

School-Community Collaborations through the Lens of Place-Based Education:
Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract

This mixed-methods action research study investigated the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations through the lens of place-based education (PBE) in two contexts. Each of these contexts was located in the Comox Valley, in School District 71. A survey was completed in one of the contexts, and focus groups with a variety of stakeholders, including students, staff, and community collaborators were held in each of the locations. One location was a rural Gulf Island, where the other was a suburban school. Five benefits and five challenges emerged from the data. The benefits were 1) motivation, 2) enrichment, 3) relationships, 4) health and safety, and 5) indigenous knowledge and perspectives. The challenges were 1) time and scheduling, 2) funding, 3) expertise and expectations, 4) organization and communication, and 5) mindset of administrators. An additional three themes emerged surrounding the role of place in school-community collaborations. These included 1) natural sciences, 2) culture, and 3) connections and relationships. These findings assert that the benefits to school-community collaborations are wide reaching, extending not only to students, but also to staff, collaborators, and the wider community. Other findings show that a greater emphasis on PBE could be seen in more urban or suburban settings. This study contributes to the literature by showing the similarities and differences in school-community collaborations in two distinct but geographically close contexts. Additionally, this study confirms the importance of school-community collaborations and the challenges inherent in these collaborations.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

A few people to thank in writing, because even if I've done it out loud, this may feel more permanent. First, to my mom, who taught me to write well when I was young, and has been editing my papers ever since. Thanks for reading the first (or at least the second and third) drafts, and for giving kind and helpful feedback. I love you.

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I'll leave you with a word from Alice, which makes me wonder whether I studied the wrong thing.

Where I come from, people study what they are not good at in order to be able to do what they

are good at. – Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

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Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the importance of community in education and to hear from teachers, students and community members about what school-community collaborations look like, why they are challenging and how they are beneficial to students, collaborators, and the wider community. My objective was to learn more about school-community collaborations in order to be able to implement some of these collaborations in my own practice and to be able to encourage my colleagues and my community to do the same. I also hoped to be able to support collaborations already in place and to facilitate their processes wherever possible.

Community involvement has been considered an important component of a child's education for a long time (consider the cliché "it takes a village to raise a child"), and often that involvement occurs not within the confines of a school building or the hours of a school day, but rather on a soccer field, in a community kitchen, or at a music hall. However, considering funding cuts in education and the financial crunch that many families experience, is it not critical to children that community members become involved in schools, and that schools become more widely used by communities?

Education is in a period of significant change. Educators are more uncertain today than they have ever been about what challenges will face our students when they graduate from high school or university. Not only is it difficult to imagine what types of jobs will be available and what skill sets will be required in 10 years, but the requirements on teachers are becoming more complex. On top of planning and teaching lessons, conducting assessments and communicating with colleagues and families, teachers are expected to stay on top of curriculum changes and

technology developments. Furthermore, they are expected to keep their students engaged and to reach all students at their individual levels. This has always been a demanding task, but the current climate of uncertainty - whether due to the implementation of a redesigned curriculum in British Columbia, the rapid pace of technological and societal change, or other big changes on the horizon - makes it especially daunting. Community collaborations may be a way to alleviate some of this pressure, while engaging students and building community at the same time (Preston, 2013).

Community collaborations in education are well-researched and well-documented. Researchers have found numerous benefits to both the communities and to the students involved in these kinds of partnerships. These benefits range from student engagement, community building, intergenerational learning, environmental education, and healthier and happier families (Bartleet, 2012; Cripps Clark, Tytler & Symington, 2012; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005; Howley, Howley, Camper, & Perko, 2011; Preston, 2013; Smith, 2002). Students have been shown to score higher on standardized tests when parents and communities are involved (Epstein, 2001; Washington, 2010).

As an educator living on a rural Gulf Island where community is an integral part of daily life, I see the power it can have in our schools. Denman Island Community School has two full-time teachers, and many students will only ever have those two teachers for the first eight years of their formal education. If community members, including families, were not involved in the education of these children, they may go on to high school with a very small and narrow perspective on education, and, accordingly, their experiences about what school is and who plays a role in education would also be small and narrow. However, the Island community participates heavily in the school - it is a rare school day if there is no form of community collaboration

present. It makes our school unique and centres it in its geographical and cultural place - an idea central to many rural schools.

Place-based education (PBE) is the pedagogy that emphasizes how place is important in education. It encourages students to learn in authentic ways and to tap into their lived experiences (Smith, 2002). It is a theory that I value, for while our world is becoming smaller and smaller, many communities are at risk of losing their uniqueness if we do not differentiate them. As I currently do not work at Denman Island Community School, I am interested in looking at the school-community collaborations that exist in the rural island community where I live and those at Stony Lane Elementary¹, in the small town where I work.

Justification of the Study

There are many reasons to develop and build school-community collaborations, but, as Epstein (1995) states, “the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life” (p. 82). One of the biggest reasons for community collaborations is to redefine education as something that does not only happen in schools and is not only taught by a certified teacher. Communities have expansive knowledge that is not encompassed by the walls of a school, but rather is distributed amongst its individuals. There are a variety of reasons that youth need to be exposed to wide arrays of knowledge and experience, and community members and organizations are often able to present this knowledge in ways a single teacher cannot. Whether collaborations are occurring to promote student success, as they have frequently been proven to do (Alleman & Holly, 2013; Epstein, 2001; Patrizio, 2013; Washington, 2010) or to enhance engagement (Bartleet, 2012; Cripps Clark et al., 2014; Howley

¹ Stony Lane Elementary is a pseudonym

et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2005; Smith, 2002), the studies show that the potential of a group is greater than the potential of the few.

Many community collaborations, especially those in more rural environments, are rooted in the local culture and geography of the community. While different researchers and organizations have varying definitions of place-based education, the Rural School and Community Trust (2014) defines the concept as learning that “engages students, teachers, and community members to explore and discover resources and opportunities right in their own communities in the form of culture, history, the natural environment, the local economy, and issues and opportunities that residents want to address ... Academic work is tied to place in ways that matter both to students and to others in the community.” Many collaborations in rural environments take place outside and involve the natural world. Those who believe in PBE believe that place - culture, history, geography and the surrounding natural environment - impacts our learning and teaching. PBE teaches that rural environments have assets their urban neighbours do not - an important consideration when so many rural students cannot wait to graduate and move to the city (Spring, 2013). Teaching our youth about the importance of these locales allows them to see the viability of staying in a rural community (Howley et al., 2011). Not only does PBE help the students stay engaged in their education, but it also impacts the way the community feels about its school. Jennings et al. (2005) showed how place-based projects allowed the community to not only feel valued by school employees, but to also feel that the local school was a welcoming place for them. Furthermore, Alleman and Holly (2013) showed that community connections can help provide a stronger sense of identity, especially when communities are economically stressed.

The benefits of school-community collaborations are numerous and extensive.

Throughout the literature, researchers have documented benefits to students, families, schools and communities as a whole. These benefits include academic performance, student engagement and interest, intergenerational learning, and a greater sense of community (Bartleet, 2012; Cripps Clark et al., 2012; Jordan, 1999; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009). Students frequently learn skills they would not in the standard classroom, as Martin and Henry (2012) showed in their article on agriculture programs in schools. Martin and Henry also showed that community collaborations can promote the local economy and create a local identity.

While the benefits of school-community collaborations are well researched and well documented, the challenges inherent in these programs are equally so. Schools regularly struggle through every step of this process, and while some succeed and have incredible programs and results to show for it, as at Island Community School (Howley et al., 2011), the path that got them there has been complicated and processes that work for one community rarely work for another. Furco (2013) discussed many of these challenges at length. He found that “limited accessibility to classrooms, inflexible school schedules, costly background checks for those who work with or near children, lack of teacher flexibility” (p. 623) and other challenges were significant issues that were hard to overcome in order to create successful and sustainable partnerships. That said, while there are numerous challenges, many researchers documented steps that partners could take in order to facilitate collaborations (Furco, 2013; Patrizio, 2013; Sanders, 2001).

The types of collaborations are as varied as the communities in which they exist. Collaborations often occur because of the existing resources in a community. These collaborations can be based in music (Bartleet, 2012), agriculture (Martin & Henry, 2012),

science (Cripps Clark et al., 2014) or the environment (Howley et al., 2011). However, collaborations also occur to fill a need, as Washington (2010) described in his article about low graduation rates for African American men. It is important to keep an open mind when considering what types of collaborations are possible, and who potential partners may be.

Denman Island Community School partners with its community quite extensively. Not only is there a Friday afternoon program that involves community members teaching their expertise throughout the year, but there is also a school-garden program run by a parent volunteer, a local weather station operated by another parent volunteer, and regular music, arts, and environmental education provided by members of the local community, whom they call their “community mentors” (Turner, 2015, p. 1). Stony Lane Elementary School has fewer collaborations, likely due to their greater population of staff - there are more bodies employed by the school district to take on all of the necessary jobs. I am interested in seeing how the collaborations that occur on Denman Island can be adapted and incorporated into more “mainstream” schools.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Due to my personal interest in the importance of place and how community and environment affects and impacts a child’s education, and due to the fact that I live on a Gulf island that is frequently and intricately involved in our local school, but work on Vancouver Island, I have decided to perform a case study of the two contexts. How can school-community collaborations be beneficial to students, collaborators and the wider community, and how are they challenging in each of the school environments?

It was believed that students and community members would identify different benefits, and that these benefits would also differ depending on which community the members were a

part of (i.e., part of the Denman Island Community School, or Stony Lane Elementary School). I hypothesized that adult community members would mention the benefit of intergenerational learning, and how community-school collaborations build community, especially on Denman Island. Additionally, I believed that adult community members would discuss place and how the culture and geography of the community affected collaborations.

I believed that students would identify benefits in terms of their engagement in school. Some adults may also identify this benefit.

I believed that most of the challenges would be identified by the adults. Some of the hypothesized challenges included the time required for collaborations (I believed that teachers would identify this challenge as time required out of the instructional day, and that volunteers would identify this as time required to be at the school). Other challenges were hypothesized to be the financial cost of collaborations, getting “buy-in” from students and teachers, and finding organizations and individuals to partner with.

Definition of Terms

The word community invokes numerous beliefs and imaginations. Communities can be defined along geographical, political, religious, and cultural boundaries, amongst others (Spring, 2013). In this research, community was an inclusive term and was defined as any individual or group that self-identified as a stakeholder in the school.

School-community collaborations have been well-defined in the literature. Preston (2013) defines community involvement as “any student-focused school-community connection” (p. 416), which is a relevant and functioning definition for the purpose of the research in the current study. These connections can be between students, teachers, school administrators or district administrators on one side, and any community member or organization on the other side,

including parents, local businesses, health care organizations, First Nations groups, non-governmental organizations, arts organizations, and others. Examples of these collaborations include, but are not limited to field trips, guest presentations, coaching, school clubs, music events, school-wide presentations, and science activities. These collaborations can be one-time events or can be ongoing.

Benefits, for the purpose of this study, are defined as self-identified advantages to any local individual or group as identified by members of a focus group, in a survey or an interview, to the students or the school community. These benefits may include, but are not limited to, a building of community, student engagement, intergenerational learning, and a sense of place. Challenges, for the purpose of this study, are defined as difficulties that arise in any part of the collaboration process. These may include time, financial constraints, willing partners, and buy-in from administrators, teachers and students.

Brief Overview of the Study

This study was a focused case study of Denman Island Community School and Stony Lane Elementary School, both located in the Comox Valley, British Columbia. The superintendent of this school district, SD#71, was contacted and her permission was obtained in order to research school programs in the district. The administrators of both schools also gave their permission to research these programs.

Two student focus groups were held; one with four students from the intermediate class of Denman Island Community School and another with five intermediate students from Stony Lane Elementary School. The students were chosen through recommendations of their teachers and principals. Students and their parents were made aware of the implications of the study and

gave their consent. Questions during this portion of the study were focused on student engagement and interest in regards to community collaborations in school.

Concurrently, a second set of focus groups was held with staff members from both of the schools. A total of ten district staff participated in these focus groups, including teachers, an administrator, a learning support teacher, a counsellor, a substitute teacher and a CUPE staff member. These focus groups included questions about the interest in school-community collaborations and where that interest came from, as well as perceived benefits and challenges. An additional question regarding the role of administration in school-community collaborations was asked of staff members.

An additional two focus groups were held with five adult Denman Island community members who had participated in school partnerships. While my intention had been to hold only one of these focus groups, due to extenuating circumstances on the part of the participants, this focus group occurred twice. These focus groups included parents involved in the school and volunteers at the school. The goal of these focus groups was to determine the benefits and the challenges that involved members of the community found in school-community collaborations. My initial intention had been to hold a similar focus group at Stony Lane, but time constraints did not allow this to occur.

My last focus group was held with one adult Denman Island community member who self-identified as a stakeholder in the school but who had not participated in any school-community collaborations. This focus group was not held at Stony Lane Elementary School due to logistical difficulties in finding suitable participants. This individual was an islander who did not volunteer at the school but attended fundraisers and other similar events. This focus group was conducted in order to triangulate the information received from the other focus groups, and

to determine how the wider community felt about the school and whether the school impacted the community's vision of place and togetherness. It was hoped that this focus group would give a different perspective, and possibly a less biased one, of school-community collaborations.

