predominately White, middle class military families and local families that had lived in the community for several generations. The community’s population declined soon after the base closed, and the school’s enrollment dropped dramatically as a result.

The school’s demographics have also changed over the past 20 years. The percentage of African American students has more than doubled, and the percentage of Hispanic students has increased eight-fold (from 1% in 1987 to 8% in 2010). Student mobility rates have also increased.

The school’s academic performance has also changed, apparently in response to demographic shifts. Once highly regarded for academic excellence, the district has struggled in recent years. In addition, participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities has decreased. The achievement gap between White students and their African American and Hispanic counterparts is also quite pronounced.

Despite its struggles, the school presented an interesting case because it seemed to be making unusual efforts to address its increasing diversity. Administrators and teachers had instituted several programs designed to improve academic achievement and the general well-being of students. In response to the large number of children in need of

\(^1\) Lincoln High School and Lincoln itself are pseudonyms. They are used throughout the study to disguise the identity of the school and the town in which the school is situated and thereby protect the confidentiality of the study’s participants.
supervision while their parents were working on local farms, for example, the school
district established a summer migrant program in 2007. The school also attempted to
provide culturally relevant curriculum by hosting events throughout the school year that
focused on the cultural experiences of its diverse student body.

As this brief description suggests, Lincoln High School and its surrounding
community are in transition. Changing demographics have altered the community,
bringing in new cultural traditions and values and new educational challenges. While the
community tries to retain its traditional rural character, school personnel realize the
importance of providing additional social and academic services to its increasingly
diverse student body. A more detailed portrait of demographic changes and school
responses is presented in Chapter 4.

Statement of the Problem

This case study examined one rural district’s response to increased diversity in its
school and community. Attentive to community change over a 20-year time period, it
sought to understand how school personnel and community members responded to
increased diversity. It looked at ways in which teachers, staff members, and
administrators addressed the needs of the school’s diverse student body with the aim of
developing insights that might be useful to rural educators confronting similar challenges
in their communities.

The purpose of this study was to seek an understanding of how increased diversity
influenced one rural school district and how stakeholders responded to the district’s
changing needs. As rural areas in the United States continue to become increasingly
diverse, school leaders will be faced with issues similar to those that confront the school personnel and community members who participated in this study. The intent of this study was to provide insight into one district’s challenges so that rural school leaders across the country might be better prepared to respond to similar challenges.

The following research questions guided the study:

• How do teachers, school staff, administrators, and community members understand the influence of demographic changes in their community on academic and extracurricular programs at the school?

• How do teachers, school staff, administrators, and community members view the school’s efforts to address diversity?

Significance

While several studies have investigated the ways in which urban public schools respond to increasingly diverse student populations (e.g., Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Lotherington & Chow, 2006; Nevarez & Wood, 2007; Sung & Clark, 2005), a smaller body of literature examines this phenomenon from a rural perspective (e.g., Brunn, 2000; Chavez, 2005; Dorfman, 2000; Tarca, 2005). Brunn (2000) proposed that as our nation’s rural schools become more diverse, there is an increased “need for understanding of the dynamics of such rapid changes” (p. 12). With the intent of contributing to a greater understanding of the ways in which rural schools across the country are responding to rapid increased diversity, this study examined how one rural school and community has responded to demographic change.
As rural schools across the country are becoming increasingly diverse, principals and other educational leaders will be faced with issues similar to those confronted by the participants in this study. Several authors have suggested that principals feel underprepared to deal effectively with the educational and social needs of their increasingly diverse students (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004; Williams & Portin, 1997). According to Yin (2003), single case studies contribute to readers’ understanding of a phenomenon. This case study, therefore, was positioned to contribute to educational leaders’ understanding of the ways in which rapid demographic change affects rural schools and their surrounding communities. Informed by this understanding, principals in rural schools might be better prepared than they otherwise would be to confront similar conditions in their own schools and communities.

According to Stake (2005),

How we learn from the singular case is related to how the case is like and unlike other cases we do know, mostly by comparison. It is intuition that persuades both researcher and reader that what is known about one case may very well be true about a similar case. (p. 454)

This view of case study research supports the claim that educational leaders might learn from this case study by acquiring a deep understanding of one school’s response to change and comparing it to their own situations. Although each school and its surrounding community face a unique set of circumstances, educational leaders can learn from the experiences of one school and community and may be better prepared to deal with similar issues in their own schools and communities.
Institutions of higher education also face challenges in preparing future educators for teaching careers in diverse rural schools (Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). While diversity training is included in most teacher preparation programs, additional professional development may be needed to prepare preservice teachers to work effectively in schools serving diverse groups of students (Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005). Such training may be important for principal preparation programs as well, because school principals play an integral role in providing teachers with the tools they need in order to work effectively with diverse groups of students (Williams & Portin, 1997).

Some schools adopt professional development models to help teachers gain skills that will help them serve their increasingly diverse student populations through effective pedagogies. Professional development can also provide teachers with opportunities to surface their views about diversity and to change their attitudes toward low-income and/or ethnically and racially diverse students. Such models often vary in scope and focus. Some are practical, providing teachers with skills to work with targeted groups of students, such as English language learners or special education students (Brunn, 2000; Wrigley, 2000). Others are more theoretical. One such model focuses on the differences between students’ and teachers’ cultures, beliefs, and behaviors (Payne, 2003). Another model encourages teachers to form an understanding of their own cultural backgrounds and explore stereotypes about race and class in a group setting (Sato & Lensmire, 2009).

Finally, a review of related literature revealed that few studies have investigated the ways in which rural schools are responding to changing student demographics. As rural schools become increasingly diverse, administrators and teachers will need tools to
help them deal effectively with students’ changing needs, including their need to learn English as a second language and to cope with the challenges of poverty and transience. This study serves as a starting point for this work by focusing through an in-depth analysis on one school’s response to increased diversity. Additional research beyond the current study is also needed to help educators understand how rural schools across the country are responding to changing demographics so that educators have a range of perspectives to consider as they think about how best to serve their increasingly diverse rural communities.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Two assumptions, which are associated with my perspective as an educator, inevitably had an influence on this study: (a) racism and classism have extremely negative influences on the learning environment of classrooms and schools and (b) teachers and principals want to learn how to improve their capacity to address diversity in positive ways. This section discusses these assumptions and the possible limitations each posed to the study.

The first assumption I make in this study is that racism and classism are highly destructive of students’ learning. Among others, Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) and Sato and Lensmire (2009) claimed that educators’ prejudices have detrimental academic and social consequences for students. Educators’ stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and class contribute to “school structures, polices, and practices” that perpetuate academic and social inequities between poor and minority students and their White and middle class counterparts (Gorski, 2008, p. 145). These stereotypes “put
children at risk of being viewed as less capable, less cultured, and less worthy as learners” (Sato & Lensmire, 2009, p. 366). Further, Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, and Garrison-Wade (2008) proposed that teachers’ low expectations of minority students contribute to the academic disparities between White and minority students, including their disparate standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college admission rates.

Some educators also go further by asserting that a multicultural learning environment is preferable to a homogenous one (Tamura, 1996). This assumption is expressed in some theoretical literature on multiculturalism, and it is often included on school, university, and organizational websites. The National Education Association’s “Diversity Toolkit,” for example, provides educators with strategies for teaching their students about the importance of diversity as well as other social justice issues (National Education Association, 2008c). Nevertheless, empirical support for this perspective is limited. Rather, it is a normative stance that has the support of only some of those educators who present themselves as advocates of social justice.

Proponents of this point of view argue that diversity enriches our society, and diversity education in schools helps students understand the value of living in a multicultural world (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2008). Further, some educators claim that students who participate in a multicultural learning environment develop self-confidence as they learn how their own cultures contribute to a rich society (Tamura, 1996). These educators suggest that including information about diverse cultures in a school’s curriculum makes learning more relevant to all students (Gay, 2000; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amati, 2005; Sato & Lensmire, 2009).
Whereas some critics of multicultural education claim that it is counterproductive because it focuses on differences rather than commonalities among groups of people, other critics voice concerns because multicultural education fails to address the structural inequities and racism that exist in schools and society (Sriraman & Adrian, 2008). Notably, conservative critics claim that, both in K-12 schools and in institutions of higher education, multicultural education with its tendency to draw attention to race and ethnicity is divisive. They suggest instead that curriculum should focus on students’ “common” culture as Americans and the founding principles of the American democratic process (Bloom, 1989; Ravitch, 1990; Schlesinger, 1992). These critics further claim that multicultural curricula serve underachieving minority students poorly because they fail to provide them with rigorous academic preparation (e.g., Ravitch, 1990).

Liberal critics, by contrast, claim that educators must confront the educational inequities that currently exist in schools and communities before they can address students’ awareness and acceptance of racial and cultural differences (Henry, 2005; Murray, 2010; Waltzer & Heilman, 2005). These authors suggest that the current model of multicultural education, which gives students a vague introduction to diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures, is not productive because it does not address the structural inequities that exist in schools, including gaps in academic achievement, graduation rates, discipline, curriculum, materials, and instructional practices (Henry, 2005; Murray, 2010). Instead of the current approach to multiculturalism, these authors propose that schools focus “on exploring real multicultural problems people experience” (Henry,
2005, p. 1062), such as racism, classism, and other social justice issues that contribute to the social and educational inequities that exist in schools and the wider society.

The second assumption that guides my study is that teachers and principals want to learn how to improve their capacity to address diversity in positive ways. Schools across the country have adopted diversity initiatives to prepare teachers to instruct diverse groups of students (e.g., Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003; Miserando, 1998). The implementation of these initiatives suggests that teachers and administrators do want to make improvements. Indeed, one of the reasons I chose Lincoln High School as the site for this study was because, seeing the initiatives it had adopted to address diversity, I surmised that the school was committed to providing effective instruction to students from diverse groups.

However, it is possible that not all of Lincoln’s teachers and administrators were committed to promoting effective strategies for diverse groups of students. As the study’s findings, in fact, show, some did not see it as a priority while others held negative views about or even resented the school’s diversity initiatives. McCray, Wright, and Beachum (2004) found that some principals of smaller rural schools did not view multicultural programming as beneficial. These principals expressed concern that focusing on multiculturalism might worsen race relations among students. Others feared that local business owners would not support such initiatives, thus breaking down the relationship between the school and the community. While some principals may fear political fallout from establishing diversity initiatives, others feel too overwhelmed with the daily pressures of running a school to have time to develop and sustain culturally responsive
programs (Williams & Portin, 1997). As I interviewed teachers and administrators about their perceptions of the school’s response to demographic change, I became aware that not all teachers and administrators viewed diversity as an important issue or saw themselves as an integral part of the process of promoting educational strategies that address diversity.

**Summary**

Increased diversity in America’s rural schools, paired with new educational policies, has changed the way educational leaders think about race, ethnicity, and academic achievement. Principals often feel underprepared to respond to the social and academic needs of an increasingly diverse student body, yet they play an essential role in providing teachers with the training and resources required to give these students equitable and appropriate educational services. This case study examined one rural high school and its surrounding community to understand how educators responded to demographic changes.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Statistics from the United States Census Bureau indicate that rural areas are becoming increasingly diverse, yet these numbers do not explain why demographic changes are taking place in rural areas or their implications for rural schools and communities. The following review of literature will begin with a look at the possible causes of demographic changes in rural communities, followed by a discussion of the implications of these changes for rural schools. It concludes with a review of literature on educational responses to demographic changes in rural schools in the United States.

Causes of Demographic Changes in Rural Communities

Seasonal agricultural work has traditionally attracted migrant populations to rural areas in the United States. Migrant workers from California, Florida, Mexico, and Texas travel north during the late spring and summer months to work in agriculture and related industries, and they return home at the end of the harvest (Branz-Spall & Rosenthal, 2003). This phenomenon is not new. Farmers in California relied on migrant workers as early as the 1880s, when the development of labor-intensive fruit and vegetable farming increased demand for farmhands (Martin & Taylor, 2000). Recently, however, migrant workers, as well as other immigrant populations, are moving to rural areas throughout the country looking for seasonal employment, permanent work, and an improved quality of life, the result of which is the rapid diversification of many rural areas throughout the United States.

According to Gilroy (2007), economic opportunity is the driving force behind recent migration to rural areas and subsequent increases in population diversity.
Immigrant populations, once primarily located in urban areas, are now moving to rural areas in search of good jobs and affordable housing (Aponte & Siles, 1997; Gilroy, 2007). Several authors suggest that new job opportunities for migrant and immigrant workers are the result of industrial relocation from urban to rural areas and an increased demand for and reliance on the immigrant and migrant labor force (Aponte & Siles, 1997; Brunn, 2002; Fennelly & Leitner, 2002; Kandel & Parrado, 2005). The following section looks at the possible economic incentives that are attracting minority populations to previously homogenous rural areas in the United States, especially in the Midwest.

**Economic incentives.** There are several possible explanations for the immigration of diverse populations to rural areas in the Midwest, including industrial restructuring and relocation, changes in immigration laws, and increased employment of agricultural and assembly-line workers. The following discussion looks at the ways in which demographics in certain regions of the United States have changed as a result of these circumstances.

Minnesota, for example, has experienced rapid demographic change as a result of industrial relocation. Fennelly and Leitner (2002) reported that increased diversity in Minnesota is largely the result of the meat processing industry’s relocation to rural areas of the state in the early 1990s. The industry added low-wage jobs as demand for meat products increased, and these jobs attracted thousands of Cambodian, Hmong, Somali, and Vietnamese immigrants between 1990 and 2000. African American, Asian, and Hispanic populations in the state doubled during that time period as well.
Reporting similar economic shifts, Kandel and Parrado (2005) explained that restructuring of the meat processing industry, paired with changes in immigration laws, greatly increased the Hispanic population in rural areas throughout the United States, especially in the Midwest. These authors suggested that the relocation and restructuring of the meat processing industry, combined with corporate hiring of immigrants who were willing to work in low-wage jobs, contributed to rapidly increasing diversity throughout the Midwest. Rural Illinois, for example, has experienced rapid demographic change as a result of the relocation of the meat-packing industry. Over 800,000 Hispanic people moved to the Midwest between 1980 and 1990, many to rural Illinois (Brunn, 2002).

Also offering a similar analysis, Aponte and Siles (1997) reported that many Hispanics who once lived in urban centers have been relocating to rural areas of the Midwest. These authors concluded that most of this population migration can be attributed to new jobs created by the meat-packing industry in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska. More Hispanics are also “settling out”, that is, deciding to stay in the communities where they first were employed as migrant workers—a circumstance that has contributed to the increasing Hispanic population throughout the Midwest.

Economic factors, such as industrial restructuring and increased hiring of immigrant and migrant workers, have played a key role in the recent and continuing diversification of rural America. Gilroy (2007) claimed that these demographic changes in once predominately homogenous rural communities have had “a profound effect on the local culture and economy” of those communities, as well as the schools that serve them.
The following section will look at the implications of these demographic changes on rural schools and their surrounding communities.

**Implications of Demographic Changes in Rural Schools**

Rapid demographic changes in rural areas have had both social and educational implications for rural schools and their surrounding communities. Rural schools face the challenge of educating immigrant and migrant students who have special educational needs. These needs often affect the kinds of services schools must provide as well as the personnel required to deliver these services effectively (Batt, 2008). Increased diversity also has social implications for historically homogenous schools and communities, as residents struggle to make sense of changes while incorporating newcomers into their communities (Brunn, 2002; Tarca, 2005). The following section discusses both the educational and social implications of demographic changes on rural schools and communities.

**Educational implications.** Demographic changes affect academic instruction in rural schools because of the increased number of English language learners, increased percentage of students living in poverty, and increasingly mobile student population. The discussion below provides a brief consideration of the educational implications of each of these circumstances.

**English language learners.** One of the main issues rural schools face in dealing with increased diversity is to find ways to teach students for whom English is a second language—students who are often referred to either as limited English proficient (LEP) or as English language learners (ELL). Five and a half million students in the United States
were classified as LEP in 2003 (Batt, 2008). Over 10 million students in the United States live in homes where the primary language spoken is one other than English (Hill & Flynn, 2004). As more of these students move to rural areas, teachers and principals are faced with the challenge of trying to educate children whose native languages differ from the language of instruction (i.e., English).

The provisions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), moreover, intensified pressures on schools to address the needs of ELLs. Under Title III of NCLB, schools are required to demonstrate that all students, including ELLs, are making adequate academic progress. Title III helps to “ensure that English language learners attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic content and student academic achievement, and meet the same challenging academic and student academic achievement standards that all children are expected to meet” (Iowa Department of Education, 2004, p. 24). Meeting these goals can be particularly difficult for rural schools that might not have access to qualified English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers. For example, in Idaho, where the ELL student population grew 200% between 1990 and 2000, schools reported difficulties in filling ESL teaching vacancies and even in finding certified candidates for those positions (Batt, 2008).

While federal mandates have increased schools’ accountability for providing high quality instruction to English language learners, there is an even more persuasive reason for educators to work hard to meet the academic needs of these students—democracy, in fact, requires it. As Mayorga (2008) argued, educators in a democracy have a moral obligation to provide equitable educational opportunities to English language learners so
that these students, like their English-speaking peers, can become productive citizens and experience a decent quality of life. One starting point for teaching these students in effective ways, according to Mayorga is to treat English language learners’ native languages and cultures “as assets rather than liabilities” (p. 2).

*Migrant students.* Migrant students in the United States face many difficulties, including extreme poverty, interrupted education, limited English proficiency, and social isolation (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Migrant farm workers have been referred to as the “poorest of the working poor” (Branz-Spal & Rosenthal, 2003, p. 55), with some migrant families earning less than $5,000 per year (Romanowski, 2003). Along with extreme poverty, migrant students often live with parents who have limited English proficiency. Finally, because of the demands of seasonal agricultural work, many of these students must leave their home schools before the year ends and return long after the new school year has started (Branz-Spal & Rosenthal, 2003). Poverty, mobility, and language difficulties function as major barriers to migrant children’s education. In one study migrant children scored, on average, 25 percentage points lower on state achievement tests than their non-migrant peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Approximately half of migrant students performed below grade level in reading and math. As a result of their poor performance in schools, the dropout rate for migrant students has been extremely high (Perry, 1997).

*Influence of school leaders.* Riehl (2000), among others, claimed that educational leaders play a crucial role in creating school cultures that are inclusive of diverse students and responsive to these students’ academic challenges. Several empirical studies,
moreover, have examined the ways in which school leaders have responded to demographic changes in their communities. While some principals were proactive in addressing diversity and related social justice issues (Magno & Schiff, 2010; Theoharis, 2010), others did not seem to see such responsiveness as a priority (Young, Madsen, & Young, 2010) or viewed an explicit focus on diversity and social justice as disruptive of the school’s academic goals (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004).

Theoharis (2010) conducted a case study of six urban public school principals from three different states who were committed to improving social justice for the diverse students in their schools. The author found that the principals implemented various strategies to make their schools more equitable for all students. These principals eliminated pull-out programs for English language learners (ELLs) and special education students and moved all students into mainstream classrooms, analyzed and shared academic achievement data to increase teachers’ accountability for all students’ learning, opened fine arts courses to all students, reduced out of school suspensions to increase student learning time, provided teachers with professional development to help them understand race and social justice issues, and invited all parents to become more involved with the school. Based on these findings, Theoharis concluded that schools can create greater equity when school leaders foster a “climate that deeply respects and values the racial, cultural, and economic diversity represented in many public schools” (p. 368-369).

