

TEACHERS' NARRATIVES OF FORT McMURRAY

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Dedication

I would like to especially thank my wife, Janis Lawrence-Harper, our four children and all of my parents: Martha and Bob Harper, Gert and Stan Lawrence, Herve Lalonde and Sandra George.

Moms and Dads, thank you for instilling in me the values of education, family, community, and faith in a world where everyone has a place, particular challenges to overcome, and abilities to learn from their experiences. You have shared your homes and enriched all of your children by being there when we needed you most, making decisions, taking actions, demonstrating maturity, speaking your words, and sharing your stories.

Janis, when our story began at the try-outs for a Jasper-Banff Relay team it was impossible to have foreseen the course we would eventually follow. Instead of handing-off the baton along the Icefields' Parkway we began a much more enlightening journey taking turns, sharing responsibilities, and refining our complementary disciplines. You have shared a dynamic load, through many more races, courses, detours, taking what I could offer and providing much more in return. Through many terms of school, tag-team parenting, family life with children and economic cycles you have made our home wherever we have lived.

I am grateful for your support when I needed to travel to Lethbridge in the summers and you were left alone with two, three, and finally four increasingly energetic and creative young children. Your tolerance for science fiction and your superb parenting skills were appreciated as you endured my many hours of cybernetic connectivity with our computer, out-of-body experiences shuffling through course work, books, webs, software and annual system crashes. You are simply the best and I love you.

Never is any one person responsible for success and if it were not for the unconditional love, unending support and encouragement I received from my parents and my wife I would never have completed this degree. This is for them.

As for Gregory, Patrick, Meghan, and Sean, "It's your turn on the computer!"

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to share the stories of five teachers who have taught in Fort McMurray. The study began with the digital recording of images and sounds in the community that were linked with video clips of the interviews conducted with teachers. Such an audio-visual collage provided an added perspective to the narrative of teaching and living in Fort McMurray.

Fort McMurray, in Northern Alberta, is a unique place to live. Geographically and socially it has a physical landscape that can be overwhelming to some while others find it supports a dynamic human landscape. Depending upon one's perspective this community rests at either end of the desirability scale of places to live and teach. When I arrived, I was one the youngest teachers in my school. Elder mentors have begun to retire and people my age are taking more leadership roles. In many communities, it takes decades to outgrow the newcomer appellation. But, in Fort McMurray the ideas of cooperation and belonging seem to be enhanced. These ideas and their corollaries, distance and isolation, were explored with five teachers who have lived in Fort McMurray between 15 and 30 years. Interview excerpts and literature on teachers' narratives, ethnography, and learning communities have helped to make connections and deepen my understanding of belonging in this particular place.

Travelling from Fort McMurray to attain a Master of Education degree at the University of Lethbridge was a personally challenging and professionally rewarding experience. I was comforted by the simplicity of a stark prairie landscape while studying at Lethbridge and appreciative of the Internet environment provided by the faculty for working at home, 1000 kilometres north. However, as deeply as I was enriched by those

experiences, readings, seminars, writing, research, institutes, and online discussions, none of it would matter without a place to teach.

The desire to create an electronic representation of the teachers' stories arose from my interests in geography, photography, music, art, and technology. Due to technical difficulties and time constraints, the website component is still in progress and remains a focus for future research.

Acknowledgements

A debt of gratitude is owed to my supervisors on this project. Erika Hasebe-Ludt opened my mind to the complex tapestries of curriculum, culture, and *currere* during my first summer class in graduate studies at the University of Lethbridge. Those initial lessons inspired a fruitful quest through innumerable possibilities of final projects. Five years later, Janice Rahn provided virtual yet vital connections between stories of teaching and images of life during my last course. As a teacher-artist she modeled using technology for research and as an expressive medium that I found essential to unravel disparate strands of this project. Erika guided my selection of threads while Janice showed me the loom.

I would also like to figuratively tie up loose ends of my story of becoming a teacher by casting a message of thanks to the exceptional people who taught me, whose stories nurtured my growth in the profession, and inspired me through times I thought I would quit. Perhaps you know them, people like them, the ones who demonstrated a sincere love of learning, and those with a disposition for sharing what they know with others.

Mrs. Brown, grade one, and Mrs. Kemp, grade twelve, encouraged me the most to read, write, proofread, and rewrite. Bob Sissons, Peter Schneider, Matt Sepp, Monsieur Ouelette, Sid Holmes, and Joan Mantle, taught their way through my youthful ignorance in Sudbury by sharing their particular skills and passions for teaching, social studies, music, science, and French. Margaret and Ludo Winckel modelled educational leadership in their family, schools and community. David Freisen and Paul Meunier guided my final practicum with shared ideas of graduate studies, stories and mapping one's quest. Rita Daley, Alan Day, Gord Maclock, Keith Dargatz, and Jim Kielbaugh inducted me into the profession with support and challenges in Drayton Valley. Annette Ramrattan, Colin Kelly, John Gunraj, Rod Hyde, Will Baker, Randy Chernipeski, Reg Belfontaine, Joel Lipman, and Casey Brown, guided me as a principal-teacher at Anzac opening my eyes to other perspectives of teaching, life, and learning. John Waddell, Les Hansen, Paula Hanson, and Kath Rhyason have guided my course through teaching and administration over the past five years in Fort McMurray. Thanks especially to the teachers of Thickwood Heights for teaching me well, tolerating my tangents, and helping me with this project.

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Qualitative research and evaluation can serve as a map, but they are more likely to function as a guide, ... Guides call to our attention aspects of the situation or place we might otherwise miss. ... The good guide deepens and broadens our experience and helps us to understand what we are looking at. Eisner (1991, p. 59)

Introduction

On many maps, Fort McMurray is the largest dot in the mostly unpopulated north-east quarter of Alberta near the end of a line called Highway 63. Geographically it is isolated. This project will share some of the salient aspects of the community with several experienced teachers as guides. At the beginning of this project I wondered what people thought about Fort McMurray, its location and their reasons for coming here. The stories I had heard ranged from leaving the realities of poverty elsewhere to enthusiastic adventuring to begin one's career. Economic cycles have brought waves of migration to Canada's north from as far away geographically as Africa and as distant culturally as the urban heartland. Images of natural beauty, northern lights, the stories of Jack London and poems of Robert Service, inspired some of their expectations while boom-time headlines attracted others. Resource companies have earned a reputation of generously supporting the service sectors of company towns as well as paying their own employees well. Such ideas and stereotypes of northern communities have encouraged many to come here.

A common teacher's story involving a balance of economics and idealism begins with "I just came here for a couple of years to refine my skills, pay-off student loans, and move back to..." During the 1990s, those stories ended with "...that was twenty years ago." But, many of those people have begun to retire and move away while newcomers who join us are sharing a new sentiment. "With costs the way they are right now, we can't afford to live here." My own story is not uncommon, too young to retire, but too connected to the community to leave. The teachers in this study describe a balance or

‘give-and-take’ relationship between inspiring elements of the physical landscape, challenges and successes of being a teacher, and coping with the distance-related isolation from extended family. Like them I have found Home in Fort McMurray among the people closest to me within a dynamic community and inspiring natural environment.

Why Narrative?

Stories provide a sense of belonging for us when shared. They “empower us when we decide what we will tell or write at a particular time” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1). Stories are part of the ongoing narrative among teachers. These are shared in staff rooms, and in the community. They form an oral history of teaching in different places. (Aoki, 1991) In part, this project seeks to give voice to the lives of several teachers who have chosen to make their careers in Fort McMurray. It is neither a critical analysis of curriculum nor a biography. It is a selective guide to teaching and living provided by teachers who have experienced all aspects of this situation and place. The project is also a tool for my reflection on my own story of personal and professional growth while becoming a member of this community.