Lastly, a survey was included in the Denman Island Community weekly newspaper and consisted of mostly closed-ended Likert style questions, but included three open-ended questions regarding the benefits, challenges and examples of school-community collaborations.

The results from the survey were tabulated first in order to pull out initial themes of the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations. The transcripts from the focus groups were then analyzed using the themes that had surfaced in the surveys as a guide. Additional themes in the transcripts were determined regarding the ways that collaborations affect students' relationships to place. The results from each of the school communities were compared to see whether similar themes emerged from the rural island community as compared to the more diverse school, as were results across stakeholder groups.

The majority of this study used qualitative method approaches, yet the survey added a small amount of quantitative information.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Throughout my career, but especially over the past year and a half as my passion in community education has grown, I have wondered about the ways that schools successfully collaborate with their communities. I have wondered about what types of projects exist, the steps involved in creating these collaborations, and the energy and time required to sustain them. I have also wanted to learn more about the reasons schools and communities choose to collaborate with each other.

In my survey of the literature I have found that collaborations, especially those in rural environments similar to the island where I live, are often based on the premise of place-based education (PBE) and are intrinsically linked to the environment and the culture of the community the school serves. The list of benefits and challenges to collaborations are both extensive and long – both in the implementation stage of collaboration and in sustaining an already existing collaboration. Benefits were found to all members participating in, and directly linked to a collaboration – students, staff, involved community members, families, and others. I also found an incredible variety of partnerships, encouraging me to find greater ways to collaborate in my own practice and in my community.

Place-Based Education

Sobel, the author of seven books and a senior faculty member in education in New Hampshire is often credited with creating the pedagogy of PBE, and he is consistently referenced in articles on this theme. His book, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (2013) contains many case studies of schools and teachers that have effectively used place to bolster the engagement of students, to improve relationships with the local

environment, and to strengthen the social capital of the surrounding communities. Sobel justifies the use of PBE in classrooms and gives many examples of the pedagogy in practice.

Sobel defines PBE as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum” (p. 11). The emphasis is on experiential and hands-on learning. He gives many examples of what this looks like in different schools – from studying about plants using a local forest or park, to learning about history through the lens of local individuals, to providing a service to the community through a local newspaper written, edited, published, and delivered by students. Many of Sobel’s examples of PBE focus on environmental education (EE), but this is not always the case, as in the newspaper example.

While Sobel accurately describes what PBE is, he also succeeds in justifying why schools should be looking to PBE as one of the changes schools are in need of. One of his most significant rationalizations for PBE is student engagement, which leads to greater academic success – a claim I feel could be substantiated in schools everywhere. Another justification is an improvement in student behaviour. For example, one school that had implemented a PBE program found that students involved had “54 percent fewer suspensions” (Sobel, 2013, p. 37) than students who were not involved in the program, and attended 11% more frequently. Students involved in authentic learning are more likely to see projects through to completion. They are more likely to take an interest in their learning when they see a purpose to their time spent at school and their behaviours will often change accordingly.

PBE is especially valuable in rural communities, where the school often provides more than education but serves as a gathering and bonding place (Spring, 2013). Spring, a music teacher in a rural community in Ontario, looked into the meaning of rurality and how place

shapes teaching practice. She conducted seven interviews with other rural music teachers, and asked questions related to their definition of rural, the role of place in teaching music, and the role of music teachers in their schools and communities.

One of the emergent themes in Spring's research was one of affirmation. She found that current curriculum focuses on urban characteristics and ways of life, thereby assuming that urban living is superior. The lack of emphasis on rural life encourages students to migrate to cities for better opportunities, and one of Spring's participants commented on how she was constantly reaffirming the benefits of her own rural area to students. The participant told a story of two students, one of whom stayed in the community, took over their family's large farm, and was running a successful business. The other student went away to university, moved to the city and was doing well. The rural community viewed the success of the student who left as more valid and important than the success of the student who stayed. Spring argues that through a place-based curriculum, the misconceptions that "rural equals backward will be deconstructed as the students are taught the benefits of rural places and the importance of supporting their local communities" (2013, p. 34). She believes that PBE can inspire students to care for their local communities, including fellow students, other community members, and the environment on both a local and global level. While Spring's article is based in a rural context, I believe that education that is grounded in a local context will encourage students, regardless of their setting, to care more deeply for the community surrounding them. This belief in the importance of rural life and the perspective that PBE can help to inform this value was explored in my study, especially as I was comparing the responses in my focus groups on Denman Island to those from Stony Lane.

Jennings, Swidler, and Koliba (2005) performed another in-depth study looking at place-based curriculum and the ways state standards affect a teacher's use of the pedagogy in the classroom. They performed a total of 22 interviews, both with teachers and with key players in writing statewide standards in Vermont. Additionally, they sent out a survey to grade four, eight and twelve teachers, as these were the years where students write statewide-standardized exams. 226 teachers, from 125 schools responded, equating to 13% of the teachers from 37% of the schools surveyed. These surveys asked teachers 40 questions on three different themes: the teachers' beliefs and practice with PBE, their awareness of the state standards, and the effects of the standards on practice in the classroom.

Of the educators who responded to the survey, over 83% either agreed or strongly agreed that PBE "has important academic value" (p. 57), where over 87% either agreed or strongly agreed that PBE has "important social value" (p. 58) to students. One principal commented on how community members began to see the school as a resource once PBE practices started taking place, and another commented on how PBE was a great way for "community people to feel good about school and to feel valued by teachers and administrators" (p. 58).

My research into PBE heavily informed my own study. It helped me to write sections of my survey and became the focus of one question for my focus groups. Additionally, my reading of the literature helped to convince me of the importance of PBE. Lastly, through this research I recognized that all school-community collaborations are a form of PBE, as community is an integral component of place and context.

The Importance of Community

One way that some schools utilize PBE in their classrooms is with collaborations with the wider community. Joyce Epstein has been at the forefront of school community collaborations

for over 30 years. In 1995 she set up the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), with the aim of increasing the involvement of families and communities in schools by providing districts with professional development. She has over 100 publications in the field of family, community and school collaborations (“Dr. Joyce L. Epstein”, 2011). While it is common knowledge that students learn and grow in schools, at home, and in their communities, many schools, families and communities do not collaborate in order to offer the best for children. Epstein claims that “without partnerships, educators segment students into the school child and the home child, ignoring the whole child” (2011, p. 5). Figure 2.1 is a model of her overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2011, p. 32), which states that students learn more when educators work with community members and families to guide and support them (Epstein, 2011). One of the biggest benefits of Epstein’s body of work is that it contains an extensive list of practical ways to increase family and community involvement in schools.

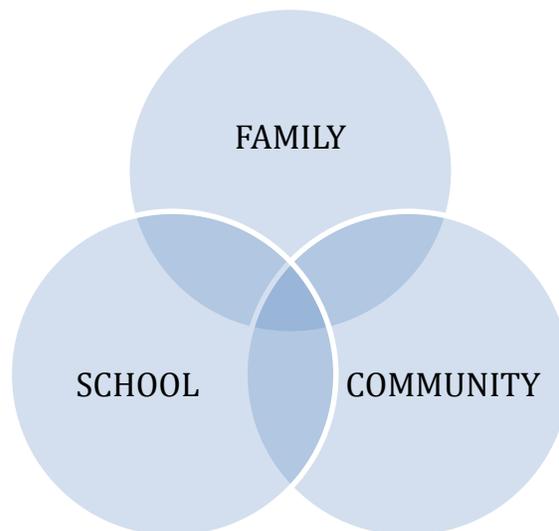


Figure 2.1 Epstein’s overlapping spheres of influence

Sanders investigated the role of community in school, family, and community partnerships, and how educators can enhance the role that communities play through these partnerships (2001). She surveyed all 611 schools that were part of the NNPS in 1997 and asked about types of collaborations schools were involved in and whether they were thought to be successful. 73% of the schools responded, and the surveys were completed by a range of individuals associated with the school, including teachers, administrators, parent volunteers, and community coordinators, and many (51%) were completed together by a group of individuals. She found that the majority of collaborations were student-centered, as opposed to being family or community centered. She believes that schools need to take the leading role in these collaborations, and that partnerships should be focused on benefiting all groups – not just students. I, however, am of the opinion that even if a collaboration is focused on the needs of the student, the community member or group in the collaboration will also benefit. Additionally, the family of that student will incur some benefit due to the enriched learning of the child.

In her research, Sanders also found an extensive list of obstacles to community collaborations that were substantiated across the literature. Examples of these obstacles include, but are not limited to participation of community members, time, leadership, funding and communication.

Howley, Howley, Camper, and Perko (2011) performed seven case studies of rural schools that use PBE. Upon completion of their research they decided to report on one of the case studies because it differed so significantly from the others in the richness of the data and in the extent to which the school intentionally practiced PBE. The methods of the research included focus groups with a total of ten students in grades five through nine, field notes, a collection of

artifacts, and interviews with the principal, teachers, community members, parents and a PBE specialist hired by the school.

This research had two specific research questions - “which school and community dynamics support and sustain place-based education?” (Howley et al., 2011, p. 217), and which “dynamics threaten or constrain place-based education” (p. 217)? Once the research had been conducted, matrices were used to code for the two research questions and four themes emerged from the data, which were then verified by a return to the transcripts. These themes were 1) strong leadership from the principal, 2) interaction of seasonal residents with the school, 3) diverse teacher expertise, and 4) a focus on student inquiry. The article includes numerous quotes from a variety of interviewees to substantiate these themes.

Island Community School, the case reported in the study, was able to run some incredible programs that engaged students, involved the community and grounded education in local interests and career options for a variety of reasons. One of the ways that Island Community School benefited their students was by giving them additional opportunities when compared to other rural, and even some urban students. Because of the school and its program focus on community collaborations and local PBE, results indicated that students were considerably more aware of the opportunities for employment and self-employment if they were to stay on the island. They were intricately aware of the abundant natural resources on the island and the danger posed to some of these resources. The community attempted to mitigate the outpouring of youth to larger, urban centres by including local economies in the curriculum. Students were involved in long-term projects, including boat-building and the creation of a bio-diesel fishing vessel, short-term projects, including journalism and ethnography projects, and also in unanticipated opportunities, such as the production of a musical. All of these projects would not

have been possible if it were not for the support and expertise of the local community.

At the end of the research article, the authors included a critical reflection where they discussed their bias and potential flaws with the study. By identifying the weak points of their research, I feel that they strengthened the research as a whole. The most significant flaw noted by the researchers was that they were all interested in the field of rural education and many of them have a positive attitude and partiality towards PBE, which caused an emotional response to the research at Island Community School. The emotional reactions of the researchers were partially off-set in the article through numerous readings by neutral colleagues.

While there were several weaknesses to this study, it had many more strengths. Firstly, the student voice was powerful throughout the article. Many of the other articles I've read have had limited, if any, student voice.

Again, my current study was justified by my review of the literature into the value of school-community collaborations. Due to the similarities noted between Denman Island Community School and Island Community School – both in instructional model and in context – much of my study design was based on the methodology of the study at Island Community School. I wanted to include student voice, amongst the voices of other stakeholders, and I used focus groups as my primary method of gathering information. Additionally, I saw a need for further study into school-community collaborations in my own context – the value inherent in these collaborations is clear for other provinces and countries, and I wanted to know more about how these collaborations were used where I work and live.

Benefits and Challenges of School-Community Collaborations

Many articles that discuss school-community collaborations also discuss the benefits and challenges to implementing and sustaining these collaborations. Bartleet (2012) performed six

case studies of school-community music collaborations in Australia, where community music is a strong part of the culture. Her purpose was to explore the different ways that schools and communities are dealing with the issues and challenges facing school-community collaborations. The challenges preventing optimal involvement were documented in a survey conducted, where respondents discussed “restrictive school timetables, and a lack of resources including funding, venues and volunteers” (p. 49).

Bartleet (2012) found that when successful, school-community collaborations can lead to “important musical, social, cultural and pedagogical outcomes” (p. 59), but these collaborations require highly invested school teachers in addition to skilled local music facilitators. Additionally, schedules must be flexible, and planning must take the visions of all member groups into account. A range of resources is required, including financial, infrastructure, and volunteer hours. Lastly, Bartleet found that a shared sense of leadership was instrumental in successful collaborations.

Preston (2013) looked into the ways that community involvement in schools was shaped by the presence or lack of social relationships in a bedroom community – a small, rural community where many residents commuted into a nearby city for work. She conducted 35 interviews over seven months with teachers, community members, and members of the School Community Council (SCC), “an elected group of parents and community members that promotes parent and community involvement in school and advises the principal on school issues and policies” (p. 420). I found the lack of student interviews disappointing, but in line with many other research studies on community involvement in education. In addition to her interviews, Preston also made observational field notes at SCC meetings and school and community visits.

Of the nine community members that Preston interviewed, six were parents of children at

the school. The school involvement of these parents was often intricately linked to the welfare of their own children, but interviewees were able to see other benefits once they were involved in a collaboration. For example, many parents noted that their relationships with other parents increased through time spent together at school events. These relationships enhanced social cohesion and pride in the community as a whole. Preston (2013) noted that “community involvement was facilitated by having both a hospitable place and a non-intimidating reason for community members to meet” (p. 424). Examples of these events included sports games and school concerts.