Magno and Schiff (2010) examined nine suburban school districts in Connecticut to see how school leaders responded to an increased student population of Hispanic immigrants. These authors interviewed 14 principals and assistant principals and found
that while all of the principals were aware of their school’s increased Hispanic population, only one principal actively responded to increased diversity in his school. This principal established a diversity office at the school where Hispanic students could socialize with one another, attended training and provided professional development to teachers about working with English language learners (ELLs), made sure that all elective classes were available to Hispanic students, allowed all ELLs to take mainstream classes, and started a peer tutoring program that matched native speakers with ELLs. He also organized an international food day, invited musicians and dancers from different cultural backgrounds to perform for students, and showed films to students about different cultures.

Young, Madsen, and Young (2010) conducted a qualitative case study of principals from a diverse suburban school district that had implemented a “diversity plan” to respond to the district’s changing student demographics. Twenty-two principals participated in small focus group discussions and described their reactions to the program’s implementation. The authors then selected four principals from the focus group to participate in individual interviews. Young and associates found that the vast majority of principals did not understand the meaning of diversity as it was related to the diversity plan, were unsure of their role in implementing the diversity plan, and did not see the program as a priority in their schools. These principals blamed the district for failing to communicate details about the plan to them and for not providing professional development to train them prior to the program’s implementation.
Several studies suggest that principals think increased diversity is changing their leadership role. Williams and Portin (1997) surveyed 2,431 members of the Association of Washington State Principals to identify possible ways in which increased diversity might be changing how they functioned as school administrators. Of the 850 principals who returned the survey, most reported that increased student diversity had a significant influence on their school and job responsibilities. Principals expressed the belief that the job had become more challenging as a result of the increased number of students requiring special education services. Most of the principals also claimed that the special programs needed to help impoverished students, those whose parents were migrant workers, and ELLs were more difficult to implement than regular education programs. Based on these findings, Williams and Portin suggested that increased student diversity added job complexity; and larger numbers of special education students contributed to new pressures, concerns, and responsibilities for school principals in Washington State.

While Williams and Portin (1997) found that principals saw their role changing in response to increased student diversity, other studies show that disagreement exists among principals about how schools should address demographic changes. For example, a study conducted by McCray, Wright, and Beachum (2004) found that some principals think multicultural education in primarily homogenous schools may actually be disruptive of the educational process and divisive to the student body. These researchers surveyed 302 secondary school principals in a southeastern state to investigate the relationship between school size and principals’ views of multicultural education. The authors found that of the 124 principals who responded to the survey, principals from
smaller schools, generally located in rural communities, tended to view multicultural education as divisive, potentially intensifying racial tension and segregation within schools. These principals also expressed the belief that multicultural education took time away from core academic subjects. By contrast, principals from larger schools tended to report that multicultural education did not have negative effects on students or on the educational process.

Increased diversity in rural areas has significant academic implications for rural schools, including increased pressure on school administrators to deal with the diverse needs of migrant and immigrant populations. Increased diversity also has social implications for schools and their surrounding communities, as the discussion below suggests.

Social implications. Torres (2001) claimed that demographic changes can “disrupt social patterns, add tension to social relations, and change the character of social institutions such as schools” (p. 1). The following studies look at how several rural communities reacted to rapid demographic changes.

Community perception of change. Chavez (2005) investigated how changes in the ethnic and social class makeup of a rural California town influenced intergroup dynamics. In particular, he conducted 20 formal interviews and 25 informal interviews to understand how White residents perceived Mexican immigrants, as well as how Mexicans saw themselves in their role as members of the community. The author found that White residents saw their immigrant neighbors as disconnected from the community and responsible for increased crime and gang activity. The White residents reported their
own active involvement in the local fire department, community center, and library and expressed fear that the quality of community life was declining as a result of the increased immigrant population. In contrast, Chavez found that Mexican residents also saw themselves as active community members, especially in the local elementary school. While Mexican residents expressed a sense of belonging within their own social circles, they experienced racism and exclusion from mainstream events in the larger community.

Brunn (2002) interviewed 33 teachers and 3 administrators from one rural school district in Illinois to identify their attitudes toward rapid demographic change in the student population. Brunn found prejudice and bigotry among some faculty members. These teachers were resistant to change, unwelcoming to migrant students and their families, and viewed the increased migrant student population as disruptive of their instruction and of the classroom environment overall. Other teachers expressed a commitment to providing the best educational opportunities for all of their students, including those from migrant families. Educators in the latter group were open to the new programs for migrant students, including an after-school study program, free and reduced price meals, and immunizations. Teachers also reported incidents suggesting that White students and their parents were prejudiced against Hispanic residents. And many community members expressed resentment toward programs that were offered to Hispanic students only.

Tarca (2005) interviewed 14 teachers, administrators, school board members, and community members to determine their reaction to a rapidly increasing African American population in a small, formerly homogenous rural community. The rapid influx of
African American residents to the community was partially due to urban African American males who received drug and alcohol treatment counseling at a center just outside of town and then chose to stay in the area after they had completed treatment. The residents of the town became fearful that increased diversity would bring “urban problems”, such as increased crime, drugs, and gang activity, to their rural community.

Interviews revealed that racism and discrimination against African American students was rampant in the local school. African American students were disciplined more frequently and severely than White students. African American students did not perform as well as their White counterparts on state achievement tests. Teachers and administrators pushed to establish a social skills program targeting only African American female students in response to increased discipline problems and inappropriate behavior, which likely reinforced racial stereotypes about African American students. Tarca found that school administrators and teachers did little to address the academic and social issues that resulted from increased diversity while at the same time denying that racism existed at the school.

Increased diversity in rural areas creates challenges for schools and communities. School leaders, teachers, and community members struggle to make sense of changes in their once homogenous schools and communities. While increased diversity poses academic and social challenges for rural schools, many have responded to these challenges in specific ways. The following section considers studies that examine how particular rural schools have responded to demographic changes.
Educational Responses to Demographic Changes in Rural Schools

Rural schools in the United States have adopted a variety of academic and social programs in response to their changing student demographics. Some schools, for example, have provided staff development to prepare teachers to work with ELLs, while others have offered dual-language programs to encourage Spanish-speaking students to continue to learn in their native language while also learning English (Wrigley, 2000; Zehr, 2005). Other schools have adopted materials that help teachers incorporate features of migrant and immigrant culture into the curriculum (Martinez & Velazquez, 2000; Whittaker, Salend, & Guitierrez, 1997).

**English language learners.** Schools structure ESL programs in many ways. Some schools use a pull-out model, whereby students spend the majority of the day in a mainstream classroom and spend a portion of the day in an ESL classroom, while others use an inclusion model, whereby ELLs spend the entire day in their mainstream classroom and are assisted by an ESL aide or teacher (Zehr, 2005). Some schools or districts provide a resource center, where ESL teachers work to provide academic assistance to ELLs (Iowa Department of Education, 2004). Other schools use a variety of methods to increase ELLs’ academic achievement: cooperative learning activities that pair ELLs with their English speaking peers, lessons in the ELLs first language to teach academic content, and demonstrations and hands-on activities (Hansen-Thomas, 2008).

Zehr (2005) described one rural school district in Oklahoma that experienced a rapid influx of Spanish-speaking students. Although the district had a history of serving a few students with limited English proficiency, in the early 2000s its Hispanic population
began to increase dramatically. In response, the school district moved from a pull-out ESL program to a federally funded two-way language-immersion program. This program, called *Dos Amigos*, required students from both English- and Spanish-speaking backgrounds to learn both languages together in their classrooms. Students learned to read in their native language and were not introduced to reading in the second language until the third grade. The school also employed a bilingual parent liaison to communicate with Spanish-speaking parents. After the program’s implementation, the school began to meet the state standards for English proficiency.

Some districts take a proactive approach to educating English language learners by creating ESL programs before large numbers of immigrant or minority populations move into the district (Wrigley, 2000). Wrigley (2000) looked at one rural school in Virginia that had established an ESL program to meet the needs of just a few Spanish-speaking students, with the intent of serving larger populations in the future. The school hired qualified ESL teachers, established a summer stipend for them to work on a plan for the district, contacted state and national organizations to find resources and guidelines for educating students, and researched better ways to assess students’ English proficiency levels. Soon after the program’s implementation, the school’s ELL population increased, and as a result of the early planning, the school was prepared to provide academic programming to the new students. Based on these findings, Wrigley concluded that schools should be proactive in developing programs for English language learners so that they are prepared when demographics change in their communities.
Migrant students. The Federal Migrant Education Program was established in 1966 as part of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to provide educational services to the children of agricultural workers whose jobs required them to move from place to place (Zehr, 2007). Funded by the United States Department of Education, the Office of Migrant Education continues to offer educational services to migrant students across the nation. The program’s purpose is to “help migrant children, who are uniquely affected by the combined effects of poverty, language, cultural barriers, and the migratory lifestyle, to meet the same challenging academic content and student academic achievement standards that are expected of all children” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, para. 1).

State education agencies have flexibility with migrant education funding and can use it to provide a variety of services both during and after school and over the summer (Perry, 1997). Funded programs include academic support services for migrant students (including bilingual education), home-school liaisons, parental involvement programs, a credit exchange program, an electronic student records exchange system, health services, and family literacy education (Perry, 1997).

According to its annual report, 767,472 migrant students participated in the Migrant Education Program in 2001-2002. Eighty-nine percent of these migrant students were Hispanic (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Schools across the nation are using funds from the Migrant Education Program to provide various services to migrant students. Strang and von Glatz (1999), for example, found that schools were using federal funds to provide supplemental instruction in reading, math, language arts, and English as
a second language; teachers aides for migrant students in regular education classes; extended day or summer programs; counseling; medical and dental services; free and reduced priced meals; and transportation to and from educational programs.

Some schools have responded to an increased population of migrant students in their communities by offering special summer educational programs (Perry, 1997; Strang & von Glatz, 1999). However, according to some educators, rural teachers who are used to working primarily with a homogenous White population do not always have an understanding of migrant students’ cultural values (Romanowski, 2003). The following study looks at the ways in which one school responded to its increased migrant student population.

Romanowski (2003) conducted a qualitative study of a summer migrant education program in a rural school district in Ohio that provided 8 weeks of summer education to approximately 150 migrant students. Romanowski interviewed 14 teachers, 2 administrators, and 33 migrant students to develop an understanding of migrant students’ academic and social needs. The author found that there were several barriers to migrant students’ success in the classroom, including teachers’ negative stereotypes and their lack of understanding of the students’ cultures. Romanowski argued that schools must recognize students’ culture as important and find ways to integrate cultural studies into the curriculum. He also claimed that schools must go beyond serving ethnic food in the cafeteria and celebrating cultural holidays to including activities in the curriculum that contribute to teachers’ and students’ understanding of migrant families’ language, cultural values, experiences, and beliefs. In addition, Romanowski suggested that schools
can ease migrant students’ transition in and out of the district by providing bilingual liaisons to interact with parents and using the Migrant Student Record Transferring System (MSRTS) to maintain and transfer records to and from students’ home schools.

Migrant students bring substantial challenges to rural schools, including extreme poverty, mobility, limited English proficiency, and cultural differences. However, as Romanowski (2003) concludes, “At the same time, they can enrich the educational experiences of all students by bringing to the classroom their diversity, travel experiences, and bilingual fluency” (p. 32).

**Responses to diversity.** Several studies look at programs that rural schools have adopted or developed to respond to increased diversity. Dorfman (2000) conducted a case study of a high school in Mattawa, Washington to investigate district programs implemented to address rapid increases in community diversity. Enrollment at Wahluke School District grew dramatically from 374 students (67% White) in 1987 to 1,287 students (71% Hispanic) by 1997. Dorfman noted that the Hispanic students in the district were mostly children of Latino migrant workers from nearby orchards and vineyards, while the rest of the population included a small group of Native American and White students.

Dorfman (2000) found that administrators at Wahluke High School implemented several programs in response to the school’s increasingly diverse student population, including, bilingual transition classes, a stay-in-school program (which included visits to the homes of Hispanic students), a Spanish sports circle, a food service program incorporating Hispanic foods, and use of indigenous art to decorate the school. Despite
the school’s commitment to diversity, Dorfman found that educational and social inequalities between White and Hispanic students persisted. White students graduated at a much higher rate than their Hispanic peers, and few Hispanic students participated in honors courses. Teachers and administrators in the building were primarily White, and support staff members were mostly Hispanic.

Brunn (2000) conducted a qualitative study of one rural school district in Illinois that experienced a rapid influx of Hispanic students as a result of increased hiring at a local meat-packing plant. The school’s Hispanic enrollment jumped from just a few students in 1996 to over 180 in 1998. The author interviewed 23 teachers and 5 administrators to gain an understanding of the process the school used to develop a district wide program to boost academic achievement among all students.

Brunn (2000) found that prior to the program’s development, teachers in the district expressed the belief that they lacked the resources to be effective in teaching students with limited English proficiency. In response, the principal included teachers, Hispanic parents, and students in the planning process to create the school’s own bilingual program, which included literacy instruction, multicultural social activities, after-school academic enrichment, parent meetings, and professional development for teachers. Because all stakeholders were included in the program’s development, each group’s contribution was represented in the final program. Further, stakeholders expressed their belief that the program improved the academic and social supports the district offered to ELLs. Based on these findings, Brunn concluded that bilingual
programs have a greater chance of success when there is strong leadership from administration paired with shared decision-making with students, teachers, and parents.

Farrell, Valois, Meyer, and Tidwell (2003) examined the effectiveness of the RIPP (Responding In Peaceful and Positive Ways) violence prevention program in rural schools with ethnically diverse student populations. RIPP consists of programming for three grade levels: violence prevention for sixth grade students, conflict resolution for seventh grade students, and transitioning to high school for eighth grade students. In 1997, five rural school districts in Florida received a grant from the United States Department of Education to pilot the RIPP program, which had originally been developed for urban middle schools.

Farrell and associates (2003) selected nine schools from the five rural districts to participate in the study, assigning five schools to the intervention group and four to the control group. In all of the schools, more than half of the students were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program and approximately one-third came from minority backgrounds, primarily Hispanic families who were employed as migrant agricultural workers. By the second year of implementation, the authors found that students from schools in the five intervention-group schools exhibited less frequent aggressive behavior, reported a higher life satisfaction, and had fewer disciplinary-code violations than their peers in the control-group schools. Further, the RIPP program seemed to be more successful in the Florida rural schools than it had been in the urban schools for which it had originally been designed.
Hoffman (2004) provided an example of one strategy both rural and suburban schools have used to deal with their increasingly diverse student populations: producing inclusive yearbooks that showcase all students. Hoffman interviewed 132 yearbook students from five suburban high schools and 54 students from five rural high schools across two states to identify how they defined diversity as well as the strategies they used to include underrepresented students in the yearbooks for their schools. Hoffman found that students defined diversity in terms of race and ethnicity but also in terms of school status and involvement in clubs and organizations. Rural students reported including underrepresented students because it was the right thing to do, but their suburban counterparts included these students to meet the expectations of their yearbook advisors. Rural students also noted the importance of having a diverse group of students working on the yearbook to insure that all student groups were represented in the final product. According to the author, the inclusive yearbooks from these rural schools revealed that the students who were in charge of the yearbook were indeed making conscious efforts to include students from the schools’ different racial and ethnic constituencies.

Gaps in and Limitations of the Extant Literature

As Hispanic, African American, Cambodian, Hmong, and Somali populations relocate to rural areas, rural schools are becoming increasingly diverse (Brunn, 2002; Fennelly & Leitner, 2002; Kandel & Parrado, 2005). However, the few studies about rural schools’ responses to increased diversity focus primarily on the ways in which rural schools have addressed increases in Hispanic student populations (Brunn, 2000; Dorfman, 2000; Romanowski, 2003; Wrigley, 2000; Zehr, 2005). Very few studies have
examined how rural schools are responding to students from other racial and ethnic groups. While educators continue to benefit from research about how rural schools are responding to the increased enrollment of Hispanic students, additional research is needed to present a more complete picture of schools’ initiatives for other groups of minority students and their responses to the racial and ethnic dynamics resulting from complex demographic shifts.

According to some researchers, school leaders play a crucial role in shaping schools’ cultures in ways that are more or less responsive to students from minority groups (Riehl, 2000). However, studies that examine how principals of rural schools are responding to demographic change are quite limited. Those few that do exist are primarily quantitative studies focusing on principals’ perceptions of increased diversity and its impact on their daily administrative duties (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2004; Williams & Portin, 1997). And, while the qualitative studies included in this literature review provide important insights about how a select group of principals have addressed diversity in suburban and rural schools (Magno & Schiff, 2010; Theoharis, 2010), these studies document the views and actions of only a small number of participants. Further research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed to provide a more complete, in-depth understanding of the ways in which rural school principals are leading change efforts in response to population shifts in their communities. Additional qualitative studies may be particularly helpful for uncovering the complex challenges that principals face and the leadership they exercise in increasingly diverse rural schools.
Among the most serious challenges that such schools and their leaders face are prevailing prejudices against minority students and their families. As an ample literature reports, such prejudices can have extremely detrimental academic and social consequences for students (e.g., Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Sato & Lensmire, 2009). Several studies in this literature review identified racism and ethnocentrism as serious problems in rural schools and communities that had experienced demographic changes (Brann, 2002; Chavez, 2005; Tarca, 2005), but none deeply explored the impact of racism and ethnocentrism on school culture and student achievement. The prevalence of racism and ethnocentrism revealed in these few studies, nevertheless, provided persuasive evidence that more research is needed not only to examine the ways in which rural educators perceive minority students, but also how these views affect the academic learning and social development of minority students in rural schools.

Rural educators’ prejudices are not limited to race and ethnicity. While several studies I included in this literature review described the extreme poverty of some rural minorities (Branz-Spall & Rosenthal, 2003; Romanowski, 2003), none separated race and ethnicity from social class to consider rural educators’ possible biases against the poor or the impact of these biases on students’ academic performance. Nevertheless, several authors have found that rural educators often hold disparaging views of poor students as well as their families, communities, and cultures (Duncan, 1999; Howley, Howley, Howley, & Howley, 2006; Jupp & Slattery, 2010). These studies suggest that such prejudices are likely to have detrimental social and academic consequences for poor
rural students. Additional research is needed to help educators understand how classist biases influence the learning and social adjustment of students from underprivileged backgrounds as well as their involvement in the cultures of their schools.

Summary

The literature presented in this chapter suggests that, over the past 20 years, rural areas of the United States have become increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and social class. Primarily due to an increased number of low-wage jobs in rural areas created by the relocation of the food processing and other agricultural industries, some rural communities have experienced rapid demographic changes over a short period of time.

Increased diversity has significant academic implications for rural schools and their surrounding communities. Many of these schools face the academic challenge of teaching students who are English language learners, highly mobile, live in extreme poverty, and often do not have the academic preparation needed to succeed academically. Rural schools are underprepared to meet these challenges, often having little experience dealing with diverse student populations. These schools face additional challenges, including difficulty recruiting and retaining quality ESL teachers and providing the sorts of professional development to school personnel that will enable them to work effectively with diverse students.

The studies that I presented in this literature review described many ways in which rural schools have responded to increased diversity. These responses included the establishment of bilingual classrooms, employment of ESL teachers, sponsorship of
summer programs for migrant students, and provision of social and health care services to students and their families. They also typically involved efforts to provide teachers with relevant professional development.