The literature I consulted includes examples of teachers in unique places or situations. Ted Aoki shares two stories that portray teachers indwelling between self and the lived curriculum. Christa McAuliffe was en route to sharing her love of science and exploration with students and teachers around the world when she died in the crash of the Challenger spacecraft (Aoki, 1991). Mr. McNab, an ordinary teacher in British Columbia during World War II, modelled the importance of being present for children as he stood vigil for departing Japanese students on their way to internment camps. For at least one child, he showed caring as witness to the seemingly normal departure that would only

gain historical significance in later years (Aoki, 1991). Catherine Beaton (1997) asks readers to go “beyond a cover story” of her life as a special education teacher when she shares her narrative of being a single mother, teaching and healing while completing her Master of Education. Jo-Ann Stocki (2003) shares the frustrations of Kelly, an idealistic beginning teacher, rising quickly to administrative goals. Through graduate studies and taking leave from her relatively isolated northern teaching position she seeks to grow professionally and understand older more cynical colleagues. Margaret Ruth Olson (1993) bases her thesis on narrative biographies of two teachers through their first year of teaching. She models narrative authority in teacher education by introducing the study with her own story of growth as a student, teacher, and doctoral student again with themes of “fitting-in” and “surviving the system.”

In this project I have chosen to focus on a few of my colleagues. These are teachers who have earned my trust. Their actions have been supportive and advice relevant. They have valued me enough to ask for my help and the examples they have provided are making my life more satisfying in Fort McMurray. Craig (1999, 2003) refers to such relationships among individuals and groups with whom educators make sense of their practices as their “knowledge communities.” In this project I listened to the stories of those with more experience in order to better understand my own perceptions of teaching and community. My own thoughts of teaching and living in Fort McMurray found a voice within the context of the experiences we shared. Ultimately, this may help all of us to envisage alternative ways through the challenges and successes of teaching here in Fort McMurray and perhaps elsewhere. Pinar (1988) captures this idea succinctly when he says that

[w]e are not mere smudges on the mirror. Our life histories are not liabilities to be exorcised but are the very precondition for knowing. It is our individual and collective stories in which present projects are situated, and it is awareness of these which is the lamp illuminating the dark spots, the rough edges. (p. 148)

This project provided a unique view of the particular setting in which I live and teach. Fort McMurray has not formally been examined in the literature of educational research. Mass media reporting tends to focus on economics, sensational specific events, or the celebrities involved. My story is not exceptional and the narrative of teachers I know may be similar in some ways to those of many experienced teachers around the province. But the teachers interviewed and I can provide our perspective of being a teacher in this particular location. Our narrative will add to the only other document that shares stories of teaching here, “The Fort McMurray Dis-Advantage” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2002). It highlights the economic dark side for teachers during the current oil boom. Teachers’ anecdotes describe difficult living conditions with almost 50 pages of data comparing costs here with other Alberta locations. It was produced by the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) Local Executive and circulated during the provincial teachers’ strike, February 2002.

At that time, in rallies and meetings, many teachers shared stories and many of us asked each other: Why did we come to Fort McMurray? Why are we still here, teaching? Why aren’t we taking better paying jobs in the oil industry? People who answered these questions openly with stories of community, caring for children and supporting education made just as great an impact on me as those who spoke succinctly of economics, housing, cost of living, and comparisons to the provincial average.

In the quest to make sense of one’s life, Witherell and Noddings (1991) use the term “caring relation” to describe the notion “that the self is formed and given meaning in

the context of its relations with others” (p. 5). With that in mind I begin to understand why I continue to teach, as do most of my colleagues. Teachers continually work with and create caring relations within their classrooms. We converse with colleagues about the practical ways of belonging as teachers, with students, and in the community. We continually negotiate the meaning of ourselves in relation to others and to our community “as a complex and personal expression of knowing that grows out of and continues to be informed by a multiplicity of personal, social cultural, and political influences” (Cole, 1991, p. 185). By gathering, analysing, and publishing a few teachers’ stories I created a collective narrative that informs readers about being a teacher in Fort McMurray.

Research Question

“Why teach in Fort McMurray?” was the principal question. Its formation as a project topic began while I was a rookie principal-teacher in Anzac, 40 kilometres south-east of Fort McMurray. My own response to the question continually balanced my constantly changing perspective of the advantages and disadvantages of my position, profession, and location. What could I say to potential teachers in job interviews to encourage the good ones to accept offers of employment? Conversely, could I discourage others who appeared unable to cope with northern life and teaching conditions? Should I? What were the most important factors for teaching and living here? Teaching skill, yes. But were there specific aptitudes or attitudes that would enable one to adapt to the local landscape: With less than three years of administrative experience and eight years as a teacher, what did I know? So, I began to ask others, listen to their answers, listen for clues in daily conversation and observe how the experienced people lived and taught. In living with the research questions, I was also asking myself three component questions:

“Why Teach?”, “Why Fort McMurray?”, and “Why Teach in Fort McMurray rather than driving an oil sands’ dump truck for \$80,000 year plus overtime?”

To see if my colleagues also had doubts about teaching, being in Fort McMurray, or not taking more money for a less demanding job, I asked a series of probe questions. They were outlined chronologically through the interview to parallel phases of what I perceived to be a teachers’ professional life (Appendix A). The first probe, “When and where did you start teaching?” revealed that Fort McMurray was the first or second teaching place for all five of the interviewees. Other questions were meant to encourage reflections of fitting in as a teacher in Fort McMurray. For each probe question I asked the teachers if they perceived their role self-determined or inspired by others, family, colleagues, community, or the environment. I was interested in finding out to what extent teachers had consciously thought about their roles and identity in the community when making decisions about their lives and careers in Fort McMurray. Had the teachers I interviewed gone through similar reflections and formed a personal narrative as I had? If so, did they perceive a connection between their personal and professional relationships with the in-school and community landscapes affecting their decisions. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) suggest the “holistic nature of narrative is to connect personal stories to action and an intentional future” (p. 245). In essence, had these teachers undertaken an informal kind of action research by thinking about important times and decisions on their own and had the questions I posed encouraged formal reflections that would influence future actions.

Clandinin and Connelly (1990, 1999, 2000) provide many examples of teachers’ stories in a variety of contexts. Their reflections on knowledge and identity helped me to

understand the scope and value of a variety of teaching and learning situations in many school settings. The teachers in this study have developed relationships and taken specific actions over many years in the school landscape and as key members of the knowledge community I have grown to rely upon. They have also acted in the out-of-school landscape, having family, friends, and social relationships that depend upon their involvement. Depending on the detail of teachers' answers to the probe questions, I inquired further about the significance of particular people or relationships. "How did this (issue/perspective/decision) relate to your personal identity? How did it relate to your teaching? ...to your family? ...to extended family? ...to your 'home' or former community"?

The best model I have found for viewing the interconnections a person has with his or her surroundings is the aboriginal worldview illustrated by Coutu and Hoffman-Mercredi (1999). It includes the self, at the centre of a circle representing life, outward to family, community, and environment. It explains the supernatural or holistic connection among all things. A more basic concentric model is promoted by Covey (1991). One's character, talent, time, tools, and ability to use them determine the innermost "circle of influence" (p. 42). These are the things that really matter in life, personal and proximate needs or responsibilities. For Covey anything else is in the outer "circle of concern" that includes things we may voice concern for, but lack abilities to influence. With specific reference to teaching, Craig (1983) puts "influences on the first-year teacher" at the centre with elements of the in-school landscape in the adjacent layer. Out-of-school landscape, including college classes, family, friends, and parents of students fill the

outermost layer (p. 6). Perhaps this suggests these factors are of peripheral significance for teachers?

Aoki (1991) describes teaching as three-layered voices that are heard to varying degrees by researchers and curriculum developers. The overview, “black box” perspective of teaching, is technological. He suggests there is a generally accepted top-down view of delivering pre-packaged curriculum that negates the need for prescient teachers. The second layer includes observable formulations of knowledge, roles and behaviours that might be modeled by teachers. It includes a set of practical competencies that are mastered by effective teachers. The innermost layer focuses on teaching as a mode of being. These layered voices are the composite experience of daily life among human beings and interaction among teachers as colleagues and with their students. At the core, Aoki calls a “place where care dwells” (p. 3) as true pedagogic leading that happens between teachers and students. This is the composite layer I believe extends throughout one’s life and into the community. With these layered and concentric models in mind, I reflected upon teachers’ stories of times and situations that have encouraged them to teach in Fort McMurray.

Through this project I hoped to gain an understanding of the voices of teachers by asking for their stories, listening to them, and sharing their common themes with readers. They reflected on real situations of teaching and living in Fort McMurray. Their stories conveyed perceptions of identity and belonging; knowledge and skills; attitudes and aptitudes; and appreciation for the particular balance among people and the environment necessary to be a teacher in Fort McMurray. Witherell and Noddings underscore the importance of stories as powerful research tools when they suggest stories...

...invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning, and researching to improve the human condition. Telling and listening to stories can be a powerful sign of regard – of caring – for one another. (1991, p. 280).

Teaching in Fort McMurray for many years involves participating in the narrative of being present for students in a dynamic northern community. Environmentally, culturally and economically this community provides rewards and challenges. This project seeks common elements of the stories shared by several teachers to give a collective voice to those who have chosen to work here for the better part of their professional lives.

Methodology

This project is a narrative ethnography that includes the story of myself, as the action researcher, and the overall focus extends to several teachers. The aim of the project was to create an electronic disc or website with which to share stories of Fort McMurray teachers. My interests in geography, photography, music, art, and technology had drawn me to produce a multi-media collage of images, sounds, and video clips linked with text to convey a composite narrative of teaching and living in Fort McMurray. The research questions were asked during semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers invited to participate by the researcher. Interviews were recorded with cassette and digital audio as well as compact videotape. Each teacher reviewed between 15 and 30 years of teaching and living in the north in about one hour. Consequently, transcripts of the interviews provide only a partial narrative of the professional landscape and community landscapes interviewees inhabited during that time. Transcripts of the interviews were coded with reference to common themes that arose spontaneously or as a result of probe

questions. To analyse these story segments and put them into a succinct narrative form I have reviewed and written about the common themes presented by the teachers. I have also drawn upon my own reflections as biographical reference for myself and as a foundation for this study. Jerome Bruner's (1990) view of the self is useful in understanding the importance of an individual's biography in order to make meaning of the current context. He sees a socially constructed concept much in the same way we construct other concepts, the self is "distributed" because it is a "product of the situations in which it operates" (p. 109).

Teachers were asked to provide or suggest images for me to gather that would exemplify Fort McMurray and their time in this place. It was hoped that multi-media components of this project would enhance the text of the final report on a compact disc. Technologically, it was advantageous to have three recording devices activated at one time. Microphone placement was critical to the clarity of recording on both digital and cassette recorders. The digital recorder was capable of the best recording when placed within one foot of the interviewee and settings were placed to high quality. The type of videotape used, VHS Hi-8, was not long enough to record complete interviews. So this was only used for the summary narrative at the end of each interview. Technical difficulties, such as poor sound quality and lack of the necessary graphics card and software to transfer video onto a compact disc, forced me to focus on audio, text and still photography to support the stories. Using web technology was also meant to provide visual links between the teachers, the landscape, and their stories. All interviewees were accustomed with the technology and were comfortable with the text and photographic publishing of their stories. One teacher requested not to be videotaped. I began to create a

disc of linked images and audio to provide a multi-media tableau upon which to present the text of teaching and community. This aspect of the project continues to evolve as a subplot to be revealed in a later rewriting of the story.

From the beginning of this project, five years ago when I began my Master's program, I thought it should include everything. As an avid science fiction reader I likened this quest to Douglas Adam's "ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything" to which he devoted years of writing and production of several books and the television series "Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy" (1980). Ideas of what I should include in my own master piece ran from the very first thoughts I had of becoming a teacher to current professional growth plans and representative elements of my entire graduate studies program. I also reflected on experiences and kept an electronic journal with innumerable files of generally relevant aspects of teaching and life in relatively isolated northern communities. Some of them included suggestions, memories, and stories of meeting and working with the teachers being interviewed.

Technology has become integral to all of my work as a student and a teacher, so I was convinced that my project should provide an exemplary product of everything I was capable of doing with my home computer including the creation of a multi-media website. Losing many of these files due to computer problems or software failure was a concern until I read about Wilma, in Kim Stafford's (1986) "Call this, the story that saved life", She suggests many generations of work are required for a story. "You have to forget 90% of what happens if you want to tell the story right" (p. 17). Extraneous details, "burrs and sawdust" must be rubbed away to bring a story down to size. Perhaps, the best parts of teaching in Fort McMurray for over 15 years are the most prominent stories in

the memories of the teachers sharing them. This has been a long and difficult process for me to narrow the project topic and delete links to copious pages of background data and arrive at a unified response. But, like Adam's, with considerable patience from advisors and family, I have found a cohesive way to ask the questions and consider the answers.

To create the narrative of coming to teach and live here, I began and concluded each interview with the principle research question. I expected teachers would present the most forthright response at the beginning and provide a more thoughtful story after taking time through the interview to reflect upon their experiences. Hopefully, a better story "rich with threads of time, place, character, and even advice on what we might do with our lives" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1) would emerge and be used to encourage prospective teachers to come to Fort McMurray. To elicit these best stories, prompt reflection, and avoid tangents I used a page of scripted probe questions. This set of questions provided sequential categories for the interviews beginning with the times of being hired and first arrival. Further questions focused on the teachers' perceptions of challenges and successes while teaching and living in Fort McMurray. In conclusion I asked the teachers for thoughts on their future plans as they grow toward retirement and what advice they could provide for new teachers coming to Fort McMurray.

Analysis

"The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (King, 2003, p. 2). The researcher's story has provided a plot outline with the time and focus framed by interview questions. The teachers are characters, protagonists in their stories and playing supporting roles in the community. Within the project's parameters I found a partial view of teaching in Fort McMurray relevant to the interviewees' current vantage as experienced teachers.

The participants reflected upon times of arrival, challenges, success, and thoughts of what comes next. In this way the teachers provided a dynamic perspective. As a researcher-photographer, I captured images of these teachers, their classrooms, schools, and community, from my own viewpoint. Likewise, my own experiences have guided the stories the teachers have provided because of the nature of the probing questions I used. To clarify the setting for these perspectives I begin the analysis with teachers' stories and short biographies of the interviewees. Then I conclude with general themes of community that were identified.

The Teachers

This first section of analysis is an introduction to the characters. They are five teachers who I have gotten to know over the past five years in Fort McMurray. In different ways they have contributed to my personal and professional growth during that time. Craig (1999) would call them members of my "knowledge community" because the work and conversations we have shared at school, in the community, and within this project have helped me to make sense of my teaching practices and life in Fort McMurray. I have written a short biography of the teachers to introduce them to you.

Mrs. Z

During the time I have known Mrs. Z, I have seen her as a model teacher who integrates technology into instruction while managing even the most challenging students in her primary classroom. She is an exceptional organizer, putting tons of experience, energy, and creativity into everything she does. Dramatic productions at our school give children a time to shine. You can count on Mrs. Z as having something to do with the quality of their performance. Thinking of retirement, Mrs. Z acknowledges "it's coming."

But, until then she is very happy being a “professional classroom teacher” and regularly taking-on projects like plays, musicals, and websites.

Having taught in rural Manitoba for her first year, she and her husband were looking toward life in a larger community where they could both be employed, settle down and raise a family. They arrived for interviews in a December snowstorm, 1981, and decided to stay for the long term within the first two years of living here. “We came from a community of 135 people in Manitoba and that was isolation.” They have lived and taught here for 23 years.

Mrs. Z’s answer to “Why teach in Fort McMurray?” is . . .

I think teaching in Fort McMurray gives you opportunities that you probably wouldn’t find in a larger urban centre. Great school district, you get a lot of support from teachers. It’s a good place to be teaching. It’s also a good place to learn. I like the community because there are good services, but also a chance to become independent. We came to Fort McMurray for work, but we stayed because we love it.

Mrs. Z’s interview was conducted in her classroom, after school. We sat at primary students’ desks on small chairs and followed the interview script fairly closely. We were interrupted by a couple of announcements over the P.A. from the office and we hastened our pace as we tried to get back to the script. Her responses were very concise with little voluntary elaboration. Mrs. Z summarized what is really important for teachers, “...there are things you really do enjoy about the children. Just the day-to-day stuff...” After the formal interview, my first for this project, we talked about problems with the technology and using three recording devices. When reviewing this, my first interview, I thought I should relax a bit and not adhere so rigidly to the interview script.

Mrs. M

During the time I have known Mrs. M, she has been nominated for an Excellence in Teaching Award and taught my two eldest sons. I have known her as a model teacher and as a mature professional meeting the challenges of computer literacy. She began her career at age 19 in a rural school close to home in Saskatchewan. She soon began to earn her permanent teaching certificate by taking courses and teaching in schools around Prince Albert and Saskatoon. After marrying and moving to British Columbia she began to take courses toward her Education degree and when her husband was transferred to work in Fort McMurray during the mid 1970s, Mrs. M focused on caring for her family, and teaching whenever practical.