Participants mostly saw the community’s proximity to the city as a challenge for community involvement at the school. Preston found this was due to two main causes. The first was that the majority of teachers lived in the nearby city and were therefore not a part of the small community. Because of this, the teachers were not knowledgeable about the specifics of the community. They did not know which families to ask for help on certain subjects, and they were not aware of the intricacies of the familial relationships in the community. Additionally, many of the families in the community spent considerable time in the city – whether to access sports and recreation or art activities for their children, to buy supplies, or for other reasons. This meant that the relationships in the community were not as strong as they were when the community was serving the majority of the needs of its residents. This resonated very strongly with me, as I live on a small island where many of the residents, myself included, commute off-island to work. I do not feel as knowledgeable about either of the communities I spend time in due to the fact that so much of my time is spent away from the community. Additionally, I was interested to see whether this effect was replicated in my study – whether Stony Lane Elementary experienced more challenges in school-community collaborations than Denman

Island, and whether these additional challenges were partly due to its proximity to a more urban centre.

Other articles (Furco, 2013; Martin & Henry, 2012) had similar findings. Time, especially in implementation stages, was always a mitigating factor in collaborations. Dedicated teachers and administrators were always required in order to have success, and Furco (2013) found that when partnerships were initiated by a community group, instead of by the school, it was helpful when the needs of the school were addressed alongside the group's agenda.

However, regardless of the discouraging challenges of community collaborations, all of the literature I read said that it benefited students, families, and communities. Alleman and Holly (2013) found that community collaborations provided exposure to new places and new ways of thinking, which promoted post-secondary participation. Washington (2010) found that school counselors who encouraged school-community collaborations improved the academic performance for African American males. Community collaborations can be used to address challenging societal issues, such as immigrants, students with disabilities, or other marginalized groups (Preston, 2013). Additionally, students can have access to service learning opportunities through work with the community (Smith, 2002).

Conclusion

While my focus group and survey questions were very simplistic and did not ask about specific benefits, and therefore were not heavily influenced by the literature, one of the limitations identified in a number of the studies was that students' voices had not been heard. This limitation in the research encouraged me to ensure that students were a key part of my study. Other literature (Sanders, 2001) that included only a survey left the researcher with many unanswered questions, whereas studies that incorporated interviews or focus groups (Bartleet,

2012; Howley et al., 2011; Martin & Henry, 2012; Preston, 2013) included more in-depth responses from participants. This was important to me, and therefore informed my research design.

I am hoping that my research will either confirm or reject some of the results that I found throughout my readings. My hope is that school district employees, community members and families can use my findings to advocate for the use of community collaborations. Additionally, I hope to find some ways to overcome some of the challenges inherent in collaborations through my research and my discussions with school staff and collaborators. Ideally, these strategies would be transferable to many school districts and could help other schools adopt and sustain collaborations.

As a teacher, the idea of a long-term community collaboration is incredibly exciting, but also incredibly daunting. I feel the challenges, especially time and separation between the communities where I live and work, weighing down on me and causing me to doubt whether it's possible. However, I am also confident in the many small collaborations that can happen easily in a classroom – an X-ray technician coming in to help teach about the human body, or a commercial fisherman coming in to help with our salmon dissections. While I am striving to have more of the mentorship style partnerships in (and out of) my class, I am also learning to recognize the ways I already collaborate with the community and the benefits that are emerging from these collaborations for me, my students, their families, and the collaborators who come into our schools. My exploration of the current literature on school-community collaborations has shown me not only what is possible, but it has given me the justification to put in the time and energy, and to request that time and energy of others.

Chapter Three: Procedures and Methods

Research Design

The aim of this study was to determine what school-community collaborations exist in two elementary schools in the Comox Valley, British Columbia, how these collaborations benefited students and the wider community and also to determine the challenges in implementing and sustaining these partnerships. The research was conducted in School District (SD) 71, and the schools were chosen because of their proximity to myself - both geographically and emotionally - as I live in one context (Denman Island) and work in the other (Courtenay).

I live on Denman Island, a Northern Gulf Island located approximately 25 km south of Courtenay. It is serviced approximately 14 times a day by BC Ferries from Buckley Bay. The island is limited in terms of services with a hardware store, a bookstore, a local craft store, two small cafes and a General Store with a small grocery section and housing a Canada Post outlet. Rounding out the downtown are two community halls and the Community School. The island has a rural feel and most properties are larger than one acre. Many residents are actively involved in the facets of local, rural life - there are numerous boards to join and frequent community activities and events. The island has a significant “alternative” population who have chosen to live on a Gulf Island in order to distance themselves from mainstream life. Due to the older population on the island, Denman Island Community School has a very small population. There are two teachers and a part-time principal working at the school, servicing the approximately 30 students who attend. At one time the school serviced close to 150 students. Parents and community members are significantly involved in the school. Turnover has been high for the principal and one of the teachers, whereas the second teacher has been teaching at the school for close to 20 years.

At the time of my study, I was working at Stony Lane Elementary School. It is one of the schools servicing one of the suburban areas of Courtenay, a small town with a population of approximately 55,000 on central Vancouver Island, BC. It is one of the largest elementary schools in SD 71 and is considered to be one of the most affluent schools. The staff at Stony Lane is diverse, but sees little turnover, as much of the staff has sufficient seniority to allow them to stay in their positions. The school has several long-standing collaborations with the community, and many staff members have expressed interest in participating in more frequent community collaborations.

For my study I was interested in hearing the voices of as many stakeholders as possible in both contexts. Too often the student voice is left unheard in the field of educational research, as is the voice of the greater community. To do this, I intended to hold focus groups at both schools with students, staff, and community members who had collaborated with the school. These last focus groups included parents. Due to my involvement in my local community and my ability to recruit participants in a variety of ways, I was also able to hold a focus group with individuals who are members of the Denman Island Community but who are not directly involved in school collaborations. My hope for this last focus group was to receive a less biased opinion of the benefits of school-community collaborations. I was unable to identify and recruit participants for this type of focus group at Stony Lane Elementary School, so I opted to conduct this focus group only once. Unfortunately, due to a variety of circumstances, I was unable to hold the focus group with community members at Stony Lane Elementary. Partly because of this, I held two focus groups with community collaborators on Denman Island. Additionally, due to the busy lives of staff members at Stony Lane Elementary, I was unable to hold only one focus group at a

convenient time for all participants, so there were two focus groups held with the staff at Stony Lane Elementary.

Finally, my study included a survey of Denman Island residents, with several open-ended qualitative questions and several closed-ended questions on a Likert scale. The majority of my research was qualitative in nature, although there was a small quantitative component. This was a conscious decision due to the richness that qualitative data can provide.

Sample

Participants for this research were members of two distinct communities, and the demographics of each sample will be described as fully as possible, without comprising confidentiality.

The survey was administered to Denman Island residents in the local newspaper, *The Grapevine*, which is distributed to 630 Denman Island mailboxes weekly. The island has a population of just over 1000 people, and the demographic has changed significantly in the past 30 years to an older, primarily retired population. The median age on the island was 57.5 years in 2011, with 92.8% of the population being over the age of 15 (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Surveys were also available at Denman Island Community School. Participants returned their survey via a “Free Post” box in the local bookstore, where Islanders leave mail for each other. Of the 671 distributed surveys, 45 were returned, for a return rate of 6.7%.

In addition to the survey, eight focus groups were conducted - five on Denman Island and three in Courtenay. The first focus group on Denman Island was conducted with students from the intermediate class of Denman Island Community School. There were 14 students in the class, and they ranged in age from nine to 13. Their teacher informed the class of my study at the end of a school day and interested students took home an information sheet and a consent

form. Four students returned their forms to their teacher, who then passed their forms to me. One of the students was female and three were male.

The second focus group on Denman Island was conducted with staff from the Denman Island Community School. Both teachers, the administrator, the Educational Assistant (EA), the librarian, a retired teacher who is a frequent substitute teacher at the school, and the community school coordinator were invited to participate. Four individuals volunteered to participate in my research. One of the staff was male and the other three were female. Participants had a very wide range of ages. The third and fourth focus groups on Denman Island were conducted with a total of five community members who had been involved in school-community collaborations. These individuals were recruited via an opt-in sheet included with the survey that was delivered to all Denman Island homes. One of the community members was a parent of current students, two were regular volunteers, and two had participated irregularly in collaborations. One was a retired teacher, and two were parents whose children had attended Denman Island Community School in the past. The fifth Denman Island focus group was with one individual who had not been involved in school-community collaborations. This participant was recruited via the survey she received through *The Grapevine*, and opted to participate because she values community education.

The individuals from the focus groups in Courtenay were students and staff at Stony Lane Elementary School, and were similarly recruited to the students and staff on Denman Island. The staff at Stony Lane consists of approximately 13 full-time teachers and six part-time teachers. Additionally, there is one full-time and one part-time learning support teacher, a part-time counsellor, one full-time and one part-time administrator and approximately 20 support staff, including EAs. Participants for this focus group were recruited through an email that was

sent to all staff members at the school. An additional invitation was sent to the district aboriginal curriculum support workers, as I believed it was important for their voice to be heard. Of the staff members contacted, eight staff members, who represented a variety of positions at the school, responded. I held two focus groups with the staff from Stony Lane, with a total of six participants, as two individuals who responded to my email were unable to attend either of the focus groups.

The last focus group in Courtenay was held with students. Stony Lane has a student enrolment of approximately 400 students, of which approximately 210 are intermediate students. An email was sent to the intermediate teachers and the principals, requesting help in identifying students who represented a variety of demographics and viewpoints, and also students who would be comfortable talking with me. 10 students were identified. They ranged in age from 10-13.

Instruments Used

My study included two different methods of obtaining data. The first was an anonymous survey (Appendix A) distributed to the majority of households on Denman Island via an insert in the weekly newspaper. The survey consisted of three parts. The first part had three questions and was open-ended and qualitative in nature. These questions asked respondents to identify whether they had participated in a school-community collaboration within the past year, and then to identify benefits and challenges of this type of collaboration. Included on the survey, above the questions, I included a sample list of possible benefits attributed to school-community collaborations in the current literature (Bartleet, 2012; Cripps Clark, Tytler & Symington, 2012; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005; Howley, Howley, Camper, & Perko, 2011; Preston, 2013; Smith, 2002), in order to clarify the subject for respondents. The

second part of the survey included seven questions on a Likert scale, and was therefore quantitative in nature. These questions focused on whether, and to what level, participants believed school-community collaborations were beneficial to students, collaborators and the wider community. Other questions asked participants to quantify the importance of the school to the wider community. The purpose of these questions was to determine whether participants felt there were benefits to school-community collaborations, and if there were, whether these benefits were deemed to be integral to the community and the students, or whether these benefits were relatively inconsequential. Some of the literature (Alleman & Holly, 2013; Martin & Henry, 2012; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009; Spring, 2013) states that schools are vital to rural communities, and I was interested in whether this viewpoint was shared with respondents of my survey. I was also interested in whom participants felt benefited most from collaborations, as my research question specifically asks how school-community collaborations are beneficial to students, collaborators, and the wider community. The last part of the survey asked participants about their demographic, including age, time spent on the island, and whether they had school-age children.

The second method of obtaining data was through focus groups. Five focus groups were held on Denman Island and three in Courtenay. The focus groups on Denman Island were held with students, school staff (including current and retired teachers, the librarian, and the community support worker), two separate focus groups with community members who have been involved in a school-community collaboration, and one with a community member who has not been involved in a school-community collaboration. The focus groups with community members included parents.

My focus group with students asked a total of six questions (Appendix B). The first question asked students about what motivated them to learn. I decided to ask this question to see

whether students' motivations were different in the two school settings, and to see whether students mentioned real-life context, including community collaborations, in their initial answers, especially as many other researchers (Bartleet, 2012; Howley, Howley, Camper & Perko, 2011; Jennings, Swidler & Koliba, 2005; Smith, 2002) have found that student motivation increased during and following school-community collaborations. The next four questions were about collaborations they had been involved in, what they had liked about collaborations and what they had learned. The reason for these questions was to find information about the benefits of collaborations from a student's perspective. Much of the literature did not include student voice, and it was important to me to ensure that the benefits, as identified by staff and collaborators, were compared against those identified by students. The last question asked students to identify collaborations they wished they could participate in. Students were then given the opportunity for a final comment.

The focus group with school staff included eight questions (Appendix C). The first and second question asked participants about the ways in which they collaborate with the community at school, and why they choose to do so. Examples were given so participants were able to reflect on their practice. The next three questions asked about the perceived or imagined benefits to themselves, students or the wider community from these collaborations. The next question asked participants about any challenges they had faced or had heard of in collaborations and if they knew of any ways to overcome these challenges. This question also enabled staff to comment on whether they had not been involved in collaborations due to challenges or complications. I then asked staff about the role place played in school-community collaborations. I was especially interested to compare and contrast the answers between the two contexts for this question, as Denman Island has such an easily definable place, and Stony Lane

does not. The final question this group was asked focused on the roles of school or school district leadership in implementing or sustaining partnerships. This question was asked because many researchers have commented on the importance of having supportive and dedicated leaders in order for partnerships to be successful (Epstein, 2011; Howley et al., 2011; Patrizio, 2013; Preston, 2013; Washington, 2010). Participants were then given the opportunity for a final comment.