The literature review also showed that increased diversity often has social implications for rural schools and communities. Several studies reported that some rural educators and community members harbored racist and ethnocentric attitudes. Further, some rural educators were resistant to participating in change efforts that were positioned to improve teaching and learning for the diverse students in their schools. Some studies suggested that educators’ stereotypes and limited knowledge about students’ cultural backgrounds served as barriers to the academic success of minority students in rural schools.

The studies in this literature review also showed that rural principals responded in different ways to issues of diversity. Some, for example, viewed multicultural education as having a negative effect on their schools. Others tended to endorse initiatives that addressed diversity in one-sided or superficial ways. Nevertheless, some rural school leaders were making meaningful changes to improve the quality and equity of education for all students in their schools. These findings suggested that rural principals can achieve beneficial outcomes by implementing programs that explicitly address diversity issues, involve all stakeholders in the change process, and provide professional development that confronts racist, classist, and ethnocentric attitudes.

Finally, I identified several gaps in and limitations to the current literature on rural schools’ responses to increased diversity. First, most of the studies focused on how rural
schools were responding to increases only in the enrollment of Hispanic students. Further studies are needed to develop a more complete understanding of the approaches rural schools are taking in response to demographic shifts involving other racial and ethnic groups. Second, the majority of studies documenting school leaders’ efforts to address demographic changes in their schools have targeted suburban and urban school principals. Given the unique challenges of leading rural schools, more in-depth research is needed to demonstrate how rural school principals are responding to population shifts that result in increased diversity. Finally, several studies identified the prevalence of racism, classism, and ethnocentrism among educators. Further studies are needed to examine the academic and social consequences of such discriminatory attitudes and practices on the low-income and culturally diverse students in rural schools.
Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology for the study of one high school’s responses to changes in community demographics. The chapter presents the methodological assumptions that guided the study, the researcher’s background and pertinent experiences, a definition of terms, the specific research methods that were used to collect and analyze data, and a discussion of the study’s validity and limitations.

Methodological Assumptions

This study involved a qualitative case study of one school and its surrounding community. The study’s purpose was to understand and interpret how one rural school responded to demographic changes that occurred over the course of 20 years. Its aim was not to predict future events or make generalizations, but rather to provide a deep understanding of one case in which demographic changes affected a school and community. This understanding emerged from a thorough investigation of participants’ perspectives and actions. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), deep understandings of this sort are among the main foci of qualitative research.

Providing a similar perspective on qualitative research, Glesne (2006) noted, “Qualitative researchers seek to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (p. 4). The purpose of qualitative research is not to make generalizations, predictions, or determine causality, but rather to form a deep understanding of a phenomenon through observation of the phenomenon and investigation of participants’ perspectives about the phenomenon (Glesne, 2006). Qualitative research “produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures” but
through the study of people’s lives, feelings, and behaviors (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 10).

The following section provides a discussion of case study design, identifies its purpose, and explains why I chose this approach for conducting the study.

**Case study.** Yin (2003) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). This definition emphasizes that a case study allows the researcher to gain a nuanced understanding of a phenomenon by observing how it relates to a particular context.

Adopting a very similar perspective, Stake (1995) defined a case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). As both definitions suggest, the case study enables the researcher to learn about a phenomenon by examining an individual case in the context of its environment.

When should a researcher choose to do a case study? Stake (1995) suggested, “If there is something that we do not sufficiently understand and want to—we do a case study” (p. 133). Yin (2003) proposed that the case study method should be used to answer “how” and “why” questions in circumstances in which a researcher has little or no control over behaviors or events.

I chose the case study method because it was well suited to my topic of study and the nature of my research questions. According to Yin’s definition, the case study method can best be used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon. How rural schools respond
to the demographic changes occurring in their communities is a contemporary phenomenon with practical implications for teachers and administrators. This phenomenon can be understood by observing how one school and community responded to demographic change so that other rural educators’ may consider it as they think about how best to serve their own increasingly diverse rural communities.

As indicated above, I addressed the research questions through a single case study of Lincoln High School. Yin (2003) recommended choosing a single case design “when the case represents an extreme case or a unique case” (p. 40). Lincoln High School presented a unique case of a rural school that has experienced demographic change over a relatively short period of time. My rationale for choosing Lincoln High School as a single case was based on its atypical demographics (and demographic changes) given its rural locale. In 2005, student enrollment in rural schools in the United States was 81% White, 10% African American, and 6% Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Lincoln’s student population (55% White, 29% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 6% Multiracial) is much more diverse than the national average, making it unusual for a rural school.

**Background and Pertinent Experiences**

I have been interested in diversity issues since I was in elementary school. I grew up in a small college town and attended a diverse elementary school. Many international graduate students and faculty lived in the neighborhood and sent their children to the school. As a result, I made friends from all over the world and enjoyed befriending those
who were different from me. It was an incredibly positive experience that sparked my interest in diversity in schools for the rest of my life.

Many years later, I took a job teaching music in an inner city school in a large urban area. The school served primarily low-income, African American students as well as a growing population of Somali immigrants. Although the school employed several English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers, most seemed unprepared to work with Somali students who had limited English proficiency and additional social needs resulting from their poverty and relocation to a new country. There was much racial tension between African American and Somali students, which eventually led to a race-related riot in the cafeteria and a violent attack in the school parking lot. These incidents gained the attention of the local community and the media. In response, teachers and administrators focused on conflict resolution and diversity training. In particular, the school hosted elaborate multicultural fairs, read the morning announcements in both Somali and English, and trained both Somali and African American students in conflict resolution. Tension between the two groups lessened but was still present on a daily basis, and few students socialized with peers who came from a cultural group other than their own. I often wondered what teachers and administrators could do to encourage meaningful and positive interaction between the two groups.

I started teaching music at Lincoln High School in the fall of 2007. Although the school is located in a small, rural Midwestern town, the student body is racially and ethnically diverse. My first experience with the school’s diversity was at my interview. The school holds a summer educational program for migrant workers’ children. As I
entered the school for my interview, I saw a group of 20 Hispanic elementary school children singing traditional Spanish songs and playing games. When I asked the superintendent about the students, he told me that they were participating in a pilot program to provide seasonal educational opportunities for migrant children while their parents worked in the fields. He explained that, whereas most of the families left after the harvest ended, some families decided to stay in the town at the end of the season.

I quickly realized when school started that Hispanic students made up only a small portion of the student population at Lincoln High School, and most left in October. African Americans represented the largest minority group at the school, constituting over 20% of the student population. I was surprised at the school’s diversity, given its rural locale, and I was interested in its history. I observed the complex race and ethnic dynamics in both the school and community as the school year progressed. In school, students from all backgrounds came together for lunch, academic classes, and extracurricular activities. Students were somewhat segregated in the cafeteria, but it was obvious that many students had friends from other races. There did not seem to be race-related tension in the building, although many students made racial jokes, some of which were demeaning. African American and White students participated together in football, basketball, and dance. The fine arts classes were also somewhat diverse. However, honors and Advanced Placement courses predominately enrolled White students, and few or no minority students were in any of these classes. No minority students had been recognized as Student of the Month. Few minority students were on the honor roll. No minority students participated in Future Farmers of America or agricultural classes.
I was impressed at the ways in which administrators and teachers were assisting the migrant student population through a special program, but wondered how they were addressing increased diversity on a day-to-day basis. Were African American students getting academic and social support? How did rural community members perceive changes in the community? How did teachers and administrators address the academic needs of all of their students? These questions, along with my past experiences with diversity, led me to pursue this study.

My role in this study was that of full participant. I was a member of the teaching staff at Lincoln High School from 2007 through 2009. As the school’s only music teacher, I instructed all of the band and choir classes. I purposefully selected students from diverse backgrounds to hold leadership positions and encouraged students from all backgrounds to participate in music classes. I also led a professional development session that presented strategies for teaching English language learners.

As a teacher, I observed student interactions; participated in school functions; and worked closely with teachers, administrators, and community members. I wanted to see all students succeed socially and academically and supported programs that helped them do so. These experiences inevitably influenced the lens through which I observed behaviors and interpreted data in the study.

My experience as a teacher at Lincoln High School might have influenced my observations and analysis because I had preconceived ideas about the ways in which teachers and administrators handled diversity issues at the school. Further, my analysis may have been less critical than it might otherwise have been because I knew that I
would continue to have professional relationships with many of the participants once the study was completed. I included several measures in the research design to control for possible bias. I will discuss these measures in detail later in the chapter in the section called *Study Validity*.

**Definitions of Terms**

This section defines two key terms that will be used throughout the study: rural and diversity.

**Rural.** The term rural can be defined both quantitatively and qualitatively. The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as “all territory, population, and housing units located outside of urbanized areas and urban clusters” (United States Census Bureau, 2002). Under this definition, communities that have fewer than 2,500 people and are located outside of urbanized areas are classified as rural.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), Lincoln High School’s locale is classified as a Town, Fringe. Lincoln is located within 20 miles of a large, Midwestern university that supports an urbanized area. Also, its population of approximately 12,000 is well over the maximum needed to be classified as rural. While Lincoln does not meet the census definition of rural, it has characteristics similar to those of traditionally defined rural communities (see e.g., the relevant discussions in Blakely, 1984, and Rios, 1988).

Several of Lincoln’s feeder schools are located in areas that fit with definitions of rural that are commonly used in quantitative studies. Two feeder schools are located in communities classified as Rural, Distant by the National Center for Education Statistics.
These communities are homogenous and predominately White. Each school serves between 100 and 200 students. The other two feeder schools are located in areas classified as “Town, Fringe.” One is a small school located just outside of town, which serves approximately 200 students and is predominately White. The other school is located in Lincoln and provides the highest percentage of students that attend Lincoln High School. It is also the largest and most diverse, with over 1,500 students, one-third of whom are classified as African American or Hispanic.

Based on the claims of Lincoln High School personnel and residents of the surrounding community, one would conclude that Lincoln is rural. For example, agriculture historically was central to the community and still is important to it. Farmland surrounds Lincoln, and although agriculture is not the town’s primary employer, both community members and seasonal migrants are involved in the industry. Commerce in the town caters to farming needs.

Lincoln also resembles other rural schools in many ways. Lincoln’s community is somewhat isolated. All of the school board members and the majority of administrators graduated from the school, as did many of the teachers. The district has a high teacher turnover rate and has a difficult time recruiting and retaining teachers from outside the community. Finally, Lincoln struggles with poverty. Sixty percent of the student population qualifies for the federal government’s free and reduced lunch program.

**Diversity.** Defining diversity for the purpose of this study is also somewhat idiosyncratic. Many definitions of diversity are broad, focusing on variability of a group of people based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, culture, and
religion. For the purpose of this study, however, a more narrow definition seemed to work better. As was the case with the rural character of the community, its diversity also depends on community members’ perceptions of what diversity means. In Lincoln, the salient categories of diversity are race, ethnicity, culture, and social class. Narrower and more locally salient definitions, however, have been used by some researchers. For example, Bustrin (2006) defined diversity exclusively in terms of “cultural, ethnic, racial, and multiracial diversity” (p. 5).

Lincoln High School and its surrounding community are diverse under a similar definition. The student body is culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse. According to the school’s state report card, Lincoln’s student body is 55% White, 29% African American, 8% Hispanic, 6% Multiracial, and 2% Asian. Lincoln’s community also meets this definition of diversity. Of Lincoln’s 12,000 residents, 74% are White, 19% African American, 2% Asian, and 6% are Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2000). In addition, according to a local newspaper, between 2,000 and 3,000 Hispanic migrants come to Lincoln from Texas and Mexico during the harvest months in the summer and early fall. Many migrant children start the school year at Lincoln High School and return to their home schools after the harvest ends, but a growing number has started to stay in the community for the entire school year.

The rural community schools that feed into Lincoln High School do not meet this definition of diversity. All three of the rural elementary schools that feed into Lincoln have student populations that are over 95% White. Even though the rural communities that surround Lincoln are not racially diverse, students from all schools, including the
three rural elementary schools, attend Lincoln High School for grades 9-12 and both contribute to and experience its diversity.

Methods

The following section addresses the research methods I used to conduct this study, including the selection of a research site and participants from that site, initial contact with participants, the process for setting up interviews, data collection, and data analysis.

Site selection and participant selection. Stake (2005) recommended that researchers select a site that provides them with an opportunity to learn the most about the phenomenon being studied. In addition, according to Stake, the researcher must have access to the site and its participants. One rationale for choosing a single case design is that one research site might have special characteristics that fit the research questions (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003).

I selected Lincoln High School as the site for my research based on its diverse student body, rural locale, recent demographic change, and accessibility. These characteristics allowed me the opportunity to study a rural school that had experienced demographic change over a relatively short period of time. Although census data suggested that rural schools in the United States were, in general, becoming increasingly diverse, Lincoln High School’s large percentage of minority student enrollment still seemed relatively unusual for a rural school. Further, Lincoln had several programs in place to address the needs of its diverse student population. The research questions for this study related to the ways in which school stakeholders understood the effect of
demographic changes on their school and how they perceived the school’s efforts to address diversity. I selected Lincoln as the research site for this study because I believed its unusual demographics and programming would contribute to an improved understanding of rural school and community responses to increased diversity in rural areas.

Another factor in selecting Lincoln High School as the site for my research was its accessibility. As a teacher in the district, Lincoln High School was more accessible to me than other locations. My role as full participant gave me access to school events and meetings that outside researchers might not have. In addition, my social and professional connections with teachers, administrators, and community members provided me with access to key informants who could recommend other individuals willing to serve as participants in the study.

Stake (1995) recommended that researchers select participants for case studies who will contribute to the deepest understanding of the research questions. Therefore, I identified certain stakeholder groups from which to select participants because I believed they would contribute to my understanding of how different constituencies in the Lincoln community perceived demographic changes and their effects on Lincoln High School. In total I selected 35 participants, 34 of whom ultimately participated in the study. Participants for the study included 11 Lincoln High School teachers, 4 non-teaching staff members, 4 administrators, 1 school board member, and 14 parents and community members.
I chose 35 as the sample size for this study because I believed interview transcripts from this number of participants would yield enough data to enable me to answer my research questions. Further, I believed conducting 35 interviews during the given amount of time was reasonable for one researcher for the purpose of a dissertation study. The following section presents the rationale I used for selecting individual participants.

Among the participants I selected were 11 teachers. This number represents 20% of the total teaching staff at Lincoln High School. The teachers whom I selected did not represent a true proportionality of teacher demographics because of the small size of the teaching staff. However, I tried to approximate proportionality by selecting teachers who were representative of the teaching staff as a whole. Participants varied by length of employment, gender, subject area, race, and ethnicity. The purpose of including teachers in the study who represented the entire teaching staff was to attempt to include the views of different factions without interviewing every teacher.

The teaching staff at Lincoln High School is approximately 65% female and 35% male, so I selected 7 women and 4 men to participate in the study. Further, because the average teaching experience in the district is 11 years, I selected 6 teachers who had been employed with the district for 8 or more years and 5 who had recently joined the staff. Because there were no male minority teachers at Lincoln, all of the male teachers whom I selected to participate in the study were White. However, I selected 2 African American, 1 Asian, and 4 White female teachers to participate in the study. Teachers’ subject areas varied, although I used purposive sampling to ensure that I had data from the 1 foreign
language teacher who worked with the summer migrant program and the 1 English teacher who taught the multicultural literature class.

I also selected staff members to participate in the study: 2 secretaries, the technology specialist and coach, and the athletic director. Staff members also varied in length of employment, gender, and race. Staff members were included as participants because they were able to provide certain insights about students and the community that teachers and administrators were not able to provide. Secretaries had daily contact with students and parents regarding attendance and discipline issues. The technology specialist and athletic director observed students outside the classroom during extracurricular activities. Reports from these participants contributed to my development of a more complete understanding of how the school functioned on a daily basis.

I selected 4 of the school’s 5 administrators as participants: the superintendent, the school’s principal, and 2 deans. All of the administrators whom I included were White men. Three administrators either had graduated from the school or had a spouse who had graduated from the school. The fourth was new to the district, having joined the administrative team in 2007. All four were actively involved in daily decision making about policy, discipline, professional development, hiring, and scheduling. The three administrators who had close ties to the community had observed demographic changes first hand, while the fourth administrator provided the “outsider” perspective of someone who was new to the school and community.

Finally, I selected 2 school board members and 14 community members to participate in the study. Although I originally selected 2 school board members, a White
female and an African American male, in the end only the White female agreed to participate in an interview. Also, because I was a teacher at Lincoln High School during the data-collection phase of the study, I selected 2 community members as key informants as a way to limit my initial contact with potential participants who might feel pressured to participate based on my position. One of the key informants was a White female who had lived in the community for approximately 20 years and was in close contact with many long-term members of the community. The other key informant was an African American woman who had connections with African American and Hispanic community members. The African American key informant also chose to participate in the study. These 2 key informants identified 13 other community members and made initial contact with them to see if they would be willing to participate in the study. I instructed the key informants to select a diverse group of parents and community members who varied based on length of time living in the community, race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Procedures

This section describes the procedures I used to carry out the study, including initial contact with participants, scheduling of interviews, data collection procedures, and methods of data analysis.

Interviews. I met with Lincoln High School’s superintendent in December, 2008 to explain the details of the study and to gain consent to use the school as my research site. Once the superintendent agreed, I met separately with the two key informants to identify prospective parents and community members to participate in the study. All
participants received a letter of introduction in December, 2008 describing the purpose of the study and the role of each participant (see Appendix B). The letter explained that participants would not receive any compensation for participating in the study and that they would be given pseudonyms to insure confidentiality in the report of study findings. A letter of consent was included with the letter of introduction: the letter of consent asked each participant to indicate if he or she agreed to participate in the study and to have the interview digitally recorded. I contacted each of the teachers, the school board members, staff members, and administrators 1 week after they received the letter to see if they were interested in participating in the study and to set up interviews. The key informants contacted and set up interviews with parents and community members.

Interviews began in January, 2009 and continued through October, 2009. I scheduled each participant for an hour-long interview. All interviews were audio recorded and stored as digital files on my computer. I transcribed all of the audio files of the interviews and then I destroyed them. Participants’ real names and positions were used during initial transcription only. I assigned pseudonyms to transcript data to ensure confidentiality in the final report.

Data collection. Patton (2002) identified three sources of qualitative data: interviews, observations, and documents (p. 4). While interviews were the primary method of data collection for this study, I used all three sources of data to some degree to inform my analysis and interpretation.

Interviews. Interviews are an essential data collection tool in many qualitative studies. Patton (2002) claimed that interviews provide researchers with information about
participants’ experiences, perceptions, and opinions. Interviews also give researchers access to multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Patton suggested that interview questions should be open-ended to prevent interviewer bias.

I interviewed a total of 34 teachers, administrators, staff, and community members over a 10-month period. Interviews were approximately 1 hour in length and took place at Lincoln High School for school personnel and at off-campus sites—including participants’ homes, places of work, and a meeting room at the public library—for community members. I began each interview with open-ended questions (see Appendix C), but allowed participants’ answers to guide subsequent questions.

**Participant observation.** Stake (1995) claimed that observations give researchers a “greater understanding of the case” because unlike interviews, observations remove all researcher control over participants’ actions (p. 60). Observations can take place at the research site or at outside events that relate to the study such as school activities, informal participant interactions, and teachers’ and parents’ meetings. According to Stake, observations should be recorded in detailed field notes so the researcher can return to them during the data-analysis phase of the study.