She has lived a rich and balanced story of caring for her daughters, husband, and managing the household while playing active roles in the communities of church, preschool, Brownies, Guides, and school. Mrs. M took a break from her teaching career when her daughters were young and gradually worked back into the profession through substitute teaching and taking-on short term contracts. Like me, Mrs. M made time to upgrade her teaching credentials. She took correspondence courses and attended May and June summer sessions when her husband could take care of the girls before and after school. For the last few years, as children have moved away and her husband has been retired, Mrs. M has committed her energy, focus, and experience to teaching her students. During the interview she wondered aloud about taking seventeen years off with children and not having a few more years to count towards pension. But, she has never been sorry about the time she has spent with her family. As this school year draws to a close Mrs. M is making plans for retirement. She will keep teaching in some way, possibly through her

church helping people learn to read, as an ESL instructor, working in a library, or as a tutor through her church or private learning centre.

Mrs. M's answer to "Why teach in Fort McMurray?" is . . .

Fort McMurray has many opportunities. It has a wonderful area around it and there are wonderful people working in the community as well as in the schools. I think there is every opportunity to use your gifts and your talents here and what you do is appreciated.

My interview with Mrs. M was conducted in her classroom, after school. She sat at her solid maple teacher's desk on an equally solid wooden chair. I sat in a large student's chair across the desk from her. I had the impression that she and I were more comfortable in this setting than either Mrs. Z or I during the first interview. Her responses were fairly concise but she did elaborate in some areas while I relaxed my attention to the detailed prompts listed on the interview script. We greeted one interruption by a caretaker with an offer to interview her next. We all laughed and ignored anything we heard over the P.A. system.

Mr. B

I have known Mr. B as a coach, mentor in coaching, referee 'on and off court', a fellow science teacher, and role model as a teaching dad. His youngest daughter attended kindergarten with my second son. He came to Fort McMurray with his wife in 1988 after a year as a teaching intern and a year of substitute teaching. There was a desperate shortage of teaching positions for graduates during the 1980s and Mr. B had applied to dozens of places before accepting a job with the Fort McMurray Public School District.

He was originally hired as a science, computing, and math teacher, but with interests in Outdoor Education and being a male in an elementary/junior high school he gravitated to coaching. He has been the Physical Education teacher at his current school

for several years. He participates actively in the local Health and Physical Education Counsel, and has supported scouting and a local dance group for his children.

Mr. B's wife is also a professional with very marketable skills regardless of community. They got to know people through their local church, became comfortably established with jobs and by their third year started their family and settled down "for the long term." They keep in touch with family by telephone, making regular visits to parents and relatives in southern Alberta, and have encouraged others to come and visit despite the highway "seeming longer" for most to travel north than for Mr. B to travel south.

Considering years of teaching and his age, Mr. B suggested he won't have to make decisions about retirement for another ten years. He suggests there could be a lot of changes over that time with the oil industry, the growth of the city, and meeting the challenges of raising his teenage children. Mr. B knows people who have returned or remained in Fort McMurray to be close to children as they are growing-up and getting jobs in town or in the oil sands. Mr. B and his wife have been looking forward to doing service projects through their church. Mr. B's answer to "Why teach in Fort McMurray?" is . . .

I think the school community we have in the public and separate school districts, are very supportive. The long-term prospect is good. The teachers that have been here for most of their career have stayed for all the right reasons. It's a great place to be, the administrators that I've had experience with are all very adept at their jobs as administrators with people, students and balancing the things of government requirements and the personal sides of things. So I've been very happy to be here and work with people. On a personal side, it's a great community. I really enjoy it, the outdoor activities, everything oriented for a family and if you don't mind a little drive to the large centre of Edmonton or Calgary, then it's as good a place to live that I've ever been, and I've traveled around.

My interview with Mr. B was conducted after school hours, in his office adjacent the school gym. A rehearsal for the school musical was beginning and the vice principal

interrupted within the first few minutes to follow-up on a student issue. Mr. B was the most forthcoming of the interviewees so far. His responses to my scaled-down probe questions told a story of life and teaching with which I could readily empathise. Perhaps our comfort level through the interview relates to our shared stories of being male elementary teachers in a predominantly female profession.

Of all the interviewees, Mr. B has taught in Fort McMurray for the shortest period of time, 15 years. As gym teacher for the entire school and head coach, Mr. B has provided considerable leadership to staff members, like myself, in our coaching duties. One of Mr. B's ideas of success in teaching is the recognition of former students returning to say, "thank you" or "you've made a difference in my learning". Lately, he has also considered graduate studies in education and discussed his ideas with me. This interview may have given him the opportunity to reflect on his life and articulate his ideas of life as a teacher in Fort McMurray.

Mr. and Mrs. F

Mr. and Mrs. F have been my neighbours as well as colleagues. They came to Fort McMurray in 1975 for their first teaching jobs and have seen most of the schools and much of the city being built over their three decades here. Of the interviewees, Mr. and Mrs. F have lived in Fort McMurray the longest. Almost 30 years. They came from rural communities east of Edmonton and despite having been raised less than 100 km from each other and attending university at the same time they didn't actually meet until they came to Fort McMurray. But, they have grown as teachers and as a family with more stories of teaching and the community to share than one could cover in this project.

Mrs. F's interests have been in primary education and children's literature with considerable time and energy focused on her own children and maintaining their family home. Mrs. F's answer to "Why teach in Fort McMurray?" is . . .

There are several reasons why you may choose to teach in Fort McMurray. Personally if you enjoy nature, it's best. Seeing deer in your front yard, foxes on the golf course, wolves and bear on the greenbelt.

Also Fort McMurray is a relatively young and multi-cultural community, which offers and supports many resources and experiences for a growing family. Professionally, Fort McMurray is a place that brings out the best in teachers. Due to its remoteness, colleagues look to each other for support, and as a result, there is a unique bond and relationship established in the community of educators in Fort McMurray.

If you enjoy meeting challenges, Fort McMurray is the place for you! Overall, Fort McMurray is a good place to teach and meet many interesting students as well as colleagues.

Mr. F's is more community oriented. From a farming background and a year developing curriculum for Alberta Agriculture, he has progressed through elementary and secondary teaching positions related to Outdoor Education, Computers, and Career and Technology Studies. Mr. F has enjoyed many outdoor recreational activities including refereeing for the softball league and officiating for other sports and tournaments like the Arctic Winter Games. He has been a frequent visitor to my school, as district technology consultant. He has modeled patience, perseverance, and personal integrity as a mentor, teacher, and decent person. Mr. F's answer to "Why teach in Fort McMurray?" is . . .

If you're starting out in a teaching career and looking for a progressive board, Fort McMurray has one of the most progressive boards in Alberta. The community has city-like activities yet it's small enough to be a big town. If you like nature it's just a step outside. It's good to teach here. When you're starting out, teachers will help you when you need any assistance.

Thinking toward retirement within the next five years, Mr. and Mrs. F will likely move someplace close to family and outdoor activities. As their children are still working through their post secondary education, Mrs. F says 'one thing at a time' suggesting

parents' retirement after children's graduation. They both enjoy teaching and have talked about facing challenges with genuine care for the welfare of their students. A major factor for them to remain as teachers will be government commitments to reducing class sizes and providing funds to support special needs students. They see those areas as frustrations for teachers all over Alberta as well as in Fort McMurray.

The interview with Mr. and Mrs. F was the most relaxed and fruitful. They welcomed me into their home with a table full of baking and comfortable chairs. I had a sense of déjà-vu as we began. Mrs. F had interviewed my wife and I for a course she had taken during the fall term. Like my wife and me, they have both modelled lifelong learning by taking courses whenever time permitted via correspondence or through the local college. Having a good understanding of studies in education and the key elements of my project, they were quite at ease throughout the interview. Upon review of the transcripts, I found that all areas of probe questions had been addressed without following the script. For me, this final interview, with shared answers between husband and wife, provided the most enlightening and narrative review of teaching in Fort McMurray.