The focus groups with community members who had been involved in collaborations included the same questions (Appendix C) as those posed of staff members, albeit from a different point of view. Community members were asked about challenges in implementing school-community challenges, for, as Furco (2013) discussed, many teachers “resist involvement from external constituents” (p. 623). Participants were also given the opportunity for a final comment.

The last focus group (Appendix D) on Denman Island was with one individual who had not participated in a school-community collaboration. The first question asked of this participant was whether she believed that school-community collaborations were beneficial, and why. Howley et al. (2011) commented in the limitations of their study that they wished they had had the opportunity to discuss the community school with the wider community who were not involved in the school in order to determine whether the efforts of the school to collaborate were well received. By asking this question, I hoped to mitigate this limitation. The second question I asked was whether there was something the school could have done to encourage her to become involved in a collaboration. The last question asked the participant whether she was aware of any challenges to collaborations and ways to overcome these challenges. She was then asked if she had any further comments.

The focus groups held in Courtenay were exactly the same, except there were no focus groups held with community members. This was primarily done due to time constraints and logistical purposes, as these individuals are more difficult to recruit and I do not live in this community.

Procedures Followed

Upon receiving approval from the ethics board at Vancouver Island University, I approached the superintendent of SD71 to receive her approval to conduct the research. Approval was also sought from the administrators of Denman Island Community School and Stony Lane Elementary School.

The survey was administered to participants as an insert in *The Grapevine*, a weekly newspaper delivered to 630 households on Denman Island. Participants responded to the survey and submitted it anonymously in an envelope in the Free Post, a community-used resource in the local bookstore. The envelope was checked on a weekly basis through the end of November 2015. Surveys were also available at the front desk of the Denman Island Community School and at my weekly Farmer's Market table. Survey respondents had the opportunity to opt-in to participate in one of the focus groups by detaching a second sheet of paper into a second envelope and providing their contact information. This ensured their survey would remain anonymous. Participants were directed not to identify themselves in any way on the survey. A notice at the top of the survey informed participants that returning the survey implied consent to participate and, due to the anonymous nature of the survey, once participants returned the survey I would be unable to withdraw them from the research.

Focus group participants were recruited and chosen via a number of methods. All students from the intermediate class on Denman Island were invited to participate through a

notice that was read by their teacher. Interested students took an assent form for themselves and a consent form for their parents. Of the 14 students in the class, four returned their consent and assent forms to me via a box at the office of Denman Island Community School. The focus group was scheduled for 5-6 pm on Denman Island on a weeknight, as I was unable to arrive earlier in the evening after commuting back from my position as a teacher in Courtenay. The focus group was located in the library of the Denman Island community school.

Students from Stony Lane were chosen at the recommendation of their teachers and administrators in order to represent different ages, genders, and varying participation in school-community collaborations. Once I had been given the names of students, I invited them to participate in my study by informing them of my research and giving them assent forms for themselves and consent forms for their parents. Students were also informed of the time for the focus group to ensure they would be able to attend. Ten students were invited to participate at Stony Lane, and five returned the consent forms and participated in my study. The focus group at Stony Lane Elementary School was scheduled for 2:45 - 3:45 pm on a weeknight, as this is where I was employed and school ended at 2:30. This enabled all students to be able to attend.

Staff at Stony Lane Elementary were invited to participate in my study via an email that I sent out to all staff. I sent an additional email to aboriginal curriculum support teachers in the district. Interested participants responded to my email. Two interested staff members were unable to make either of the possible times for focus groups, but all others who responded to my email were able to participate in my study. This focus group was held from 3-4 pm on a weeknight, in order to give participants sufficient time to prepare for the following workday. Staff from Denman Island were similarly invited to participate. A time that was feasible to all who were interested was decided upon. Participants were given consent forms at the focus

groups that informed them that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. They were also informed that I might use direct quotes in my thesis.

Recruitment for the focus groups with community collaborators on Denman Island was conducted via an opt-in sheet in the survey, which was distributed to households via the free weekly paper. Interested participants returned the opt-in form at the local bookstore, with their contact information. Once a date and time was arranged for the focus group, I contacted willing participants. Several opt-in sheets were submitted after the focus groups were conducted, and three willing participants were unable to attend either of the possible focus group times. All other interested participants were included in the focus groups. Consent forms were distributed to participants at the time of the focus group as well.

The last focus group, for non-collaborators, was the most difficult to recruit participants for. Participants of the survey were able to identify themselves as willing to participate with a second page of the survey, but only one participant was recruited this way. A notice was placed in the Denman Island Community School newsletter and in *The Grapevine* but there was no response. Therefore, this last focus group had only a single participant, who consented to the research at the time of the focus group.

All focus groups were audio-recorded, using an iPad. Additionally, I took notes throughout all of the focus groups.

At the time of the focus group, participants were also informed that a debriefing session would be arranged in each of the contexts once I had finished compiling and analyzing my data. This debrief would allow me to share my understandings of the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations with both communities. Participants were asked whether they wanted to be informed of the upcoming debriefing session via email, and all participants

requested to be contacted. I also put up posters in both schools informing both school communities about the debriefing session. A notice was placed in each of the school newsletters and in *The Grapevine*. The majority of focus group participants attended one of the debriefing sessions. The debriefing sessions each lasted approximately one hour.

Validity

External validity of this research was strengthened through the number of focus groups that were held and the inclusion of a survey, as this allowed for triangulation of the data. The voices of a considerable number of stakeholder groups in each community were heard, as much of the previous research in this field spoke only to teachers or community members. Hearing from several community members who were not intricately involved and from one community member who was not at all involved in the community school was important, as these members of the community are often silent in this type of research. Additionally, I considered the voice of students to be imperative. As I was able to recruit participants in a variety of ways and contexts, external validity was improved. Additionally, the mixed-methods approach to this research strengthened its validity. I was able to gauge the importance of school-community collaborations with more individuals on Denman Island, as well as the community's opinion of the school as a resource, by using the quantitative portion of her survey. Lastly, validity was strengthened by the fact that questions from both my survey and my focus groups were designed after I was informed by relevant literature on PBE and school-community collaborations.

It was difficult for me to remain neutral throughout the research as I had personal and professional relationships with the majority of the participants. It is very likely that some of the comments made by participants were comments they believed I wanted to hear. This is a limitation of the study. An additional limitation in my study is my personal belief about the

benefits and importance of school-community collaborations. I found it difficult throughout my study to remain unbiased in this respect.

While the generalizability of this research is not high, having the opinions and viewpoints of two different and distinct schools significantly strengthens the data. The data was triangulated in two different ways - within a school setting using the survey and focus groups, and also between the two school settings.

Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data collected from the surveys was transcribed, compiled and analyzed. The median and mode of each question was calculated to determine the importance of the school in the community on Denman Island and to what extent school-community collaborations are beneficial. The qualitative portions of the surveys were analyzed to see what themes emerged regarding benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations, and these were put into a table to determine which themes were most common.

The recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and coded for the themes that had emerged from the surveys. I then examined the transcripts to determine which themes appeared across stakeholder groups and in both of the contexts. Because there were very few themes that were mentioned in each of the focus groups, I proceeded to analyze the recordings and transcripts to determine whether there were themes that may not have been mentioned by all of the stakeholder groups, but that were passionately discussed during at least two of my focus groups. I determined that a theme was discussed passionately when all members of a focus group agreed on it, or when a group discussed it at length. From this process, five themes emerged in relation to both the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations. Three themes emerged regarding PBE.

Once I had determined the most frequently mentioned and most passionately discussed themes, I re-examined the audio recordings, listening for stories and direct quote from participants, which I used to support the themes that had developed.

Chapter 4: Findings and Results

Introduction

My purpose in conducting this research study was to find some of the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations. This was done through a mixed-methods approach; although the vast majority of data collected was qualitative in nature. My research was completed in two parts. The first component was a survey that was distributed on Denman Island via *The Grapevine* – the local, free weekly newspaper. Additional surveys were available at the front desk of the Denman Island Community School during the months of October and November, although only one survey was taken from this location and was not returned. A total of 671 surveys were distributed. Of these, 45 were returned, indicating a return rate of 6.7%. The purpose of the survey was to determine locals' perceptions of the community school on Denman, in addition to answering my research question.

Following my survey I conducted a total of eight focus groups, situated both on Denman Island and in Courtenay, at Stony Lane Elementary School where I worked during my research. Focus groups were held with staff and students at both schools. As I was interested in hearing from as many voices as possible, staff included administration, primary and intermediate teachers, CUPE workers, learning support teachers, counselors, and a district aboriginal support worker. Students who were invited to participate were in grades four through seven. Additional focus groups were held on Denman Island, both with community members who had been involved in school-community collaborations, and with interested residents who had not been directly involved with collaborations in the past. My intention had been to hold a focus group at Stony Lane with community collaborators, but I was not able to due to time and scheduling constraints. A total of 25 individuals participated in my focus groups.

Survey Results

Denman Island is not unique in the Gulf Island with its aging population. Many residents have chosen to retire here, while others have lived here for many years, buying land when it was cheap and making their lives here. The demographics of participants of my Denman Island survey (Appendix A), as reported in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, both with number of years lived on the island, and the age of participants, fairly represent the demographics of the island. The majority of residents are retired, and the median age on the island was 57.5 years in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Table 4.1

Age of Survey Participants

Age	n (n = 45)
18-24	0
25-34	8
35-44	3
45-54	3
55-64	12
65-74	13
75+	6

Table 4.2

Number of Years Living on Denman Island

Years	n (n = 45)
Less than 1	0
1-5	10
5-10	11
10-15	7
More than 15	17

The last question I asked participants about their demographic was whether they had school-age children, and if so, whether their children attended the Denman Island Community School. Of the 45 respondents, five had school-age children, and four of these indicated that

their child or children attended the community school. I think it is unfortunate that I did not receive a greater response from parents on the island, as I believe that their voices are incredibly important. That said, I am pleased that I did get a response from an islander who had chosen not to send their child to the neighbourhood public school.

The quantitative questions of the Denman Island survey (Appendix A) asked residents to indicate their agreement with the following statements on a five-point Likert scale, with one equating with “Not at all true” and five equating with “Very true.”

1. I feel welcome in the Denman Island Community School.
2. Communities should be involved in public school education.
3. Students benefit from community collaborations in public school education.
4. Communities benefit from collaborations with public schools.
5. I have benefited from a community-collaboration with the Denman Island Community School.
6. I feel that the community is involved in the decision-making process at the Denman Island Community School.
7. Denman Island Community School is an important part of our community.

The overall mean and mode scores for each statement are represented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.3

Overall Mean and Mode Scores for Denman Island Surveys

Statement	n	Mean	Mode
1	44	4.23	5
2	43	4.79	5
3	44	4.91	5
4	44	4.81	5
5	43	3.98	5
6	39	2.91	2
7	44	4.95	5

Table 4.3 illustrates that Denman Island residents who responded to the survey value school-community collaborations. Statement 6, which asked respondents how much they felt the community was involved in decision making at the school scored lowest in both mean and mode scores, and also garnered the fewest responses. Statement 5, which asked respondents about whether they had personally benefited from a school-community collaboration, received the next lowest score.

In addition to the quantitative questions on my survey, four qualitative questions were included. The first of these questions was in two parts and asked respondents whether they had been involved in a school-community collaboration within the past year. If participants stated they had participated in a collaboration, they were then asked to describe those collaborations. Participants who stated that they had not participated in a collaboration were asked to list some

ways they could have been encouraged to participate. Tables 4.4 and 4.5 show the most common responses for both parts of this question. Of the 42 responses, 23 people stated they had participated in a collaboration, whereas 19 said they had not.

Table 4.4

Most Frequent Types of Collaborations

Type of Collaboration	n (n = 23)
Community activities	8
Choir and concerts	8
Feasty Fridays	7
Garden	6
Donations	6
Sparks	4
Classroom activities	4
Field trips	4
Parent Advisory Council (PAC)	3
Art activities	2
Conservation	2
Sports	2

Table 4.5

Ways to Encourage Participation

Way to Encourage	n (n = 19)
Being asked	6
Time	4
No response	4
Having/knowing a child at school	3
Relevant skills	3

Table 4.4 illustrates the ways in which Denman Island residents already collaborate with the school. Community activities refers to events that happen at the school, but which are often run by community members, often in conjunction with students. These events include sports,

movie presentations, music, etc. Community members make donations to the school for events, such as bake sales or plant sales. Feasty Fridays is a monthly event where community members and students cook a meal and eat together. Sparks is a more long-term collaboration, where students spend time every Friday for a period of six weeks with a community member, developing a “spark” or interest in an area of expertise for the community member and an area of interest for the student. Conservation refers to any activity, either related to the Denman Island Conservancy, or to activities focused on environmental activism, such as the beach clean up.

For the residents who had not recently participated in a collaboration, the majority said that being asked, either personally by a staff or student, or in the weekly newspaper, *The Grapevine*, would be sufficient to encourage participation. Other residents stated that having or knowing a child at the school would encourage them to participate. Many residents also stated that they simply did not have sufficient time, as they are volunteering with other community-run organizations. Finally, some felt that the skills they had were not of relevance in a school setting, while others did not write any response when asked how they could be encouraged to collaborate with the school.