My role in this study was that of full participant because I was a member of the teaching staff at Lincoln High School during the period of time when I was conducting the study. As a full participant, I had access to the school events and meetings that an outside researcher might not have had. I was also required, as part of my teaching position, to be in attendance at many extracurricular events and parent meetings. My presence at these events gave me the opportunity to observe participants in a variety of
settings. I used participant observation in this study to confirm or disconfirm information that participants shared via interviews.

I used the following process to select events for observation. First, I identified events that participants had discussed during interviews and that had contributed to my understanding of diversity at the school or in the community. Then I attended each event and wrote field notes following each observation. My field notes included both descriptions of the activities and my own commentary and reactions. I typed and stored the field notes on my personal computer and compared them to relevant portions of the interview transcripts during the data analysis phase to determine whether what I had observed supported what participants had stated during their interviews.

**Documents.** I included the following types of documents in the set of data collected in this study: newspaper articles, e-mail messages from teachers and administrators, and academic reports.

From two local newspapers I collected 10 articles that described the school’s diversity initiatives, as well as 13 other articles that were related to demographic changes in the community. In addition, I included five e-mail messages that were related to diversity initiatives. I also included Lincoln’s state report cards for the period 1998-2010 as part of the data set. The state report cards provided information about the school’s demographic changes and academic performance during this time period—information that was not available from any other source. The state report cards also included information about academic achievement broken down by gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status. I compared data from these various documents with data from
interviews and observations to see whether or not the documentary data supported findings from the other sources. The following section describes how I analyzed the data gathered in the study.

Data Analysis

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data analysis allows researchers to draw valid conclusions from qualitative data (p. 1). These authors claimed that qualitative data analysis typically consists of “three concurrent flows of activity”: initial coding, identifying relationships among codes, and using these relationships to identify themes in the data (p. 10). The process I adopted for analyzing data made use of these three “flows of activity”. First, I developed inductive codes, then I combined those codes into broader categories (i.e., second level codes), and finally I used the categories to help define themes (i.e., explanatory propositions). I began inductive coding as soon as data collection was complete. I continued on to second and third level analyses at that point, first identifying categories and then deriving themes.

I used the software HyperRESEARCH 2.8 (ResearchWare, 2009) to conduct the qualitative data analysis for this study. HyperRESEARCH 2.8 allows researchers to code data, identify connections between codes (categories), identify themes, and build and test theories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The section below describes in greater detail the process I used for analyzing the data collected in this study.

Inductive codes. Coding helps a researcher identify initial concepts in the data that contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first step I took in the data analysis process was to identify
inductive (i.e., first-level) codes. Inductive coding allows the researcher to simplify data, thereby making further analysis more manageable. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that codes, or “labels for assigning units of meaning,” be used throughout data reduction to organize material for analysis (p. 56).

Miles and Huberman (1994) explained, moreover, that codes can be established either prior to data collection, based on the research questions and related literature, or after some of the data have been collected, based on concepts that become evident in those data. Although the first method is convenient and allows for easy organization of data, it can contribute to researcher bias. I used the second method instead, creating codes as I identified relevant concepts that appeared in the data.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommended that researchers code data either line-by-line or in bigger sections, by sentence or paragraph. These authors indicated that line-by-line coding allows researchers to generate categories more readily, but can be more time consuming than sentence or paragraph coding. I used line-by-line coding for this study. I copied initial interview transcriptions into HyperRESEARCH and began inductive coding as soon as interviews were complete. As I coded, I used the software to create a master code list. The software allowed me to organize the codes and generate information about how frequently they were used. I reviewed the list of codes periodically, checking to see if some codes were so similar in meaning that they could be combined. I also used this process to reduce data, eliminating codes that appeared infrequently in the data set. During the process of reducing data, I eliminated portions of the narrative that were irrelevant to the study. These portions of the narrative comprised only a small fraction of
the data set; and they included introductions, portions of participants’ descriptions about themselves, and off-task comments that were unrelated to the research questions.

**Categories.** The second level of coding, sometimes called “axial coding,” allows the researcher to see how inductive codes relate to one another and begin to identify patterns in the data. I developed categories to reflect such patterns, during this stage of the data-analysis process. Axial coding benefits from the creation of memos and visual diagrams that inform the researcher about how first-level, open codes are related. Memos are “the researcher’s records of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 110).

Memos contribute to early stages of theme identification, as the analysis starts to make sense of the ways in which codes are related to one another. In addition to memoing, various types of data display allow researchers to organize data through the use of matrices, graphs, or charts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Organizing information into graphs and charts produces a visual representation of how categories are related and helps researchers identify patterns in the data. I wrote memos, made charts, and developed a code map, which was a visual representation of the ways in which the inductive codes were related (see Appendix D). The relationships revealed in the memos, charts, and code map served as the foundation for theme identification, the final step in the coding process. Based on the relationships represented in the memos, charts, and code map, I identified three main categories: (a) socioeconomic status and economic change in the community; (b) race, ethnicity and demographic change in the community; and (c) the school and community’s response to diversity.
**Themes.** The final step in data analysis is theme identification. Themes are theoretical claims that represent the findings of a qualitative study. They describe the relationship between and among categories in the data. Theme development is “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). Researchers use theme identification to draw conclusions and build theories.

The code map revealed two distinct patterns—one relating to negative attitudes toward low-income and minority students and their families and another relating to change agents who were making an effort to help low-income and minority students. It also showed an interrelationship between attitudes in response to students’ and families’ social class and attitudes in response to students’ and families’ race or ethnicity. The patterns that the code map revealed prompted me to return to the interview data and make a list of all quotes related to these two categories as well as a separate list related to the school and community’s response to diversity. I used the salient ideas from quotes from these two categories to make a chart comparing the main ideas implicit in the three groupings of data. This process supported an interpretation in which three main themes explained the most significant dynamics that the data revealed: (1) Educators’ and community members exhibited social class biases, (2) educators’ and community members’ prejudices conflated race/ethnicity with social class, and (3) change agents who advocated for poor and minority students encountered apathy and resistance. These themes will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Once I identified these three themes, I refined them by returning to the data. Using this process, researchers validate their theoretical propositions by comparing them
to patterns in the original data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Researchers look to see if the data support each theme or if there are inconsistencies within the data that need to be considered. I returned to the quotes that corresponded to codes in each category. I read through quotes and made memos about how the quotes related to each theme. I used these memos to refine the themes, and then I identified salient quotes that supported each theme.

During this stage of data analysis, I also identified outliers in the data set. These outliers, all of which were quotes from interviews, related to the three themes, but did not fit with the general patterns that emerged. Instead they presented an opposing view from what was revealed in the majority of the data. For example, while most participants viewed demographics changes in the community from a negative perspective, quotes from one or two participants showed such changes in a more positive light. I included these outlier statements in my interpretation in an effort to demonstrate how minority perspectives contrasted with dominant points of view.

**Study Validity**

According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), the validity of qualitative research relates to its internal and external credibility. The following section presents a discussion of these two types of validity and describes the techniques that I used to increase the internal and external credibility in my study.

**Internal credibility.** Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) defined internal credibility in qualitative research as “the truth value, applicability, consistency, neutrality, dependability, and/or credibility of interpretations and conclusions within the underlying
setting or group” (p. 234). In other words, internal credibility is the relationship between what a study’s findings claim and the truth, or reality, of what is being studied. These authors identified the following techniques to increase internal credibility and reduce researcher bias: prolonged engagement, triangulation, leaving an audit trail, checking the meaning of outliers, and member checking. With the exception of member checking, I used each of these techniques to increase the internal credibility of my study.

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) described prolonged engagement as “conducting a study for a sufficient period of time to obtain an adequate representation of the voice under study” (p. 239). Prolonged engagement allows the researcher to “understand… the culture and build… trust with the study participants” (p. 239). My two years as a teacher at Lincoln High School gave me the opportunity to develop an understanding of the school’s culture and build trust with many of my participants. I believe that this trust contributed to participants’ ease during their interviews and willingness to speak openly and truthfully.

According to Maxwell (2005), triangulation involves the collection of “information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods… reducing the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method” (p. 112). I used multiple forms of qualitative data collection to assemble the most complete case study possible. In addition, I compared findings from different data sources to determine whether different sources supported similar or different conclusions. I compared three forms of qualitative data in this study: interviews, observations, and documents.
Interviews served as the primary method of data collection for this study. The questions used during interviews were open-ended, which according to Creswell (2008), reduces bias from the researcher. In addition, the interview schedule was carefully constructed so that it did not bias participants’ answers. I used the word “change” in questions 1-5 instead of “increased diversity” to allow participants to formulate their own understanding of change and its influence on the school and community. I included questions 6 and 7, which used the words “increased diversity” only if participants did not address the topic in their responses to the previous five questions.

Observations were a secondary method of data collection for this study. According to Creswell (2008), observations allow the researcher the opportunity to study actual participant behavior. I scheduled observations based on the events that were mentioned during interviews as a way to verify information provided in participants’ responses to interview questions. The field notes from these observations were helpful in controlling for bias because I was able to return to the notes during the analysis of interview data to either confirm or disconfirm the information reported by participants. In addition to observations, I used documents as concrete evidence to support or contradict themes that emerged from analysis of observation and interview data. As these details show, I used triangulation of data sources as a way to increase the internal credibility of the study.

I also constructed a thorough audit trail as another way to increase internal credibility. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) described leaving an audit trail as “maintaining extensive documentation of records and data stemming from the study” (p.
These authors listed raw data, field notes, memos, code maps, and instrument development information as important parts of the audit trail. The procedures through which data are collected and analyzed also form part of the audit trail. Indeed, this chapter of the dissertation, which presents a detailed discussion of the data I collected and analyzed and the methods I used to collect and analyze it, actually represents part of the audit trail for this study. The electronic versions of interview transcripts, field notes, documentary evidence, the code map, and my memos to myself represent the remainder of the audit trail.

The final technique I used to increase internal credibility was checking the meaning of outliers. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), outliers are valuable because they can provide the researcher with a way to “strengthen conclusions by testing the generality of findings” (p. 242). As I discussed in the data analysis section of this chapter, I identified outliers and included them in my findings to show the character of and point out the infrequency of exceptions to what the vast majority of participants said during their interviews.

While I did use many of the techniques Onwuegbuzie and Leech recommended as ways to increase internal credibility, I purposefully chose not to involve participants in member checking, that is, reviewing data with them to check for accuracy (Cho & Trent, 2006). Both my role as a teacher in the district during the study and the potentially inflammatory nature of the study’s findings influenced my decision not to share findings with participants prior to developing the final report.
**External credibility.** Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) defined external credibility as the “degree that the findings of a study can be generalized across different populations of persons, settings, contexts, and times” (p. 234). One common criticism of qualitative research is that a single case study cannot be generalized to a larger population (Cho & Trent, 2006; Flyvberg, 2006). Nevertheless, several researchers have argued that single case studies can, in some ways, generalize to other cases. According to Flyvberg (2006), for example, “One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods” (p. 228). In particular, case studies can inform the development of theories, and such theories can be confirmed through replications, field trials, and/or large-scale quantitative studies.

My purpose with this case study was to understand how one school district responded to increased diversity. Although the purpose was not to generalize to a larger population, my aim was to develop insights that might be useful to rural educators confronting challenges in their communities that were similar to those confronted by educators and community members in Lincoln. Although I used the techniques suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Leech to increase the internal and external credibility of my study, I also recognized possible threats to its credibility. The following section, which considers the study’s limitations, addresses these potential threats.

**Limitations**

According to Creswell (2008), “limitations are potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher” (p. 207). He suggested that by identifying
potential weaknesses, researchers can “help readers judge to what extent the findings can or cannot be generalized to other people and situations” (p. 207). I identified three potential limitations to the study: the single case design, my role as a full participant, and key informants’ selection bias. The following section provides a brief discussion of these limitations.

**Single case design.** The research design for this study was a single case. Yin (2003) claimed that single case design can keep the researcher from making generalizations or drawing causal conclusions because it involves observing a phenomenon in one location at one point in time. The findings from this study described one rural school’s response to demographic change over a 20-year period. The study’s single case design presented a potential limitation because the ways in which other rural schools and communities experience and respond to demographic change may be different from the ways in which this one school and community responded. Further, educators and community members in other rural areas might not hold the same beliefs as those held by the participants in this study.

The findings from this study are not intended to represent generalizations about how rural schools across the country are responding to demographic change. However, I believe an in-depth look at one community’s response to change contributed to a broader understanding of the ways in which increased diversity may affect rural schools and their surrounding communities. Further, findings from the study—particularly those related to change agents—provide rural school leaders in other districts with insights into possible
approaches for responding to similar challenges. These leaders can decide for themselves whether or not insights from this study are relevant to their circumstances.

**Researcher as full participant.** My role as a full participant in the district presented a second limitation to this study. As a member of the teaching staff at Lincoln High School during the course of the study, my role in the study was that of full participant in the community. Glesne (2006) defines a full participant as “a functioning member of the community undergoing investigation and an investigator” (p. 50). Yin (2003) suggested the major problem that full participants present in case study research is their inability to work as an external observer and thereby to see the research site from the perspective of an objective outsider. By nature, participant-observers are subject to bias because of their close relationship with the group they are observing. My role as a participant observer at Lincoln High School presented a potential limitation to this study because I worked closely with teachers, staff, and administrators at the school on a daily basis throughout the course of the study. I had personal friendships with some teachers and professional relationships with many of the teachers, staff, administrators, and community members who participated in the study. These relationships limited my ability to be as “objective” as an outsider might be.

According to Patton (2002), “the ideal in evaluation is to design and negotiate that degree of participation that will yield the most meaningful data about the program” (p. 267). I believe that the benefits of my access to key personnel and events in the school and community outweighed the risks of bias and allowed me to understand the situation in a way an outsider could not. Further, as a teacher in the district for 2 years, I was not
fully immersed in the community and was cognizant of the importance of remaining as objective as possible throughout the study.

**Key informants’ selection bias.** The third limitation to this study was that key informants’ exhibited bias in selecting potential participants for the study. The 2 key informants that I selected for this study were middle class and long-term members of the Lincoln community. One was an African American woman and the other a White woman. Although I instructed the key informants to select a diverse group of community members who varied based on length of time living in the community, race, gender, and socioeconomic status, the key informants actually identified potential participants with whom they were familiar and who had backgrounds similar to their own. These participants varied by gender, race, and length of time living in the community, but they were all middle class and either White or African American. Key informants did not suggest anyone from other social classes or any Hispanic participants.

This selection bias presented a limitation because findings from the study represent the views of middle class White and African-American community members, but not those of community members from other social classes or the Hispanic population. Therefore the study does not portray a complete picture of how all groups within the community understood the influences of demographic changes.

**Summary**

This chapter presented the methodology I used to conduct this study. It began with an explanation of the methodological assumptions on which the study was based, particularly the choice to use a single case design to answer the research questions
guiding the study. It then presented the ways in which my experiences shaped my understanding of diversity and my interest in demographic change at Lincoln High School. This discussion was followed by a definition two key terms used throughout the study—“rural” and “diversity.” Next, the chapter presented the methods I used to conduct the study, including the rationale for choosing Lincoln High School as the site for the study and selecting participants; a description of interviews, participant observations, and documents used during data collection; and a description of the processes of inductive coding, identifying relationships among codes, and theme building used during the three levels of data analysis. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the methods used to strengthen the study’s internal and external credibility and three potential limitations to the study: the single case design, my role as a full participant, and key informants’ bias in selecting potential participants for the study.
Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study of educators’ and community members’ responses to increasing diversity at Lincoln High School. A description of the town of Lincoln, its surrounding communities, and its high school contextualizes the subsequent presentation of evidence supporting three central findings that emerged from a systematic analysis of data collected during interviews with school personnel and community members. The chapter concludes with an interpretative analysis that integrates study findings to explain the dynamics characterizing racial, ethnic, and social-class relations at the high school.

Lincoln: A Changing Community

Lincoln is a small, rural Midwestern town of approximately 12,500 residents. Despite its rural locale, Lincoln is racially, ethnically, and economically diverse. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), 74% of Lincoln’s residents are White, 19% are African American, and 6% are Hispanic. While many of Lincoln’s residents are middle class, 23% of families with children in Lincoln are classified as living below the poverty line. Among the middle class families, moreover, quite a few have relatively low incomes as indicated by the fact that they qualify for free and reduced-price meals. The community’s primary industries are manufacturing and agriculture.

Originally the town’s major focus was on serving the farms surrounding it, but in the 1910s it was chosen as the site for a military base. Lincoln’s population was just over 2,000 when the base opened (U.S. Census Bureau, 1920). According to Lincoln’s historical society, several major construction projects expanded the military base during
the late 1930s. Economic growth resulted in a doubling of Lincoln’s population during the Great Depression, from approximately 3,000 residents in 1930 to over 6,000 in 1940 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1930, 1940). Lincoln’s population growth created a demand for new businesses, and the increased demand promoted expansion of the downtown area. The Korean War in the 1950s doubled the number of people training on base, growing Lincoln’s population to over 19,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 1960). The base and town continued to flourish throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The military base was recommended for closure during a reduction in defense spending in the late 1980s and was closed soon thereafter.

Lincoln experienced an immediate, sharp population decline when the military base closed. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (1990, 2000), Lincoln’s population dropped from approximately 17,000 residents in 1990 to 13,000 in 2000. At the same time, Lincoln experienced a change in the composition of its population. The number of White residents, who made up the majority of the population loss, dropped from approximately 14,000 in 1990 to under 10,000 in 2000. During that same period, the number of Asian and Hispanic residents decreased, while the number of African American residents increased by 10% (from 2,000 in 1990 to 2,200 in 2000).

Prior to the closure of the military base, Lincoln had been a predominately White, middle-class community, although some racial and ethnic diversity existed as a result of the fact that military personnel at the base came from all parts of the country and from a variety of backgrounds. With the base closure, however, Lincoln lost a large portion of its middle-class residents, many of whom had worked at the military base, and the
community lost approximately 5,000 military and 1,500 civilian jobs. The closure of the base left hundreds of vacant housing units both on and off base, as well as large, abandoned industrial areas on base.

Lincoln’s local government officials recruited industries—including a meat processing and a manufacturing plant—to occupy some of the base property. In addition to attracting new businesses, local government and business people reopened vacant military housing as low-income rental property. To fill the housing, the community advertised its availability in a nearby metropolitan area that had recently closed a number of housing projects. The closure of the military base, and the subsequent increase in industrial jobs and low-income housing, had a significant impact on Lincoln’s demographics.

Lincoln High School is the town’s only high school, serving the town of Lincoln as well as its surrounding rural villages. According to the school’s State Report Card (2010), approximately 775 students are currently enrolled at Lincoln High School. The student body is 55% White, 29% African American, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 6% Multiracial. Sixty percent of the school’s students are classified as low-income on the basis of their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches. Lincoln High School employs 60 teachers, 56 of whom are White. The teaching staff at Lincoln High School is 38% male and 62% female, and has an average of 10 years of teaching experience. The district-wide instructional expenditure per student is about $6,500, and the operating expenditure per student is about $10,500, which is slightly below the state average (State Report Card, 2010).
As suggested by the changes in the town’s demographics, the closure of the military base and the increased availability of low-income housing in the Lincoln community had an impact on student demographics at Lincoln High School. Figure 1 illustrates the demographic changes in the student body at Lincoln High School from 1988 to 2009, revealing a decline in total enrollment, a decline in the number of White students, an increase in the number of low-income students, and an increase in the number of African American and Hispanic students.