Themes of Community

Community is the universal theme found in this study. The teachers provided practical examples relating the concepts of place and location to their feelings of belonging and having a home in Fort McMurray. Community, according to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, is a "unified body of individuals" that may be "the people with common interests living in a particular area". Community can also describe "the (geographic) area itself" or "a group linked by common policy, ...having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests" (Woolf, 1975, p. 228). For

the purposes of this project, I have considered the *particular area* of Fort McMurray, a place with particular topographic features, physical elements of nature, and a specific map location in northern Alberta, as *geographic landscape*. Similarly, I have considered the *unified body of individuals* as the population of Fort McMurray with various historical and social relationships. Teachers in particular are defined in this study as *human landscape*. With those ideas in mind, the words *community* and *Fort McMurray*, including the region around it, were used interchangeably throughout this study.

To a great extent, the differences between geographic and human landscapes parallel the differences between the teachers' out-of-school lives and in-school lives. Away from school, in our homes and interacting with the greater community we are more likely to be influenced by the geographic landscape while at school and in our learning communities the relationships are generally limited to the human landscape. All of the interviewees viewed Fort McMurray as a particular geographically remote place with an active population in which newcomers could easily fit in. They qualified the notion of being isolated with anecdotes supporting the cultural vigour and openness of various social, educational, recreational, religious, and other interest communities that comprise Fort McMurray society. However, the degree to which teachers fit in or adapt to these landscapes determines how likely one is going to feel at home in Fort McMurray. Interviewees shared ideas of a place with naturally beautiful surroundings, reasonably sized human landscape with teaching and learning environments unencumbered by layers of bureaucracy and supported by a substantial economic base that has met most residents' needs for the past 40 years. I found that all of the teachers perceived certain aspects of landscape to be important for enjoying life in Fort McMurray. To facilitate analysis, I

have organised the teachers' views of this community by focusing on the sub-themes of geographic landscape and human landscape.

Geographic Landscape

The geography of Fort McMurray, its physical location, environmental attributes, and general landscape make it an exceptional community in which to live as a teacher and have a life outside of school. Webster's dictionary defines landscape as "landforms of a region in aggregate" (Woolf, 1975, p. 646). Interviewees described the environment as providing challenges, inspiration, and opportunities for outdoor education. All of the interviewees admitted an appreciation for nature, outdoor recreation, wildlife and trees. They also expressed the importance of finding balance in one's life to accommodate some of the environmental extremes inherent to living in the north. To reflect on images of the physical environment that teachers shared through the interviews I focused on the specific aspects of location and place.

Location is where we find Fort McMurray, in the northern woodlands, isolated from other communities by great distances of relatively unpopulated and agriculturally unproductive land, and having particular climatic features that are common with other northern regions. The specific aspects of location that were important to the interviewees were distance and climate. The location of Fort McMurray is isolated. It is the largest urban community located northeast of Edmonton. But, as Mrs. M explains, "you've got one road out and one road in and if you've gone down that road, ...then you're finished. There isn't a road network like in other areas". The prairie-wide grid of rural roads, secondary highways, and small farming communities ends 250 kilometres to the south and a drive to Edmonton takes at least four-and-a-half hours. This kind of isolation is a

reason for some people to not come to Fort McMurray. Mr. B recalls “A typical reaction ...was that the road north was longer than the road south” so he had to coerce people to come and visit at first. “After they had made one visit it was no big deal and we’d see them again”. Likewise, teachers who choose to live here must become accustomed to the long trip through the trees or be satisfied with remaining in the local landscape. Fort McMurray is unique as the only community designated as a city in this quarter of Alberta and is the only city lacking agricultural hinterland in the entire province. Most of the surrounding 68,454 square kilometre Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is covered with boreal forest. Beyond the municipality, forests stretch across the entire continent in a band of spruce and poplar with pockets of pine and birch where conditions are right. It is a sparsely populated region of Canada speckled by lakes, camps for fishing and hunting, and dotted by logging and mining sites. (Daly, 1992. p. 40). Of all the settlements in this band of forest Fort McMurray is arguably the largest, most permanent, and possibly least isolated.

Mrs. F suggested a balance for considering geographic factors of distance and isolation from extended family. “We were close enough to family and yet far enough from family that we could establish our own family unit and have space.” With respect to family, Mr. B said telephones are an easy way to keep in touch and as teachers we have seasonal “...breaks that you can use to stay close to your family wherever they are. If you choose to travel or have them come here” (Mr. B transcript 22). When guests do travel to this region they can take advantage of the vast natural surroundings that offer limitless possibilities of fishing, hunting, camping, canoeing, and driving recreational vehicles.

To set the stage for the interviewees' comments on climate here is a description of our home. On any map of Canada, Fort McMurray's location appears to be just south of the Northwest Territories. It is closer to the Arctic Circle than the United States border and well north of the most populous centres of southern Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. The location suggests a cold climate. This is true during winter months with limited daylight keeping most of the potential heat away. We do have weeks of -30°C and occasional nights down to -40°C . Teachers run their cars during lunch hour to ensure they will start after school. It is common for parking lots and intersections throughout town to be obscured by the fog of vehicle exhaust. As teachers we dread the frequent 'cold snaps' from December to February with weeks of indoor recesses. Board policy limits outdoor activities when daytime temperatures are colder than -20°C . This frustrates energetic students in overcrowded classes, but, each of the teachers interviewed provided examples of appropriate indoor activities. Fort McMurray rarely receives the harsh storms and winds experienced in southern Alberta and so schools have an *always open* policy unless the pipes freeze or furnaces don't work. According to the Atlas of Alberta (1969, p. 16) Annual precipitation for this area is similar to Lethbridge and Medicine Hat in the southern most part of the province. In the north precipitation mostly falls as rain in the summer. Snowfall is minimal with dry crystals rather than the heavy damp snow falling elsewhere. It isn't so bad because *it's a dry cold* . . .

During winter Mrs. F suggested that Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a growing concern the community. SAD is an emotional or psychological condition resulting from lack of sunlight, possibly linked to a shortage of vitamins. We agreed that arriving at school and leaving in the dark was depressing. She recalled that one year her

family took a winter vacation to Florida and how much better and more quickly that year seemed to pass. Mr. F also noted after-school activities were limited to indoor pursuits for most people during the winter. Winter is a time of dormancy, mostly. Mrs. M said she becomes “a little tired of winter from time to time, dragging on a little too long.” Mr. F suggests a need for six months of warm weather and daylight to balance the winters. “...at 4:00 pm it’s dark. What are you going to do? Can’t go cross-country skiing... It’s basically Saturday and Sunday afternoons.” Many people find belonging to either of the local ski clubs rewarding. Vista Ridge provides excellent instruction, ski team support, lights for night skiing, and a fabulous lodge for non-skiers just 20 minutes from town. The Birchwood Trails, joining Thickwood and Timberlea crisscross the Conn Creek valley. They provide a venue for all levels of Nordic skiing, nature hiking, and a limited amount of dog walking. Snowmobiling is also a big attraction for this area. Having arrived for her first interview in a December snowstorm, Mrs. Z admits weather has never been a challenge. She thought it was a beautiful city all the same. “It’s cold and dark in Winnipeg, too. Maybe not as cold or dark.” During winter, there are many opportunities for indoor activities, culturally and recreationally.

Spring arrives a month later than in southern Alberta, but rapidly increasing daily temperatures melt the snow quickly and average summer temperatures are within a few degrees of the rest of the province. Around-the-clock daylight is another product of our northern location. As the annual tilt of the earth’s axis brings more direct sunlight to the northern hemisphere, Fort McMurray experiences twilight from midnight until two in the morning. The night sky is only black on cloudy nights from late May to early August. With the added solar energy many people find it difficult to sleep at night. Stories of

empathy for the shift workers at the mines are often shared as more members of the community find themselves staying awake later at night or getting up earlier in the morning.

Signs of outdoor activity are apparent in every schoolyard as children's baseball, soccer, and football occur every evening and weekend. Skateboarding teens and children of absentee shift-working parents can be seen at corner stores and parks past midnight. In May it isn't uncommon for people to be doing yard work while their children play till ten or eleven, even on school nights. Teaching is difficult, focusing on year-end goals, exams, and provincial achievement tests, when sleep patterns of teachers and students alike are disrupted. Depending upon one's appreciation for these factors of a continental climate and northern location, Fort McMurray may or may not be a desirable place to live and teach.