The second and third qualitative questions asked respondents to identify the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations. These questions were purposefully inclusive, to allow participants to discuss benefits and challenges to themselves, students, the school, organizations, or the wider community. Table 4.6 shows the most common benefits stated by participants, and Table 4.7 shows the most common challenges, as stated by the participants.

Table 4.6

*Benefits to School-Community**Collaborations*

Benefit	n (n = 41)
Building of community	27
Relationships and connections	18
Intergenerational learning	11
Special skills (art, conservation, etc.)	8
Importance of children in society	8
Respect for all age groups	6
School as a hub in the community	6
More opportunities for our youth	5
Safety (of students and community)	5
Curriculum enhancement	4
Providing role models/mentors	4

Table 4.7

*Challenges to School-Community**Collaborations*

Challenge	n (n = 40)
Funding	13
Lack of volunteers	12
Difficulties with the school board	11
Leadership	10
Mindset	9
Time	9
Staff already too busy	6
Organization	4
Size of school	4
Priority of academics	2

As evidenced by the numbers in Table 4.6, many residents identified benefits that were, in one way or another, related to the building of relationships. Others commented on the benefits to our students due to the special skills available in our community, notably in the arts and in the field of conservation, on the ways curriculum could be enhanced through collaborations, and on an increased feeling of safety when collaborations are happening.

The challenges listed in Table 4.7 document many difficulties out of the control of the community – namely the school board, school leadership, funding, and the workload of staff. Other challenges included a lack of volunteers, and, similarly, a lack of time.

Focus Group Results

There were certain themes that surfaced across all focus groups when participants were asked questions regarding benefits, challenges, and roles of administration in collaborations. Other themes surfaced only with particular groups, or only in one of the settings, or were strongly voiced by a majority of members of a focus group. I will discuss the themes that were most prominent across focus groups, but also those that were most important in either of the contexts or with specific stakeholder groups. There were five benefits of school-community collaborations that fit these criteria of either being mentioned across stakeholder groups or significantly stressed within a group: motivation, enrichment, relationships, health and safety, and indigenous knowledge and perspectives. There were also five themes around the challenges to school-community collaborations which were time and scheduling, funding, expertise and expectations, organization and communication, and the mindset of administrators. Lastly I will discuss themes addressed regarding the role of place in school-community collaborations. Three themes emerged from this question in my focus groups, which are the natural sciences, culture,

and connections and relationships. The names of locations and people have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

Benefits of school-community collaborations.

Motivation.

There's a woman who is at Brightwater² and she can't see very well – she was asking about bringing books with larger print, which we have at primary, but one of the [Kindergarten students] heard her and went home and practiced a book so that she could come back and read it to this resident, and the name of the book was June the Bunny³, and this woman's name was June³, so she had picked the book to come back and read [to the resident].

- Focus group participant, Stony Lane staff focus group

Motivation to learn was mentioned across all of the focus groups as a benefit to school-community collaborations. As the students were asked directly about what motivated them to learn, many talked about choice in education – being able to pick what and how they learn. Students connected this to collaborations they had experienced. One student talked about how “a bold presentation” from a community member motivated her to further her learning and resulted in her starting a school club to raise awareness for the subject of the presentation. Another student talked about being motivated to learn more about certain professions when a community member came in and talked about “what they do.”

School staff spoke about motivation in a different way. One staff member stated that “learning is relational,” so we must foster relationships in order to encourage or motivate

² Brightwater is a pseudonym

³ June is a pseudonym

students to learn. Another staff member spoke about how learning goes both ways, and how community collaborations increase her own engagement – she said that she can get kind of “stuck until you start talking to people.” One of the staff members on Denman Island was adamant about describing how “the quality of character of the kids who grow up on Denman is really exemplary,” and chalked up much of this citizenship to the extent to which the students were a part of a larger community throughout their youth and schooling.

Enrichment.

[A geneticist] came in and he would bring animals in the room and kits and he would demonstrate perfectly Mendel’s recessive and dominant gene thing – you know the little graph they have – and it would just work out perfect. And the kids were just handling these little rabbits and checking out their eye colours, and checking out the flop of their ears and those kind of things. So direct, right? We live in a place where there are so many intelligent and well-educated people that we use them really well, especially botanists and zoologists.

- Focus group participant; Denman Island staff focus group

While all groups mentioned that community collaborations serve as a way to enrich the curriculum, this was especially prominent in the Denman Island focus groups. Staff, students and community collaborators alike spoke of the importance of giving students opportunities to learn from additional adults due to the small school staff – most students will have only two teachers from Kindergarten through grade seven. When asked why she collaborated, one resident stated she did it “for the kids – to enrich their lives.” Students on Denman spoke about how collaborations with artists were important to them, whereas students at Stony Lane spoke about how they would love to have more collaborations with artists, especially “passionate

professionals” who could not only teach students, but also the teacher who could then take their new knowledge into their other classes. Students at Stony Lane also mentioned that they were interested in having further collaborations with a range of artists – potters, sculptors, carvers, painters, etc.

Other staff members talked about how much collaborators had to offer, both to students and to the staff themselves in their own learning. One example given was of a radio producer who “came in and taught the kids how to do interview techniques and then they interviewed a senior on the island.” A different staff member spoke of the “whole exploitation of the knowledge that you have in your community if you dig around and get to use it.” Staff talked about their own stereotypes being dismantled, about learning new skills (like the care of ponies and donkeys), and about the general “wider enrichment, greater learning” that happens when community members are involved with the school.

Relationships.

There have been some very special connections between certain children and so even though [the residents at Brightwater] don't want to really pair up [with a specific student], there's just some magic that happens and there's certain children and residents that have a kinship, a connection... I know one of the girls, she goes and visits one of the residents because of having done this for two years.

- Focus group participant; Stony Lane staff focus group

While the students did not talk much about the relationships forged with members of a school-community collaboration, relationships were mentioned repeatedly by almost every other participant in my research study. The importance of strong relationships was stressed by a

resident on Denman, who stated that students “knowing other community members, community members knowing them, all of us knowing who each other are strengthens everything for all of us.” She went on to say that collaborating with the school “strengthens my whole community - the community that I live in is better if we’re all participating.”

Other participants in my study talked about the benefit to children of having a wide network of adults who know them and care for them. The word “intergenerational” was used regularly, by many participants, across focus groups, as a benefit and a reason to continue supporting and participating in school-community collaborations. One collaborator, who is also a parent of a child at the school, spoke about the friendships he has made due to collaborations at the school and spending time with other involved parents. Someone mentioned that it is a “wonderful thing to have children in your life when you get older and you live far apart from your own family” and another spoke of the opportunities to show compassion during a collaboration that don’t happen during a normal school day. A staff member stated that it is “critical that we foster relationships and connection,” and another said that the relationships she makes and the conversations she has during collaborations are important to her because she works “with 4, 5, and 6 year olds many hours of the day.” Participants thought it was important for adults to be modeling connectedness and showing vulnerability during collaborations, as a teachable moment for students. One of the staff focus groups from Stony Lane spent considerable time discussing a number of “authentic, deep, real community relationships” that they have seen develop over a number of years.

While relationships with collaborators were not brought up during the focus groups with students, one group of students talked about the deep and meaningful relationships they fostered with other students while on an extended field trip, which involved many community members.

Students had to fundraise for the trip and had to work with others who were not necessarily in their friend group. Additionally, some friendships were made that would likely not have transpired had it not been for the time away from the normalcy of school.

Health and safety.

My wife won't pick up men [hitch-hiking] if she's alone, and so if she saw a boy that was maybe 14 or 16 or something like that she might not pick him up unless she knew him. But if she recognized him from some interaction that we'd had somewhere then she'd say "Oh yeah, I know him," and she may not even know his name, but she'd pick him up.

- Focus group participant; Denman Island collaborator focus group

A number of the focus groups with adults, especially those on Denman Island, focused on the theme of healthy and safe communities. Participants mentioned, time and again, the sense of safety that was created by being known by others in the community. One Denman Island resident said that school-community collaborations create "a huge amount of safety if the kids know who you are and know who people are in the community, and I think it's great because then kids can have more freedom." Another said that "there's something very psychologically healthy about being known – me knowing those kids and those kids knowing me." She went on to describe how beneficial it is for children to be known personally – for adults to know what they're good at and "where they shine."

School district employees had similar opinions about the health benefits to children and community members in relation to school-community collaborations. One employee said that collaborations "impact the kids so positively that it makes for healthier students and a healthier student body." She added that collaborations validate and add richness to the lives of the people

who come into the school. Sharing knowledge or reading a story “builds resilience and mental health capacity in older people too,” especially for older members of the community who spend a lot of time alone. Another employee talked about the separation between school and community as being artificial and unhealthy – “we need the bridge between the outside community and the school, and that needs to be a wide bridge and a well-worn bridge so that people are part of the health and well-being of the community here, in the school.”

Additionally, two participants mentioned a number of outside community members and groups that they collaborated with that were directly tied to the health and safety of students, families and the wider community. These community members and groups included doctors (optometrists, hearing specialists, and family doctors), autism specialists, social workers, counselors, support workers, and the Ministry of Child and Family Development, amongst others.

Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

I was just at Ospringe Elementary⁴, and this lovely boy, as soon as I walked down the hall - I'd been there three or four times – he came up to me and goes “I didn't know you were going to be here today, I was going to bring my regalia for you.” He's from Alert Bay, we've been teaching him about residential schools... but before this, he didn't talk about his heritage at all, so just having him come up and greet me into the school and feel a sense of pride and belonging...

- Focus group participant; Stony Lane staff focus group

⁴ Ospringe is a pseudonym

It was important for me, throughout my research, to hear aboriginal voices – both staff and students. While these participants talked about the importance for “our aboriginal kids... [to feel] more comfortable in a room that’s open and accepting of different ways,” participants without First Nations heritage had similar things to say. School-community collaborations were valued and beneficial across many of the focus groups as a way to normalize aboriginal culture. In one student’s previous school, “instead of singing O Canada in the morning, [they] would sing a First Nations song,” and another talked about First Nations storytellers who visited and told creation stories. A staff member told a story about a presentation she had recently made about residential schools to the BC superintendents’ association, after which a lady came to thank her for teaching this – the lady’s father had attended a residential school, and it is not something she was ever taught in school. Additionally, comments were made about honouring aboriginal cultures and bringing them into the present. One staff member said that it is important to remember that First Nations people are “living, breathing, human beings” who are not only living in the past. Students have asked her why she has an iPhone because she is First Nations, and she believes that having more aboriginal voices in the classroom will help dispel these stereotypes.

Challenges of school-community collaborations.

Time and scheduling.

We tried to do a collaboration with [a high school] ..., and we tried a few times to bring [a] group over to our Kindergarten class, which had a lot of potential.... Part of the issue too [in collaborating between elementary and high schools] is blocks – [the high school teacher] would say “I can come on Tuesday at 2:00 or Wednesday at 9:15” and I’m like “well that won’t work”,

because their schedule is all over the place, I think we only ended up having them come two or three times and it was the scheduling that was a really big challenge because we're on completely different systems as far as scheduling goes.

- Focus group participant; Stony Lane staff focus group

Time – both not having enough of it, and the coordination of schedules – was mentioned by all of the focus groups with adults as a challenge in implementing and sustaining school-community collaborations. One volunteer who taught pottery to students mentioned the time required not only to volunteer, but the additional time required to take the students' work home to fire it, and then “bring it back, then they could draw on it and then I'd put a clear glaze on it and then I would refire it.”

Every staff member talked about the time required in collaborations. They talked about everyone being busy – staff members and community members alike. Staff members talked about having “too much on their plates,” “being asked to do more with less,” and a few mentioned that “the collaborative piece is the first to go.” The staff on Denman Island also spent considerable time talking about the changing demographics of the island – there are considerably fewer students at the school now than there were a few decades ago (current school enrolment is 27, and the school had enrolment over 100 during the 1980s and 1990s). With fewer students, there are fewer parents, and “our first line of the public are the parents.” “Having fewer parents means it is more demanding to keep the same level of service.” Additionally, many of the “volunteers are volunteered-out.” Lastly, call-outs for volunteers often does not result in anything, and finding the right person or group to collaborate with takes considerable time on the part of staff.

Funding.

In our community, because we don't have a rec centre, the Comox Valley Regional District funds Denman \$20,000 a year. It used to be that a good chunk of that came to the education society to run the recreation programs. As our community amenities become enhanced... the consequence for us is that we've been getting less and less and less and less... We all have great respect for these organizations, we're not saying, "they shouldn't get it, we should get it" ... The same \$20,000 is getting divided up into more and more mouths to feed.

- Focus group participant; Denman Island collaborator focus group

Funding always seems to be a challenge in education. School-community collaborations are no different. The literature I read mentioned funding as a concern, and the participants of my focus groups almost exclusively mentioned money as a significant obstacle. Not only do some community collaborators want, expect and deserve to be paid, but many community collaborations cost money. Transporting students is a significant expense. One of the long standing collaborations at Stony Lane, an intergenerational project between Kindergarten students and residents from a seniors' facility, struggled with transportation of students at the beginning. "The first time we went we took two classes on a school bus, but that cost \$140... so now we use the Brightwater bus, and they come to pick us up." Fortunately, this collaboration was able to overcome this challenge.