![Lincoln High School Student Demographics](image)

Figure 1. Lincoln High School Student Demographics: 1988, 1998, 2010

As these statistics show, the demographics of the Lincoln community have changed substantially since the closure of the military base. The predominately White and middle class community of the past is now racially, ethnically, and economically
diverse as a result of additional industrial jobs and the increased availability of low-income housing. As Figure 1 shows, moreover, changes in students’ socioeconomic status are far greater than changes in their racial composition. The percentage of low-income students at the school grew from 10% in 1988 to 60% in 2010, compared to smaller increases in the percentage of Hispanic students—2% in 1998 to 8% in 2010—and African American students—14% in 1988 to 30% in 2010. These changes in the demographics of the study body at Lincoln High School reflect demographic changes in the community. The resulting increase in diversity among residents and students makes Lincoln a suitable site for the study of how school personnel and community members responded to increased diversity among the local population.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how increased diversity influenced the Lincoln community and how stakeholders responded to the community’s changing demographics. Data were collected via interviews with teachers, school administrators, and other community members. Interview questions focused on how the respondents perceived the influence of demographic changes on the school and community and how these stakeholders viewed the school’s efforts to address increased diversity. Three central findings emerged from systematic analysis of the interview data, as discussed below.

**Educators and community members exhibited class biases.** The most significant theme that became evident through data analysis was that educators and community member exhibited class biases. They perceived distinct academic and social
differences between children from middle-class homes and children from low-income homes. All 34 respondents discussed social class during the interviews, specifically in regard to the increased number of low-income residents in Lincoln and their perceived negative impact on the school and community. The vast majority of respondents expressed strong negative views toward the poor and attributed a perceived decline in the community and school to the influx of low-income residents. Respondents clearly valued the middle-class military and farming cultures that once characterized the community, and they condemned the “culture of poverty” they associated with the poor, making strong statements about what poor people do and believe. Teachers and administrators at Lincoln High School expressed similar views of the poor, which seemed to be reinforced through a series of “poverty training” professional development workshops held at the school. Evidence of social class bias in the Lincoln community and at Lincoln High School was evident in three ways, as discussed below.

Many respondents associated discipline and hard work with military and farming culture. Lincoln’s long-term residents and older school personnel associated positive cultural values—namely discipline, accountability, work ethic, and respectfulness—with the middle-class military and farming subcultures that once composed the majority of the community. One administrator described Lincoln High School’s socioeconomic climate during that time period:

There were kids whose parents were in the military that had various ethnic backgrounds from the White folks who lived here, but the town was basically White, mostly middle class. We had some low-income folks, but
a very low percentage. And the high school, of course, had the rural kids, who are by and large pretty well off in this area. Most farms are pretty successful around here.

Several respondents described middle-class farming and military students as disciplined, hard working, and respectful. One staff member compared discipline issues among the current student population with discipline issues among the students from farming families. “They [farm kids] were more respectful, a lot more respectful. They were hard-working kids. They had to help with their family, mostly on the farm.”

These respondents also placed value on similar attributes associated with military life, including discipline and accountability. School personnel recalled military parents as being actively involved in their children’s education and personally and professionally responsible for their children’s behavior. One teacher described the situation this way:

If they were in the military, and they had bad grades or got in trouble in school, they heard about it from their parents. The parents were unbelievably supportive of the high school, and sometimes their chance for promotion was dependent upon how their child or family acted. If their child acted up and their superior heard about it, they might get called in on it. That type of person was very well disciplined.

A community member concurred:

No discipline problems ever. The base kids were all very well behaved because, if they weren’t, their fathers got in trouble. If they got in trouble
at school, their fathers were called, who were usually in the military, and those kids really had to toe the line.

In general, respondents attributed Lincoln’s disciplined, hard-working student population “pre-base closure” to the middle-class values of those associated with the military and farming communities. While the majority of respondents associated positive values with middle-class farming and military community members, they held an opposite view of Lincoln’s poorer residents and blamed a decline in the school and community on the recent influx of low-income residents. As one teacher commented,

This is going to sound bad, but maybe there used to be a different type of people here who were more of a positive influence on the community. So, once the base shut down, and that group of people left, the people who were left here were not up to that same level of those that were in the military and maybe didn’t have the same types of values that they had.

Clearly, many respondents had a high regard for military and farming cultures and the values they associated with those cultures.

Many respondents associated negative values with a “culture of poverty.” Many respondents described a “culture of poverty” as being prevalent amongst Lincoln’s low-income residents. These respondents viewed the poor as having a different culture and different beliefs than their own, and they expressed strong negative opinions about what poor people do and believe. Respondents blamed decreased property values and tax revenue on low-income residents, attributing the decline to low-income residents who, as
renters, did not take care of their property or pay property tax. As one community member described,

> We have a lot of Section 8\(^2\) in Lincoln, which is not bad, but if you have a place that you are living in and all you have to pay is $16 a month, well, people just don’t take care of what doesn’t belong to them.

Many of Lincoln’s long-term community members expressed strong negative beliefs about the poor, claiming they lacked a strong work ethic, were involved in crime and drugs, and were focused on immediate survival. One community member posited,

> Low-income families move to town, they bring the crime rate up, and business owners don’t want to have their businesses in a crime-infested area, so they will move out or they just can’t find enough quality workers to work there to make any money, so they can’t keep their business open, and so they close.

The majority of administrators, teachers, and staff at Lincoln High School seemed to share similar beliefs about the “culture of poverty” among their low-income students. According to one administrator, “We’ve had to work with our staff on how to deal with kids who come from a culture of poverty, or dealing with [the fact that] people have different beliefs and how you acknowledge that, and that’s been a challenge.” School personnel described low-income parents as not being involved in their children’s education, not valuing education, and being undereducated or uneducated themselves.

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\(^2\) The Section 8 “housing choice voucher program is the government's major program for assisting very-low-income families to afford decent, safe, and sanitary housing in the private market.” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2011, para. 1).
Several teachers and administrators specifically stated that low-income families did not place the same value on education as their middle-class counterparts. According to a teacher at the school, for example,

A number of my students who are White and who are richer, their parents are more involved and seem to care more about their education. Especially with my Hispanic students, when I call home, they don’t care. They just think that their kid is going to work in the fields, or in the factory, or move back to Texas, and it’s just not a priority for them at all.

Teachers and administrators speculated that the influx of low-income students was responsible for declining academics and increased discipline problems at Lincoln High School. One administrator claimed, “Statistically, it [the demographic change] has reduced the overall performance level of the school. Again, I think it’s an income level, that piece of the demographics.”

In response to concerns over a rapidly increasing low-income student population, declining student academic performance, and increasing student discipline problems, Lincoln High School implemented several professional development sessions for teachers and staff that focused on working with students from poverty.

*Professional development on poverty may have reinforced a deficit-model view of students in poverty.* Lincoln High School teachers participated in several “poverty training” professional development workshops over a 2-year period. These workshops were led by the school’s superintendent and guest lecturers from a nearby university. According to administrators at the school, the purpose of these workshops was to provide
teachers with a framework for understanding their poorer students. As one administrator elaborated, “We are trying to get the teachers to understand where the kids are coming from and how their lifestyles are so much different from ours—just giving them background information.” A teacher summarized that the workshop taught the staff “how to deal with a diverse class, how to deal with the rich versus the poor.” Teachers’ and administrators’ comments indicated that the training emphasized differences between the middle class and the poor, and that such training may have reinforced or contributed to their negative views of the poor.

While a few teachers reported they were frustrated that the workshops did not provide them with specific tools to meet their students’ academic needs, the majority stated that the workshop had been successful and recalled the information they had learned from the sessions about working with students from poverty. As one teacher remembered,

I think a lot of times when you have children who come from poverty and still live in poverty, education is not number one on their priority list. Survival is number one on their priority list.

Another teacher noted,

We have to be aware that if we are from a middle-income background, the poor might interpret something differently or their behavior might be different. Students who are in a poor house might talk a lot louder for attention than someone who is in the middle income or the high income. So, when they are in the classroom and they are talking loud, it’s not that
they are talking loud because they want to be disruptive, it’s just because that’s their way and where they come from.

According to administrators, the purpose of the professional development workshop was to provide teachers with a framework for understanding students from poverty. While the majority of teachers reported an increased understanding of low-income students as a result of the training sessions, their responses indicated that the professional development emphasized differences between social classes, contributed to social class bias, and presented a deficit-model view of students experiencing poverty.

The school and community’s culturally embedded social class bias was the dominant theme that emerged during the analysis of interview data. A conflation of race and social class, as described below, constitutes the second finding that emerged during the analysis.

**Educators’ and community members’ prejudices conflated race and ethnicity with social class.** Data analysis yielded three indicators that educators’ and community members’ prejudices conflated race and ethnicity with social class. First, all interview respondents, regardless of their own racial background, recognized an increase in poor African American and Hispanic newcomers to the community, and many described the same negative beliefs about African American and Hispanic residents that they expressed about the poor. Second, school administrators, teachers, and staff identified the school’s poor African American and Hispanic students as the lowest academic achievers and suggested that African American and Hispanic parents were not involved in their children’s education and did not place value on education. Third, several teacher
respondents mentioned the lack of African American and Hispanic students in upper-level courses, co-curricular activities, and extracurricular activities requiring a financial commitment from students.

**Respondents perceived a parallel relationship between social class and race and ethnicity in Lincoln.** The majority of those interviewed for the study recognized a strong relationship between social class and race and ethnicity in Lincoln: They identified the town’s African American and Hispanic residents as its poorest and attributed Lincoln’s increased African American and Hispanic population to the availability of low-income housing and jobs in the meat-processing and agricultural industries.

One teacher asserted the following:

The rental property values have drawn in people who normally wouldn’t be here—for example, African Americans from the city, Hispanics, all the different groups—traditionally lower socioeconomic groups looking for an affordable town and Lincoln is an affordable town.

According to one community member,

There’s been growing numbers of people of other ethnic backgrounds, other cultural approaches. There has been quite an influx of African American people from the city. They’ve moved down to Lincoln, which became a community where there was lots of housing available about 10 or 12 years ago, and much of it was housing that was readily affordable for someone, kind of from a dubious economic standard or level, and so people moved in. They moved in to the rental properties.
While a few respondents recognized the increased low-income African American and Hispanic population as positively contributing to the diversity of the town, the majority saw this increased diversity as negative, specifically in regard to decreased property values and a declining tax base. One community member commented,

Especially in a Midwest town, I think there is always that perceived notion that, if African American or Latino people move in, property values are going to go down. That’s just a perceived thing, and that’s just because we have an older town that maybe some of these generations of people living in the community, that was the norm for them.

Overall, respondents, especially community members, reported that the majority of African American and Hispanic newcomers to the community were either unemployed or worked in factory or agricultural jobs, which required less education than professional jobs. One community member posited,

It might be because there seem to be more blue-collar workers here. I notice that the African American families, the jobs that they have, they don’t seem to be as well educated and maybe they don’t feel like they can communicate with the teachers as well.

While all respondents identified African American and Hispanic residents as Lincoln’s poorest and noted the increased poor African American and Hispanic population in the community, a few respondents also mentioned other middle- and upper-class minority groups as decreasing in number. These respondents recognized a decline in middle-class East Indian and Asian residents, as well as a decline in the small group of
remaining middle-class African American retirees from the military base. This group of respondents described a decline in the number of minority residents who valued education and worked as professionals in the community. A teacher noted,

We used to have a huge Indian population here. We had Patels everywhere you looked. I don’t know if they’ve all grown up and moved out, but the Indian population has declined significantly. A lot of the Patels were the ones who went on to become doctors. They challenged each other academically—the majority of them, not all of them.

A community member attributed the decline in the number of Asian community members to the closure of a local automotive plant:

The plant was an Asian company that was producing car parts, and they had a big plant right outside of town. It closed last year. They brought in some Asian workers as part of their company, as well as management that they brought over from Asia. And, we had a lot of Asians that would work in that market too. But, once the plants closed, they weren’t tied to anything around here, so they just left.

The majority of administrators, teachers, and staff also expressed negative views of poor African American and Hispanic families, especially in regard to valuing education and parent involvement in school. Such views influenced academics at Lincoln High School, as discussed below.

**Educators’ and community members’ prejudices had an impact on academics at Lincoln High School.** Almost all teacher and administrator respondents at Lincoln High
School attributed a general decline in student academic performance at Lincoln High School to the increased low-income, minority student population at the school. A few respondents differentiated social class from race and ethnicity as the underlying negative influence on academic achievement. For example, one administrator suggested,

Statistically, it [demographic change] has reduced the overall performance level of the school. Again, I think it’s an income level, that piece of the demographics. I don’t think it’s a racial piece, although there is a large correlation in this town between race and poverty.

The vast majority of teachers and administrators, however, claimed that minority students were the lowest academic performers in the school. These educators expressed blatantly racist views about minority students’ cultural values regarding academic achievement. The following quote is from a teacher:

It just saddens me that our students, especially those from different ethnicities other than White, are still our lowest academically performing students, and I don’t know what can be done about that. I see it every day when I grade papers. I think, oh my goodness, my African American students are the worst ones.

An administrator elaborated as follows:

With our growing number of African American and Hispanic students in the building, education doesn’t seem to be important. It’s very few that show that it’s important to them and their actions speak louder than words, and a lot of them don’t seem to care.
Lincoln High School’s 2009 State School Report Card illustrates the discrepancy between the academic performance of White students and their minority counterparts. Just 23% of White students at Lincoln High School scored at level one (the lowest level) on the state reading test, compared to 56% of African American students and 50% of Hispanic students. The differences were even more striking on the mathematics test: 9% of White students, 46% of African American students, and 36% of Hispanic students scored at level one. Conversely, less than 1% of African American and Hispanic students scored at level four (the highest level) on the mathematics test, compared to 10% of White students.

Several teachers, in addition to emphasizing African American and Hispanic students’ low academic achievement, also noted that these students were underrepresented in honors and college preparatory courses at the school. As one teacher said,

I know that Lincoln’s population contains a higher percentage of minority students than I have [in my classes], and by my class roster you would think that Lincoln is not nearly as diverse as it is, because I have a majority of White students in my class and few minorities.

Another teacher agreed:

In many of the classes, especially my senior-level classes, there are only one or two African American students. Maybe because there are no others? I don’t know. But, if you go around to all the honors classes at our school, how many diverse students do you see in there?
When I asked these respondents why they thought minority students performed at lower levels than their White peers, the majority blamed a lack of emphasis on education in African American and Hispanic culture. As one community member commented,

I don’t think that education is a priority in that particular culture [Hispanic workers]. Maybe it’s because what we’ve seen is the migrant population, and their mobility rate is just high; it’s a very transient population. School attendance is really hit and miss. When kids become junior high age, they basically go to work. So, their formal education, if they are attending, just didn’t go much farther. So, for the particular ones that we have coming from Texas and working for the seed companies, I don’t think that education is that high of a priority.

A teacher concurred:

I think, again, it’s because different cultures value different things, and I think the African American culture really values its sports. They are good at it. I guess that’s racist. They value being athletic more than they value their academics. I think with White people, maybe their parents instill this in them. They understand they need to do well in school so that they can get into a good college, whereas the African American culture thinks they can get a good scholarship from sports.

While some respondents blamed poor academic performance on cultural differences, others suggested that minority students, especially those coming from other
geographic areas, were not as well prepared educationally as their peers. A community member noted,

Unfortunately, I think increased diversity has hurt academics in our area, but I don’t see it as the normal stereotype like we have Mexicans coming in and they aren’t going to be smart. I see it as, especially with the Latino population, we have migrant workers coming in, and they are bringing their children who don’t necessarily speak English, and they don’t have the same education criteria wherever they lived before, so coming here, it might be a little harder for them to catch up or maybe just learn the way we are learning here.

While many respondents expressed negative views about low-income African American and Hispanic cultural values, especially in regard to education, a few respondents mentioned positive attributes of the Hispanic population, including an emphasis on family and community involvement. According to one administrator,

We’re finding it very strong in the Latino families who are destitute largely, and have pretty significant size families, and for whom family is a very important thing. It’s an important value that they have culturally. Thank goodness, that’s a good thing.

As these data show, teachers, administrators, and community members expressed strong views about the lack of cultural emphasis on academic achievement from African American and Hispanic families, the lack of minority student representation in upper-level classes, and the differences in academic achievement between minority students and
their White counterparts. The following discussion addresses the impact of educators’ and community members’ prejudices on extracurricular activities at the school.

*Educators’ and community members’ prejudices had an impact on co-curricular and extracurricular activities at the school.* Almost all teachers and administrators interviewed for this study reported race, ethnicity, and social class as having an impact on participation in extracurricular activities at Lincoln High School. While some respondents recognized certain sports for their diversity and inclusiveness and noted the value of diversity in extracurricular activities, others pointed out the lack of minority student participation in co-curricular activities and in those sports and activities requiring more of a financial contribution from students and their families.

Several respondents recognized the diversity on Lincoln High School’s athletic teams and the important role sports play in providing an opportunity for students to interact with other students whose backgrounds differ from their own. A teacher reported the following:

> We have a good mix of ethnicities on our sports teams. It’s not predominately White, or African American, or Hispanic. It’s a pretty good mix here, which I think is great.

Another teacher elaborated:

> I’m always blown away by that [diversity], especially given the other demographics in our school. It’s amazing that it’s not more of an issue. I think extracurricular activities give students a tremendous opportunity for intermingling to happen. It gives the students a world experience.
A few respondents also recognized the value of diverse student leadership in extracurricular activities. As a school staff member noted,

You have [minority] kids in band and in those positions leading the way, or in sports, you’ve got different captains who are guys from different backgrounds. It’s just nice to see variety. Everyone feeds off of that.

There’s no expectations, no stereotypes, because you just see everyone, it’s a nice rainbow. I think that helps the kids as well as academics go.

Yet, while those few respondents praised some of Lincoln’s extracurricular activities for their diversity and expressed the value of diversity, the majority recognized a lack of student diversity in many sports, especially more expensive ones. As one teacher reported,

There are certain ones [sports] that are more diverse than others. Football and basketball are diverse. Golf is not diverse at all. Again, those are sports that the lower socioeconomic kids can’t afford to participate in. It takes money to play golf. It takes money to play tennis. To a certain extent, baseball and softball, you have to get the cleats, and the gloves, bags, and bats and all of that and to go out and play a game you need a whole bunch of people whereas with basketball you just need a few people and a ball. You don’t need a whole lot of people to play basketball.

Football, I guess they get out there and throw it around. Football and basketball are the most diverse.
Photographs of sports teams on the school’s website support this teacher’s perspective. While pictures of varsity football and basketball teams show that African American students comprise over half of the membership, pictures of golf, cross country, baseball, softball, and cheerleading teams illustrate extremely limited diversity. Across all of the team photographs, only two Hispanic students are pictured—both in the football team’s picture. Team photographs also revealed that teams with greater student diversity were led or assisted by African American coaches, while teams with less student diversity were led by White coaches.