Place is the unique combination of natural resources, topography, settlement patterns, and human interactions with the natural world that are found at this particular location. As a place Fort McMurray is more than a dot at the end of the line called Highway 63. The teachers and I have come to know, appreciate, and discuss the city as an urban landscape intermingled with elements of the natural environment. The physical geography not only supplies the city's industrial *raison d'être* but also presents a visual backdrop, setting, or venue for activity in all areas of the community.

Extraction of natural resources has always been the economic base for Fort McMurray. Through history, the lowland at the mouth of the Clearwater River has been significant to humans. The Athabaskan, Chipewyan, and Dene peoples used this area for seasonal campsites where bands met to prepare food and skins for their own use and to

trade. Later this meeting place became a dot on the maps drawn by fur traders and explorers like Peter Pond and David Thomson. The earliest record of bitumen, the oily sand that currently provides wealth for the community, was written in the journals of Alexander MacKenzie. Fish and other wildlife are no longer a food staple, but currently meet the needs of hunters, eco-tourists and outdoor enthusiasts from around the world who visit area lodges (Travel Canada, 2004). Local trees are even harvested when displaced by roads, construction and the open pits of oil sand mines for processing by a local lumber company. The area is an excellent location for many lessons in history, geography, and science (Fort McMurray Historical Society, 2004).

Both Mr. B and Mr. F acknowledge being drawn to the north because of the chance to teach outdoors. “What’s the outdoor education for students?” was the first thing Mr. F asked about during his job interview. He recalls taking grade six classes camping each fall and spring for two or three days when teaching at Dr. Clark and Clearwater Schools. Despite the need to be aware of potential dangers and be prepared to avoid trouble, Fort McMurray has a very active recreational community of dog walkers, tree fort builders, mountain bikers, hikers, runners, walkers, and skiers who also use the woods and trails regularly.

In Fort McMurray, there is a noticeable hierarchy of affluence. During boom time, anyone working in the oil industry does well including service sector businesses and workers who are able to charge and earn whatever the market will bear. However, when the oil market is low many people find themselves out of work. Mrs. M’s husband was laid-off by the employer that transferred him to Fort McMurray when faced with the downturn of the 1980s. As teaching positions everywhere were also rare at that time,

they decided to remain in the town where Mrs. M had recently been awarded a teaching contract. Teachers were still needed in Fort McMurray despite the lack of work in the oil industry. Employees of the two major mines also have relatively secure jobs and benefits through the economic cycles.

Fort McMurray is the urban core, service centre, and seat of government for the largely forested Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. In forty years the city has grown from 1,186 to 56,111 (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, 2004). During the 1970s neighbourhoods were cut out of the bush on five adjacent hills, each having between 3,000 to 18,000 people according to the current census. “Let’s put it this way. In 1975, there was no Thickwood Heights or Beaconhill. All there was, was Downtown and Waterways. The community just started growing.” Several valleys carved by smaller rivers converge at Fort McMurray. They form barriers between neighbourhoods giving the impression of being in a series of much smaller settlements.

Schools are the heart of each neighbourhood in Fort McMurray. School sites include one public and one Catholic school, with shared playing fields managed by the municipal parks department. Subdivisions have been planned to take advantage of the natural contours with schools, playgrounds, apartments, and commercial buildings in the widest flat land. Streets with single-family housing reach out along ridges with greenbelts and nature trails running the perimeters linking between neighbourhoods. Mrs. Z noted “in two minutes you’re in the bush.” Forested slopes of creek valleys join the major river valleys as continuous tendrils of the boreal forest that surrounds us. “The physical setting is beautiful. Any city in a river valley that hasn’t been totally concreted over is a great place to be.” The teachers at our school regularly take students along the greenbelt and

into the valley for physical education and science. Mrs. M also “loves the area, as far as the way it looks, the rivers, the hills, and the changing seasons.” The parks and wilderness areas have regularly inspired creative art and writing experiences for teachers to share with their students.

Mrs. F has been inspired by “seeing deer in (her) front yard, foxes on the golf course, wolves and bear on the greenbelt ...it’s like living in Jasper, except we don’t have mountains.” As a neighbour to Mr. and Mrs. F, the deer generally graze on my mountain ash berries on the way to their yard. Mrs. Z and her husband also appreciate the outdoors, woods, and trails. Having grown up in Winnipeg, with excellent parks and trails, they have appreciated improvements to the local trails made over the years. “A place we could run the dogs... it was everything we were looking for.” All of the interviewees had positive things to say about nature and their personal ways of coping, appreciating or engaging actively in the environment.

Not all of the nature surrounding Fort McMurray is “Bambi cute” or pet friendly. Natural Resources placed a bear trap in the greenbelt across the road during the first month I moved to town. With three young children, we had seldom worried about wild animals when living in the bush at Anzac, where everyone had large dogs to scare the wildlife. Five years later, I now worry about the increased traffic of impatient or sleepy shift workers and contractors racing between work and home. Natural dangers have also increased in the form of cougars along some of the more remote trails near the Athabasca River. Occasional sightings have linked them to the disappearance of smaller domestic animals. We always confirm safety issues, bring cell phones and pack first aid kits when heading into the woods for nature hikes, fitness runs, or cross country skiing. High school

groups and physical education classes take advantage of the surroundings with seasonal camping and canoe trips.

People considering a teaching career in Fort McMurray might well consider their relationship with nature. Some school-based opportunities exist for studying and enjoying the natural environment. The location and climate provide challenges that can be overcome or at least tolerated. In dealings with parents and living in this area the economic realities of natural resource extraction are facts of life that environmentalists might find difficult to live with. Along with the natural beauty this landscape holds many challenges and some dangers of which incoming teachers should be aware.

Human Landscape

Fort McMurray is geographically isolated, but its human community maintains an active culture, first through a variety of local services and associations, and secondly through personal and organisational connections with other places. Interviewees made reference to a personal and professional quality of life that has been enriched by people coming from all over the world to build a new community together. The predominantly young and mobile population arriving to work in the oil industry, service sector, and teaching in particular has generally left extended families behind. This lack of familial connection seems to have enabled stronger relationships among neighbours, coworkers, and members of social groups. The qualities of these relationships and activities they share have also been ameliorated by the relatively great wealth and small size of Fort McMurray. However, these aspects of community have been maturing over 30 years since the first oil boom. Global economics, provincial politics, a growing population, an aging workforce, and a decreasing percentage of newcomers are changing the small town

atmosphere of Fort McMurray and teachers' lives here. To facilitate analysis, I have organised the teachers' views of the human landscape by focusing on the sub-themes of small town dynamics, learning community, and home community.

Fort McMurray is often spoken about as having a small town feel with big city services. This may be true for three reasons, the first being that the actual population is small for a city. Franklin Avenue is the only main street with two schools, apartment buildings, and businesses distributed over its three-kilometre span. Downtown is generally thought of as a four square block area near the north end of Franklin where municipal and oil company offices are located along with banks, hotels, and other commercial property. Second, the geographic landscape provides natural divisions making most of residential neighbourhoods seem like small towns. Compared to the vastness of surrounding forests the urban footprint is small. Third, and most vital for this section on human landscape, are the people of Fort McMurray. The people, workers, families, and teachers have a lot in common with each other and their surroundings that could also be true in other small one-industry towns. This is basically a one-industry town with two companies and their employees dominating the economy since the first oil boom. 63% of the regional workforce is employed by oil companies or by contractors doing work for the industry. (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, 2004, p. 16). Anyone providing services for their operations, for their families, or teaching their children couldn't help becoming aware of the interdependence between the oil industry and the community.

Through Fort McMurray's oil boom history a joke has been told: What is the largest city of Newfoundlanders? The answer is Fort McMurray. Since the 1960s many

Maritimers, especially from Newfoundland, have made their way from small fishing, logging, and mining towns to Fort McMurray. With them they have brought skills from centuries-old coal mining history, technical training in the oil industry gained through work on North Atlantic oil projects like Hybernia, and a particular *joie de vivre* from generations of life in small close-knit communities. Maritimers continue to be a significant minority of the local population with an active “Newfoundlanders’ Club” and noticeable spoken accents to be heard in all sectors of society. During the 1970s influx of people, such a preponderance of Easterners moved into the Abasand neighbourhood that locals have unofficially dubbed it Newfie Heights. These Eastern connections and the overall notion that Fort McMurray has a small town atmosphere encouraged me to Gerald Pocius’s study of Calvert, Newfoundland, “A Place to Belong” (1991).