For collaborators on Denman Island, the cost of ferries is another considerable expense. Additionally, many participants mentioned the possibility of grants, but many grants do not cover the hiring of a person, only the purchasing of a product. This was considered unfortunate by a number of individuals, as it meant that local experts could not be brought in to teach or

collaborate with students. The general feeling, expressed well by one participant, was that “we could do so much more if we had more funding.”

Expertise and expectations.

We know who the artists are now that LOVE coming and who know how to do it because not everybody can just walk into a big group, especially when you've got five year-olds and 85 year-olds and everybody's happy.

- Focus group participant; Stony Lane staff focus group

Another challenge that was mentioned in every focus group I ran with adults was the expertise of the collaborators, and whether both parties had similar expectations. It was interesting to hear about this challenge, both from the point of view of school staff, and from the point of view of collaborators. Collaborators often mentioned how they were not all “experienced with groups of children,” and therefore how difficult it was to plan a class or a lesson or an activity that would appeal to everyone. Collaborators found that “teaching a group of six or eight kids was intimidating.” Teachers had similar things to say, but from the opposite point of view. One teacher commented on how important it was to find an activity in the comfort zone of the volunteer, whether it was a whole-class presentation, a small-group activity, or some one-on-one time with a student. Teachers remembered some “really unfortunate incidents I’ve had with people coming into the classroom to share,” and remembered thinking “this is going SO down, SO far, I’m going to tell [the presenter] that it’s Math next, like NOW.” Another staff member commented on how sometimes you have to “interject with a naïve question” in order to get a collaborator back on track, or back at the level of the students.

In addition to the collaborators’ expertise around working with children, many participants spoke of “expectations probably too – how things should look in the end.” One staff

member discussed intention – whether her intention matched the common goal. Another staff member discussed how worried she was about being judged by any collaborators – judged for the behaviour of her students, for the way she handled discipline, for the structures set in place in her class, etc. She felt “a lot of pressure” when she started doing community collaborations with her students.

Organization and communication.

There were a lot of growing pains at the beginning. We had to figure out what was going to work. There were a LOT of meetings, but so worth it in the end... We often get together and just say “What about this? How are we going to make this work? Will you do this if I do this? Who’s paying for this part and who’s paying for that part?”

- Focus group participant; Stony Lane staff focus group

Organization tended to be another sticking area for many of the staff members and collaborators. One collaborator mentioned how “you can’t always find that person that wants to organize whatever workshop or event or activity that you’ve got in mind.” Another talked about how “people do want to be involved and they want to help, but they don’t want to be in charge.”

The staff on Denman talked at length about different ways to communicate needs and desires to the community. While many respondents to my survey mentioned that they would be willing to help if someone asked them or if there was an ad in *the Grapevine* requesting help at the school, the staff felt like they were already doing this. Communication between the school and the community is a concern – perhaps there would be more willing volunteers and collaborators if the communication were more seamless. A staff member at Stony Lane also mentioned that school structures often do not support school collaborations – whether it is

something relatively minor like bell schedules or something more systematic, like the frequent turnover of staff in buildings. Collaborators talked about how misunderstandings frequently resulted in collaborations not happening, or in being uncomfortable and under tension when they did occur. An example of this was given in regards to criminal background checks – for whom they were required, for what reasons, and what information was being looked for. The participants of one focus group believed that the Denman Island Community School had lost a number of potential volunteers because they believed they were required to have a background check and did not feel comfortable getting one, when, in reality, very few collaborators are required to have a criminal check.

Mindset of administrators.

We understood – we had sort of understood intuitively that there was a community plan, that there was a vision for the school... I believe the role of the administration is to run things in line with the vision that the community has for what they want the school to be.

- Focus group participant; Denman Island collaborator focus group

The last challenge that was mentioned, in one form or another, in every focus group I had with staff and with community collaborators, was one of mindset or trust in relation to the role of administration in regards to school-community collaborations. As one of my focus group questions specifically asked participants about the role of administration, I am not surprised that this was a common response.

The staff, both at Stony Lane and on Denman, spoke of the need for administrators to “facilitate the building of relationships”, and to be willing to trust that the collaboration is worthwhile. Staff on Denman Island were especially fervent in their desire for administrators to

be “welcoming, warm and [to practice] genuine regard for ALL members of the diverse community.” As Denman Island already has a number of well-established school-community collaborations, staff also expressed that the continued success of school-community collaborations was dependent on administrators who trust and support the programs already in place.

Role of place in school-community collaborations.

While most participants in my focus groups voiced similar opinions in regards to the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations, the responses given to my question about whether a student’s relationship to place is affected by school-community collaborations were very different depending on whether I was talking to the staff at Stony Lane or to staff and collaborators on Denman Island. The only participant at Stony Lane who was able to answer easily and with confidence regarding the role of place for a student was the aboriginal curriculum support worker. Comparatively, almost all participants from the Denman Island focus groups had a lot to say about the ways that students’, and their own, relationships to place are impacted by collaborations. In fact, one participant said that she couldn’t “imagine a community collaboration that wouldn’t strengthen a student’s connection to Denman Island.” Therefore, the following responses come almost exclusively from Denman Island.

Natural sciences.

We live in a place where there are so many intelligent and well-educated people that we use them really well, especially botanists and zoologists. [For example], tours in Winter Wren and listening to birdcalls and identification. Our famous forester... down on his hands and knees, showing kids different ferns and why

this fern is surviving so well in this area, and why this fern is surviving so well here, and all the trees and talk about trees.

- Focus group participant; Denman Island staff focus group

My research has shown that a significant percentage of the community collaborations on Denman Island are, in one way or another, linked to the natural sciences, which is understandable considering the location of our island and the environment in which we live. One participant stated that, for a period of time when she was helping to organize collaborations, the school focused on finding people who were able to teach some form of natural sciences to the students, including plant identification and marine life information. Additional collaborations have occurred with a marine field station located on Vancouver Island close to the Denman Island ferry terminal. Staff members also spoke about using yearly natural events, such as the herring spawn, as prime opportunities for collaboration, whether with botanists, conservationists, or fishermen and women. The Denman Island resident who had not participated in a collaboration commented on how she believed that collaborations that focused on conservancy were important because it “would be great for young people to connect with naturalists and for the island to have a strong group of young advocates.”

One of the other participants on Denman spoke about how students on the island have been indoctrinated into having a strong connection to their natural environment. He went on to discuss how “raising children in this kind of a place is a kind of indoctrination” to nature and the natural world around us, but that “not all indoctrinations are a bad thing.” His belief was that when students live so closely with the wildlife that surrounds them, they will be more inclined to protect it and care for it in the future.

Culture.

We don't have a uni-culture here at all. You can just see that when you look at the kinds of lunches kids bring. Some have got plastic city in their lunch, and it's right out of the supermarket shelves, and others are handmade granola or whatever, in their little Tiffin containers.

- Focus group participant; Denman Island staff focus group

One of the tenets of place-based education (PBE) is that the people are a significant part of place – PBE does not exclusively focus on geography or the natural sciences. Hand in hand with the people who live in a place is their culture, and this idea was discussed at length during Denman Island focus groups.

One of the ideas mentioned on a number of occasions during the Denman Island focus groups was that the island does not have a uni-culture. One participant spoke about this in terms of the number of people on the island “who share a lot of values about gender diversity and sexual diversity, and this is all normalized for our kids in a beautiful way.” Another spoke about the ways that children on Denman are growing up expecting certain things from their communities – a communal Christmas dinner, an excellent sports program, local food, amongst other things – and argued that the children will fight for those things if they are no longer provided. Participants truly believe that the culture of a community is better, and more contextualized, when it is shared with children at the school.

The aboriginal support worker I spoke with echoed this opinion when she spoke about the ways that aboriginal cultures are taught through collaborations between aboriginal groups and schools. She talked about the legend of Queneesh, the white whale in the K'omoks glacier. She also mentioned that community collaborations “connects all of those generations, all of the

people who have lived here before” to students in the classroom, “crossing boundaries of young and old.”

Connections and relationships.

Don't all relationships ground you in the place that you are? Don't your relationships define the place where you're at? I mean nature does too, but if you think about when you were growing up you think about the relationships that you had, the people - family, teachers, friends, neighbours – and when you have those memories it takes you back to that place – historically places are often grounding for you.

- Focus group participant; Denman Island staff focus group

The last way that many of the participants on Denman Island talked about a student's relationship to place being affected by a collaboration was in the ways the student related to the other members of the community. One staff member commented that this was obvious when prior students came back and spent time at the school. Another staff member commented about how young adults often leave the community after school, but a strong contingent of them are moving back to the island. One staff member said that some parents have recently told her that they've moved back to the island so their “kids can go to this school.” A community member spoke about why he'd recently moved to the island, when his son was in high school. He said that he wanted his child to have a connection to the place where his parents lived, so he would have a place to come back to, but also so that he would have people to come back to.

One of the few ways that the staff at Stony Lane connected relationships to place through school-community collaborations was through relationships. One of the staff members spoke of how her students make connections to a community member during a collaboration, and then

when the student sees that community member out in public, they make a deeper connection to their community. The staff member found this especially true for younger students.

Additionally, the staff members at Stony Lane spoke about the relationships they have fostered through school-community collaborations, and how these relationships have affected their own connections to place, but also their ideas and stereotypes about certain segments of our communities, especially towards the elderly.

Conclusion

Many benefits and challenges were discussed in both my surveys and in my focus groups. Some of these were in line with the literature I read, while others were surprising to me and were not mentioned in any of the literature I came across. In Chapter Five I will more thoroughly discuss the themes with connections to the literature, and I will also draw some main conclusions from my study.

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion and Implications

Summary

The purpose of this study was to look into the ways that school-community collaborations are used in two contexts: Denman Island Community School and Stony Lane Elementary. I chose to look at these two schools because I live on Denman Island, but commute off-island to Stony Lane Elementary, where I work as a teacher. Specifically, I was interested in the benefits of school-community collaborations, as identified by a variety of stakeholders, and the challenges in implementing and sustaining these collaborations. It was important for me to include benefits for all member groups, and not just those for students. These included benefits to staff, collaborators, and the wider community. I was also interested in the ways that school-community collaborations affect a student's relationship to place. My specific research question asked, *"How can school-community collaboration be beneficial to students, collaborators and the wider community, and how are they challenging in each of the school environments?"* The data from my research was gathered and analyzed in the hopes that school-community collaborations can be more effectively used in the Comox Valley – both in small, rural communities, and in more suburban settings.

My research included a survey (Appendix A) and ten focus groups. My survey was sent out in the free local newspaper on Denman Island to all residents, and asked participants four qualitative questions regarding what types of school-community collaborations they were aware of, and the benefits and challenges of these collaborations. In addition to these qualitative questions, I asked seven quantitative questions regarding how welcome participants felt in the Community School, how involved the community is in school planning, and other similar questions. Of the 671 surveys I distributed, 45 were returned, for a response rate of 6.7%.

When survey participants were asked about the benefits of school-community collaborations, either to themselves, students, or the wider community, the most prevalent responses were about community building and relationships. Participants also frequently responded that community safety was increased through school-community collaborations. Another benefit noted by participants was that the role of children in society was elevated through collaborations with the school. Few participants noted that student engagement, motivation or curriculum enhancement were benefits to collaborations.

In regards to the challenges of school-community collaborations, the most frequently noted was funding. The second most frequent was a lack of volunteers, which is directly related to a lack of time. Following this, the next three most common responses were all related to leadership – whether at the school or the district level. Again, few respondents noted that the curriculum was a challenge to implementing or sustaining a collaboration.

Following my survey, I conducted a total of ten focus groups (Appendices B – D), both on Denman Island and at Stony Lane. These focus groups were held with students, staff, community collaborators, and with one interested resident who had not been involved in a school-community collaboration. I asked similar questions in all of my focus groups. These questions focused on the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations, the role of administration in school-community collaborations, and whether school-community collaborations affected the students' relationships to place. Additionally, I asked the students questions about their motivation to learn, which collaborations had been their favourites (and why), and about whether there were any collaborations they would be interested in participating in but had not yet had the opportunity.

In contrast to my survey, all of the focus groups I held named motivation and engagement as a benefit of school-community collaboration, especially the focus groups I held with students. Another benefit of collaborations that was almost always mentioned was the enrichment of curriculum. This was especially important for the focus groups – both those with staff and collaborators alike – on Denman Island, where there are only two classrooms for grades K through seven, which means that many students will only have two different teachers for the first eight years of their formalized education.

The focus groups I held, both those on Denman and those at Stony Lane, all discussed relationships as another significant benefit to school-community collaborations. Some staff discussed the relationships they had fostered with collaborators. Students discussed relationships they had built with other students as a benefit of collaborations. Parents discussed relationships they had built with other parents, in addition to the relationships they had built with students. On Denman Island, adult participants of my focus groups believed that the fostering of relationships that occurred through collaborations increased safety in our community. The thought was that since students are known by many adults in the community, they are safer and can be allowed more freedom. Additionally, several participants felt that crime in the community, especially crime committed by teenagers, was diminished due to community members knowing each other.