Several respondents also pointed out the lack of minority participants in co-curricular activities, such as National Honor Society and Student Council. As one teacher reported,

As for the academic extracurricular activities, like National Honor Society or Student Council, it’s not as diverse as I would like it to be. We don’t have very many minorities in Student Council. It’s predominately White. National Honor Society is predominately White—[I’m] not saying that there aren’t minorities in those groups, but they are predominately White.

A coach of an academic team added,

I can’t think of a minority that I’ve had on my team. Actually, one or two in the 7 years that I’ve been coaching it, so that’s a pretty powerful statement right there.

When respondents were asked to explain the lack of minority student participation in co-curricular activities and some sports, several suggested that
minority students simply did not have the money to participate in sports and activities. As one coach elaborated,

The same is true for my team. When it’s time to go to camp, the African American girls can’t afford it. And, if you look at the cheerleaders here, they are usually all White, and they can afford to go to camp. The African American girls have the most problem getting money and the White girls do not.

A few other respondents said that minority students’ were more likely than majority students to be academically ineligible to play sports due to poor grades. As a teacher noted, “Many of the students from diverse backgrounds are not keeping their grades up, and they are probably not going to do sports.”

One teacher blamed the combination of cultural values and socioeconomic status for the lack of diversity in many extracurricular activities:

There are very few African Americans in band, but there is a high percentage in football. Why that occurs? A variety of reasons, probably. There are some that tend to be very diverse and some that tend not to be. Athletics is still something of value. Again, it goes back to socioeconomics. Band is expensive, football is not as expensive. Music is not something of value in certain ethnic groups. Being involved in a structured band. Then, you have something like National Honor Society. That educational standpoint. Not necessarily ethnicity, but low
socioeconomic is underrepresented. And then there is a correlation between that and ethnicity.

Respondents offered several explanations for the lack of diversity in many of the co-curricular and extracurricular activities at Lincoln High School: financial cost, academic ineligibility, differing cultural values, and lack of interest. While these explanations may have held true in some cases, it is also true that educators’ comments revealed deeply imbedded racial and cultural biases about poor and minority students. These biases may also have influenced student participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities at Lincoln High School, but the possibility was not mentioned by those interviewed in the study.

While many respondents expressed negative views about poor African American and Hispanic community members, a small group, both in the school and in the community, articulated the value of diversity and worked to provide opportunities for minority groups and to create unity among the community’s diverse groups. However, their efforts were met with apathy and resistance from many members of the school and community. This finding is discussed below.

**Change agents who advocated for poor and minority students often encountered apathy and resistance.** A small cadre of change agents advocated for poor and minority students, but many members of the school and community responded with apathy and resistance. Notable were the acts of a few strong leaders in the school and community who initiated change to provide support to racial minority and low-income students and residents.
Change agents in the school frequently encountered apathy and resistance. A few key teachers and administrators were identified during interviews as leading the change effort to address diversity issues at Lincoln High School: the superintendent, an assistant principal, one teacher who acted on her own, and a small group of other teachers involved in organizing and implementing the student mentoring program.

Almost all respondents pointed to a veteran African American teacher as the lead advocate for addressing diversity issues (primarily African American issues and culture) at Lincoln High School. This teacher had taught at Lincoln High School for 26 years and was one of the few minority teachers on staff. She organized an annual program to celebrate African American History Month, taught a multicultural literature course, and established the dance team and gospel choir.

While many respondents recognized the importance of this teacher’s efforts, others harshly criticized her for focusing only on African American culture. For example, one teacher made the following observation:

I see every February we have the African American History Month program, which is kind of disheartening because I don’t ever see anybody else go above and beyond for Hispanic kids or Asian kids or even White kids. I think sometimes we spend so much time learning about minorities, but sometimes I feel like a minority, to be honest with you. I’m in here with my kids so much that I don’t pay a lot of attention, but the only thing I really see pushed is for the African American groups, and I don’t see a lot for anyone else, which is kind of upsetting.
Meanwhile, the veteran teacher who had worked tirelessly toward change described her own frustration at the lack of involvement by the majority of the teachers and students in the change effort: “Every year I think it’s my last year doing it because no one cares about it. Even African American students don’t come, except for the ones that are in the program.” Yet, despite criticism and lack of involvement from students and other teachers, this teacher continued to create activities that increased cultural awareness at the school, and she pushed students to think critically about racial issues and stereotypes.

Many respondents also recognized Lincoln High School’s superintendent for establishing diversity initiatives at the school and involving community members in the change process during his 7-year tenure. Respondents credited the superintendent with establishing the migrant education program, treating staff and students fairly regardless of race or ethnicity, pushing for multicultural literature and history courses, addressing racial and ethnic stereotypes and biases among students, and hiring more diverse teachers and coaches. One teacher offered the following description:

Well, especially the current superintendent seems to be more concerned about that than those we have had in the past, especially with hiring some diverse faculty. He’s really concerned about that. And I’ve seen that we have more of that since I’ve been here. And we have more teachers from different backgrounds: Jewish teachers, Asian teachers. When I first came, I don’t think there were any Asian teachers.
Respondents also credited the superintendent with reaching out to minority community leaders and welcoming them into the school to participate in a group of concerned community members. According to a community member,

I think the administration, specifically the superintendent, has done a good job of reaching out and bringing those groups into the school. Trying to reach out and make us as transparent as possible to those groups so that they aren’t afraid to come into the school, that they feel comfortable. I think that’s the major change that we’ve made in terms of diversity.

In addition, several respondents recognized the efforts of an assistant principal for his involvement in the summer migrant program and his fair treatment of all students, regardless of their background. A staff member described an incident involving two students where he overheard the assistant principal deal with a racially charged situation after President Obama’s election:

Just after the recent election, I heard two or three kids in his office, White guys, talking about the election, that must of said something that he didn’t really agree with, because he said, “It’s attitudes like that that we need to get rid of. For me, it’s long overdue, and it’s about time that something like this happened.” I sent him an e-mail saying, “I don’t know what was said, but based on what I heard from you, I appreciate you expressing your opinion with those young men.” He e-mailed me back and said that it was no problem, that he was sincere about it, and that those were his honest
feelings. I think administrators as a whole are on the right track as well as the entire staff here at the high school.

*The student mentoring program seemed to have greater support and more success than other school efforts to address the needs of poor and minority students.*

Almost all school personnel recognized the teachers and administrators involved in starting a student mentoring program at Lincoln High School as having a positive impact on the academic and social success of minority students. The program was formed in response to the high rate of academic failure among freshmen; more than one fourth of freshmen students failed at least one class at Lincoln High School in 2007. Initiated in fall 2008, it was conceived as a student-led effort to provide social and academic assistance and to help ease the transition to high school for freshmen students. The program involved 20 juniors and seniors, who mentored 80 freshmen, as well as several teachers who volunteered their planning time during homeroom several times per week to provide academic enrichment and social activities for freshmen.

Teacher advisors and one administrator selected students to participate in the mentoring program at random from all freshmen students, but mentors had to apply and interview with teacher advisors in order to be eligible to participate. Mentors were selected based on leadership qualities, and to represent the diversity of the student population. More than 30% of mentors were classified as racial or ethnic minorities. Each mentor was assigned to four or five freshman students during their homeroom time. Students participated in team-building activities, academic enrichment, and informal
social time to talk with one another about making good choices both in and outside of school.

Several teachers mentioned that they were impressed by the large percentage of minority students who served as mentors and noted the importance of having student leaders in the school from diverse backgrounds. One teacher commented,

It seemed like a diverse group of students in there, lots of different races and backgrounds and different academic abilities. They have a diverse group of students as mentors as well. In the old days, they probably would have put all White students, “A” students, as mentors.

A staff member concurred:

I know they have a nice variety of ethnic groups leading the way as mentors. I think that’s nice to see. The African American kids in a group don’t look up and see the pretty blonde White girl with blue eyes leading the way for us, because I don’t care what people think, those kind of things are real. When they see people in leadership positions are all the same color, built out of the same mold, after awhile, they start to buy into that.

According to an administrator’s report given at a faculty meeting during the second semester of the program, the mentoring program for freshmen seemed to have a positive impact on participants’ grades, behavior, and attendance. Students who received services from the mentoring program had fewer “F’s”, days of suspension, and unexcused absences than their peers who did not participate in the program.
The mentoring program was one example of academic and social support that a small group of educators at Lincoln High School initiated to encourage and include students from diverse backgrounds. An administrator described the importance of the mentoring program:

I would say that our mentoring program is necessary because we have kids who are coming in that aren’t tuned in to a culture of a school where things are formal; they aren’t tuned in to a future of college or what it takes to get there, because they come from families where none of them have been to college. Many of these kids see college as a place where you go to play basketball or football, not necessarily a place where you go to get an education to eventually get a job. So, I think trying to help kids understand what high school is and how you go about it successfully is an important program that we are developing.

As shown by the examples discussed above, a small group of teachers and administrators at Lincoln High School have demonstrated a commitment to meeting the needs of their increasingly diverse student body. Met by apathy and resistance from some faculty members at the school, this group of educators worked to embrace diversity and found ways to give students extra support through special programs and services. The next section of this chapter presents the various ways community members participated in the change effort in both the school and the community.

*Change agents in the community got mixed reactions and mixed results.* Most Lincoln High School teachers and staff expressed the opinion that community members
were not involved in the change process in the school and community. However, during interviews with administrators and community members, respondents recognized several community members for leading change efforts in Lincoln. Respondents specifically mentioned three groups that had been involved in increasing diversity awareness and providing social services for community members in need: Unify Lincoln, Los Creceros, and Concerned Citizens of Lincoln.

*Unify Lincoln.* Four respondents mentioned Unify Lincoln as an organization that had actively addressed diversity issues in the Lincoln community for several years. According to one of its members, Unify Lincoln was a community grassroots organization composed of 5-10 individuals who worked to bring together diverse groups in the community. The organization’s main focus was on planning an annual cultural food and arts festival that, according to a group member, “promoted everyone in the community getting together regardless of race, economic background, and coming together as a community as a whole and enjoying each other’s company and enjoying the differences that we all have.” Unify Lincoln also established a focus group of students at Lincoln High School to gain insight into students’ views about what it was like to grow up in the Lincoln community and what issues students faced on a daily basis.

While the group’s members clearly articulated the importance of their mission, several described their frustration at the lack of involvement from the community, especially in regard to the turnout for their annual festival. One Unify Lincoln member commented,
I don’t know if it’s the economy or if the people in this area are not open-minded to doing something like that, but it’s been a little bit harder to get this group started and to get this whole project going to where we think it would be a success as far as communicating to the community what we do and as far as opening eyes to different diverse groups that we have in the area.

Another member of the group described the challenges involved in promoting cultural diversity in the Lincoln community:

In the past, we’ve really had a hard time wrapping our head around promoting cultural diversity. I guess me being a minority in the area, it is a sensitive subject, despite the fact that people don’t believe it is or people don’t believe there is an issue here. But, for me being a minority to walk out there and try to promote cultural diversity, you can sometimes get a negative backlash.

After several years of promoting cultural diversity in Lincoln, despite all of the group’s efforts, Unify Lincoln disbanded due to lack of community support and volunteers.

*Los Creceros.* Ten respondents cited Los Creceros, a local Hispanic outreach ministry, as one of the community’s leading diversity efforts. The ministry was led by a former gang member from a nearby major metropolitan area. The mission of Los Creceros was to help Hispanic migrants assimilate into the culture of Lincoln and the surrounding areas and spread awareness about Hispanic culture to the greater Lincoln
community. The organization held a voter registration drive for Hispanic citizens, provided free medical exams, and connected residents to an Immigrant and Refugee Rights representative. Los Creceros also focused on educating Hispanic youth through afterschool tutoring programs and a preteen community service project that took place during the summer.

Several respondents recognized the group’s leader as an important force in initiating change in the Lincoln community. In response to growing concerns about violence and gangs in the community, the group’s leader worked with Lincoln High School’s administration to set up a series of discussions with students about making positive choices regarding violence, gangs, alcohol, and drugs. As one community member noted,

He has dedicated his life to helping wherever he can. He has a whole ministry for young people, especially the Hispanic community in Lincoln. He doesn’t make it exclusive. Anyone can go to the building, Los Creceros. He does some dynamic things.

While respondents recognized the importance of Los Creceros and noted that it benefited the greater Lincoln community, a few were disappointed at the lack of non-Hispanic involvement in the organization. As one community member said, “I see Los Creceros offers something, but it’s only the Hispanic people who show up. People never want to step over that safety zone and interact.”

*Concerned citizens of Lincoln.* Six respondents mentioned the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln as having a positive impact on African American students at Lincoln High
School. In response to growing concerns about increased discipline problems among African American students at the high school, a group of African American men from the community partnered with Lincoln’s principal and superintendent to form the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln. This organization presented several assemblies to large groups of students; the message presented at these assemblies related to character development, behavior, respect, and trying to do well in school. The group members also acted as mentors to African American students who were having behavior problems, and they served as liaisons between the school and minority parents to encourage parental involvement and efforts at home to promote students’ academic success. One staff member described the role the group played at the school as follows:

There is a group of mainly men, they call themselves the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln. They are all African American men. They come to the school for meetings when there is a kid in trouble. They come here to try to help, and they will say that it starts at home. I will talk to this child’s parents. And, they need more leaders like that who will help.

While several community respondents and school administrators praised this group of men for taking the initiative to mentor African American students, others noted the lack of involvement by the young adults in the community, most notably the parents of African American students at the school. As one community member noted,

A lot of people who belong to these groups, their children are already grown and have been raised. But the younger people, who really need help, the parents of those children should really join in with what the
community is trying to do. But, 9 times out of 10, you aren’t going to get that.

As these findings show, a small number of school personnel and community members worked as change agents to provide academic and social support for minority groups and created opportunities for different groups to come together and celebrate diversity. Some teachers and administrators collaborated to establish a student-mentoring program, activities that celebrated minority culture, diversity within the curriculum, and social support services for all students. However, despite their advocacy for and efforts on behalf of diverse students, the majority of these leaders expressed many of the same negative attitudes toward low-income African American and Hispanic families as did their peers.

Discussion

Community members and educators’ pervasive classist, ethnocentric, and racial biases were deeply engrained in the culture of Lincoln High School and perpetuated academic and social inequalities in the school. There seemed to be a strong correlation between these biases and students’ opportunities for social and academic success: Lincoln’s educators and community members placed value on middle-class culture and closely identified themselves with it. In turn, White and middle-class students at Lincoln High School fully participated in upper-level academic classes and earned the highest scores on standardized tests. These students were often recognized for their outstanding academic achievement and leadership in the school. White and middle-class parents were viewed as being actively involved in the school and in their children’s education.
Educators and community members who placed a high value on middle-class culture consistently “othered” poor and minority students and described them as lacking the same positive values as the middle class. They described poor and minority students and their families as uninvolved and uninterested in education. Likewise, poor and minority students were placed in the lowest level courses and had the lowest standardized test scores. Poor and minority families were not involved in the school. Such inequities were also apparent in many co-curricular and extracurricular activities, which served predominately White and middle-class students.

Even those change agents who advocated for poor and minority students made racist and classist remarks about these students’ families. While these educators worked to meet diverse students’ needs, their beliefs worked against change on a school-wide level, keeping poor and minority families from participating in the school. Even in an attempt to increase diversity awareness through “poverty training,” school leaders inadvertently sustained or contributed to educators’ personal biases against poor and minority students at the school, creating further boundaries between the school and these students and their families. While educators freely discussed their own personal biases regarding poor and minority students, none seemed to recognize their own role in sustaining disparities between the middle-class and White students and the poor and minority students at Lincoln High School.

The school culture at Lincoln High School reflected and reinforced that of the Lincoln community. Educators’ biased, ethnocentric, and classist beliefs mirrored those of Lincoln’s long-term residents, just as inequities in the school reflected similar
inequities in the community. Rather than working toward change, educators and community members were generally hindered by beliefs that perpetuated the inequities that existed in the school and community.

**Summary**

With the closure of the military base in the early 1990s, the community of Lincoln quickly changed from a predominately White, middle-class military and farming community to one with substantial racial and economic diversity, including a large population of low-income African American and Hispanic residents who were drawn to Lincoln by low-cost housing and agricultural and industrial jobs. Interviews with school personnel and community members revealed that they generally viewed this change as negative, placing blame on the influx of low-income residents for an economic downturn and increased crime in the community.

Three significant findings emerged during a systematic analysis of interview data: (a) educators’ and community members’ classist biases contributed to academic and social disparities between children from White and middle-class families and children from minority and low-income families; (b) educators’ and community members’ prejudices conflated race and ethnicity with social class; and (c) change agents advocated for poor and minority students, but their efforts were often met with apathy and resistance from members of the school and community. Respondents expressed classist biases with regard to low-income newcomers to the community, making strong stereotypical statements about what poor people do and believe. They also proposed that poor people belonged to a “culture of poverty” that held beliefs different from their own. Teachers
and administrators at Lincoln High School generally shared this opinion of the poor, claiming that low-income families were uninvolved in the school and did not value education.

Respondents identified a strong relationship between social class and race and ethnicity in Lincoln; the beliefs they expressed about African American and Hispanic residents were similar to the beliefs they expressed about the poor. Community members attributed an overall decline in the community to the influx of low-income African American and Hispanic residents, and school personnel held demographic change responsible for the school’s decreasing academic performance. Teachers identified African American and Hispanic students as the school’s lowest performers and noted the lack of diversity in upper-level courses, co-curricular activities, and those extracurricular activities that required larger financial contributions from students.

Although the majority of respondents held negative views of Lincoln’s low-income African American and Hispanic residents, a small group of community members and educators worked to initiate change by increasing diversity awareness and providing academic and social supports to poor and minority community members and students. Despite some school personnel’s advocacy for minority students, these leaders appeared to share teachers’ stereotypical beliefs and negative attitudes about poor and minority families. Community advocates expressed frustration at the apathy and resistance to change from the majority of community members.

Educators’ and community members’ racist, ethnocentric, and classist beliefs appeared to be deeply engrained in the culture of Lincoln High School and to contribute
to academic and social disparities between White and middle-class students and poor and minority students at the school. Lincoln High School’s culture and the deep-seated inequities embedded in that culture reflected and at the same time contributed to inequities in the surrounding community.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Recommendations

Within the context of relevant research literature, this chapter reviews and interprets findings from a study of educators’ and community members’ responses to diversity at Lincoln High School, and, on the basis of this interpretation, it presents recommendations for educators who work in increasingly diverse rural schools. As the chapter will show, the causes of the demographic changes that occurred in Lincoln, and the social and academic implications of those changes, mirrored dynamics described in studies of other rural communities. Likewise, Lincoln educators’ and community members’ responses to increasing diversity were similar in some ways to those reported in other research studies. Nevertheless, few such studies offer such a clear picture of how educators’ racist, ethnocentric, and classist perspectives limit the opportunities made available to poor, African American, and Hispanic students in a rural school. These findings led the researcher to explore the relevance of literature related to deficit thinking and the impact of poverty training on educators’ views about poor and minority students—two bodies of literature that had not originally seemed germane but that turned out to be useful in explaining the dynamics observed at Lincoln.

Brief Summary of the Study’s Findings

Increased diversity changed the demographics of the Lincoln community from 1990 to 2010. The closure of a military base in the early 1990s caused an immediate decrease in the number of White and middle-class residents, and in the years that followed, a number of low-income families moved to Lincoln. Many of these families, who were drawn to the community by the availability of low-cost housing and industrial
and agricultural jobs, were African American or Hispanic. The purpose of this study was to learn about the perspectives of educators and community members with regard to these demographic changes in the school and community and to understand the high school’s responses to those changes.