Compared to the rich ethnography of a community shared by Gerald Pocius this project is a mere snapshot. His study took years of intense investigation as a participant-observer as well as exhaustive archival exploration, mapping, photography, thorough serial interviews, and historical analysis. In comparison, this project is based on five interviews and background observations of the researcher’s five-year residency in the community. The five teachers interviewed have lived in Fort McMurray between fifteen and thirty years. There are obvious connections between people and the physical landscape in both of these studies. However, the 300-year history of fishing, gardening, and living has given Calvert’s population a tangible sense of belonging. Certain places and buildings hold greater significance than the individuals who have owned, possessed, or shared them at a particular time. Residents could describe the proprietary history of most material elements of the community. In Fort McMurray, the teachers expressed the

importance of shared spaces, nature, greenbelts, trails, and outdoor activities, but with much less sense of permanence and no suggestion of ownership. Their histories of 20 years or less limit their connection with the geography. Photos suggested by the teachers to supplement their narratives were chosen because of personal connections. This differs from Pocius's images in that his subjects could trace connections to elements of the physical landscape through generations of family history and importance to the community. The teachers only mentioned details of material culture, homes, schools, places, or structures in the community as points of reference. For the teachers, human relationships, the day-to-day dynamics of teaching, class size, quality of programs, and issues of student needs being affected by family housing situations and parental work schedules were most important to their sense of belonging to this particular place.

Each of the interviewees had something to say about the affects of parental work patterns on their children during the 1970s and the current oil boom. Shift work at the mines and a 30-60 minute bus ride each way puts significant stress on many families. Children spend more time with babysitters or on their own. Those with well-paid parents experience the material rewards that \$100,000+ per year wages can bring. However, Mr. B says, "They don't see that people [their parents] have to work hard..." It is difficult to persuade students to work hard at school and learning when their parental and community role models are only seen around enjoying the toys that their large salaries have paid for.

Many people new to town have lived with relatives or friends and when they could afford to, or find suitable accommodation, they would move again. Along the way to eventually finding an affordable home children transferred between schools. Sharing homes or rooms has also provided a variety of awkward or crowded situations for

children to live through and share with teachers and counsellors as reasons for not doing homework. Most children in Fort McMurray have experienced at least one move between communities, neighbourhoods, or schools and tend to welcome newcomers. Mrs F notes that even in the latest boom children are resilient and compassionate people.

I think people in Fort McMurray are so used to the coming and going and just being very welcoming that way. It's nothing new to have new students. When we received a new student two weeks ago, her mother commented on how amazed she was that these kids just welcomed her daughter, no questions asked, and that's just the way not only the kids, but also the adults that are in Fort McMurray.

From the 1960s into the 1990s Fort McMurray had a small town atmosphere for the teachers in this study. Chance meetings with friends or colleagues were common downtown. School district officials and staff knew many teachers by name. The town was growing rapidly with support from the two major oil companies distributed widely around the community. "I think the isolation sort of drew everyone together." The learning community was well funded with ample resources for professional development and university courses offered through the community college. However, economic, industrial and legislative changes made during the past ten years have resulted in greater economic disparities for people during the recent oil boom.

Pocius describes the close-knit community of Calvert as an isolated out-port with its survival based on the single industry of fishing. To a great extent townsfolk depended on each other to distribute fishing quotas fairly. Fort McMurray's single industry and major employers Syncrude and Suncor helped to build the community during the first oil boom with large financial, labour, and equipment contributions to various sports, recreation, and educational facilities. As these businesses began much of their executive and planning work was done in Fort McMurray and administration all the way up to CEOs worked and lived here and made regular contact with the community through local

activities. Corporately, through real estate branches of their business they maintained the largest holdings of residential rental property in town and provided housing grants for new employees. Since the 1980s their apartments and condos have been disbursed to private enterprise and houses sold to employees or through local realtors. During the latest boom, these companies have also made efforts to keep numbers of permanent employees down by contracting other companies to perform various aspects of their extraction, processing, and construction work of new plants. Other oil companies have undertaken several new oil sand developments. Competitive ideals have taken over some of the community interdependence that existed during the earlier days when Syncrude and Suncor were just starting. There was also a sense of belonging as schools were being built in the heart of each new neighbourhood, chance meetings with friends or colleagues were common downtown, and school district officials and staff knew many teachers by name. Competition similar to the oil industry has affected schools in Fort McMurray.

Facility funding guidelines and open attendance boundaries enabling parents to choose which schools their children attend have forced schools to adapt their programs. Closures of the district junior high schools and neighbourhood primary schools left empty spaces for retail developments and buildings to be used by alternative, private, and charter schools as well as the Y.M.C.A. Elementary schools now serve wider areas with kindergarten to grade eight students filling two or three wings of portables connected to their core buildings. Mr. and Mrs. F noticed a shift in focus with this change "...it was basically on the junior high kids, ...and forget about resources for elementary... the timetable, the options, the emphasis on sports, gym classes, and teams are different than you would have in grade 1, 2, and 3." Apart from their location schools now promote

enrolment by meeting particular educational needs with programs like intermediate skills and integrated occupational programs (IOP) for special needs students, music and performing arts, physical education and school athletics, or French immersion. All of these program concentrations fall outside of Alberta Learning guidelines for student grants that schools receive. Without the economies of scale found in larger school districts it is necessary for individual schools to redirect their budgets, hiring of staff, and parental fund raising toward programs that generally benefit junior high student the most.

Until the early 1990s, revenues from taxes and local industrial equipment levies were directed to municipal governments and local school boards. This provided teachers and schools with funding and benefits comparable to oil company workers and facilities. The highest salaries in the province for teachers enabled them to live in the highest costing community in the province. Professional development, technology in schools, facilities, and district office support were also better than the provincial average.

Technology and economy help to bridge the distances. Air travel as a quick means of escape from the geographic isolation has been improved by the oil boom economy. Recent additions of Westjet and Corporate Express have brought competitive fares. Until 2001, Air Canada was the only regular airline travelling to Edmonton with prices similar to rates charged for Edmonton to Toronto flights. The current boom, availability of high-paying jobs, and lack of local housing has encouraged travel of industrial workers from homes in the south to live in residential camps near the mines. The sheer numbers of workers commuting has brought airfares down and increased availability of flights for everyone. However, Mr. B and Mrs. M both noted this transient population has helped to

increase local traffic, especially at shift changes, making travel within town slower and line-ups for shopping trips downtown longer.

In efforts to “level the playing field” and make quality education equally available to all Albertans, the conservative provincial government centralized school taxes and removed industrial equipment levies. Funds to school districts are now distributed to the entire province based on provincial averages. For a variety of obvious reasons, Fort McMurray has always been more expensive than most places in the province. Subsequently, schools and teachers have been put into the unenviable position of making ends meet with fewer resources. This is especially noticeable as average house prices near \$250,000 and many experienced teachers with families and annual incomes around \$50,000 find themselves at the threshold of the statistical poverty line. Fortunately for the teachers who have been here longer than a few years, they may have bought houses before the largest spikes in prices. However, those who couldn’t afford down payments join the newer teachers who have bought houses in the past five years. Less fortunate are the new teachers alone or in single teaching salary households. For them it is impossible to pay rent and save for a home without sacrificing food, transportation, student loans, finding a well-paid roommate or living rent-free with parents. A teaching salary family qualifies for subsidized community housing in Fort McMurray. (ATA, 2002)

Mr. and Mrs. F recall arriving in 1975 amid construction and a housing shortage. At that time the local school boards owned trailers, houses and sublet apartments for district staff. Mrs. F was able to rent an apartment while Mr. F moved in with a cousin. With changes to education funding, most school boards are no longer able to own or even arrange for staff housing. The provincial government’s attempt to “level the playing

field” has meant local teachers’ salaries have decreased toward the provincial average over the past nine years while rents have more than doubled in the past six. House prices have doubled since 1996. As a beginning teacher it is advisable to share accommodation with an employed roommate. In “The Fort McMurray Disadvantage” (ATA, 2002), principal Amgad Rushde acknowledged the hiring priority of confirming applicant’s ability to take care of themselves economically and find suitable accommodation.