The last benefit that was discussed by almost all of the focus groups was an increased understanding of indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing and learning. Students discussed this in terms of some of the collaborations they had experienced. Staff spoke about their own increased knowledge of aboriginal knowledge, which expanded their practice. Collaborators spoke about the ways that indigenous ways of knowing and learning, in addition to knowledge of current and past aboriginal cultures, were expanded through collaborations.

Many of the challenges identified in my focus groups were repeated by different stakeholder groups and in each of the contexts, although I did not ask students about the challenges of collaborations. Unsurprisingly, the two most common challenges discussed were a lack of time and a lack of funding. School staff discussed how they felt overworked, and how collaborations are often one of the first things to go. Collaborators discussed how the same volunteers are repeatedly asked to help, and are often tired. Everyone discussed how difficult the funding situation is, and how challenging it is to implement and sustain collaborations without a sustainable source of funding.

The other challenges discussed were all connected to each other. The first was the expertise of collaborators, and the expectations of everyone involved. It is difficult for many trained and expert teachers to understand the needs of all of their students – much more so for collaborators who spend little time with students, and who are often experts on a subject, but may not be experts in educating children. The second related challenge was organization and communication. Many collaborators on Denman Island discussed how they were willing to volunteer, but did not want to organize events or workshops. Staff had similar comments, but more in relation to the time required to organize a collaboration. The last challenge discussed by all of the focus groups was in relation to the mindset of administrators. What participants told me was that if administrators are not on board and are not supportive, then collaborations are almost impossible.

The last theme I asked the focus groups about was the ways that school-community collaborations affected a student's relationship to their place. This question was answered easily by all of the focus groups with adults on Denman Island, but the staff at Stony Lane had

significant difficulty answering this question, and therefore the themes pulled from this question are almost exclusively from the Denman Island focus groups.

The first way that Denman Island participants discussed a student's relationship to place was through the natural sciences. This is understandable on Denman Island, as forests and ocean surround us, and we have many expert botanists, foresters, biologists, and others. The second way that relationships to place were effected through collaborations was through culture, including aboriginal cultures. The last way that collaborations were discussed in connection to place was through the connections and relationships that participants can make. It is important to me that PBE is not defined as solely the education of a geography, but that it encompasses culture and the ways that humans interact with each other as well.

Discussion and Conclusions

Benefits. Research suggests that school-community collaborations are beneficial to students for a variety of reasons. One of the most consistent benefits discussed in the literature was students' motivation to learn (Bartleet, 2012; Cripps Clark, Tytler & Symington, 2012; Epstein, 1996; Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005; Howley, Howley, Camper, & Perko, 2011; Preston, 2013; Smith, 2002; Spring, 2013). The findings of the current study support this, especially through the focus groups I held with students and staff. One student discussed how participating on a sports team coached by a parent volunteer "got [him] to come to school," while another talked about how participating in a monthly communal meal at the school encouraged her family to spend more time cooking together. School staff had similar stories about motivation in their classrooms and buildings – during and following collaborations, students were more interested and more engaged. Conversely, the participants from my survey rarely mentioned student motivation and engagement as a key benefit to collaborations with the

community. I believe this is mainly due to the participants' distance from day-to-day class life, as many of the participants in my survey were seniors. While the majority of survey respondents had participated in a collaboration, in one form or another, I believe that few had an intricate knowledge of the realities of a modern classroom on a day when a collaboration is not taking place, where many students struggle to be engaged and choose not to participate in many activities, and therefore many learning opportunities are being missed. Additionally, as this question on the survey was qualitative in nature, many participants may have chosen motivation or engagement as a key benefit to students had they been given a list of choices, as opposed to being asked to generate benefits on their own.

The literature also suggests that school-community collaborations were an excellent way to enrich the curriculum (White & Reid, 2008). Bartleet (2012) found that "school-community collaborations have improved the quality of learning in the arts" (p. 59), while Cripps Clark et al. (2014) found that school-community collaborations are most useful when a school examines the resources and expertise they have in-house in order for collaborations to fill a niche not covered by school staff. This benefit was routinely discussed, in my focus groups and mentioned a number of times by the respondents of my survey. Students in my focus groups talked about learning from experts, while staff focus group participants discussed how difficult it is to be a generalist teacher and therefore considered an expert in all subjects. Special collaborations, including gardening, animal-care, cooking and sewing were also mentioned as ways that the community has enriched the curriculum for students. This was especially true on Denman Island, where the school staff is so small, and therefore the breadth of interests and expertise of the staff is correspondingly less than larger schools.

Another benefit discussed in the literature was that of relationships. Macbeath (2013) states that “learning is a social activity” (p. 102), and Shamah and MacTavish, (2009) discusses how collaborations can exemplify a student’s sense of belonging in a community. Again, the findings from my study coincide with this literature. Almost all participants in the focus groups, regardless of which community the participant was a part of, or which stakeholder group they belonged to, discussed the importance of building relationships. The exception to this was some of the student participants, although several did discuss this as a benefit. I believe if I had asked more direct questions on this subject a greater number of students would have identified this benefit as well.

Relationships and a sense of community were the benefits most frequently identified by survey respondents. I was touched, but not surprised, by the strength of some of the relationships that had evolved due to collaborations, including a student on Denman Island who continues to visit a mentor she had from a collaboration five or six years ago, and another grade two student from Stony Brook who visits one of the elderly residents at Brightwater after having participated in a collaboration there for two years. Additionally, the value of some of the relationships, especially for active and athletic boys who did not always have strong male role models in their homes, or at the school (there have been years when all of the school staff was female), was impressed upon me. Many parents came out to coach sports teams on Denman Island, and the importance of these relationships to boys who needed the support were clear to the staff and collaborators alike.

Two other benefits arose from my study that were not immediately indicated in the literature I read. The first was that school-community collaborations increase the sense of safety in a community. While this was mentioned as a response both in my survey and my focus

groups on Denman Island, it was not observed in town. I believe this has to do with the rural nature of the community on Denman Island. Upon further research into this subject, I found connections between many historical aboriginal groups and this theme of safety. While historically, First Nations communities would not have had school-community collaborations in the way I have defined them in this study, these communities typically collaborated in much more extensive ways than our culture does today. Through these collaborations, children were given “increasing opportunities to learn... without coercion” (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002, p. 53). Brendtro et al.’s (2002) premise, from my understanding, was that in order for children to survive, they needed to make successful independent decisions. Correspondingly, in order for communities to survive, individuals had to be successful. I see that through collaborations, our communities become safer environments to live in, and our children become more successful citizens.

The other benefit mentioned across my focus groups, was an increase in indigenous ways of knowing and learning. I believe that there are a number of reasons this benefit was mentioned by my focus groups, but I also believe that it may have been due to the participants, three of whom self-identified as First Nations. Furthermore, participants were supplied with the questions I would be asking, in addition to a list of examples of collaborations (Appendices C and D) prior to the beginning of their focus group. Included in this list of collaborations was “*First Nations presentations/story-telling.*” I wonder whether this benefit – of indigenous ways of knowing and learning – or this genre of collaboration – First Nations presentations – would have occurred to some participants had it not been included in the list.

While my study can corroborate much of the literature on the benefits of school-community collaborations, I feel that there are three areas where this current research can

augment the body of literature on this subject. Firstly, few studies in the literature had student participants. I believe this is one of the strengths of my research. While the opinions of the students were similar to those of other participants, I still believe that hearing their voices is insightful and essential when their interests are most at stake. Secondly, I believe that the two benefits discussed in my focus groups that were not consistently discussed in the literature – safety and indigenous ways of knowing – are important themes that could further our understanding of the potential benefits of school-community collaborations.

Challenges. Throughout the literature on school-community collaborations the inherent challenges are well-documented. The two challenges most frequently discussed, both in the literature and throughout my focus groups, were that of time and money. While the challenge of funding is mentioned extensively both in the literature and in my current study, very few solutions to this challenge were presented. One focus group participant said that “stable, sustainable funding” is required in order to implement school-community collaborations. However, as it is incredibly unlikely, given the current economy, that a significant increase to funding is coming from the government, schools and communities are simply going to have to find ways around this challenge. I found one solution to this challenge in the literature. Howley et al. (2011) studied place-based education (PBE) and school-community collaborations at a small, rural island school in the United States and acknowledged that a significant percentage of their funding came from a wealthy group of residents. Without this extraneous financial support the majority of the school-community collaborations at Island Community School, the school in the study, would have been impossible (Howley et al., 2011). While clearly this is not a solution that will work in many contexts, it is an interesting premise and not one to be completely ignored.

As for the challenge of time, I believe that there are solutions to this that are more easily found. As we live in a region with a large retired population, I believe that if we bridge the gaps between seniors and schools, school-community collaborations will be a natural outcome. Certainly this will not solve the problem of time required by teachers and school staff to organize these collaborations, but, as stated by one focus group participant and in a number of studies, once collaborations are underway and have a “solid infrastructure in place” (Bartleet, 2012, p. 59) the time required for organization diminishes significantly.

The other challenges frequently mentioned by participants were experience and expectations; organization and communication; and the mindset of administrators. All of these challenges are well documented in the literature. Howley et al. (2011) stated that the “leadership of an ‘activist’ principal” (p. 226) was imperative to the collaborations that occurred at the school studied. Other researchers found almost exactly the same challenges as I did – Bartleet (2012) lists “restrictive school timetables, and a lack of resources including funding” (p. 49) in addition to the expectations of schools and communities as challenges in either implementing or sustaining school-community music collaborations. Kaser and Halbert (2009) state that mindsets of trust and integrity are key to furthering student learning. These mindsets are important for all school staff, but imperative for formal leaders, as, without devoted principals, collaborations are incredibly difficult.

I found little surprising in terms of the challenges in implementing or sustaining school-community collaborations as discussed by either survey or focus group participants in my study. Therefore I feel that while I can help to substantiate the literature, my study does not add significantly to the body of research relating directly to the challenges of school-community collaborations.

Role of place. The biggest discrepancy between the two contexts in my study occurred when I asked participants about whether and how school-community collaborations affect students' relationships to place. When I asked this question on Denman Island, participants had lengthy responses, and responded with ease, whereas when I asked this question in Courtenay, participants often had responses of "I'm not sure," or "I don't know if I can answer that question." Much of the literature around place-based education (PBE) is focused in rural areas and on geography, so this is not surprising, but still worrisome. Brendtro et al. (2002) stated that "nowhere is the critical mass of youth at risk greater than in the inner cities of large metropolitan areas" (p. 13), and while suburban Courtenay is certainly not a large metropolitan area, it has similarities with larger urban areas. If we are to believe that PBE is beneficial to students, schools and communities – that youth are more responsible and independent (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009) and that they improve academically (Sobel, 2005); that schools have an improved climate (Alleman & Holly, 2013) and have a more reciprocal relationship with the community (Spring, 2013); and that communities are more likely to stand behind their school (Howley et al., 2011) – then why are we not encouraging this pedagogy more in our urban and suburban areas?

Having a sense of place is not solely about one's relationship of and knowledge about a specific geographical setting, but also the "impact of historical, social, and cultural influences on people's lives, as well as the ensuing relationships [people] develop within their communities" (Spring, 2013, p. 27). As a Gulf Islander, my place is easily definable – the tide line demarcates it quite precisely. My community is correspondingly easy to identify. Defining one's place is inherently more complicated when there is not an ocean to do it for you, and I believe this may be one of the difficulties that arose for the participants in town. I wonder whether my findings

would have been different had I been more specific that place is not strictly geographical – I believe that I would have. Regardless, I believe that my study shows that suburban environments, specifically the community of Stony Lane, school staff does not perceive that school-community collaborations affect a student’s relationship with their place. In order for these relationships with place to be fostered, I believe that the emphasis, in these more urban contexts, should be expressed in cultural, historical, or relationship-based collaborations.

Limitations

The goal of this research was to identify the benefits and challenges to school-community collaborations in two contexts: Denman Island and Courtenay. In order to do this, I distributed 671 surveys to the residents of Denman Island and 45 were returned, for a response rate of 6.7%. While my survey was only a small portion of my project, I was disappointed by the response rate, especially amongst parents at the school. Only five of the 45 respondents had school-aged children at the school, and only one survey was returned from a parent who has elementary-aged children on Denman Island, but whose children do not attend the Community School. As there are approximately ten families who choose other educational opportunities for their children, I am interested in the views of this segment of the population, who I did not hear from in detail. Additionally, the mode of the age-range of my participants was 65-74, which, while being comparable to the mode age on Denman Island, is an interesting population to question in terms of education.

The second part of my study, and the main way I was hoping to discover some of the benefits and challenges to school-community collaborations was through focus groups conducted in each of the contexts and with a wide range of stakeholder groups. Initially I was hoping to have a focus group in each context with adults who had collaborated with the school, but due to

time constraints, this was simply not feasible for me, and I ended up only holding this focus group on Denman Island. Additionally, I initially hoped to hold a focus group with individuals on Denman Island who had not participated in a collaboration, but had significant difficulty finding these individuals, and therefore this last focus group was held with only one individual. I think that not holding the focus group with collaborators in Courtenay is a significant limitation of my study. I believe that some of the responses I received in town would have been more varied coming from individuals who were not school district staff and who had other interests and expertise.