When interviewed for the study, school personnel and community members expressed racist, ethnocentric, and classist biases against poor and minority residents. Interview respondents described poor and minority families as having cultures and beliefs that were different from their own, and they attributed an overall decline in the community’s well-being to increased numbers of low-income African American and Hispanic residents. These beliefs perhaps contributed to the evident segregation in the community: I observed very little intermingling among people of different races, ethnicities, and social classes.

While the majority of respondents expressed negative views about Lincoln’s low-income African American and Hispanic residents, a small number of change agents worked to bring together diverse groups in the community and to provide social and academic support to poor and minority students. The advocacy efforts of these change agents, however, often met with apathy and resistance from educators and community members.

**Interpretation of Findings**

Lincoln was chosen as a study site based on its changing demographics, its rural locale, and the high school’s perceived proactive response to increased diversity. Prior to conducting this study, I identified and reviewed literature related to demographic change
in rural areas, academic and social implications of demographic change for rural schools, and rural schools’ responses to demographic change; this literature is discussed in Chapter Two. Findings that emerged during data analysis prompted the review of two additional bodies of literature, which pertained to (1) deficit thinking about minorities and the poor and (2) poverty training. Presented below is an interpretation of study findings in light of these additional, though clearly related, bodies of literature as well as the literature discussed in Chapter Two. The discussion begins with an interpretation of the demographic shift in Lincoln in relation to the literature about demographic changes in rural areas in general.

**Demographic changes in rural areas.** As mentioned previously, demographic changes in Lincoln resulted from the closure of a military base, which subsequently increased the availability of low-cost housing and industrial jobs in factories (including a meat-processing plant) that opened on and around the property formerly occupied by the base. Seasonal agricultural work also created demand for Hispanic migrant workers, many of whom chose to stay permanently in Lincoln because of the affordable housing available there. In general, economic opportunities attracted low-income African American and Hispanic residents to Lincoln.

Findings from the study conducted in Lincoln are consistent with earlier findings reported by other researchers who studied demographic changes in rural areas. In some of this earlier literature, scholars attributed demographic changes in rural areas to increased economic opportunities, including the availability of low-wage agricultural and industrial jobs and affordable housing (Aponte & Siles, 1997; Branz-Spall & Rosenthal, 2003;
Gilroy, 2007; Martin & Taylor, 2000). According to this research, most job growth in rural areas is in agricultural work and the meat-processing industry. While agricultural work once attracted seasonal migrant workers, now many workers, looking for permanent jobs and a better quality of life, are choosing to locate in one rural community and stay there (Aponte & Siles, 1997). The relocation of the meat-packing industry from urban to rural areas has also created low-wage jobs in some rural communities (Aponte & Siles, 1997; Fennelly & Leitner, 2002; Kandel & Parrado, 2005).

The majority of studies about demographic changes in rural areas have focused on the economic opportunities that have attracted Hispanic residents to such communities. These rural communities typically experienced population growth as they added new residents (Brunn, 2002; Fennelly & Leitner, 2002; Kandel & Parrado, 2005). While Lincoln did experience growth in its Hispanic population in response to opportunities provided by agriculture and related industries, its case is somewhat unusual, in part because of its loss of a sizeable population of White, middle-class residents and the simultaneous growth in the number of low-income African American residents. These demographic shifts contributed to increased social tension in the Lincoln community.

Social implications of demographic changes in rural areas. Demographic changes had significant social implications for Lincoln’s high school and community. Lincoln’s long-term community members blamed low-income African American and Hispanic newcomers for increased crime, gang activity, decreased property values, and a general decline in the school and community. Many of Lincoln’s educators and community members held strong racist, ethnocentric, and classist beliefs about poor and
minority students and their families and described them as having different values from the middle class, such as not viewing education as important, not taking care of their property, participating in criminal activities, and not valuing hard work. Many blamed poor and minority families’ “culture” for these shortcomings and suggested they belonged to a “culture of poverty” that perpetuated many of these unproductive values.

The vast majority of Lincoln’s educators and community members voiced prejudiced views about poor and minority students and their families, and significant academic and social disparities existed between middle-class White students and poor and minority students at Lincoln High School.

The social dynamics in Lincoln and in Lincoln High School resembled those described in studies of other rural communities and schools experiencing demographic changes, as discussed in Chapter Two. For example, Chavez’s (2005) study of a rural California town found that White residents blamed Mexican community members for increased crime and gang activity. Brunn’s (2002) study of teachers and administrators in rural Illinois found prejudice and bigotry among some faculty members toward Hispanic migrant students. Romanowski (2003) reported that teachers’ negative stereotypes and lack of understanding of students’ home cultures were barriers to migrant students’ academic success. Tarca’s (2005) study found that White residents feared that new African American residents would bring urban problems to their community.

While the social dynamics described in these studies resembled the dynamics observed in Lincoln, none of the studies included in the original literature review in Chapter Two connected their findings to literature that addresses possible factors
contributing to prejudices among school personnel and community members. Analysis of interview data collected during the Lincoln study, however, resulted in the identification of “deficit thinking” as a possible contributor to these prejudices. I subsequently reviewed literature related to “deficit thinking” in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of Lincoln educators’ and community members’ prejudices against minorities and the poor.

Two main models are used to describe deficit thinking about minorities and the poor, one based on genetics and the other on culture. According to Foley (1997), early deficit thinking was based on a biological, or genetic, model of thinking about racial and ethnic minorities. In order to explain the academic underachievement of minorities, adherents to this view claimed that racial and ethnic minorities were biologically inferior to Whites, a condition that limited their intelligence and therefore their ability to achieve academic success (Foley, 1997).

Menchaca (1997) traced deficit thinking about minority students and their families back to slavery and described how this thinking has affected the schooling of minorities in the United States. Menchaca presented a historical description of the education of minority students (from students of color being denied the right to education in the 1800s to racially segregated schools in the 1900s to current inequities in education) and posited that in each case, the decisions made by those in power were based on the belief that members of minority groups are biologically inferior to Whites. Menchaca claimed that deficit thinking produced “curricular recommendations that the ‘intellectually inferior’ and the social order would best be served by providing these
[minority] students concrete, low-level, segregated instruction commensurate with their alleged diminished intellectual abilities” (p. 38).

While only one interviewee among those at Lincoln made a comment about minority students’ being intellectually inferior to White students, many made comments about minority students’ underachievement and lack of interest in education. Nevertheless, the espoused racist, ethnocentric, and classist beliefs of educators as well as the character of the educational and social inequities that existed between White and minority students at Lincoln High School suggested that some educators may have grounded their view of diversity on a biologically based deficit model. The study provided several types of evidence suggesting that this model was tacitly operating at Lincoln. Notably, very few African American and Hispanic students participated in upper-level and honors classes, yet African American students were overrepresented in special education classes. White students academically performed far above their African American and Hispanic counterparts. Educators also remarked that poor and minority students lacked many of the academic and social skills necessary to be successful in school.

Despite this evidence that some Lincoln educators’ may have accepted biological explanations of the inferiority of African American and Hispanic students, the more recent, culturally based explanation of deficit thinking most closely resembled their espoused views about poor and minority students. Educators at Lincoln High School consistently blamed poor and minority families’ culture for these students’ deficient academic achievement. Educators described African American and Hispanic culture as
not valuing education and repeatedly cited it as the primary reason why poor and minority students and their parents did not participate in school activities. Educators claimed that poor and minority parents either valued other things, such as sports, or lacked the time and resources to devote to their children’s education.

The greater resonance of the cultural rather than the biological version of deficit theory is not surprising. In the 1950s, as school segregation came under fire, researchers and theorists challenged the biological model of deficit thinking as racist and “politically incorrect” and began to present an alternative explanation for minority students’ failure in school that looked beyond genetics (Pearl, 1997a). This model of deficit thinking was based on “a cultural explanation of failure in school and life” (Foley, 1997, p. 115) and placed the cultural deprivation of poor families and their home environment at its center (Pearl, 1997b).

Foley (1997) traced cultural deficit thinking about the poor to Oscar Lewis’ (1961) “culture of poverty” theory, which was based on qualitative case studies of poor families in Mexico. Lewis described the culture of poverty as “a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines [for]…people who are at the very bottom of the socio-economic scale” (pp. xxiv-xxv). He provided a list of both economic traits and social characteristics of the culture of poverty, including a constant struggle for survival, unemployment or underemployment, lack of savings, living in crowded quarters, alcoholism, violence, predominance of single-parent families, and a lack of ability to defer gratification (p. xxvi). While Lewis
acknowledged that middle-class people might exhibit some of these characteristics, he emphasized that the poor exhibit patterns of behavior reflecting the entirety of the list.

Lewis’s (1961) “culture of poverty” model most closely fits with Lincoln educators’ and community members’ deficit thinking about poor and minority residents. Indeed, many respondents used Lewis’s exact phrase to describe the “deficient” cultural values of Lincoln’s poor and minority families. Respondents used almost all of the characteristics in Lewis’ list to describe these families, holding them responsible for increased crime, drugs, and gang activity in the community. Some respondents even pointed to poor and minority families’ crowded apartments and poor living conditions as evidence of their lack of pride and their inability to take care of their housing.

While there is limited research about how middle-class educators view poor students and their families, a few recent studies have examined this phenomenon. Howley, Howley, Howley, and Howley’s (2006) case study of six rural schools serving primarily economically disadvantaged students found that, in five of the schools, although educators approached their work with low-income students in responsible ways, their focus was on “saving” poor children and their view of the poor was disparaging. Howley and associates describe this practice as “othering” the poor, or viewing the poor as having different (and inferior) attitudes and beliefs from those of the middle class. Jupp and Slattery’s (2010) study of White males teaching in diverse classrooms found that participants voiced deficit thinking in regard to poor students’ families, communities, and culture. These authors claimed that deficit thinking “diminishes historical differences
as deficits of character, morality, work ethic, or cultural background and blames the marginalized for their personal problems” (p. 203).

The findings from Howley and associates’ (2006) study and Jupp and Slattery’s (2010) study are similar to those from this study. Educators at Lincoln High School “othered” poor and minority students and their families, viewing them as having values and beliefs that were different from (and lesser than) their own. While no respondents mentioned “saving” these students, educators focused interventions (such as the freshmen mentoring program) on providing students with the academic and social skills they saw poor and minority students as lacking. In other words, their interventions focused on the perceived deficits of this particular group of students rather than on the full range of skills that needed to be developed among all students.

**Academic implications of demographic changes in rural schools.** State test scores revealed that African American and Hispanic students performed far below White students in mathematics and reading at Lincoln High School. Low-income students also performed less well than more affluent counterparts. The achievement gap between Lincoln High School’s middle class and White students, on the one hand, and poor and minority students, on the other, is reflective of the achievement gap between these groups throughout the United States (NEA, 2008b).

This finding also corresponds with the research literature, discussed in Chapter Two, on the challenges of teaching English language learners and migrant students. According to this literature, half of the migrant students in the United States achieve
below grade level in reading and mathematics (Perry, 1997); and many face barriers related to poverty, transience, and language (Branz-Spall & Rosenthall, 2003).

The challenges described by Lincoln educators charged with teaching increased numbers of English language learners and migrant students were similar to the challenges described in several of the studies discussed in Chapter Two (Brunn, 2000; Dorfman, 2000; Romanowski, 2003). For instance, those interviewed in Lincoln mentioned being frustrated with high transient rates among migrant students and not having adequate preparation or support staff to provide effective instruction to the English language learners who were mainstreamed into their classrooms. While teachers saw the school’s employment of one part-time English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) tutor as an encouraging sign, many emphasized that they needed much more help in order to provide English language learners with appropriate instruction.

The challenges facing Lincoln educators who provided instruction to English language learners and migrant students were consistent with those discussed in the related studies reviewed in Chapter Two, but such challenges constituted only a small subset of the academic implications of demographic changes in Lincoln. Notably, the demographic changes in Lincoln involved more than an influx of Hispanic students and their families. In addition to these new residents, Lincoln also saw in-migration of African American families from a nearby city. Moreover, the average income of its residents was on the decline. Lincoln’s shifting and diverse student demographics presented additional challenges to educators—a circumstance that I will discuss later in this chapter.
Rural schools’ response to demographic changes. Lincoln High School was selected as the site for this study in part because of its perceived proactive response to increased diversity. For example, Lincoln hosted a summer migrant program for elementary students whose parents worked in the fields and for high school students who worked during the day. The school hired an ESL tutor to meet the needs of the increased number of English language learners. Administrators presented several professional development sessions focused on teaching diverse learners. The school arranged multicultural events throughout the year to celebrated African American and Hispanic culture and established a multicultural literature and history course as part of its curriculum. Teachers and administrators collaborated to establish a mentoring program for freshmen students from all backgrounds. And the school welcomed diverse leaders from the community to participate in its daily activities.

Although Lincoln High School’s responses to demographic changes resembled the responses of schools investigated in other studies, Lincoln’s responses were not as comprehensive as many of those reported in the earlier studies. For instance, Zehr’s (2005) study of a rural district in Oklahoma found that one school moved from a pull-out ESL program to a two-way language immersion program in which students stayed in their regular classes and spoke both English and Spanish. Wrigley (2000) reported on a rural school in Virginia that had designed a comprehensive ESL program for just a few Hispanic students in anticipation of an increase in the number of English language learners at the school. Brunn (2000) described a rural school in Illinois that had hosted professional development for teachers and established after-school enrichment
opportunities and literacy instruction for migrant students. Strang and vonGlatz (1999) reported that some schools used funds from the federal Migrant Education Program to provide migrant students with summer programs, free and reduced-price meals, medical and dental services, and transportation.

While Lincoln High School’s response to increased diversity was reflective of general trends reported in the literature and, on the surface, seemed to be responsive to the needs of its diverse students, the findings of this study revealed that educators and community members held “deficit” views of poor and minority students and their families, focusing on the differences between middle-class families’ and poor and minority families’ cultural values and using the “culture of poverty” model to explain why these students were not performing well in school. One possible reason for these educators’ espoused views is that their participation in a series of “poverty training” professional development workshops contributed to negative stereotypes of poor and minority students.

Over the course of 3 years, teachers and administrators at Lincoln High School had participated in several short seminars based on Ruby Payne’s (2003) book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. The school’s superintendent scheduled this “poverty training” in response to the school’s growing number of poor students and described its purpose as helping teachers understand cultural differences between the middle class and the poor. The findings of this study showed that educators who participated in this training were able to articulate differences between the poor and the
middle class—perspectives that tended to reinforce prejudiced views of poor and minority students and their families.

Critics of Payne’s books and professional development series agree that her professional development model can be detrimental to poor and minority students’ academic and social development (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Sato & Lensmire, 2009), and some assert that it is “toxic to teaching and learning” (Dworin & Bomer, 2008, p. 101). These critics claim that Payne’s model is not based on research and is laden with racial and social class stereotypes (Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Bomer et al., 2008). Bomer and associates (2008) claimed that A Framework for Understanding Poverty, which is used as the core component of Payne’s professional development activities, is a “classic example of what has been identified as deficit thinking” (p. 2498), and they argue that the book may reinforce educators’ stereotypes about the poor—stereotypes that often lower teachers’ expectations for the academic performance of students from minority groups and low-income families. As a sizable body of research literature shows, moreover, when teachers hold low expectations for students’ performance, they contribute to a self-fulfilling prophesy. Notably, student achievement suffers when teachers view students as deficient (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Sato & Lensmire, 2009).

Several studies have examined the ways in which Payne’s book fuels readers’ stereotypes about the poor. Dworin and Bomer (2008), for example, showed how the author’s language might work to reinforce readers’ presumptions about people in poverty. These critics suggested that “the language of Ruby Payne’s text taps into this discourse
about poverty, activating some readers’ pre-existing assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge” (p. 105). Further, Dworin and Bomer argued that Payne used specific, charged language to differentiate the poor from the middle class, thereby contributing to readers’ likelihood of coming to understand the poor through the lens of a deficit model. These authors pointed specifically to Payne’s (2003) quiz that defines “hidden rules among classes” (pp. 53-54). This quiz asks educators to read statements about poor, middle-class, and wealthy families and decide if they could function more effectively under the rules governing a life of poverty or under the rules governing life in the middle class. Payne made the following statements about what people in poverty know how to do:

- I know how to physically fight and defend myself.
- I know how to get a gun, even if I have a police record.
- I know how to get someone out of jail.
- I know how to live without electricity and a phone. (pp. 53-54)

Conversely, Payne made the following statements about what middle-class people know how to do:

- I talk to my children about going to college.
- I know how to help my children with their homework.
- I know how to get my children into Little League, piano lessons, soccer, etc.
- I know how to get a library card.
- I know how to use the different tools in the garage. (pp. 55-56)
The statements that Payne made about people living in poverty focus on physical violence, crime, and existing day to day in order to make ends meet. No statements in the list referred to caring for children or valuing education. In contrast, statements about the middle class described a commitment to education, an engaged approach to child-rearing, financial responsibility, and resourcefulness.

Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) claimed that Payne’s book “reinforces ways of thinking and talking about children in poverty that are false, prejudiced, or at the very least, limited” (p. 2500). As a result, these authors argued that the book can have detrimental academic and social consequences for poor and minority students. For example, Payne (2003) listed the following student “behaviors that are related to poverty”: disorganized, don’t do homework, physically aggressive, harm other students verbally or physically, cheat or steal, laugh when they are disciplined, talk back, angry response, inappropriate or vulgar comments, cannot follow directions, and dislike authority (pp. 78, 103).

Critiques of Payne’s work that emphasize its potential contribution to disparaging views of the poor are validated by the findings of the Lincoln study. Educators at Lincoln High School voiced many of the same views of poor and minority students as those presented in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. While these educators may have held these views prior to their participation in the workshop, their use of Payne’s terminology and the examples they gave to describe poor and minority families suggested that they had also been influenced by the training. Rather than helping teachers better understand poor students, which was the superintendent’s intent, participation in “poverty
training” contributed to educators’ stereotypes about poor and minority students and may have increased, rather than bridged, the academic and social divide among Lincoln High School students of different races and social classes.

In summary, the findings of the study at Lincoln were mostly consistent with findings from the literature presented in Chapter Two: (1) some demographic changes in Lincoln were similar to those in other rural communities, (2) the academic and social implications of these changes in Lincoln fit with what has been observed in other rural schools, and (3) the responses of Lincoln’s educators to demographic changes were compatible with responses seen elsewhere. Nevertheless, the circumstance in Lincoln was different from that reported elsewhere in that (1) increases in the African-American population and losses in the White and middle-class population contributed to a complex pattern of demographic change and (2) although the school did provide programs for low-income and minority students (including ELLs), its response was not as proactive nor as thoroughgoing as responses observed in some other rural communities.

Furthermore, findings about Lincoln educators’ and community members’ biases against poor and minority residents were consistent with the (typically urban) literature on deficit thinking about minorities and the poor and the possible negative impact of poverty training on educators’ views of these students. But the attitudes expressed by study participants from Lincoln were even more negative than those reported in some other studies of rural schools in communities with changing demographics. This finding demonstrates that rural schools can make superficial adjustments on behalf of diverse students while at the same time harboring extremely negative, even damaging, attitudes
toward those students. This finding supports several recommendations for educational practice in increasingly diverse rural schools.