Home as a theme for the five teachers I interviewed is tied intricately to family. It still holds meaning as their place of origin for each of the teachers and as a term to describe their current residence. Over the course of each interview the narratives told of a balance created and continually adjusted enabling interviewees to live with the idea of two homes. Home was not presented as explicitly within the narratives as distance and place. Seasonal or vacation travel to visit parents, extended family, or friends in other distant places was discussed. Similarly, home and other specific words to describe belonging were not used to describe Fort McMurray even when discussing decisions to buy houses or remain here for their entire careers. Connections with people, particularly family and shared activities at school and in the community appeared to be more significant than taking ownership of places and calling them home.

In the greater community everyone had examples of becoming more involved during their first year or two. Church groups and supporting their children’s activities were cited by four of the interviewees as key places to belong. Mrs. Z noted about unpacking in their “really nice neighborhood”, being happy with schools, opportunities, and being two minutes from the bush. “Where are you going to find that again?” Once their son came along the feeling was certain, “We wanted to stay here even more to raise

our family.” Making use of local facilities, organizations, and the environment, Mrs. M led her daughters through Girl Guides. Mr. B was active in Scouting. Mr. F became a softball coach and referee. Both Mr. F and Mr. B expressed enthusiasm for outdoor education programs in their schools and opportunities to appreciate the natural surroundings. Being active rather than overwhelmed by the physical landscape was important to all interviewees establishing familial roots. Mrs. F described this process, “...as a family we were more involved in the community... There were things for [our children] to get involved in... which is excellent for kids growing up. I know our kids wouldn’t have had those experiences had we lived in a smaller community.”

All interviewees denied suggestions that Fort McMurray was isolated, culturally. Mrs. Z and Mrs. M said everything they needed was available in Fort McMurray. During their earlier years in town they found stores were fairly limited in number and inventory, but, so are teachers’ budgets and the needs of their young families. Being here for the long term requires some adjustment to expectations about travel. Mrs. M reminded me, you can’t just “pop over to Edmonton for a couple of hours, because we know that’s not how it is.” The latest oil boom has brought several large retailers and a handful of specialty shops to town. Mrs. Z mentioned the Internet as a source for anything else. She and I are two of a handful of Ebay members on our school staff who have expanded our professional development training from online research, webquests, and resource searches to book buying at Amazon.ca and general shopping from a variety of internet sources. So, the physical distance to other communities was viewed by all of the teachers as a fact of life that can overcome when needed.

As circumstances have changed over the years the distance in certain instances has grown longer again. Mrs. M admitted finding "...the road long. And at the time of my grandmother's death or my dad's death, certainly I wished I was a little closer." Mrs. Z's being here when father had a stroke was also difficult, "...because we couldn't get to him." As these teachers' parents are aging the teacher's need to be close is increasing. This need to be close to family also extends to the next generation as their children begin to marry and start families of their own.

CONCLUSIONS

This project consisted of teachers' stories, as they shared them during a series of interviews. The full and complete story of teaching in Fort McMurray is still being lived, told, and written among the journals, notes and letters of all teachers here.

I began my examination of these teachers' narratives with some preconceived ideas. First, the goal to produce an electronic web on compact disk that would integrate the teachers' stories with audio and visual imagery of the community became unrealistic. Technological difficulties were too difficult to overcome within the timelines established for this project. Second, I believed the interviewees would spontaneously tell stories rich in detail, inspiring photographable views of the landscape, and suggesting audio tracks or songs that I could record and link to the relevant themes on the compact disk. What they did provide were fairly succinct answers to the interview questions that could broadly fit the theme of community. People and their relationships among the school and community landscapes were obviously more important than the geography of this place. Their suggestions for visual imagery were also limited. My background as a social studies teacher, cartographer, and visual learner must have biased my expectations. I've

confirmed this tendency with the observations of my final round of student teaching, outlined in a report by my faculty associate David Freisen (1991, p.14).

To support their stories of Fort McMurray the teachers suggested a few specific images of classrooms and ideas for photographs of the community landscape. Everyone mentioned the natural beauty of Fort McMurray's tree-lined neighbourhoods with trails for walking, cycling, and skiing. More suggestions of classroom images to use included stuffed animals and puppets used in classrooms, gifts from students, photos of teachers' children participating in cultural events, walking dogs, and listening to bird calls.

Photographs and the compact disk that were part of the project proposal will be left for private sharing among the storytellers.

Using an interview script was both useful and challenging. It provided a series of questions that could prompt interviewees into expanding on their initial responses and developing more thorough narratives. However, the questions tended to guide the telling of personal narratives, especially when I attempted to ask them sequentially. With successive interviews I became more comfortable asking for details without necessarily following the interview script in a verbatim manner.

Of the five interviews, the last two were more substantial than the others. These were recorded at home with a husband and wife jointly discussing their reasons for spending their entire teaching career here. 2004-2005 will be their thirtieth school year in Fort McMurray. Little prompting was required for them to elaborate on their responses to the interview questions. These details provided me with a thorough and thoughtful review of three decades of teaching and living with a growing family in Fort McMurray. The other interviews were conducted at the teachers' schools with more rigid time constraints

and job related interruptions. Consequently, narratives provided by these teachers yielded concise responses and little attempt to delve into personal narratives beyond the guiding questions.

For the most part Fort McMurray was the first full-time teaching position for all five interviewees. They all welcomed the change that brought them here at an early stage in their adult lives. As they became familiar with the community by making professional and personal connections their sense of belonging also grew. When asked the project question, “Why teach in Fort McMurray?” every teacher mentioned supportive people in schools and other community organisations. Taking personal responsibility to get to know people and ask for help were suggested as successful steps they had made to fit in. The small town atmosphere cited by interviewees has meant Fort McMurray is relatively easy to become involved to whatever degree in any aspect of community life one wishes. From the local ATA and school boards to community associations and municipal government Fort McMurray lacks layers of entrenched elite or bureaucracy found in larger urban centres. Over time, teaching roles and community involvement were reinforced by interviewees’ nuclear family commitments that were growing roots at the same time. It would likely have been easier for a single teacher or childless couples to make a change and leave the community.

Considering current economics and these teachers’ stories Fort McMurray might still be a good place for a teaching couple to begin their careers and family lives. Teachers who can manage the economic realities, appreciate the natural environment, and adapt to this particular human landscape could move to Fort McMurray and create a rewarding career and social life.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Script – Probe Questions

Elaboration/Probes for further narrative response to the project question:

Principal Research Question: Why teach in Fort McMurray?

When and where did you start teaching?

Why and when did you come to the Fort McMurray?

- How long have you been teaching here?

What were the circumstances of your hiring and arrival?

- How did your decision to come here relate to your personal identity (personality)?
- How did your decision to come here relate to your teaching?
- How did your decision to come here relate to your family?
- How did your decision to come here relate to your extended family?
- How did your decision to come here relate to your home or former community?

Could you describe the community of Fort McMurray? . . . as it relates to your teaching

Could you describe how you see yourself in relation to the community?

How do you feel about the idea of isolation here? (Physical or Cultural?)

How would you describe your focus in life?

(family, children, social, community, professional, society, environment)

Was there a time when you consciously decided to stay in Fort McMurray?

- How did this decision relate to your personal identity (personality)?
- How did this decision relate to your teaching?
- How did this decision relate to your family?
- How did this decision relate to your extended family?
- How did this decision relate to your 'home' or former community?

Was there a time when you thought about leaving Fort McMurray?

- How did these thoughts relate to your personal identity (personality)?
- How did these thoughts relate to your teaching?
- How did these thoughts relate to your family?
- How did these thoughts relate to your extended family?
- How did these thoughts relate to your 'home' or former community?

What is the best teaching experience you have had in Fort McMurray?

- What has been the biggest challenge of teaching in Fort McMurray?

What is the best thing about living in Fort McMurray?

- What has been the biggest challenge of living in Fort McMurray?

As you've grown in your teaching career (toward retirement?) have you thought about what's next?

- Would you care to share those ideas?

If you were asked by a recent education graduate (next generation of Fort McMurray teachers)

- "Why teach in Fort McMurray?"...how would you respond?