Another limitation to my study, especially in terms of the focus groups I held with school staff, was fatigue. All of these focus groups were held at the end of a workday, and many of them lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. It was clear that the responses towards the end of the allotted time were not as well-thought out, and participants were ready to go home and be done for the day. If I were to complete a similar study, I would be interested in attempting to put the questions in varying orders to see if I could receive more in-depth responses that way.

A last limitation I found involved the benefit of indigenous ways of knowing and learning. As stated in my discussion, I believe that this benefit was repeatedly mentioned due to both the individuals involved in my focus groups and the fact that “First Nations presentations” was included on my list of collaborations handed to participants prior to the commencement of the focus groups. Additionally, I believe that themes of First Nations are currently front of mind for many teachers, especially in terms of the redesigned curriculum and current discussions surrounding low graduation rates. I wonder whether this limits the transferability of this portion of this study.

Suggestions for Further Research

Interest in involving the community in standardized education is increasing. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has synthesized seven principles “to guide the development of learning environments for the 21st century” (Groff, 2010, p. 6), one of which is “building horizontal connections” (p. 7) for learners to see connections between their formal learning environments and the communities they live in. Community connectedness and the opening of school doors to involve non-certified teachers in the education of our youth is not only fashionable, but also essential in our current climate combining decreasing funding and students who lack connectedness and relationships to the people and land that surrounds them (Brendtro et al., 2002).

As this area of study is currently expanding, I believe that my study enhances the literature in the two specific and unique contexts I studied. I believe that the juxtaposition between the two incredibly different but not distant environments is key to understanding the ways that staff are ready to collaborate with communities, and the ways that communities want to be welcomed into schools.

In terms of further research, and as I previously mentioned, I believe it is unfortunate that I did not speak with any community collaborators in town. If we are to strive to have the community more involved in our schools, it seems logical to seek out community members, organisations and businesses who are willing and able to collaborate and ask them about what would encourage their participation. I am especially interested in retired populations, as, seen from my study, many of these individuals who are involved in collaborations speak about how important and beneficial it is for them to be in direct and regular contact with youth. From my personal experience, I know many retired individuals who are seeking reasons to leave their

homes, but also ways to feel useful and needed in our society that so often casts them aside. I believe that these individuals are a relatively untapped resource in terms of school-community collaborations. Additionally, as the staff at Stony Lane had difficulty in discussing the role of place for their students, I believe that finding collaborators who would be willing and able to augment these discussions in classrooms and with teachers would be especially useful.

I believe that another area for further study is to perform a case study on a single collaboration, over a longer period of time. For example, if a researcher was able to study the long-standing collaboration between Kindergarten staff and students at Stony Lane and the residents at Brightwater, a local seniors residence, much could be added to the body of literature of school-community collaborations. Interviews could be conducted with students, school district staff, staff from Brightwater, and the residents themselves. Much could be learned about the benefits of long-term collaborations like this one, and research such as this could greatly help other schools implement similar programs. Another example of a long-term collaboration that could be studied more in depth would be some of the mentorship programs, either on Denman Island or in other contexts, where students spend significant time with one community member or group, often learning a specific skill. It is my hope to perform one of these research studies in the future.

Lastly, as many participants, particularly those on Denman Island, commented on the increase in community safety that can occur due to school-community collaborations, I believe that this is another area requiring further research. I wonder whether it is possible to quantify this safety, particularly in more urban areas. I am curious as to whether school-community collaborations can help decrease crime – Sobel (2013) claims that when a school program began to clean up and paint over local graffiti in collaboration with community groups, the graffiti

problem significantly decreased. I wonder whether this is true in other contexts, and with other aspects of health, safety, and crime.

Personal Implications for Practice

“Symbolically, partnerships tell students educational achievement is a value spanning the entire community, and not only within the walls of the school” (Alleman & Holly, 2013, p. 8). Education, for me, is something incredibly vast that encompasses an extraordinarily diverse array of topics. I do not ascribe to the belief that people who have spent fewer days or years in a formal school are less educated, but rather that their education is of a different sense and occurs in a different context. We can all certainly relate to workers in any trade who are exceptionally skilled – seamstresses, farmers, carpenters – many of whom never completed formal schooling yet have an incredible education, ability level and knowledge base, far beyond many academically trained individuals. I believe that through community collaborations, we teach our children that education is not just something that happens in the walls of a school building, and it is not necessarily something taught to students by a teacher. Learning is much broader than that.

Over the course of this study I have already tried to implicate my communities more regularly and more systematically in my classroom and in my school. While I am still a transient teacher, who moves between schools (I have yet to teach at the same public school for more than a year), this is difficult. It is not possible, yet, for me to create long-term collaborations between one school and the community. However, there are community groups that I have worked with at a variety of schools. Still, I am looking forward to a time when a collaboration of my own, or in my classroom, moves beyond the start-up phase, where it requires significantly more organization.

Further implications for my own personal practice include an increase in the service-learning component of collaborations. While I have attempted to do this through a variety of groups including the SPCA and Habitat for Humanity, the majority of the service learning my students have participated in has been fundraising, at one level or another. Furco (2012) discussed a wide array of benefits to students who have been involved in service learning, including academic as well as social benefits. I believe this is another area where schools can greatly benefit their direct communities, and, as Brendtro et al. (2002) state, “without opportunities to give to others, young people do not develop as caring persons” (p. 65). I hope to offer my future students more opportunities to give to others, and to experience generosity of spirit.

Lastly, in order to facilitate the building and implementation of school-community collaborations in the Comox Valley, I hope to create a list of interested individuals, organizations and businesses, along with a description of their areas of expertise. This will be an asset-based model, which involves “flexing community assets or strengths rather than fixing community needs or weaknesses” (Martin & Henry, 2012, p. 111) which has been shown to be useful and successful in the literature (Martin & Henry, 2012; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2013). This list, including contact information, will be available to teachers in the district, in the hopes that schools and teachers are not repeating the same work of contacting each other, or wasting time talking to the wrong person at either a school or an organization. As Furco (2013) states, “implementing a school improvement program for one grade level (or subject area) over another can result in disaster if one is not aware of the historical, cultural, political, relational, and symbolic issues present at the site” (p. 626), and a list that includes the right people to contact at schools or organizations – people who are willing to put in the time and effort to make

collaborations happen – will, hopefully, help to initiate collaborations. Additionally, in forming this list, I hope to encourage community members and groups to contact schools, informing them of what expertise they have to offer, or whether their main asset is time. I know many classrooms that could benefit from someone who spends a little time every week reading with students. Hopefully, this list could prove beneficial, not only to our schools and in improving the learning for our students, but also to the relationships that develop and hold our communities together.

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APPENDIX A

School-Community Collaborations: Benefits and Challenges

YOU MUST BE 18 YEARS OR OLDER TO COMPLETE THIS SURVEY.

Please submit completed surveys to the GREEN envelope in the Free Post at Abraxas, labelled “Kerri Boland Surveys”, filed under the letter Z.

PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME OR IDENTIFY YOURSELF IN ANY WAY ON THIS SURVEY.

If there are any questions you would not like to answer, please feel free to leave them blank.

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions are being used:

- **school-community collaborations: “any event involving students and members of the community”**
- **community :“any individual or group that self-identifies as being a stakeholder in the school”**

1. Have you participated in a school-community collaboration within the past year? Examples include, but are not limited to school presentations, field trips, Feasty Fridays, helping in classrooms at the school, volunteering with the PAC, volunteering at a school event, etc. Please circle one.

yes

no

a) If you answered yes, how have you participated?

b) If you answered no, is there something that would have encouraged you to participate in a collaboration at the school?

2. What do you believe are the benefits to school-community collaborations? These can be benefits to students, organizations, or the wider community.

3. What do you believe are some of the challenges in implementing or sustaining school-community collaborations?

4. Do you have any other comments regarding school-community collaborations?



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APPENDIX B

Student Focus Group Questions and Protocol

Student Focus Group (Both on Denman Island and at Stony Lane Elementary School)

Welcome! You are all here because you and your parents have consented to being a part of my research into school-community collaborations. Just to get you thinking about it, school-community collaborations are times when members of the community, including your parents, do stuff with the school. The SPARKS program is a great example, but so is guest presentations in the gym, or having someone who doesn't work at the school come and do a nature walk. I'm going to ask a question, and then you'll all have a chance to answer – please don't talk when it's not your turn, because it'll be really hard to hear. If you ever don't feel like answering a question, you can always pass. If you want to come back to it later, no worries! We can do that too. You will have a chance at the end for some final comments as well. I put a copy of each of the questions in front of you, so there are no surprises and you can have some time to think about your answers.

I may use some direct quotes – exactly what you say – in the paper that I write up, but I can't say that you said it – I'll have to come up with fake names for each of you. While I promise not to identify you in my paper, the other students who are here will hear what you say and I can't guarantee that they won't share. Any questions before we get started?

Now both you and your parents have agreed to be video and audio recorded. Is everyone still okay with that? Cool.

1. What motivates you to learn?
2. What kinds of school-community collaborations have you been involved in? This can be a field trip where a non-teacher was involved, a presentation at school, guest lessons, etc. Any time a non-teacher or non-school district staff member is involved at school.
3. Tell me about one collaboration that you remember as being better than any of the others you participated in.
4. Why do you think you liked that collaboration more than others?
5. What have you learned as a result of school-community collaborations? Do you think you could have learned this without the collaboration?
6. Is there a way you would like to see the community collaborating with the school that isn't happening yet?
7. Any further comments? Thanks! You guys were awesome!



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APPENDIX C

Staff and Collaborator Focus Group Questions and Protocol

Welcome and thanks so much for coming! You are all here because you have consented to being a part of my research into school-community collaborations for my Master's in Educational Research at VIU. I'm looking into the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations not only because they're of interest to me personally, especially because of where I live and work, but also because I'm interested in ways we, as teachers and school staff, can enhance education, and communities may prove to be incredible resources.

Many of you probably know, but the way that focus groups work is I will ask a question, and you will all have a chance to answer – please don't interrupt someone else, and please wait your turn. If there is ever a question you do not want to answer, please just let me know. There will be time at the end for final comments. You each have a copy of the questions, so you can read and re-read them as you like.

There is a possibility that I will use direct quotes in my thesis, but I will not attribute the quotes directly to you. While I promise not to identify you in my paper, the other participants who are here will hear what you say and I cannot guarantee that they won't share, although I do ask you all to maintain the privacy of your colleagues. Any questions?

Is everyone still okay with being audio and video recorded? Great.

Examples of school-community collaborations include, but are not limited to:

Guest presentations, parent coaches, First Nations presentations/story-telling, field trips, school clubs, music events, school-wide presentations, garden clubs, science activities, etc.

Examples of benefits include, but are not limited to:

Student engagement, intergenerational learning, academic achievement, community building, sense of place, hands-on experiences, authentic learning, social learning, etc.

1. How have you collaborated with the community as an educator, or how have you collaborated with the school as a community member?
2. Why do you collaborate with the community, or with the school?
3. What do you see as the benefits to school-community collaborations to yourself?
4. What do you see as the benefits to school-community collaborations to students?
5. What do you see as the benefits to school-community collaborations to the wider community?

6. Do you believe that community collaborations can affect students' relationship to place? Do you have any examples of this?
7. Have you encountered any challenges to collaboration? Were you able to overcome any of these challenges? Are there collaborations that you were unable to complete due to challenges, either real or foreseen?
8. What do you believe the role of administration is in school-community collaborations?
9. Any further comments?



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APPENDIX D

Denman Island Resident Focus Group Questions and Protocol School-Community Collaborations

Welcome and thanks so much for coming! You are all here because you have consented to being a part of my research into school-community collaborations for my Master's in Educational Research at VIU. I'm looking into the benefits and challenges of school-community collaborations not only because they're of interest to me personally, especially because of where I live and work, but also because I'm interested in ways communities can be involved in education.

Many of you probably know, but the way that focus groups work is I will ask a question, and you will all have a chance to answer – please don't interrupt someone else, and please wait your turn. If there is ever a question you do not want to answer, please just let me know. There will be time at the end for final comments. You each have a copy of the questions, so you can read and re-read them as you like.

There is a possibility that I will use direct quotes in my thesis, but I will not attribute the quotes directly to you. While I promise not to identify you in my paper, the other individuals who are here will hear what you say and I cannot guarantee that they won't share, although I do ask you all to maintain each others' privacy. Any questions?

Is everyone still okay with being audio and video recorded? Great.

Examples of school-community collaborations include, but are not limited to:

Guest presentations, parent coaches, First Nations presentations/story-telling, field trips, school clubs, music events, school-wide presentations, garden clubs, science activities, etc.

Examples of benefits include, but are not limited to:

Student engagement, intergenerational learning, academic achievement, community building, sense of place, hands-on experiences, authentic learning, social learning, etc.

1. Are you aware of any school-community collaborations at the Denman Island Community School?
2. Do you believe school-community collaborations are beneficial, either for students or the wider community? Why or why not?
3. Is there something that would have encouraged you to participated in a collaboration at the school?

4. What do you see as the challenges to school-community collaborations? Do you believe there is a way to overcome these challenges?
5. Any further comments?