**Recommendations**

Rural schools are becoming increasingly diverse in the racial and ethnic as well as the socioeconomic composition of their student populations. Consequently, rural teachers and administrators in many rural schools may confront challenges similar to those faced by the educators at Lincoln High School. As a considerable body of literature shows, the way schools respond to these challenges has an important impact on the academic success and social well-being of students from all backgrounds (Riehl, 2000). School leaders, moreover, play a critical role in preparing teachers and staff to meet the needs of diverse students by creating school environments that are fair and equitable to all (Brunn, 2000; Riehl, 2000).

The gap between leaders’ aims in this regard and their actual accomplishments may, however, be consequential, as findings from the current study reveal. The existence of such a gap in one school suggests that the phenomenon may be more widespread. Given this possibility, it seems reasonable to suggest that leaders of rural schools might begin by critically examining the ways they are addressing issues of social class and race/ethnicity in their schools as they strive to build an inclusive school culture and challenge stereotypes and deficit thinking about poor and minority students and their families. The following recommendations address the potential points of leverage suggested by the present study and relevant research literature.
Recommendation 1: Adopt professional development models that challenge stereotypes and deficit thinking and work toward a school environment that is fair, encouraging, and inclusive of all students. Gorski (2008) recommended that school leaders organize and support “anti-poverty” education rather than training in how to understand the so-called “culture of poverty”. Gorski claimed that anti-poverty education “prepares teachers and administrators to fix classist structures, policy, and practices instead of the people oppressed by them” (p. 145). Anti-poverty education focuses on eliminating school structures that perpetuate stereotypes and creating an equitable and high-quality educational environment that meets the needs of students from all backgrounds. In addition, Gorski urged educators to provide all students with equal access to upper-level classes and high-quality materials, to hold high expectations for all students, to practice fair assignment to special education so that poor and minority students are not over-represented, to include multicultural materials in the curriculum, and to provide transportation and child care to make sure that the school is accessible to parents from all backgrounds.

Similarly, Pearl (1997) recommended that educators use practices associated with “democratic education”. According to this author, school activities should be inclusive of all students, regardless of racial or socioeconomic background. He suggested that educators “encourage everyone to participate equally in all school-sanctioned activities and look to change school practices when there are wide discrepancies in student participation” (p. 228). Pearl also noted the importance of encouraging all students to
perform to the best of their ability by creating a safe and welcoming school environment that encourages competence in all students.

Sato and Lensmire (2009) proposed a school change model that focuses on children’s competencies and teachers’ cultural identities, and is “based in ongoing collaborative work among teachers” (p. 365). These authors argued that students’ culture and intellect are assets, not deficits, to their education and should be integrated into the curriculum. Further, Sato and Lensmire urged teachers to form an understanding of their own cultural backgrounds and to explore stereotypes about race and class in a group setting.

Based on the findings of this study, I believe the professional development models that these authors recommend are preferable to some current activities educators use that claim to celebrate “multiculturalism”. While such practices as exploring different religious and cultural holidays in the classroom (Myers & Myers, 2001-2002), serving Hispanic foods in the cafeteria, and hanging art from diverse cultures in the school’s hallways (Dorfman, 2000) might contribute to students’ understanding of cultures other than their own, these activities do not address the deeper issues, such as educators’ stereotypes and deficit thinking, that negatively impact poor and minority students’ academic achievement and social involvement in school.

This recommendation might resonate with practices in some rural schools, and it might seem discordant with practices in others. One such practice is place-based education. The Rural School and Community Trust defines place-based education as “learning that is rooted in the unique history, environment, economy, and culture of a
particular place” (Rural School Partnership, 2009, para. 1). Hattam, Brennan, Zipin, and Comber (2009) proposed that connecting curriculum to what students already know about their own culture and community empowers and engages them. These authors suggested that place-based education enables “engagement and success for those typically marginalized and failed by schools” (p. 303).

Despite the commitment of some rural schools to addressing students’ and educators’ stereotypes and deficit thinking about poor and minority students, other rural schools may continue to resist change (Brunn, 2002; Romanowski, 2003). Indeed, the sorts of changes that are required to uproot deficiency thinking and the discriminatory practices it tends to support will not take place easily in any locale. As an ample literature on school change suggests, schools that involve all stakeholders in the change process, including teachers, staff, administrators, and community members are more likely to see marked improvements in school culture than are schools that are less thoroughgoing in their efforts (Brunn, 2000; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001). These findings imply that improvements in the culture of a rural school will likely benefit from the establishment of a coalition of advocates from across the community’s varied constituencies.

**Recommendation 2: Work toward a school culture that emphasizes students’ diverse strengths, and incorporate those strengths into the classroom.** Lincoln High School educators’ deficit thinking focused strongly on poor and minority students’ social and academic deficiencies. Based on findings from this study, as well as those from similar studies, I conclude that other rural educators may also share some of the same
deficit thinking as administrators and teachers at Lincoln High School. Therefore, the second recommendation suggested by this study is for rural educators to work to promote school cultures that view students’ diversity as a set of strengths with the potential to enrich the schooling experience for all students. This recommendation resonates with what Gay (2000) called “culturally responsive teaching” (p. 29) and what Gonzalez, Moll, and Amati (2005) discussed as an educational approach grounded in students’ “funds of knowledge”.

The small size of rural schools makes them especially amenable to making these types of changes in school culture. According to the United States Department of Education (2001), “Because change is easier to implement in a smaller setting, smaller learning environments create a context hospitable to reform” (cited in Jimerson, 2006, p. 10). Jimerson suggested that several attributes of small schools, such as smaller class sizes and heterogeneous classes, contribute to change efforts. Further, this author claimed that educators in small schools develop close relationships with their colleagues and students, making professional development and collaborative work more meaningful—a circumstance that increases the likelihood that improvements supported by a school staff will actually be implemented.

Nevertheless, making time to improve school culture might be particularly difficult for rural school leaders who are already under pressure from the federal government to increase academic achievement. As Williams and Portin (1997) found, some school leaders are overwhelmed by the additional job responsibilities that come with providing quality instruction to diverse groups of learners, including English
language learners and special education students. These school leaders might be resistant to undertaking the work needed to increase the cultural responsiveness of their schools’ curriculum and instructional practices. Despite the immediate and on-going challenges of this type of school reform, rural educators can bolster such efforts by drawing attention to the long-term benefits of fostering school cultures that value students’ diverse strengths.

**Recommendation 3: Offer field experiences and curricula in teacher preparation programs to prepare teacher candidates to work with diverse student populations.** The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010) includes “Diversity” as one of its six Unit Standards. Teacher preparation programs are expected to provide pre-service teachers with field experiences and curricula to prepare them to work with poor and minority students as well as with colleagues from a variety of racial and ethnic groups. Based on the Council’s requirements and the findings of this study, the third recommendation is that teacher preparation programs offer diverse field experiences and curricula to better prepare pre-service teachers to work with diverse student populations.

This recommendation may be especially significant for pre-service teachers who will be teaching in rural schools. Many of these candidates are White and from middle class backgrounds and have had little experience with racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. As a result of their limited experience with diversity, these pre-service teachers would likely benefit from field experiences in diverse rural schools (Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). In general, such field experiences cultivate pre-service teachers’ sensitivity to diverse students and their cultures as well as helping these candidates learn
how to use instructional strategies that are effective for working with different groups of students, such as ELLs, migrant students, and so on (Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005).

Despite the importance of providing these experiences to pre-service teachers, teacher education programs may be challenged to find appropriate field-experience sites, particularly sites that are both rural and inclusive of diverse populations of students. This difficulty reflects the fact that rural schools are remote by definition and many are still racially and ethnically homogenous. Nonetheless, given the importance of providing such experiences to pre-service teachers who plan to teach in rural schools, programs that prepare teachers for these schools can use various strategies to give their candidates at least some experiences with diverse populations. For example, McClanahan and Buly (2009) suggested that teacher education programs might partner with diverse schools via internet so that pre-service teachers who do not have local access to diverse schools are given an opportunity to interact with diverse students. In addition, Hsu (2009) proposed that pre-service teachers can benefit from sharing experiences and resources during diverse field experiences by interacting with one another in online professional learning communities.

**Recommendation 4: Initiate change within schools by encouraging school leaders to work collaboratively with teachers, parents, and community members.**

The Lincoln study describes the role that several educators and community members played in instituting change at Lincoln High School. One unique aspect of this study was the administration’s willingness to include change agents from the community as a part of the change process in the school, inviting African American community leaders to
participate in daily activities, parent conferences, and school assemblies. However, school administrators at Lincoln High School were less successful in including minority parents in the change process, due in part to their own personal biases. As numerous researchers report, school leaders, whose role is indeed crucial to any effort seeking to change the school’s culture, have the greatest opportunity for success when they include all stakeholders, including parents and community members, in the change process (e.g., DeYoung, 1995).

DeYoung (1995) commented that “school improvement and school reform are critically dependent upon characteristics of innovative individuals, or change agents” (p. 187), and he claimed that educators can act as cultural change agents in their schools. Based on these insights, the fourth recommendation of this study is that school leaders should work collaboratively with teachers, parents, and community members to initiate and sustain meaningful change in their buildings.

This recommendation resonates with conditions in many rural schools. The size and location of rural schools may make involving parents and community members in the change process more feasible than it is in urban or suburban schools. As Dee, Ha, and Jacob (2007) noted, “small schools are more effective in promoting parental involvement in schools as well as engagement with the broader community” (p. 95). These authors found that the small size of schools in many rural communities increased parent and community participation, in part because stakeholders who were involved with the school were well connected to other members of the community. Bauch (2001) suggested that partnerships require connections and that rural schools have the advantage of having
“close connections to the surrounding community” (p. 211). Increased parental participation and community connections may make it easier for rural school leaders to involve stakeholders in the change process.

However, these same attributes may hinder change in rural schools. As was the case in the Lincoln study, the parents who were involved in the school were primarily White and middle class. Administrators and teachers were well connected with this constituency, and White parents from the middle-class maintained connections in the community primarily with people like themselves. The challenge for rural school administrators is to reach out to stakeholders from all of the different groups in a community so that the views of all constituencies are represented in the change process.

**Recommendation 5: Conduct additional research to help educators better understand race, ethnicity, and social class dynamics in rural schools and to identify successful responses to demographic changes.** Further research is needed to help educators better understand rural school dynamics that relate to class, race, and ethnicity. Improved understanding will enable educators to respond to such dynamics in both sensitive and effective ways. Although some such studies do already exist (e.g., Brunn, 2002; Dorfman, 2000; Romanowski, 2003; Tarca, 2005), this body of work primarily examines teachers’ responses to racial and ethnic diversity in rural schools. The existing studies have important implications for rural educators, such as disclosing the prevalence of racism and discrimination in diverse rural schools and the educational and social inequities that exist between White and racial minority students, they do not consider the interconnectedness of race/ethnicity and social class. The present study provides a
starting point for discussion of the dynamics produced by such interconnectedness, but additional research is needed in order to illuminate this complicated issue.

As rural school leaders adapt to changing demographics, additional research is also needed to find out how educators in other rural schools are responding to increased diversity. This study revealed the ways one rural school responded to demographic changes. Other rural schools may be adopting more democratic and equitable approaches (e.g., Hattan et al., 2009; Ngai & Koehn, 2010). Rural school leaders can learn from what other schools are doing and may find additional research helpful in surfacing effective practices for responding to the changing characteristics of their own student bodies.

Rural educators would also benefit from additional research on diversity in rural schools—research similar to the current study but with a focus on the perspectives of participants from all demographic groups, not just the majority. A limitation of this study was that participants were primarily middle class and either White or African American. While these participants’ views contributed to an understanding of the influence of demographic changes in the community, they did not tell the whole story. Notably the views of members of underrepresented groups did not contribute to a full account of school and community dynamics in Lincoln. Future studies should pay particular attention to the perspectives of members of underrepresented groups in an effort to develop a more complete understanding of the impact of demographic changes on rural schools and communities.

Finally, most of the research about demographic changes in rural schools examines how such schools have responded to changes over a relatively short period of
time. Since demographic changes are often gradual and complex and professional development initiatives take time to implement and assess, longitudinal studies can provide insights about the long-term consequences of demographic changes as well as the long-term impact of school initiatives to address such changes. For example, in order to evaluate how intergroup dynamics change over time, researchers might conduct periodic case studies—perhaps over a 15 year period of time—in one rural school that has undergone a significant change in its population characteristics.

Summary

This chapter first reviewed findings from the case study of educators’ and community members’ responses to increased diversity in Lincoln. Next it considered the findings in light of previous related literature. Finally, it presented recommendations that were supported by the study’s findings.

To a certain extent the findings of this study are consistent with findings from the literature discussed in Chapter Two. Lincoln’s demographic shift, prompted by the closure of the military base, resulted from the increased availability of low-wage agricultural and industrial jobs and affordable housing. Similar explanations for demographic changes have been cited in other studies. The social tensions and biases discussed in other studies of shifting demographics in rural communities and schools closely resemble those in Lincoln and Lincoln High School. Other schools’ responses to increased diversity are similar to Lincoln High School’s, though some responses described in the related literature tended to be more comprehensive, by comparison.
This study differs from earlier related studies in that its findings provide an in-depth description of the impact of educators’ biases on the academic achievement and social integration of students from diverse groups. The findings from this study, in fact, illustrate the connection between educators’ “deficit thinking” about minority students and the discriminatory practices that are evident at the school. At Lincoln High School and perhaps elsewhere, the view of minority students as deficient was bolstered by the district’s use of a popular professional development series that focuses on “poverty training”.

The findings of this study support several recommendations. First, school leaders can adopt professional development models that challenge stereotypes and deficit thinking and work toward a school culture that is fair, encouraging, and inclusive of all students. Second, they can proactively work toward a school culture that emphasizes and incorporates the strengths of all students. Third, to better prepare new teachers to work with diverse student populations, teacher preparation programs can include field experiences that give their candidates opportunities for working with diverse rural students. Fourth, school leaders can initiate change by working collaboratively with teachers, parents, and community members. Fifth, researchers can design studies that investigate the interconnectedness of race, ethnicity, and social class in an effort to help educators understand and respond appropriately to the complex dynamics associated with demographic changes in rural schools.
References


America. Paper presented to the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association, Estes Park, CO.


Hoffman, L. (2004). We’re so diverse: How students use their high school yearbooks to bridge the gaps. *American Secondary Education, 33*(1), 4-25.


Appendix A: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Increased Diversity in Rural Schools: One School’s Response to Change

Researcher: Megan E Rhodes

You are being asked to participate in research. Megan E Rhodes, a teacher at Lincoln High School*, will conduct the research and all interviews for this study. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study seeks to understand how teachers, administrators, staff, school board members, and community members understand the impact of demographic change on their school and community. Teachers, administrators, staff, school board members, and community members associated with the school will be selected to participate in the study. Participants will be asked to take part in one hour-long interview.

Risks and Discomforts

There are psychological risks associated with disclosing perceptions about controversial issues and the subject matter for this dissertation may be controversial for participants. To minimize the psychological risks, the research site and all participants will be given pseudonyms and will not be referred to by name in the final manuscript. Also, all interviews will take place in private locations and in locations acceptable to interviewees. Finally, participants will be given the opportunity to share information “off the record”.

Benefits

Rural schools in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse. Rapid change in the make-up of student populations presents challenges to schools and communities, such as dealing with increased numbers of English language learners, increased student mobility, cultural diversity, and poverty. This study may produce insights that may be useful to rural educators confronting these challenges in their communities.
Confidentiality and Records

The research site and all participants will be given pseudonyms to make every effort that their identities and views are kept confidential. Further, audio files from interviews will be securely stored on the researcher’s computer, transcribed, and will be destroyed within six months of collection. Participants’ names will not be used on the transcriptions to further protect confidentiality.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

Compensation

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Megan Rhodes at me205595@ohio.edu or at (614) 354-9090.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

• you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions
• known risks to you have been explained to your satisfaction.
• you understand Ohio University has no policy or plan to pay for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this research protocol
• you are 18 years of age or older
• your participation in this research is given voluntarily
• you may change your mind and stop participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Signature ______________________________ Date ______________

Printed Name ______________________________

* Lincoln High School is a pseudonym
Appendix B: Letter of Introduction

January 15, 2009

Dear Potential Research Participants,

My name is Megan Rhodes and I am a doctoral student in Educational Administration at Ohio University. I am also a teacher at Lincoln High School*. I am conducting a research study entitled *Increased Diversity in Rural Areas: One School’s Response to Change* in partial completion of my degree requirements. The purpose of this study is to understand how school personnel and the surrounding community responded to demographic change in Rantoul over the past 20 years. The findings from this study will be published in my doctoral dissertation and possibly presented at professional conferences and published in professional journals.

You have been selected to participate in this study as a school employee or member of the Lincoln community. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in one hour-long interview. In some circumstances, a follow up interview may be scheduled to clarify any information given during the first interview. Your participation in this research project is voluntary, and you may decline to participate or stop participating at any time.

The research site and all participants will be given pseudonyms to make every effort to ensure that their identities and views are kept confidential. In addition, participants’ positions and length of employment will not be used together as identifiers in the final manuscript. Finally, participants’ names will not be used on the transcriptions or in the final manuscript to further protect confidentiality. All interviews will be audio recorded. Your consent to record the interview will be obtained in the attached Consent Form.

If you chose to participate in the study, please read and complete the attached Consent Form. I will be contacting you in the next week to find out if you are willing to participate and to set up a date and time for the interview. Please bring your completed Consent Form with you to the interview.

Please feel free to contact me at (614) 354-9090 or me205595@ohio.edu with questions or concerns regarding the study. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Sincerely,

Megan Rhodes
Doctoral Candidate
The Office of Research Compliance at Ohio University has approved this research project. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593-0664.

* Lincoln High School is a pseudonym
Appendix C: Interview Schedule

1. What is your connection to Lincoln High School*?
   a. Are you a teacher, administrator, school board member, or community member at Lincoln High School? How long have you been associated with the school?
   b. Tell me about where you are from.

2. How do you think the Lincoln community has changed over the past 20 years?

3. What changes have occurred in the past few years? Why do you think change is occurring?

4. What impact do you think changes have had on the community?

5. What has the community done in response to changes?

6. How has Lincoln High School responded to increased diversity?

7. How has the local community responded to increased diversity?

8. How have these changes impacted Lincoln High School?
   a. What have been the impacts on academics?
   b. What have been the impacts on extracurricular activities?

9. How do you think Lincoln High School has responded to this change?
   a. How have students responded?
   b. How have teachers responded?
   c. How have staff members responded?
   d. How have the school administrators responded?
Note: I used questions 6 and 7 only if participants did not mention diversity as an important part of change in their answers to questions 1-5.

* Lincoln High School is a pseudonym.
Code Map of Theme 3

- Administrators' response to diversity
  - School partnerships
  - Multicultural literature class
  - Multicultural social studies class
  - ESL literacy
  - Hiring diverse teaching faculty
  - Professional development
  - Student mentoring program
  - African American history month program

- Teachers' response to diversity
  - Gospel choir
  - Dance team
  - International club
  - Racial prejudice

- Teacher resistance to change
- Change agents

- Community response to diversity
  - Community outreach
  - Concerned Citizens of Lincoln
  - Unity Lincoln
  - Las Americas

- Community resistance to change

- Racial prejudice